

Position of Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI): Examining Gender Discriminations in the District of Hooghly

Animesh Pan, Dr. Sushama Mukherjee

Research Scholar, Department of Sociology Seacom Skills University Birbhum, West Bengal

Abstract: Women empowerment has emerged as a key focus area for both domestic and international development efforts. Women empowerment refers to the creation of an environment that enables women to develop themselves independently. Furthermore, it refers to enabling them to be treated equally in social, economic and political areas. A major method of empowering women through active political participation is to enable them to participate in the governmental system and take part in the decision-making process. From an international, national and regional perspective, there is a focus on politically empowering women. Presently, the issue of women's political participation is getting increasing attention from legislative bodies around the world as well as from international organizations. As such, there have been a number of schemes, plans and laws developed that are intended to bring women into the mainstream of society and eliminate discrimination and oppression against women. Participation of women in local self-government is generally viewed as a means to enhance their political empowerment at the local level. On the other hand, experiences suggest that the reality is quite the opposite. The ongoing nature of patriarchy and male domination in political parties and institutions creates barriers to their effective impact. Although women may be elected to positions of authority, their participation is typically symbolic. In many instances, elected women are controlled by their party leaders or husbands. Some women are even identified in public media and official documentation by their husband's name rather than their own. As a result, women's roles in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are typically limited to nominally representing their husbands or other dominant groups. Therefore, to realize these goals, a research project was designed to obtain quantitative and qualitative data concerning the subject matter utilizing both data collection methods. Qualitative and quantitative research approaches are utilized to collect and analyze data to explore issues. Historical and comparative research methods were employed in this research to create a comprehensive research methodology. An empirical research design employing an interview schedule was employed to supplement the theoretical understanding. This research is empirical and utilizes both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through field work. Secondary data were collected from official documents particularly through the official web portal of the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India; District and Block Development Offices; and Village Panchayat Offices. In addition, relevant information was collected from the Economic Survey of the Government of India; statistics from the Government of West Bengal; studies and reports published by researchers in this domain; yearly reports from the Department of Rural Development; reports from various rural development organizations; and a variety of books, articles, journals, government publications etc. The researcher must use multi-stage random sampling methodologies to select respondents for the study. Additionally, the researcher also employed a multi-stage sampling methodology to identify the target population. This sampling strategy was used to select 87 elected women in Hooghly District. The data collection process was conducted as face-to-face interviews using a structured interview schedule with participants.

Keywords: Panchayat, Woman Empowerment, Politics, Society, Gender Discrimination



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1. Introduction

The call for 30 percent reservations for women in electoral bodies has grown significantly over the last decade and led to an increased number of female legislators across several nations. Advocates for quota systems expected that this increase in the number of female legislators would lead to changes in the government's policies, priorities, and in the decision-making process. However, the ability of women to have a voice in the government is dependent upon the party and electoral systems. A proportional representation (PR) system with a fixed party list can produce a higher number of female legislators than in other systems. However, those selected are typically party loyalists who may limit the amount of policy they can create. Countries that use a single member constituency system are required to pass laws to establish reservations for women. As a result, women leaders from civil society organizations are more likely to be successful in single constituency elections. Therefore, they will be able to have a greater impact on policy. While there is evidence of some improvement, women are still faced with many barriers in male dominated political environments[26]. Although the Constitution provides for equal representation of both men and women in the legislature, very few women are represented in the decision-making process within the legislature. This article seeks to examine the political empowerment of women in the Indian Legislature through their participation in the process of making decisions and their underrepresentation in ministerial positions. Participation in politics is one of the most important pathways to empower women and participate in the choice generating mechanism[19], [20]. The political status of women represents how equally and freely they are viewed as being able to share political power and what value society places on their position in the political system. Equality and active political participation are inherently connected. Female participation in politics is an important part of their empowerment and goes well beyond simply voting. It involves sharing power, jointly creating decisions, and collaboratively creating policies in all areas of governance. Gender equality in the political sphere is critical for a country's overall advancement and development[18]. Women worldwide continue to encounter numerous social, economic, and political obstacles. Due to a variety of reasons, including restrictive laws, customs, societal norms, and gender stereotypes, women are generally excluded from the political arena. Limited educational opportunities, limited access to health care services, and the disproportionate burden of poverty all contribute to their marginalization. In recent times, governments around the globe have placed a focus on increasing the socio-economic circumstances of people by providing more authority to local organizations[12]. Unless their social and economic conditions improve, women cannot be empowered. The only way to achieve this is to develop specific social and economic methods of support that allow women to reach their full potential as powerful citizens. Globalization, liberalization, and other social and economic elements have offered some respite to a large percentage of the population. Nevertheless, empowering women in India is still absent in many domains[24]. The effects of literacy and academic achievement on women's empowerment and provide recommendations for improving the adjustments needed for women's emancipation and for economic growth[13]. According to [13], empowering women requires a multifaceted approach to enhance their financial, social, and political standing, which has historically marginalized women. Empowering women also means protecting children from all forms of abuse[25]. While women's empowerment is not a need for our country, it is a requirement for its long-term success. Let us start empowering women today so we can have a safe future. We need to change the views of Indians toward women. The man should think that equality and fairness are increasing globally. Thus, empowering women will assist in the empowerment of the next generation[17]. Women empowerment in India, a knowledge-based society, is concerned with enhancing the capabilities of women and enhancing their skills to acquire knowledge and insights. Women play a vital role in promoting social development, national development, and nation building. In recent years, women empowerment has emerged as a significant and highly debated subject in India, since the development of the nation cannot take place without the full participation and engagement of women[1]. Empowering women is essential to inspire and motivate them to overcome the challenges, whether social, religious, psychological, or economical—and to fight for their rights to live better lives. True empowerment must include all aspects related to social, psychological, financial, and economic.

Contextual Background and Literature:

Women's empowerment is defined as a process of enhancing individuals' or groups' capacity to achieve their goals and make choices about their own lives. Women's empowerment is a transformative process of internal development of individual capacities, collective action by women (and men) to alter the structures of gender subordination, and the ability to act. The 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution in 1992 stipulated that no less than one-third of the seats in each Panchayat would be reserved for women.

This provided a major boost to women's local self-governance, which had previously been dominated by men. Prior to the 73rd Amendment, women were appointed to Panchayats either by nomination by the state or selected by the largely male-dominated leadership of these local governing bodies. At the time, the government focused its policies related to women primarily on improving their literacy levels. Political and economic empowerment of women was not considered. In 1958, the government created a National Committee on Women's Education to recommend ways to reduce the gap in literacy rates among genders. In 1957, the government decided to co-opt two women into each block Panchayat to serve as liaisons for women and children[4]. Studies on factors affecting women's interest in politics have shown that women who hold higher education degrees and belong to upper or dominant castes are more likely to engage in political affairs. Additionally, studies have demonstrated that women who regularly communicate and discuss issues with their fellow women representatives exhibit a stronger interest in politics[6], [9]. The Panchayati Raj system operates as a three tiered structure as outlined in Articles 243-A and 243-B of the Indian Constitution. The village (Gram) is the first tier. The second tier is the block (Janpad). The third and highest tier is the district (Zila). Article 243-C requires that all members of these bodies are directly elected by the people every five years, with elections being carried out according to Article 243-E. Article 243-D requires that at least one-third of the seats and chairperson positions in all Panchayats be reserved for women. The Panchayats have received increased fiscal freedom and independence[5]. Local self-governance by way of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in rural areas provides the opportunity for elected representatives to participate in the governance of their localities. Panchayats are responsible for providing basic infrastructure services and for the welfare of the villagers. They distribute funds for the execution of development projects and monitor their implementation. Panchayats play important roles in areas such as health, education, governance, and women's empowerment[8]. One of the greatest advances toward women's empowerment and increased participation in decision making was the enactment of the Indian Constitution's 73rd Amendment in 1992. The 73rd Amendment provided constitutional status to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and mandated the reservation of at least one-third of the seats in Panchayats for women. The bold initiative of the 73rd Amendment resulted in over one million women being elected as representatives in rural councils. To encourage women's economic empowerment, the government initiated the Self-Help Group (SHG) movement and micro-finance programs. Initially, SHGs were developed to provide credit and help women overcome poverty, thus allowing women to become economically independent. Both programs, however, focused primarily on either increasing women's political representation in local governance or developing economic opportunities through SHGs without including a strong educational component to support women's skill development. Existing literature has indicated that the lack of an educational component diminished the overall effect of the SHG movement and micro-finance programs[3]. Issues facing women in India include domestic violence against women, wage inequality, sexual harassment and abuse, discrimination in accessing nutrition, and low female literacy rates[16]. Twelve case studies from 12 states regarding local governance indicate that India is presently experiencing a significant transition. During the next decade, it is expected that Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and women will continue to improve their status in terms of leadership, economic position, education, and awareness of their rights to a share of power. These improvements will allow them to assertively demand a share of the power structure. Local governance will provide a foundation for future leaders. The cycle of leadership development will begin once again due to the fact that elections are held every five years[2]. An essential component of decentralization is the empowerment of women. Many countries have undertaken specific policies to enhance women's empowerment across the realms of economics, society, and politics. Consistent with this goal, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) proposed by the United Nations have established gender equality as a fundamental development goal. This corresponds with current academic and policy research, which has demonstrated that women's empowerment has positive effects on economic growth, reduces output losses, and aids in alleviating poverty. As evidence of progress, the proportion of women in national parliaments has risen to 25% in 2020, compared to 11% in 1995. Study explores the impact of reserving seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) on their participation and leadership in rural governance. Research focuses on the socio-political transformations resulting from the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which mandated the reservation of women in PRIs. By focusing on Rajasthan, the study shows how women leaders have played a major role in education, sanitation, and healthcare in improving rural infrastructure and governance transparency. The purpose of this research is to analyze the impact of decentralization and reservation policies on women's ascension to leadership roles in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Authors review data from multiple sources to highlight the challenges and accomplishments of women's participation in local government. The authors examine women's participation in governance, especially in underrepresented groups, based on the effects of the

73rd Constitutional Amendment's reservation policies. Although there has been considerable improvement, many women leaders are still hindered by social norms, limited decision-making authority, and the assumption of proxy roles by male family members. The authors demonstrate that empowered women have greatly enhanced community life through addressing issues such as healthcare, education, and sanitation. The authors emphasize the importance of creating capacity building programs to develop the leadership abilities of women so they may fully utilize their roles in governance. Finally, the authors advocate for legislative reform to increase women's representation and autonomy in PRIs and promote equality and sustainable development[22]. Through real-life examples from rural India, the authors illustrate how women leaders in PRIs have successfully addressed critical challenges such as education, healthcare, sanitation, and economic development. The study highlights the immense influence women have in rural communities historically controlled by patriarchal systems, and indicates the empowering role of PRIs in facilitating women's participation in local decision-making. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment significantly increased the number of women represented in PRIs. Through case studies, the authors demonstrate how women's participation in decentralized governance benefits both their communities and their personal lives. The authors conclude that empowering women through PRIs enhances local governance and challenges traditional gender norms, leading to broader societal change. The authors recommend additional structural assistance to enable women leaders to reach their full potential. These results provide valuable insights to policymakers, researchers, and practitioners working toward gender equity and rural development in India.

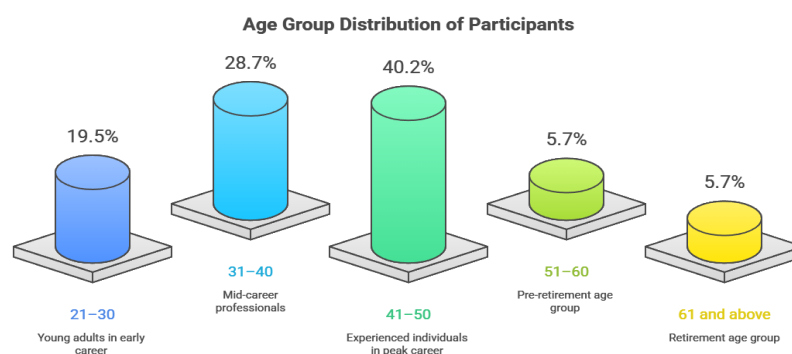
Objectives of the Study:

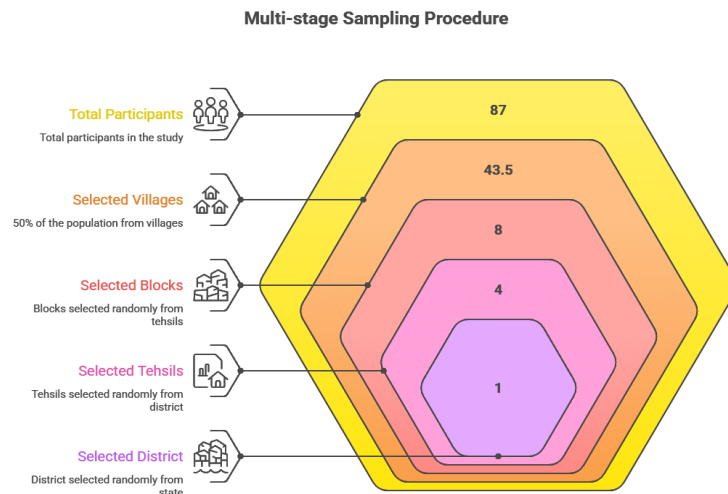
This study aims to fulfill the following objectives.

1. Socio – economic background of the respondent will be studied.
2. Obstacles / causes in the participation of women through PRI's at different levels.
3. Role of family and society in promoting the participation of women.
4. The role and function of woman representative as an officer in the PRIs.

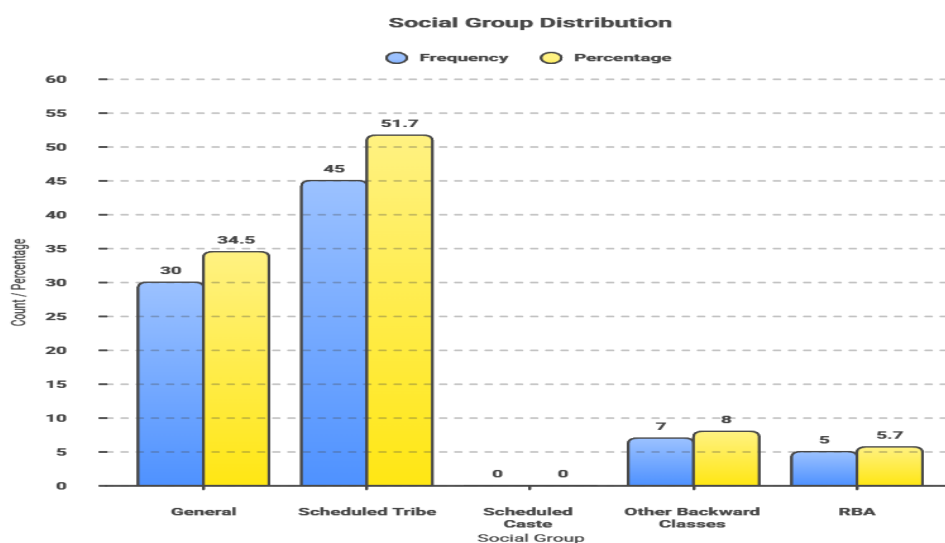
2. Methodology

The purpose of this research study is to utilize quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain information regarding the subject area. Quantitative and Qualitative research are utilized as part of the study design to explore, gather and analyze data. Historical and comparative methodologies have been used together to provide an overall approach. An empirical study, using an interview schedule will provide additional theoretical understanding. The respondents will be selected utilizing a multi-stage random sampling procedure to determine the appropriate target population. The total number of participants included in this study was 87. A Multi-stage sampling procedure is where samples are obtained through multiple levels of sampling; beginning at the largest unit (such as a district or tehsil), then reducing to smaller units (such as a village or household). The multi-stage sampling that was used in this study was conducted in the following steps: Division of Population (Stage 1) Selecting one district (Hooghly) out of twenty-three districts of West Bengal. Selection of Tehsils (Stage 2) The selection of four tehsils (Chinsurah Sadar, Chandannagar, Serampore and Arambagh) from the Hooghly District. Using the simple random sampling technique, the researcher could select a sub-set of tehsils. For example, select 4 tehsils randomly. Selection of Blocks within each Tehsil (Stage 3) Since each selected tehsil has two blocks, the researcher would need to select 8 blocks. In addition, these 8 blocks were selected randomly. Selection of Panchayat / Village (Stage 4). The researcher selected the panchayat / village sequentially. 50% of the population was taken from the selected villages. For the study, 87 elected female representatives were selected and interviewed individually. Their knowledge prior to entering local government and post-joining were examined in detail.



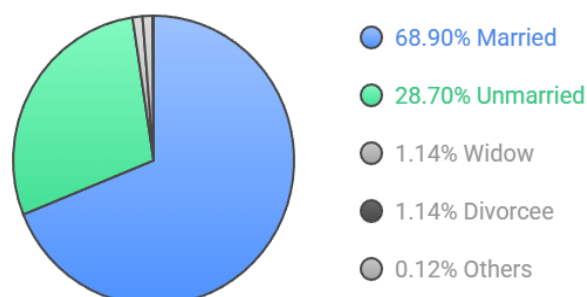


Initially, while the researcher conducted the research to study the role and development activities of women in the Panchayat Raj Institutions in Hooghly district of West Bengal, the researcher attempted to know the age group of the respondents of the research. After collecting and analyzing the data, it was concluded that 17 respondents belong to an age group of 21-30. Following this age group were those that belonged to the age groups of 31-40 (which is 25 in number). Next, there were 35 respondents that fell into the 41-50 age group. There were five (5) respondents that belonged to a 51-60 age group. Finally, the last group had five (5) respondents that belonged to an age group of 61 years or greater.

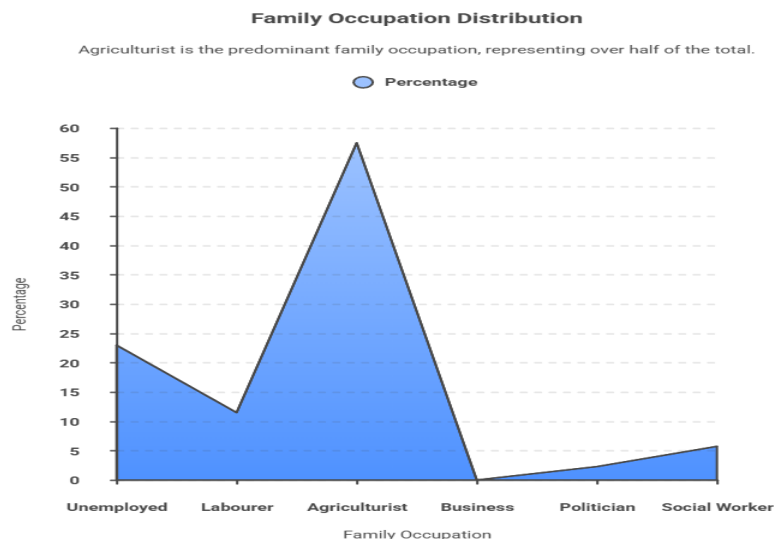


The respondents were asked what category they fit into; that is, did they fall into the general population (General), schedule caste, scheduled tribe, or other backward classes (O.B.C) categories, and it was discovered that the majority of the women who responded to the survey were in the Schedule Tribe, with 45 out of 87 selected. However, it was determined that 30 respondents fell within the General category, five of whom were in the RBA category and seven were in the OBC category.

Distribution of Marital Statuses



According to the results of the study, 68.9 percent of participants were married, while 28.7 percent of participants had never been married. The marital status of individuals will have an impact on their level of emotional insecurity and security. For example, those who have a happy marriage will typically be stress-free, at ease, motivated to work to make a better living for their wives and children, as opposed to those with unhappy marriages who are often irritable, critical, and not enthusiastic about working. They experience emotional instability, and they tend to be brooding and anxious. It is generally difficult for unmarried individuals, especially young women, to redirect their sexual desires toward the opposite gender. So long as their beauty or youth has not begun to fade, marriage will provide them with a most suitable husband. In addition, there are many who believe that marriage is the best way to live a truly fulfilling and happy existence; therefore, the true meaning of life can be discovered through marriage.



The data collected from the previous study shows a major portion of the participants were engaged in agricultural occupations (50) while the other participants who were unemployed (20) in the district of Hooghly. Furthermore, 10 participants of the total of 87 participants were employed as a laborer, 2 participants as a politician and the rest of the 5 participants were employed as a social worker. Therefore, the previous study has shown that most of the people rely on agriculture.

3. Results and Discussion

Identify Strategies to Increase Women in Politics: Women are not yet as represented as men in all forms of government. A number of factors contribute to this disparity. Some of the most important include: Education, and training, for women in governance Decision making independence for women. Elimination of discriminatory attitudes from society: Sociocultural barriers that impede women's ability to assume leadership positions in government. Technology, and other modern tools for facilitating communication, information sharing, and decision making: the first step towards increasing women's representation in government will be to develop a greater level of consciousness about the need for women's representation in government. In addition to raising consciousness, education, and training programs for women who wish to enter public service are also needed. This includes programs to provide women with the skills and knowledge necessary to perform effectively as members of governing bodies. Finally, strategies for increasing the participation of women in public service must also address sociocultural barriers, such as the discriminatory attitudes of society towards women in leadership positions. Such barriers must be addressed through programs to increase gender equality, as well as through legislation or other mechanisms to protect women against discrimination and harassment.

The use of technology to improve communication, information sharing, and decision making in government is another strategy for increasing women's representation. For example, using mobile applications and the Internet to facilitate communication between women representatives and their constituents, as well as providing them with access to information and resources.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Issues related to gender equality have been occasionally explored and placed on the agenda. However, solutions to these problems continue to be elusive. As a result, women make up the majority of the world's population and are facing discrimination, domination, exploitation, marginalization and harassment. Their socio-political status has changed over time but women do not yet enjoy all the rights due to them as human beings. In recent years, women in India have made great strides. There are many

legal protections for women under the constitution. Legal protections such as equal opportunity and dignity were given to women. Women have also greatly increased their participation in every aspect of society. Many laws have also been passed to strengthen women in their role in society as well as in the areas of economics, law and politics. Up until now, the concept of women's empowerment has only been viewed from the perspective of "the power to" as opposed to "the power within." Therefore, the laws that were created to give women the power to be empowered were embedded into the institutions of society. They have never allowed women to participate in the decision making process. Due to the importance of rural India, the Indian government has designed many programs to support the Panchayati System. The Panchayati System is the backbone of the country based on the population and economy. Through the 73rd Amendment, PRIs were given constitutional status. The amendment also provided for the reservation of seats for women. Providing reservations for women clearly demonstrates the greatest degree of governmental commitment to supporting the empowerment of women.

The local body of PRIs in India is a one-of-a-kind system of decentralized administration at the local level. These organizations play a significant role in facilitating political awareness and education among the general public, as well as their active participation. Therefore, they represent a vital mechanism through which the common citizen can become involved and develop. As such, the PRIs provide the essential element required to enable the democratic system to function in the public interest. Even though the Indian democracy has existed for more than fifty years, the common Indian woman continues to dream of being politically empowered. The importance of women's contribution in the political process is very important in regards to both equality and development. A 33% quota for women in panchayat institutions represents a substantial initial step toward this goal, even though there is still a similar quota for women in the Lok Sabha and the state assemblies. Elected women delegates to the PRIs have had both positive and negative experiences. One million women first entered into the public sphere and it is anticipated that they will bring about considerable changes in a society firmly rooted in tradition. For the minority that has been dominated for centuries, their degree of involvement in the panchayat bodies was not particularly noteworthy, therefore their behavior may be irrational. The majority of the elected women have no knowledge of the implications of occupying a position of political power. They simply follow the orders of their male counterparts (father, brother, father-in-law, and husband). Illiterate women cannot make decisions and are basically under the influence of the dominant and shrewd male members who operate behind the scenes. It is important to consider the representation of females within the framework of addressing gender-specific issues.

The Indian Constitution has provided adequate opportunities to the decentralized institutions at the grass-root level to improve the socio-economic condition of the people. These institutions include Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) which are a unique decentralised system of administration in India. The objective of PRIs is to make people politically conscious, educated and participatory in the democratic process. The PRIs facilitate the political participation and development of the people. Therefore, the PRIs provide the necessary material base for the functioning of the democratic system in the public interest. However, despite more than five decades since the inception of the Indian democracy, it is still a dream of the ordinary Indian woman to be empowered through politics. The participation of women in the political process is very essential for achieving equality and progress. A notable initiative has been taken in this direction with the implementation of the 33% quota for women in panchayat institutions, though a similar stipulation for women in Lok Sabha and state assembly is yet to be initiated. The women who have been elected as representatives in PRIs have experienced both positive and negative aspects. For the first time one million women have come into the public domain and they are expected to bring about a substantial change in a society that is deeply rooted in tradition. For those minority groups who have been ruled for generations, their level of participation in the panchayat bodies was not exceptional; therefore, their behavior may be irrational. Most of the elected women do not know what are the consequences of being in a political office. They merely follow the directions of their male counterpart (father, sister, father-in-law, and husband). Illiterate women cannot take decisions and they are mainly guided by cunning and dominant male members who work behind the scene.

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