

CHAPTER 2

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

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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

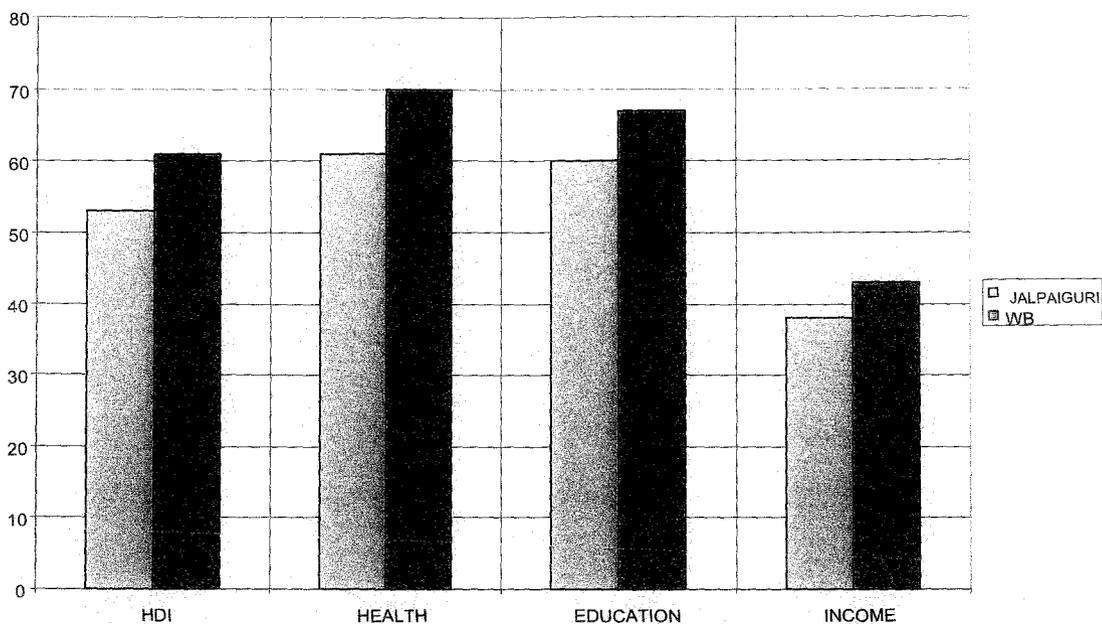
	Jalpaiguri	West Bengal
HDI	.53	.61
Health	.61	.70
Education	.60	.67
Income	.38	.43

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.

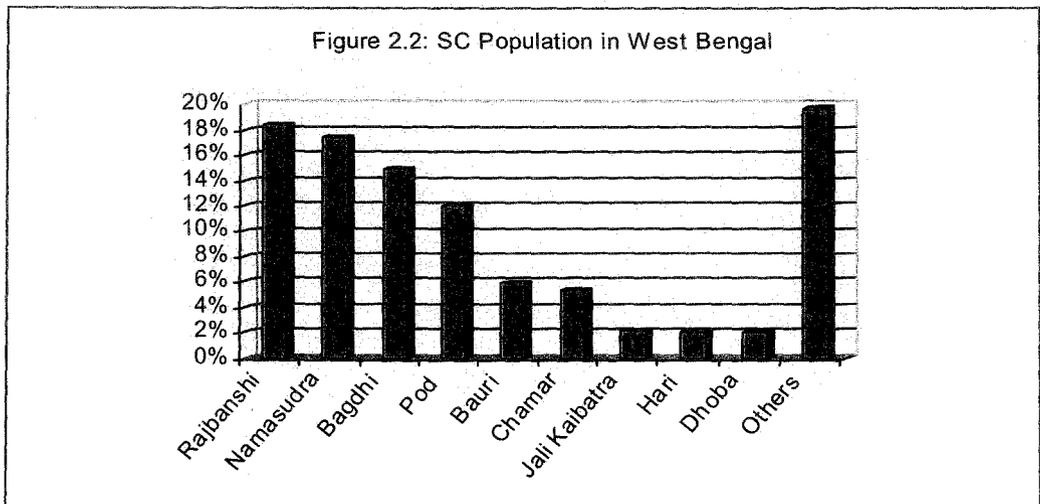
The table 2.2 shows the major SC population in West Bengal:

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

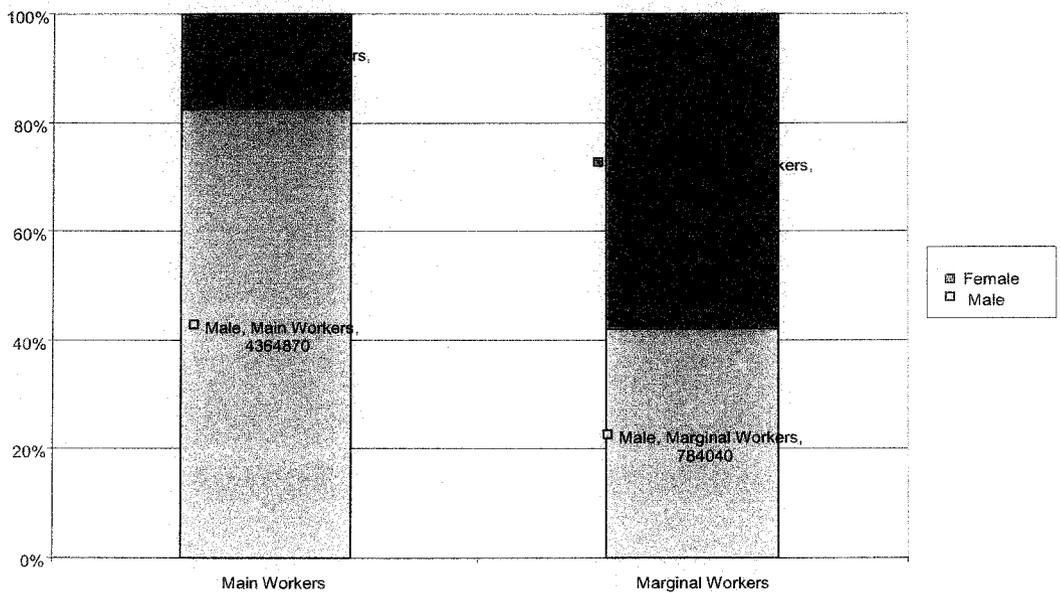
Of the total SC main workers, 31.9 per cent has been recorded as agricultural labourers and 20.3 per cent as cultivators.

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

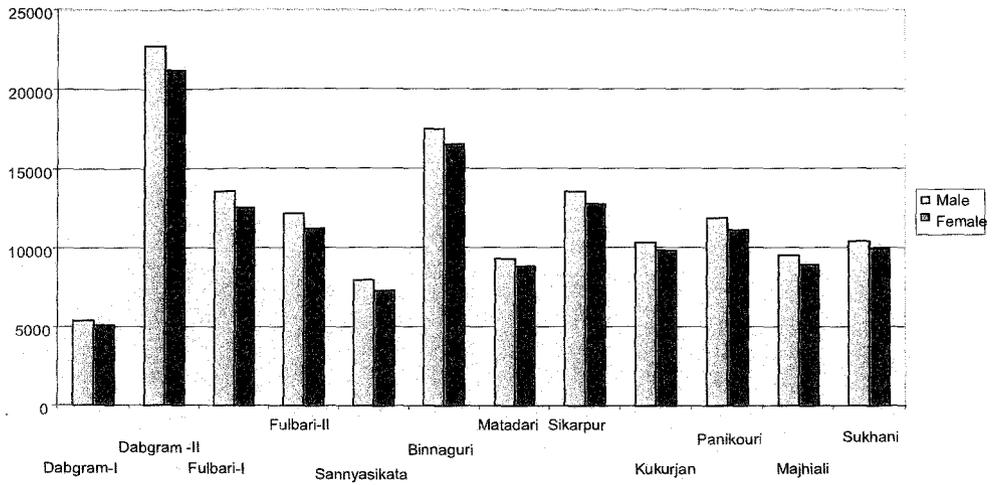


Figure 2.5: GP-wise Panchayat representatives of women and SC women w.r.t. reserve seats

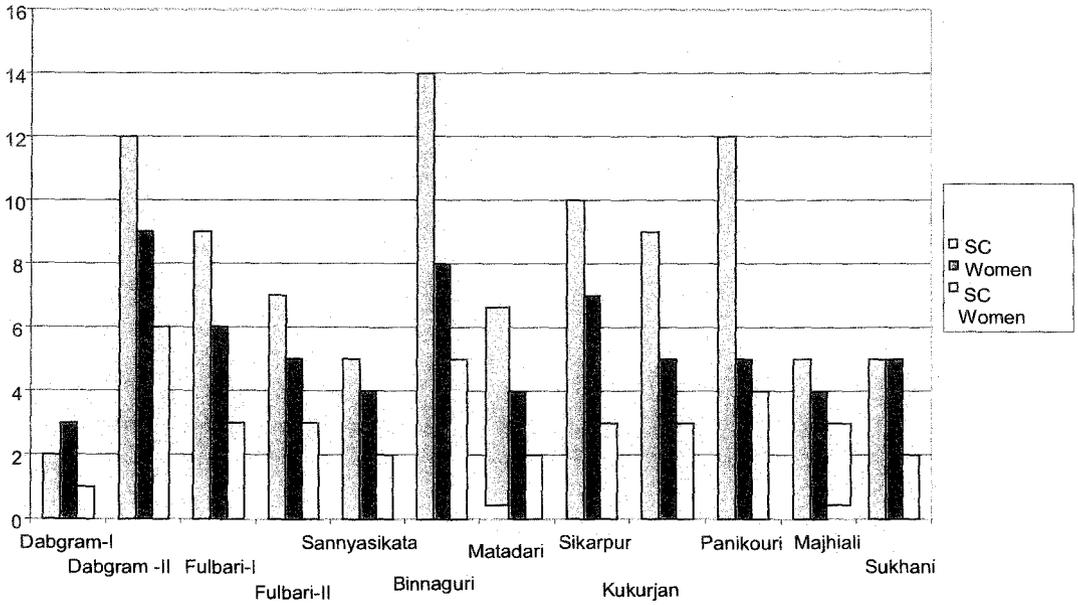


Table 2.5 BLOCK – JALPAIGURI (SADAR)							Popu- lation	Representatives		
Sl. No.	G.P.	Male	Fe- male	SC	ST	Others	Total	SC	Women	SC Wo- m en
1	Baropatia	7267	7011	9207	1335	3736	14278	7	4	4
2	Patkata	9999	9246	10790	847	7608	19245	7	6	3
3	Arobinda	9949	9498	5970	357	13120	19447	7	6	3
4	Paharpur	15863	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

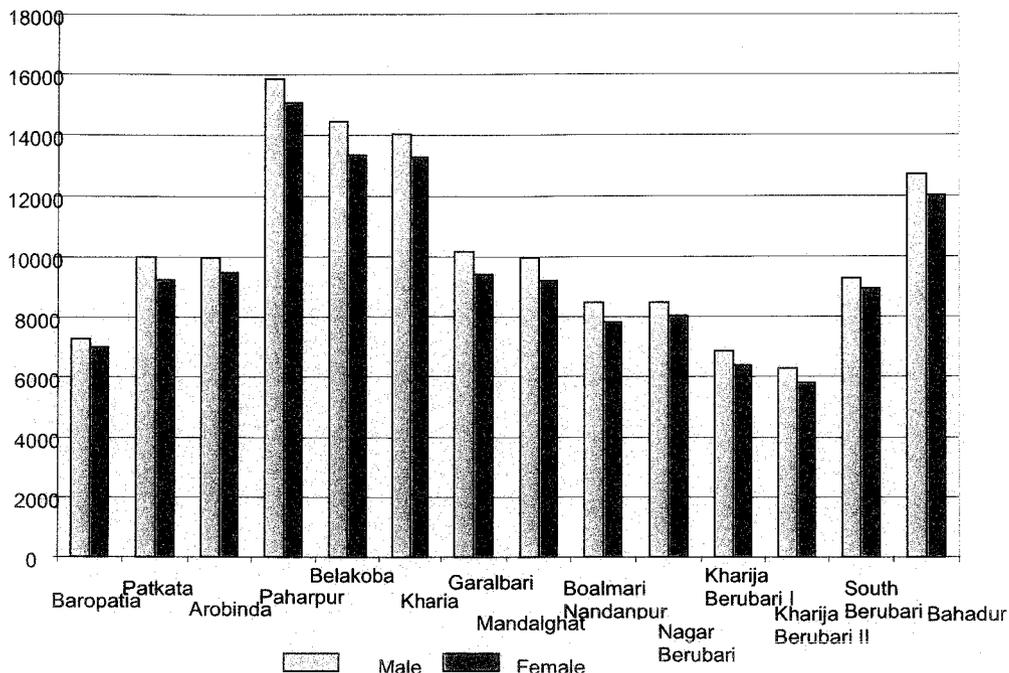


Figure 2.7: GP-wise Panchayat Representatives of Women, SC Women w.r.t. Reserved Seats

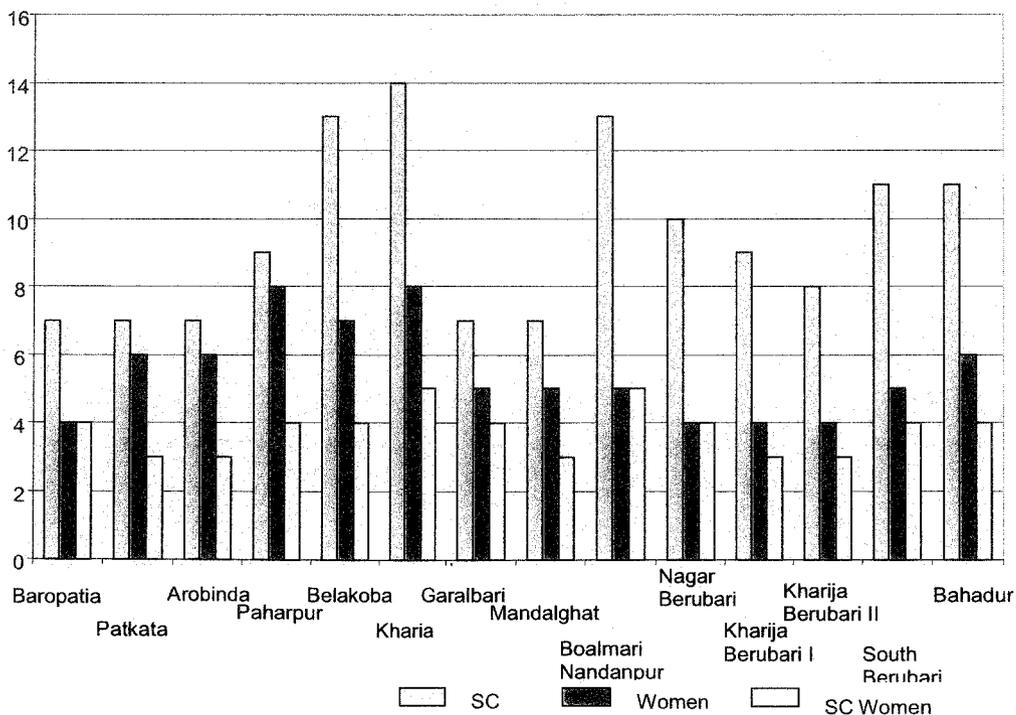


Table 2.6: BLOCK – MAYNAGURI							Popu- lation	Representatives		
Sl. N o..	G.P.	Male	F e m a l e	SC	ST	Others	Total	S C	W o m e n	SC W o m e n
1	Ramsai	11536	10805	15918	1740	4683	22341	12	6	4
2	Amguri	12426	11523	21095	165	2689	23949	15	7	5
3	Domohani I	6754	6327	8256	152	4673	13081	6	3	2
4	Domohani 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

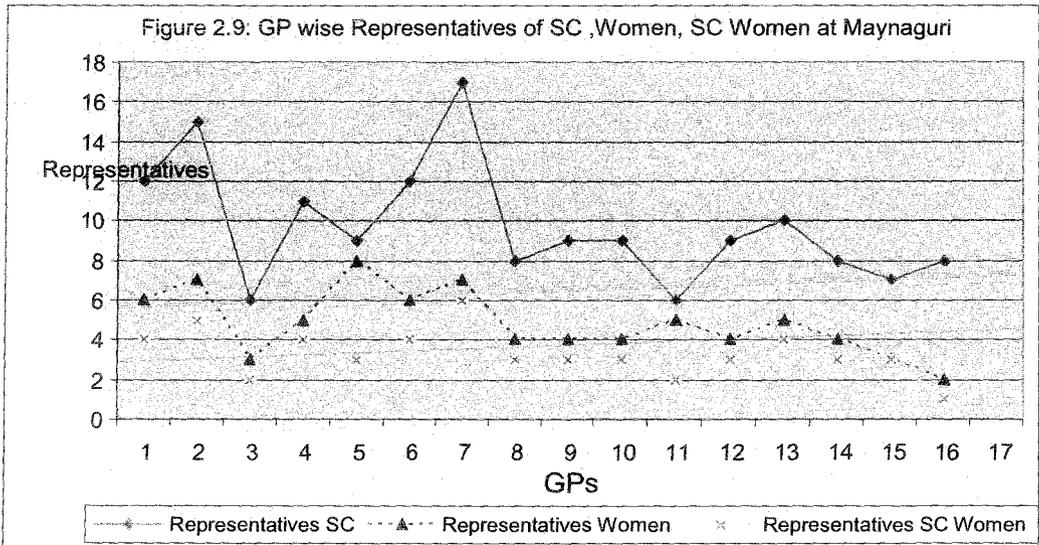
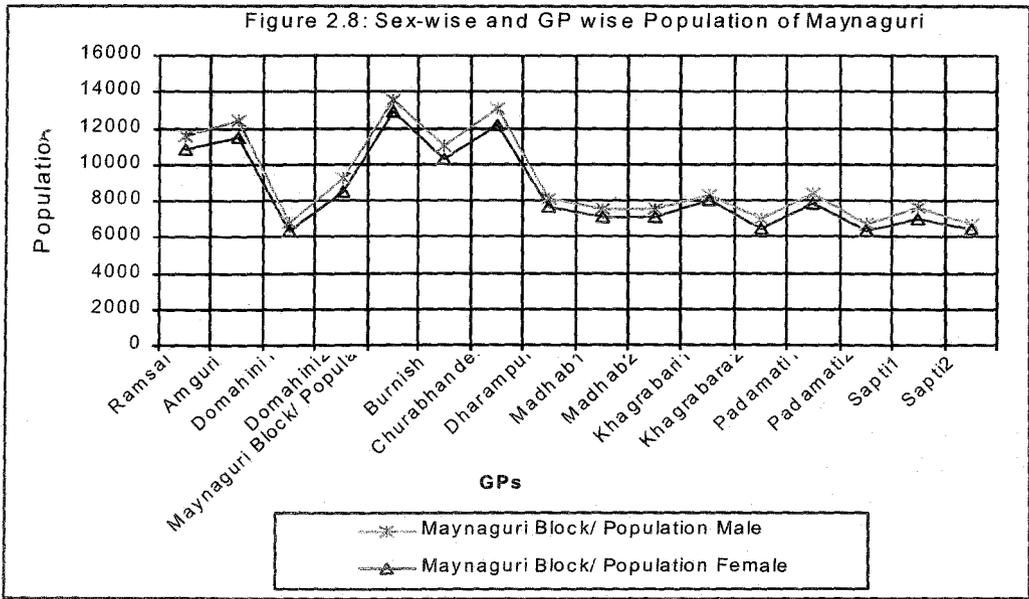
Maynaguri Block –

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.