

EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTION: A STUDY ON WOMEN REPRESENTATIVE IN NAMSAI DISTRICT, ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Chow Ananda Chiring * B Komow **

INTRODUCTION:

The term 'Empowerment' has become the central theme in contemporary discourse on democratic development, aiming to uplift the marginalized groups especially the women facing socio-economic discrimination. Recently, the idea of women empowerment has got the attention of the policy makers. In simpler terms, with growing concern for decentralization and participatory government, empowering of women to participate in the grassroots' level had become the vital concern in the society.

In a societal context, 'empowerment' can be interpreted at two levels i.e. individual and community. It is generally an interaction between the individual and their environment (Das, 2014). As society evolves, different perspectives on women's empowerment have come to light. Liberals interpret the term as women's decision-making skills, enabling them to achieve equal status in a society where antediluvian practices prevail. The Marxist perspective advocates for the emancipation of women by uprooting the capitalism (Sen and Dutta, 2016) while the Subaltern perspective refer to the women experiences and dilemmas in subaltern groups, where their voice remain unheard in the patriarchal society. Mahatma Gandhi, 'the father of Nation - India expressed that the nation's development is closely connected to the status of women within the state. Thus he sought to address the causes responsible for women's subordinate status and also urge the women to challenge social barriers and actively participate in public affairs that hold significance for their lives and society. That is to help the women to become self-reliant and independent for building equality in the society (Das, 2014).

Women's empowerment is a gradual process that aims to elevate their marginalized status by enabling strategic decision-making, as emphasized in the Sustainable Development Goals. Historically, women have been instrumental in shaping the society alongside men and their equal participation would further pace up the country's socio-economic and political

* Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Arunachal University of Studies, Namsai, Arunachal Pradesh, India

** Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Arunachal University of Studies, Namsai, Arunachal Pradesh, India

development. Governments and stakeholders have been initiating to create pathways for women's political participation. The Indian Government has taken a historical step by passing 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 which ensure 33 per cent reservation of seats guaranteed for women in local self-government i.e. Panchayati Raj Institutions. Politics and empowerment are deeply intertwined as it can ensures equitable women representation in decision-making bodies and encourages their active participation in policy formulation, transforming marginalization into empowerment and fostering a balanced society (Das, 2014). A similar scenario could be seen in Arunachal Pradesh, India. The state attained its statehood on February 20, 1987.

Arunachal Pradesh, one of India's north-eastern states, is famous for its breathtaking landscapes and untapped natural resources. The state's population, predominantly tribal, is approximately 13.83 lakhs as per the 2011 census of India. It is worth mentioning that even during the British rule in India, the state had a non-interfering policy of the British in their culture and thus uninterrupted and remained isolated (Swain, 2012). Even after India's Independence, the scenario remains similar until the Chinese Aggression in 1962, which led to various initiatives aimed at accelerating the state's development. Each tribe is primarily governed by the traditional village council. Even though the women in the state are seen enjoying considerable freedom and actively contribute alongside men. However, they face underrepresentation and societal suppression in such traditional system. A four members Committee under the chairmanship of Dying Erin was constituted to examine the political scenario of the state which was known as North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). Based on the Committee Report in 1965, it strongly recommended the introduction of PRI. It highlighted that the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) would unify the tribal communities within the state, fostering integration with the rest of the nation. In essence, to establish a consistent political framework across the state (Gyati, 2011). Accordingly, the Panchayati Raj Institutions was inaugurated by the then Governor of Assam on 3 December, 1969 in the state (NEFA) with four-tier system. Thus, democratic decentralization at the local level was established to overcome the limitations of the customary political institutions (Saga, 2014). Moreover, in accordance with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992, Arunachal Pradesh enacted the Arunachal Pradesh Panchayat Raj Act of 1997, establishing a three-tier system. The year 2003 saw the first election held under this act, followed by subsequent elections in 2008 and 2013. In 2020, the Panchayat elections in Arunachal Pradesh were conducted under the 2018 Act, which introduced a two-tier system by eliminating the intermediate Anchal Samiti (Dubey, 2021). Thus, PRI is regarded as having significantly enhanced opportunities for women to engage in and represent themselves within grassroots decision-making processes, thereby playing a crucial role in their political empowerment.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Vandana Upadhyay and Deepak K. Mishra (2005) highlighted the different challenges faced by the tribal women of Arunachal Pradesh such as demographic context as well as due to interaction between the tradition and modern institution in the society.

Shashi Kaul and Shradha Sahni (2009) pointed out the issues and challenges of women in the districts of Jammu and Kathua. It emphasized that, despite the positive outcomes, women are now treated and respected equally to men in society. However, women still face male domination even after being elected in their respective fields, and they are not free to make their own decisions..

Gomo Karbak (2010) examined the scenario of the PRI in West Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh by understanding the socio-economic condition of the representatives as well as whether the PRI is an instrument to foster development of society especially in the rural area.

Satarupa Pal (2014) highlighted the insufficient representation of women in the politics globally. The author highlighted that despite Constitutional support for women representation in India, there is still hindrances during the process for effective implementation.

Ashwani Sharma and Sannia Handa (2022) expressed the view that Panchayati Raj has enable the women participate and take up the responsibility in the administrative and political aspects. Thus, encourage the qualified women to participate to improve the societal standing of women or uplifting women as a whole.

Amit Anand(2024) mentioned that historical and socio-economic factors considered women have inferior status in the society. Thus, the author expressed the important of understanding the historical and cultural gender inequality to overcome such discrepancy in the present society.

It can be inferred from the above literature that PRI is playing a vital role in empowering the women in the society. It pointed out how historical and socio-economic aspect of the representative impacts the effectiveness of the PRI. It also highlighted those women still do face various challenges to participate and represent effectively in the decision-making process besides the domination of men in the political field. It was found that the arrangement for women to represent in the PRI enhance the empowering process of women in the society. Thus, the present paper tried to examine the participation and women representation in the PRI in Namsai District of Arunachal Pradesh. The study aims to investigate the representation of Women leaders in the PRI of Namsai District, Arunachal Pradesh. It further examinethe opinion of the women representatives about the position of women in the society and also on various aspects of PRI in the district.

Brief Profile of the Study Area: District Namsai, Arunachal Pradesh

The Namsai district was bifurcated from the Lohit district in 2014 with its district headquarter at Namsai. It is in the eastern region of Arunachal Pradesh. The region is primarily inhabited by the Tai-Khamti and Singpho tribes, together with other communities such as Adi, Galo, Mishing, Ahoms, Adivasis, Deories, Kacharies, and Morans. 2011 Census of India reveals that the entire population of the district is 95,950, with 49,856 males and 46,094 females.

Table 1: Profile of the Gram Panchayat in Namsai District, 2020.

Sl. No	Name of Gram Panchayat	Total No. of Gram Panchayat	No. of Gram Panchayat Segments	No. of Men GPM	No. of Women GPM	No. of Male GPC	No. of Female GPC
1	Lekang	21	96	42	33	14	07
2	Upper Lekang	22	117	58	37	13	09
3	Nigroo	20	82	34	28	07	13
4	Namsai	34	164	74	55	09	25
5	Chongkham	19	114	46	48	10	09
	Total	116	573* Men - 307 (53.8) Women – 264 (46.2)	254 (56.0%)	201 (44.0%)	53 (46.0%)	63 (54.0%)

*Note: Gram Panchayat Members (GPM) and Gram Panchayat Chairperson (GPC). *2 GPM seats vacant*

Source: As per latest data 2024 from Official Data of Panchayati Raj Department, DC Office, Namsai.

The data in Table 1 highlighted the detailed outline of the division of Blocks, Segments and Members and Chairpersons of the Gram Panchayat in the Namsai district. The Gram Panchayat of the district has five blocks viz. Lekang, Upper Lekang, Nigroo, Namsai, and Chongkham, with a total of 116 Gram Panchayats. Namsai Block has the highest number of Gram Panchayats with 34 followed by Upper Lekang with 22 and Chongkham with 19 Gram Panchayats. With regards to segments, there are 573 Gram Panchayat Segments in the district however two seats are vacant. There are in total 264 women representative i.e. 46.2 per cent which is more than reserved seats for women in the Panchayat. Furthermore, women Gram Panchayat Chairpersons (63 i.e. 54.0 per cent) are more than that of the men Gram Panchayat Chairpersons (53. i.e. 46.0 per cent). Thus, it is evident that in the Namsai District, women representation in the panchayat are more than reserved seats for women which shows a positive of women coming forward to participate and represent in the grassroots level.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

Namsai District of Arunachal Pradesh was considered as study area for this paper. The District is divided in five Blocks for Panchayat i.e. Lekang, Upper Lekang, Nigroo, Namsai and Chongkham. For Primary data, 50 elected women representative were selected based on stratified sampling, i.e. 10 elected women representative from each circle. Furthermore, the 10 elected women representative were further selected randomly.

For the study, a sample of 50 respondents of women representatives were classified on age variable, 10 respondents were between 21-30 years of age group, 22 respondents were between 31-40 years of age group and 18 respondents were above 41 years. Furthermore, with academic qualification variable, 24 respondents were having an Elementary education, 20 respondents were with Secondary education and 6 respondents were having Graduate or above academic qualifications. With regards to occupation variable, 37 respondents were unemployed, 6 respondents were self-employed and 7 respondents were cultivator. The response of the women representatives of the Panchayati Raj Institution in Namsai District, Arunachal Pradesh regarding the status, participation and views on PRI were discussed as follows.

Table 2: Women representative are treated equally as men in your society.

Agree	Un-Decided	Disagree
34(68.0)	09(18.0)	07(14.0)

Source: Computed from Primary Data.

Upon reviewing the data in Table 2 it was found that, the respondents with 68.0 per cent had agreed that women representatives are treated equally as men in the society. Furthermore, the respondents with 18.0 per cent remain undecided whereas 14.0 percent respondents had disagreed to the statement. Thus, indicate the progress toward gender equality in representation however they urged for more improvement.

Table 3: You advocate for greater women's empowerment in the society.

Agree	Un-Decided	Disagree
48(96.0)	02(04.0)	00(00.0)

Source: Computed from Primary Data.

On analysing the data in the Table 3, it was found that the respondents with 96.0 per cent had advocate for more women empowerment in the society. No respondents could be seen on disagreed response whereas 4.0 per cent of the respondents remain undecided to the statement. The respondents highlight the relevance of women's empowerment and expressed to support to empower women in the society.

Table 4: Education empowered women to actively participate in Panchayat elections.

Agree	Un-Decided	Disagree
49(98.0)	01(02.0)	00 (00.0)

Source: Computed from Primary Data.

Table 4 showed that 98.0 per cent of the respondents had agreed that education has empowered women to actively participate in Panchayat elections whereas one respondent (02.0 per cent) remain undecided to the query. The respondents depict the vital role of education in enhancing women's involvement in local governance.

Table 5: Compare to men, women are less ambitious in politics.

Agree	Un-Decided	Disagree
09 (18.0)	07 (14.0)	34 (68.0)

Source: Computed from Primary Data.

As per the data presented in the Table 5, 68.0 per cent of the respondents had disagreed with the asked question. Furthermore, 18.0 per cent of the respondents had agreed to the statement whereas 14.0 per cent respondent had responded on undecided option.

Table 6: Electing a representative often hinges more on the political party than on the candidate's capability.

Agree	Un-Decided	Disagree
14 (28.0)	07 (14.0)	29 (58.0)

Source: Computed from Primary Data.

On enquiring whether electing a representative often hinges more on the political party than on the candidate's capability, the data presented in the Table 6 highlighted that 58.0 per cent of the respondents disagreed with the asked query. Furthermore, 28.0 per cent of the respondents had agreed to the query. Meanwhile, 14.0 percent of the respondents responded on undecided response. The respondents highlighted that political parties also play role in electing the representatives apart from individual capability of the candidate.

Table 7: You observe an enhancement in the inclusion of women in the Gram Panchayat.

Agree	Un-Decided	Disagree
45 (90.0)	04 (08.0)	1 (02.0)

Source: Computed from Primary Data.

In accordance with the data in Table 7, 90.0 per cent of the respondents had expressed that they observed an enhancement in the inclusion of women in the Gram Panchayat.

Furthermore, only one respondent (02.0 per cent) negated the query whereas 08.0 per cent had remained undecided with the query. The respondents reflected the positive changes towards gender parity in the Gram Panchayat.

Table 8: Do you encourage people to support the women representative?

Agree	Un-Decided	Disagree
50 (100.0)	00 (00.0)	00 (00.0)

Source: Computed from Primary Data.

The recorded data in Table 8 highlighted that all the respondents (100.0 per cent) had agreed that the women representative do encourage people to support women representatives. There are no respondents on undecided or disagree response. It highlights the necessity of people support for women representatives to build their confidence in the representation.

Table 9: Does women's participation in PRI further influence them to engage in social, community, and political activities?

Agree	Un-Decided	Disagree
50 (100.0)	00 (00.0)	00 (00.0)

Source: Computed from Primary Data.

Examining the provided data in the Table 9 had affirmed that women's participation in PRI further influences them to engage in social, community, and political activities as cent per cent of the respondents (100.0 percent) responded on agreed response. This strong approval, suggests that such participation not only strengthens women but also encourages their broader engagement in various societal roles.

Table 10: Do you get complete support from the male elected representatives?

Agree	Un-Decided	Disagree
39(78.0)	06 (12.0)	05 (10.0)

Source: Computed from Primary Data.

On examining the information provided in Table 10, 78.0 per cent of the respondents had agreed that the women representatives received complete support from male elected representatives whereas 10.0 per cent were against the query. Furthermore, 12.0 per cent of the respondents remained undecided to the query. Thus, it highlighted the need of efforts to foster inclusive and supportive environment for women in political roles.

Table 11: You participate in Panchayat elections because your household has influenced you to do so.

Agree	Un-Decided	Disagree
23(46.0)	02(04.0)	25(50.0)

Source: Computed from Primary Data.

On asking the women representative that whether they contest in the Panchayat elections because their household influenced them to do so in which 50.0 per cent of the answerers had disagreed to the query as presented in the Table 11. Furthermore, noticeable respondents i.e. 46 per cent had agreed to the query that they contest Panchayat election because their household influenced them to do so whereas two respondents (04.0 per cent) responded on undecided option.

MAJOR FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION:

The study revealed that women do represent in the PRI more than that of the women quota in Namsai district both as a GPM along with GPC. A large number of women representatives believed they received fair treatment in the society. It is likewise evident that women representatives urged for more women empowerment and considered education as essential element for women to get involved in the decision-making process. The women representatives expressed that women indeed have political ambition as that of the men. Furthermore, it was found that to a certain degree political parties play an essential role in electing representatives than the candidate capability though a large number of respondents disagreed with the query. The women representatives observed the improvement of women's representation in the PRI. The male elected representatives fully supported them and as a result, they also seek the support of the community. The women representatives expressed that their representation in Gram Panchayat broaden up their engagement in other field/activities in the society. However, household opinion still influences the women representatives to contest in the panchayat election. No doubt, the positive improvement could be seen in the condition of women in Namsai district due to participation and representation of women in Gram Panchayat. However, still more efforts need to be addressed towards empowering women within the society by creating more inclusive, equitable and supportive environment for women in politics.

SUGGESTIONS:

To uplift the social status of women, it is essential to provide targeted training and capacity-building programs to women representatives in PRI. It would improve the knowledge regarding the authorities and responsibilities within PRIs which can enhance the leadership abilities specifically for women elected representatives. Additionally, ensuring women's access to financial resources is crucial, and allocating Panchayat funds specifically for women-centric activities can be initiated. This can be achieved by facilitating loans, grants, and subsidies for women-led development initiatives. Moreover, gender-specific policies must be considered to address the unique needs and hurdles women encountered in rural areas. Establishing a forum for women representatives to interact, encourage, support,

and collaborate without fear of discrimination can encourage more inclusive and effective local governance. Furthermore, encouraging women to actively participate in elections is crucial and to hold leadership positions at different levels to strengthen their participation and representation for overall women empowerment. Initiatives to promote education and awareness of women's rights, roles, and responsibilities would not only bring political upliftment but also improve the overall development of women in society. To put it differently, promoting women's participation in PRIs is crucial for effective governance and advancement of women in the society.

CONCLUSION:

Women's active participation in the electoral process in recent decades has confirmed the initial hopes for women's emancipation in Indian society. Achieving gender equality in the society is very crucial for the socio-economic and political progress of the community. Currently, there has been a rise in awareness among people who are taking a keen interest in exercising their electoral powers, especially the marginalized section including women, which is inevitable for the success of democratic decentralization at the local level. Based on the study in Namsai District, Arunachal Pradesh, it is known that many elected women representatives experienced improved status both personally and socially after being elected to the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI). Women representatives believed that PRI involvement boosted their confidence and allowed them to participate directly in the decision-making process. Nevertheless, they continued to encounter obstacles in active political participation due to socio-cultural norms within the tribal society. To address these challenges, community-based organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), public leaders, and responsible individuals can significantly contribute by fostering an inclusive environment and emphasizing the importance and benefits of women's political participation. By tackling these challenges collectively, society can advance towards a more equitable and inclusive political system, benefiting the society as a whole.

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