

ROLE OF ELECTED SCHEDULED CASTE WOMEN IN PANCHAYATI RAJ SYSTEM A STUDY OF JALPAIGURI DISTRICT

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS USED IN THE THESIS

- BDO - Block Development Officer
- BPL - Below Poverty Line
- CPI (M) - Communist Party of India (Marxist)
- Edn. - Edition
- EPW - Economic and Political Weekly
- GP - Gram Panchayat
- MLA - Member of Legislative Assembly
- MP - Member of Parliament
- NBU - North Bengal University
- NGO - Non-Governmental Organization
- PR - Panchayati Raj
- PRI - Panchayati Raj Institution
- PRS - Panchayati Raj System
- PS - Panchayat Samiti
- Pub. - Publication
- SC - Scheduled Caste
- ST - Scheduled Tribe
- Vol. - Volume
- W. r. t. - With respect to
- ZP - Zilla Parishad

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Problem
- 1.2 Status of Women
- 1.3 History of Panchayats
- 1.4 Review of Literature
- 1.5 Hypotheses
- 1.6 Methodology
- 1.7 The Overview

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 THE PROBLEM

The Indian Constitution provides equal rights to women in regard to take part in politics, but the reality is that women of our country have to face various obstacles that have mostly excluded them from taking part in formal politics. Moreover, women from scheduled caste and scheduled tribe communities have to face constraints arisen due to poverty and patriarchy that lead to illiteracy, superstitions and prejudices. Majority of women of our country burdened with domestic responsibilities, remain illiterate, exploited and dominated by man. They are excluded from decision-making.

Women constitute almost one half of the population of the World. But their social, economic and political status is lower than that of men. The status of Women is affected by numerable factors including class, caste, region, family, education, age etc. In our country, where tradition governs any Indian woman does not stand-alone; her identity is defined by her relationship with others, as a daughter, wife or as mother. She is hardly considered as a person in her own right.

The Indian tradition holds that the male will be the head of the family. The women are advised to remain under the control of her father, husband and son. The role of Indian Women has undergone dramatic and drastic changes from the era-to-era, while within the eras themselves there have existed simultaneous contradictions. Furthermore, it has varied from caste to caste and with the various socio-cultural and economic status of the society.

The promotion of equality between men and women requires not only the priority should be given to the economic and political participation of women but also to the complex problem of the redefinition of the sex roles within the family and the wider society.

In order to understand the status of women a number of factors have to be considered. The ratio of women to men is low that accounted for poor care of female infants and of women. The low value for female life is the biggest problem. She suffers from malnutrition, lack of medical attention, early-marriage and frequent childbirth.

Several studies have recorded a gender asymmetry in the utilization of health services during illness, fewer women than men seek and receive treatment. Attendance and admission figures at hospitals are significantly lower for women than for men; for every three men who avail of hospital facilities, there is only one woman who does so. [Ira Pant and Tara Gopaldas 1994] [Cited by Narasimhan]

In terms of food intake, women suffer greater deprivation intra-familial. A very systematic sex bias is also reflected in higher nutritional/caloric deficiency among girls vis-à-vis boys. [Amartya Sen and Sunil Sen Gupta 1985] [Cited by Narasimhan]

Another major problem is that of illiteracy. Education is the most significant factor in changing women's role and status in the society. There is a significant increase in the enrolment of girls at primary education; although progress is not still satisfactory.

In India, where large-scale discrimination, disparity and inequality prevail in the society, literacy is the source of empowerment, enlightenment and emancipation. The literacy will not only eradicate

ignorance, submissiveness, enslavement but also it will change the attitude of women and it will enable them to think positively and develop the capability to manage oneself. It will develop self-confidence among the learners and reduce dependence on others.

Constitution of India guarantees equal rights for men and women. Women are striving to achieve equality socially, economically, educationally, politically and legally. However, they continue to face discrimination and marginalization, both subtle and blatant, and do not share the fruits of development equally. Notwithstanding the progress women have made, women concerns are still not the utmost priority. Education especially among women is cornerstone for social development to improve the prospectus of general welfare of the society. Education would empower women to achieve many social, psychological, economic and political dreams, which are customarily denied to her.

Sheetal Sharma (2008) says that the importance of education for empowerment of women is undeniable. However, India still has one of the lowest female literacy rates in Asia. In 1991, less than 40 percent of the 330 million women aged 7 and over were literate, which means today there are over 200 million illiterate women in India. This low level of literacy not only has a negative impact on women's lives but also on their families and on nation's economic development and prosperity.

A UN document, titled 'Women: Challenges to the year 2000', observes that rural societies which depend heavily on women for their survival are 'especially resistant to educating them....rural women are more likely to encounter resistance from within the family to their pursuing an education; an educated woman might pose a threat to her husband and upset the family status quo.'

The status of women and its contribution to social and economic development largely depend on the availability of employment opportunities for women. There are some efforts of the States to improve the present economic condition of women, it continues to be unsatisfactory.

Women constitute 70 per cent of the world's poor population of 1.3 billion. They produce 50 per cent of the food worldwide but receive only 10 per cent of the incomes. Women's access to and ownership of resources is less than that enjoyed by men.

Women's average earnings are consistently lower than those of men but in the unorganised sector, which accounts for 94 per cent of economically active women, earnings are even lower. [Sakuntala Narasimhan (1999)]

Women do 2/3rd of the entire world's work. In exchange they receive 10 per cent of all income and own a mere 10 per cent of all the world means of production. [The UN figure cited by Rekha Pandey (2000)]

The figures stated above clearly point out how the ideology of the family where women are seen primarily as mother and housewife and secondarily as earner, affects women's economic status. The culture of the society tries to justify discriminatory wage-structure, unequal access to technology, information, training etc.

Violence against women is one of the evils of our society. It takes many horrible forms like wife battering, female foeticide and infanticide, domestic violence, dowry deaths and so on. The other form of violence that haunts the female population in the age group of 10 to 40 is rape.

Despite the legal safeguards provided for women, violation against women continues unabated in our country, both inside and outside the home. Women are often terrorized so that they do not assert their rights. [R.K. Tandon (1998)]

37 per cent of married women are being suffered from different sorts of violence everyday. They are tortured physically as well as mentally. Everyday, 19 women are killed due to custom of dowry. In West Bengal, 40% wives are being tortured daily. [S. Dutta (2007)]

So, the question arises, in this socio-cultural context, how a woman would be allowed for taking part freely in the local governance? Does she enjoy freedom in decision-making process? Does she get ability to deal with the public life and to look after the interest of the community?

It is the SC and ST communities, which have generally been excluded at the decision-making level in villages. Their voice is often ignored or stifled, especially, that of women. SC/ST women have a double disadvantage of being suppressed by the caste and gender factors.

S.C. Dube (1990) in 'Varna and Jati' stated 'On the level of emotional and intellectual awareness the inequality and inhumanity built into the *Varna* and *Jati* framework have been denounced, but no worthwhile attempt has been made to demolish it. Nearly one half of the country's population, consisting mainly of scheduled tribes, scheduled castes and other backward communities, share between them only about 10 per cent of all agricultural land.'

For centuries the people from higher castes had been the owners of the land and other resources of the society. They used to control over the people from so-called lower castes, the workforce of the society. These people from lower caste had no voice to rise against the exploitation on them. The women of these families had to live a miserable life.

Women in any society derive their status and rights from the community to which they belong. Empowerment of the scheduled caste women as such cannot be conceived without the empowerment of the scheduled caste as a whole. The people of the scheduled caste communities have been suffered from exploitation, suppression and oppression for centuries. This has resulted in the creation of a mindset characterized by inferiority complex and very low self-esteem.

SC people are the poor and downtrodden. Traditionally, in the Hindu social order they are placed at the bottom of the hierarchy. They live in the villages and lead a miserable life with all sorts of evils like low-earnings, illiteracy, ill-health etc.

A vast majority of scheduled castes (84 per cent) live in rural areas. They are agricultural labourers, sharecroppers or self-cultivators. Nearly 13 per cent of the SC households, against 11 per cent of the others, are landless. And among those who own land, a vast majority (nearly 86 per cent) comprises small and marginal farmers. [Ghanashyam Shah (2001)]

With their degraded socio-economic condition, the SC people have been exploited at every point in their life. And being a woman of this community she suffers on two counts, first as member of so-called lower caste and second as a weaker sex. As Dalit she suffers at the

hands of the society of upper castes, as woman she suffers in society as well as at the hands of her own family members.

SC people are often called 'Dalit' in other parts of the country. The term Dalit itself expresses the deprivation of this section of people. Paswan and Jaideva (2002) expressed the position of Dalit woman as 'Dalit woman is said to have more freedom than her counterpart in the higher castes. But this freedom does not really mean anything. This is the freedom given to her by men for their own convenience. She goes out of home to work long hours to earn some money, however meagre it may be, and on this money she has no right. She is the breadwinner of the family but the bread eludes her. In spite of working long hours at home and outside, she is the last claimant to the food at home. Worst still, she suffers exploitation at work place at the hands of employers and superiors.

Rural women from scheduled castes carry a triple handicap – as women, as rural persons and as SC. In patriarchal society as woman she has to suffer in every sphere of life. She works hard to serve every member of the family. In work place she is low paid worker. She suffers from malnutrition, ill health, and low level of education and so on. The socio-economic conditions of the urban people are better than that of rural people. A large number of rural people live below the poverty line. The socio-economic status of SC people is far behind the people of the upper castes. SC women in rural areas suffer more than that of women of the same community in urban areas.

As SC women they have to lead a miserable life. They are looked down in all aspects of life. They are exploited by the upper castes people and male members of the own family.

For women as wage-labourers, their exploitation was mediated through social patriarchy, which sustained the differentiation of the labour market by gender and caste. The SC women are paid the worst wages as they are the most disadvantaged in the access to education and other resources, and because the culture of hierarchy supported the system of differential advantages. [Bardhan (1985), cited by A. K. Rajuladevi (2000)]

Empowerment generally refers to the processes by which women take control and ownership of their lives through expansions of their choices. It refers to the improvement of the status of women in the family, in the community and in the society at large. Their status can be raised with the help of education, employment and through political participation.

Since 1958 when Panchayats began to be introduced in the traditional rural set up, it was soon detected that that PR leadership consisted exclusively of traditional rural elite such as *Jotedars* (owner of big chunk of land), moneylenders and high caste people. Some commentators held that landed gentry simply hijacked PR leadership and economic resources at the disposal of PRIs further allowed these groups to be still more powerful. [Amal Mandal (2003)]

The 73rd amendment to the constitution has mandated representation of at least one-third women through election instead, of the earlier token one or two women nominated by government or co-opted by the predominantly influential, powerful male leadership.

The Government of West Bengal was first among the states to respond to 73rd amendment to Indian Constitution and passed the West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 1992 to facilitate reservation of

one-third of seats at all levels of Panchayat institution for women. This includes women belonging to SC/ST communities. This undoubtedly widened the scope for participation of the otherwise voiceless section in the grassroots democracy from the 1993 Panchayat election.

In recent years or to be more specific after the 73rd amendment of the Panchayat Act there has been a great deal of interest in studying the role played by the elected candidates who are enjoying the facilities of reservation in the seats allotment.

Lack of education, social and family barriers and preoccupation with family duties prevent women from participating in the political process. [Nandini Prasad (1998)].

Some studies on women participations in PR system have been done. But our study is to analyse and interpret the position of the SC women in the local governance. SC women have double disadvantages of being suppressed by the caste and gender factors.

The study attempted to analyse the relationship between elected SC women representatives and the women electorate of same communities in the specific context of PR governance.

Further attempt is made to see whether the elected SC women have been playing proper role to empower the women of their respective communities.

With the implementation of land reform and PR system the economic status of rural people in West Bengal has been changing. We are to analyse the correlation between the participation of the SC

women in local governance and the economic empowerment of women in the respective caste.

1.2 STATUS OF WOMEN

The Indian Society like a number of classical societies was patriarchal. In our ancient texts we find that women are generally treated as a uniform category and unambiguously equated with the 'Sudras'. According to 'Parasar' the punishment for killing either a woman or a 'Sudra' is identical. Manusmriti states that a woman should never be independent. As a daughter she should be under the surveillance of her father, as a wife of her husband and as a widow of her son.

Vedic Age

Vedic Society was a patriarchal one and hence father was the head of the family. Women in the Vedic Age, within the limitations of patriarchal system, enjoyed a higher status by performing a prominent role in every activity of the family and the society.

Altekar (1962) points out that women in this age could be initiated in Vedic Studies and were entitled to offer sacrifices to gods or goddess. The son was not absolutely necessary for this purpose. Further the marriage of daughter was not a difficult problem; it was often solved by daughter herself. There was no dread of widowhood, because levirate and remarriage were allowed by the society and fairly common. [Cited by S. Vijaya Kumar]

In regard to of education of women during this period, especially in the age of Rig Veda, it may be noted that the position of women was

generally not unequal to that of men. There were as many as twenty-seven women composers of the hymns in Rig Veda. Lopamudra, Viswavara, Ghosha etc. were the famous amongst them. Women had the fullest rights to undergo *upanayan* ceremony and to wear the sacred thread (*upavita*) like her brother. They had the right to study Vedas and to chant Vedic Mantras.

In the Vedic times women had access to all branches of learning. Women like Ghosha, Apala and Viswavara were composers of outstanding Vedic hymns. [The Gazetteer of India: Country & People Vol. 2 (1973)]

In this age there had been proof of women's active participation in war. We heard the names two celebrated women soldiers, Vispala and Vadhrimati. [Sukumari Bhattacharjee 2006]

As regards property rights, according to Vedic hymns, both husband and wife were joint owners of the property. The unmarried daughter inherited and possessed property (RVIII 177) of her father. There was no evidence of child marriage in this age. The Vedic widow too enjoyed equal right to remarriage.

In the Vedic age women were not deprived of the advantages of education. They were considered competent to study the Vedas. Especially in the early age of Rig Veda, women received higher education and participated in discussions of political and philosophical nature with male scholars. At the close of Rig Vedic period several restrictions were gradually imposed on the freedom and privileges which women enjoyed earlier.

Savita Vishnoi (1987) stated that women were then (at later Vedic Age) debarred from the study of the Vedas and were considered to be unfit to pronounce the Vedic mantras.

The Age of Upanishad

We have had some glimpse of the status of women during the Upanishadic period. The Upanishads represent the aim or goal of the Veda. It is well known that in this period there were great Bhrahmavadinis who were life-long students of philosophy.

The caste systems as well as class in the society had already been prevailed. In course of time women's status started degrading gradually.

We may quote from the Gazetteer of India: Country and people (Vol. 2, 1973) ' There was no equality of sex as men could have more than one wife while women could have only one husband and must be loyal to him'

The Epic Age

During the great epic period, a prototype of feminine ideals (the ideals of Sita & Draupadi) existed and these ideals have influenced the later generations of Indian womanhood. (S. Vijaya Kumar 2000)

In our epics, we find many liberal rules regarding women. Sons and daughters were given full opportunities for education and social participation. In these two epics there are evident that women were considered pivots in domestic life as well as in the society. They used to participate in the solution of religious and social questions. But side-by-

side, certain instances like harassment of Draupadi in the court of Kaurav create some contradiction. Treatment to Sita after the end of the exile proves the inequitable status of women. Ramayana and Mahabharata also show us that it was the polygamous society. And thus, women gradually lost their position in the society as well as in the family.

The Age of Smritis

Manusmriti is full of paradoxes of respect and neglect of women. The passages of Manu, which speak highly of women shows that woman, occupied a very honourable place in domestic and social life.

According to Manu, women must always be honoured and respected by the father, brother, husband and brother-in-laws who desire their own welfare, where woman are honoured there gods are pleased.

On the other hand we find in Manu (IX, 3) 'A women should never think of independence from the father, the husband or the son because by doing so she will make both families contemptible.'

In this period a woman was always under male domination. She was considered as inferior to man. She had to be dedicated to the husband during her lifetime. (N. Sandhya 2005)

Advent of Buddhism and Jainism

The Sixth Century B.C. is regarded as an age of religion and philosophical upsurge. Buddha and Mahavir refused to accept the

superiority of the Vedas and their philosophy. During this period the status of women was to some extent protected.

According to Buddhism every human being is equal and *Nirvana* is possible for both men and women. Padmini Sen Gupta (1974) says that the ancient period of Buddhist influence was a kind of golden age for women. As long as the Buddhist influence was there in the society women enjoyed high status and afterwards again it was degraded.

During the Buddhist period women were not denied learning. Nuns figure prominently in songs, which found place in the Pali Canon. But they had lost the right of Vedic studies.

Women in Jainism enjoyed a good deal of freedom also. They appeared in public without any restriction. They could go out to visit their friends and relatives, shrines, gatherings and festivals. But some of the Jain texts showed different attitude towards the secular position of women. That was almost the same as in the preceding age. In household affairs, the position of Jain women did not undergo any distinct change. [Savita Vishnoi (1987)]

Reflection in the Kautilya's Arthashastra

We have had some knowledge on the patriarchal society existed in the society in 300 BC through Arthashastra of Kautilya. Women figure in the work of Kautilya primarily as objects and instruments for furthering the aims of the state. However, as the work deals with practical concerns, in spite of its recommendatory patriarchal and brahmanical framework, it gives us a better idea of the visibility of women in public spaces than the Dharmashastra literature, which is mainly focused on brahmanical norms in domestic and public spheres.

The Arthasastra contains interesting data on women of diverse background obliged to earn their living. There were women skilled in spinning yarn and they could be employed for spying living inside the house of the enemy. Those women might be from the upper castes.

References to women of lower orders were also more frequent in the Arthasastra of Kautilya. Women from lower castes constituted a significant labour force. Kautilya provided rules concerning them. He also looked upon prostitution as an occupation and mentioned several categories of prostitutes, ganika, pratiganika, rupajiva, bandhaki etc. In the male dominated patriarchal society prostitution was a socially sanctioned profession. We have also references to female slaves dedicated to gods as devdasis in the Arthashastra.

Megasthenes is reported to have said that female bodyguards protected the Mauryan King and when he went out to hunt, women hunters accompanied him riding on chariots, horses and elephants equipped with all kinds of weapons. (R.C. Majumdar 1960)

The then society was very much patriarchal one. The entire discourse is characterized by patriarchal and brahmanical prejudices. The Arthashastra repeats the well-known Dharmasasric view that wife is only a leather bag for holding the male seed, an object for procuring a male issues. Kautilya also permits physical violence against a wife, whose offence against her husband is well known.

Kautilya provides us some inkling of the variety of female experiences and scope for independent activity notwithstanding gender discrimination and a large section of women suffering from the disadvantages of poverty and caste exploitation. [Suvira Jaiswal 2001]

Muslim Period

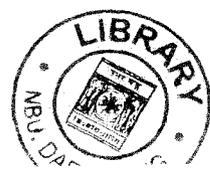
The religion and culture of Islam entered India in the year 712 AD. along with the Muslim invaders. In Islam the practice of seclusion has kept women in backward stage by imposing so many social restrictions. The Shariat Law placed women in inferior position. During the Mughal period the position of Hindu women deteriorated further. To protect women from Muslim invaders the traditional Hindu society imposed various restrictions on women. The custom 'Sati' was strictly followed. The purdah system, child marriage, prohibition on upper caste of widow remarriage, female infanticide became prevalent and order of the day.

During the time, women of Royal family obtained education at home. The Hindu women of upper caste also to some extent got education. But there were no institution meant for higher studies for women. There were some evidences that boys and girls were permitted in getting primary education. The Mughal emperor Akbar somehow tried to spread education amongst the Muslim girls. He opened a Madrasa for girls' education at Fatepur Sikri.

To check the Muslim domination over the orthodox Hindu society, a movement called 'Bhakti' started. The saints of this period propagated the idea of equality between man and man, between man and woman, and preached that all are equal before the God. This movement was suppressed by the upper group in the society. It failed to bring significant change in the status of women.

The role that Muslim women from royal families have played in the medieval period of Indian history is not so insignificant. Raziya Sultan, the only woman occupied the throne of Delhi. In the Muslim regime we have had some prominent names amongst the Muslim

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women. They are Gulbadan Begam, Nur Jahan, Jahan Ara Begam, Chand Bibi etc.

On the whole, women's status was low at this time because women were virtually imprisoned in the four walls of the home. They had no liberty to go elsewhere freely and without purdah. Education was not considered essential for them. Hindu women were also behind in education in the period due to the effect of Muslim Society. (Farhan Khan 1999)

British Period

At the time of the advent of the British rule the position of women in India was at its lowest ebb. Child marriage, custom of Sati and purda were strictly enforced.

During the early phase of colonial period, the British rules did not interfere with the traditional social system, as their main aim was to rule the country not to bring any radical change in the system. The East India Company had nothing to do with our social system, but to maximize profit and collect resources for their nation. However, in the later phase, especially at the beginning of the 19th Century, some measures were taken to strengthen their administration by introducing English education for Indians. The establishment of a new political system followed by the impact of Christianity and western education brought in some ideas regarding liberty, equality and fraternity.

The social reformers like Rammohan, Keshabchandra, Vidyasagar, and others fought to remove evils like custom of Sati and child marriage, barrier to widow remarriage, illiteracy amongst women etc. They were against social and legal inequalities. Raja Rammohan

Roy fought against the Hindu Orthodox Custom 'Sati'. The Serampore Missionaries were the first to ridicule the evil of Sati, it was Raja Rammohan Roy who reopened the subject in 1818. (Usha Kapoor – 2000). He published two tracts against the evil in 1818 and 1820, organized vigilance committee and submitted petition to the East India Company to abolish it. Despite severe opposition from Orthodox Hindu Society he succeeded in persuading Lord William Bentinck to make Sati illegal in 1829. The British passed the resolution by which Sati was treated a crime of culpable homicide punishable with fine, imprisonment or both. (Tandon 1998)

Women had no right on ancestral property. They were deprived of education. The state of widow was very miserable. A widow had to lead her life as a domestic slave. She had no right to join the rituals and other social functions. The widow remarriage was not practised in the Hindu Society.

Raja Rammohan Roy supported the right of women to seek education. He also advocated for widow remarriage and the property right of women. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar also advocated for widow remarriage, necessity of schooling of women and was against child marriage. It was Vidyasagar whose fireless effort made successful British Govt. to pass the Hindu Remarriage Act 1856.

Keshab Chandra Sen was greatly interested in social reforms such as elevating the status of women and in removing some of the inequalities of caste. 'The passing of the Brahma Marriage Bill was the greatest triumph in Keshab's career as a social reformer.' [Anuradha Sharma 1998]. As a result of this Act, early marriage was abolished, polygamy was made a penal offence and it sanctioned widow remarriage and inter-caste marriages.

Ignorance of illiteracy breeds, which is the root cause of all social evils. The East India Company remained totally indifferent to the education of women till the passing of the Charter Act of 1813. The Christian missionaries made efforts to school the Indian male and female children. The Free School Society, which was founded in Calcutta on 21st December 1789, announced that it was ready to receive applications for the admission of children whether male or female to be educated in the school established by the Charity missionaries'. [Kali Klnkar Dutta 1975]

There had been several efforts from the Christian Missionaries to educate Indian women. In 1791 Female Juvenile Society was formed by a number of English women. The aim of the society was to establish female Bengali Schools.

The surveys made by the Calcutta School Society revealed that only four hundred women out of about four million could read and write. It was then that the British and Foreign School Society of London deputed Mrs. Wilson to educate poor Hindu girls in 1821. Other great contributor to this field was Bethune. Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and Bethune marked a turning point in the history of female education in India.

After the end of the rule of the East India Company in 1858 the British Government cautiously approached in this regard as some educated and influential Indians opposed the female education. In 1882 the Education Commission discussed the problems of women's education with great insight. It recommended more schools for girls and appointment of women teachers and women inspectors for the purpose.

Since the task of imparting education to women involved a fundamental change in the attitude of Indian communities, the onus fell on a number of social reformers. An enlightened public opinion in favour of female education began to build up as a result of the efforts of Raja Rammohun Roy, Raja Radhakanta Dev, Dwarkanath Tagore, Vidyasagar and many others. Attempts were made not only to educate women but also to raise their status by repudiating such customs as Sati, infanticide, child-marriage, purdah, polygamy etc.

The National Movement created new opportunities for women to change their status. Many women joined the movement. But most of them were from the upper or middle class of caste Hindu families. Women's participation in the political field became somewhat conspicuous during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This was due to an increasing awareness about the economic exploitation of India under the British rule. A number of women became involved in the revolutionary movement actively participating as couriers, distributing literature, looking after various institutions and risking police repression, imprisonment and even capital punishment. [Towards Equality – Report of the committee on the status of Women in India 1974] [cited by Usha Kapoor]

The Calcutta session of the Congress (1917) with Annie Basant as its President approved the demand for the political rights of women. Two years later when the South Borough Committee intending to elicit views on the question of franchise, visited Bombay, 'a requisition signed by eight hundred women of the Presidency was submitted to it,' [Manmohan Kaur (1968)]. The demand of women in this regard was rejected by the committee. In 1921, Madras Provincial Legislature allowed women to franchise. By 1929 all Provincial Legislatures followed suit. 'But the right to vote was restricted to a small section of

women who possessed qualifications of wifehood, property and education.' [Manmohan Kaur (1968)]

Gandhiji paid special attention to the emancipation of women in India by bringing them into Freedom Movement. He tried to remove various social and economic hurdles, which stood in the way of their prosperity.

G. Tendulkar (1951) quoted from Gandhi 'I am uncompromising in the matter of women's rights. In my opinion, women should labour under no legal disability not suffered by man. I should treat the daughters and sons on a footing of perfect equality.'

Gandhi was against the purdah system. 'By seeking to interfere with the free growth of the womanhood of India, we are interfering with the growth of free and independent spirited man. What we are doing to our women and what we are doing to the untouchables recoils upon our heads with a force thousand times multiplied. It partly accounts for our weakness, indecision, narrowness and helplessness. Let us then tear down the purdah with one might effort.' [Quoted by G. Tendulkar]

Mahatma Gandhi wanted that Indian woman should realize her dignified status that she was 'the queen, not the slave of the household.' He asked the congressmen to give the women of India a lifting hand. 'Let congressmen begin with their own homes. Wives should not be dolls and objects of indulgence but should be treated as honoured comrades in common service.' [Quoted by Usha Kapoor]

Gandhi wanted women to become equal partner in the battle for *Swaraj*. '*Swaraj* would be meaningless without reform of the social structure and upliftment of the weaker sections, namely the women and

the lower social strata to a position of equality with others.' [Quoted by R. K. Tandon (1998)].

Position after Independence

After independence gradually striking changes are taking place in the position of women. Education once denied to women is being identified as a major instrument for raising the status of them. Several development programs have been undertaken to support our women's economic status. Legislations and constitutional safeguards were made to protect women from all evil acts.

After independence Indian Women attained the bonafide citizenship of the new nation. The preamble to the Indian Constitution undertakes 'to secure to all citizens justice – social, economic and political; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; equality of status and opportunity and to promote among them all fraternity, assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity of the nation.' [Usha Kapoor (2000)]. For achieving these objectives, the constitution contains a number of provisions. Articles 14-16 guarantee to all citizens, irrespective of sex. 'Equality before the law, equal protection of the law and equality of the opportunity in matters of public employment.'

During the post-independence era and especially from the seventies many efforts have been made to highlight the plight of Indian women and liberate and modernize them. In view of empowering women the United Nations declare 1975 as International Women's year and the period between 1975 and 1985 as women's decade. In India, appointment of the National Committee on the status of women in 1972 and publication of its report in 1975-marked official attempt to study and recommend changes to improve women's in the society.

Because of the existing gender relations in our society women's contribution has not been recognized and women are not acknowledged as active partner in the development process. Many of our plans and programs have been gender-blind resulting in the neglect of valuable 'women resource' of our nation.

For the first 25 years of development planning in India, it was assumed that the general progress made by the population as a whole, would ultimately be shared by all sections, and that whatever benefits accrued to the men would also percolate to the women and result in better status and gender equality. This, however, turned out to be a faulty assumption, as periodic assessments at the end of each plan period showed. [Sakuntala Narasimhan (1999)]

In 1971, the Government appointed a commission on the status of women in India. Its report, 'Towards Equality', led to debates that highlighted the need to view women not just as targets of welfare policies, but also as 'critical actors of development.'

A separate ministry for women and children was created in 1984. It supports the fact the state takes initiatives toward the welfare of women and children.

Rural women's development received priority during the sixth plan period. The emphasis however continued to be on the economic front, through program such as the Integrated Rural Development Program (IRDP), Development of Women and Children of Rural Areas (DWCRAs) etc.

Article 15 of the constitution empowers the state to enact legislation to protect women and promote the welfare and progress of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Several laws were introduced in the post-independence period such as Protection of Civil Rights Act (1955), Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), Hindu Succession Act (1956), Hindu Marriage Act (1955), Equal Remuneration Act (1976), Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Act (1976) etc.

There were aimed at giving the weaker sections greater clout in asserting and claiming their legitimate entitlements as citizens, irrespective of sex or caste.

The rural poor have nonetheless remained largely untouched by legislation, because they have neither the information, nor the machinery to claim their privileges or dues under the law.

Education is one means of generating confidence and countering diffidence. While literacy projects for women have been initiated, there have been only partially successful, due to lack of motivation and enthusiasm among the target groups.

S.C.Dube (1990) comments 'Several forms of gender discrimination emerge from a contradiction in the Indian constitution. It ensures equality for all before law and prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth, but it also guarantees freedom of religion – the right freely to profess, practice and propagate religion. This provision of religious freedom takes away much of the freedom and equality extended to woman by the constitution. Because family and personal law is rooted in religious codes, women do not have equal rights within the family or to property.'

Women must be given a greater share in decision-making and implementation process. This can be achieved through greater representation of women in Panchayat and municipal administration, political parties, state assemblies and parliament.

The 73rd Amendment provides for mandatory reservation for the SC, ST and women. Such reservation covers the offices of the members as well as those of the chairpersons of the Panchayats at different levels.

The 73rd amendment to the constitution may be regarded as a watershed in the history of the state initiatives in regard to political empowerment of the rural women. It indicates a noticeable shift in the approach of the Indian States toward women. Earlier, women were generally viewed as objects of development only. The amendment made women the subjects of development, an indispensable part of the decision-making process.

1.3 HISTORY OF PANCHAYATS

Indian Context

Ancient Period:

We have long history of local governance in village level. Panchayat is an oldest institution in India. In the Vedic age, we have proof of existence of local governance. Self-sufficient village was the unit. The village was governed or administered by the elders who were named as *grampal* or *gramini* and so on. The head of the village was appointed or elected by the community. The villages were self-sufficient

and independent in origin. The village assemblies in the Vedic age were termed as *sabha*, *samiti* or *vidhata*. [Jayswal (1955) 'Hindu Polity']

In our epics, Ramayana and Mahavarata, we find the presence of the Panchayats. Villages were governed by the graminis, the officials appointed by the king. Graminis had to work under the guidance of the Panchayats. The elders of the villages constituted the Panchayat.

The decentralized governance in the villages during the period of Buddhism and Jainism in the form of Panchayats was in existence. At that time there were also different Panchayats based on occupation.

It is witnessed from Kautilya that the villages at Mouryan period were governed by the elders of the villages called 'Gram Vridhas'. It is nothing but the Panchayat form of the ancient Indian society.

In India in different regimes, we see that the democratic values were supported and encouraged by the rulers. The village Panchayats had their roots in our ancient society and it had been the backbone of our socio-economic system. [Hansraj (1992)]

Muslim Regime

During the Muslim Rule the power of the state was to some extent centralized. The administrative, legislative and judicial power was in the hands of the Sultans. The concept of self-governance or local governance was somehow abolishing at that regime.

The Mughal rulers introduced a new land policy which brought the provinces, districts and villages under the charges of centrally appointed personnel named as subedars, muquaddams, patwaris etc.

The great ruler Akbar reorganized the revenue collection system. He introduced direct link between the state and the peasants through the appointed personnel of the village. The person was the village headman known as Chaudhuris, Mukhiya or Muquaddan. So, the village headman was the most important person in the general economy of the village.

British Rule

At the advent of the British rule, the idea of the self-governance disappeared. Later, after the great mutiny in 1857, the necessity of local self-governance was felt.

After the mutiny, the government had been put into severe financial hardship. To overcome this financial stringency, the government took the policy of developing more and more power to the provinces. [Bhatnagar, S (1978)]

In 1870 Mayo, the then Viceroy of India advocated for local self – government. The Bengal Chowkidari Act, 1870 was passed and thus the traditional village Panchayat system revived.

In 1882, Viceroy of India Ripon adopted a resolution advocating democratic decentralization as a means of political development at grass roots level. For local self-governance Ripon suggested the self-governing bodies should have majority members from common people who would be elected by people. The bodies should have non-official chairman and sufficient financial resources. As Ripon's resolution was not supported by his successors, it could not be implemented

immediately. However, in 1885, the Bengal Self-Government Act was passed.

In 1906 the Indian National Congress put pressure to the British Government demanding establishment of 'self-government'. In 1907 the Government formed a Royal Commission for the purpose. In its report 1909, the commission advocated the necessity of decentralized government at rural level. It recommended for establishment for Panchayats. Due to bureaucratic attitudes of the government official, the suggestions of the Royal Commission were not implemented.

Montagu-Chelms Ford Reforms Act, 1919

The Act suggested that there should be complete popular control in local bodies and largest possible independence for them. Eight provinces and some native states had passed the Act for the establishments of Village Panchayats.

Government of India Act, 1935

The Act was passed in 1935, which introduced provincial autonomy in regard to local self-government institutions. Almost all elected provincial governments realized the necessity for passing laws for further democratisation of local self-governments including the village Panchayats.

Gandhi's View on Panchayats

Mahatma Gandhi thought that the national development was only possible through autonomous rural organization, which he liked to building following the heritage of ancient Panchayat in our country.

He strongly advocated for Panchayati Raj. Gandhiji opined that as India lived in villages, the power among the rural people should be delegated. For ideal democracy decentralization is a must. This was the thought of Gandhiji.

Gandhi emphasized on 'self-sufficient' village. His 'Swaraj' means independence at grass root level. Every village would be a republic with the authority to the Panchayats in regard to legislative and judicial power.

After Independence

The first draft of India's constitution made no mention about village Panchayats. It was included through an amendment motion moved by K. Santhanam, which formed a part of Article 40, which reads "the state should take steps to organize village Panchayats and endow them with such power and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-governments".

Item no. 5 of the schedule 7, list II of the constitution explains 'local government' as 'the constitution and powers of municipal corporations, improvement trusts, district boards, mining settlement and other local authorities for the purpose of local self-government or village administration.'

The First Generation Panchayats

The Balavantray Mehta Committee Report, 1957

After independence the National Development Council was formed. The state started development work through community

development program (CDP) and National Extension Service (NES). Participation of common people in the development program could not be ensured in absence of effective instruments. A committee headed by B. Mehta was constituted to explore the effective institutions, which would successfully implement the development program among the common people at grassroots level.

The committee submitted its report on 24th November 1957. It recommended a three-tier Panchayat system to be set up at different levels. At village level, Gram Panchayat is to be constituted with the members elected by adult members of the village. The middle tier, the Panchayat Samiti at block level would be formed with its members directly elected by village Panchayats and B.D.O as its executive officer. At the top level, there would be Zilla Parishad. The presidents of all Panchayat Samitis, MLAs and MPs would be the members of the Zilla Parishad.

The Government of India accepted the B.Mehta Committee report in 1958. All the States of the country passed the Panchayat Act by 1959. Rajasthan is the first state to implement Panchayat Raj and the second was Andhra Pradesh.

The first generation Panchayats as it is named, failed to serve the purpose due to overpowered by higher caste people and landlords.

'There was a climate of optimism and resurgence, but within years of the inauguration of a new era, Panchayati Raj Institutions began sag, stagnate and decline.' [Singhvi, L.M.Committee Report 1986]

The observation of A. Bose (1998) is that the system was very much fruitful at its earlier stage. But after Nehru's death it started to decline. The Government fails to take care of Panchayat Institutions and it becomes stagnant.

Second Generation Panchayat

The Asoke Mehta Committee Report 1978

In 1977 Janata Party formed Government in centre. The new government tries to reform the Panchayat system. It appointed a committee chaired by Asoke Mehta for the purpose. In August 1978, the committee submitted its report recommending regular election and participation of political parties in the system. The Asoke Mehta committee recommended for the introduction of a two-tier Panchayat system instead of existing three-tier system.

The Asoke Mehta committee Report (1978) was a seminal document, which sought to make Panchayat an organic, integral part of our democratic process. The Panchayati Raj institutions, which come into operation in certain states after the Ashoke Mehta committee's recommendations, could be considered the second generation Panchayats. States like West Bengal, Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and later Jammu & Kashmir gave a new life to Panchayati Raj institutions, either by revising their existing Panchayat Act or passing new Acts. West Bengal Government took an initiative in 1978 to inject a new life to its existing Panchayats on the line of Asoke Mehta committee and retained successful in this matter. [Abdur Razzque (2006)]

The two-tier system was recommended. In this system the Zilla Parishad was considered as an executive body and under the Zilla Parishad a Mandal Panchayat would be constituted by grouping a number of villages. It emphasized that the Panchayat institutions would emerge as a political institution at the grass roots level and thus the emphasis shifted from the bureaucracy to the political elements. It recommended seat reservation for SC / ST on the basis of their population. The recommendation for party based system and creation of Mandal Panchayat was rejected by the most of state governments at a meeting of the Chief Ministers of different states in 1979. But there were no different views in regard to more decentralization of power at grass roots level and responsibilities of the Panchayats in development process. The Government of Karnataka successfully established Panchayats system following the recommendations of the committee.

In West Bengal, the emergence of social composition of leadership replacing the old patterned rural leadership was the distinctive feature of the second generation Panchayat. (Pravat Dutta, 1993)

G.V.K. Rao Committee

In 1985 another Committee chaired by G. V. K. Rao was formed to review the existing administrative arrangements for Rural Development and Poverty alleviation programs.

The committee in its report recommended for the introduction of Mandal Panchayats, a new model for a group of villages with population of 15000 to 20000. Members directly elected from the grass roots level would constitute the body. There should also be reservations for SC, ST and women. The suggestion for 'gram sabha' was made in the report. It

stressed on the need of development and felt the necessity of bringing planning, close to the people through democratic bodies.

L. M. Singhvi Committee

The Singhvi Committee in its report (1987) criticized the role of existing Panchayati Raj. The report says that the present Panchayati Raj system fails to become self-government institution.

The committee emphasized that the Panchayati Raj institution had to be organized as a part of the process of democratic decentralization, which would become an institution of 'Self-Government' through people's participation in the process of planning and development. The committee further recommended that the local self-government should be constitutionally recognized, protected and preserved by the inclusion of a new chapter in the constitution. (Ambedkar, S. Nagendra 2000)

64th Constitution Amendment Bill 1989

The then Central Government introduced the 64th Constitution Amendment Bill in the Parliament in 1989. The Bill was passed in the Lok Sabha but it was rejected in the Rajya Sabha. The main features of the bill were as follows:

1. There would be three-tier Panchayats in all states except in the states whose population was below twenty lakh. These states would have two-tier Panchayats.
2. All seats are to be filled up by direct election.
3. The tenure of these elected bodies would be of 5 years.

4. There would be reservation of seats for SC and ST in proportion to their population.
5. Thirty percent seats would be reserved for women.
6. A Finance commission in every five years would be appointed for reviewing the financial position of the Panchayats and recommending for financial support.
7. There would be an election commission for conducting the election.

The 73rd Constitution Amendment Act 1992

The 73rd amendment to the constitution, 1992, which come into effect from April 1993 has mandated that Panchayat must be constituted in every state at three tiers, namely the village level, block level and district level. The Act provides for mandatory reservations for the SC, ST and women. Such reservations cover the offices of the members as well as those of the chairperson of the Panchayats at different levels.

The 73rd amendment to the constitution may be regarded as a watershed in the history of the state initiatives in regard to political empowerment of the rural women. It indicates a noticeable shift in the approach of the Indian states towards women. Earlier, women were generally viewed as objects of development only. The amendment made women the subjects of development, an indispensable part of the decision-making process.

The salient features of the 73rd Amendment Act are as follows:

- (i) PR will have uniform three-tier structure at village, block and district level. The states having population below 20 lakh may have two-tier system.

- (ii) Seats in every Panchayat shall be filled up by direct election to be conducted by the State Election Commission.
- (iii) The tenure of the elected bodies would of 5 years.
- (iv) The chairpersons of lower tiers would be ex-officio members of the succeeding tiers.
- (v) The Member of Parliament and the Member of Legislative Assembly may similarly be members of the Panchayats of the concerned constitutions.
- (vi) There would be reservation of seats for SC and ST in proportion to their population in the area and state.
- (vii) One third of the total seats will be reserved for women. One third of reserved seats for SC and ST will also be reserved for women.
- (viii) The offices of chairpersons will also be reserved accordingly.
- (ix) There will be a 'Gram Sabha' for each village or group of villages.
- (x) Specific responsibilities will be entrusted to the Panchayats to prepare plans for economic development and social justice in respect of 29 subjects listed in XI schedule of the constitution.

Panchayat Raj System in West Bengal

Colonial Period

Chowkidari Act

The Chowkidari Act was passed in 1870. The Chowkidari Panchayats was established under this Act. Its power was limited to maintaining law and orders and in a few cases to collecting local taxes.

'It had nothing to do with normal municipal functions and was principally concerned with the maintenance of the village watch and ward. The concerned Act divided the whole of the then Bengal into a number of Unions each of which having an area of 10 -12 miles. The head of the Chowkidari Panchayat was the district collector. The Chowkidari panchayat became very unpopular shortly after its introduction'. [Pramanik & Datta 1994].

Bengal Local Self Government

The Bengal local self-government Act was passed in 1885. It provided a three tier Panchayat for rural Bengal. At the district level there would be a District Board having jurisdiction over the entire district. At the sub-division level, a local board would be constituted. At the lower level there would be union committee with jurisdiction over a union or group of villages.

The local board at sub-divisional level had no autonomy and could not function democratically. The district board also failed to live up to the expectations due to its wide jurisdiction. The union committees had very few responsibilities and insignificant role outside the context of village politics.

Village Self Government Act 1919

Immediately after the Bengal Partition movement (1905) the Royal Commission of Decentralization was formed in 1907 under the guidance of Mr. Hobhouse.

“The Bengal Partition agitation in 1905 heralded a new era in the nationalist movement making administrative reform inevitable. The imperial government had no other alternative but to decentralize administrative powers’ [Pramanik & Datta 1994].

On the basis of the recommendation of the commission, the village Self Government Act was passed in 1919. In accordance with the Act the Chowkidari Panchayat and the union Committee were merged. The Union Board was formed at the village level and the District Board at the District Level. This two-tier system of local self-government lasted till 1950. Both the bodies had limited franchise. Everyone was not allowed stand for election neither was everyone allowed to vote. Only those who paid a certain amount of tax or above could stand for election. The Act also tried to introduce a third tier at the Mahakuma level called the Local Board to advance the three-tier system. But this experiment failed.

Post Independence Scenario

The West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1957 established Gram Panchayat and Anchal Panchayat. Thereafter in 1963 the West Bengal Zilla Parishad Act was passed in view of re-modelling the local government. The West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1957 and the West Bengal Zilla Parishad Act, 1963 together introduced a four-tier system of local governance;

At the district level – Zilla Parishad

At the block level – Anchalik Parishad

With a cluster of villages – Anchal Panchayat

For each village – Gram Panchayat

In the beginning, general elections were held only at gram panchayat level. The upper levels had indirect voting system. As the members were indirectly elected, it nullified the call for popular participation at the lower level.

West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973

A three-tier Panchayat system was introduced replacing the four-tier system in 1973. The West Bengal Panchayat Act (1973) provided for direct popular election to all three-tiers namely Gram Panchayat at the village level, Panchayat Samity at block level and Zilla Parishad at district level. But no election in the new system was attempted till 1978. The Act of 1973 was passed by the Congress Government but the State Government did not take initiative to implement it. They did not have any commitment towards establishing Panchayati Raj. It is the Left-front Government who took initiative to establish democratic process in Rural Bengal. The first task of the left-front government was to take up a program of rural development based on land reform and decentralizing power through Panchayats. The government held election in 1978 to all three-tiers of Panchayats.

The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution

The revival of Panchayati Raj culminated into giving the Panchayati Raj the constitutional status. The amendment is considered as the most important intervention in the history of the system of local governance. The Government of West Bengal immediately implemented the new amended act. The Act provides reservation for women, lower caste and tribe people. Reservation of not less than one-third of the seats and offices for women were provided. To enhance scheduled caste women's participation, the act provides for the reservation of one-

third seats for scheduled caste women. In fact it tried to create opportunity for women from all strata to demonstrate their potential and to prove their capabilities as partners in the process of rural development.

The Constitution (73rd Amendment) has made Panchayats instruments of local-governance with potential space for women and marginalized groups in the federal set-up. [Mahi Pal 2004].

For direct participation of common people in decision-making process, the State Government constituted *gram sansad* and *gram sabha*. As per provisions of the law the State Planning Commission and the State Election Commission have been set up.

1.4 Review of Literature

Various studies relating to the role and socio-economic status of women have been conducted by different social scientists at micro as well as macro level in India.

In their studies Parikh and Garg (1989) expressed that Indian womanhood has yet to be explored, experienced and understood in all its vicissitudes, multiplicities, contradictions and complexities.

On the status of Indian women, Anuradha Sharma (1998) comments that the reality of the subordination position of women is indicated through adverse sex ratio of girls, the growing domestic violence, increasing number of dowry deaths and rape cases.

Women and society is one of the most important areas of study among the researchers to analyse the social process and changing

pattern of the society, affecting Indian women in different ways. [Arun K. Singh (2000)].

Menon (1989) concluded that Indian women have yet to go a long way to get passed several enactments that are needed as also get amended the existing since independence, as women still continues to be the weaker section and at the mercy of a man dominate society. [Cited by Arun K Singh].

Kanak Mukherjee (1993) in her writings in Bengali says that it is the realization of the present world that the civilization will not advance if the half of the world, the women remains in the realm of the social inequalities.

Jasodhara Bagchi (2002) shows that one of the drawbacks of the capitalistic society is the division of labour on the basis of sex.

Published materials on women empowerment is vast, varied and ever going in volume. Any review however well attempted, will have to remain exhaust-less.

After the 73rd amendment of the constitution, the studies on political empowerment of women have been conducted.

On political empowerment of women, Bharat and Madhu (2004) wrote, 'Political empowerment of women implies that they exist as a separate political group with separate interests. But we find that such a consciousness does not exist among women'.

Amrit Patel (2006) observed 'At present 50 per cent members (women) are virtually outside the GS meetings because they are not

allowed to participate by their male family members and another chunk mostly SC/ST and other weaker sections do not attend due to some compulsions. These members are less motivated to attend meetings because they do not expect any gain from such meetings but lose their one-day wage.'

Asok Kumar (1990) says that as far as women's participation in the Panchayati Raj is concerned, it is not up to the mark. Mere reservation will not solve the problem unless women members are given commensurate powers to function effectively.

Sumathi and Sudarsen wrote (2005) 'The 73rd Amendment has perceptually widened the democratic base providing the potential for local-level planning and implementation of development programs. The new PRIs have the potential to act as the democratic institutions of local self-governance. These potentialities include the participative self-governance, ensuring political empowerment to the poor, marginalized and the oppressed – scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and women – at the grassroots level.'

The very success of PRIs depends largely on the quality of leadership available at the grass root levels. [Bhargava (1979).]

Our study aims at evaluating the quality of leadership achieved by the elected SC women after the statutory reservation of one-third seats has been ordained at grass root levels.

Amal Mandal (2003) in his writings emphasizes that with the passage of 73rd Amendment Act, 1992, India is at a crucial juncture in the evaluation of PRIs, the Indian brand of rural local self-governments.

The Hindu society till date for its caste system has been suffering from social inequalities. The SC people considered untouchable by the people of so called upper castes like *Brahmin*, *Kayastha* etc. The position of women is not better than that of *Sudras*.

A.R. Desai (1969) says 'the social structure looks like a gigantic hierarchic pyramid with a mass of untouchables as its base and a small structure of elite, the Brahmin, almost equally unapproachable, at its apex.'

Upasana Sharma (2003) says that the caste system in the past was regarded as divinely ordained and was connected with the law of *karma*, according to which a man's status in the life was determined by his actions in past lives. It is the most outstanding feature of Indian social life as Hindu society is divided into castes and sub-castes. With the course of time caste was determined by the birth.

In the past the treatment of the society to the lower caste people and to the women had been the same. They were not allowed to step in the education.

In 'Advance' (July-Sept 2004), the study of late Dr. Gopal Singh was published. It may be quoted from his writings 'Not only are the *Sudras* denied the reading (or even the hearing) of the Hindu scriptures, but even women are denied this privilege.'

'Theologically speaking, women were classed in the same category of *sudras*.' [Anuradha Sharma (1998)].

Despite typically patriarchal cultural representations the *Arthasastra* of Kautilya provides us some inkling of the variety of female

experiences and scope for independent activity notwithstanding gender discrimination and a large section of women suffering from the disadvantages of poverty and caste exploitation.[Suvira Jaiswal (2001)]

Sonalkar (1999) comments 'Caste is perpetuated through endogamy, but then it operates through a number of social and economic institutions and ensures, first and foremost, that the domination of the upper castes and the subservience of the lowest castes remain at the bottom of the hierarchical order, they have no right to privacy or decision-making and no right of protection against sexual exploitation.'

Deshmukh and Ranadive (2003) commented that the poor women from *dalits* households are thrice discriminated against by virtue of their class, caste and gender.

So, the class-concept is very important for the study. We are to investigate economic status of the family from where the SC representatives come.

The women's property rights are not appreciated by the patriarchal society as ours.[Savita (1987)]

The essay 'Origin of Family, Private Property and the State' (1884) by Engels is one of the earliest discussions on gender and property. Engels traced a direct link between private property, class formation and the subordination of women.

Engels pointed out 'as wealth increased, it, on the one hand, gave the man a more important status in the family than the woman, and, on the other hand, created a stimulus to utilize the strengthened position in

order to overthrow the traditional order of inheritance in favour of his children.'

Some feminist scholars critiqued Engels theory in relation to the origin of women's subordination.

Nitya Rao (2005) cited the observations of Sacks (1974). According to Sacks 'although property ownership seems important for women's domestic position vis-à-vis a husband, the exercise of domestic power, particularly in class societies, is limited by whether or not women have adult status in the social sphere. This in turn is determined by their participation in social production.'

S.P.Ruhela (1999) pointed that the Indian women are not a homogeneous group or category. We have many religious, races, castes, classes and so on.

Sanjoy K. Roy (2005) showed that ownership of land by women would have been a potent investment toward empowerment of women. While land was distributed in West Bengal on land reform program, 90.3% was in favour of males and only 9.7% in the joint name of husband and wife.

Amal Mandal (2003) observed that women generally follow diktat of male head of the family or influential member of the family.

Ghosh and De (2005) apprehended that leadership quality of the male counterpart overpower the women leadership.

Maithreyi (2005) also showed that women could not play proper role of leadership in organization where men are numerically dominant.

Vimala Ramchandran (2000) says that because she is poor, education is hardly a priority in her everyday battle of survival.

Literacy rate amongst women in our country is very low, especially amongst the backward classes. To acquire leadership quality a person must be properly educated. D. Narayan (2005) says 'As regards women's effective participation in local governments, literacy is a must.'

Ashok Mitra (1979) stated that the problem of illiteracy in India is embedded more in illiteracy among females than among males and the problem here is compounded by a variety of cultural, economical, sociological and even anthropological factors to keep women in economic subjection as long as is possible. [cited by Arun K. Singh].

SC people are economically backward class. So, the class factor is one of the main causes for illiteracy amongst the SC women. S. Padmavathy and P.K. Pandian (2004) show that poverty is the main reason for the female child dropout.

Bhargava (1979) emphasized on the quality of leadership at grass-root levels.

'The Panchayat election, 1993 made a radical change in the distribution of power.' [Sukanta Bhattacharyya (2003)].

Shramajibi Mahila Samity in its report (2003) noted that a long history of the Left movement and Hindu Reform movements have broken down caste barriers in West Bengal to a large extent.

But, Amal Mandal (2003) pointed out that even when caste has lost much of its stranglehold in West Bengal, there is no gainsaying of the fact that its rudiments are not entirely insignificant.

Pramanick and Datta (1994) mentioned that the election held in 1978 had another significant implication for panchayati raj in the country. The leadership thrown up by the elections marked a definite departure from the past in terms of their class character. The survey conducted by the Development and Planning Department of the government of West Bengal in 1979 covering 100 gram Panchayats had shown that 71% of the elected representatives were small and marginal farmers; 42.9% of them held land the size of which was less than 2 acres, 28.2% held land the size of which varied between 2.5 acres.

Asit Kumar Basu (1998) in his writings in Bengali pointed out that the Panchayat system brought in social changes in villages. This system made successful gatherings on a common platform of the people from different religious and castes. The Panchayat institutions supported people to become political conscious.

Sukomol Sen (1992) quoted the congress leader Babu Jagjivan Ram. The custom of untouchables can only be removed through total reformation of present socio-economic conditions. It requires a social-political-economic revolution that would be unprecedented in the world.'

If nearly half the country's population – among whom the SC/STs and women from the majority – is below the poverty line, the quality of life indices become the more meaningful measures of assessment. [Sakuntala Narasimhan (1999)].

Amrit Patel (2006) observed that the policy of the reservation of seats in PR system has its impact on women empowerment process. According to Patel 'Impact of the provisions of the 73rd Amendment Act concerning reservation for women and disadvantaged sections of the community has been that it has improved women's awareness and perception and had created an urge in them to assert for their rightful share in the decision-making exercise at the local level.'

Various studies relating to the socio-economic status of women have been conducted by different researchers at micro as well as macro level in India

Parikh and Garg (1989), Anuradha Sharma (1988), Savita (1987) and others studied the socio-economic status of women in our country.

We have gone through some studies on women's empowerment in relation to reservation policy in PRIs. Amrit Patel (2006), Asoke Kumar (1990), Sumathi and Sudarsen (2005) and others did their studies on women's political empowerment.

Amal Mandal (2003), Maithreyi (2005), in their studies tried to observe the position of elected women in PR system.

Our study is to see whether the elected SC women to the Panchayats perform their duties properly. There are many studies on PRIs and role-performance of women in general. But, we find no study conducted on performance of elected scheduled caste women in Panchayats in our study area. The significance of studying the different factors influencing the role-performance of the elected SC women in local governance in rural areas in Jalpaiguri district has its great significance.

1.5 HYPOTHESES TO BE TESTED

In this dissertation we would like to test the following hypotheses:

- 1) SC women being the members of the patriarchal society are dominated by their male partners and so they are not doing well in PRs.
- 2) SC women have double disadvantages of being suppressed by the caste and gender factors.
- 3) SC women due to their economic backwardness are forced to engage themselves in earning for the family. They have no time or few times to participate in decision-making process in PRs.
- 4) SC women are playing better role than that of women from higher caste in managing the home economy.
- 5) Non-SC women due to their higher socio-economic status enjoy more power than the SC women in PRs.

1.6 METHODOLOGY

The objective of the study is to assess the effectiveness of Panchayati Raj for empowering women, especially women from the so-called lower castes. The 73rd Amendment of the Constitution made provisions for scheduled caste women to be elected and to participate in decision-making process of the local government.

For the purpose of the study we have selected Jalpaiguri. The district has total population of 3401173 out of which the percentage of male and female are 51.49 and 48.51 respectively. According to Census 2001, total Scheduled Caste population in the district is 1248577. The male and female ratio amongst them is about 16:15.

Three blocks have been chosen in the district for our purpose. These blocks are Jalpaiguri (Sadar), Maynaguri and Rajganj. These three blocks have 14,16 and 12 GPs respectively. In 2003, PR election 219 SC women were elected in GP in the district. Jalpaiguri (Sadar) has 53 elected SC women in GP. The other two blocks, Rajganj has 37 and Maynaguri has 53.

In order to get a clear picture for the purpose we have selected these three blocks as scheduled caste population in these blocks are more concentrated. These three blocks have 527952 population of SC whereas the total SC population in the district as a whole comprises 1248577. [Census 2001]. That is 42.28 per cent of total SC population of the district reside in these blocks.

Among the elected SC women in these three blocks 64 members were interviewed. Besides, from each GP two SC women of different age group were also interviewed. We also take interview of the elected male representative in the GP. The elected SC women members have been interviewed with an interview schedule. Open-ended questions were also given due space in schedules to collect the ground reality of problems under research. We have had discussions with other people in an informal way. Besides this, the focus group discussion has been held. We also use secondary data for the purpose.

The secondary data, we have collected from the Census of 2001, the offices of Panchayats and Zilla Parishad. We also use data from the writings of various authors.

The elected SC women to the Panchayat have been the unit and object of analysis of the study. They are regarded as one separate

category; they as subject of the inquiry and their participation and performance in the local governance are analysed in the overall social, political and functional context of Panchayat.

Detailed personal interviews and focused group discussions have been organised to analyse the present position and any sort of changes occurred in their life style.

1.7 THE OVERVIEW

The total study consists of five different chapters. We tried to deal with different aspects of the problem in these chapters

Chapter 1 is the introductory one. It deals with the research problem, methodology, review of literature and objectives. An overview of the Panchayati Raj system of the country as well as of West Bengal and the status of women in our society in different era are given in the introductory chapter.

Chapter 2 deals with the socio-economic background of the scheduled caste women representatives to the Panchayats. Different factors like age, education, occupation; family size, political involvement etc. are considered to correlate the quality of leadership with the socio-economic features of the representatives.

Chapter 3 is related with the study about the awareness of the elected scheduled caste female members of the Panchayats to the functional role and responsibilities. To what extent they are aware of their role and responsibilities that are reflected in this chapter.

Chapter 4 deals with the people's participation in the process of Panchayati Raj system. The problems and constraints faced by the scheduled caste women in their effective participation in the system are studied in this chapter.

Chapter 5 is the concluding chapter. In this chapter our findings and observations are summarized. Some remedial measures have been suggested to overcome the problems that are faced by the scheduled caste women in the process of effective participation in the rural decentralized governance.

CHAPTER 2

SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF THE SCHEDULED CASTE WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES IN PANCHAYATS

2.1 The Locale

2.2 Present Position of SC Women

2.2.1 Indian Context

2.2.2 SC Women in West Bengal

2.2.3 Socio-economic Status of SC Women in Jalpaiguri

2.3 The Study Area

2.4 Socio-economic Background of SC Women Representatives

CHAPTER 2

SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF THE SCHEDULED CASTE WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES IN PANCHAYATS

2.1 THE LOCALE

We have selected three blocks namely Jalpaiguri (sadar), Maynaguri and Rajganj in the district of Jalpaiguri. The district is one of the backward districts enlisted by the Central Government. The geographical location of Jalpaiguri is latitude North 27° N and South $26^{\circ} 16'$ N and longitude East $89^{\circ}53'$ E and West $88^{\circ} 25'$ E.

The total population of the district is 3401173 out of which 82.16 per cent live in rural areas. The scheduled castes (SC) and scheduled tribes (ST) population in the district of Jalpaiguri are 1248577 and 641688 respectively. The SC population constitutes 36.71 per cent of the total population of the district. [Census, 2001].

The district is backward in every respect of socio-economic factors according to Human Development Indices. The literacy rate in the rural areas of the district is 58.93 per cent whereas in West Bengal, it is 63.42 per cent. The literacy rate among the SC population in Jalpaiguri is 61.87 per cent and that in the state is 70.54 per cent.

We may compare the indices represented in table 2.1:

Table 2.1: Indices

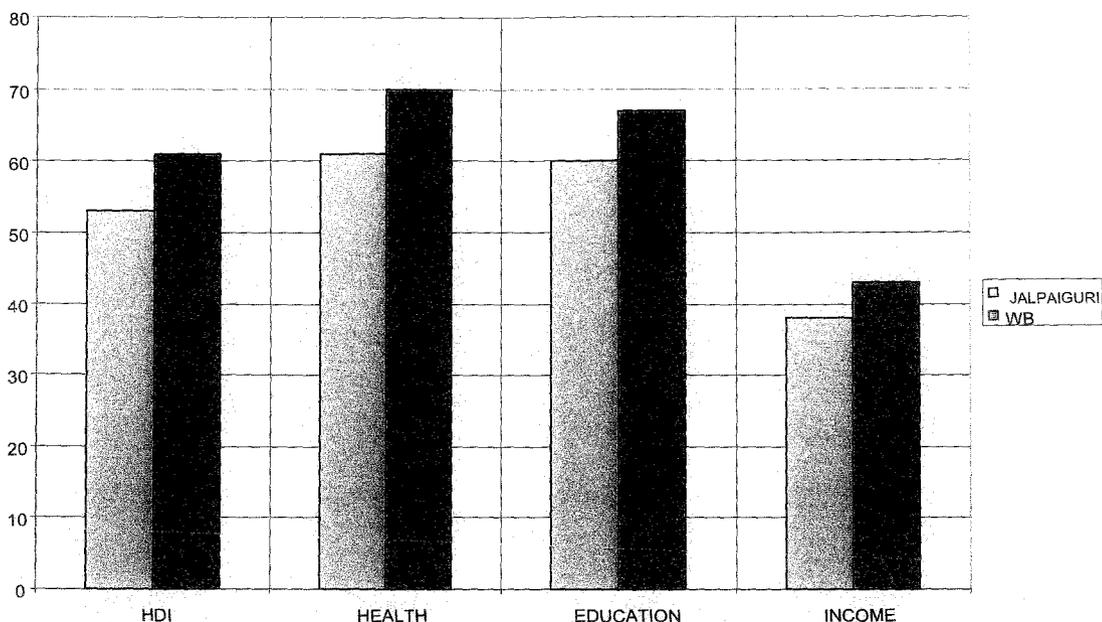
	Jalpaiguri	West Bengal
HDI	.53	.61
Health	.61	.70
Education	.60	.67
Income	.38	.43

Source: HDRC Centre D&P Department, West Bengal 2004

The indices represented in table 2.1 justify the inclusion of Jalpaiguri District in the list of backward areas. The district is densely populated by SC, ST and other backward people. The SC people who are known as 'dalits' in other parts of India have been suffering from exploitations from the caste people since the introduction of the caste based society. In the epic age the people from the lower caste was named in hatred as 'Mlechha'. The name of Bhagadatta, the king of Kamrup has been mentioned in the Mahabharata as a king of the Mlechhas. [Sukbilas Barma (2004)]

We may represent the data shown in the table 2.1 with the following figure (figure 2.1). It clearly shows that the District Jalpaiguri is far behind in respect to health, income, education indices than that of the average figure of the state, West Bengal. HDI of the district is very much lower than that of the state, West Bengal. In the state, the HDI ranking of the district is ten.

Figure 2.1: Some Selected Socio-Economic Indicators of the District, Jalpaiguri compare to the State, West Bengal



The concept of social exclusion has been used by scholars in recent times to explain the position of certain deprived groups in society. Amartya Sen (2000) has elaborated the concept in the Asian context by mentioning that social exclusion leads to deprivations and limits our living opportunities. Social exclusion – in its more specific manifestation as discrimination – refers to the processes through which groups are wholly or partially restricted from full participation in the economic, educational and social institutions that define social membership. Exclusion involves both the act of restricting access and the consequences that follow, principally forms of deprivation. In the Indian context, exclusion revolves around institutions that discriminate, isolate, shame, and deprive subordinate groups on the basis of identities like caste, religion and gender.’ [Sukhadeo Thorat, Katherine S Newman (2007)]

The concept of social exclusion is well suited to study the socio-economic conditions of the so called 'reservation groups' in India. These groups, particularly the first two (SC&ST), have been excluded from participating in the development process, thus resulting in 'capability poverty'. [K.S.Chalam (2007)]

'The inability to interact freely with others is an important deprivation in itself'. [Amartya Sen (cited by Chalam)]

2.2 PRESENT POSITION OF SC WOMEN

2.2.1 Indian Context

Our constitution provides us equal status. There should be no discrimination between man and woman, amongst the castes, religions and so on. But in practice we see that the people of the country feel better to follow the customs instead of law provided by the constitution. For years, the SC people have been suffering due to injustice prevailed in the society. The SC women have double disadvantages due to gender and as well as caste. In the patriarchal society, as woman she suffers at the hands of her own family members as well as other members of the society. As a member of the SC community she suffers at the hands of the upper caste society.

Dalit women continue to be illiterate, malnourished, in poor health, overworked, oppressed and victimised by a number of factors, including their own family and community. They make up the substance of the body of research, knowledge and information in the country displaying the poorest social indicators, dismal social and economic achievement. They lack access to resources including the natural

resources they work with everyday, although their labour enriches their masters. [Ruth Manorama (2006)]

The Dalit woman is a social force, a cultural symbol, and has a historical background. She is the prominent feature of a farming culture. She is the true builder and heir of prominent face in the industrial culture. She plays a big role in the construction of buildings and laying roads. She foils in textile mills, cement factories, hospitals and quarries. Dalit women are estimated to contribute eighty percent of labour to strengthen the national economy. She looks after the family. She walks miles and miles to fetch water, fodder, fuel and so on. She gets up before the cockcrows. Her day starts by sprinkling water mixed with cow dung in front of the house. As the sun rises she goes out to work in the fields. She comes back in the evening and stars her routine household work. She eats very less and she sleeps late in the night and she wears patched clothes. Such a hard working supporter and builder of the family, society and nation at large, today is a suffering lot in India. She is struggling for survival and existence. She is leading a life full of disadvantages of being Dalit and of being a woman. [Sanjay Paswan and P. Jaideva (2002)]

Position in the Family

She is the main breadwinner in the family. She has to do all household works in the morning. Then she goes out in search of work to earn for the family. After returning home in the evening she engages herself to serve the other members of the family. She is treated subordinate to male members of the family. Most of the SC women suffer from malnutrition, as they have to take food left after serving the other members of the family.

Position in the Society

Ours is a patriarchal and caste based society. SC women are helpless beings in the caste-based society. Their positions are very backward and marginalized. They are the victims of caste, class and sex. They suffer from malnutrition, lack of medical attention, customs of early marriage, dowry murders and female infanticide and so on. She is looked down upon because she belongs to lower caste; she is a woman and has to live below the poverty line. The SC women are triply oppressed by caste, gender and poverty.

In many parts of the country the members of the SC community are considered untouchable whose very shadow pollutes the caste Hindus. They are denied to fetch water from well and tube-well commonly used by the upper caste people.

Dalit females suffer from the interconnections of multiple oppressions of class, caste, gender and cultural at all levels by both men and women from all castes and classes. [Moses Seenarine (1996)]

Economic Status

SC people in general are poor and live below the poverty line. A SC woman has to go out and work for earning money. They are low paid workers. A SC woman enjoys freedom to go out and join the economic work. But her economic status is very low and is not honoured in the society. Her capacity to earn money does not pay to her status in the family as well as in the society. They are mostly engaged in unorganised sectors. Ninety per cent of the female workers in unorganised sector come from so-called dalits.

By law they have equal right to possess land and other immovable properties. But in practice she is denied to hold land in her own name. Only the exception we see in the state of Kerala.

Political Status

In our patriarchal society, in general, women are denied to take part in the politics. They are allowed to choose through their right to vote, representatives to the parliament, assembly and local governments. But they do not take part directly in the politics. Even in the case of exercising their right to vote, they are influenced and motivated by their male members of the family.

The 73rd and 74th amendments to the constitution provide seat reservation for women in the local government. From 1993, the SC women are being elected to the reserved seats in Panchayats. But the question arises whether they are allowed to take part in decision-making process freely.

As down through the centuries the wisdom, strength, power of women from lower castes has been exploited for serving the cause of upper caste people. So, they cannot participate in the local governance, the proxies do the needful in this regard.

The political power in India has for long been the monopoly of a few dominated upper caste men. There are various barriers for SC women not to participate in politics. The economic oppression of these women has made them live below the poverty line. Majority of them are illiterate. Lack of education, economic oppression, oppression from the higher caste people as well as from the members of the family prohibits the women of the lower caste to participate in the politics effectively.

'We strongly recognize that the Dalit Women are thrice alienated on the basis of their class, caste and gender. The Dalit women have to grapple with discrimination due to caste hierarchy and untouchability on the one hand, and extreme deprivation and poverty on the other, as well as with political, legal and religio-cultural discrimination.' [Ruth Manorama (1999)]

2.2.2 SC Women in West Bengal

The position of SC people as well as women of that community in the state is some sort different from other part of the country. They are not termed as dalit in West Bengal. They are not considered untouchables here.

A long history of the left movement and Hindu Reform movements has broken down caste barriers in West Bengal to a large extent. [Report (2003) of Shramajibi Mahila Samity]

The undivided Bengal has had its long glorious history of left movements. *Krishak Sabha*, the mass organization of Communist Party of India had played an important role organizing the farmers of the villages towards the democratic movements. The left movements on different issues help the people of Bengal to come closer to each other. '*Tebhaga Andolon*' (movement for one third share of crops) has its great contribution in this regard.

Kalyan Dey (2008) pointed out that the poor farmers of Bengal from all castes and religions were united to organize agitations against the landlords and the British imperialism for restoring their rights on proper share of crops. They fought for establishing their rights to live as

human beings and for protecting their all sorts of rights, which they had been enjoying for years. Through their movements the poor farmers of the villages made a new history.

It may rightly be claimed that the long history of left movements has its contributions to remove the barriers of castes in West Bengal. It is fact that they are not termed as dalits or untouchables in the state, but their socio-economic status is much lower than that of caste Hindus.

Though the caste has lost much of its stranglehold in West Bengal, we cannot deny the fact that its rudiments are not entirely insignificant. [Amal Mandal (2003)]

Scheduled Castes (SCs) constitute 23 per cent of the population of the state. The state has registered 14.8 per cent decadal growth of SC population in 1991-2001. There are fifty-nine notified SCs and all have been enumerated in 2001 census.

The Rajbanshi and Namasudras having more than 32 lakh population each constitute 35.8 per cent of the total SC population in the state.

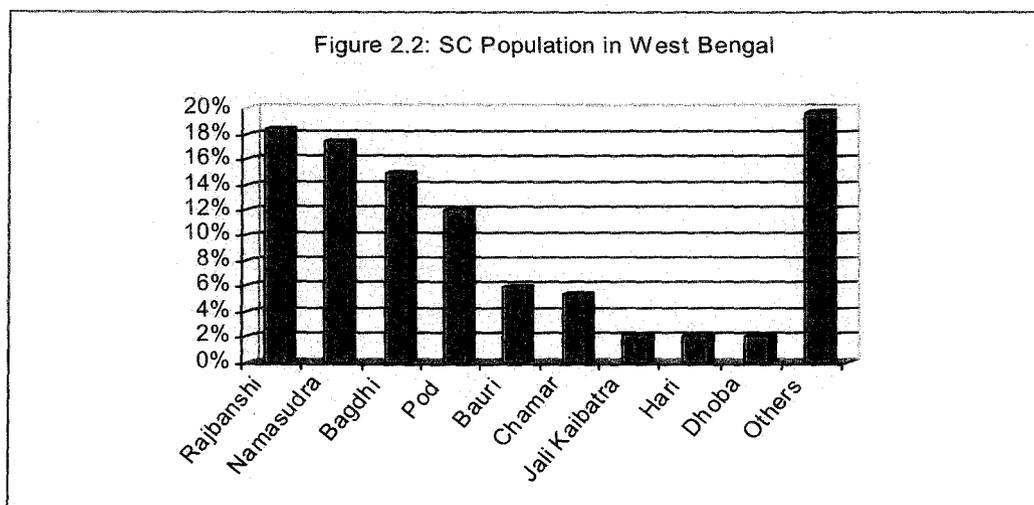
The table 2.2 shows the major SC population in West Bengal:

Table 2.2: Major SC Population in West Bengal

Name of the SC Population	Total Population	Percentage to the total SC population
All SCs	18,452,566	100%
Rajbanshi	3,386,617	18.4%
Namasudra	3,212,393	17.4%
Bagdi	2,740,385	14.9%
Pod	2,216,513	12.0%
Bauri	1,091,022	5.9%
Chamar	995,758	5.4%
Jali Kaibatra	409,303	2.2%
Hari	390,619	2.1%
Dhoba	369,808	2.0%

Source: Census of India, 2001

The major scheduled caste population shown in the table 2.2 may be represented with the following figure (figure 2.2).



Others include Sunri (excluding Saha), Dom, Jhalomalo, Lohar, Mal, Kaora and Tiyar. Each sub-caste of the SC population included in others is less than two percent of the total SC population in the state.

84.1 per cent of the SC population of the state live in the rural areas. The percentage of SC workers to total population is 38.8 per cent, which is lower than the aggregated figure for SC at the national level (40.4 per cent). Of the total SC workers 74 per cent are recorded, as main workers and the balance 26 per cent are marginal workers. The female work participation rate has been 22.3 per cent only that is quite low when compared with male (54.4 per cent).

Table 2.3: Distribution of Total, Main & Marginal Workers among SC

	Total Workers	Main Workers	Marginal Workers
Total	7,153,225 (38.8%)	5,291,661 (74%)	1,861,564 (26%)
Male	5,148,910 (54.4%)	4,364,870 (84.8%)	784,040 (15.2%)
Female	2,004,315 (22.3%)	926,791 (46.2%)	1,077,524 (53.8%)

Source: Census of India, 2001, West Bengal

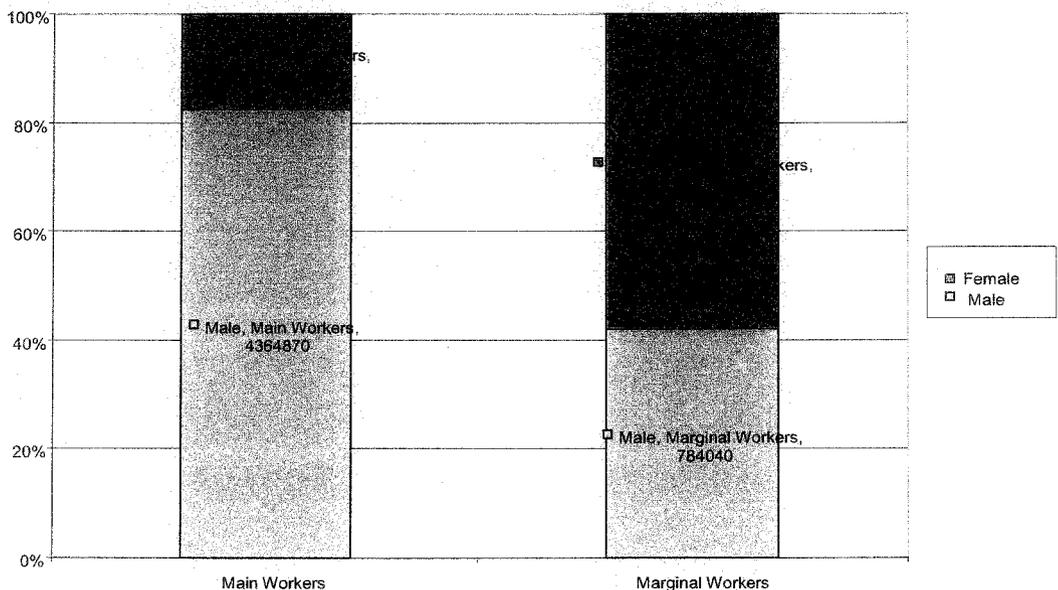
Of the total SC main workers, 31.9 per cent has been recorded as agricultural labourers and 20.3 per cent as cultivators.

The above data shows that SC people are mostly engaged in primary sector. They are village poor people. Women of these families have to live a very miserable life. Most of the women engage

themselves in household works and supporting works to agricultural activities. They also use to rear the livestock. But these sorts of works are not recognized as economic activities. They are ill treated at home and outside at the society. A large number of SC populations have to live below the poverty line.

The SC women who manage to engage themselves in economic activities, they are to spend all of their earnings for the family. She earns, she spends all of her income for other members of the family and she has to suffer from malnutrition, lack of medical facilities and education.

Figure 2.3 Gender-wise SCs Work-force Participation



The above figure shows the gender-wise SCs work-force participation. The figure shows that the female workers from the SC communities mainly engage themselves as marginal workers. In fact the SC women are to work hard to earn a meagre amount.

If we compare sex ratio and educational level of the SC women of the state with that of national level, it would show some differences between them. The sex ratio of the total SC population in the state is 949, which is higher than the national average (936). The child sex ratio (0-6 age group) for SC in the state is 958 whereas this ratio in the national level is 938.

If we compare literacy rate, we see that among all SCs 59 per cent is literate which is higher than the aggregated national average for SCs (54.7%). The gender gap in literacy among SC people in the state is quite conspicuous with male and female literacy rate of 70.5 per cent and 46.9 per cent respectively. [Census, 2001]

2.2.3 Socio-economic Status of SC Women in Jalpaiguri District

The position of SC women in the district is no different from other part of the state. The socio-cultural factors define the position of women in the society as well as in the family. In Jalpaiguri, out of total population of 3401173, 36.17 per cent are SC population. The sex ratio amongst the SC population in the district is 942, which is higher than the national level (936) but slightly low in comparison with the state level (949). In the district 90 per cent of the total SC women live in the rural areas. [Source: District Statistical Hand Book, 2004, Jalpaiguri]

Amongst the SC population in the district the Rajbanshis are the single largest group. According to census, 2001 Rajbanshi population in Jalpaiguri is 811567 whereas the second largest group is Namasudra having population of 286708. Rajbanshis constitute 65 per cent of the total SC population of the district and Namasudras constitute almost 23 per cent only. The population amongst other groups of SCs is negligible.

The female members of the Rajbanshi families have to work hard from dawn to dusk. They do all sorts of household works. The male members are mostly cultivators or agricultural labourers. The female partners support the male partners in cultivation. A portion of them has to engage themselves in the construction works in the towns nearby. They are low paid workers.

According to Charuchandra Sanyal (1965), a Rajbanshi woman of a village is up from bed before daybreak. She does all sorts of household works as sweeping and cleaning the house and courtyard, fetching water, cooking, serving food to adult males and children of the family.

The women eat after the males have finished their meal. The adult women never take food in presence of the adult males. The adult daughters never sit with their father for eating.

The position of the Namasudra women is no different that of the Rajbanshi. They also have to lead miserable life. They suffer due to their caste, gender and class. The Namasudra people migrated from the then East Pakistan and settled in different parts of West Bengal. The partition of the country heavily fell on their economic positions. They had to leave all their immovable holdings in East Pakistan.

Some different views, also, we see in the writings of various authors. As S. D. Banerjee (1978) observed that the immigrants are economically better off; they are hard working, thrifty and intelligent. The Rajbansis, on the other hand, are extravagant and prone to be conservative in their outlook. Lack of foresight and reckless spending has made them to sell away their lands to the settlers. Today the

community is marked by the absence of a middle-income group. Grim poverty among them is borne out by the fact that in 1974, a year of acute food scarcity, all the cases of starvation death in the Anchal were confined to the Rajbansis and the local Muslims. No Namasudra or caste Hindu was a victim.

2.3 THE STUDY AREA

The district Jalpaiguri is divided into three sub-divisions namely Jalpaiguri (sadar), Mal and Alipurduar. The district has 13 blocks as well as 13 Panchayat Samitis. There is 146 Gram Panchayats in the district.

For the study we have collected data from three blocks namely Jalpaiguri (sadar), Maynaguri and Rajganj. Jalpaiguri (sadar) has 14 Gram Panchayats. Maynaguri and Rajganj have 16 and 12 Gram Panchayats respectively.

The following tables and figures show the population pattern of each Gram Panchayat of the study area:

Table 2.4: BLOCK – RAJGANJ Population								Representatives		
SL. NO.	G.P.	Male	F e m a l e	SC	ST	Others	Total	SC	W o m e n	SC W o m e n
1	Dabgram – I	5417	5070	4509	2201	3777	10487	2	3	1
2	Dabgram – II	22724	21226	28567	391	14992	43950	12	9	6
3	Fulbari – I	13553	12534	14347	165	11575	26087	9	6	3
4	Fulbari - II	12143	11189	11899	131	11322	23352	7	5	3
5	Sannyasikata	7932	7299	8377	551	6303	15231	5	4	2
6	Binnaguri	17500	16511	20066	971	12974	34011	14	8	5
7	Mantadari	9284	8801	11094	3757	3234	18085	8	4	2
8	Sikarpur	13524	12761	13931	3491	8863	26285	10	7	3
9	Kukurjan	10333	9841	12306	269	7599	20174	9	5	3
10	Panikouri	11882	11116	14948	689	7361	22998	12	5	4
11	Majhiali	9518	8911	9951	1105	7373	18429	5	4	3
12	Sukhani	10419	9902	6502	290	13529	20231	5	5	2

Rajganj Block –

Total Seats Reserved for SC = 98

Total Seats Reserved for Women = 65

Total Seats Reserved for SC Women = 37

[Source: Records of the Jalpaiguri Zilla Parishad]

Figure 2.4: Sex-wise and GP-wise population in Rajganj

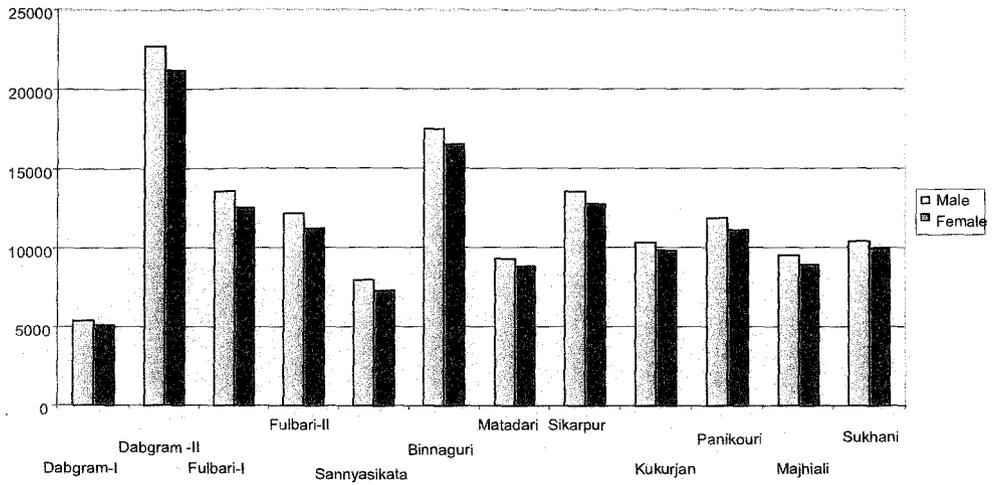


Figure 2.5: GP-wise Panchayat representatives of women and SC women w.r.t. reserve seats

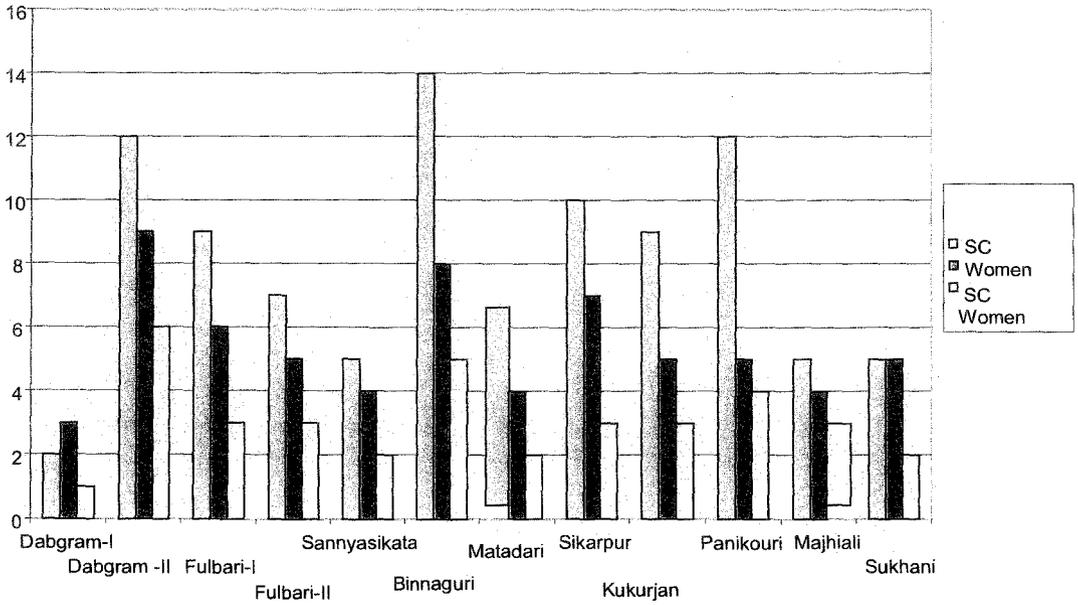


Table 2.5 BLOCK – JALPAIGURI (SADAR)							Popu- lation	Representatives		
Sl. No.	G.P.	Male	Fe- male	SC	ST	Others	Total	SC	Women	SC Wo- m en
1	Baropatia	7267	7011	9207	1335	3736	14278	7	4	4
2	Patkata	9999	9246	10790	847	7608	19245	7	6	3
3	Arobinda	9949	9498	5970	357	13120	19447	7	6	3
4	Paharpur	15863	15073	9335	300	21301	30936	9	8	4
5	Belakoba	14450	13357	15982	420	11405	27807	13	7	4
6	Kharia	14049	13278	18127	56	9154	27337	14	8	5
7	Garalbari	10153	9421	7735	481	11358	19574	7	5	4
8	Mandal Ghat	9975	9189	11503	25	7636	19164	7	5	3
9	Boalmari Nandanpur	8481	7840	15798	0	523	16321	13	5	5
10	Nagar Berubari	8475	8051	12560	116	3850	16526	10	4	4
11	Kharija Berubari – I	6854	6382	11362	44	1830	13236	9	4	3
12	Kharija Berubari – II	6270	5790	10468	2	1590	12060	8	4	3
13	South Berubari	9282	8925	14173	1487	2547	18207	11	5	4
14	Bahadur	12719	12027	9350	158	15238	24746	11	6	4

Jalpaiguri (Sadar) Block –

Total Seats Reserved for SC = 133

Total Seats Reserved for Women = 76

Total Seats Reserved for SC Women = 53

[Source: Records of the Jalpaiguri Zilla Parishad]

Figure 2.6: Sex-wise population across GPs in Jalpaiguri Sadar

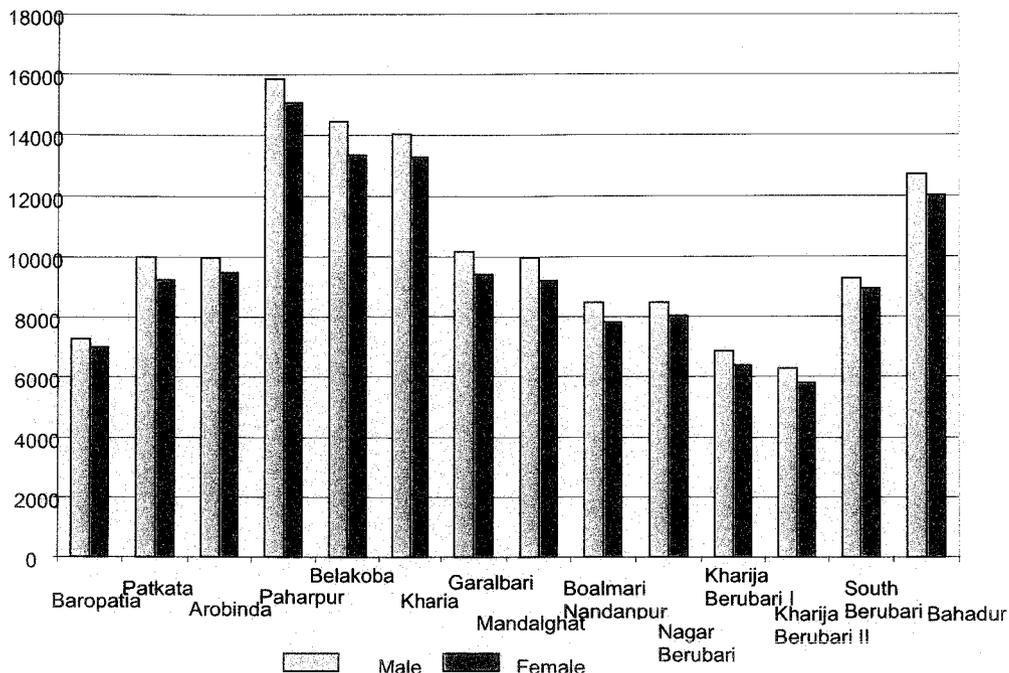


Figure 2.7: GP-wise Panchayat Representatives of Women, SC Women w.r.t. Reserved Seats

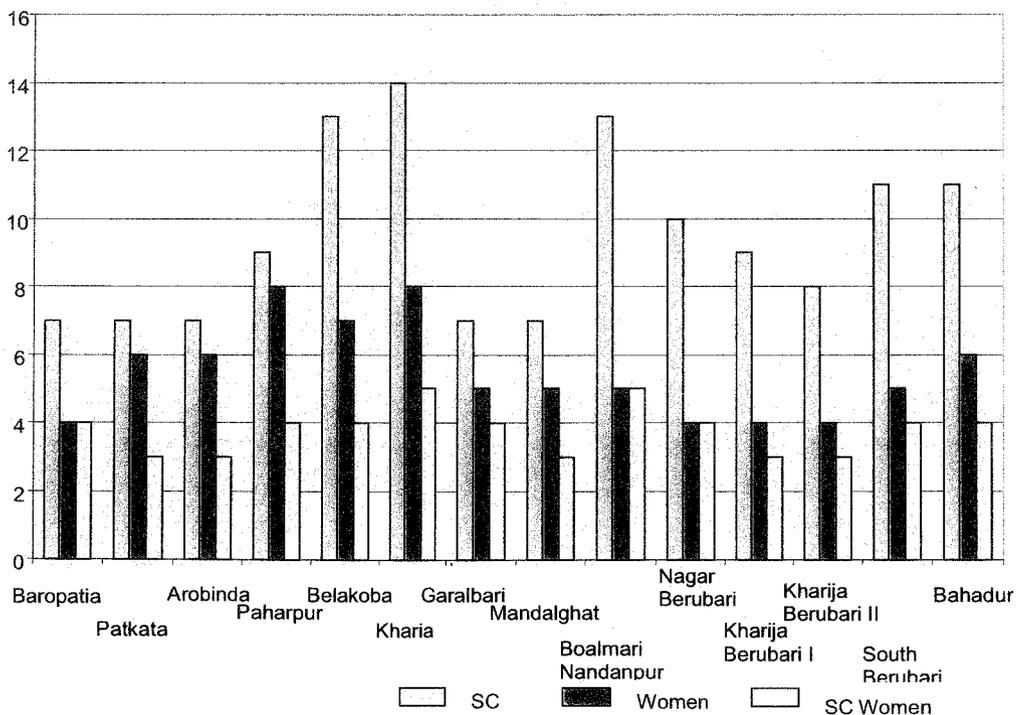


Table 2.6: BLOCK – MAYNAGURI							Popu- lation	Representatives		
Sl. N o..	G.P.	Male	F e m a l e	SC	ST	Others	Total	S C	W o m e n	SC W o m e n
1	Ramsai	11536	10805	15918	1740	4683	22341	12	6	4
2	Amguri	12426	11523	21095	165	2689	23949	15	7	5
3	Domohani I	6754	6327	8256	152	4673	13081	6	3	2
4	Domohani II	9178	8502	13122	65	4493	7680	11	5	4
5	Maynaguri	13552	12852	11355	229	14820	26404	9	8	3
6	Burnesh	11033	10257	17727	121	3442	21290	12	6	4
7	Churabhandar	13112	12116	21233	192	3799	25224	17	7	6
8	Dharampur	8123	7579	11350	Nil	4352	15702	8	4	3
9	Madhabdanga I	7574	7030	11403	103	3098	14604	9	4	3
10	Madhabdanga II	7565	7104	11300	9	3360	14669	9	4	3
11	Khagrabari I	8284	7980	7688	122	8454	16264	6	5	2
12	Khagrabari II	6975	6402	10043	Nil	3334	13377	9	4	3
13	Padamati I	8418	7819	10457	11	5769	16237	10	5	4
14	Padamati II	6718	6322	11488	Nil	1552	13040	8	4	3
15	Saptibari I	7588	6986	9317	47	5210	14574	7	3	3
16	Saptibari II	6701	6370	10036	3	3031	13071	8	2	1

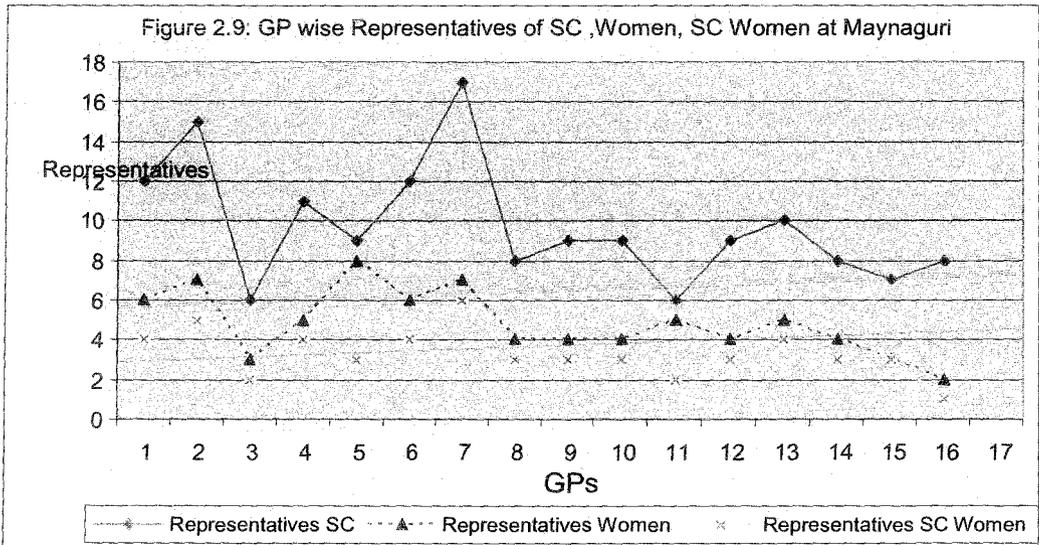
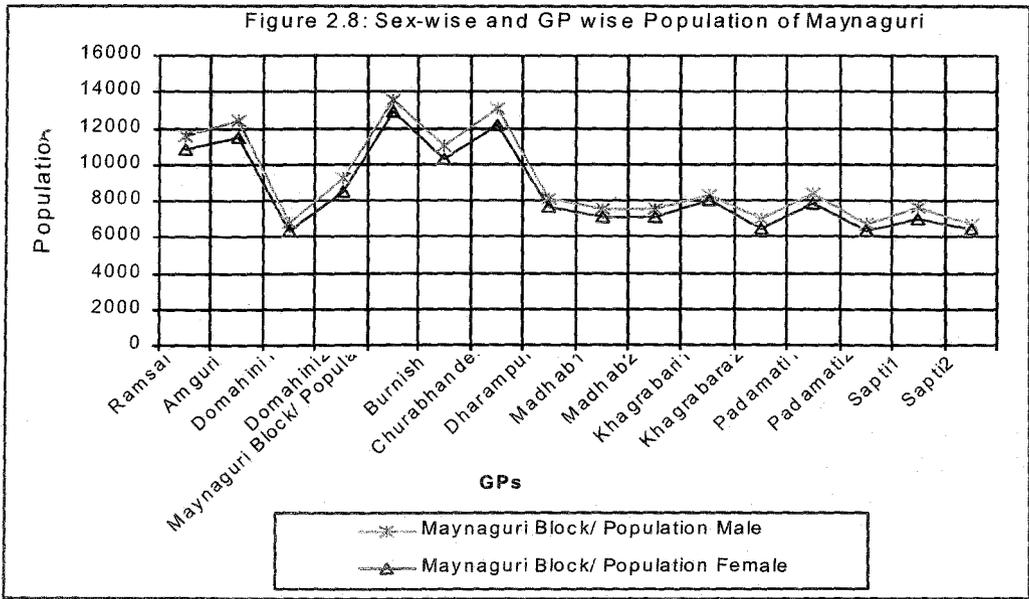
Maynaguri Block –

Total Seats Reserved for SC = 156

Total Seats Reserved for Women = 77

Total Seats Reserved for SC Women = 53

[Source: Records of the Jalpaiguri Zilla Parishad]



2.4 SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF SC WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES IN PANCHAYATS

For the purpose we have collected data in different gram Panchayats of three blocks mentioned. The data have been collected by personal interviewing the elected members of G.P. and PS through schedule questionnaire.

An understanding of the socio-economic background of the Panchayat representatives is almost a prerequisite for analysing their role performance in the Panchayats.

Socio-economic status of sampled women Panchayat Members in the district has been analysed in terms of age, education, occupation, income of the family and land holdings.

Age

'Age' has its greater influence on affecting participation in public life. There is a general view that young and middle aged person participates actively in institutions.

The significance of age and social characteristics is almost universal to all human societies and social positions and when are defined by age grading. [D.R. Singh (1990)].

"Being associated with a scriptine status, experience, knowledge and wordly wisdom it is considered an important indicator or status and prestige". [Dharmaraj Sing, (1985)]

Age of women Panchayat members is critical from social and political standpoints. In our villages the traditional values and views prevail till date. So, it is generally viewed that young and unmarried women should not join the politics. The aged women with their experiences in traditional society can properly work in the Panchayats. But, for direct participation of the political parties in local government, mobility and acceptability of the candidates are considered.

Table 2.7: Distribution of Age of SC Women Members of Panchayats Interviewed

Age Group	GP	PS	ZP
21 – 30	12 (24%)	3 (27.3%)	nil
31 – 40	26 (52%)	7 (63.6%)	nil
41 – 50	10 (20%)	1 (9.1%)	2 (66.67 %)
Above 50	2 (4%)	nil	1 (33.33 %)
Total	50	11	3

Age distribution of the respondents has been grouped into four categories as 21-30, 31-40, 41-50 and above 50. The most of the elected women are in the age category of 31-40. They are 52% of the total respondents. Then come the 24% of the age group 21-30. In case of group 41-50, it is seen that they constitute only 20% of the elected SC Women. The mean age of SC women in Gram Panchayats is 35.9 year. They are very young in comparison with the age of politicians who contest for the Assembly or Parliament. It proves the village people have their faith on the younger age group as well as on the middle – aged persons.

Education

Educational level of the members of Panchayats is an important

factor for performing role in the decision-making process. It should be the most decisive factor for women's participation in local governance.

Education is the fundamental basis of effective socio-political participation. (Khan1980).

Goyal (1974) says that in pluralistic societies, like India, it is only education that can synthesis and crystallize values based on social justice and equalitarianism.

Education plays an important role in the process of Empowerment of women. Particularly, the education of parent/husband or other male guardians is considered important because it influences the thinking, social aspirations, behaviour pattern and performance of the family members in a desired way in their life. [Abdur Razzaque (2006), p. 376].

'That West Bengal, under the Left Front Government which implemented a program of land reform, could not break this stranglehold has got reflected in the ways in which it has affected the access of the deprived and toiling section to education.' [Jasodhara Bagchi and Jaba Guha (2005)].

To interpret the educational background of the representatives, we have collected the data in regard to educational standard of the members themselves as well as their parental educational status. We have tried to judge whether the SC women representatives to the Panchayats are first generation learner or otherwise.

Table 2.8: Education of SC Women Representatives in Panchayats

Levels	GP	PS	ZP
A (up to Class VIII)	20 (40%)	NIL	NIL
B (up to Class X)	12 (24%)	2 (18.17)	NIL
C (Madhyamik)	10 (20%)	3 (27.31%)	NIL
D(Higher Secondary)	6 (12%)	3 (27.31)	NIL
E (College Level)	2 (4%)	3 (27.31%)	3 (100%)
Total	50	11	3

The table shows that most of the representative in GP has low level educational background. 64% of them are below the level of Madhyamik. Higher Educational background has been marked in the case GP Pradhans and members of the PS & ZP.

Table 2.9: Education of Parents of Representatives

Levels	Mother	Father
Illiterate	37 (74%)	11(22%)
Literate	9 (18%)	30(60%)
Low Level	4(8%)	6(12%)
High Level (College)	Nil	3(6%)
Total	50	50

Educational backgrounds of the parents show that the elected members of the GP are first generation learners. So, they do not get proper support from their parents in performing their assigned jobs to

the society. Besides, as members of the patriarchal Society, they are overpowered by the male members of the family, especially the spouses who instead of providing proper help, make some sort of barriers on role performance. Low level of education of the SC Women is a problem in itself and in turn, it gives rise to many other problems. They are elected people's representative but lack of education results in their lower social status.

Occupation

Occupation is an important ingredient in moulding participation. Occupation plays a direct role in men's livelihood as well as it affects the socio-economic conditions of people.

"Both social status and educational level are closely related to occupational status attained by women in society. Thus the possession of a job or occupation whether ascribed or achieved become very much related to the enjoyment of status among members, men and women". [Paswan and Jaideva (2002)].

	GP	PS	ZP
Housewives	36	7	2
Students	2	Nil	Nil
Service	2	2	1
Business	2	Nil	Nil
Service (Low paid) (ICDS, Para teachers)	3	2	Nil
Self help Group	5	Nil	Nil
Total	50	11	3

Majority (72%) of SC women representatives in GP engage themselves in household works. The housewives work hard from dawn to dusk. They fetch water, run the kitchen and feed all members of the family. They rear livestock and work hard in kitchen garden. Their hard workings pay nothing towards their economic empowerment as these sorts of jobs are either undervalued or not valued at all.

While discussing women's economic empowerment it is essential to remember that a part of the work that women do is paid and a part unpaid. The proportion of unpaid work done by women is very high compared to that of the paid work. Most of the work that women do in either supplementary or invisible and exhaustive information about this kind of work is practically impossible to obtain. [Ishita Mukhopadhyay (2004)].

Out of 50 respondents two are students. Out of them one is the student of college level and another is doing her master degree. They are members of extended families. Though they come from lower caste families, they enjoy better position in expressing their views due to their education. Two of the respondents are primary school teachers. They are doing well in maintaining public relations. The representatives who are engaged in low paid services (6% of total respondents) also do better in performing their jobs.

Two GP members are traders. They are engaged in selling agricultural products to the markets. They have very little time to keep public relations. Some of the representatives are members of the self – help groups.

Economic independence of the representatives makes them free

from economic and psychological control of husband or other members of the family. It helps in shaping assertive personality that allows them greater access to decision making.

Majority of the members are simply housewives and as such dependant on family which tends to bestow little, if any, status for public role performance.

Family Income

Economic status and occupation of other members of the family have its influence on the position of the women members; especially income and occupation of fathers in case of unmarried members and of husbands in case of married members have greater influence on their status in the groups.

As majority of the women members do not have independent economic background, we are to consider the economic background, of their families.

A household's annual income is the best indicator of its economic and social position, because annual income represents the net outcome of household productive capabilities and resources. Income also determines the household's ability to pay for goods and services; and its social status in the community.

It was felt difficult to collect actual income of the families of the respondents. Majority of the SC women members come from the families of cultivators or agricultural labourers. They are housewives and not concerned with family income. However, the following table shows the relevant data.

Table 2.11: Family Income of the SC Women Members of Panchayats

Class	GP	PS	ZP
(Annual Income in Rs.)			
Up to 20,000	14	1	nil
20,000 – 40,000	24	6	nil
Above 40,000	12	4	3
	50	11	3

The SC women members are not from the affluent families. Majority of them come from lower-lower income group and lower-middle-income group. It is observed that in Jalpaiguri District women from lower and middle income group come into politics and try to participate actively in Panchayati Raj System.

Land Holdings of the Family

As majority of the representatives are from cultivators' families and they failed to supply accurate data regarding their family-income, the land areas hold by the family is considered for the study purpose. Further, it is to be noted that the respondents do not have any land in their own name.

Table 2.12: Land holdings of the Families of SC Women Members

Holding (in Acre)	GP	PS	ZP
No Land	11	5	1
Up to 1 Acre	23	4	2
1 – 2 Acre	10	1	nil
Above 2 Acre	6	1	nil
	50	11	3

Out of total GP members respondents 11 families do not have any land. Their family members are engaged in various types of jobs. One respondent's father earns plying the rickshaw. Some of them are simply agricultural labourers. Some of them are BPL cardholders.

Majority of these families hold land whose areas are below 1 acre. They are not simply cultivators. They also try to earn from other sources.

Analysing the data regarding income, occupation and land holdings of the respondents as well as of the members of their family, it is revealed that SC women members are down – trodden people. So, it is rightly said that they are thrice discriminated against by virtue of their class, caste and gender. [Deshmukh and Ranadive, (2003)].

It is evident that in the district most of the SC women Panchayat members belong to the cultivators family and lower-income group. Further, maximum women members of SC communities elected in the Panchayats are from the low-standard educated families. Mostly they are first generation school goers.

Pramanik & Datta (1994) say 'The data on the social background of the Panchayat members reveal that there has been a concentration of poor peasants and low income group people in the leadership structure and absolute absence of the rich land lords in the Panchayats'. . In the case of women leadership also, in the district we see that they are from Low Income Group.

We also consider the marital status and family size of the

respondents. Out of 64 respondents, the unmarried women representatives are 8 only i.e. 12.5%. The average family size of a member is 5.83 person.

Table 2.13: Family Size

Size	No.	Percentage
1 – 4	15	23.44
5 – 8	44	68.75
9 – 12	5	7.81
	64	100

Majority of the elected women come from the extended families. She with her spouse and children live with one or two in-laws. 23.44% of the respondents live in a nuclear family. 7.81% of the members have their joint families. These two factors, family size and marital status are also very effective in making quality leadership amongst the women leaders at grassroots level.

To sum up our findings on the socio-economic background of the SC women leadership in Panchayats in the district, the following points may be envisaged:

- a) The majority of the representatives are being drawn from younger age group. Almost 78% of the total respondents are in the age group of 21-40 years.
- b) None of the respondents are illiterate. Mostly they are first generation learners. Majority of them could get school level education. There are very few of the respondents who got education at college level.

- c) Majority of the SC women representatives come from cultivators' families. They engage themselves in household works and are to manage the home economy.
- d) Most of them are married and live in the extended families.
- e) Almost 50% of them fall in the family-income group of Rs. 20000-40000 per annum.

CHAPTER 3

AWARENESS TO THE FUNCTIONAL ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES

- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Features of the Act
- 3.3 Leadership Quality
- 3.4 Factors Affecting Capacity
 - 3.4.1 Age
 - 3.4.2 Education
 - 3.4.3 Occupation
 - 3.4.4 Family Income
 - 3.4.5 Reservation Policy
 - 3.4.6 Caste System

CHAPTER 3

AWARENESS TO THE FUNCTIONAL ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES

3.1 INTRODUCTION

With the passage of 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 (which became law on April, 24, 1993) participation of people in the process of planning, decision-making and implementation in the rural India has been recognized.

In rural India, local Government comprises 2,32,278 village Panchayats, 5905 intermediate Panchayats and 499 districts Panchayats, making a total number of elected representatives of Panchayats at various levels are 2.92, million of which about one million are women and a large majority of them are first timers. Impact of the provisions of the 73rd Amendment Act concerning reservations for women and disadvantaged sections of the community has been that it has improved women's awareness and perception and had created an urge in them to assert for their rightful share in the decision – making exercise at the local level. [Amrit Patel (2006)].

3.2. FEATURES OF THE ACT

The constitution gives power to the women in general and women from the SC/ST communities to be elected in the local bodies and to perform role for their causes.

The features of the Act in brief are:

- Panchayats shall have a uniform five-year term and elections to constitute new bodies shall be completed before the expiry of the term. In the event of dissolution, elections will be compulsorily held within six months.
- In all the Panchayats, seats shall be reserved for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in proportion to their population and one-third of the total number of seats will be reserved for women. One-third of the offices of the chairpersons of Panchayats at all levels shall also be reserved for women.
- Offices of the chairpersons of the Panchayats shall be reserved in favour of SCs and STs in proportion to their population in the state.
- The Gram Sabha will be a body comprising of all the adults members registered as voters in the Panchayats area.

The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution ensures political empowerment to the poor, marginalized and oppressed – SC, ST and women at the grass roots level. The political empowerment of the common people depends on various factors out of which the important one is leadership quality of the representatives whom they like to elect to the local government. This chapter discusses features of the 73rd Amendment Act, leadership quality and factors affecting leadership capacity, such as age, education, occupation, family income, reservation policy and caste system.

3.3. LEADERSHIP QUALITY

To what extent the elected SC women to the Panchayats are aware of their role and responsibilities that depends on their leadership quality.

The very success of Panchayati Raj Institutions depends largely on the quality of leadership available at the grass – root levels. Political development and democratic growth depend on the local leadership and it's functioning in the Panchayati Raj Institutions. [V. M. Sirsikar (1970)].

A leader is a person having the capacity to read the necessities of other people and to organize people and resources towards meeting the common goal.

B. S. Bhargava (1979) says, ' Leadership is quite necessary to influence people to cooperate towards a common goal and to create situations for collective response'.

By leadership what we understand is that it actually is an intrinsic quality of a person that is exhibited through his/her influence on other people and who shows the path to be accepted and followed by others through his/her activities. The leaders for their abilities and intensions go ahead of others in the social or other group activities. [Ghosh and De (2006)].

To what extent the elected SC women to the Panchayats are aware of their role and responsibilities that are depended on their leadership quality. The 73rd amendment of the constitution gives opportunity for empowering women and downtrodden people. We are to investigate whether the reservation policy at grass roots level of governance helps in creation of leadership quality amongst the elected SC women.

The leadership quality depends on various factors like age, education, occupation, income, family size, and length of participation in local governance and so on.

Most of the respondents are first time elected representatives to the Panchayats. They are less experienced in handling the different problems in the village societies. They have little ideas or no idea in relation to functioning process of the Panchayats. They require proper training in this regard.

Mahi Pal (2003) in his article on capacity building says, 'As most of the elected representatives were elected for first time and major segments of them was from marginalized groups and women, enhancement of their knowledge about their roles and responsibilities as assigned to them under the Panchayat Act and as subsequently transferred through executive orders was necessary through training and exposure.'

In our study it is observed that commonly, the Pradhans of GP, members of the ZP have some experiences on functioning of Panchayats. They are not first timers to the Panchayats. For their experiences gathered in the past, somehow they are to some extent aware about their duties and responsibilities to be performed or to bear as elected personnel to the Panchayats.

Out of our 64 respondents, we see that 54 are first time elected. Though they are first – time elected, they have no experience about the role to be performed, they were found in challenging mode in building their capacities.

It is needless to say that the Panchayat system has its great impact on empowerment of weaker sections like SCs, STs and women. To conform to the 73rd Amendment, the Panchayat constitution Rule of West Bengal was again modified in April, 1998 to introduce reservation of Chairpersons positions for women and SC/STs. Reservation of electoral seats as well as position of Chairpersons is considered an effective tool to safeguard the interest of the weaker groups.

The well heard allegation against women representatives that they are proxies of their husbands is not well established. The women representatives from the caste Hindus or SCs are not so reluctant about their role and responsibilities. It is sure that their abilities in this regard differ due to different factors that are discussed below.

To quote from Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) we are to say that local leaders seem to have some effective control over decisions even when they are women or SCs. Moreover, it indicates that the oft – heard anecdotal evidence regarding women being entirely controlled by their husbands when in office should not be given too much weight.

SC women are mostly disadvantaged group in the society. They are backward due to their caste, class and gender. Is it possible to build their capacity to hold the position of leaders of the society? We are to adjudge all these factors.

Leadership capacity of a person depends on several qualitative and quantitative factors. These are mainly the level of education, occupational pattern, level of income, age, sex etc. These are the objective criteria or indicators through which one can measure the leadership quality of a person in the society. This is the quality, which makes a person aware to the causes.

3.4 FACTORS AFFECTING CAPACITY

3.4.1 Age

One of the important factors that determine rural leadership is age. Traditionally, it was the privilege of the elders to occupy important positions in the village. Respect for age in rural society is the projection of behaviour in a patriarchal family system, where youngsters are supposed to obey their elders. In the case of women, especially, we see that the ladies with younger age have no voice to raise outside as well as inside the home. In our traditional society women in older ages get some authority to express their opinion in family decision-making. The position of the SC women in the family is somehow better as they are breadwinner of the family members. But, in the society, they are excluded from participation in social decision-making.

The position has been changing since 1978, the year of establishment of second generation Panchayats in West Bengal. And, the 73rd Amendment makes it clear that the rural self-governance needs leaders from women and from weaker sections of the society. The old age tradition for dependence on elders for leadership has also been changing rapidly.

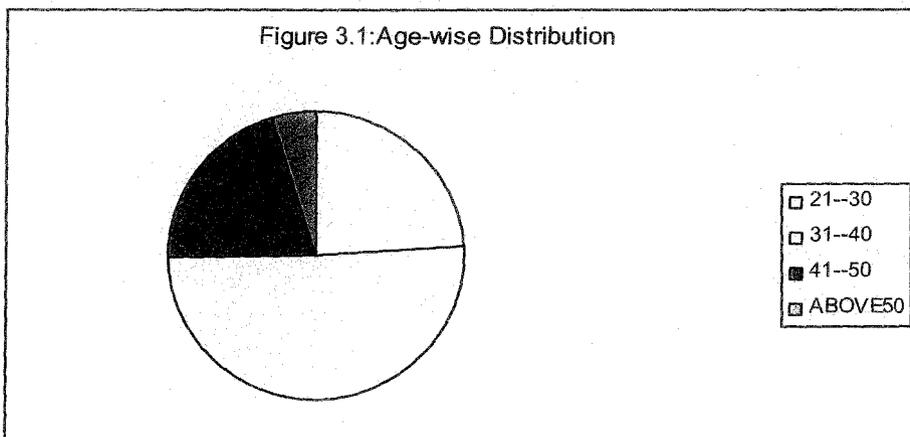
B. S. Bhargava (1979) observed that the rights of the citizens for electing their representatives on PR institutions and minimum age prescriptions for being elected have been exploding the myth of 'wisdom of the elders' in the rural areas.

The change in the traditional pattern, with regard to age is distinctively noticeable in our sample analysis. It is evident from Table

2.7 that the elected SC women to the Panchayats are in the young and middle age group. 24 percent of the respondents elected in GP are in the age group of 21-30 years and 52 percent of them are in the age group of 31-40 years. In PS most of the elected women are in the age group of 31-40 years. But in ZP experienced and elders are elected.

In their recent study, Poonam Kalash, Rajendra Rathore and Manoj Kumar (2009) observed that the majority of the Sarpanches and Panches in Rajasthan Panchayat were from the middle age category. They comment that there is significant association between performance level of women Panchayat members and age.

We may represent the data in regard to distribution of age of SC women representatives to the Panchayats (shown in table 2.7) with the following figure:



The fact is that women contested in the PR elections are nominated by the political parties. Almost all political parties try to nominate elder woman for ZP seats. It is common belief that an elder one is supposed to be well aware of her role performance in the PR system.

Dutta and Pramanick (1994) in their studies show that 86 percent of the members are fully aware of their role and of them 52 percent belong to the age group of 36-50. They comment that adequate attempts have not been made to make the younger leaders aware of their roles and responsibilities.

A decade has been passed since their findings. Now a day some sort of changes we have observed in our study. Though the Political parties prefer to nominate elders in the ZP level, but a large number of younger contest in the seats of the GP and PS. It is very much felt that younger women, especially women from SC community, are very much interested to know their liabilities and duties.

The younger elected SC women are mobile than the elders. These women, though, have to spend a lot of time in household works they have time to be utilized in making public relations. They know the socio-economic background of most of the families in their constituent areas. Hence, the distribution of BPL cards has been completed smoothly in some areas. The programme of 100 days work has also been taken with lesser flaws.

In the other hand the middle aged SC women representatives feel their duties not only to carry out the Government sponsored programmes but also to look after the disputes in the families occurred due to different reasons in their locality. So, we may say that elected women in Panchayets are to some extent aware of their role and liabilities. The middle-aged women engage themselves actively in solving the personal problems arisen in a family or between two families. Thus, they gain the popularity in the society and get empowered in decision-making process in the local governance.

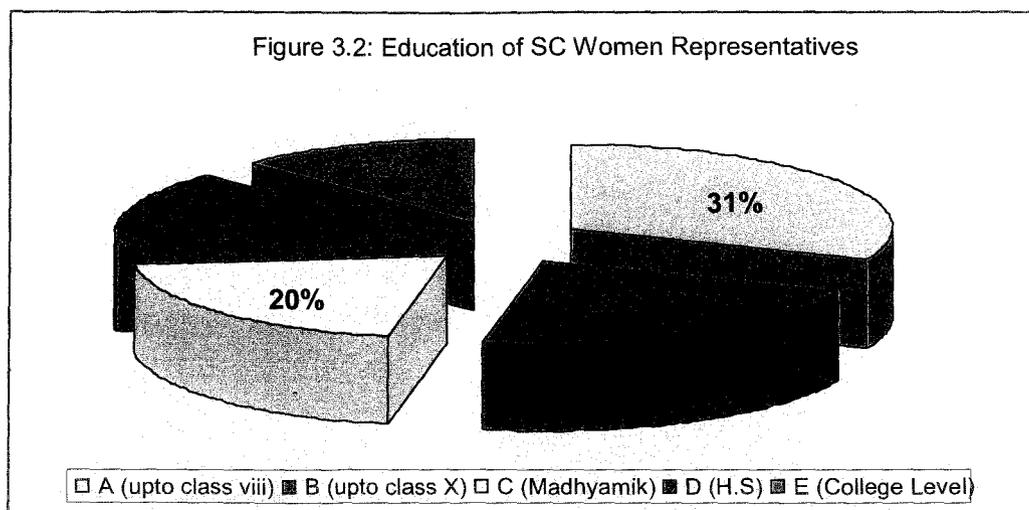
3.4.2 Education

Chattopadhyay & Duflo (2004) say that a necessary condition for the efficiency of the reservation policy is that the elected representatives have independent power and autonomy, over and above not only the direct control of the villagers (exerted through voting or through the gram sabhas), but also above the control of the bureaucracy, party hierarchies and the local elite.

It is the educational level of the elected representative to the Panchayats that ensures the ability of their role performance. The table 2.8 shows that none of the respondents are illiterate. But, their educational level is very much low. In the GP, 40 percent of the elected SC women hardly pass the class VIII th standard. In the upper tiers political parties choose the contestants with the educational level of at least Madhyamik. In the post of Pradhans we have evidence that the SC women in the chair have low-level education. But, they are well trained, as most of them are active political participants. Though they have not got formal education, they have been informally enlightened through the interactions with the leaders of the political parties they belong to. It is clearly evidenced in the case of left parties' representatives.

We may show the education level of the elected SC women members with the following figure:

Figure 3.2: Education of SC Women Representatives



Some programmes to train the women representative to Panchayats have been organised by the State Governments, NGOs and women studies centres in different colleges and universities. The political parties have also their programmes to aware representatives in performing their roles. But formal education is very important determinant for leadership quality. It is needless to say that illiterate or women with low-level education lack of capacities in participating actively in these programmes.

D. Narayana (2005) considers that literacy becomes a major determining factor in implementing these newly amended provisions. The women representatives in Kerala with cent percent literacy rate are considered to be more effective in the decision making process than the semi and illiterate representatives in Madhya Pradesh.

The evident shows that the elected SC women in Panchayats are the first generation learners. So they are not well supported by their parents in regard to building capacity to role performance. Spouses of the most of the respondents are not highly educated. They cannot extend their support. In some cases husbands try to influence their

wives in performing the role, which have some kind of negative effects in the process of democratisation at grass roots level.

Education is one of the means of generating confidence and countering diffidence. Some of the respondents, though educated, are reluctant about their role. But it is needless to say that education makes a leader competent to perform duties effectively.

The elected representatives of the PRIs should engage themselves in the programmes meant for spreading education amongst the masses. 'Sarba Shikhya Abhijan' and 'Adult Education' are run for the purpose. It seems that educated representatives are able to lead the masses towards the goal.

We have evidence that some of educated representatives are not aware of their role, rights and responsibilities. On the other hand, it is evident that women representatives with lower educational level are very eager to know their duties and responsibilities. We feel that the elected SC women though their educational level is very low are very eager to send the children of their communities to the schools. But, they are not interested about adult education.

In other states also the elected SC women show their interest in sending boys and girls to the schools. In the article of Vinod Vyasalu and Povrnine (1999) we see that a SC woman elected President of a GP in Malgudi District of Karnataka with her educational level of primary standard was very keen on promoting education. She has been running literacy class for women in the village. On hearing of the Government Programme for girls' education she got the details of the scheme and followed the procedure to get a school opened in her village.

Cithara Paul (2008) cited example of an elected SC woman from Punjab. Elected under the SC reservation seat, the woman member says her priority is to improve the educational facilities in the village, as she could not study beyond her class XII. She feels that the education is the key to success. She wants all children in the village to have a bright future.

In the district Jalpaiguri, the study area, we see that not only elected SC women are interested to send their children irrespective of sex to the schools but also other women in the village follow the same way. So, in the district drop out cases have been declining. But, our elected representatives do not show any interest for the adult education. The representatives with their educational level below Xth standard like to enrich their ability to perform successfully in PRIs, but they do not show any interest to enrich them with formal education. And then the programme for adult education has not been successfully taken up here. With all these odds, the female literacy rate in the district has increased from 33.2 percent (1991 census) to 52.9 percent (2001 census).

3.4.3 Occupation

Occupation is one of the important variables that affect leadership quality. Majority of the respondents are housewives. They have to work hard to serve the other members of the family. Their works are not considered economic activities. They cannot enjoy the so-called economic status in the society. They are economically dependents on their husbands/fathers. Economic independence helps in freeing women from economic and psychological control of husbands or other members of the family. 72 percent of the SC women respondents are

housewives and dependents on their husbands. Generally, they cannot feel free to access in decision-making process.

Two of the respondents are students. They show their eagerness to perform their jobs properly. They are very much aware of their responsibilities.

The SC women representatives to the Panchayats who are members of the self-help group show interest to their role performance. They expressed their willingness to be trained for the purpose. They are, somehow, to some extent free from the psychological control of their husbands.

Two of the respondents are primary school teachers. They are very much aware of their tasks to be performed.

A respondent jointly with her spouse runs a shop. She has to spend a lot of time in the shop and also in the housework. But, her engagement with economic activities makes her independent in realizing the democratic decentralisation of the governance. She being a member of the opposition party does not feel embarrassed to raise issues for the causes of the local people.

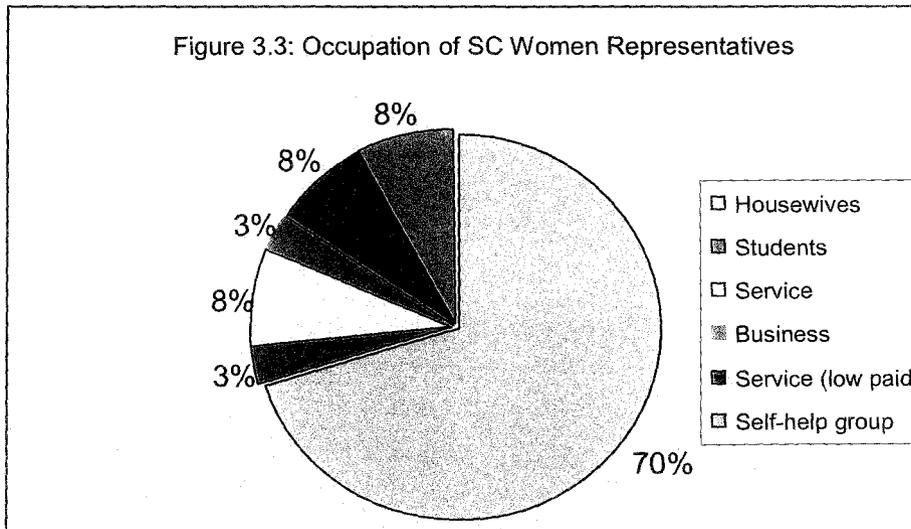
Occupation is very important variable that helps in personality building of the women representatives. In this regard, the self-help groups have been contributing to some extent. The respondents who are members of the self-help groups are contributing to the family income. They share their times into three activities as in the household works, in Panchayats and in their economic activities of the self-help groups.

Suhrid Sankar Chattopadhyay (2008) shows that although women in West Bengal have been active in politics from the time of the independence movement, it cannot be denied that for long there was no institutional arrangement for their active participation in the political process, in development activities and in policy formulation. This opportunity finally came in 1993 with the 73rd and 74th constitution amendments, which prescribed that one-third of the seats in the local bodies, must be reserved for women.

In 1998, in another major step forward, one-third seats of office bearers have been reserved for women. In the state seven GP are run exclusively by women.

Between 1981 and 2001, there was a reduction in the BPL population by close to 51 percent in rural West Bengal. The birth rate came down by 42.7 percent and death rate by 48.36 percent. The infant mortality rate fell by 59.18 percent. The average marriageable age of girls increased from 14.3 years to 19.6 years and the literacy rate among women went up from 30.25 to 60.22 per cent. All these achievements have been possible because of the concerted activities of women in Panchayats, not only individually, but also through the collective efforts of self-help groups which have played a pivotal role in the empowerment and socio-economic up-liftment of women.

Figure 3.3: Occupation of SC Women Representatives



3.4.4 Family Income

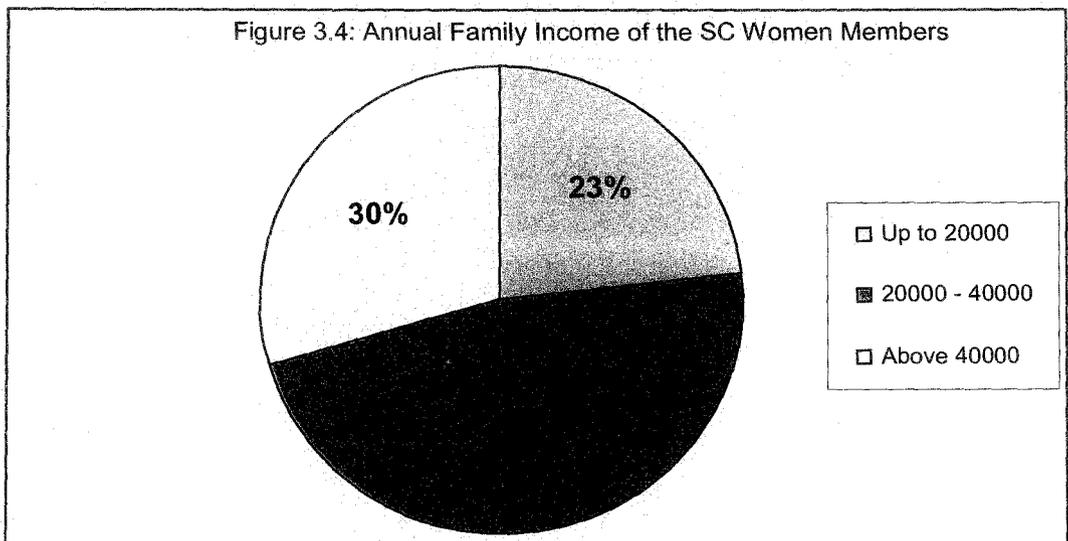
The economic status of the family reflects on the attitude of the members of the family. We are not sure that the family income disclosed by the respondents is true. They do not like to disclose the real income of the family and a large number of them are ignorant of their family income. Most of the respondents are from cultivators families. Accounting of agricultural income is not well adopted in our country. So, they are not in a position to compute their annual income from agricultural products.

Majority of the female gram Pradhans are housewives and their husbands are service holders. The economic status of the family helps them to be promoted to the chair of Pradhans. Other factors also exist there such as position of the husband and wife in the political parties. In some cases, we see that husband and wife both are active political participants.

In the case of elected members in the GP, we see that women representatives from comparatively higher income group enjoy some

sort of decision-making authority. They, though come from SC families, have got capacities to influence other members of the GP and community.

To what extent the elected SC women to the Panchayats are aware of their role and responsibilities that depends on several factors like age, educational level, occupation, family income etc. of the representatives. Besides all these factors the political awareness is required for the purpose. Political parties, especially, the left parties regularly organize some programmes in this regard. It is observed that majority of the elected SC women are mere supporters of the political parties, not the members of the parties. They feel no urge to attend the political classes arranged by the political parties. The elected women, who got the membership of the political party, attend this kind of classes. They are very much aware of their political identities and role to be performed.



3.4.5 Reservation Policy

The 73rd Amendment of the constitution gives opportunity for empowering women and other excluded groups. Reservation of posts for the excluded sections like women, SCs and STs in the local bodies is one of the most applauded features of the amended act. This has the potential to ensure representation for women and other marginalized groups. Reservation policy at grass roots level of governance helps in empowering the leadership quality amongst the SC women.

Many elected representatives to the reserved seats have the first time experience in the arena of politics and governance. The reservation policy makes room for their representations to the local governance and in the other hand; it has adverse effect due to the reserved seats being allotted by rotation every five years.

In practice, an elected representative, be it a ward member or a sarpanch/president in village Panchayats elected under anyone of the reservation categories after having served the office for five years, and plan and work hard on several issues, there is all likelihood that there is no prospect for them to contest for the next term. This system of allotment of reservations through rotation has several implications in terms of political participation of socially excluded groups. [Sumathi and Sudarsan (2005)].

Samita Sen (2003-04) pointed out the problems arisen due to the rotational seat reservation policy. The women members realize that they owe their position for reservation. But they have diverse motives for entering politics, as they call it. In some cases, they are persuaded by the family and/or the party to enter the fray. But once elected, most of them wish to go on. They wish to be re-elected.

In our study we also see that due to rotational reservation, most of the respondents know that they will not be re-elected. We asked every respondent if they like to be re-elected. In reply some of them say that the seat would be free from reservation. So, they would not be considered for unreserved seat. But, the members of the left parties refuse to answer the question. Some of them say that the party will decide.

When a reserved seat opens up, many women are initially encouraged to enter politics by family and friends. However, they often are unable to remain in politics beyond this one term. Recently, seats have been coming up for re-election more frequently. While a seat may be reserved once for a woman, it is highly likely that it will not be reserved when the next election comes around and the women in the position will be put up for re-election against men. Since the women were supported by their families and parties to run for a reserved seat, they are less likely to maintain the same support for a non-reserved seat. The husband and political party members are likely to return to their original motives and ideals, and are less inclined to support a long-term political career for their wife or fellow female Panchayats members. [Alexandra L. Geertz]

Through her research on women's involvement in local politics in the state of Kerala, M.S. John (2000) found difficulty in re-election to be one of the largest problems that women faced. John claims that 85 percent of the women she interviewed were not likely to run again for re-election and 30 percent would only attempt re-election if they are strongly supported by their friends, family and political party.

Other glorious picture has been cited by Debjani Sengupta (2005). 'In West Bengal, the Kultikri Panchayat, the pioneer Women Panchayat was elected consecutively for three terms. In the 2003 election, ten other Panchayats were turned into all women Panchayats. The politics for these villages is no more the exclusive domain of the male voters. The Kultikri experiment proves beyond doubt that the voters irrespective of their sex bias have faith in the capabilities of the women Panchayats members without which the Panchayat could not have worked as a woman Panchayat for three consecutive elections. The women candidates nominated by the Left Front have to fight the elections against the male candidates nominated by the opposition parties.'

3.4.6 Caste System

Caste in India is a social phenomenon that is extraordinarily difficult to define because of the diversity of its nature. In the villages the caste system is deep rooted. In the Indian context broadly caste is co-terminus with class. Commonly the SC people are the poorest in the society. They are debarred from various human rights activities.

George Mathew (2003) wrote 'Even after coming to positions of power, dalit elected representatives are restricted in effective exercise of their leadership. This is more in the case of women dalit members who have to face double oppression. Instances are not uncommon where the women dalit sarpanches sit on the floor during the course of the panchayat meetings while the male upper caste members sit on the chairs.'

In West Bengal the people of so-called lower caste do not have these sorts of problems. A long history of left movements in the state,

somehow, removes this kind of barriers between these two, lower and upper castes. In Jalpaiguri 'Krishak Sabha' is very much active with its different programmes functioned in the villages.

Peasants in India broadly represent a vast mass of landless agricultural labourers, sharecroppers, tenants, poor artisans and small and marginal cultivators having a close social interface with the socially deprived, such as the scheduled tribes, scheduled castes, other backward classes and women. The so-called 'outcastes' of the Varna hierarchy in the real sense of the term form the core of the peasantry in rural India. [Debal. K. Singha Roy (2005)]

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 elsewhere in India. But, it is needless 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 castes. The SC women have same problems in regard to socio-economic status.

Ansari and Shamshad (2007) wrote that the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution has greatly contributed to the political empowerment of women and marginalized communities in the rural society and has thrown open political opportunities in the Panchayats to these disadvantage sections.

The leadership that emerged in a result of the empowerment of women had to cope with several problems due to their traditional socio-conditioning.

According to George Mathew (2003), the most notable achievement of the CPI (M) Government is that clienteles and patronage, based on religion, caste, communal or feudal interests, have almost disappeared from West Bengal.

CHAPTER 4

PARTICIPATION IN THE PROCESS OF PANCHAYATI RAJ SYSTEM

- 4.1. Introduction
- 4.2. Participation in PRI by SC Women
Representatives
- 4.3. Participation in Panchayats Meetings
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CHAPTER 4

PARTICIPATION IN THE PROCESS OF PANCHAYATI RAJ SYSTEM

4.1. INTRODUCTION

It is now taken for granted in different parts of India that locally elected Panchayats can be important instruments for ensuring more effective delivery of different public services and Government programmes, as well as means of social and political mobilization for more democratic outcomes.

In fact, West Bengal was a pioneering state in this regard, which set the agenda for the rest of the country. The positive experience of West Bengal's own Panchayats legislation and subsequent measures at decentralization of different powers was what set the tone for the attempts elsewhere in the country.

The participation of women, SCs and STs in Panchayats tends to have dynamic effects on the social and political empowerment of these groups in general. [Jayati Ghosh (2008)]

Decentralised governance has the capacity to carry out the benefits of development to the all sections of people. The inclusion of so far excluded groups in decision-making process has its effective role in making the rural society more democratic than that was in the past under the feudal society. Due to land reform, the feudal relationship has been disappeared. And the advent of Panchayats system gives the oppressed people opportunities to gain political and social power.

Panchayat Raj in India is one important avenue for the empowerment of the disadvantaged oppressed or depressed sections of the Indian society by giving them powers of self-governance through active participation so that they virtually control material assets, intellectual resources and ideology. The material assets over which control can be exercised may be physical, human or financial such as land, water, forests, labour and access to funds. Intellectual resources include knowledge, information and ideas. Control over ideology signifies the ability to generate propagate and sustain and institutionalise specific sets of beliefs. In short, empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building to greater decision-making power and control and to transformative action. It is also a product and can be perceived in individuals and communities. [Prof. Sachchidananda (2006)].

Reservation of seats in PRI to the scheduled castes has been provided with the hope that the elected representatives will not only be empowered themselves but the process will empower their own community. To reach the fruits of reservation for scheduled caste women, provision for reservation of seats has been extended to them in the same way.

'Decentralisation enhances the scope of political participation of those who remain excluded from the process of public decision-making under centralised governance system.' [M.A.Oomen and Buddhadeb Ghosh (2005).]

In the opinion of Sudha Menon (2007), 'the socio-political changes expected by the introduction of Panchayati Raj system remained largely unfulfilled for long. Particularly the objectives like

social equality, gender equity and the change at grass-root level leadership envisaged as the main among the objectives of Panchayati Raj were not fulfilled in a meaningful manner. In this regard it was felt that the marginalized groups like the women and other backward castes in the society continue to face many hurdles and found it difficult to participate at the grass-root level development process.'

In fact, the third generation Panchayats, as it is called, comes into effect due to the constitution amended in 1992 and it gives the constitutional mandate to establish the local self-governments in rural and urban areas. The provisions for reservation of seats for weaker sections like SC, ST and women widens the scope for decentralising the governance and participation of these so far excluded sections in development planning and programmes of the local areas. The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution has given opportunity to the women of the upper caste as well as women of SC/ST to take part directly in rural local governance.

The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution envisages *Gram Sabha* as the foundation of the PRI system. Article 243A provided that a Gram Sabha may exercise such powers and perform such functions at the village level as the legislature of a state may, by law, provide.

Gram Sabha means a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to a village comprised within the area of Panchayat at the village level. The Gram Sabha literally means village assembly or council and it includes all the adults in the village whose names are registered as voters.

In West Bengal, in addition to *Gram Sabha*, *Gram Sansad* has been formed in every ward of GP constituencies. In every year two

meetings of Gram Sansad are held in the month of May and November. The registered voters in the ward are entitled to attend the meeting and raise their voices for proper governance.

A Gram Sansad has been defined by the West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 1994 as 'body consisting of persons registered at any time in the electoral rolls pertaining to a constituency of a GP, delimited for the purpose of last preceding general election to the GP.'

According to the Act, at least two meetings of the Sansad are to be held in a year; one in the month of May and the other in November. One-tenth of the total members form the quorum of the meeting. Elected member to the concerned GP must attend the meeting. The GP is required to consider every resolution adopted in the meeting of the *Gram Sansad*. The budget prepared by the GP is placed in the Sansad. The report of the audited accounts is placed before the members of the Gram Sansad. The members present in the meeting can raise other issues for discussion. And so, the Gram Sansad is considered as the voice of the common people.

Besides Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad, another provision is made to form Gram Unnayan Samiti. According to the West Bengal Panchayat Act (Amended), 2003, the Gram Unnayan Samiti is to be formed in every Gram Sansad area. With the formation of the Gram Unnayan Samiti, further decentralization in local governance has been achieved.

The Gram Unnayan Samiti is formed with the elected Panchayat member, the highest vote getter among the defeated candidates, three members of Self-help groups, retired or working Government

employees of concerned area, members of the NGOs and retired or working teacher of the area.

4.2 PARTICIPATION IN PRI BY SC WOMAN REPRESENTATIVES

By the term 'Participation' we like to mean it as a measure of socio-political empowerment of SC women representatives in Panchayats. We are to review whether the elected SC women representatives attend the Panchayat meetings and raise their voices on different issues. We also review if the SC women members go to Panchayat office regularly or they attend common people at office or at residence or how much time they spend for Panchayat matters. We like to examine the nature and extent of participation of SC women representatives to the Panchayats and common women from SC communities in the process of decentralised governance through PR system. The common people have ample scope for participating in the process of Panchayats through regular interactions with the members of Panchayats and attending meetings of Gram Sansad and Gram Sabha.

Participation implies that people are closely involved in the economic, social cultural and political processes that affect their lives. People may in some cases have complete and direct control over these processes – in other cases, the control may be partial or indirect. The important thing is that people have constant access to decision-making and power. Participation in this sense is an essential element of democracy.

The act provides reservation for one-third of total seats in PRIs for women. The allotment of reserved seats has to be rotationally changed. One-third of total seats reserved for SC and STs have also to be set apart for women belonging to these communities. One – third of total

seats of chairpersons have also to be reserved for women. And thus, in some GPs we see that post of chairpersons are reserved for SC women.

The rural women from either castes, the caste Hindu or SC have been participating in the process of PRI as voters. They cast vote in Panchayat elections. Almost 80percent of rural women put their franchise in the PR elections. The common people are very much involved in the process of electing representatives to the PRIs. The elected representatives are delegated authority to participate in decentralized governance. But the Act provides ample scope for common people for direct participation in the process of decision-making. Every voter has right to attend the Gram Sansad meeting and to raise their voices. In West Bengal the Gram Unnayan Samiti are formed in a general meeting. Participation of common people of either sex in the general meetings like Gram Sansad Gram Sabha etc. is very important factor in the democratic process of decentralized governance.

According to the 73rd Amendment Act, while Article 243 G of the Constitution empowered the state legislation to endow the Panchayats with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self government, the provision of reservation for SC, ST and Women (Article 243D) has given them an opportunity to hold formal positions of powers and, in turn, participate in the decision making process.

The Constitution has given scope to the disadvantaged groups in making decisions and formulating programmes for their causes. But, the question arises if this excluded section of the people performs their jobs through proper and effective participations. The participation of the representatives is assessed by examining the way they act in regular

Panchayat activities. The activities include attendance in Panchayat meeting, time spent for interacting people, regular attendance in Panchayat office, raising issues in the meetings and participating in discussion etc.

Prtyusna Patnaik (2005) writes “the increased importance of participation in the Panchayats through policies of affirmative action has necessarily increased the number of SCs, STs and Women in the rural political institutions. However, such numerical representation itself does not ensure empowerment of weaker sections unless and until it is transformed into effective participation.”

Patnaik added, “Active participation, which means initiating and being involved in discussions in the meetings, was found to be very rare in the case of representatives from the disadvantaged groups, and more so among women belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.”

4.3 PARTICIPATION IN PANCHAYATS MEETINGS

The elected SC women representatives told us that they used to attend almost all Panchayats meetings. They expressed some constraints in attending the meetings. They tried to attend meetings in spite of all the constraints they mentioned. They said that travelling allowances paid to them are so meagre in amount that does not meet the real cost of transport. We have learnt that each representative gets only Rs.40 (forty) per month for the purpose and the Pradhan of the GP gets only Rs.50 (fifty). The Pradhan of the GP generally uses to come to the office five days in a week. They feel it is very difficult to meet the transport cost from their own pockets. The Government also recognizes the problem and declares that the newly (2008) elected Pradhans of GP

will be treated as whole-time functionaries. Their allowances will be revised accordingly. In the word of Jayati Ghosh (2008), we may say that it is encouraging to note that the State Govt. has recently announced that for the newly elected Panchayats as of June 26, 2008, pradhans of the gram Panchayats will be declared as whole-time functionaries and their remuneration and honorarium will be revised accordingly. This was a much-needed measure to enable proper functioning, and along these lines other measures need to be taken to provide sufficient administrative support to all Panchayat members. This is especially important for elected representatives who come from weaker sections and have less in the way of their own financial and other resources.

Other constrain is lack of separable time for attending the meeting. Majority of the SC woman representatives come from cultivators' family. They engage themselves in household works and are to manage the home economy. From dawn to dusk they have to work hard and to serve other members of the family. So, they do not have separable time that can be devoted in serving the other people of the society. But we see that somehow they manage and try to attend the Panchayats meetings.

Roopashri Sinha, Asha Singh and Piyush Bajpai (2002) say that the women are generally tied up with household responsibilities, which leaves them with very little time to attend meetings. Many are not allowed by their husbands.

Women feel that they are invited only to fulfil the quorum. Their views and problems are not considered important.

The elected SC woman members to the Panchayats attend the meetings. Do they actively participate in the meetings?

Sen and Yasin (2007) observed that the Gram Panchayats meetings are held regularly. They not only organise all the twelve meetings in a year but also special meetings are held from time to time whenever any urgent matter crops up. In most of the meetings not only quorum, in fact attendance was much above the quorum requirement.

Mere attending the meetings does not mean participating actively. The representatives from weaker sections rarely make themselves involved in discussions in the meetings. Generally women members from SC and ST attend the Panchayats meeting but do not try to raise any issue in the meetings.

The Government of West Bengal was first among the states to respond to the 73rd amendment to Indian Constitution and passed the West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 1992, to facilitate reservation of 1/3rd of seats at all levels of Panchayats institution for women. This includes women belonging to SC and ST. This reservation policy widened the scope for participation of otherwise voiceless section in the grassroots democracy from the 1993 Panchayat elections.

Majority of the respondents told us that they attended GP meetings but they did not take part in discussions. Some of them say that they try to participate in decision-making process but the male partners always try to influence them. All married women disclosed that their husbands always try to influence.

Women representatives to the Panchayats attend the Panchayats meetings. But they hardly act independently. They generally follow

diktat of their spouses or male head of the family. Women from either caste do not take part actively in the meetings. Generally, they do not raise any issue. Male partners do all the jobs in the meeting. Woman members try to influence the Pradhan or male partners before the formal meetings start. The issues on which they would try to influence the Pradhan or the male partners are also decided by their husbands. It is very frustrating that almost all of the woman representatives from SC communities have no individual identity, they are known to all as wives of Mr. X or Mr. Y and so on. It is clear that if there is any scope, the husband must contest in the election in place of his wife. But, the reservation policy limits the scope of man in this regard.

The underlying intention behind participation of women in local bodies is that, by their active involvement women will initiate the process of reducing the gender bias in political decision-making. It is expected that the elected woman representatives would act as catalyst for the secluded and subdued rural women folk. But, in practice, we see that their achievements are far behind from our expectations. The elected women especially from scheduled caste communities do not possess the quality of a good leader. Their level of education, occupation, economic status of the family and different kinds of family-burdens make barriers in front of their self-development process.

The woman representatives require time to be acclimatized and space to grasp, learn and acquire the skill. They need receptive spirit and co-operation. The SC woman members get support neither from the higher caste male members of the Panchayats nor from the male members of the same communities. Even the SC woman Pradhans confess that in decision-making process their husbands always try to influence.

Participation of SC women members in rural local governance is not so insignificant everywhere and for every member. We have evident that in some Panchayats some of woman members are doing better in performing their jobs. They are very much serious to their role performance. The SC women Pradhans with their low level of education and other hurdles have been doing better in performing their duties. At least, they have been trying their best.

Members elected in the PS and ZP is experienced to some extent in regard to PR systems. They claimed that they could raise different issues in the meetings and raise voices in support of their claims.

4.4 PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL CLASSES

Left parties claim that they arrange classes to train the newly elected representatives to Panchayats. It is learnt that the left parties hold training classes for the newly elected representatives to the Panchayats. The left parties take special care for their women members to the Panchayats. But these types of oriental classes are organized immediate after the election process is over. We cannot see the continuous effort from any party in this regard.

The training classes for Panchayats members cannot be treated as political class. On regular basis the left parties, especially the CPI (M) arrange classes for its members to teach them policies and programmes of the party. But these kinds of classes are attended by the party members. A very few amongst the elected SC women are members of any party. They are mere supporters of that party and their husbands or male members of the family have connections with the party. And so, they are not entitled to attend the party orientation classes.

4.5 DAILY INTERACTIONS WITH COMMON PEOPLE

The respondents were asked whether the common people meet with them and discuss the different local problems with them. All of them said that daily in an average ten people meet with them and raise different issues. Both men and women from every sphere of the society come and discuss different issues. We have question in mind that the people come to their places, belong to which class and caste or only the women only come to meet with the elected women members. They answered that both men and women come to their places and obviously most of them are from SC communities.

The question arises how they deal with these problems placed by the common people. It is learnt that in most of the cases husbands of the Panchayat members take up the issues and refer those to the local political leaders. Sometime we see that the women representatives instead of raising issues in the meetings like to talk on them with the Pradhan personally. They request the Pradhan to raise the issues in the meeting and take decision in favour of them.

The common people come to them with different kinds of issues. It includes demand for road construction, irrigation facilities, and new connection of electricity and so on. They also appeal to the members for providing scope for getting personal benefits from different projects of Panchayats. They also like involvement of the elected representatives in solving family disputes and disputes arisen between two families and so on.

We observed that middle aged women representatives from SC communities are very much interested in solving the problems arisen

due to family dispute or disputes between two families. The respondents cited different examples on the topic.

It is evident from their discussion that the level of involvement in social activities is higher than that of their political activities. Some people show their faith on them in solving social disputes. Socio-political involvement of the SC women representatives to the Panchayats give them some scope to establish themselves empowered in the society.

Abdur Rezzaque (2006) wrote that in spite of the above (different difficulties), the political involvement by the women Panchayat members has increased their power, prestige and dignity in the society in comparison their early days. This social dignity and prestige have caused their upliftment and so called social empowerment, to some extent, though it could not reach up to the desired level.

4.6 ATTENDANCE IN PANCHAYAT OFFICE

SC women Pradhans come to GP offices five days a week. Some of them are very serious to maintain the times in regard to arrival and departure from the office. We observed some women Pradhans from SC communities are not so serious in attending the office in time. They are very much dependent on secretary and office staff for daily routine work.

The general members of the GP cannot manage to come to office daily. As the Sc women members are from low-income group, they have no time or very little time to spend for the causes of the society. They are to engage themselves in earning money for the family and/or in household works. The other constrains to attend the office daily is the

transport cost. The poor members of the GP cannot afford this cost. The common people though they often meet the members at their houses, like to see their representatives at the office. This kind of difficulties can be removed by providing proper financial assistant to the members of the GP.

One woman Pradhan from SC communities told that the husbands of the members always come to the office and try to collect up to date information in regard to various projects. She added that she tried her best to restrain the spouses of the female representatives to act like this, but she could not succeed in this regard. The women members support this kind of role played by their husbands.

Some exceptions we have observed in case of unmarried and politically involved members of the GP. The unmarried women representatives, who have got membership of political parties, try to perform their duties independently. They come to office regularly and try to collect information in regard to various projects. However, they are guided and directed by the party leaders.

In West Bengal the Panchayat elections are fought and won on party basis. Political parties control the activities of Panchayats. In most of the cases husbands of the women members are involved in political activities. They feel that on behalf of their parties, they are guiding their wives.

The Panchayats in West Bengal are termed as 'Political Panchayats'. Lieten (1992) admits that substantial decisions are made at the level of party.

In most cases the women members of the GPs do not come to Panchayat office regularly and so they get very few chances to consult with fellow members. Due to geographical distance, lack of time and energy they seldom could meet or sit together so as to evolve or settle for unite stands.

4.7 PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN GRAM SANSAD MEETINGS

Grassroots democracy becomes a reality with the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act which sought to bring about the democratic processes at all levels of the society by formalizing mechanism wherein people from all sphere of life would get opportunity to participate freely in discussions on their development and welfare matters.

Gram Sabha as defined in the Act is a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to a Gram Panchayat area. The jurisdiction of a Gram Sabha is the whole area of a Gram Panchayat. The difference is that Gram Panchayat is an institution of elected representatives of its area, whereas Gram Sabha is a forum for registered voters of a Gram Panchayat.

The meeting of Gram Sabha takes place once a year in the month of December. In this meeting the members of the village council or Gram Sabha reviews the proposed budget for the next year and the previous year's performance. The Gram Sabha covers a large number of voters and as a result the people cannot interact and exchange their views properly.

To overcome these sorts of problems in our state Gram Sansad has been formed. The registered voters of the village constituency form

the Gram Sansad. The meetings of the Gram Sansad take place twice a year in the month of May and November.

In the first meeting, month of May, discussions are held on last year's Panchayat budget, the list of beneficiaries of different development programmes, review of the last year's functions and planning for the coming year. And in the second meeting, month of November, the opinion and suggestions for coming budget, audit report of Panchayat is discussed. In this way, the government wants to ensure participations and involvement of the rural people in the Panchayat activities. [Sudipta Bose (2008)]

The West Bengal Panchayat (Amended) Act, 2003 has made it obligatory for a Gram Panchayat to act upon any recommendation of a Gram Sansad relating to prioritisation of any list of beneficiaries or scheme or programme so far as it relates to the area of the Gram Sansad. If Gram Panchayat decides in a meeting that such recommendations are not acceptable or implementable under the existing provisions of the Act, rules or orders, such decision of the Gram Panchayat shall be placed in the next meeting of the Gram Sansad. The quorum of a Gram Sansad meeting is ten per cent and the meeting should be adjourned in absence of quorum. The adjourned meeting of Gram Sansad shall be held after 7th day at the same venue and at the same time. In adjourned meeting no quorum is required.

It is learnt from the respondents that they attend Gram Sansad meetings. They also try to motivate common people especially women of the locality to come to the Sansad meeting. The data we have collected shows very poor attendance in such meetings. The common people do not feel any urge to attend and raise voice in Gram Sansad. The elected representatives fail to motivate the village people in this

regard. The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution envisages Gram Sabha as the foundation of the PRI system. In West Bengal, to ensure participatory Government in the rural areas, the Government introduces Gram Sansad and to further entrench democracy for the rural people 'Gram Unnayan Samitis' have been formed.

In spite of all efforts from the Government, the socio-political changes expected by the introduction of PR system remained largely unfulfilled for long. The common people are not enthused to participate in local governance. Rural women always keep distance from the Sansad meetings. They are not encouraged by the elected representatives. We expected that the elected SC women to the Panchayats would play proper role to encourage women of their communities so that rural women could join the process of local governance. But in practice, we see the participation of women in PR system is not glorious. Despite being in operation for over thirty years the PR system in West Bengal have failed to generate enough enthusiasm among the so-called excluded groups as women from SC communities about their activities.

In the word of Sanjay K. Roy (2005) 'Gram Sansad in West Bengal are notorious for lack of attendance by members.'

Figures made available by the Department of Panchayats from Gram Sansad meetings held in May and November, 2002 show the average attendance of 12 per cent and 11 per cent respectively with the high of 19 per cent and low of 6 per cent. The percentage of adjourned meetings was abnormally high. It was 25 per cent in May and 18 per cent in November.

The year-wise data on meetings of Gram Sansad show the same picture.

Table 4.1: Year-wise data on Meetings of Gram Sansads, Up to 31-03-2004

Year	Total No. of GP	Total No. of GS	Avg. No. of electors per GS	Total no. of GS meeting held in May	Avg. No. of attendance in each meeting with(%) in May	Total no of GS which did not Hold meeting	Total no. of meetings held in Nov with(%)	Avg. No. of attendance in meeting with(%) in Nov.	Total no of GS meetings adjourned in Nov.	Total No. of GS which did not hold meeting in Nov.
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
1999	3330	44634	746	43346 (97)	90 (12)		43872 (98)	94 (13)	2496	762 (15)
2000	3360	45167	748	42910 (95)	88 (12)	2257	43246 (96)	94 (13)	4929	1921 (4)
2001	3360	45167	750	43770 (97)	86 (12)	1397	42829 (95)	79 (11)	11056	2338 (5)
2002	3358	45095	798	42384 (94)	86 (12)	2780	41625 (92)	94 (12)	9231	3470 (8)
2003	3354	45154	752	4705 (10.4)	89 (12)	40392	41120 (91.07)	88 (11.7)	5335	4034 (9)

* Figures in the bracket indicate percentage to total.

Source: - Dept. of PRD Govt. of West Bengal, Kolkata (www.siprd.org)

Amal Mandal (2005) observed that Sansad and Sabha meetings are overwhelmingly man dominated. Women's participation is solidly subdued. In his study areas, in total 57 Sansad meetings, only 1100 women in total or 19 women per meeting attended. Average number of women electorate in each ward was 371, thus 5.12 per cent of total women Sansad member actually came to attend meeting. Among men, total 6161 attended, on average 108 men in each meeting or 37.34 per cent of total men electorate participated. In other words, women

composed of 15 per cent and men 85 per cent of total participants in each meeting.

Rajat Roy (2008), observed that meetings of the Gram Sansad – the village assembly of the people of the Panchayats in which all adult villagers can participate and plan future development works, hardly take place. The record shows a dismal (only 11 per cent) attendance, just about sufficient quorum to make the meetings valid.

In our study area we have collected data on meetings of *Sansad*. The name of the GP is Kharia. The GP is under the Panchayat Samiti, Jalpaiguri (Sadar). The area is adjacent to Jalpaiguri Municipality. The population of Kharia GP may be presented as below:

Table 4.2: Gram Panchayat: Kharia

Sex	No.	Caste	No.	Members to the GP	No.
Male	14049	SC	18127	SC	14
Female	13288	ST	56	Women	8
		Others	9154	SC Women	5
Total	27337				

Source: Records of Jalpaiguri Zilla Parishad (www.jalpaigurizp.org)

The people of the GP as it is adjacent to the urban area are culturally influenced by the urban people. But, in regard to participation in local governance, they show their reluctance that reflects in the table 4.3.

Table 4.3: Attendance in Gram Sansad Meeting

Ward No. and Names	Date of Meeting	Attendance in Gram Sansad Meeting	Attendance in Gram Sansad Meeting	Attendance in Gram Sansad Meeting
		Total	Male	Female
Debnagar North (80)	26.11.2007	70	42	28
Debnagar North(81)	3.12.2007	85	50	35
Debnagar South(82)	5.12.2007	74	45	29
Deonia Para(83)	27.11.2007	75	60	15
Korani Para(84)	27.11.2007	127	95	32
Danga Para(85)	8.12.2007	76	45	31
Old Pandapara(86)	8.12.2007	99	63	36
Jagannath Colony(87)	28.11.2007	106	73	33
Pandapara Colony(88)	28.11.2007	65	50	15
Sarada Pally(89)	27.11.2007	62	41	21
Porapara(90)	10.12.2007	85	60	25
PoraPara(91)	10.12.2007	90	68	22
Brammotor Para(92)	3.12.2007	87	75	12
Fakir Para(93)	3.12.2007	117	77	40
Sovabari(94)	1.12.2007	81	59	22
Rakhaldevi(95)	30.11.2007	110	94	16
Vivekananda Pally(north)(96)	7.12.2007	106	75	31
Vivekananda Pally(97)	7.12.2007	153	112	41
Sukanta Nagar(north)(98)	29.11.2007	111	96	15
Sukanta Nagar south)(99)	6.12.2007	125	125	-
Average attendance		91	65	26

Source: Records of Panchayat Office

It is seen that total 1824 people participated in 20 Sansad meetings that is only 91 persons in a meeting. The average number of voters per ward 700 that is only 13 percent of total members attended the meeting. This is the picture throughout the whole of the state of West Bengal.

Ghatak and Ghatak (2002) studied 20 village constituency meetings located under village councils in five blocks of three district of west Bengal namely North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas and South Dinajpur. The average attendance rate per village constituency was around 12 percent, which is less than the average for west Bengal as a whole (16percent). They comment that a person attending the meeting (often the household head) is likely to represent the views of more than one voter, and so in terms of effective popular participation, the attendance rate may appear lower than it really is.

Ghatak and Ghatak added 'If we compare the composition of the eligible voters to those attending the meetings a striking fact is that these meetings were overwhelmingly a male dominated event – in spite of official policies targeted towards empowering women, such as reserving one third of the seats in the village councils.

On attendance and participation of the rural people in Gram Sansad and Gram 'Sabha meetings, Sudipta Bhattacharyya (2004) wrote that the overall picture in this regard is very much demoralizing. The attendance of the Gram Sansad & Gram Sabha meeting is abysmally low and that too declined over the years. The decline was as great as from 18 percent in 1996 and 1997 to 16 percent in 1998 to 13 percent in 1999 and 2000 and then stuck to 11 percent in 2001 and 2002. The decline was sharp for the Gram Sabha Meeting. The percentage of attendance was around 30 percent till 1998, after that it

collapsed to around 5 percent. Bhattacharyya (2004) also added that the most striking is the attendance of female population. The percentage of attendance of female population was as low as 2.

We may also cite the report on meetings of Gram Sansads of another GP in our study area. The GP is Ramshai under the PS, Maynaguri, far from the urban influences. The population of Ramshai GP may be presented as below:

Table 4.4: GP: Ramshai

Sex	No.	Caste	No.	Members to the GP	No.
Male	11536	SC	15918	SC	12
Female	10805	ST	1740	Women	6
		Others	4683	SC Women	4
Total	22341				

Source: Records of Jalpaiguri Zilla Parishad (www.jalpaigurizp.org)

The data in the table 4.5 shows the same picture as it is found in case of Kharia GP. On attendance and participation of the rural people in Gram Sansad meetings, the overall picture is very alarming, especially; the participation rate of women voters is very low.

The Gram Sansad is the most effective bottom level body for the participation of the villagers. It is the body of the entire electorate. It meets twice in a year in May and November. In order to give wide publicity about the meetings the help of the both the print and electronic media is sought. The traditional method of beating of drums is also used for dissemination of information about the meetings. The field experience shows that the mass organizations of the parties are also geared to action for the purpose. The quorum is 10% of the total

members. The meetings of the Sansads have gained considerable significance following the amendment made in 2003. The GPs are now

Table 4.5 Attendance in Gram Sansad Meeting

Name and No. Of Wards	Date of Meetings	Attendance in Gram Sansad Meeting		
		Total	Male	Female
Kawagab	8.12.2007	109	90	19
Zharbarogila	8.12.2007	119	86	33
Kajal Dighi	7.12.2007	123	67	56
Uttar Kalamati	7.12.2007	126	104	22
Changmari	5.12.2007	148	107	41
Dakshin Kalamati	5.12.2007	131	113	18
Zharbarogila	10.12.2007	114	99	15
Barmanpara	10.12.2007	104	82	22
Panbari	1.12.2007	152	90	62
Panbari	30.11.2007	104	39	65
Satvendi	1.12.2007	132	55	77
Satvendi	3.12.2007	130	100	30
Ramshai Bazar	3.12.2007	80	63	17
Budhuram Banobasti	4.12.2007	54	42	12
Jaldhakachar	4.12.2007	84	54	30
Average Attendance		114	79	35

Source: Records of Panchayat Office.

bound to accept recommendations of the Sansads unless they violate or contradict the provisions of the Act/rules or orders made there under. [Prabhat Datta (2007)] Datta added, 'But the fact remains that the attendance is still not very significant. The highest attendance of members has never been more than 18 per cent. The data on attendance released by the state government last year tend to show

that it varies from 8 per cent to 18 per cent. The attendance of women member is much lower than that, i.e. not more than 3 per cent.'

Datta tried to identify the factors that contribute to the low percentage of members in the meetings. He showed that one-third of the villagers are not aware about the Gram Sansad. A critical analysis of the responses indicates that there are three reasons, namely, lack of time, the impression that the decisions are not taken in the meetings and reluctance of a section of the leadership to listen to the critical points made by the members.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

5.1 Introduction

5.2 Summary of Findings

5.3 Conclusions

5.4 Suggestions

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

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.

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