

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
- 4.4. Participation in Political Classes
- 4.5. Daily Interactions with Common People
- 4.6. Attendance in Panchayat Office
- 4.7 People's Participation in Gram Sansad Meetings

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.