

**PARTICIPATORY DECENTRALISED GOVERNANCE AND EMPOWERMENT: A STUDY OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE GRAM SANSADS OF TWO SELECTED GRAM PANCHAYATS OF JALPAIGURI DISTRICT OF WEST BENGAL (2003-2011)**

**ABSTRACT**

The Idea of decentralised governance is not a new concept in Indian context. But it was very much influenced by western political thoughts. Apart from the Gandhi's vision of 'Village Republic', Indian decision makers are not serious about implementing the policy of democratic decentralisation popularly known as 'Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)' before the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment of the Constitution. This Amendment opens a door for common people in general and women in particular to participate in the grassroots governance through newly created institutions like Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad. The women at the grassroots were given 33 per cent reservation in the Panchayati Raj bodies. As a result, in every Panchayat election, 10 lakh women enter to the democratic process of the country and they are involved in tasks of village welfare. Women can take part in the decision making process, planning and evaluation of the rural developmental programmes which has improved their livelihood. The participation of women in Panchayats tends to have dynamic effects on the social and political empowerment of women and it is essential for a gender just and equitable society.

Under the circumstances, the present study tries to identify and measure the level of people's participation in the grassroots democratic institutions particularly in the newly devised institution of Gram Sansads. In fact, with the introduction of the Gram Sansad below the Gram Sabha, there have been claims and counter claims regarding the kind, nature and extent of participation in the Gram Sansads. Here in our study we try to make an objective

assessment of the kind, nature and extent of participation in these grassroots democratic institutions, particularly that of women so that a generalization could be drawn as to the operational aspect of the Gram Sansads and as to the feasibility of this novel institution to become a model to be replicated.

The present research has proceeded along with an eclectic research design combining the descriptive and diagnostic research design besides being exploratory too as per the requirements of the objective of the study and the research questions that were to be addressed. Exploratory method has been followed for identifying the conceptual and theoretical supplements of participatory decentralized governance, development, empowerment, local democracy etc. The study was descriptive as it aims at portraying objectively the state of decentralised governing process, its correlation with development and empowerment and the kind and nature of local democracy. Finally, the study was going to be diagnostic as it aimed at finding out causes of participation / non-participation of women in the local democratic institution of Gram Sansad as well as the contributory / non/anti-contributory role of participation / non-participation on empowerment of women.

The study is going to be a micro study conducted in two selected Gram Panchayats of Jalpaiguri district. All the Gram Sansads of the selected Gram Panchayats were studied by way of attending the meetings of the Gram Sansads in person (Observation) and there was a sample of women members of each Gram Sansad, interviewed on the basis of a schedule. Besides, a sample of male members of the Gram Sansads was also interviewed to supplement and substantiate the information relating to the participation / non-participation of women having a bearing on empowerment of women. Indeed, the selection of the sample

respondents has been judgment based but was taken to make it objective as far as possible. 516 respondents have been selected from two Gram Panchayats of Jalpaiguri district for empirical research. Data extracted from schedules may be presented for analytical findings. The principal purpose was to assess the nature of attendance of Gram Sansad in general and women in particular, awareness about Panchayati Raj System in general and Gram Sansad in particular, nature of participation in Gram Sansad, role and participation in decision making, reasons behind the non-participation in Gram Sansad, level of participation, attitude towards decision making and women empowerment etc.

After careful analysis of the field experiences the finding of the study is that though the Gram Sansad meetings are held regularly, but the participation of majority of members has not yet been ensured. Women of the society have not got the opportunity to present their views or opinion in the Gram Sansads and the empowerment of women has not been achievable without the active participation of women in the decision making process of Gram Sansads. It is true that the New Panchayati Raj Act has offered an opportunity for active participation of hitherto suppressed rural women in socio-economic life and this has clearly resulted in increased numerical participation of women. However, the fact to be realized is that if Panchayati Raj Institutions are to become a vibrant vehicle for the empowerment of rural women, a lot more need to be done.

A sum and substance of recommendations may be suggested for future policy implementation. Decentralised Governance cannot run successfully without proper knowledge and skills towards grassroots democracy. Awareness development is the most crucial task for injecting an attitude within the people in general and women in particular

towards participation in the decision making process in Gram Sansads. Education, especially elementary education, must be made compulsory for ensuring equal participation of women in all walks of life. The governmental and non-governmental organizations may be engaged for women education programmes and skills development programmes for realizing their responsibilities and develop their character and personality. Economic self sufficiency is one of the major pre-condition for political empowerment of women. They are to depend on their husbands or male members of the family. They have not taken any decision in the family matters as well as their personal matters. In such a situation, it is not possible for them to take an effective role in political sphere. The lack of information is one of the major causes for low attendance in Gram Sansad meetings. It depends on the political will of the ruling political party whether they can use the Gram Sansad as a direct democratic institution or a rubber stamp. The poor rural villagers may attend the Gram Sansad meetings if they get some sort of benefit from the Gram Sansad. Instead of an advisory body, the Gram Sansad should be made an approving/sanctioning authority for taking up any development programme at the village level. It should be mandatory for every Gram Sansad to meet not less than four times a year. In order to ensure participation of disadvantaged groups, the quorum for holding a Gram Sansad meeting necessarily should include 33 per cent participation/ presence of women, SC/ST. The role and responsibility of the Gram Sansad and its functional relationship with Gram Panchayat need to be clearly spelled out.

Empowerment is the process through which the powerless becomes powerful in the different sphere of life. It means the control over resources and ideology. The Indian women still carries the curse of traditional social system on them. In our country as well as even in the

whole world women are usually confined to household activities and this is the only reason for their dependence, social neglect, and political ignorance which in their turn prevented women from empowering themselves.

It is true that the active participation of women in the decision making and their empowerment in the Panchayati Raj Institutions in general and Gram Sansad in particular were not ensured even after the two decades of 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment. Undoubtedly the reservation of seats in the grassroots democratic institutions for women has created some opportunities for participating in the decision making process but it is not the only way to make them wholly empowered. Women empowerment will be possible if women are able to make decisions in every spheres of their life i.e. economic, social, psych-physical and political. Gram Sansad is one of the institutions for exhilarating women empowerment but it has so far failed to do so as women are yet to be concerned about their rights as well as the achievement of the same through an organized struggle.