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Women involvement in grassroot level politics in north-west India: Anthropological aspects

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Abstract:

Strengthening women's participation in political institutions has received more attention since the last two decades, which are gradually strengthening their participation in grassroot politics. Nevertheless, rural women still come across a variety of difficulties in political settings. There was a need to study these barriers which women face in decision-making processes of politics, particularly in a patriarchal minded state like Rajasthan. The purpose of the present study was to assess the challenges faced by the women in participating in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) of village Indrapura, Rajasthan, North-West India. The sample size chosen for the mixed research was 50 and the respondents who had ancestral roots in the village were considered eligible for the study. Primary data was collected first-hand from the village by personal interviews, participant observations, focus group discussions and also by a semi-structured questionnaire. Results showed 91.17 percent of the female respondents were literate, but still they were not aware about the political scenarios of the village. Findings inflicted only 31.4 percent women had contested election, while 68.5 percent of women have never contested any election. It was observed that women had limited access to political information, which were results of discriminatory social norms and patriarchal mindsets in the village. The study recommends the policy-makers to focus on education and build capacity-building program to involve more women at decision-making processes and grassroot level politics in North-west regions of India.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), grassroot politics, patriarchy, women participation, gender equality.

Introduction: Men in power have often taken advantage of the position of women in the society. In Indian societies, where patriarchy is followed, there is a long history of women being suppressed and pushed to the corner by the people sitting in power. In India, a significant portion of the population are rural women. Their existence is characterised by toil and hardship, without even the most basic comforts. There are several stereotypes that are influenced by culture that prevent women from participating [1]. Despite continuing to carry out household, agricultural, and construction tasks in rural areas, it is inferred from

previous literatures that women are often not allowed to engage in any decision-making and economically beneficial activity of the society [2-6]. Although, Institutions under the Panchayati Raj have been designed by the Constitution to promote social, political, and economic development in rural regions of the country and the designers emphasised that rural women should play a vital role in development as well as being recipients of it, the reality is often far from of what it should be, as significant gender gaps exists regarding access to employment, religion and education [6, 7]. All initiatives to improve the status of women in society essentially revolve around including them in the political process and ensuring their economic independence in the society, but hinder due to the concept of patriarchy and religious and social stigmas that exist within the rural areas of the country. Women in India haven't been significantly included in institutional politics over the years, but changes have been perceived in the last two decades due to transition in socio-economic and political scenarios in the nation (Phukan, 2010; Das, 2014). As a consequence, there was a great need to investigate the challenges they encounter in managing grassroots political decision-making processes in anthropological contexts. The current cross-sectional study intends to analyze the barriers that women experience when engaging in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the hamlet of Indrapura, Rajasthan, North-West India. The study highlight the issues faced by women of the village in participating in PRIs, their opinions in overcoming those challenges and how PRIs affect their lives in shaping their authority in a village of a state renowned for its strong patriarchal viewpoints.

Positive findings were recorded for the participation of women in parts of South India. Ban and Rao (2008) assessed the impact of women's reservations. Sample was selected using a strategy designed to control for path dependencies and cultural factors while making state comparisons, from two districts in Andhra Pradesh—Medak and Chittoor; three in Karnataka—Bidar, Kolar, and Dakshin Kanada; two in Kerala—Kasargod and Palakkad; and two in Tamil Nadu—Dharmapuri and Coimbatore. It was concluded that women presidents never perform worse than men. A notable exception is in their interaction with higher-level officials, where they do not do as well as men. Less than 20% of women have a desire to contest for governance by their husbands; instead, political leaders are more likely to persuade them. Women presidents are powerful. They are more likely to be knowledgeable because they are at the upper end of the spectrum of women and their involvement in politics, have more political experience, and make more money than their counterparts.

Materials and methods: The present cross-sectional study was conducted in village Indrapura, Jhunjhunu district (now Nim Ka Thana), Rajasthan, North-West India. 50 participants were recorded during the course of the research, who had ancestral roots and currently were a part of the village. Age groups between 25 and 70+ were considered as the study demanded asking questions about the perception of women in decision-making processes in the village. The universe of the present study is in Indrapura village of Jhunjhunu district of the state of Rajasthan. 25 households were selected other than educational and political institutions of the village. Most of the participants selected were

female, keeping in frame the aim of the research. Random purposive sampling and snowball sampling methodologies were adopted for selecting the sample respondents. Random respondents who could provide valuable insights were selected and approached to collect data, on the basis of study objectives. The respondents were asked to provide locations from where similar data can be obtained, and based on their references new respondents were approached. Both methods were essential for researching hard-to-reach households of the village. Primary data was collected first-hand from the village by personal interviews, participant observations, focus group discussions and also by a semi-structured questionnaire. Moreover, the rural women of the village were interviewed regarding their perception of women empowerment in political contexts. Photographs were used to infer data and assess its significance. Secondary data were collected from the official publications of the *zilla parishad* in nearby Udaipurwati town. Other sources for collecting secondary data were the records of the department of rural development and Panchayati Raj, records at the BDO, census data of 2011, books, research articles, and other administrative reports.

Findings and discussion: The present research vows to observe and evaluate the representation of women in the Panchayati Raj structures in the hamlet of Indrapura, in anthropological aspects. The political system is very rigidly followed in Indrapura and other adjacent villages. The population affects the number of *gram panchayat* members, which varies from village to village. There are ward *panch* members, an *up-sarpanch*, and a *sarpanch*, the chief of the *panch*. Upon investigating, it was found that the *sarpanch* was a female and was sentenced to jail in charges of corruption. In the village there are 11 wards, and every ward have a ward *panch*. Some of the major operatives of the *gram panchayat* are LCD (Lower Division Clerk) and operator. These *panchayats* are headed by a VDO (Village Development Officer), who heads over more than 500 *gram panchayats* in total. There are a total of 13 members elected in *Gram Sabha*, from which 7 are female members and 6 are male members. The *sarpanch*, *up-sarpanch*, lower division clerk and 5 ward *panch* members have been officially registered for females whereas other ward *panch* members are males. On the entry, the name of *Sarpanch* and *Village Development Officer* was found to be written with their contact numbers. Panchayat meetings are held two times in a month. Women members were found attending very less *panchayat* meetings. According to some of the elder female respondents from the village, elected women representatives do not attend the *panchayat* meetings regularly. In their place, male members of the respective families of the women represent them. Participants opined that that all the work and responsibilities of the *sarpanch* is done by the father-in-law of *sarpanch*. Similar scene could be observed with the post of *up-sarpanch*, who was a female member, but in *panchayat* meetings her husband came to represent and looked after all the responsibilities. It was also observed that male toilets were open for use and the female were locked. Upon asking, the people in-charge of the *Panchayat Ghar* refused to answer the question.

Kinship and family patterns showed high prevalence of joint families with males being the sole decision maker of the family, and females were often restricted to household

chores, and under the supervision of their male counterparts. Women were found to be actively involved in farming and animal husbandry. The freedom of women in gaining knowledge and coming in contact to the outside world was often restricted to a bare minimum, due to patriarchy that existed in the households of Indrapura, although high literacy rates were evidenced among women in the village. 91.17 percent of the women respondents were found to be literate. Women had completed primary, upper primary, and secondary, higher secondary, graduation, and post-graduation (**Table 1**). The data inferred 17.1 percent women had access to primary education and 17.1 percent to upper primary, 14.2 percent secondary, 8.5 percent in higher secondary, 20 percent graduate and 14.2 percent post-graduate, which concluded that Indrapura had a good educational system. The drawbacks thus may be attributed to the existing social stigmas and the patriarchal mindsets in the village, so women's participation in decision-making systems were often compromised.

Table 1: Percentage of educational degrees and illiteracy among the women respondents in Indrapura village

Education level	Percentage (%)
Primary	17.1
Upper Primary	17.1
Secondary	14.2
Higher Secondary	8.5
Graduate	20
Post-Graduate	14.2
Illiterate	8.5

Investigations revealed the presence of self-help groups (SHGs) in the village. There are some women who were working under *Rajeevika* or RGAVP (Rajasthan Grameen Aajeevika Vikas Parishad). According to some respondents, this project aimed to transform the lives of poor and weaker women section and empower women financially in rural areas. Among women respondents, some of them were found employed under *Rajeevika*. Eight self-help groups in the village were found and each one consisted of ten women members. Every group had a specific name like *Karni mata group*, *Laxmi bai group*, *Meera bai group*, *Shri ram group*, etc. The female leaders of these groups were involved actively and made significant efforts to educate about women's rights. They held meetings to make other women understand about the functioning of *Rajeevika*, and urged other women to join these groups. Majority of respondents felt that they should be given a significant place in political field and grassroot level decision-making processes. They were satisfied with 33% of the reservation for women in political scenarios while some were not. Their participation in PRI will help to empower them and also, but positive improvements were opined by the

female respondents for getting 33% of reservation. According to some women respondents, if more women members in Panchayati Raj Institutions were inoculated, it could be an advantage for other women as they could connect easily to women members about their problems as it could be comfortable for them. They strongly believed that not only in village *panchayat* elections but women should participate in politics from state to national level. They also felt it was essential for them to have family guidance and inspiration if one wants to participate in *Panchayat's* elections, but were wary of the restrictions that were imposed on them by the male members of the village. Some respondents strongly felt the administration was not making enough efforts to increase women participation in PRIs. Lesser education level was cited as another reason for less participation of women and opined that education was a foundation for political awareness and felt it was difficult for those women who were illiterate to participate in PRI. Some of them also believed that economic position was responsible.

Female participants believed that participation of women in politics has significantly increased in recent times and maximum of them had opined that it was essential for them to participate in *panchayat's* elections for the upliftment of status of women and political development. According to some respondents, since the last two decades in Indrapura village, representatives of *Saini* caste have occupied the position of *Sarpanch* and other major positions in the Panchayat office. The present female *Sarpanch* also belong to *Sainis* and is at power for more than two and half years. Upon questioning, some of the respondents mentioned that the caste which has greater population count in the village, takes part in the decision-making processes of the village and possess power to select people according to their choice, which is usually from their caste. It was also observed that female *Swamis* had less power to make decisions in the village, in comparison to the *Sainis* as the representatives of the Panchayat office belongs to *Sainis*. In the *Gram Sabha* of Indrapura, there are total eleven ward members, one *up-sarpanch* and one *sarpanch*. Amongst these elected members a good number of female representatives have been observed. Indrapura evidenced a female *Sarpanch* for the first time, who was found heading since past two and half years. The *up-Sarpanch* and five ward members were also females. Under the three-tire system of PRIs, the active engagement of female elected members in village *panchayat* was determined by taking into account their awareness score and involvement score in various activities. **Table 2** depict the involvement of women in PRIs and other decision-making processes in the village. The reason for political participation was an important indication, and it was discovered that 62.8 percent of women engaged in active politics owing to their husbands and family's coercion. However, just 11.4 percent of women participate in politics because of relatives involved in politics respectively, and 25.7 percent of women entered in decision-making processes and political engagements because of self- consciousness (**Figure 1**). When the female respondents were questioned about their participation in voting in the elections during the study, it was observed that 77.1 percent of the women engaged in voting and 22.8 percent women never took part in elections, as illustrated in **Table 3**. It was observed that there were some women did not

possessed a Voter identity card, due to which they were not able to vote in the elections. Few made their Voter Identity cards after marriage but hadn't cast their vote yet, and some were not interested in politics, so they did not take part in elections.

Table 2: Reasons behind participation of women respondents in PRI's and other decision-making processes

Attribute	Category	Percentage (%)
Reason behind political participation	Self-esteemed	25.7
	Relatives in politics	11.4
	Husband and family enforcement	62.8

Figure 1: Pie chart representing the reasons behind political participation of women

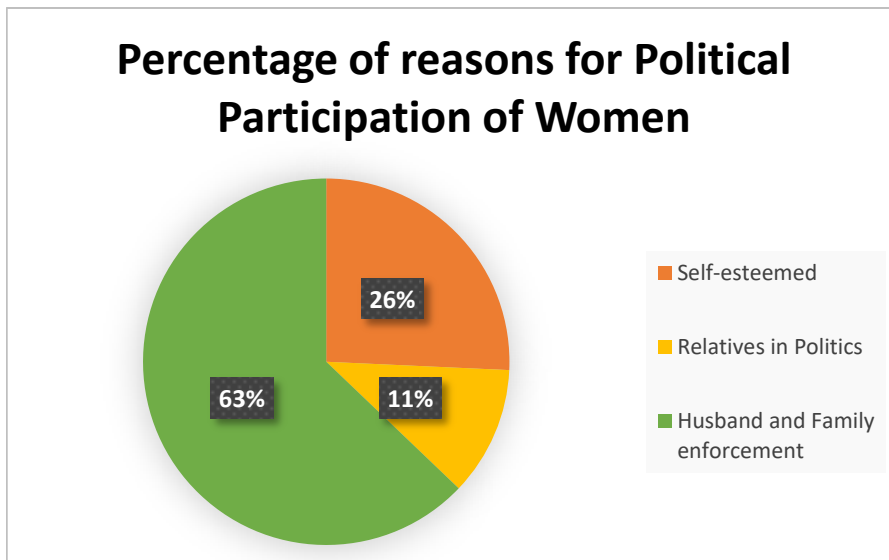


Table 3: Percentage of participation in voting by women respondents

Attribute	Category	Percentage
Participating in casting vote	Yes	77.1
	No	22.8

Even though women respondents possessed a high literacy rate, they lacked political understanding. Most of the respondents do not have a background in politics. This resulted in lack of interest and knowledge for the female respondents. It was observed that some of

them weren't even aware about the 33% reservation for women in PRIs. Women who were literate and were aware about the percentage of reservation were involved in decision-making spheres, supported and encouraged the other participants to become independent. Few literate women respondents, who were not involved in PRIs, were found to have joined SHGs (self-help groups). The level of awareness about elected women representatives (EWRs) among villagers often correlated with the overall education level in the community. Illiteracy and lack of access to information hindered awareness and understanding. According to some female respondents, they bear a lot of responsibility due to social expectations. Thus, it was difficult for them to devote enough time and effort to their elected posts. Pervasive patriarchal attitudes and gender bias compromised the legitimacy and authority of women in *panchayats*. Women in leadership positions encountered resistance and lack of support from their male counterparts and fellow community members due to traditional gender norms and expectations. It was noticed that maximum female members of the village agreed with the decisions made by the male members of their house like husband, father-in-law and brother. The final decision is taken by the male members of the household. Few male members encouraged them in engaging in PRIs and other decision-making processes, the numbers are fewer. For example, according to the *Up-sarpanch*, after getting elected her husband took advantage of her post by keeping her out of important meetings and attending the meetings in place of EWRs and also took major decisions in place of her. The decision of whom they want to vote, was also taken by the male members, which reflected patriarchal dominance in decision-making processes in the village.

Thus, findings from the present research revealed that the participation of rural women in Panchayati Raj in Jhunjhunu district of Rajasthan was similar to women's status in other parts of India. Although literacy rate in the village was high, and elected *Sarpanch* and *Up-sarpanch* were female, patriarchal mindsets and social norms often restricted them for engaging in political participations and decision-making processes. Findings of the present research can be compared with similar researches conducted in various states of the country. Chattopadhyay and Duflo in 2004 [4] voiced female presidents of unreserved *gram panchayats*, female presidents of reserved GPs are less likely to be literate, less educated, less politically savvy, younger, and poorer. They also postulated that female reserved GP presidents were likely to be obedient to local elites since they appear to be socially and economically disadvantaged. Positive findings were recorded for the participation of women in parts of South India as Ban and Rao in 2008 [10] assessed the impact of women's reservations to conclude that women presidents never perform worse than men. More researches with anthropological interests in similar topics should be conducted especially in patriarchal states like Rajasthan, where the concept of women empowerment is questionable. The present research recommends in promoting women empowerment through education and provide equal educational opportunities to women, focusing on political literacy and awareness about PRIs. This will help women of Indrapura understand their rights and responsibilities, enabling them to actively participate in decision-making

processes. The present study also suggests to conduct training and need based capacity-building programs by involving anthropological techniques like FGDs (focus group discussions) and IEC (Information, Education and Communication) methods to organize trainings and workshops specifically tailored for the women of Indrapura. These programs should focus on building skills such as public speaking, negotiation, policy formulation, and implementation. This would enhance women's confidence and effectiveness in fulfilling their roles, and challenge societal norms and gender bias by addressing patriarchal norms and biases that hinder women's participation in political affairs in the village and promote gender equality and challenge traditional beliefs that restricted women's involvement in decision-making processes in the past.

Conclusion: The present study conducted in Indrapura, Rajasthan, North-West India aimed to assess the participation of women in the PRI and decision-making processes and their awareness about the political structures of PRIs. Findings revealed that the participation of rural women in Panchayati Raj in Jhunjhunu district of Rajasthan is similar to women's status in other parts of India. Although, education level was found to be better as compared to similar investigation conducted on other states, social norms, patriarchal mindsets and lack of awareness about PRIs were one of the key factors behind women's lack of participation in political arena of the village and beyond. The study recommends there is a strong need for training and capacity-building for women of North-West India in leadership positions, to address patriarchal norms and gender bias, and promote women's contributions and participation in decision-making processes.

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