

**LOCATING THE MUSLIM WOMEN IN GRASSROOTS POLITICS:
AN EMPIRICAL STUDY IN THE DISTRICT OF PURULIA, WEST BENGAL**

MD. REJA AHAMMAD

*Research Scholar, Department of Sociology,
Vidyasagar University, Midnapore
Email:mdrejaju@gmail.com*

ASMITA BHATTACHARYYA

*Assistant Professor,
Department of Sociology,
Vidyasagar University, Midnapore*

BIPUL KUMAR BHADRA

*Professor (Retd.),
Department of Sociology,
Jadavpur University, Kolkata*

Abstract

The grassroots institutions are now recognized as important mechanisms which ensure people's participation in a healthy and vibrant democracy. A major part of the minority population consists of Muslim minorities, so to ensure an integrated rural development the participation from the minority people is very essential. There is no doubt, among the Muslims, the women are still socially disadvantaged and politically less empowered. But in a society unless and until a woman is socially upgraded and politically empowered the real development of the community will not be achieved. So, the socio-political development of women is the unavoidable condition of the true development of a society. So, through this paper, an intensive inquiry has been made to find out the real location of Muslim women in grassroots politics. The paper is mainly based on the primary data collected from the field survey.

Keywords: Grassroots politics, Panchayat, Participation, Empowerment, Social discrimination.

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**MD REJA AHAMMAD
ASMITA BHATTACHARYYA
BIPUL KUMAR BHADRA**

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Introduction

For a vibrant and dynamic democracy local participation in grassroots politics is very much essential, so for the sake of establishing a grassroots mechanism in rural India local institutions have been constitutionalized in our country. As we all know that local institutions deal with the local problem and the implementation of different policies made for the local people. Actually, in a large democracy like India, most of the works are to be implemented at the grassroots level. The participation of grassroots people is required for the better functioning of those policies. The beneficiaries for whom the policy is made, if their representation is ensured it will be much more effective. But the question arises why the local people will participate in those activities unless it satisfies their needs. So to attract the local people the various grassroots bodies like *Gram Sabha*, *Gram Sansad* have been set up. But for a healthy democracy, not only male participation, but female participation is also essential as almost half of our population consists of women. So today, to ensure effective policy implementation women's participation is encouraged by the government and to increase women's participation the reservation for women has also been introduced at the various local-level institutions. Another dimension is that as a significant proportion of our population consists of different caste, religion, sex, so for the sake of an integrated rural development the people from all levels should be motivated to participate in this process. While we are talking about Muslim women's participation, it should be kept in mind that in our society a large minority community i.e. Muslim can also play an important role. And at the same time, it is a well-accepted fact that if a woman is politically educated and conscious then the whole community will be conscious at large, so women participation in every sphere of the society will not only enhance their socio-political empowerment, simultaneously it will enhance the quality of society in which we belong to. In our society, somehow, there are various reasons and as a consequence of these Muslim women are not found adequately in the grassroots politics. Through this paper, the result of an empirical study has been analyzed where we have tried to find out the nature of their participation in grassroots politics and to trace out the reasons behind their non-participation and reluctantness towards politics. The broad theme of our discussion will be confined to search the exact location of Muslim women in grassroots politics and examining the popular perception that Muslim women are reluctant to be associated with politics particularly in grassroots politics. Based on extensive literature review and initial field survey we have developed some specific objectives which are as follows:

Objectives

- 1) To understand and assess the location of Muslim women in the grassroots

institutions.

- 2) To analyze the responses of Muslim women towards the grassroots polity.
 Based on the above objectives, we have formulated a research question.

Research Question

Is there any autonomy of Muslim women in Panchayat politics?

Methodology

The present study has been conducted in 4 Gram Panchayat of one block in Purulia District of West Bengal. 400 respondents, taking 100 from each GP have been studied in this work. Data is collected from the adult (21 years and above) females of each GP through a direct interview (with the help of a structured schedule) and Focus Group Discussions. The respondents are selected purposively. For the secondary sources the different journals, government reports, newspapers, books, etc. have been used. At a glance, the demographic profile of the respondents of our study areas can be understood from the following table (Table-1).

Table -1: Demographic profile of the respondents

Demographic Profile	Options	Respondents	%
Age	21-30	158	39.5
	31-40	115	28.75
	41-50	80	20
	51-60	41	10.25
	Above 60	06	1.5
Educational Qualification	Nonformal Education	147	36.75
	Elementary Education	225	56.25
	Secondary (10+)	15	3.75
	Higher Secondary(12+)	7	1.75
	Graduation and PG	6	1.5
Marital status	Married	382	95.5
	Unmarried	4	1
	Others	14	3.5
Types of family	Nuclear	340	85
	Joint	60	15
Occupation	Housewives	371	97.5
	Bidi maker	20	5
	Business	2	0.5
	Others	7	1.75
Caste	General	161	40.25
	OBC-A	234	58.5
	OBC-B	5	1.25
Monthly income	1-3000/-	211	52.75
	3001-5001/-	151	37.75
	5001-10000/-	35	8.75
	Above 10000/-	3	0.75

Source- Field Survey Report, 2019-2020.

To understand the exact location of Muslim women in grassroots politics we should examine their participation in various local bodies. How many women participate in those bodies, if they participate how do they influence the decision-making and in which form they take part in those activities. As the *Gram Sansad* is a micro-level local body that is formed with the interest of local people. So there is ample scope for village people to participate in the activities performed by *Gram Sansad*. Generally, the *Gram Sansad* meeting is held within the locality. So due to geographical proximity, the rural people take part in its meeting but the presence of Muslim women in this meeting is not so significant.

Only 12% of respondents are attending the meeting. And it is also noticed that the women who participate in the meeting do not play an active role, in most cases, they play the role of the audience. From the following table this picture will be clearly understood (Table-2):

Table-2: Participation in Gram Sansad meeting

Participation in Gram Sansad	Respondent	
	No.	%
Yes	48	12
No	352	88
Total	400	100

Source: Field Survey Report, 2019-2020

From the above table, it is noticed that a large number of Muslim women do not participate in the *Gram Sabha* meeting. Though there are various reasons behind the non-participation of Muslim women in *the Gram Sansad* meeting. While we are talking about the participation of Muslim women in grassroots polity we should be careful enough about the causes which affect the rural Muslim women by which they are barred to participate in this political process.

Table-3: Causes of non-participation in Gram Sansad

Causes of not Participation	Respondent	
	No.	%
Household activities	114	32.39
Political apathy	33	9.37
Lack of communication	25	7.10
Social obstruction	144	40.91
Not having any benefit from Panchayat	36	10.23
Total	352	100

Source: Field Survey Report, 2019-2020

In our study, we have observed that the presence of Muslim women in

grassroots politics is very low in comparison with the women of other communities. Though, they also cast their vote regularly but do not participate equally in the other political activities. Few Muslim women have political preferences and as a reflection of that, they support the different political parties. In the following table it has been shown:

Table-4: Supporter of a political party

Supporter of a political party	Respondent	
	No.	%
Yes	140	35
No	260	65
Total	400	100

Source: Field Survey Report, 2019-2020

From the above table, we see only 35% Muslim women who have a special political choice and they are the supporter of various political parties. Being asked by the researcher they replied that, it is due to their family influence they support the particular political parties. Muslim women generally do not campaign for any political parties. In our study, it is revealed that only 6.75% of respondents were involved in political campaigns during the Panchayat election. Though this type of campaign is not like the popular campaign which is found in *Vidhan Sabha* or *Lok Sabha* election. Their campaign is only limited to the whispering campaign, one of the reasons for this attitude is that the political tension and anxiety during the election.

As we have mentioned that political tension is one of the major reasons behind their non-campaigning in the election but another most significant reason, is due to their social obstruction they are not allowed to go outside of their family.

And as an inevitable consequence of this obstacle, they do not participate in political meetings or rallies. Only 8.25% of women are found to participate in political meetings or rally. In that case, also, only the women whose family members are directly associated with politics attend those meetings. Another cause that has been noticed in some cases that the rural Muslim women are compelled to attend the political meeting or rally as they are asked to do so otherwise they will be debarred to receive various financial relief and assistance from local Panchayat. So due to their acute necessity sometimes they are found to join the political reality or meeting without their willingness. The ratio of their participation in the political rally has been shown in the following table (Table-5).

Table-5: Participation in political meeting /rally during the election

Participation in political meeting/rally	Respondent	
	No.	%
Yes	33	8.25
No	367	91.75
Total	400	100

Source: Field Survey Report, 2019-2020

We have already discussed earlier that the participation of Muslim women in the different political activities is very low, simultaneously their consciousness about the political order and institution are not significantly mentionable. Though, they have heard the name of different political parties and their activities during the political campaign. Most of our respondents are aware of the name of Panchayat Pradhan of their locality but it significantly differs while the Panchayat Pradhan belongs to the outside of the locality. In the same way, they have the idea about the political affiliation of Panchayat Pradhan who belongs to the locality but in the case of Panchayat Pradhan who belongs to the outside of their locality, they do not have any clarity.

In the following table, we see 235 respondents out of 400 who know the name of the Panchayat Pradhan but while they were asked about the affiliation of Panchayat Pradhan they do not have any clear conception. Though, nowadays, the name of a particular Panchayat Pradhan has been highlighted and well informed to them due to his involvement in different scams or political activism. Thus, as a rumor, this incident has been highly publicized among the rural people of the locality. So, it is not any substantial cause by which they have become conscious of their level of political consciousness has been increased, rather it is a co-incident by which they have been aware of the fact. However, in the following table the respondent's knowledge about the name of their Panchayat Pradhan has been shown (Table: 6)

Table-6: Knowledge about the name of Panchayat Pradhan

	Respondent	
	Frequency (N)	%
Yes	235	58.75
No	165	41.25
Total	400	100

Source: Field Survey Report, 2019-2020

In the same way, while they are asked about the political affiliation of the respective Panchayat Pradhan they could not answer properly. So here we see, due to several causes they have heard the name of Panchayat Pradhan, but due to lack of political awareness, they do not have any clarity about the political affiliation of

the respective Panchayat Pradhan. From the following table, it is observed that 41.75 % of respondents know the name of Panchayat Pradhan as well as his political affiliation. Interestingly another significant matter has been noticed while the rural Muslim women know the political affiliation of the Panchayat Pradhan but do not know the name of the respective Panchayat Pradhan. It happens mainly because that they have heard the election result and a respective political party has formed the Gram Panchayat.

Table-7: Knowledge about the political affiliation of Panchayat Pradhan

	Respondent	
	Frequency (N)	%
Yes	167	41.75
No	233	58.25
Total	400	100

Source: Field Survey Report, 2019-2020

Generally, Muslim women are not nominated for candidature in the Panchayat election. The male members of their family are, sometimes, found to participate in direct politics. In those families, sometimes women are allowed to contest in the election while it is required. The main reason behind the non-selecting of Muslim women in the Panchayat election mainly because of their socio-religious position in which community they belong to. In an exceptional situation where there is no option in hand, Muslim women are nominated as candidates. Though, as per the West Bengal Panchayat Amendment Act, 2012 there is a provision for reservation of one-half of its seats for women including those from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes including Muslim women. But in practice, this provision is not implemented due to the ambiguity of laws. Generally, the seat is reserved for OBC women but nowhere it is specifically mentioned for Muslim women. Due to this ambiguity most often the women who belong to the OBC category from the majority Hindu community are selected for this post. As a consequence, they are debarred from this opportunity. But in exceptional cases while no women are found from the majority Hindu community or the region is highly Muslim populated, there are may have an opportunity for Muslim women. In that case, only the women whose family members are associated with politics or those who have a political connection are nominated for the candidature.

Problems and Prospects

Through the classification and analysis of data, some major causes have been revealed in our study which creates the hindrance of participation for Muslim women in grassroots politics.

1. Generally the Muslim women are not allowed to go outside of their home due to their orthodox family background.
2. The patriarchal influence and the male dominance in Muslim society still some of the major causes behind the spontaneous participation of women in grassroots politics.
3. Very low level of education, sometimes, creates a sense of political reluctance towards politics and political engagement.

Above all, the rural Muslims are facing an acute financial problem and most often they have to remain busy to maintain their daily bread and butter. Naturally, large proportions of Muslim women who have come from this family do not have any scope of political participation due to their financial crunch. Sometimes due to poor socio-economic conditions, the minority people are stigmatized and have to face the political indifferent attitude from the local elites. So generally, they are not giving proper importance in mainstream politics. Though the provision of reservation has ensured the political participation on the part of marginalized groups including Muslim women due to the lack of clear-cut statutory provision still is not materialized. Despite all these difficulties, there is hope, today to some extent the level of Muslim women's participation has been increased. If they are given a healthy environment and adequate space for participation then undoubtedly the aim of an integrated rural development will be achieved, it will on the one hand enhance the level of their financial capability simultaneously a sense of social bonding, culture of mutual coexistence will be developed on the other, which will truly explore the true essence of a vibrant democracy.

Conclusion and recommendations

Through the overall discussion it can be concluded that Muslim women are not holding a significant place in rural politics. And it cannot be interpreted with the help of any independent dimension; various interrelated factors are there which have complicated the situation. The problem of historical deprivation and religious isolation makes them separate and a sense of mutual distrust among the communities has been developed. So, gradually the Muslim women have become conservative and they are not accustomed to outsiders. They are not free to interact with those local institutions which are mainly male-dominated. Due to financial inadequacy, most rural women have to remain busy with their household activities, they don't have any scope of participation in rural politics leaving their daily engagement. Sometimes, it seems to them the participation in politics is a luxury way to spare their time for fruitless purposes. Apart from these, we cannot deny the orthodox nature of rural

Muslim families where the women are not allowed to engage in activities outside their homes. Naturally, due to their orthodox religious position women are still controlled by the male members of their family. So gradually a spontaneous space is not created for rural women in every sector of their life. Today the scenario is to some extent changed where some Muslim women are found to participate in various local activities. So here the Muslim women's participation should not only be looked at in terms of women empowerment rather it will enhance the community understanding among the Muslim and non-Muslim and an integrated rural development will be materialized with the fullest corporation of all sections of the society. It is a well-accepted principle that if a woman is politically educated then the whole family will become politically conscious. So, for the greatest interest of society women's participation should be encouraged at the grassroots level. As a consequence of that, a healthy vibrant society will emerge. And to achieve this end, not only the constitutional mechanism but also the political will is very much needed where a common space should be created and should be encouraged for the participation of minority along with their women. It will meet the gap between the Muslim and non-Muslim society at large. The way of an integrated rural development will be initiated which will create a new purpose and self-reliant rural India.

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