

Assessing the women empowerment in terms of the extent of participation in political activities at North 24-Parganas district of West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

In West Bengal the three tiers Panchayat Raj system empowers the women to raise their voice towards the human development in general and women development in particular. The present study was conducted with a view to assess the women panchayat leader's participation in political activities with the help of some socio-personal and socio political attributes of the women leaders. For this the present study was conducted in the block Barasat I under North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. The District and block were selected purposively. Complete enumeration technique was followed in case of selecting the gram panchayat and the respondents from the selected gram panchayats. The total number of gram panchayats under the selected block was nine and the women gram panchayat leaders were sixty who were altogether selected as the respondents. The women participation in political activities was operationalised and considered as predicted variable and the independent variables like age, education, family type, family size, economic status, democratic mindedness, information use index, political ideology and political efficiency of the women panchayat leaders were operationalised and considered as the predictor variables. The data were collected with the help of structured interview schedule by personal contact method. The collected data was processed into the statistical tools like coefficient of correlation, multiple regression analysis and path analysis for drawing conclusion for the present study. The study had revealed that extent of participation in political activities of elected women leaders of gram panchayat is positively and significantly correlated with their education, economic status, democratic mindedness, information use index, political ideology and political efficiency. Democratic mindedness, information use index and political efficiency of the elected women had positively contributed towards characterising their political activities and their family type had negatively impacted towards characterising their political activities. All predictor variables together had explained 82 percent of total variation embedded with the predicted variable, extent of women participation in political activities. The variable education had exerted highest direct and indirect effect on extent of participation in political activities over other 8 antecedent variables. The variable democratic mindedness had channeled the highest indirect effect of as many as 7 antecedent variables which ultimately proved the importance of democratic mindedness in case of any fare political activity.

Key words: Democratic mindedness, women empowerment, women participation in politics

By the middle of the last century, the concept of women's empowerment had become a burning issue in the social consciousness especially in the developing nations. However, the history of the location of women in the empowerment process in the developing countries has not justified the ideas of empowerment as a process of enhancing people's well-being in line with the human development approach. The process of "development in the developing countries has, by and large, marginalised women and deprived them of the control over resources and authority within the household, without lightening the heavy burden of their 'traditional duties' (Afshar, 1991). In the last five decades, the concept of women empowerment has undergone a sea change from welfare oriented approach to equity approach. It has been understood as the process by which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. Empowerment particularly includes control over resources and ideology. According to Sen and Batliwala (2000) it leads to a growing intrinsic capability- greater self confidence, and an inner transformation of one's consciousness that enables one to overcome external barrier. Since independence, the Government of India has been making various efforts to empower women. In

various plan periods, the issues regarding women empowerment has been given priority. From fifth five year plan onwards there has been a remarkable shift from welfare oriented approach of women empowerment to development oriented approach. The National Commission for women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights' of women. The 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution of India provided opportunity to women to take part in active politics. The year 2001 was declared as the year of women's empowerment for enhancing their status. To achieve the goal, the government introduced different programmes, identified strategies, established different institutions and made various legal provisions. Women's political participation is one of the important issues in the context of empowerment. In conventional analysis it means activities related to electoral politics like voting, campaigning, holding party office and contesting election. But in broader sense it encompasses all voluntary actions intended to influence the making of public policies, the administration of public affairs and the choice of political leaders at all levels of government. Political interventions by women of India today range from movement for peace and good governance to protest against dowry, rape, domestic violence, food

adulteration, price rise etc. (Desai *et al.*, 2007). In West Bengal the three tiers panchayat raj system empowers the women to raise their voice towards the human development in general and women development in particular. In such a research environment the present paper has assessed the women empowerment through panchayat raj institutions in terms of the women participation in the political activities.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study was conducted with a view to assess the women panchayat leader's participation in political activities with the help of some socio-personal and socio political attributes of the women leaders. For this the present study was conducted in the block Barasat I under North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal due to the opportunity of getting ample number of responsive women panchayat leaders. The District and block were selected purposively. Complete enumeration technique was followed in case of selecting the gram panchayat and the respondents from the selected gram panchayats. The total number of gram panchayats under the selected block was nine and the women gram panchayat leaders were sixty who were altogether selected as the respondents. The pilot study was conducted before going to the final data collection. The women participation in political activities was operationalised and considered as predicted variable for the study and the independent variables like age, education, family type, family size, economic status, democratic mindedness, information use index, political ideology and political efficiency of the women panchayat leaders were operationalised and considered as the predictor variables for the

present study. The data were collected with the help of structured interview schedule by personal contact method. The collected data were processed into the statistical tools like coefficient of correlation, multiple regression analysis and path analysis for drawing conclusion for the present study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents the coefficient of correlation between the extent of participation in political activities and 9 independent variables. It revealed that extent of participation in political activities (Y) of elected women leaders of gram panchayat was positively and significantly correlated with their education (X₂), economic status (X₅), democratic mindedness (X₆), information use index (X₇), political ideology (X₈) and political efficiency (X₉).

Women members having higher education can more easily take over responsibilities as panchayat representatives. Women having higher economic status are more suitable to occupy stronger political positions. Women members having more information use index are able to participate more in the work of panchayat. Women members with more political ideology and political efficiency participate more in panchayat related activities. Higher level of democratic mindedness helps the women member in case of involving themselves in panchayat activity to render the service for social justice to the people.

It also revealed that the extent of participation in political activities was negatively and significantly correlated with age (X₁) and family size (X₄). That means women having more age and big family participate less in panchayat work.

Table 1: Correlation coefficient between the independent variable and extent of participation in political activities (Y)

Variables	Correlation coefficient
Age (X ₁)	- 0.43**
Education (X ₂)	0.63**
Family type (X ₃)	0.193 (NS)
Family size (X ₄)	- 0.40**
Economic status (X ₅)	0.65**
Democratic mindedness (X ₆)	0.60**
Information use index (X ₇)	0.61**
Political ideology (X ₈)	0.73**
Political efficiency (X ₉)	0.56**

*Note: Tabulated value of correlation coefficient at 0.01 and 0.05 level for 58 d.f. are 0.330 and 0.254 respectively and ** and * significant at P = 0.01 and P = 0.05 respectively, NS – Non-significant*

From table 2, it can be concluded that extent of participation in political activities (Y) is explained by the variables democratic mindedness (X₆), information use index (X₇) and political efficiency (X₉) with their positive contribution towards enhancing their political activities (Y) and variable family type (X₃) with its negative impacts towards

reducing the magnitude of their political activities (Y). It reveals the fact that women having single family get more time to participate in political activities of Panchayat. All predictor variables (X) together had explained 82 percent of total variation embedded with the predicted variable, extent of women participation in political activities (Y).

Table 2: Multiple regression between extent of participation in political activities (Y) with causal variables

Dependent	Reg. equation (stepwise)	R ²	Adj. R ²	SE
Y	$Y = 3.07 + 0.15 X_6^{**} + 0.35 X_7^{**} + 0.92 X_9^{**} - 1.11 X_3^{**}$	0.82**	0.81	1.52

Note : ** : P < 0.01 and * : P < 0.05

Table 3 represents the path analysis to explain direct, indirect and residual effect of antecedent variables on consequent variable i.e., extent of participation in political activities (Y). The result reveals that variable education (X₂) exerts highest direct and indirect effect on extent of participation in political activities over other 8 antecedent variables. The variable democratic mindedness (X₆) had channeled the highest indirect effect of as many as seven antecedent variables which ultimately proved the importance of democratic mindedness in case of any fare political activity.

and characterization. In our developing country this issue has been properly dealt with from the recent past by giving the voice to the women through the political institution. The panchayati raj institution incorporates the women member to empower them by involving themselves in the political activities. The present paper had properly examined the issue of participation in political activities through panchayats towards the empowerment of the women community for women development. For planning and implementation of women empowerment strategy in the rural context the participation of women in political activities can be considered in the light of their age, education, political ideology, democratic mindedness, family type and information use index.

In the changed global perspective women empowerment is a burning issue for its exploration

Table 3: Path analysis (Y) (extent of participation in political activities vs the causal variables)

Antecedent variables	Total effect (r)	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Substantial indirect effect		
				I	II	III
Age (X ₁)	-0.430	-0.245	-0.185	-0.230 (X ₆)	-0.148 (X ₉)	0.142 (X ₂)
Education (X ₂)	0.630	-0.263	0.893	0.172 (X ₁)	0.156 (X ₆)	0.098 (X ₉)
Family type (X ₃)	0.193	-0.206	0.399	-0.077 (X ₆)	0.073 (X ₂)	-0.064 (X ₇)
Family size (X ₄)	-0.400	-0.136	-0.264	-0.135 (X ₆)	-0.125 (X ₉)	0.098 (X ₇)
Economic status (X ₅)	0.650	0.152	0.498	-0.186 (X ₆)	0.163 (X ₉)	-0.128 (X ₂)
Democratic mindedness (X ₆)	0.600	0.255	0.345	0.221 (X ₁)	0.164 (X ₉)	-0.124 (X ₂)
Information use index (X ₇)	0.610	0.168	0.442	0.202 (X ₆)	-0.116 (X ₂)	0.102 (X ₉)
Political ideology (X ₈)	0.730	-0.071	0.801	0.232 (X ₆)	0.213 (X ₁)	0.175 (X ₉)
Political efficiency (X ₉)	0.560	0.250	0.810	0.169 (X ₆)	0.145 (X ₁)	0.099 (X ₅)

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