

# THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

## Women Empowerment at the Grassroots: Lessons from Rural Assam (India)

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**Abstract:**

*This paper is divided into two parts. In the first part two arguments are forwarded. The first argument is that the PRIs as envisaged by the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act 1992 have facilitated neoliberal penetration into the rural India. Panchayats as a means of decentralisation of power has contributed in fulfilling the neoliberal objective of a minimal State since decentralisation is a logical outcome of neoliberal theoretical construction of a minimal state. Panchayat as an agency to mobilise and empower the rural deprived, is used for widening the base of consumerism for the multinational products. This is for the simple reason that consumerism is higher in the socio-economically capable sections of the society. Social mobility and widespread participation are prerequisites for consumerism. The second argument is that although neoliberalism is allowed to penetrate by the Indian 'welfare' state, such penetration is not without check. The state itself has put resistance to such tendencies. The panchayats are shaped in such a way that they serve as means to State's power exercised through the bureaucracy. Various rural development schemes at the auspices of multilateral agencies are implemented through the panchayats with supervision of the State. While, on one hand, the multilateral agencies are endeavouring to widen the consumer base of the MNCs in the rural areas using the developed transport and communication infrastructures with a dual expectation of- no state interference in the MNCs' operations, and state protection for them at the same, on the other, the state is also exercising control on the multilateral agencies-sponsored development projects by way of supervision through its bureaucracy. Thus a 'clash of interests' (profit vs. power) between the state and neoliberal tendencies could be noticed. In this clash the greater objective of empowerment of the rural deprived (women) seems lost. Therefore, it can be argued that empowerment of the rural women through panchayats remains farce. This is also due to, firstly, the majority of the rural women is incapable of becoming the part of grassroots politics, and secondly, the majority of the elected women (victory attributed largely to the reservation policy) is incapable of taking part in the decision making effectively (due to host of reasons). These two arguments are substantiated in the second part of the paper.*

*This paper is based on primary and secondary data. Primary data used in the second part are collected from field study conducted on women representatives of Gaon Panchayats (GP) in Nalbari district of Assam. For generation of primary data, random sampling method has been employed*

**Keywords:** PRIs, women empowerment, neoliberal state

Panchayats, as administrative units of the 'self-governing village communities',<sup>i</sup> had existed in India for centuries. Panchayat, literally meaning an assembly of five, looked after the affairs of the village and had both police and judicial powers. With the advent of the British, the self-sustained village communities and their panchayats ceased to get sustenance. In course of time, they were replaced by formally constituted institutions of village administration. The local self-government in India, in the sense of an accountable representative institution, was the creation of the British.<sup>ii</sup> Out of the administrative compulsions the colonial masters took certain steps that contributed to evolution of panchayat as well-structured unit of governance at the grassroots level.<sup>iii</sup> Panchayat system occupies a special place in Gandhian thought of rural development. Mahatma Gandhi was much ambitious of panchayati raj system for his scheme of *swaraj*. He defined his vision of village panchayats (village *swaraj*) as a complete republic based on perfect democracy and individual freedom. He emphasised that real *swaraj* in India would be possible only through establishment panchayats in the villages. However, the policy makers of independent India had shown a thumb down to his vision of *swaraj*. The first draft of the Constitution of India did not include a provision on the panchayats. After much debate a provision on panchayats was included in the Part IV (Directive Principles of State Policy) which is not mandatory. Article 40 reads, "the state should take steps to organise village panchayats and endow with them such power and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government". The Schedule Seven, List II (State List) also mentions about the local self government. In the preceding years, following the recommendations of various committees appointed by the government of India, panchayats were established in almost all of the states.<sup>iv</sup> However, they were victims of dirty politics and therefore they could not

contribute any substantial to the objective of local self-government and rural development. It was primarily because the panchayats lacked constitutional recognition and legal safeguards. It was only after 1992 through the Constitution (73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment) Act 1992 (came into force on 24 April 1993), that PRIs emerged with a new *avatar*. The Act along with many historic features, granted the PRIs the much needed constitutional recognition, and made it units of local self-government in real sense. It brought a fundamental change not only in the realm of local self-government but also in India's federal character. Thus the journey from the 'local self-government' idea of Lord Ripon to the 'institutions of self-government' concept in the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment took more than a century.

By granting the legal status to the panchayats, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act of 1992 opened a new vista of grassroots politics in India which widened the base of political participation for the rural deprived people. Thus, the panchayati raj system in the post-73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act has bore a different look in its content and spirit. The Act, besides making panchayats' formation regular, has made women's representation mandatory. The panchayats have come to accommodate more of the deprived sections in the decision-making and have involved them in the implementation of the development programmes initiated by the state.

Here the apprehensions in a curious mind are- first, the legal status accorded to the panchayats in 1992 has been too late on the part of the political leadership of the country, albeit appreciated. Secondly, it is the time which is simultaneous with Indian state's decision for its economic reforms. The Congress party-led government during this time began economic reforms. Steps for economic reforms meant many- the Structural Adjustment Programme, opening of economy for foreign investment, relaxing restrictions on entry of foreign companies for trade in the country, cut in public expenditure, downsizing the public sectors enterprises along with selective privatization which argued not to be profit-making etc. In other words, Indian economy has been integrated with the global economy that is market controlled and where the state has very limited role. These have links with the leadership's urge for according panchayats a legal status and making it an effective means for decentralisation.

Political power has been decentralised through the panchayats. Participation of the rural masses, esp. the women, in grassroots politics has been ensured through the panchayats. They have been politically mobilised. Here two points may be made- first, decentralisation is a logical out come of neoliberal objective for a minimal state, and secondly, mobilisation of the rural masses and development of the rural areas are required to serve the economic interests of neoliberal state. This is because consumerism is higher in the mobilised people and development of the villages, esp. the communication infrastructure is essential for expansion of neoliberal economic interests. By involving the rural masses in public affairs through the panchayats are exposing them to the greater markets of neoliberal consumerism. Therefore, a logical link may be inferred between institutionalisation of the panchayats and making it as units of decentralisation of political power, and liberalisation of Indian economy.

Panchayats are generally treated as means to empower the deprived rural mass by way of involving them into grassroots decision making, and the panchayati raj system envisaged by the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act has specially been hailed revolutionary in empowering the rural women. The Act ensures their representation in the panchayat decision making by way of reservation of seats. It has led to an increase of women's participation and representation in the grassroots politics. Women have entered into the men's area of dominance. The elections following the Act have witnessed thousands of women taking part in grassroots politics. These women have had never thought of such involvement. They had been confined to four walls of the houses and engrossed to their traditional household works and child bearing. Thus the Act began a revolution in the country by bringing the rural women folk to the fold of grassroots politics. Nevertheless, this increased participation and representation has not contributed much in meeting the goal of women empowerment. The institutional mechanism for women's political representation has been proved inadequate in realising the greater objective of women empowerment. The opportunities provided have been much exploited by the women belonging to the well to do sections of the rural society.

This part of the paper argues that women's political empowerment through panchayats remains rhetorical in spite of women's increasing participation and representation in panchayat politics. This is substantiated by study of women's representation in the Gaon Panchayat (GP) level of the PRIs as it represents the bottom of grassroots politics.

## 1. Area of the study

This part is based on primary data collected from filed study conducted on the GPs (constituted by 2007 elections) and its elected women members. The field survey was conducted in Nalbari district of Assam. Nalbari district was formed on 14<sup>th</sup> August 1985 which in subsequent time faced a split on February 10, 2003 when Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) was formed in which some parts of the district were included.<sup>v</sup> The district occupies an area of 1,009 square kilometres<sup>vi</sup> and it has, according to the Census of India 2011 Report, a population of 769,919 (i.e. 2.47% of the state population) of which male population stands at 395,804 (i.e. 51.408525%) and female at 374,115 (i.e. 48.591475%). Nalbari district has a sex ratio of 945 females per 1000 males, and a literacy rate of 79.89% (total literate persons 542,680). Male literacy rate stands at 85.58% (299,224) and female at 73.85% (243,456).<sup>vii</sup> As far as panchayat structure is concerned there are 65 Gaon Panchayats, 7 Anchalik Panchayats (APs) and a Zilla Parishad (ZP). Nalbari district is well known for political activism on the part of its people.

### 1.1. Methodology and Sample

Data were collected through interview schedule conducted on the women representatives of the GPs. There were 235 women representatives that included 211 members and 24 presidents. For the purpose, a 'random sample method' was employed and sixty percent of the women representatives (respondents) had been selected from the list of the representatives. Thus the sample so drawn came to be 141 (127 members and 14 presidents). The sample size is considered adequate to represent the universe (235) as it is tested by statistical sample size calculation where 'level of confidence or probability' is 95 per cent and 'margin of error' is 5 percent.<sup>viii</sup> For collection of data a structured interview-schedule method was employed which included both 'open-ended' and

'closed-ended' questions. While selecting the respondents question of 'cross-section representation' had been taken care of. Data are presented esp. through bi-variable tabulations. Analytical method is adopted to interpret the data. The selection of the random sample is presented in the following table:

Blocks	No. of Respondents Selected		Total Respondents
	Presidents	Members	
Pub Nalbari	2	17	19
Borigog Banbhag	1	18	19
Paschim Nalbari	3	27	30
Madhupur	1	11	12
Tihu	2	15	17
Barbhag	1	16	17
Barkhetri <sup>®</sup>	4	23	27
<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>141</b>

Table 1: Selection of Respondents

## 2. State of Women Empowerment through Panchayats

The claim that panchayats have brought about women empowerment needs to be substantiated empirically. An endeavour is made here to reveal the state of women empowerment on the basis of the study on GP in Nalbari district.

### 2.1. Representation lower than the percentage prescribed by the Constitution

In pursuance of the Constitution's 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act, the Assam government enacted the Assam Panchayat Act 1994 and initiatives were taken to conduct elections under the new Act. However, due to lack of political will, it took about seven years to conduct first panchayats elections in the state. The first were conducted in 2001 and the second in 2007, and third was conducted recently on which information are yet to be available officially and the elected members are yet to show their performances. According to the 2007 panchayat elections, women representation in the GPs in Nalbari district is as follows:

Blocks	No. of GPs	No. of GPCs	GP Presidents			GP Members			
			M	F	% of FR	M	F	T	% of FR
Pub Nalbari	10	100	5	5	50.00	72	28	100	28.00
Borigog Banbhag	9	90	7	2	22.22	60	30	90	33.33
Paschim Nalbari	15	150	12	3	20.00	105	45	150	30.00
Madhupur	6	60	4	2	33.33	42	18	60	30.00
Tihu	6	60	3	3	50.00	34	26	60	43.33
Barbhag	7	70	4	3	42.85	44	26	70	37.14
Barkhetri <sup>®</sup>	12	120	6	6	50.00	80	38	118	32.20
<b>Total</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>650</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>36.92</b>	<b>437</b>	<b>211</b>	<b>648</b>	<b>32.56</b>

Table 2: Women Representation in Gaon Panchayats (in comparison to Male)

GPCs-Gaon Panchayat Constituencies; M-Male; F-Female; FR-Female Representation;

<sup>®</sup>Elections for panchayat members were not held under Barkhetri Block's 54 no. Kekankuchi Kaplabari GP constituency 3 no. Bartola (2no.Kaplabari 1st Part) and 55 no. Barnibari Naptipara GP constituency Barnibari 3<sup>rd</sup> Part

The table suggests that representation of the women in the members' posts fell short of the stipulated percentage. Their representation in four blocks (viz. Pub Nalbari, Paschim Nalbari, Madhupur and Barkhetri) did not reach to the required number. Again it is important to note that all the women representatives had won from the reserved seats. Although in the presidents' posts women representation had crossed the prescribed number, total strength of women representation (32.95 per cent) permitted male domination (with 67.04 per cent) in the panchayats representation. Thus it does not support the claim that the 73<sup>rd</sup> Act or Assam Panchayat Act 1994 has brought 'huge' number of rural women into the political power-sharing process at the grassroots level.

### 2.2. Lesser representation from the poor section

Occupation of a person has significance for participation in the public activities. It also determines one's social position. The following table presents occupational pattern of the respondents at the GP:

Office	Household works <sup>@</sup>	Govt. service	Others <sup>#</sup>	Total
GP members	124	--	3	127
GP presidents	14	--	--	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>--</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>141</b>

Table 3: Occupational pattern of the Respondents

<sup>@</sup>include- House wife (in case of married women), farming activities (agricultural activities and poultry), weaving etc.; <sup>#</sup>include- works like tuition, work as casual teacher etc.

The table suggests that majority of the respondents were housewives who were engaged in works such as farming activities, weaving, poultry etc which are regular works and women find hardly any time to think about involvement in public activities. Nevertheless, due to the opportunity provided by reservation, these women had come to contest the elections and got elected which suggests that they made compromise between their political responsibility and household chores. The 'others' category in the table includes works such as private tuition, engagement as casual teachers in local schools, weaving on professional basis, etc. From interview schedule it became obvious that most of the women in this category were unmarried women, and few were widows.

### 2.3. Least representation from the Backward Communities

Caste is a distinguishing feature of Indian social system and plays significant role in politics. Caste factor at the panchayat levels tends to be more influential since panchayats are village level politics where caste system is firmly grounded. However, caste system is much flexible in case of Assam. On the basis of caste identity, the respondents were grouped into four - General, OBCs, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Office	General	OBCs	SCs	STs	Total
GP members	77	24	22	4	127
GP presidents	10	2	2	--	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>141</b>

Table 4: Caste-wise distribution of the Respondents

It appears that women from the 'General' category maintain dominance followed by the OBCs. The SCs and STs have lesser representation. This is an indication of the socio-economic conditions of the respondents.

### 2.4. Least representation from Minority religious groups

Religion exerts considerable impact on political participation and representation. On the basis of religion population of the district can be divided into two—Hindus and Muslims. The following table shows respondents' representation on the basis of religion:

Office	Hindus	Muslims	Total
GP members	96	31	127
GP presidents	11	3	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>141</b>

Table 5: Religion-wise distribution of the Respondents

It appears that Hindu women with almost 76 per cent had domination over the Muslim women (24 per cent). It was also observed that all of the Muslim women were elected from the women reserved seats.

### 2.5. Reservation-based representation

It is noteworthy that all of the women members were elected from 'women reserved seats'. However, in case of the presidents' office, two women got elected from open seats. But women's overall representation in the GP suggested reservation-based representation which indicated that women contested elections due to compulsions put by the system.

### 2.6. Less representation from younger generation

It is often claimed that the present time is the age of younger generation and in India. About forty percent of the current population is composed of this age group. Although panchayats are treated to be first platform for politics, they have not been able to attract more young people into the system. In order to substantiate this point, the respondents were divided into three broad groups— young-aged (20 to 34 years), middle-aged (35 to 49 years) and aged (50 years and above).

Office	Age group			Total
	20-34	35-49	50 & above	
GP members	33	90	4	127
GP presidents	1	10	3	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>141</b>

Table 6: Age-wise distribution of the Respondents

It appears from the above that young women had only 24 percent of representation. The respondents in the 'aged group 20-34' include four unmarried. It was observed that majority of the rest had contested elections on family pressure. Political ambitions of unmarried young women were greatly determined by their parents since they were dependent. It was also noted that parents with apolitical nature preferred academic career or marriage for their daughters rather than forwarding them for a political career. This had resulted into lower representation of the younger women.

### 2.7. Lack of independence in performing political duties

Mere increase in number of women representatives may not necessarily mean real representation. In most cases it was seen that although women were elected to the panchayats, many of them did not get proper scope to exercise their power in the decision-making. This was due to certain compulsions stemmed from personal as well as familial, social and official conditions. It was inferred from the field study that following factors might be held responsible for influencing women representatives' participation in decision-making of the panchayats:

#### 2.7.1. Lower level of education

There is a correlation between the representatives' educational qualification and the quality of representation in politics. Highly educated representatives expectedly give good representation since they are well versed with political information. They are also people with good skill of communication which helps in expressing their views succinctly. The respondents were categorized into four—(a) illiterate (b) under-Metric, (c) Metric and above, and (d) Graduate and above.

Office	Education Level				Total
	Illiterate	under-Metric	Metric & above	Graduate & above	
GP members	6	76	43	2	127
GP presidents	Nil	8	4	2	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>141</b>

Table 7(a): Educational status of the Respondents

The table shows that more than 92 per cent of the respondents fell in high school and secondary level of education. There were also illiterate women. It appears that elections had been confined to the less educated and the well-educated women seemed not to be interested in GP elections and they were out of the fray. This had impact on the quantitative as well as qualitative representation in the GPs and on the objective of women empowerment.

#### 2.7.2. Lower attendance to office and meetings

It is observed that many of the women representatives are irregular to their offices and in attending the meetings. The following table show the frequency of respondents' attendance to office and meetings:

Posts	Regular	Once a Week	Once a Fortnight	Once a Month	Seldom	Meetings' Day (approx.)
GP members	11.81	52.75	1.57	13.38	9.44	87.00
GP presidents	14.28	35.71	14.28	7.14	--	99.00

Table 7(b): Attendance to Panchayat office (in percentage)

It appears that major percentage of the respondents visited office once in a week. It is also clear that largest number of respondents attended the office on the day when there was a meeting.

From investigations it was found that marital status, motherhood responsibility and household works were few of the major factors that exerted pressure on political duties of the respondents and cause irregularity to office and meetings. The following table shows marital status of the respondents:

Office	Unmarried	Married	Total
GP members	3	122	125
GP presidents	--	13	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>139*</b>

Table 7 (b-i): Marital status of the Respondents  
\*included 2 widows

The table suggests that majority of the respondents were married which indicated influence of family responsibility on their political duties. As far representation of the unmarried respondents was concerned they constituted merely two per cent. They were found to be irregular as they see their colleagues' irregularity. This had impact on the quality of women representation and therefore, on women empowerment.

Motherhood is great responsibility for the rural women. Women need to devote much time to their children and this hampers their political interest and activities. Therefore, having children or without children is a factor influencing participation in political activities of the women representatives. The following table shows number of married respondents who were mothers:

Office	Without children	Having children	Total
GP members	4*	120	124
GP presidents	--	14	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>134</b>	<b>138</b>

Table 7 (b-ii) : Distribution of Respondents on basis of Motherhood  
\*Three were unmarried

It appears from the above table that majority of the elected women were mothers with children and therefore engaged in motherhood responsibility. Interviews suggested that these women thought twice while filing nominations for panchayat elections. Many women succumbed to this responsibility. It was observed that such responsibility had influenced their effective participation as GP representatives.

When asked about the impact of household works on performing political duties the following data emerged:

Posts	Yes	No
GP members	83	44
GP presidents	6	8

Table 7 (b-iii) : Influence of household works on political duties

It is seen from the above that 59 percent of the sampled respondents replied an emphatic 'YES' and the rest replied 'NO'. It was noted that in the later category three unmarried women and two widows were also included. The table suggests that household works had obvious impact on political duties.

Thus it is seen that majority of the representatives were married and burdened with household responsibility. Although elected to the decision making process, they were not free from their household works which led to an irregular and reluctant participation in the decision-making process of the panchayats.

### 2.7.3. Influences over decision making

This was found to be one of the crucial issues that affected women's participation in the decision making process of the panchayats. It was seen that women were elected to the panchayat bodies on various accounts, but while performing the job and taking decisions they came under certain external pressures. This questioned the independence of the women members in decision-making. Various factors had been identified that influenced women members' political decisions. The following chart shows the main sources of influences on women members' decision-making in the panchayats:

Posts	Husbands	Other Family members	Political Party
GP members	97.00	78.00	13.00
GP presidents	99.00	87.00	20.00

Table 7(c): Factors of influence on decision-making (in percentage)

The data in the table suggest that there are considerable influences on women representatives on their political decisions. Major influence was exerted by family members. This suggested an indirect 'proxy' representation on the part on the elected women.

### 2.7.4. Economic dependence on husbands

Occupation of a person has significance for participation in the public activities. It also determines one's social position. The following table presents occupational pattern of the respondents:

Office	Household works <sup>@</sup>	Govt. service	Others <sup>#</sup>	Total
GP members	124	--	3	127
GP presidents	14	--	--	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>--</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>141</b>

Table: 7(d): Occupational pattern of the Respondents

<sup>@</sup>include- House wife (in case of married women), farming activities (agricultural activities and poultry), weaving etc.; <sup>#</sup>include- works like tuition, work as casual teacher etc.

The table suggests that majority of the respondents were housewives who were engaged in works such as farming activities, weaving, poultry etc which were regular works and women hardly found any time to think about involvement in public activities. Nevertheless, due to the opportunity provided by reservation, these women had come to contest the elections and got elected which suggested that they brought an adjustment between their political responsibility and household chores. The 'others' category in the table includes works such as private tuition, engagement as casual teachers in local schools, weaving on professional basis, etc. From interview schedule it became obvious that most of the women in this category were unmarried women, and few were widows.

#### 2.7.5. Lower level of public exposure

Involvement in organisational activities is an important indication of women's interests in public activities. It was observed that women with more involvement in socio-cultural or economic organizations tended to be more interested in politics. Reverse to it led to lower level of participation in politics. The following table shows categorises of respondents on the basis of their social and organizational involvement:

Office	Socio-cultural organizations	SHGs	NGOs	Others*
GP members	9	56	--	61
GP presidents	2	7	--	2

Table 7(e): Social and Organizational involvement of the Respondents

\*women specific socio-economic organisations/ associations

The table depicts that the respondents had more involvement in the self employment generating micro-economic organisations, i.e. Self Help Groups (SHGs) and in 'others' which included the membership of women-specific local groups/clubs such as 'Mahila Samiti', 'Xanchay' (women's micro-investment and credit groups) etc. Their involvement in socio-cultural organisations and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) which provide exposure to public/political activities was limited.

#### 2.7.6. Influence of party politics

Panchayat elections have become increasingly party based although a few candidates fought the elections as independent candidates. The elections had come to be treated as pre-Assembly or Lok Sabha elections tests. Parties that won more seats in these elections started propaganda campaign against their rivals, and tried to show as if they were going to win the next Assembly or Lok Sabha elections too. This had increased the importance of panchayat elections with involvement of almost all of the political parties. The following table shows the party affiliation of the respondents at each level of the PRIs:

Tiers	Total Respn.	INC	AGP	BJP	CPI(M)	AIUDF	BPF	IND
GP	141	71	43	2	1	3	1	20

Table: 7(f) : Party affiliation of the Respondents

Respn.-Respondents; INC-Indian National Congress (I); AGP-Asom Gana Parishad; BJP-Bharatiya Janata Party; CPI-Communist Party of India (Marxist); AIUDF-All India United Democratic Front; BPF-Bodoland People's Front; IND-independent

The table suggests that all the present political parties in the state had their presence in the panchayat elections. It is clear that only 14 per cent (20 out of 141) of elected women had won as independent candidates. Dominance of party politics had an impact on the independent decision making of the women representatives.

#### 2.7.7. Influence of local politicians and bureaucracy

The functioning of panchayats is very much influenced by the local politicians, MLAs etc. From the candidate selection process to the release of fund and its allocation, the politicians play major roles. Again the Block Development Officers (BDOs) and Deputy Commissioners (DCs) have major role in functioning of the panchayats. The BDOs were seen intervening in various activities of the panchayats through the panchayat secretaries. They were the officers who fixed the date for meetings and forwarded guidelines for fund allocations.

### 2.7.8. Lack of team spirit

It was seen that the women representatives lacked a 'team spirit'. They were observed to be very often indulged in in-house fighting. This affected the goal of their political empowerment. It was also observed that lobbyism existed in the panchayats which was based more on personal rather than political issues. The root of such conflicts had been in the issue of allocation of development scheme where decisions were taken by the presidents, and views of the members were neglected.

### **3. Conclusion**

It is seen that the strength of women representation in the panchayats is against the popular impression that the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act has brought a revolutionary change in women's political representation in the grassroots politics. It is clear that time is yet to come when the women shall show a general interest in joining politics. It is true that there is increase in the number of women as representatives in the GP. However, for such increase credit goes to the reservation system which has compelled the system to adapt a specific number of women into the decision making. There are very few women who were elected from open seats. It is also obvious from the analysis of the socio-economic and political background of the women representatives that most of the women came into the system out of certain compulsions such as family pressure, public pressure, call from political party, women reservation etc. Again after elections, women representative were not free to exercise their power. They worked under pressure of various factors. Thus issue of women's political empowerment still remains a dream. The women representatives of the GP have special responsibility in bringing other rural women in the society to the forefront. However, investigations shown that they had performed dismally in this regard.

In conclusions it can be said that the panchayats as envisaged by the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act, are becoming mere instruments of implementing the development projects under the guidance of the state. The projects sponsored by the multilateral agencies are at the aim of bringing out infrastructural development which could widen the base of consumerism for goods produced by the MNCs. The state on the other hand is also exerting influence on these projects by way of supervision through the bureaucracy located at the grassroots. Thus the claim of decentralisation of political power through panchayats looks to be fallacious and the objective of rural development and women empowerment seem to be lost.

### **4. Notes and References**

- i Sir Charles Metcalfe, the provisional Governor General of India (1835-36) termed the village communities as 'the little republics'.
- ii Mathew, George (2001), Status of Panchayati Raj in India 2000, New Delhi: Concept Publishing, p.3.
- iii Lord Mayo's resolution of 1870 (adopted out of fiscal compulsion) on local self-government is historic. Following this resolution, the first significant step to revive the traditional village panchayat system in Bengal was taken through the Bengal Chowkidari Act. Lord Ripon's tenure as viceroy was a watershed in the structural evolution of local government in the country. It was during his viceroyalty that the government resolution of 18 May 1882 provided for local boards consisting of a large majority of elected non-official members and non-official chairperson for those boards. It is considered to be the Magna Carta of local democracy in India. The role of local administration was elevated by the introduction of this resolution.
- iv In the pre-73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act, two major Committees and their recommendations can be considered important in the evolution of PRIs in the post-independence era. They are—(i) Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1957) recommended for constitution of PRIs in all the states. It popularised the term 'panchayati rai' as a process of governance; (ii) Asoka Mehta Committee (1977) marked a turning point in the concept and practice of PRIs. Its report (1978) is considered a seminal document which sought to make panchayats an organic, integral part of the democratic process of the country. In addition to these, recommendations of the Parliamentary Sub-Committee (1988) headed by P. K. Thungon are also noteworthy. It recommended for constitutional recognition for the PRIs. The same tone was maintained in the 64<sup>th</sup> Constitution Amendment bill, 1989. It was modeled on the bill (drafted by L. M. Singhvi) appended to the Asoka Mehta Committee report.
- v The BTC was formed through the Memorandum of Settlement signed between the BLTF as one party and the Government of Assam and the Union Government as the other.
- vi The Revenue Department of the District has estimated the land area as 733624 bigha, 0 kotha and 3.5 lecha.
- vii Census of India 2011, Provisional Population Totals, Paper 2, Volume 2 of 2011, Rural-Urban Distribution-Assam, Series 19.
- viii "Sample Size Calculator" developed by Raosoft, Inc. accessed at [www.google.com](http://www.google.com)