

Acceptance Levels on Women's Reservation in Panchayati Raj in Manipur

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Abstract: *The present paper aims to check the people's attitude on the government reservation of women in Panchayats in Manipur. A cross sectional as well as community base study consisting of 757 women as respondents was conducted in Imphal West district during August, 2014 to March, 2015. The findings highlighted that 79% of the respondents accept the present pattern of women's reservation in Panchayati Raj and the rest 21% of them do not accept the system. It is again emphasized that 52% of educated women having at least graduation do not accept the reservation system but 79% of their husband counterparts accept the system. Identifying the big gaps on the acceptance in women reservation in Panchayati Raj Institution, the present findings may be baseline information specifically for gearing up the status of women residing in rural areas in Manipur to achieve the national goals of sustainable development in India.*

Keywords: *community-base, women's reservation, attitude, panchayats, Manipur.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The issue of women's participation in political decision making became important only in the late twentieth century. But it is today on the international agenda and permeating many plans of action at national and regional levels. While UN adopted the Convention on the Political Rights of Women in 1952, the world-wide concern for women's participation was noticed in 1975 when the United Nations declared the decade as the Women Development Decade. In this year, the World Plan of Action, adopted in the First World Conference held in Mexico City, put forward various suggestions for the recruitment, nomination and promotion of women in various bodes of government, public bodies, trade unions and pressure groups. In Copenhagen, in 1980, many steps were also recommended to promote international cooperation and strengthen peace through women's participation. The Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies, adopted in the Third World Conference on Women, Nairobi (1985) stressed that "Women by virtue of their gender, experience discrimination in terms of equal access to the power structure that controls society and determines development issues and peace initiatives". It was further resolved that "For true equality to become a reality for women, the sharing of power on equal terms with men must be a major strategy. The importance of governmental and non-governmental organizations in educating women to exercise their newly own civil, political and social rights was emphasized.

The issue of women's political empowerment had gained momentum in the global debate for women's rights at the time of the Fourth World Conference on Women held at Beijing in 1995. The issue continued to hold centre-stage of all discussions on gender justice and equality. Women's equal access to, and full participation in decision making was emphasized in the Platform for Action, as one of the critical areas of concern. It unequivocally declared "Women's equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the general process of advancement of women. Women's equal participation in decision making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account". It also affirmed that women should have at least a thirty percent share of decision making positions". The issue of providing adequate space for women's political participation has also repeatedly come up in the NGO Meetings of South Asia Watch, Asia Pacific Women's Watch as a priority issue and more categorically at the Regional Meet on Commemorating Beijing III organized by the UNIFEM. (Third Beijing Biennial South Asia Regional Ministerial Meeting, Organised by UNIFEM, Maldives, Sept. 26-27; 2000). The Maldives Outcome Document recognized the "continuing invisibility of women in higher levels of governance, political leadership and civil service and the continuing resistance of mainstream political parties to provide space for women in politics". It further recommended, "sharing of experiences of affirmative action at grass-root levels as well as at national level; studying of different electoral systems and creation of a shared political agenda for women." The need to increase women's participation in political decision making has been a

common issue for all International and Regional Conferences relating to women held so far which means that women's political empowerment has been at the centre-stage of attention for all discourses on women's issues. (Information taken from Promilla Kapur; Empowering of Indian Women, Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of Manipur, New Delhi, 2001).

Various initiatives have been undertaken in Manipur for enabling women to participate in the political process. Looking at the grassroots level after the 73rd and 74th Amendment Bills, many women have become panchayat representatives (Gram Panchayat and Zilla Parishad). The composition of women panchayats in both the 'levels' is around 36% of the total seats which is more than the normal reservation of seats (33%) for women in all the levels of panchayats. Elections were held in 31st January 1997 both for Gram Panchayat (GP) and Zilla Parishad (ZP). Altogether 598 women representatives were elected. There were 576 in GP and 22 in ZP. The number of women in Panchayati Raj is in fact more than the given quota of 33% reservation. There are almost 7% women in GP as well in ZP (NCW 2001: 116). Hence, in Manipur many women have become panchayat representatives increasing the number of women in its political system.

There has been lots of speculation on the 33% reservation of seats for women in the PRIs. But, the 73rd and 74th Amendments Bills brought many women panchayats. However, the basic question lies in finding out as to who these women in panchayats are? In what way and to what extent are they able to work for the socio-economic equality of women in society? Have they helped to realize the main purpose of reservation, say empowerment of women? In Manipur there are only two tier system of Panchayats - I) Gram Panchayat and II) Zilla Parishad. In the light of the above concerns the present study attempts to find out and assess the role of Meetei women as panchayat representatives. The study of Meetei women has a special significance for they are comparatively better in socio-economic (not in political) spheres than her counterparts in other parts of Brahminical Manipur. It will be important to see whether a more equal social standing has enabled women to participate more effectively in the political arena. Since Meetei women did not traditionally enter in the political domain, one needs to assess their entrance in this domain through Constitutional 73rd and 74th Amendment Bills. The study aims to answer these questions by analyzing who are the women coming into panchayats? What is their socio-economic and political background? What are the issues raised and put up by them? What are the goals and nature of work that they have been able to accomplish so far? Whether there is any problem that they have as 'women panchayats'. The focus is more on women in these panchayats in order to look into issues raised by them and the general attitude of male members towards women panchayats. The kind of cooperation women panchayats get from male section in different kind of developmental works, and women related issues in the panchayats. No doubt like other parts of the world few women in the erstwhile kingdom of Manipur do have been the political domain.

In Manipur, participation of women in panchayat is important because these are the bodies where women can have a platform for their socioeconomic and political empowerment. It is very important for women's organization to forward their candidates in elections, so that they can address issues on women and implemented. In the same manner, the main objective of women's wing of political parties is representation of women's interests. They need to put up women candidates so that they are accountable in addressing the issues on women. The other groups at community level that are discussed are 'Meira Paibi'. They are women's groups at local level. Meira Paibi has been actively engaged for a long time in expressing the concerns of women and solving all kinds of disputes at local level and even state. The kind of cooperation women panchayats get from male section and issues put up addressed by them (women). Lastly and most importantly, the perceptions and opinions from various ministers (current as well as ex-ministers) and village elders about women political participation in general and women panchayats.

II. OBJECTIVES

It is to check the attitude of the respondents on the opinion about the government reservation of women seats in Panchayats in the study population.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A cross sectional as well as community based study of 757 NREGS beneficiaries from Imphal West district was conducted during the period from August, 2014 to March, 2015 utilising pre-tested and semi-structural schedule. With personal interview methods, the sample survey was conducted under multistage sampling scheme. Using simple percentage, an analysis has also been done to achieve the above objective on the basis of various socio-political and socio-economic factors through statistical package, SPSS.

IV. STUDY POPULATION

The Imphal West is created out of the then Imphal District in 1997. It is bounded by Imphal East District in the East, Bishnupur District in the South, Senapati District in the West and North. It has an area of 519 square kilometers. The density of population is 734. According to the 2011 Census the population of the

district is 5,18,000 which is 18.14% of state of which, the number of males is 2,55,000 and 2,63,000 females. The sex ratio stands at 1031 and literacy rate is 86.1% consisting of 92.2% for male and 80.2% for female. The percentage of main worker and marginal worker stands at 36.58(41.87M - 31.23F) and 2.41 (0.57M-4.22F) respectively. The total number of inhabited village is 117 and 8 are uninhabited. Numbers of households are 59907 in total where in rural area it is 26715 and 33192 in urban area. The district's Scheduled Caste composition is 2.52% of the total population (District) and Schedule Tribe total population stands 3.86%. The percentage of rural population in Imphal West is 72.48 and 27.52 urban. So, in terms of ranking of districts according to urban population, it is first. As per BPL Census 1997, conducted by Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India (GOI), household below poverty line in Imphal West are altogether 22893. In this, there are 1199- SC, 418- ST and 21276 others (LORDS 2003). The history of Imphal district (now bifurcated into Imphal West and Imphal East) forms an inexplicable part of the history of the entire Manipur. There is no historical record on how the name Imphal came to be given, but it seems there is 'congregation of plenty of house' or 'beautiful houses' in the northern part of the present Imphal. The name Imphal is perhaps derived by compounding two words namely 'yum' and 'phal' where yum means 'house' and 'phal' means plenty or beautiful (District Census Handbook – Imphal 1991). Imphal West (the then part of Imphal District) is predominantly settled by the Meeteis who are the majority community in the state. But there exist few clusters in the district which is occupied by other tribes falling mainly under the category of Nagas, predominantly the Kabui tribe. They are normally considered as valley tribe. Mention can be made of places like Keishamthong Khul, Major Khul, Kakhulong, Sangai Parou, Paite Bang etc. Other than clustered settlements, some tribal families do settle in Imphal west district in different areas.

The same is the case of mainland Indians (Marwari, Rajashthani, Bihari, Bengali, etc.) settling in some parts of the district. But the entire tribal cluster, some fall under Municipality area and few are in panchayat area. So, we find cases of tribal panchayat representatives in the district. In terms of trade and communication Imphal West is the most important trading centre and all imports and exports are routed through it. The most unique feature of this trading centre is that it has market sections run exclusively by women vendors. It is the famous 'Ema Keithel' (Ladies Market). Ladies are involved in various trades like handloom products, vegetable and fish sections etc. the other important centers in the district are Samurou, Wangoi, Mayang Imphal, Lamlai and Lamsang. The district is land locked and surrounded by hills. The roads in the district may be classified into national highways, state highways and district and village roads. The Imphal Dimapur road (national highway number 53) and Imphal Jiribam Road (National Highway number 39) are the two National Highways which connect Imphal with and neighbouring states of Assam and Nagaland. The railway station nearest to Imphal remains Dimapur (Nagaland) which is 215 kilometers from Imphal. But the quickest mode of transport is air transport and in this field, the district is also very well connected with the important cities of India via Calcutta, Guwahati and Delhi. Generally, in Manipur most of the mainland Indians originally came as traders. And all of them are settled in plain districts only. Because in the hill districts due to 6th Schedule (Constitution) none of them (including the Meeteis of the plain area), are not allowed to buy land and settle permanently. In overall Imphal West is supposedly the most advanced district in the state.

Table-1: Per cent distribution of respondents according to opinion on the Government reservation of women seats in Panchayati Raj

Factors and Category		Opinion of women Seats		Total
		Yes (%)	No (%)	
Type of family	Nuclear	307 (74.5)	105 (25.5)	412
	Joint	291 (84.3)	54 (15.7)	345
No. of family member	≤ 5	297 (92.5)	24 (7.5)	321
	5+	301 (69.0)	135 (31.0)	436
No. of women in Reproductive age	1	524 (83.8)	101 (16.2)	625
	2+	74 (56.1)	58 (43.9)	132
Caste of the family	General	72 (84.7)	13 (15.3)	85
	ST	139 (75.5)	45 (24.5)	184
	SC	88 (86.3)	14 (13.7)	102
	OBC	299 (77.5)	87 (22.5)	386
Religion	Hindu/ Meitei	396 (79.7)	101 (20.3)	497
	Muslim	98 (86.7)	15 (13.3)	113
	Christian	59 (70.2)	25 (29.8)	84
	Others	45 (71.4)	18 (28.6)	63
Educational qualification for	Illiterate	10 (58.8)	7 (41.2)	17
	Under	237 (84.9)	42 (15.1)	279

husband	matriculate			
	Matriculate	298 (75.6)	96 (24.4)	394
	Graduate and above	53 (79.1)	14 (20.9)	67
Educational qualification for wife	Illiterate	89 (91.8)	8 (8.2)	97
	Under matriculate	313 (87.7)	44 (12.3)	357
	Matriculate	184 (66.2)	94 (33.8)	278
	Graduate and above	12 (48.0)	13 (52.0)	25
Occupation for husband	Govt. employee	90 (92.8)	7 (7.2)	97
	Business	195 (75.9)	62 (24.1)	257
	Skill worker	50 (80.6)	12 (19.4)	62
	Others	263 (77.1)	78 (22.9)	341
Occupation for wife	Govt. employee	25 (69.4)	11 (30.6)	36
	Business	77 (78.6)	21 (21.4)	98
	Skill worker	29 (87.9)	4 (12.1)	33
	House wife	281 (89.2)	34 (10.8)	315
	Others	186 (67.6)	89 (32.4)	275
Monthly Income (in '000Rs.)	< 5	212 (84.5)	39 (15.5)	251
	5 - 10	197 (72.4)	75 (27.6)	272
	10 - 15	127 (82.5)	27 (17.5)	154
	15 - 20	41 (80.4)	10 (19.6)	51
	20+	21 (72.4)	8 (27.6)	29
Age at marriage of husband	< 20	28 (80.0)	7 (20.0)	35
	20 - 25	178 (70.9)	73 (29.1)	251
	25 - 30	271 (87.4)	39 (12.6)	310
	30 - 35	88 (78.6)	24 (21.4)	112
	35 +	33 (67.3)	16 (32.7)	49
Age at marriage of wife	< 20	74 (91.4)	7 (8.6)	81
	20 - 25	223 (71.7)	88 (28.3)	311
	25 - 30	189 (82.5)	40 (17.5)	229
	30 - 35	87 (82.9)	18 (17.1)	105
	35 +	25 (80.6)	6 (19.4)	31
Existing no. of son	≤ 2	333 (87.4)	48 (12.6)	381
	2 +	265 (70.5)	111 (29.5)	376
Existing no. of daughter	≤ 2	334 (93.0)	25 (7.0)	359
	2 +	264 (66.3)	134 (33.7)	398
Existing no. of children	≤ 3	252 (72.8)	94 (27.2)	346
	3 +	346 (84.2)	65 (15.8)	411
Total for each factor		598 (79.0)	159 (21.0)	757

V. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

While differentiating the respondents as per type of family categorized by Nuclear (54.4%) and Joint (345, 45.6%), 25.5% of the respondents of nuclear family do not opinion the reservation of women seats in the Panchayati Raj and 74.5% of them opined the system of women reservation in the Panchayats in the population. Also 15.7% of the respondents of joint family system do not accept the system of the present women reservation in Panchayat too, manifested in Table -1.

The respondents have also been categorized by the size of the family having two classes – the family of at most five members and the family at least six members. About 93% of the respondents of the family of at most five in its size accept the present women reservation in Panchayat but 96% of the respondents among the family having at least six members accept the said women reservation in Panchayat in the population. The findings have confirmed that 7.5% of the respondents of the family having at most five members do not accept the present women reservation system and also 31% of the respondents of the family having at least six members do not accept the system of women reservation furnished by the government in Panchayati Raj in the study population. It may interestingly be

observed that the educated women, having at least graduation in their educational level, 52% of the respondents do not accept the women reservation system under government.

In the similar way, the acceptance/ support of the present government reservation of women in Manipur has been investigated in terms of percentage of the respondents under study according to the parameters namely, number of women in reproductive age, caste of the family, religion, educational qualification, occupation, monthly income, marriage age and number of children. Based on the present field data, 79% of the total respondents under study accept the pattern of women reservation in Panchayati Raj in the population. However, the empirical findings highlights that 21% of the respondents do not accept the present women reservation in the state.

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