

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

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5.1. INTRODUCTION

The study was to examine the nature and extent of participation of elected SC Women to the Panchayats in the Grass – root level of democracy. The study areas have three blocks, namely, Jalpaiguri Sadar, Maynaguri and Rajganj of the District Jalpaiguri. The socio-economical and political statuses of the SC Women representatives have been reviewed. Their leadership quality is also adjudged. We also studied the constraints they have been facing in proper participation in decentralised process of the local rural Governance.

Numerous countries are experimenting with decentralisation initiatives to devolve powers and responsibilities to elected councils at the lower tiers of the political and administrative system. Perhaps the most ambitious of all these, and certainly the largest in terms of the number of elected representatives is India's pancayati raj reforms introduced in the early 1990s to galvanise local democracy and revitalize grassroots development efforts. [Mark Robinson (2005)]

The decentralised governance has been viewed as an instrument of local self-government for promoting the development process. The aims of the decentralised governance is to involve people from every sphere of life in the decision making process. It includes downtrodden and socially oppressed people. The SC Women are deprived in the society due to their caste, gender and class. They are now included in the process of decentralised governance. The provision for their

inclusion has been made in 1992 through 73rd Amendment of the Constitution.

The “Scheduled Caste” represents the most oppressed section of the Indian Society. The SC Women suffer due to patriarchal ideology and castes based division in our society. They are required to be empowered. Empowerment in regard to their socio-economic and political status is needed. We have tried to study to what extent they got empowered through their participation in the process of Panchayati Raj System.

The process of empowerment is both individual and collective, since it is through involvement in groups that people most often begin to become aware and develop the ability to organize themselves for taking decisions in bringing about change. [Amrit Patel (2006)]

The term ‘empowerment’ is used to denote the upliftment of the status of socially excluded groups. They suffer due to their position at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. They are denied to be empowered, as they are weaker sex in our patriarchal society. Empowering process should be of three categories, namely, economic, social and political. Empowerment can be achieved through participation in decision-making process and through awareness and capacity building. Implementation of democratic decentralisation in rural governance and provisions made for reservation of seats for weaker sections namely SC, ST and women make room for the SC women representatives to the Panchayats to be empowered. To what extent they have achieved the goals that are to be adjudged.

5.2. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In our caste based society the people of Scheduled Caste communities are most oppressed. They suffer from specific disadvantages of caste, poverty, low-level education and social isolation. In regard to social isolation, in West Bengal the problems are not so acute, but it still exists. But they are not free from the other disadvantages as poverty, low-level education etc. in our state. The SC women are most sufferers in our society. They are exploited by the upper caste people and as well as by the male members of their families. For the lower economical status of the family, women from SC communities are allowed to go outside for economic activities. They do all sorts of household works and they are to manage home economy. Generally, we see that caste Hindu women engage themselves in household works and they have no connection in management of home economy. The male members of the upper caste families, generally, look after the economic aspects of their families.

The elected upper castes women to the Panchayats are commonly from the comparatively higher income groups in the village society. With some exceptions, almost all women members from upper castes make themselves engaged in household works and they enjoy some leisure time to be spent for public purpose. The SC women are hard working. They are to manage all household works and they are bound to serve all other members of the family. The elected SC women to the Panchayats are basically from lower income groups and therefore, they are to think over how they would manage food for their family members. Practically, they have no time or few times to spend for the public causes.

Our study reveals that most of the SC women members to the Panchayats are of younger age group. The most of the elected women are in the age category of 31-40. Their mean age is 35.9 year. In regard to marital status of the SC women representatives, we see that they are mostly married women. Their family size in regard to members in an average is 5.88. Majority of the respondents live with extended families.

D.P.Singh (2008) in his study showed that in Punjab all the women in sampled Panchayats were in the young age group remaining from 31 years to 45 years. This supports the observation that relatively young women have started replacing older ones.

The SC women members are not from the affluent families. Majority of them come from lower – lower income groups and lower-middle-income groups. We considered the land areas hold by the families of the respondents. The respondents do not have any land in their own names. Majority of them come from the families, which hold land less than one acre. They are not simply cultivators. The male members of the families try to earn money from other sources also.

Overall educational background of women respondents is low. Most of the representatives in GP have low-level educational backgrounds. 64% of them are below the level of Madhyamik. Educational backgrounds of the parents show that the elected members of the GP are first Generation learners.

It is observed that there lies contrasting socio-economic background of SC women members in terms of Panchayat Tires. In GP, women members with low-level education are from the cultivators families of lower income group. The chairpersons of the GPs are comparatively higher educated and from comparatively higher income

group families. In most of the cases the spouses of the GP Pradhans are service holders. In PS and ZP, the elected SC women are higher educated and they are from higher income group. The other point is to be noted that in contrast to chairpersons, more women members in GP and PS are from the families that have no other family member in the PR tiers.

Sachitananda Shatapathi (2002) having observed Orissa's PR system says that middle age group 35-50 years have a greater participation among women in Panchayat. Secondary educated background women have a greater representation. More than 86% of the women members had no pre-existing political experience before entering into the Panchayat office.

In our adjacent district Coochbehar, in two separate studies Amal Mandal (2003) and A. Rezzaque (2006) both showed that in the GPs the elected women from weaker sections of the society are from lower income group and their level of education is low.

In our society, first and foremost obligation, women are to meet that is household responsibilities. In this regard, no discrimination is found between women from upper caste and so called lower caste. Women engaged in economic activities are also bound to do household jobs. In the district, a large portion of women from SC communities engages themselves in cultivation and in unorganised sectors. They are to work hard inside and outside their homes.

The SC women representatives to the Panchayat are mainly housewives. They told that they attended all the meetings of the GP in spite of the household preoccupations. Some of the members are engaged in the activities of self-help groups. They also work hard for

their families and the organizations. It is learnt that majority of the female members to the Panchayats face troubles in discharging their dual role as housewives and people's representatives. Majority of them consider their roles, as representatives to Panchayat are secondary one. Their primary task is to look after their household works.

The study reveals that SC women members of Panchayats are to some extent aware of their role to be performed. But they are not well communicated about the development programme and policies of the Panchayat. As majority of them are first time participants in the Panchayat system, they cannot participate effectively in decision-making process. They have no chance to gather experiences on local governance due to existing policies of rotational reservation of seats. They have had no previous experience in politics. The respondents say that they were never interested about political life. They contested the election due to reservation of seats. The political parties through the husbands or other male family members request women to accept candidature for the Panchayat elections. In the GPs, we see that except pradhans no other women members are the members of any political parties. The left parties also bank on the supporter families while choosing women candidates for the purpose. And thus women contest the election with political party symbol knowing nothing about the principle and programmes of the political parties. Most of the women members join the PRIs, not by their own will, but either by the dictate of their male guardians or by the will of the local party units. Again, due to rotation system in reservation of seats they feel no interest to enrich themselves as next they will not be a part of the local governance. They are to leave their constituencies for male members.

The rotation system of reservation also works against women's interests. In any election one third of the total number of constituencies

are reserved for women. But, in the next election after five years their constituencies will be kept open / unreserved and a different set of constituencies will be reserved for women. (B.S.Baviskar 2005).

The same observation we find in the study of D.N.Gupta (2004). In his opinion, the members from the weaker sections take longer time to learn the official work due to their initial inhibitions and low educational level. Besides, one term is not sufficient for carrying out sufficient development.

Caste and sex are the two factors, which make some barriers in developing leadership quality. In West Bengal the changing facades of caste and its invocation and manipulation in electoral politics are not same as it is found in other states of our country. But, it is need less to say that rudiments of caste politics still exist amongst the rural people of West Bengal. The SC people have lower hierarchical and economic status compared to higher caste people. The SC women have same problems in regard to socio-economic status. Most of the families of SC women representatives to Panchayats belong to lower income group and low level education, their political involvement are not so satisfactory.

The 73rd Amendment of the Constitution provides reservation of seats for women and thus creates a new situation. The political parties are to locate suitable candidates for reserved seats especially for women from SC or STs. Most of the candidates for these seats are fresher to the political arena. The SC women members to Panchayats with their low-level leadership qualities have to face different sorts of problems while performing their jobs.

Unlike many states in northern India, the caste factor does not play a prominent role in the politics of west Bengal. However, leadership in social and political matters is still retained by people belonging to upper and middle castes. Besides, caste status generally, though not necessarily, reflects class position also. The incidents of poverty are more acute among the lower caste. Women among the SC people are mostly sufferer due to social injustice.

Every five years there would be Panchayat elections for electing little over three million members and functionaries all over the country. At least half of these three million elected members would be newcomer. More than a million would be women, many of whom would be coming out of their homes for the first time in public life. They would face formidable impediments and roadblocks when they would try to be autonomous decision makers.

The elected women members are additionally disadvantaged because they face the double jeopardy of having to overcome their own political innocence and the traditional patriarchal dispositions of rural communities, given that the PRIs have been historically male bastions of power. Similarly, the ST and SC members have to face many challenges as the PRIs have also been traditional bastions of upper caste (Bandyopadhyay, Mukherjee and Sen Gavai [2003]).

All of the respondents say that everyday ten persons in an average come to her residence with different problems. Both male and female members of the village meet with the SC women members of the Panchayats. They are to listen different issues raised by the common people. It leads to upliftment of their positions in the family and as well as in the society. They also feel proud when they are to meet with the government officials like B.D.O. and other Panchayat officers.

The study reveals that most of the members are dependent on their husbands and other male members of the family for meeting the Panchayats' obligations. The married women depend on their husbands only for the purpose.

Biswanath Chakraborty (2008) observed that majority of the women members admitted that their household work continued unchanged. Women members reported that they received support of the family members in discharging their Panchayat activities. But in respect of the household works no such support was rendered to them by their family members. Majority of the women respondents considered the activity of Panchayat added new problems to their lives.

The women Panchayat Pradhans from SC communities are to attend office regularly. They are educated but their level of education is up to school standard which is not sufficient to realize all kinds of tasks of the Panchayats. They have to depend upon their male partners and other office staff to meet the day-to-day functions of the office. It is also learnt that in many cases the wives of earlier elected representatives or influential people have contested the election and become the Pradhans of the GPs. It made them dependent on the members of the family, especially on the husbands.

A woman Pradhan of SC community told us that all the female members of the GP are fully dependents on their husbands. She even told us that the husbands of elected woman members come to the office with papers and pencils in their hands in view of taking notes on different programmes of the GP. Obviously, they are discouraged and are not allowed to do those sorts of jobs by the Pradhan. But, they get it

from other sources. It is paradox that the same Pradhan disclosed that she is also dependent on her husband in discharging her obligations.

In order to ensure direct interactions with the adult members of the village, the West Bengal Panchayat Act, in addition to Gram Sabha introduced Gram Sansad. A ward-based body is called 'Gram Sansad' and the body comprising all the voters of GP is called 'Gram Sabha'. It is observed that the percentage of presence in the Gram Sansad meetings is very poor. Women's attendance in the meetings in comparison with the male attendance is very low.

The woman members to the Panchayats fail to motivate the rural women to participate in the Gram Sansad meetings. The elected SC women take no initiative to motivate other women of their communities. No informal communication process is adopted for the purpose. The objects of holding the meetings are not clarified to the common rural women by the elected woman members. The SC woman members are also lacking leadership quality and thus fail to conduct the meetings properly. And thus the common people feel no urge to attend the meetings. They do not involve themselves in decision-making process. The elected SC women representatives and the common women of the villages, both are not aware of their roles to be performed in PR systems of local governance. The organizational and communication skills and commitment are the key factors that determine the level of involvement. They are lacking all of these qualities. So, they cannot attract common people, especially women of their communities to come out and join the meetings of the Gram Sansad.

5.3 CONCLUSIONS

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1993 and the consequent conformity Acts enacted by the states have offered opportunities of political participation to the rural masses through the Panchayati Raj Systems. There are more than three million members who have been elected to the different tiers of the PRIs in the country. The elected members are from different sphere of life. It includes literate, neo-literate, illiterate, women, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other marginalized groups. Given the complexities of the tasks before them, many PRI functionaries have not been able to make much headway in the discharge of their functions.

Political participation is a complex phenomenon and essentially an outcome of social, economic, political and psychological preconditions and circumstances. Despite their numerical strength of one-third of total seats, women have the rudimentary position in political process. In our patriarchal society religion, social and cultural taboos are used to socialize girls to internalise the notion that their activities should be confined only to some preordained and constricted circles. In PR systems the elected women members are disadvantaged because they face the double jeopardy of having to overcome their own political innocence and the traditional patriarchal disparities of rural communities.

The SC women have their threefold disadvantage due to sex, caste and class factors. The elected SC women to the Panchayats have to face many challenges, as PRIs have been the bastion of upper castes male members.

There were already some women in local government prior to the passing of the 73rd and 74th Amendment. But they were few and far between. A very few number of seats was reserved for women who were selected in the PRIs through nomination. The nominees, generally, were the members of elite families belonging to higher castes and owning substantial land. They had been enjoying high status in terms of family, caste and class. The nominated women to the PRIs rarely took active interest in the functioning of the PRIs. The new system of reservation policy for women in general and women from SC communities changed their situation radically.

Seats for SC and ST are in proportion to their number in the population of each region. In the country as a whole, SCs constitute 16.2% and STs 8.2% of the population [Source: Census Data 2001]. Thus, about 24.4% of the seats are reserved for these communities. One-third of these seats are to be filled up by women belonging to these communities.

Women are often excluded from playing legitimate and active role in rural life owing to social constraints. It includes restrictions on freedom of movement and action imposed by traditional family, caste or patriarchal norms. Women Panchayat members are sometimes treated as mere proxies of their husbands or other male members of the family.

In our study area the SC women are not restricted to go out, as they are to earn money for their families. The study reveals that the SC women members to the Panchayats are mostly housewives. They are to do all sort of household works and to participate in the process of PR system. They also come out to help their male members of the family while they are in agricultural field. Some members are involved in works

of self-help group. They are to take care of their organization, family and the role to be performed as Panchayat member.

The general mindset is still not ready to accept women as capable and active participation in public life, particularly if they have low-level education and from the socio-economically weaker sections. It is common to hear that women who entered the Panchayats are proxies. Their works are done by their husbands or other male relatives. In our study area, our observations are not so frustrating. They, obviously, depend on male members of their families to some extent, but there are examples of exceptions. Large number SC woman members are very much ready to learn about the local governance and to discharge their duties accordingly. It is also observed that despite a proven lack of political experience, barriers from patriarchal culture and other prerequisites, the presence of a critical mass of women has positively affected the functioning of the Panchayats. The SC woman members of the study areas have been contributing to some extent to the rural society through decentralized local governance.

The role performance of SC woman representatives to Panchayat have been criticized but it justifies the rationale of the reservation policy. Induction of women to the PRIs is favoured for various reasons. With the felt understanding of their basic needs they are likely to contribute their perspective in the decision-making process. They can influence other members to take specific programme to overcome the problems of women exclusively. They are also to motivate fellow women to stand for women's concerns.

The presence of women in Gram Sansad meetings is very poor. The elected woman representatives fail to motivate other women of the village to come out and join the decision-making process. But, it is

observed that the GP headed by woman is concerned for women's causes.

Women from the weaker sections suffer disadvantages due to caste and gender and their responsibilities to combine livelihood and household responsibilities along with their new public role. Gender discrimination and little or no exposure of political participation exacerbate women's sense of powerlessness.

Alliances, knowledge and information can provide women with access to alternative sources of power and end a pervasive sense of isolation and powerlessness to those who never entered the public sphere earlier. Hence, there is a need to explore social supports, information networks, alliances training and questioning and removing patriarchal attitude and myths. [Nirmal Buch (2005)].

It is revealed that the women chairpersons from SC communities are dependent on their family members and this dependence is mainly on their husbands. It is mainly due to lack of higher education and political awareness. The political parties especially left parties hold party orientation classes for their elected representatives in general and women representatives in particular. Some sort of political awareness is found amongst some of the SC women members but majority of the respondents are not conscious about politics.

One of the hypotheses of the study is that SC women being the members of the patriarchal society are dominated by their male partners and so they are not doing well in PRIs. Women in general are deprived in our patriarchal society. Women from upper castes as well as from the lower castes, both have same degree of deprivation in their family. But the SC women feel some extra deprivation outside of the family. The

treatment of the elected male members of the Panchayats to the elected SC women members is not same as it is to the female members of upper caste families. And thus, the findings support the second hypotheses that the SC women have double disadvantages of being suppressed by the caste and gender factors. In West Bengal the direct conflicts between higher and lower castes are absent, but its rudiments are not entirely insignificant. The SC people with their low level of economic status have to face different problems in rural Bengal also. Caste and class are almost synonymous in our society. SC women due to their economic backwardness, engage themselves in earning for the family. They have no time or few times to participate in decision-making process in PR system. The hypothesis is not well supported. It is fact that a large number of SC women are engaged in economic activities, but majority of the elected SC women members to the Panchayats are housewives and they are to engage themselves in household works. They can, somehow, manage time for participating in different works of Panchayats.

Non-SC women due to their higher socio-economic status, enjoy more power than the SC women in PR system. The women from caste Hindu families have to do all sorts of household works. They are to serve all other members of the family. But, they are generally from higher income group and they have no obligation to look after the home economy. The SC women are from lower income groups. Some of our respondents even are from BPL status. Some of them are engaged in self-help groups for their earnings. They have to manage home economy and for the purpose they perform better role than that of women from upper income group. So, we can say that the SC women are playing better role than that of women from higher castes in managing the home economy.

Women's involvement in decentralized process of local governance depends on the socio-political environment from where they come. For proper role performance they should be empowered by achieving education and economic opportunities. Basically they are economically dependent on male members of the family. Empowerment of women is essential for over all development of the society and that demands a balance and equilibrium in factors to human life in social, economic and political aspects. The 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 brought ample opportunities to the rural women of our country to participate in the decision-making process of the decentralized governance and thereby empowering themselves politically, socially and economically.

In the decentralised governance in rural areas, the roles played by the elected SC women are not satisfactory. But, we cannot say that it is so frustrating that the provisions for reservation of seats for this folk of women have no merit. The 73rd Amendment Act gives them opportunities to engage themselves in decision-making process in local governance. They can contest the election for the reserved posts. They can also be elected as Pradhan to the GP. The study reveals that they have urge to learn pros and cons about decentralized local governance. They are lagging behind the upper castes women due to their socio-economical status, but they have same potentiality like upper castes women to perform their duties in PRIs. For proper utilization of their ability, well-defined measures are to be adopted by the Governments, NGOs and the political parties. Despite presence of a number of constraints, upsurge of women's power, particularly the women from SC communities are noticeable. They have started assessing themselves leading to new kind of situation in the society.

5.4. SUGGESTIONS

The SC women representatives have been facing some constraints for performing their role in PRIs. The well-defined measures should be taken to overcome the barrier on their way to proper participations in the local governance. Some suggestions may be enumerated for the purpose.

- a) **Education:** Illiteracy is the basic problem of our society. An illiterate or less educated woman member can never act as the decision – maker on critical issues. Education is the vital indicator that denotes to what extent a woman member is equipped with different programs and policies of the Panchayats. So, measures should be adopted for educating the rural woman of our society. A special course may be introduced for the women members of the Panchayats. The course should be so designed that the women members can upgrade their reading and writing skill.
- b) **Training Programmes:** Some sort of training programmes for newly elected members of the Panchayats is arranged by the concerned department of the State Government. These trainings are of very short period. It should be a continuous orientation program keeping in mind those representatives from the lower strata of the society need a continuous guidance. Political parties also take programs to train their representatives. The left parties in this regard are very serious. But, they also fail to hold training programs on regular basis. Not only left parties all parties should take care of this issue.
- c) **Political Education:** Mere literal education cannot inspire the rural women to be involved in the PRIs. Attempts should be made for providing political education also. The political parties should hold regular party orientation classes as the members can be enriched with the party's policies and programmes. A politically

educated member can discharge his/her responsibility to the masses very well.

- d) **Economic Empowerment:** Women should be independent in terms of economy. Economic independence is the basic pre requisite for social and political empowerment of women. The states should take measures in building the capacity and skill of women to facilitate their economic empowerment.
- e) **Attitude of Political Parties:** The constitution provided reservation for one-third seats in PR system. For this provision the Political parties have to choose female candidates for the reserved seats. But, in Assembly Election or Parliament Election, we see that the political parties promote a very few women members. Some of the political parties sideline women in granting party tickets to contest the elections. This attitude should be changed. If the strength of women increases in State Assembly and Parliament, the elected women to the Panchayats would be encouraged in performing their role properly.
- f) **Male Domination:** Women find that there is no space for them to perform effectively as decision makers because men dominate debate, make assessment, raise issues and so on. Necessary change in the attitudes of the people in the society is to be instilled.
- g) **Remuneration:** The members of the GP are provided Rs.40.00 (Rupees forty) for attending meeting. With this meagre amount it is difficult for them to meet the travelling expenses. There should be monthly remuneration system for all members of the PRIs. Besides, the TA/DA of the members should be enhanced.
- h) **Representation in other spheres:** Participation of women in local governance has been increased due to provision for reservation of seats. Besides, the women's participation in other organizations is required for empowering them. Gail Omvelt

(2005) wrote 'the project of increasing women's representation not only in the formal institutions of political power, but in the bureaucracy and in the structure of political parties themselves has to be taken up.'

Finally, a continuous research is required on women's performance in PRIs. SC/ST women are lagging behind from women of upper caste in terms of economy, education, social status and so on. Their capacities in performing role in local governance should be adjudged from various views. In a word we may say that women should be empowered socially, politically and economically so that they can perform their jobs assigned in the PRIs properly. For overall empowerment of women in our society, it requires involvement of every segment of the society, women as well as men, government, political parties and other social organizations.