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## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN PANCHAYATS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RAIGANJ AND ISLAMPUR BLOCKS OF UTTAR DINAJPUR DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL, INDIA- ISSUES AND TRENDS

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### Abstract:

In recent years women empowerment has become a significant issue among academicians, social workers, and policy decision-makers in India. After the successful establishment of the Panchayat system as well as reservations for women in the local bodies, there has been a tremendous change in the number of women representatives in PRIs. But women empowerment is not an easy process rather, that needs a change in the mindset of the patriarchal society, social institutions, and far more determined effort on the part of the women representatives. Sometimes it becomes difficult to serve political duties for the women representatives in this present situation where there is a lack of proper knowledge, lack of education, lots of dependencies, family influence, and so on. In this light, the present study is an attempt to examine the socio-economic conditions and experiences of the elected women representatives of Gram Panchayats of Raiganj and Islampur Blocks and their participation in different sectors of grassroots politics. The whole study is based on empirical data which have been collected through field survey.

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### 1.0 Introduction:

India is a democratic country where equality and freedom are its base. The utmost importance and the key responsibility of democratic nations are to serve equality among their citizens. But, in Indian society, it is seen that males are dominant in every sphere of life. The male members of the society had authority over the social, political, and economic activities in the pre-independence period. The picture remained the same even after independence. To establish the equal rights and social status of the women as the men enjoyed, different legislations have been passed, and feminist movements have been started as well in India. It is a true fact that almost half of the total population of India are women and are playing vital roles in the process of development. But, the fact is that their position in society is not good. So, for the development of the nation and to maintain democratic principles, women must have an equal status in the socio-economic and political fields. In order to bring women into the same platform where the men are standing, the

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Government of India has been adopting many measures and formulating different types of plans and programs, but still, the scenarios are vulnerable. At the policy level, various legal reforms have also been introduced to improve the social status Indian social system (Mehta, 2002). The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble: Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directives Principles of State Policies but the real pictures are different.

The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act of India becomes a new theme as 'Empowerment of woman' at the grassroots with the hope that a new paradigm of women's political participation would bring a drastic change among women in the distributive system of benefits (Buch, 1998). The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act provides a one-third reservation of seats for women in the Panchayat system. As a result of this Amendment Act, millions of women have been elected in Panchayats and participated in the decision-making process (Verba, 1978). While finding at the problems of women serving their role in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), one has to bear under what condition these PRIs are created with 33.3% reservation of seats and how they are serving their duties and responsibilities assigned to them. It is obvious from the report prepared by the Sub Committee of the National Planning Committee in 1941 upto the recent report of the Committee of the Status of Women in India that the conditions of women are awful, and they are deprived of their rights and opportunities (Mazumder, 1998).

Against these backdrops, the present study aims at examining the experiences of the elected women representatives in Panchayats in two different blocks of Uttar Dinajpur district, West Bengal, India.

## **2.0 Objectives:**

The main objectives of the study are

- To explore the awareness, interest, involvement, and various obstacles of the Elected Women Representatives in Gram Panchayats of Raiganj Block of the district of Uttar Dinajpur;
- To know the awareness, interest, involvement, and various obstacles of the Elected Women Representatives in Gram Panchayats of Islampur Block of the district of Uttar Dinajpur;
- To make a comparative study in between Raiganj and Islampur blocks of Uttar Dinajpur district.

## **3.0 Data and Methods:**

This paper has specifically attempted to study the present conditions of the EWRs (Elected Women Representative) in the village Panchayats of Raiganj and Islampur Blocks of Uttar Dinajpur District. The study was conducted in two parts. In the first part of the study, secondary sources have been used for collecting data. For the second part of the study, data have been collected solely and entirely by using the interview method of survey research with the help of a prepared questionnaire. According to the Census of India (2011), the district has two subdivisions, four municipalities, nine blocks, and 98 Gram Panchayats. In the area under the study, there are 13 Gram Panchayats in the Islampur block and 14 Gram Panchayats in Raiganj Block. For the purpose of the study, 2 EWRs from each of the Gram Panchayats of these two blocks have been taken. So, the total number of respondents is 54. These 54 respondents are randomly selected and interviewed separately. Their awareness levels before entering into the grassroots democracy and after their entry have been analyzed thoroughly. So, in the present study, both exploratory and analytical designs have been used.

#### 4.0 About Raiganj Block:

The District of Uttar Dinajpur came into existence on 1 Apr 1992 after the bifurcation of the erstwhile West Dinajpur District. Raiganj is one of the Community Development Block of Uttar Dinajpur District consisted of 1 Panchayat Samiti, 14 Gram Panchayats, 279 Gram Sansads, and 222 Mouzas. This block has formed an administrative division with the Raiganj subdivision of Uttar Dinajpur district. Raiganj block is located at 25.62°N to 88.12°E. The total area of this block is 472.13 Km<sup>2</sup> and the total population is 427840, with a total number of 966644 households (Census of India, 2011).

#### 5.0 About Islampur Block:

Islampur is one of the CD Blocks of Uttar Dinajpur District consisted of 1 Panchayat Samiti, 13 Gram Panchayats, and 178 Gram Sansads. This block has formed an administrative division with the Islampur subdivision of Uttar Dinajpur district. Islampur block is located at 26°16' N to 88°12' E. The total area of this block is 329.44 Km<sup>2</sup> and the total population is 307972, with a total number of households is 45007 (Census of India, 2011).

#### 6.0 Review of Literatures:

**Khanna (2009)** presented an important study on *The Political Participation of Women in India*. This article shows the inadequate means to cure the complexities of gender discrimination. To know the real status of women in a country, it will have to be judged by their involvement in politics and their role in the decision-making process. Here, the author has prioritized the discrimination in political participation, which is an inherent feature of our society, though our constitution secured an equal opportunity for both men and women.

**Khurshid (2015)**, in the article *Political Participation and Representation of Women in Indian Politics*, has highlighted the issues of violation of women's rights in India. According to this article, women have been neglected as an oppressed class at the societal level and their own families. They enjoy the least socio-economic status. They are the victims of a gender-based system of society. The author has written that the feminist movement can be treated as a challenge against this patriarchal society.

**Manikyamba (1989)**, in his book *Women in Panchayati Raj Structure*, identifies the effective involvement and participation of Indian women in the process of rural development. He has discussed the several constraints like structural, functional, attitudinal, and environmental for women in the affair of involvement in politics. Finally, he discusses rural women's interaction with the officials, issues relating to women's reservation in PRIs, and the nature of rural women's leadership.

**Prabhakar (2004)**, in his famous book *Women in Rural India*, has provided information about the socio-economic status of the women in the rural environment, various plans and programs for their development, their economic conditions, and different employment opportunities on the one hand. On the other hand, it has shown various problems and constraints that rural women generally face. The author has tried to create a kind of awakening among rural women by discussing women's problems and their importance in the near future in rural India.

**Satyam (2014)** has written a book called *Women in Gram Panchayat; Emerging Leader in Grassroots Politics*. His book is on women and their political participation at the grassroots level politics through the panchayat system based on fieldwork in the villages on Srirampur and Chittapur in the district of Nizamabad Andhra Pradesh, India. The importance of this book is how the leadership is being changed from male-dominated leadership to women leadership and how they are working in the PRIs. Special emphasis is given on Dalit women's leadership and their role in grassroots politics.

## 7.0 Empirical Study:

In addition to this analysis, an attempt has been drawn to highlight the personal background of the elected women representatives of the GPs of Raiganj and Islampur Blocks in the field of their political activities.

**Table 1: Encouragement to join in Politics among EWRs**

| Name of the Blocks | family |       | Husband |       | Self |      | Political party |       | For social work |       | Other reason |      | Total |
|--------------------|--------|-------|---------|-------|------|------|-----------------|-------|-----------------|-------|--------------|------|-------|
|                    | No     | %     | No      | %     | No   | %    | No              | %     | No              | %     | No           | %    |       |
| Raiganj            | 3      | 10.71 | 5       | 17.85 | 1    | 3.57 | 17              | 60.71 | 1               | 3.57  | 1            | 3.57 | 28    |
| Islampur           | 0      | 0     | 14      | 53.84 | 0    | 0    | 5               | 19.23 | 7               | 29.92 | 0            | 0    | 26    |
| N                  | 3      | 5.55  | 19      | 35.18 | 1    | 1.85 | 22              | 40.74 | 8               | 14.81 | 1            | 1.85 | 54    |

Source: Field Survey

Table 1 provides us information about the number and percentage of the respondents who have come to join politics according to the will of their parents and who have come in this field with the consent of their husbands. In Raiganj block, most of the EWRs, i.e., 60.71%, joined politics by the influence of the political party, whereas in Islampur Block, 53.84 % of the total respondents have come in politics by the influence of their husbands.

**Table 2: The EWRs' Position in Gram Panchayat**

| Name of the Blocks | Member |       | Sarpanch |       | Total |
|--------------------|--------|-------|----------|-------|-------|
|                    | No     | %     | No       | %     |       |
| Raiganj            | 25     | 89.28 | 3        | 10.71 | 28    |
| Islampur           | 20     | 76.92 | 6        | 23.7  | 26    |
| N                  | 45     | 83.33 | 9        | 16.66 | 54    |

Source: Field Survey

In the case of women, participation in politics is not the only end. It is necessary to review what kind of positions women have got or are getting in politics. The political position of the respondents has been displayed in Table 2. In Raiganj Block, 89.28% of respondents act as Panchayats members, and only 10.71% are doing their duties as Pradhan of Gram Panchayat. On the other hand, in Islampur Block, 76.92% of the total respondents act as members and 16.66% as sarpanch.

**Table 3: The idea of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act**

| Name of the Blocks | Have Idea |       | Do not have |       | To some extent |       | Total |
|--------------------|-----------|-------|-------------|-------|----------------|-------|-------|
|                    | No        | %     | No          | %     | No             | %     |       |
| Raiganj            | 1         | 3.57  | 22          | 78.57 | 5              | 17.85 | 28    |
| Islampur           | 3         | 11.53 | 23          | 88.46 | 0              | 0     | 26    |
| N                  | 4         | 7.40  | 25          | 46.29 | 5              | 9.25  | 54    |

Source Filed Survey

Table 3 has been designed on the awareness level of the elected women Panchayat members of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act of the Indian constitution. Out of 28 respondents of Raiganj Block, only 1, i.e., 3.57%, have been found to have a clear idea about the Amendment Act. On the other hand, in Islampur Block, 4 or 11.53 % of them have an idea about the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment of the Indian constitution. It is clear from the above table that most of the blocks' respondents have no clear idea about the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act.

**Table 4: Freedom of Speech in Gram Panchayat Meetings**

| Name of the Blocks | Regular |       | Occasional |       | No Comments |       | Total |
|--------------------|---------|-------|------------|-------|-------------|-------|-------|
|                    | No      | %     | No         | %     | No          | %     |       |
| Raiganj            | 14      | 50    | 13         | 46.42 | 1           | 3.57  | 28    |
| Islampur           | 3       | 11.53 | 20         | 76.92 | 3           | 11.53 | 26    |
| N                  | 17      | 31.48 | 33         | 61.11 | 4           | 7.40  | 54    |

Source: Field Survey

Table 4 illuminates the fact that how many women elected Panchayat members to express their views in the Meeting held at the Panchayat level. It is clear from the table that most of the above-cited members keep sharing their views on different agendas. In Raiganj Block, out of 28 respondents, 14, i.e., 50% attend meetings regularly and have their opinion. On the other hand, in Islampur Block, only 3 or 11.53 % speak in Panchayats meetings on a regular basis. The notable thing is that most of the respondents from both blocks speak the least during the Panchayat meeting.

**Table 5: Men's Opinion in GP is more weight full than women or not**

| Name of the Blocks | More |       | Not much |       | Little bit |       | Never |       | Total |
|--------------------|------|-------|----------|-------|------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|                    | No   | %     | No       | %     | No         | %     | No    | %     |       |
| Raiganj            | 11   | 39.28 | 9        | 32.14 | 8          | 28.57 | 0     | 0     | 28    |
| Islampur           | 14   | 53.84 | 5        | 19.23 | 3          | 11.53 | 4     | 15.38 | 26    |
| N                  | 25   | 46.29 | 14       | 25.92 | 11         | 20.37 | 4     | 7.40  | 54    |

Source: Field Survey

Table 5 shows the weight of the elected women Panchayat member's opinions in making major decisions at the Panchayat level. Out of the total respondents of the Raiganj Block, only 11 or 39.28% think that male members are more critical in this regard. On the other hand, 53.84% of the respondents of Islampur Block think that they are inferior to the male elected members in giving opinions. However, most of them believe that male elected Panchayat members' opinions are more powerful than the women elected Panchayat members in Panchayat.

**Table 6: Dependence for their activities**

| Name of the Blocks | Husband |       | Members of family |       | Members of GP |       | Not dependent |       | Total |
|--------------------|---------|-------|-------------------|-------|---------------|-------|---------------|-------|-------|
|                    | No      | %     | No                | %     | No            | %     | No            | %     |       |
| Raiganj            | 5       | 17.85 | 4                 | 14.28 | 7             | 25    | 12            | 42.85 | 28    |
| Islampur           | 14      | 53.84 | 2                 | 7.69  | 3             | 11.53 | 7             | 26.92 | 26    |
| N                  | 19      | 35.18 | 6                 | 11.11 | 10            | 18.51 | 19            | 35.18 | 54    |

Source: Field Survey

Women elected members' dependence on political activities is cited in the above table 6. Out of a total of 28 respondents of Raiganj Block, 12 or 42.85% are not dependent on anybody while serving their duties. In Islampur Block, it should be noticed that 53.84% of the respondents are dependent on their husbands while serving their responsibilities.

**Table 7: The requirement of training for newly elected women in politics**

| Name of the Blocks | Agreed |       | Disagreed |      | Total |
|--------------------|--------|-------|-----------|------|-------|
|                    | No     | %     | No        | %    |       |
| Raiganj            | 26     | 92.85 | 2         | 7.14 | 28    |
| Islampur           | 26     | 100   | 0         | 0    | 26    |
| N                  | 52     | 96.29 | 2         | 3.70 | 54    |

Source: Field Survey

Table 7 is the answer to the question of whether the newly elected members need political training or not. On this query, respondents of both Raiganj and Islampur blocks nearly answered the same. Almost all respondents of both blocks (Raiganj-92.85% and Islampur- 100%) think that political training is very important for the newly elected women representatives.

**Table 8: EWRs' interest in politics before and after the appointment**

| Name of the Blocks | More interested |       | As interested as before |       | Decreased |       | No answer |      | Total |
|--------------------|-----------------|-------|-------------------------|-------|-----------|-------|-----------|------|-------|
|                    | No              | %     | No                      | %     | No        | %     | No        | %    |       |
| Raiganj            | 7               | 25    | 6                       | 21.42 | 14        | 50    | 1         | 3.57 | 28    |
| Islampur           | 16              | 61.53 | 1                       | 3.84  | 8         | 3.76  | 1         | 3.84 | 26    |
| N                  | 23              | 42.59 | 7                       | 12.96 | 22        | 40.74 | 2         | 3.70 | 54    |

Source: Field Survey

Table 8 bears a vital question of whether the interest and enthusiasm of the respondents have increased after entering into politics. After analyzing the above table, it is found that out of 28 respondents of Raiganj Block, 14 or 50% say that after their election, their interest in politics has been decreased than before. On the other hand, 61.53 % of respondents of Islampur Block say that their interest in politics has been compared to before. So, in this question, the two blocks have shared two different views.

**Table 9: EWRs' influence on the family before and after the appointment**

| Name of the Blocks | Much greater |       | Greater |       | Little bit |       | Unchanged |       | No comments |   | Total |
|--------------------|--------------|-------|---------|-------|------------|-------|-----------|-------|-------------|---|-------|
|                    | No           | %     | No      | %     | No         | %     | No        | %     | No          | % |       |
| Raiganj            | 2            | 7.14  | 24      | 85.71 | 0          | 0     | 2         | 7.14  | 0           | 0 | 28    |
| Islampur           | 4            | 15.38 | 11      | 42.35 | 6          | 23.07 | 5         | 19.23 | 0           | 0 | 26    |
| N                  | 6            | 11.11 | 35      | 64.81 | 6          | 11.11 | 7         | 12.96 | 0           | 0 | 54    |

Source: Field Survey

Table 9 focuses on whether, after being elected, the influence of the women representatives over their families has been increased or not. Respondents of both Raiganj and Islampur have answered that their influence in the family has been increased after the political appointment. 85.71% of the Raiganj Block say that after the appointment, their influence on family becomes greater, and in Islampur Block, 42.35% say the same answer.

**Table 10: EWRs' ability to evaluate the political system before and after the appointment**

| Name of the Blocks | Much greater |      | Greater |       | Little bit |       | Unchanged |       | No comments |   | Total |
|--------------------|--------------|------|---------|-------|------------|-------|-----------|-------|-------------|---|-------|
|                    | No           | %    | No      | %     | No         | %     | No        | %     | No          | % |       |
| Raiganj            | 2            | 7.14 | 21      | 75    | 0          | 0     | 5         | 17.85 | 0           | 0 | 28    |
| Islampur           | 1            | 3.84 | 14      | 53.84 | 4          | 15.38 | 7         | 26.92 | 0           | 0 | 26    |
| N                  | 3            | 5.55 | 35      | 65.81 | 4          | 7.40  | 12        | 22.22 | 0           | 0 | 54    |

Source Field Survey

Table 10 highlights the capability of elected women representatives to evaluate the political system as compare to before. It is found in the above table 10 that 75%% of the total respondents of Raiganj Block believe that after being elected, the ability to understand and evaluate the political system has increased more than before. On the other hand, in Islampur Block 53.84% of the respondents say that the ability to evaluate politics is increased. So in the end, we may say that most of the women elected representatives of both blocks, after being elected, their capabilities to evaluate the political system have been increased more than before.

## 8. 0 Comparative Analysis of the Two Blocks as well as Basic Findings:

Raiganj is a block and headquarters of Uttar Dinajpur district. This block has 14 Gram Panchayats, where most of the EWRs are educated. None of them have graduated. Most of the EWRs of this block is in the age of 28-37. This education is mainly confined to primary (21.42%) and secondary (60.71%). Most of the EWRs belong to SC (46.42%) and General (42.85%) categories. All the EWRs are found either to be Hindu (64.28%) or to be of Muslim (35.71%) religion. Almost all the EWRs

(89.28%) of this block live in joint households whose monthly income is between 11 to 25 thousand. Most of the EWRs (53.57%) are being deprived of having family property.

Islampur Block of Uttar Dinajpur district is consisting of 13 GPs. This district is educationally backward, and higher education among the EWRs is very little. This is a Muslim inhabited block where every respondent is married and lives in an agriculture-based family (50%), though some other professions are also found there. Most of the EWRs (53.84%) live in a nuclear family and have the right to property.

In Raiganj Block, most of the respondents have entered into politics due to the requirement of the political parties (60.71%). The EWRs of this block does not have any idea about the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act and the women reservation system of India. They attend Panchayats meetings occasionally (50%) and take active participation in them. They have expressed that men receive more importance in points than women. They do not want to be dependent on anyone to perform political functions. Surprisingly, more than half of the total EWRs of this block want not to be re-elected into politics. But they think that they are able to solve social and political problems better than men.

In Islampur Block, none of the EWRs have come into politics from a free will but for their husband's sake (53.84%). Almost all women members (88.46%) do not know anything about the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, but they are well informed about the women's reservation in politics. Like other blocks, the respondents (53.84%) of this block also believe that men's authority gets more responses than women in GPs. One noticeable thing is that though EWRs think that they can serve political tasks better than men, they do not involve themselves actively.

In Raiganj Block, many of the EWRs are associated with some CSOs. However, all EWRs agree about the need for training the newly elected women representatives. They think that true women empowerment is possible through politics. Significantly, though the capabilities and abilities of the EWRs have been increased, they show less interest in politics than before.

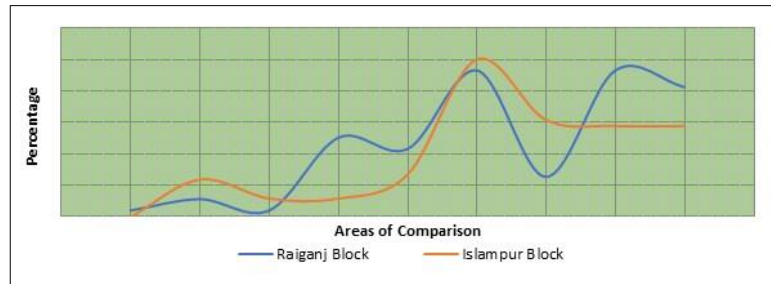
It has been noticed in the Islampur Block that most of the respondents (61.53%) of this block are engaged in NGOs, and they demand training for the newly elected women representatives. Though they are facing lots of problems, but have expressed a wish to get re-elected into politics. They believe that by political participation, true women empowerment is possible because it enhances women's capability and ability to evaluate the governmental system and their position in the family.

**Table 11: Comparative Analysis**

| Areas of Comparison                            | Raiganj Block | Islampur Block |
|--|---------------|----------------|
| Voluntarily Join Politics                      | 3.57 %        | 0 %            |
| Worked as GP's Pradhan                         | 10.71 %       | 23.7 %         |
| Idea about 73 <sup>rd</sup> CAA                | 3.57 %        | 11.53 %        |
| Speak regularly in GP Meeting                  | 50 %          | 11.53 %        |
| Work Independently                             | 42.85 %       | 26.92 %        |
| Support Training for EWRs                      | 92.85 %       | 100 %          |
| Interest to politics Increased                 | 25 %          | 61.53 %        |
| Influence Increased in Family                  | 92.85 %       | 57.69 %        |
| Ability to Evaluate Political System Increased | 82.14 %       | 57.69 %        |

Source: Field survey

Fig. 1 Comparative Analysis



Source: Field Survey

## 9.0 Recommendations:

The following recommendations are made for enhancing women's capabilities in the decision-making process through politics. This recommendation will affect the quality of women's participation, performance, and development.

- Government has to arrange modern education for them. They should be provided with open distance learning education so that they will be able to serve their own family and get higher education.
- Women in these two blocks have very little idea about technical education, such as using the computer, calculator, and internet. In this case, knowledge in these areas is very important because after getting elected in politics, women have to perform many important tasks, such as gathering information, implementation of digital work, audit e.t.c. So, the government will have to take initiatives by various schemes for the same.
- Even after being elected, EWR cannot speak freely in GP meetings. This situation may arise due to fear and shame. Therefore, the government needs to create a language lab and counseling hall in every GP where women will be trained to talk freely with the people, and thus they will understand how to make communication with others.
- Even they do not know anything about the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act. Actually, rural women are not so educated. They depend on other male representatives of the GPs in this regard. So, the government has to make a simple publication of the Indian Constitution in the form of a book where all facilities, rights, and safeguards of women will be highlighted. These books should be provided free of cost to each woman in this district.
- Most of the EWRs of these two blocks are afraid of participating in politics. Many have expressed dissatisfaction in coming to politics. Most of the respondents think that they are dependent and reliant on men, and without men, they cannot make any decision. They are habituated with this patriarchal system. So, in some cases, women themselves have to change their approach, and the government should take necessary steps in this regard.
- So far as the future of women's empowerment is concerned, it can be said with a fair amount of certainty that women are coming out in spite of several hurdles, and they play a positive role and involvement in various activities more and more than before. As a result, it can be said that they have a bright future with regard to empowerment.



## 10.0 Conclusion:

After analyzing different government reports, including census report, district factbook, human development reports, minority district projects report, and especially the data collected through field survey on the elected women representatives of Gram Panchayats of the Raiganj and Islampur Blocks of Uttar Dinajpur district, it is evident that the level of political participation of women in these two blocks has been increased more than before and through political participation women empowerment has been proceeding toward the right direction. Women's engagement has been increased in different perspectives, including women's capacity of interaction with others, women's involvement in politics, women's influence in the family, women's political culture, women's political consciousness, and women's abilities to evaluate the government system and process. However, women of this district are being empowered through political participation. Still, the pace of this process is slow and hence not sufficient. Women are still being discriminated in various fields of this district.

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