



Grassroot Leadership and Political Empowerment of Women in Odisha

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Abstract

The strengthening democracy by ensuring participation of women in grassroot politics, inclusion in governance and social justice is a meaningful intervention. In Odisha, the participation of women in grassroot local self-governance increased following the constitutional provisions in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and the subsequent reservation policy in the Panchayati Raj Institutions. This study has analysed the role of grassroot leadership to the political empowerment of women in the state of Odisha and the level of women participation in decision making at the village level. It has also examined the social, economic, cultural and political factors influencing women's leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions in Odisha. It also discusses the challenges elected women representatives face, including patriarchy, lack of education, political awareness and economic independence and interference from male family members. Despite these barriers, women leaders have made important contributions in rural development, social welfare, health, education and community mobilization. This has been substantiated by the primary and secondary data collected through field surveys, interviews, government records, books and journals. The study argues that grassroot political participation has helped to build women's self-confidence and leadership abilities and has encouraged women participation in leadership. The study assesses the impact of decentralized governance on women empowerment. It concludes political reservation has helped in bringing women's participation. For empowerment, there is a need to train, politically educate, economically empower and institutionalize women. Strengthening women's grassroot leadership can achieve gender justice, democratic decentralization and sustainable rural development goals in Odisha.

Key Words: Local Government, Pressure Group, Constitution, Politics, Gender.

I. Introduction

Women involvement in local governments will contribute towards gender equality and allow their voice to be heard when decisions are being made. One key aspect of local governance is that this is the level of government closest to citizens; it is at this level that public services like health care, education, sanitation and infrastructure can be accessed. When women are active members of local government bodies, they help to provide a way in which development can be inclusive and democracy can be strengthened through grassroot participation. Governments are creating many different kinds of programmes, they are creating both educational programmes/scholarships and welfare programmes designed specifically to help women, especially those from lower-income backgrounds, pursue education and become empowered in society. By providing access to education, women can better understand social issues, know their rights, understand health care issues, get involved in their communities etc. They are able to benefit from continual growth & improvement in their communities. The relationship between children and older relatives. Women are now encouraged here in modern developed countries to get their education and establish careers prior to marriage; this has resulted in increased female self-esteem, increased independence and increased participation among females in social or political activities. In contrast, rural females face more difficulty than rural males with regard to accessing public services, employment opportunities, social protection programs and market access. Limited mobility to and participation in development processes has been caused by issues such as poor cultural norms regarding females, gender-based discrimination, security issues, poverty and lack of a proper standard form of identification. Therefore, working to improve women access to education, access to resources and access to local governing institutions is an important factor in the pursuit of



social justice, women's political empowerment and environmentally sustainable rural development.

Engaging a significant number of women in the decision-making process will have a considerable impact on the overall social and political systems we have today. The presence of women acting at all levels of the government can create positive results for the development of public policy and development programs. Additionally, as women engage in governance and develop public policy, their concerns related to education, healthcare, social security and gender justice will become more community-based issues. Female leaders can serve an important function of opposing inequalities, discrimination and injustice on behalf of women but also on behalf of all society. Participation in public life has an array of dimensions that fall under this large umbrella by engaging in the local community, influencing elected officials, taking part in decision making processes and assisting in policy-making and implementation. In order for women to be an effective leader and exercise their rights as a leader, they must be substantially represented at key points of decision-making. Further, women will require an appropriately sound education, political training and institutional support so that they are effective when fulfilling their accomplishments.

Grassroot women refer to women living in economically and socially disadvantaged rural or urban communities who often face various forms of marginalisation, vulnerability and exclusion in social, economic and political spheres. Despite these challenges, they possess a deep understanding of the realities, problems and needs of their communities. Through collective action, community participation and local leadership, these women develop strategies to overcome their vulnerabilities, improve the living conditions of their families and increase their participation in decision-making processes that directly affect their lives. Grassroot women play a significant role in promoting social change, community development and local governance. Their efforts in areas such as education, health, sanitation, environmental protection and livelihood generation contribute to sustainable development at the local level. Moreover, their initiatives and community-based practices are closely aligned with the objectives of the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to gender equality, poverty reduction, inclusive development and social justice.

The political participation of Indian women began during the freedom movement, where Mahatma Gandhi played a crucial role in creating political awareness among poor and illiterate women

and motivating them to join the struggle for independence. Political participation refers to the voluntary involvement of individuals in political activities such as voting, contesting elections, joining political parties and participating in legislative and decision-making processes. The Constitution of India guarantees universal adult franchise and provides equal opportunities for women to participate actively in politics and governance. Women participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions has significantly influenced their self-confidence, social recognition, mobility, leadership abilities and political aspirations. Their involvement in local governance has improved their status within the family and society while encouraging greater community participation and awareness. The growing recognition and respect received by elected women representatives are considered important indicators of the empowerment process among this historically disadvantaged group. Although debates continue regarding the extent of women's effective participation and leadership development, the implementation of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment has undoubtedly encouraged the emergence of rural women leaders. Since the Panchayat elections of 1994 and 1995, women representatives have gradually moved beyond the initial learning phase and demonstrated their ability to participate actively in governance despite facing social, economic and cultural barriers.

II. Review of Literature

The book **Panchayati Raj and Rural Development** written by Raj Kumar Khosla (2017), The Panchayati Raj institution is as old as civilisation. Gram Panchayat have always been a part of the Indian social fabric. The experiment of Panchayati Raj has been made to provide firm and deep roots to democracy and a broad base to the democratic structure so as to make the common man a real partner in the conduct of his own civic and political affairs. Mahatma Gandhi saw village panchayat as a potential instrument for the socio-economic and political transformation of the rural society. He was convinced that grater the power of the panchayat the better it is for the people. The primary objective of panchayat raj is to strengthen the socio-economic condition of the people at the grassroot level. It also aims to give power to the local people so that they can take an active role in the local governance. It also envisages active participation of all sections of people in the development programmes of the village. The author focuses on the link between rural development and Panchayati raj system in India. The concept of rural development implies an over-all growth of the people inhabiting



the rural society in the country. Here the notion of development is considered in a broader sense so as to include both economic and social well-being of the people.

The book **Panchayati Raj Experience in India** by K. Raman Pillai, R.K. Suresh Kumar and P. Sukumaran Nair (2016), explain most significant the Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) have come to say in India. Time has come to take stock of the experiences gained so far in the working of the PRIs in various states. Have we really achieved the goals set up by the 73rd constitutional amendment while implementing the programme of democratic decentralisation, if not, what are the impediments in achieving the goals. How best can we remove them based on our experience so far. What corrective steps can we take to put the programme on the right track. Here some of the leading experts on Panchayati raj in various states examines the achievements and failures of working the PRIs during the past fifteen years. Concrete suggestions are put forth for making the PRIs vibrant institutions for bringing about democratic decentralization in the true-sense of the term. The scholarly papers on the state of art of the PRIs in different states in India are presented systematically in this book.

The book **Panchayati Raj Institutions and Rural Management in India** by author Umesh Chandra Panigrahi (2015), explained No single political institution has a greater impact on rural life and development to-day than the Panchayati raj institutions in India. Gram panchayats which constitute the third layer of governance of the three-tier PRIs have very successfully integrated economic and infrastructure development of the villages with their social development where the focus is on education, health, provision of drinking water, sanitation and road connectivity housing and poverty alleviation. The imperative role of Panchayati Raj institution in the context of imparting responsibilities and mobilising resources has made a positive impact on better rural management in India. This decentralised participative approach helps us reduce development cost, increase perceived and actual benefits and increase awareness among people and help in resource mobilization. Unfortunately, there lies a gap between perceived and actual reality. As we know that the Panchayati Raj institution has to operate in the complex socio-cultural, educational, political and economic milieu of India village. Grassroot leadership and grassroot bureaucracy could not strengthen the local governance to the expected level of law makers in many parts of Indian states to a larger extent. So, its big challenge on the part of the government, policy makers and public to

overcome the emerging challenges and build a modern rural India.

The book **Right to Education in India** by Ajit Mondal and Jayanta Mete (2016), Education is globally recognised as a fundamental human right and considered as the bed-rock of all socio-economic development of the nation. Just as food, clothing and shelter are basic necessities for survival, education is equally essential for self-sustenance and growth. It is also an established fact that basic education improves the level of human well-being especially, with regard to life expectancy, infant mortality and nutritional status of children. Education is the fundamental requirement not only for the individual but also for the success of democratic system of government. But sadly, education especially elementary education has remained inaccessible to many and education system at this level is being run in many places all over India like factories where the failure of the India state more than six decades after independence to provide free and compulsory quality education to all children irrespective of all caste, creed, colour and other social discriminations must surely rank among the most dismal and significant failures of the development project in the country. After a continual demand of making the education a fundamental right from all corners, the government made the 86th amendment of the constitution of India. This amendment act has added a new article 21-A after article 21 which makes the right of education of children for the age group of 6-14 years as fundamental right.

Paban Kumar Moharana (2024), explain **Grass roots democracy and women empowerment in Odisha, India: A case study of Bahanaga block in Balasore district**. This research has examined the participation of women representatives in Panchayati raj institutions and to find out the means to strengthen democracy in the context of the area under study. This paper aims to make an attempt to highlight the performance of the women representatives and to identify the problems faced by them. However, research has found various challenges like illiteracy, poverty, interference of official members, upper caste dominance, proxy of the male members, etc. faced by women representatives. Empirical scientific method has been used in this research work. Multistage sampling method has been used for collecting primary data. The findings are that, most of the women are aware of their duties and responsibilities, yet few of them are not aware because of their background of illiteracy and poverty and depended upon their male members of their family. After all, paper also suggests some remedial measures the better empowerment of women in which will strengthen democracy in the periphery in a globalized



world. The objective of my study is to understand the impact of reservation for women so far as their capacity building in Panchayati raj institutions is concerned in the area under study. In this context, it is pertinent to state that reservation for women in Panchayati raj institutions is an attempt to grass roots democracy in Odisha. Hence, the focus of the study has been on working of democracy in Odisha, importance of empowerment for women in Panchayati raj institutions and its implementations, the provisions of 73rd amendment act of the constitution and the ground realities in the study area.

Objective

- To assess the leadership roles played by elected women representatives in rural governance.
- To examine the challenges faced by women leaders in local self-government institutions.

Research Gap

The reviewed literature highlights the importance of Panchayati Raj Institutions in rural development, democratic decentralization and women's participation in local governance. However, most studies primarily focus on the structural and administrative aspects of Panchayati Raj rather than the actual grassroot leadership and political empowerment of women in Odisha. Although some researchers have discussed the challenges faced by women representatives, such as illiteracy, poverty, caste dominance, male interference and proxy representation, there is limited empirical research on how these factors influence women's independent decision-making and leadership capacity. Furthermore, existing studies provide insufficient attention to the impact of reservation policies, education, training and capacity-building programmes on strengthening women's political participation and empowerment at the grassroot level. Most importantly, there is a lack of comprehensive regional studies in Odisha that examine the real experiences, challenges and contributions of elected women representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Therefore, the present study attempts to fill these gaps by analysing the role of grassroot leadership in the political empowerment of women in Odisha

III. Methodology

This study adopted both qualitative and quantitative research approaches. The survey method has employed to collect primary data from across

Odisha. An interview schedule has used as the main tool for data collection and a simple random sampling method has applied to select the respondents. In addition, secondary data have collected from various books, journal articles, newspapers and websites. The study conducts a survey of 300 village women Panchayat Presidents selected from different districts of Odisha. Data analysis has carried out using Microsoft Excel and the simple percentage method has used for interpreting the findings of the study.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Knowledge about Constitutional Amendment	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	200	66.6
No	100	33.3
Total	300	99.9

Source: Primary data

The table shows that out of 300 women Panchayat representatives in Odisha, 200 respondents (66.6%) have knowledge about Constitutional Amendments, while 100 respondents (33.3%) do not possess such knowledge. This indicates that a majority of the respondents are aware of Constitutional Amendments and related provisions of Panchayati Raj institutions. However, one-third of the respondents still lack adequate awareness, highlighting the need for further political education and training programmes among women representatives.

Election of the Respondents through 33% reservation policy	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	300	100
No	0	0.0
Total	300	100

Source: Primary data

The table reveals that all 300 respondents (100%) in Odisha were elected through the 33% reservation policy, while none of the respondents were elected without reservation benefits. This clearly indicates that the reservation policy has played a significant role in ensuring women's participation and representation in Panchayati Raj



institutions. The findings highlight the importance of constitutional reservation in promoting grassroots political empowerment of women.

Training program relating to Panchayati raj	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	300	100
No	0	0.0
Total	300	100

Source: Primary data

The table shows that all 300 respondents (100%) in Odisha have attended training programmes related to Panchayati Raj, while none of the respondents reported the absence of such training. This indicates that training programmes are widely implemented among women Panchayat representatives and play an important role in enhancing their administrative knowledge, leadership capacity and awareness regarding local governance and rural development.

IV. Finding

The findings of the study reveal that women's participation in Panchayati Raj institutions in Odisha has significantly increased due to the implementation of the reservation policy. All the respondents were elected through the 33 percent reservation system, which has played an important role in promoting women's political representation at the grassroots level. The study also found that a majority of the respondents possessed knowledge about Constitutional Amendments related to Panchayati Raj, indicating a moderate level of political awareness among women representatives. Furthermore, all respondents had attended Panchayati Raj training programmes, which helped enhance their leadership abilities, administrative skills and understanding of local governance. However, the study observed that a section of women representatives still lacked adequate constitutional and political awareness, which may affect their effective participation in decision-making processes. Overall, the findings suggest that Panchayati Raj institutions have contributed positively towards women's political empowerment and leadership development in Odisha.

V. Conclusion

The study concludes that Panchayati Raj institutions have played a significant role in promoting women's political participation and grassroots leadership in Odisha. The implementation of the 33 percent reservation policy has created opportunities for rural women to participate in local governance and democratic decision-making processes. The findings reveal that all respondents were elected through the reservation system, which highlights the importance of constitutional provisions in ensuring women's representation in politics. The study also found that a majority of women representatives possessed knowledge about Constitutional Amendments and Panchayati Raj institutions, reflecting a gradual increase in political awareness among rural women.

The research further shows that training programmes related to Panchayati Raj have contributed positively towards enhancing the leadership skills, administrative knowledge, and confidence of women representatives. All respondents had participated in such training programmes, which enabled them to understand their duties and responsibilities more effectively. Women representatives are now actively involved in village development activities, welfare programmes and local governance. Their participation has strengthened democratic decentralisation and improved the functioning of grassroots institutions in Odisha.

The study also identifies several challenges faced by women representatives, including lack of higher education, limited political experience, economic dependency and social barriers rooted in patriarchal traditions. These factors sometimes restrict their independent decision-making and effective participation in governance. Therefore, the study suggests the need for continuous political education, awareness programmes and capacity-building initiatives to strengthen women's leadership and empowerment. Overall, the study concludes that Panchayati Raj institutions have become an important platform for women's empowerment and democratic participation, contributing significantly to rural development and social transformation in Odisha.

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