

CHAPTER 7

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Political participation is broadly supposed to include involvement in any form of organised activity that affect or likely to affect power relationships. It is the activity intended to influence the attitude and behaviour of those who have power for decision making.

In fact much depends on how we theorise the the concept of political participation. In a narrower sense it can be viewed as conscious participation in resource allocation and a wider view would include all the relationships in a given power structure. The fallout has been private and public divide where a clear trend of private relm such as family is construed as beyond politics. Yet some political scientists, more so radical feminists, increasingly uphold that "personal is (also) political".

In fact narrower conception will discredit vast range of women's involvements in issues relating to labour, water, dowry, rape, price rise and host of other issues. Much of the Third World politics occurs outside of conventional political institutions. It seems that standard assumption that women are apolitical is tenable only when politics is narrowly conceived. Consequently political participation is taken here in wider sense¹ to include any involvement or action both at formal and informal levels to influence the action or choice of public policy at any level of government.

Women's participation in structural process of panchayats (Section 1), in informal sphere (Section 2) and their future course of action or ambition in short (Section 3) are looked at in this Chapter.

1. IN PR PROCESS

We first tried to go through the proceedings of PR Meetings but individual initiatives in those meetings could not be detected as only decisions of the meetings were found recorded. As such we have to depend on the responses of women respondents to discern women's role in decision making process of PR.

As to the attendence in PR meetings only one PS woman can not make it and only three women find it difficult for most of the meetings. It is actually because of marriage in distant place the lone PS member can not participate and the three member find it difficult due to geographical distance of PR office and pressing domestic needs. All the rest attend meetings most of the times. The official Records for last one year also substantiate that the women have taken the responsibility seriously.

1. Schlozman at al. 1994. Almond and Powell (1966:314). *Comperative Politics Amerind*. New Delhi.

Table : 7 :1
Before PR Meeting women consult with

Tier	Husband	Party Member	Booth Committee	Villagers	Women Member	Do Nothing	Total
GP	1	6	20	--	--	5	32
PS	--	9	3	6	1	20	39
CP	2	2	1	2	--	12	19
Total	3(3.3)	17(18.9)	24(26.7)	8(8.9)	1(1.1)	37(41.1)	90(100)

Particularly for the inexperienced and beginners adequate homework for any engagement not only increases the probability of being effective but it also seems both expeditious and desirable. To have idea about such prior preparation by the women it is revealed that quite a lot (41%) (Table 7:1) do not have any sort of ground work before PR meeting. Almost all having consultation with Booth Committee are members of GP. Though PS and ZP members are also involved in such Committee of their concerned locality it has less influence mainly because of nature of responsibilities. Counselling from husbands, villagers, women members are indeed negligible. Party guidance in ' political panchayats' is not overtly disclosed . As such the majority attend meetings without any preceding consultation. The general inference can be that they do not visualise the importance of prior consultation either for they do not effectively participate or they are quite assertive or confident of themselves. Revelations afterwards confirm the latter.

Among those having no preparation, 49% are first time elected members from respective families: 49%, 27%, 24%, have low, medium and high education respectively and 38%, 22% 32% have low, medium and high party membership grades. Thus these variables have no immediate impact on consultation by women.

Table : 7 :2
In PR Meeting women raise issue told by

Tier	Husband	Party	Themselves	Total
GP	5	2	25	32
PS	8	4	27	39
CP	3	1	15	19
Total	16(17.8)	7(7.8)	67 (74.4)	90(100)

Women are not found meek in meetings and they usually try to raise their points and views. They clarify that they argue about the future course of action to be taken. The vast majority - almost equally divided among Tiers - are not playing roles of stooge or yes women (Table 7:2). For CP group particularly party influence is not admitted.

For women's participation in panchayats two broad trends so far are : somewhere women have dubious start but after sometimes some women become quite assertive and few get wide and even international acclaim ². But in most cases they are found as 'bibi brigade' ³ as the control of families, husbands in particular, really stultifies their performance. Some of our male respondents informally informed about the extent of domination of husbands. The Chairperson of Dinhata PS goes to the extent of asserting, with signed statement if required, that 80% women in that PS are dummies of husbands.

However, for the women of this district though only 3% consult husbands before PR meetings (as disclosed in Table 7:1) it is gathered from Table 7:2 that 18% of total women raise issue in meetings according to dictum of their husbands. Probably the whip of respective husbands as to the participation in meetings is more frequent than simple consultation. But to reiterate, influence of husbands/families is very difficult to prove.

Table : 7 : 3
Raising issue in Meeting and Socio Political Status of Women

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	X ² Value	D.F.	Table Value
Own Education	Raising issue in Meeting	0.98	4	9.49
Family Education	"	3.33	4	9.49
First Time from Family	"	0.62	2	5.99
Party Membership Grade	"	8.99	4	9.49

(For base Tables see Table 3.1 to 3.4 in Annexure 2)

2. Fatima Bi, the Chairperson of Kalva GP of Andhra Pradesh, exemplifies this category. After being elected she used to give thumb impression on paper according to the direction of her husband for one year. But afterwards she become so inspired and successful that she won the national title of 'Uttam Sarpanch' and United Nations Development Programme's Race Against Poverty award in 1998.

3. In Madhya Pradesh "in most cases it is the husbands who made the decisions for the panchayats and the wives put their signature or thumb impression on Official Documents". Tremblay & Kumtakar (1998:464). Governance and Representation - A Study of Women in Local Self Government. *Indian Journal of Public Administration*. Vol XLIV (3). Similarly 40% of about 2000 GP women Chairpersons in Uttar Pradesh hardly step out of their houses. This nagging fact compels the concerned State Government to ban husband's entrance to panchayat office and participation in PR meetings. Cited in *Panchayati Raj Update* (p.6). October 1998. ISS. New Delhi.

Table 7:3 indicates that the nature of raising issues in PR meetings is not positively related with women's education, family education, party membership grades and first time from respective families or not.

Table : 7 : 4

Women have Participated effectively in PR Meeting

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Partially Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
GP	1	24	--	7	--	--	32
PS	13	22	2	1	--	1	39
CP	6	10	3	--	--	--	19
Total	20(22.2)	56(62.2)	5(5.6)	8(8.9)	--	1(1.1)	90(100)

As an index to their cognition and own assessment the Table 7:4 in totality tells that majority of women are more or less confident that they have taken up responsibility quite successfully. Among GP members a portion (7 or 22%) are uncertain while PS members seem more assertive and CP group conspicuously less upright in their craftsmanship where less than strong conviction is evident. One PS woman strongly feels that her performance needs improvement. In a sense cognition of failure is likely to make any member more determined for the challenge.

Table : 7 : 5

Nature of Acceptance of Women's Points in PR Meeting

Tier	Not Accepted	Only Occasionally	In Majority Cases	Total
GP	6	18	8	32
PS	9	24	6	39
CP	4	10	5	19
Total	19 (21.1)	52 (57.8)	19 (21.1)	90 (100)

Total 21% categorically inform that their points are not complied with in PR meetings and for the equal number it is generally yielded to (Table 7:5). If PS member were earlier found forthwith in participation in meetings (Table 7:4), here they seem quite vincible in actual decisional output. PS members have larger proportion both in occasional acceptance (24 or 62%) and rejection (9 or 23%) and conversely endorsement is least. For CP it is not all the way adhered to and for about half it is only partially or occasionally acceded. This points

to not unassailable position for Chairpersons. The general trend, however, is not so dejecting as for the majority their points are not mocked at.

One of the possible reasons for not entertaining points of women could well be their minority or opposition party status. Data segregated along party lines suggest that of the total 19 women whose points are ignored totally only five belong to opposition party. On the other hand, of the 19 whose points are taken due note of four belong to opposition party camp. It seems that ability of members rather than party consideration decides the nature of contribution women are likely to imprint.

Table : 7 : 6

Acceptance of Women's Points and Socio Political Status of Women

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	X ² Value	D.F.	Table Value
Own Education	Acceptance of women's Point in Meeting	2.03	4	9.49
Family Education	"	3.28	4	9.49
Caste of Women	"	2.13	4	9.49
Patry Membership Grade	"	5.06	4	9.49
First Time From Family	"	5.53	2	5.99

(For base Tables see Table 4.1 to 4.5 in Annexure 2.)

Table 7:6 clearly discloses that no specific variable has any decisive impact on the nature of acceptance or rejection of women's points in PR meetings.

Table : 7 : 7

Reaction of Women when their point are refused in PR Meeting

Tier	Accept it	Become Frustrated	Remain Absent	Press for Acceptance	Total
GP	9	2	2	19	32
PS	13	1	--	25	39
CP	2	1	--	16	19
Total	24(26.7)	4(4.4)	2(2.2)	60(66.7)	90(100)

As disclosed earlier (Table 7:5) points of women are not always complied with in PR meetings. Their reactions to such repudiation are likely to provide insight as to their true participation and reflect its real magnitude or impact. Table 7:7 reveals that only 27% of total women take refutation of their points in meetings without any form of protest or reaction. Thus taking Table 7:5 together about 1/4 respondents are passive spectators who are unable to strike their entry to actual decision making. For the majority, however, performance is not so bad as they somehow react to repudiation of their views.

Table : 7 : 8

Reaction of Women when Refused and Socio Political Status of Women

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	X ² Value	D.F.	Table Value
Own Education	Reaction of women when Refused	9.21	4	9.49
Family Education	"	5.24	4	9.49
Caste of Women	"	1.45	4	5.99
Party Membership Grade	"	4.82	4	9.49
Party of Women	"	12.57	4	9.49

(For base Tables see Table 5.1 to 5.5 in Annexure 2)

Compared to other parties CPM women tend to accept more their rejection of points (38%) and less of it press for acceptance (54% while this figure is 88% for Congress and 90% for other parties). The Table 7:8 deciphers that party is the only variable positively related to their reaction to rejection of points in meetings.

Women also inform that they maintain contact with villagers in the form of meeting, talking and taking their problems into cognizance. What is gathered is that women generally do not meet them by themselves, villagers rather come to them for various purposes thus contact is maintained. The constituencies are geographically divided into wards for election purpose. There are several wards where either the lone or all two seats in the ward are reserved for women so as to follow reservation Rules. As the villagers now have to come to PR members for various purposes - for birth certificate to beneficiary selection - they have to meet them.

Ability of detecting any type of irregularity, if there is any, would not only require but also establish prima facie performance. Information in this aspect indicate that not a negligible portion (19% of total - here PS and other party women outscore others) has that capacity or

achievement of unearthing some malpractices, misappropriation in PR process. And this section has surely added significant feat to women credential.

Another aspect of this detection is that such disclosure is mainly confined to some specific PR bodies only. Equally important is that they sought redressal of such in various platforms mainly at panchayat and party levels. Thus tracing of irregularities somewhere unravels on the one hand that something needs correction and on the other hand women members have the ability to act as watchdog and thus not to be taken for granted.

Although women have so many hurdles but the lack of antecedent political experience is the foremost of all. Effort is also made to highlight the perception of women towards this most immediate hindrance or its sequel as to their role performance.

Table : 7 : 9
Lack of Previous Experience Hampering Women's Performance

Tier	Strongly Agree	Agree	Partially Agree	Uncertain	Dis: Agree	Strongly Disagree	Total
GP	10	5	10	2	5	--	32
PS	18	--	9	9	2	1	39
CP	7	3	1	--	8	--	19
Total	35(38.9)	8(8.9)	20(22.2)	11(12.2)	15(16.7)	1(1.1)	90(100)

Information elicited accordingly (Table 7:9) establish that lack of introductory experience does not thwart performance of 18%. But 39% strongly subscribe that it seems obstructive. Majority, however, confirm that it is circumventing in the sense that had they had previous experience they could have been more upright.

Table : 7 : 10
Perception of Importance of Previous Experience and Socio Political Status of Women

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	X ² Value	D.F.	Table Value
Own Education	Importance of previous Experience	17.13	10	18.31
Family Education	"	9.44	10	18.31
Caste of Women	"	12.70	10	18.31
Party Membership Grade	"	20.40	10	18.31
Party of Women	"	9.97	10	18.31

(For base Tables see Table 6.1 to 6.5 in Annexure 2)

It is found that senior women party members tend to concede it as definite barrier but those who have just joined in do not concede so. Medium grade party women are either uncertain or agree only partially. This perhaps indicates that new recruits are more determined to perform role effectively. Statistical test of significance (Table 7:10) does foresee correlation only with party membership grades.

2. AT INFORMAL LEVEL :

Gone are the days when most of the inter/intra family/ village disputes were sought to be resolved at informal level of caste panchayats . Now PR has instead assumed this role and it has become imposing in view of absence of Nyaya Panchayat as in West Bengal. Today PR members have intervening roles especially at GP levels where members are frequently called upon to mediate various types of local disputes. In fact effective role in this aspect will be karnel yardstick for assessing role performance as it will indicate legitimization of leadership and capability in the eyes of society.

Table : 7 : 11

Women have effectively participated in solving Local Level Disputes

Tier	Strongly Agree	Agree	Partially Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
GP	21	2	6	2	1	--	32
PS	22	4	8	2	2	1	39
CP	12	3	4	--	--	--	19
Total	55(61.2)	9(10.0)	18(20.0)	4(4.4)	3(3.3)	1(1.1)	90(100)

Most of the women respondents assert that they have tried saliently to adjudicate local disputes or problems (Table 7:11). While 61% are strongly convinced about their effective role in such cases, 20% feel that their performance is only partially effective. Here the prominent performance of GP members tallies with its structural composition and nature. GP is more akin to direct form of democracy for its geographical affinity, direct access and accountability. ZP, PS and CP members though have greater leverage for highr political position are neither preferred comparatively nor they are willing to devote much time unless of course when urgently required.

Moreover, realising the burden of people's aspiration reposed on them women soon realised the importance of informal avenues (besides participation in meetings) like bargain-

ing, persuasion, pressure tactics and even 'dharna' to get one's point scored. For substantiation, one PS woman, not being member of the Standing Committee, stayed all day outside of meeting hall demanding and later on obtaining sanction for School Building in her locality. At other GP appointment of labour for construction works without their prior approval and distribution of relief items for flood victims compelled them to take up the issue with Chairperson and later on fructified their roles.

3. AMBITION

Ambition is intimately associated with participation and performance. Those who are efficacious and thus complacent about present role tend to yearn for more chance and role. Thus attention to their ambition may unravel insight to the present push as well as future propensity.

Total 79 or 88% are satisfied with PR position and total 61 or 68% are to contest in the next election. Thus quite a remarkable portion is all set to pursue political career. 29 or 32% are not to stand for future PR election (24 from ruling parties). Major cause of dissatisfaction and leaving PR is not for their incapacity but to some factors beyond their immediate control. Two women are finding it though for older age of 60+, for lone CP member it is because of non-cooperation of others, marriage prospect for three unmarried, for five other it is because of non performance mainly for male usurpation of power and fear of public criticism. For instance one PS woman apprehends that when houses built under Indira's Abas Yojana in her locality would collapse because of conversion of 5" wall to 3" to make more profit people will accuse her only.

Because of politicisation of ruralites, economic and other stakes party sponsorship has become deterministic to election fate and party manifesto will be overriding both for campaign and role performance. However, a portion (12%) would contest next election even independently if required. Majority (92%) will prefer issue of village development at campaign. Though rural development is subsumed by party manifesto, if village development is highlighted so fervently it would strengthen the cause and capability both of PR and women.

SUMMARY

Right from attendance to participation in meetings women's performance in PR is really adjuvant. For the majority their points get reflected only occasionally in concrete decisions even though they constantly harp on their inclusion. They go to the extent of detecting and rectifying different forms of corruption. With varying degree majority acknowledge impend-

ing influence of lack of previous experience over effective role performance. Majority are satisfied with PR works and only 32% are not to pursue political career for various reasons.

While statutory reservation is the immediate gateway to political participation, it is also significant that 68% are to contest next election. Thus statistical majority are not baffled by domestication or dissonant socio political environment. They leastly be regarded as ornament to have just filled up the reserved posts or disinvestment. Reservation seems to have strengthened the impetus to be integrated and dedicated to the political cause, if not for gender development.

Any incursion to decision making is more easily said than done. Still certain broad trends can be perceived. Considering their first entry in politics and age old contemptible socio economic status, they are in no way docile, dummy or dispensable. Reservation has opened the avenue for their political participation and they are found to be determined to embrace and pursue the political career. This gets further credence by their feat at informal participation which dispels the traditional image of subserviency. However, besides elected positions they are unable to extend sway in other formal or informal center of influence or power like Market Committee, School Committee etc. Obviously with more exposure and experience they are likely to be invincible. However, their leadership has largely been accepted by society. Compared to others, Chairpersons as a group has clearly fumbled. Though they have higher socio political status, their folly is perhaps accentuated by not so scrupulously selected candidature (see Case Studies), discriminatory and non cooperating operational context, more demanding nature of responsibilities and requirement of more expertise. In overall consideration about 1/4 of women are not so triumphant in role performance. But party in role performance can not be expected even among the members belonging to stronger male counterpart.