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## **WOMEN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS – A STUDY**

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**Abstract:** The Women representatives are more honestly discharging their duties, when compared to the men-folk. The commitment and punctuality is an asset of the women representatives. They are taking political decisions on certain issues more judicially and patiently. They are running the grass root political institutions more smoothly and peacefully executing the developmental activities at grass root level.

**Keywords:** Leadership, Empowerment, Participation.

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**Introduction:** The survival of the Democracy is highly depends on the participation of the people. The political participation may be negative or positive, constructive or destructive, depending upon the viewer. For one, who participates the participation in a strike may be constructive, while the same is destructive to another. To someone also, it is highly destructive. It is constructive for the political activists but same is not to the non-participants. The political participation is highly personalized, based on the intensity of the involvement of the people in political debates or any issues. The strong feelings and intense urge for grabbing the political power will drive the people to participate positively or negatively, or passively or actively. In modern times, Democracy has ensured that each and every citizen can participate with other fellow beings of the civil society. Some times, the lack of political interest and an implicit faith in the elite to deliver the goods is also detrimental to the Democracy. The success of the Democracy still depends on the eternal vigilance of the fourth estate. It is also true that eternal vigilance is the price of liberty. Sometimes intense political activity gives rise to authoritarian tendencies and ultimately, it leads to dictatorships. There are several instances of the same in history. Ultimately political institutions and public opinion become unresponsive. The peoples' needs will be ignored by the political and bureaucratic bosses.

The popular participation is only possible in democracies. The authoritarian grut and dictatorships scuttle the public opinion and popular will to perpetuate their hegemonistic rule. The genuine political participation of people is only possible in democracies. The public opinion and popular will can be curtailed and suppressed to some extent, for limited period only. If the dictatorial and authoritarian tendencies create suffocation to the people they can tolerate it to the optimum level. If these regimes cross their limits people will revote against the political system. Any form of extra- legal and extra- constitutional measures are always detrimental to the democratic interest. The real function of the political participation is to strengthen the political structures and the system. The democratic political participation can be canalized through the process of decentralization. The decentralization will give impetus to express and consolidate public opinion and represents the popular will and strengthen the political institutions.

The Indian political situation is not conducive for popular participation, because the literacy rate is very low. Hence, the political participation of activists is highly subjective (narrowed) oriented. The political recruitment reflects the participation of the rural people. Participation may be positive or negative but is formulated from social and political contexts. Political economists argued that political participation by the masses through the process of education builds up a capacity for governing the civil society. The concept of universal adult suffrage in modern democracies has given opportunity for each and every section of the society. However political participation highly depends on the basis of Socio-economic status of the citizens. The forms of political participation may be identified as four stages. It is defined by Lister Milbrath as (1) attending the public meetings organized by the political parties. (2) Wearing the badges of different political parties. (3) Canvassing for political parties or contestants. (4) Distributing hand bills or pamphlets and related party literatures. These are the broad classifications described by the western political scientist. All these participative forms are considered as

'democratic political participation'. These forms are strikes, Dharmas, Demonstrations which disrupt the normal services of the civil society. Boycotting the existing laws of the land, violating the rules and regulations, disobedience, and boycotting the elections, subterfuging the public service systems, and all forms of violent activities come under non-democratic political participation, which are being practiced by the newly established states being in post world war-II. Even in Third world countries these practices are seen of late. Political apathy is also be considered as non-democratic method by some.

Since India adopted the democracy, the rule of law being its essence, it has declared itself a republic state where sovereign authority is vested in the people. It gets reflected in the indirect election. India, for the past seventy years of existence of democracy has accustomed to rule from the three power centers. One is central level, two the state level and three, local level. The Indian society, unlike other societies is divided in a criss-cross fashions into classes, religions, castes, sub-castes. This often makes it impossible for any single party to claim to represent all the interest of the society. The responsibility of the socio-economic development of the masses is onerous responsibility. It is emphasized on state level and local bodies. Hence, the Panchayati Raj administration was introduced to promote the Gandhian ideals of village republics, with a much more positive developmental content. However the national Government, through planning commission involved in all state level developmental programmers and to have direct link between national development and popular participation in rural institutions.

Hence, the participation by the people in various programs with varying degrees of intensity and understanding becomes vital for achieving the objectives of the developmental programmers. For galvanizing the rural man power, community development programmers were introduced under the stewardship of bureaucracy. Since the decentralization of the power has given opportunity to the majority of the rural people with suitable authority. The responsibility is fixed on the rural local leadership to carry out the developmental plans. This kind of popular participation can give rise to intelligent leadership. The democratic participation is considered as a democratic virtue by the western democracy. All these political institutions are imported and initiated from western democracies. However, these new political institutions are not useful to the weaker sections and other caste groups.

After the lapse of the seventy years of the independence, a new lease of life has generated new concepts theories. Indian electorate has gained a lot of experience in political maneuverings and participating in electoral politics. The contenders for political power are using the political institutions and basing on these institutions, the political actors at the grass root level are gaining manipulative techniques to capture the political positions. After the emergence of a regional political party in Andhra Pradesh, a new bunch of Political institutions and Political platforms are created in late eightys (1980's) i.e. Mandal system was introduced and give birth to new genre in local body institutions. The new vision, transference, and accountability etc are the core concepts for the good governance. The 73<sup>rd</sup> & 74<sup>th</sup> Indian constitutional amendment Acts have given flesh and blood and a new life to the local body institutions by the then government in Andhra Pradesh.

**Objectives of the Study:** In order to understand the nature and meaning of rural women participation and governance, their perceptions and performances are studied. The present study proceeds with the following objectives.

- a) Socio-economic background of the sample respondents and to determine their socio-economic profiles.
- b) To enquire into their levels of political participation and their role performance as administrators.
- c) To examine the rural governance and their perceptions towards the issues or problems.

**Research Design:** The study is exploratory in nature and proceeds with certain hypotheses. It purports to blend the macro-micro approaches in the processes of analysis. It would be micro to the extent of study of levels of participation and influencing factors of women participation in politics. The study also intends to highlight the problems in direct participation and implementation of the programmes. It also explains the women perception towards the politics and good-governance. To substantiate the broader perspectives of the participation of women in politics, a case study of women leaders in one district of Telangana - (Khammam district) is studied.

**Sample Design:** Three hundred (300) elected representatives, (Ward Members-134, Sarpanches- 110, Mandal Perished Territorial Constituencies- 34, Mandal Perished Presidents- 10, Zilla Perished Territorial Constituen-

cies- 11, and Zilla Perished President- 01) of women political leaders were taken on random basis as a sample for this study.

In this background the respondents' responses are analysed and shown in tabular form,

**Table 1: The Particulars of Respondents' (Caste & Education Wise)**

Education CASTE	Illiterate	%	Primary Educa-tion	%	Secondary Education	%	Under Graduation	%	Oth ers	Total	%
O.C	4 (2.82)	8.51	20 (20.00)	42.55	19 (42.22)	6.33	4 (8.51)	8.51	–	47 (15.67)	100.00
B.C	41 (28.87)	50.00	26 (26.00)	31.71	10 (22.22)	3.33	5 (10.64)	6.10	–	82 (27.33)	100.00
S.C	25 (17.61)	43.86	23 (23.00)	40.35	7 (15.56)	2.33	2 (4.26)	3.51	–	57 (19.00)	100.00
S.T	72 (50.70)	63.16	31 (31.00)	27.19	9 (20.00)	3.00	2 (4.26)	1.75	–	114 (38.000)	100.00
TOTAL	142 (100.00)	47.33	100 (100.00)	33.33	45 (100.00)	15.0	13 (100.00)	4.33	–	300 (100.00)	100.00

\* Source: Field Survey

The data presented in the table -1, 47.33 percent of the respondents, cutting across the caste lines are illiterates. The all pervasive poverty, social inhibitions, social structure of the village life and inaccessibility of educational institutions are the main reasons for their hapless illiteracy. The rural girl children have the onerous responsibility of taking care of their siblings in the absence of their parents, who are mostly away in search of their livelihood. This is another reason for the cause of their illiteracy. Only 15 percent respondents cutting across the caste lines completed their secondary education. A meager 4.33 percent of respondents completed their graduation. The above analysis indicates that literacy rate among women –folk in rural areas, beyond primary level is very less. But their illiteracy did not prevent them from participating in the active politics. In the course of time, their future generation will certainly improve their educational skills, paving the way for better services for the society.

**Table 2: The Respondents' (Caste-Wise) Responses about the Reasons for Their Contest**

Responses CASTE	Family Prestige	%	Political Compul-sions	%	Personal Interest	%	Others	%	Total	%
O.C	9 (9.38)	19.15	14 (12.96)	29.79	8 (22.22)	2.67	16 (26.67)	34.04	47 (15.67)	100.00
B.C	24 (25.00)	29.27	30 (27.78)	36.59	13 (36.11)	4.33	15 (25.00)	18.29	82 (27.33)	100.00
S.C	23 (23.96)	40.35	20 (18.52)	35.09	6 (16.67)	2.00	8 (13.33)	14.04	57 (19.00)	100.00
S.T	40 (41.67)	35.09	44 (40.74)	38.60	9 (25.00)	3.00	21 (35.00)	18.42	114 (38.00)	100.00
TOTAL	96 (100.00)	32.00	108 (100.00)	36.00	36 (100.00)	12.0	60 (100.00)	20.00	300 (100.00)	100.00

\* Source: Field Survey

From the data available in the table-2 above, there are two dominant factors that motivate the people to participate in politics. One is family prestige, the other is political compulsions. Nearly 42 percent of the S.T. respondents participated in politics for the sake of family prestige. Equal number of S.T respondents again participated in politics because of political compulsions. Even among the B.C. respondents both family prestige and political compulsions are behind their political participation. It is no wonder that among S.T s. family prestige is an important matter. Interestingly even the political compulsions are equally an important factor. Generally among O.C s. family prestige must be an important factor to take part in politics. But in the present case, given the geographical limitations of the study, the less number of O.C. respondents participated in politics for the sake of family prestige. In their case, it is the political compulsion that is the dominant one. But

among S.C s. and S.T s. it is the family prestige that is a more important factor than political compulsions. But among O.C. and B.C. respondents, the reverse is the reality. It is true that there is some personal interest that motivated the respondents to jump in to the political fray.

**Table 3: The Respondents' (Caste-Wise) Responses about Domination of Men-Folk in Politics**

Responses CASTE	Yes	%	No	%	Don't Know	No Re- sponse	Total	%
O.C	44 (15.77)	93.62	3 (14.29)	6.38	-	-	47 (15.67)	100.00
B.C	80 (28.67)	97.56	2 (9.52)	2.44	-	-	82 (27.33)	100.00
S.C	53 (19.00)	92.98	4 (19.05)	7.02	-	-	57 (19.00)	100.00
S.T	102 (36.56)	89.47	12 (57.14)	10.53	-	-	114 (38.00)	100.00
TOTAL	279 (100.00)	93.00	21 (100.00)	7.00	-	-	300 (100.00)	100.00

\* Source: Field Survey

The table -3, expressed that, 279 respondents out of 300 surveyed i.e. 93 percent admitted the male members of their family interfered in their (women) political activities. The interference can be benign or detrimental to their interests depending on the extent and intent of their interference. Respondents opined that interference of male members of their family is there, because, they cannot spare their time to participate in the meetings and other allied political activities regularly. Hence, the interference of male members is a kind of necessary evil during the initial period. As the years roll by, and as the respondents gain experience and self confidence, this practice can be dispensed with. Only then the purpose of empowerment of women in rural areas will be attained.

**Table 4: The Respondents' (Caste-Wise) Responses about the Election Promises That They Made**

Responses CASTE	Yes	%	No	%	Don't Know	No Re- sponse	Total	%
O.C	7 (17.07)	14.89	40 (15.44)	85.11	-	-	47 (15.67)	100.00
B.C	13 (31.71)	15.85	69 (26.64)	84.15	-	-	82 (27.33)	100.00
S.C	7 (17.07)	12.28	50 (19.31)	87.72	-	-	57 (19.00)	100.00
S.T	14 (34.15)	12.28	100 (38.61)	87.72	-	-	114 (38.00)	100.00
TOTAL	41 (100.00)	13.67	259 (100.00)	86.33	-	-	300 (100.00)	100.00

\* Source: Field Survey

The table-4 puts before us an interesting fact. Generally in elections, particularly at the higher level promises are very common, whether they are fulfilled or not. At least they are made. In the present case, as the respondents belong to local level elections, the majority did not make any promises. It is the fact that cuts across all caste groups. They just contest and win that is the beginning and end of their politics. But the real end of local level politics is, the people should get political training and aim at high. It may be that some people do promises even at the local level.

**Table 5: The Respondents' (Caste-Wise) Responses about the Specific Nature of the Women Issues**

Responses CASTE	Yes	%	No	%	Don't Know	No Re- sponse	Total	%
O.C	44 (16.24)	93.62	3 (10.34)	6.38	–	–	47 (15.67)	100.00
B.C	74 (27.31)	90.24	8 (27.59)	9.76	–	–	82 (27.33)	100.00
S.C	56 (20.66)	98.25	1 (3.45)	1.75	–	–	57 (19.00)	100.00
S.T	97 (35.79)	85.09	17 (58.62)	14.91	–	–	114 (38.00)	100.00
TOTAL	271 (100.00)	90.33	29 (100.00)	9.67	–	–	300 (100.00)	100.00

\* Source: Field Survey

The data presented in table-5, cutting across caste lines, more than 90 percent of the respondents believe the problems and issues of women are different from the men-folk. The patriarchal system, which is in vogue for the past several centuries, has kept, women more often than not, at the mercy and care of fathers, husbands and sons at different stages of their life. They are not allowed the freedom to live on their own. Women-folk in India continue to suffer silently the monstrous practices in the name of religion and traditions etc. However, post' independence certain positive changes are taking place and over a period more changes may take place through legislation and through change in the mind set of the people leading to the equality of status of women in all spheres of life.

**Table 6: The Respondents' (Age-Wise) Responses about their Personal Participation In the Official Meetings**

Responses AGE	Yes	%	No	%	Don't Know	No Re- sponse	Total	%
18-25Years	13 (4.81)	92.86	1 (3.33)	7.14	–	–	14 (4.67)	100.00
26-35 Years	143 (52.96)	91.08	14 (46.67)	8.92	–	–	157 (52.33)	100.00
36-50Years	91 (33.70)	85.85	15 (50.00)	14.15	–	–	106 (35.33)	100.00
51-60Years	22 (8.15)	100.00	–	–	–	–	22 (7.33)	100.00
61 & Above	1 (0.37)	100.00	–	–	–	–	1 (0.33)	100.00
TOTAL	270 (100.00)	90.00	30 (100.00)	10.00	–	–	300 (100.00)	100.00

\* Source: Field Survey

The table-6, shows that one comes to know that majority of the respondents i.e. 86 percent have themselves participated in the meetings of the village panchayats etc. Participation can be of two types. Some take active participation and some are passive. Active participants are capable of understanding the problem and they believe in finding out a solution after discussing the issue thread bare. On the contrary, passive participants make only token presence. Illiteracy, lack of exposure, lack of self confidence and lack of encouragement from their spouses and other family members are the reasons for their passiveness. While stating, they themselves participate in all the meetings of the panchayats, the respondents may be not telling the whole truth. Their spouse, father/brother is found participating on their behalf. This phenomenon may continue for some time. It is fondly hoped that in due course they will realize their folly and assert their rightful position.

**Table 7: The Respondents' (Age-Wise) Responses about the Presiding over the Meetings and Conferences**

Responses AGE	Yes	%	No	%	Don't Know	No Response	Total	%
18-25Years	8 (5.30)	57.14	6 (4.03)	42.86	-	-	14 (4.67)	100.00
26-35 Years	70 (46.36)	44.59	87 (58.39)	55.41	-	-	157 (52.33)	100.00
36-50Years	59 (39.07)	55.66	47 (31.54)	44.34	-	-	106 (35.33)	100.00
51-60Years	14 (9.27)	63.64	8 (5.37)	36.36	-	-	22 (7.33)	100.00
61 & Above	-	-	1 (0.67)	100.00	-	-	1 (0.33)	100.00
TOTAL	151 (100.00)	50.33	149 (100.00)	49.67	-	-	300 (100.00)	100.00

\* Source: Field Survey

The data available in table-7, Nearly 50 percent respondents say that they preside over the functions and conferences. It is well and good. It is good because they are doing what they are supposed to do. But, unfortunately the remaining 50 percent respondents say that they don't preside over the functions and conferences which they should have done in normal course. The probable reason behind this sorry situation is that the respondents are either ignorant of their powers or psychologically so conditioned that they don't dare to claim what is theirs.

There is an incident of the husband of a surpanch presiding over the function, in the presence of the surpanch, it self and other responsible officials. It happened so naturally that no body took it amiss and they behaved as if what is wrong in it. This is to say that, people take this kind of thing as normal and not violative of any protocol or rule. Unless this kind of situation is turned upside down and one is given the due what is ones', no amendments and no big speeches correct the situation. Cutting across all age groups, the above is the reality. But interestingly in the category of 51 to 60 years the majority presides over the functions. It may be that their age might have given some confidence to them.

**Conclusions of the Study:** The study reveals that, A majority of the respondents from cutting across caste lines felt that there are many corrupt politicians in politics. Interesting to note is that 90% of the respondents expressed that politicians are corrupt and self centered. Nearly 40% of the S.T respondents have tasted bitter experience of corruption in politics. Majority of the S.T respondents replied to the question "Who are corrupt politicians"?

Majority of the S.T respondents replied way that upper caste politicians ventured to exploit them because they are weak and meek. Interestingly one observation is that youth is reposing confidence in officials, where as middle aged group respondents felt that all the government officials, are corrupt. Almost 96 percent of the respondents do not support corrupt officials and corrupt politicians. It is the root of the rot that has set in our social fabric. A majority of the respondents, from cutting across caste lines i.e. 92% of the respondents did not approve the entry of corrupt and criminals into politics. Naturally, the system has not broken down. The moral fabric of the civil society is still in a better shape, at least in theory. So, it is no wonder that the corruption have fewer supporters. The constitutional reservation for S.C, S.T's has given the sample the clout to occupy different political positions and gain political experience. However, they are very much new to the politics. Where as in the case of O.C's who are still in politics, they are continuing their sway even after the lapse of seven decades of independence. Even today they are dictating terms to the other communities. It is also found, that though majority of the respondents are illiterate, they are showing keen interest and zeal to grab the political positions.

It is found that majority of the respondents from S.T and B.C categories that entered politics are forced to contest for their family prestige. Some times out of political compulsions, they are forced to participate in politics.

One pertinent observation is that even S.T respondents felt that they have contested the elections to uphold the prestige of their family. Only a few respondents contested the elections or entered into politics out of their personal interest. A majority of the respondents cutting across the age groups from 26-50 years are supporting either congress party or Telugu Desham Party. A considerable number of respondents favored left parties and their politics. Another finding is that among the left parties CPI(M) is quite popular, when compared to others in the district. More than 95% of the respondents strongly argued that money and muscle power play a vital role in electoral politics. These two factors play an important role in selecting the candidates. Considerable number of respondents also felt that not only money muscle power, but also the role of caste can not be under estimated.

Another interesting finding is that the role of money in politics is crucial. A common man can not afford to contest the elections. Even those who are contesting local body elections also have to spend huge amounts other wise they can not win the elections. In the contest, some of the respondents disposed their properties to meet the election expenditure. This trend is not healthy or conducive. Another finding can be drawn that younger (26-35 years) generation is keen on winning the elections and they are considering it has a prestige and status symbol. However, majority of them have spent not less than one lakh rupees for either ward member or sarpanch. Whereas O.C candidates spent up to 4 to 5 lakhs rupees. It is also found that, though women candidates are contesting the elections, the male interference and domination is in high proportion. In the initial stage, their support is essential but later on, they gain self-confidence and experience and they can take decisions independently. Majority of the respondents expressed that they are getting equal status and par with male population. Majority of them expressed that illiteracy is a great barrier for their growth in politics. It is also found that because of illiteracy and non-co-operation of male politicians and officials has created great hurdle for their growth. All the way they have to depend on the officials or politicians to know about the rules and regulations.

It is also found that a majority (75%) emphatically argued that equal opportunities are not there in politics. This opinion is expressed by all the respondents irrespective of their caste affiliation. Almost all the respondents felt that the 73<sup>rd</sup> constitutional amendment act 1993 is a boon to the women-folk. Nearly 65% of the respondents felt that they have addressed public and political meetings more that ten times with out any fear or inhibitions. It is also found that, even S.C; S.T respondents also addressed public meetings more than five times and also participated in door to door campaigns. A majority of the respondents said that, they have promised about the civic amenities and highlighted the chronic problems of the local areas. However, they tried to fulfill the promises, when they made at the time of elections. The women respondents anonymously felt that, the problems faced by the women are different from the men.

One pertinent observation that can be made from this study is that, officials and politicians are not allowing the women representatives to use their potential caliber. A majority (83%) of the respondents felt that, mainly they joined the politics with a view to improve their social and economic conditions of their locations. But the village panchayats are not encouraging. Majority of them are unaware of the finances and how it can be improved to meet the requirements of the village development. A majority i.e. 80% of the respondents cutting across caste lines felt that, they got insufficient finances for local bodies. Some of the respondents said that, only ruling party and upper casts representatives are getting fairly the resources from either Zilla Parishad or state government. Even in the case of some in the solutions different schemes that are being introduced by the central government, same are the situation. Such schemes are sponsored and financed to the directly to the village panchayats. Since majority of the respondents are illiterate and can not operate the computers in their respective offices, they are always in difficulty. A majority i.e., 86% of respondents felt their presence in the official meetings in nominal. Only a few members actively participated with full knowledge of the issues. But majority of them are passive participants rather than finding the solutions to the issues. The lack of exposure, lack of self-confidence, lack of encouragement, from their sponsors and other family members are the reasons for their passiveness.

One relevant observation is that the majority respondents take decisions on their own. Definitely, it is a welcome feature. If given the opportunity to the women folk, they will discharge their duties with great sincerity and commitment. If they are provided education they are no way inferior to men-folk. It is also found that nearly 50% of the respondents said that they have presided over the meetings and conferences. And they have discharged their duties in a more effective manner than the men folk. At times they have asserted their power

and authority to run the show. On some other occasions, they are bold enough to take on tough problems on their own. Some times they deliberately sent their spouses from the meetings and conferences when their presence was objected by other fellow members. It was also found that remaining 50% of the respondents are very weak. They are weak to coordinate the meetings and sometimes they are unable to control the preceding of the meetings. It was found that, if given the opportunity they too can perform the duties with sincerity, honesty, integrity and courage.

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