

CHAPTER - VII
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS
AND CONCLUDING
OBSERVATIONS

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Summary of Findings :

Democracy, a political regime found in modern states, is a decision-making process which can only exist when public contestation, inclusiveness and responsible government are present, maintained by rule of law. Much is made of defining 'democracy'. Having been abused by politicians and the media, there is also an intellectual legacy of confusion as a result of an argument on democracy as individual behaviour and national policies. If not a unanimity but a consensus, that democracy is essentially a decision-making system, with certain absences of restriction on free expression, and developed form of citizenship. The word 'democracy' is an extensive and abstract concept, which takes on different concrete forms, in different countries and at different historical moments. Here, democracy implies the participation of the largest possible section of the masses in determining and fashioning their future under a given set of conditions. The democratic process is superior to many other feasible ways by which people might be governed. The idea and practice of democracy are justified by the values of freedom, human development, and the protection and advancement of shared human interests. The idea and practice of democracy is also presuppose three kinds of equality : The intrinsic moral equality of all persons, the equality expressed by the presumption that adult persons entitled to personal autonomy, and political equality among citizens as this is defined by the criteria for the democratic process.

The democratic process does not and cannot exist as a disembodied entity detached from historical conditions and historically conditioned human beings. Its possibilities and limits are highly dependent on existing and emergent social structures and consciousness. Because of the daring democratic vision, it

invites us to look beyond and break through the existing limits of structure and consciousness .

Indian democracy is not paradoxical; a part of its economic development preceded the establishment of its political system. The latter in this sense was not an artificial "graft" on a totally backward socio-economic environment. Under these conditions, the Indian elite gradually gained the experience of a Parliamentary democracy, which was designed to meet its interests, firmly established its national legitimacy. Democratic functioning in India referred solely to the flexible mode of relations established within the different components of the bloc. This specificity of Indian democracy provides the basis for understanding the gradual deterioration and the present crisis of the political system in India.

The word 'decentralization' relates to the devolution of powers resulting from the creation of bodies separated by law from the national centre in which local representatives are given formal power to decide on a range of public matters. A decentralized local body would have a separate legal existence, its own budget and the authority to allocate substantial resources on a range of different functions, and decisions would be made by the representatives of the local people, who constitute the body. Decentralization can be believed as diffusion of power from the centre, the most common diffusion is territorial. More commonly, decentralization relates to the division of functions. Some democratic central government choose to devolve numerous functions to local government; other may retain many for themselves. In the twentieth century there has been a good deal of movement of functions in the form of decentralization. A democracy having considerable decentralization of structure and function with the lowest levels of government active in operating numerous services may still be highly centralized in many senses. Decentralization could be applied in an authoritarian state, even in democracies. The reasons for decentralizing functions are pragmatic and bureaucratic. Local autonomy should not be sacrificed to demands of centralizing national state, it is a basic democratic value and any encroachment on it is undemocratic. It is not easy to

asses how much power remains in the hands of local leaders, which may vary with changing circumstances and with the functions concerned. At grassroots, local political leaders may act as brokers between the locality and the central authorities.

The urge for decentralization is for the most part a reaction to the centralizing tendencies of the contemporary world, circumstances decide whether it is a democratic reaction or not. Decentralizers are not necessarily democrats even when they press for regional self-determination; decentralization may be a device of planners for effective economic management of regional investment policies. This is not to deny that efficient and healthier democracy may some times result from some forms of decentralization. Decentralization does not necessarily contain any democratic connotation, the term 'democratic' is used to impart a special meaning. Democratic decentralization possesses two virtues; it is consistent with the democratic trend and it is also technically the most efficient method of formulation and execution of local projects. It is democratic in the sense that the source from which the power is decentralized has its democratic base and the body to which power flows is also democratically organised. The decentralization of government administration and securing people's participation through democratic institutions at the grassroot level is the emerging political culture among developing countries. Decentralization at present is a common and distinctive feature and effective in providing for meaningful people's involvement in the local governance system. Decentralized governance is however, a semi-dependent organisation, having some freedom to act without referring to the centre for approval, but its status is not comparable with that of a Sovereign State. The powers and the existence of local government, flow from a decision of the national parliament or a state legislature and can be curtailed or cancelled when the former or the latter so decides.

Development is not merely a growth in available goods and services, it is meaningful only when the same is consistent with the aspiration of the people who are supposed to get the benefit. People who are at the focus of

development should be enhanced with individual capacity and their organisational ability for rapid development. "Development" can be called as a process by which people learn to take charge of their own lives and solve their own problems. It is also a process by which the members of a society increase their personal and institutional capacities to mobilise and manage resources to produce sustainable and justly distributed improvements in their quality of life consistent with their own aspirations. Mobilisation of community resources to supplement efforts of the government is to achieve the goals of development. It is an inevitable extension of the national effort and commitment to bring the masses into main stream of developmental process, and that is possible only through the process of decentralization, in which plan formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation are done at local level. Local leadership also plays a vital role in organising the community members and mobilising social action for development. Involvement of the local people in development schemes is expected to result in better planning and decision making, if the people are given the overall responsibility for planning and deciding their own development because the local people have a better awareness of their needs and preferences.

Today, development is emerging as the goal of humanity, and thus centres round the development of mankind toward the satisfaction of basic human needs. Development is an all-pervading activity. A real distribution of power is undergoing a revolutionary change, an ability for performance and ability is based on knowledge. Power must be used by whoever is in its possession for the attainment of development. Development is no longer synonymous with economic development, it has social and political ramifications also. It is a multi-dimensional process, which includes the development of socio-economic conditions of the people, and ensures their participation in the process of development for complete utilisation of physical and human resources for better living conditions. It also enhances both the capacity and capability of administrative and socio-economic development.

The focus on empowerment has given a new emphasis to the building of economic and social capabilities among individuals, classes and communities. Empowerment is also invoked in the context of economic weakness and insecurity, particularly of marginalised, unorganised and other disadvantaged group, classes and categories. Empowerment is about social transformation; it is about radical social transformation and about the common people rather than advantaged persons. The concept of empowerment implies formal rather than substantive power and it involves an external upper level agency to grant power rather than people below seizing it in the course of struggle. It is a part of the political philosophy of the new economic globalisation, requiring full participation of people in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of decisions determining the functioning and the well being of our society. Empowerment to Gandhi is ending untouchability and acquisition of religious and political rights by the untouchables. Thus, empowerment can be thought as the process in which powerless get empowered. The term is often used to mean a variety of different things- from individual self-realisation and self-assertion to participation in projects in a functional sense, to the control over decisions regarding all aspects of one's life and livelihood to change the social and economic institutions that embody the basic and unequal power structures in society. The process of empowerment involves not just an improvement in physical and social conditions but also equal participation in decision-making process, control over resources and mechanisms for sustaining these gains. The central thrust of the process of empowerment is the dynamics of power which can be defined as one's capacity to influence or control others. If capacity is legitimised it becomes authority, and so the term empowerment can be known as the achievement or gain of authorised power in various aspects. Empowerment as a social process challenges the fundamental imbalances of power distribution and relations, it is a process of redistribution of power, and a process aiming at social equality. The process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control

over the sources of power, may be termed as empowerment. Empowerment means gaining autonomy and control over one's life, the empowered become agents of their own development, are able to exercise choices, and are capable of challenging and changing their subordinate position of society. Women empowerment is seen as a process whose outcomes would lead to renegotiation of gender relations; enhance women's access and control over human, material, financial and intellectual resources; legitimise women's entry into non-traditional spaces and create new spaces; and support systems to sustain the process of empowerment.

During British Rule in India, the village committees which were characteristic of agrarian economics existed but it is noticed that, even with our history of village as basic unit of administration, the national movement's commitment to Panchayats did not find a place in the draft of Indian Constitution except in the form of nonjustifiable reference in Part IV of the Constitution. The dawn of Independence afforded an opportunity to undertake a crusade against poverty, ignorance and disease which had by then assumed colossal proportions. To that end, the government initiated the Community Development Programme which was inaugurated in October 1952. Those at the helm of affairs realised that real progress in rural development could not come about without an agency at the village level. The Programme had a reasonably good start, but was short lived. There was also a growing impression that democracy, though working well, has not developed its roots firmly in the process of decentralization. Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1958) recommended that public participation in community works should be organised through statutory representative bodies. Later, the National Development Council (NDC) affirmed the basic principles of democratic decentralization and left it to the states to work out the structures suitable to each state. Thus, Panchayati Raj, an agent of democratic decentralization, was born after 12 years of Indian independence.

The appointment of the Ashok Mehta Committee in 1977 marked a turning point in the concept and practice of Panchayati Raj with the initiative of

West Bengal government to give a new life to the process of decentralization in 1978. During this period the following features were observed:

- (a) a high level of political perception among the rural people; (b) the emergence of a new, youthful, rural leadership; (c) a substantial devolution of powers and resources to the local bodies; and (d) the participation of political parties creating large scale enthusiasm among the villagers. The institutions of local government held out a promise of effective cure against the twin ailment of stagnation in the community development programme and the dangers to democracy. It was increasingly felt that, if these institutions were properly developed and strengthened, they would not only provide a firm base to our democracy but would also accelerate the process of development. The logic of decentralization was so powerful that it has almost been universally accepted. It is now a well recognised dictum that since local resources are to be harnessed, local needs are to be consulted and local knowledge is needed, a large degree of decentralization is essential for the success of development.

The 73rd constitution amendment act reshaped the structure of decentralised governance in India with special features as (a) formation of gramsabhas. (b) uniform three tier Panchayat system (c) reservation on rotation for SC/STs (d) reservation of 1/3 seat for women in all three tiers. (e) devolution of powers and responsibilities for development plans. This amendment has brought a new dimension to decentralization for better development and women empowerment.

In the context of decentralization and development, West Bengal presents a model which could be usefully emulated. The empowerment of the people, democratic decentralization are the main planks of the three tier Panchayati Raj system in West Bengal. Before the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act came into force, West Bengal had amended the relevant Panchayat Act in 1992 to make provision for reservation of 1/3 rd seats for women as well as SC/STs. West Bengal Panchayat Act was also amended in 1994, 1995 and 1997. In fact, people's participation in decision making, grassroots planning and

programme implementation has supposedly the moving spirit and the motive force behind the successful developmental effort in West Bengal. It has been observed that through Panchayat election, power has been decentralized and the organised force of the village poor and middle class has carried out the task of establishing the power of poor curbing the power of the administrative officers in the villages. The performance of decentralized governance in West Bengal since 1978 has also led to the emergence of a new generation of leadership in rural West Bengal.

The doctrine of democratic decentralization led to the system of Panchayati Raj which opened an important avenue for women to come forward and demonstrate their abilities and capabilities. Women have acquiesced in a secondary status in social life, economic activities and decision making. A number of socio-economic constraints limit their work productivity and political efficiency. Low level of women's education which in turn affects the attitude of man and woman's consciousness of their own rights and privileges dictates a low status of women (Sabri, M.A., 1998). In India the goal of empowerment is particularly critical for women who have been deprived of powers within the family by main-stream religious and social traditions. Women cannot hope to exercise public power so long they are powerless over their own lives because of forced subservience to family members or party heads (Saxena, K., 1994). In our society many cultural and religious barriers are there to women's equality outside the realms of government action. Rights cannot be achieved unless the status of women is improved, that can be called empowerment, which means vesting of power to the powerless. It is not to confine only to socio-economic status but to political empowerment also. Despite their vast numerical strength, women occupy a marginalised position in Indian society because of many socio-economic constraints. Women's role in political process has virtually remained unchanged, despite the rapid growth of their informal political activities. Hectic activities started at the central level towards strengthening grassroots democratic organisations and achieving the goals of real democratic decentralization.

People's participation in the political and economic process has not been successful in ensuring women's participation. The demand for reservation for women in adequate proportion in the various representative bodies has been persistent. Women empowerment is one of the major objectives of the third generation of Panchayats in India. The 73rd Amendment is a milestone in the way of women assuming leadership and decision making positions. But it must be remembered that a change cannot be brought about overnight and by legislation alone. As the reservation for women in PRI was full of excitement and happiness but also bewilderment and anxiety.

Democracy will not be meaningful in a traditional society like India without the full involvement of women. The involvement of women in PRIs is considered essential not only for ensuring their political participation in the democratic process but also for realising the developmental goals for women. Women in general, are shrouded in silence, hopelessness and passivity. They are averse to participation in the political process right from local bodies to legislatures. There has been a perceptible change in the situation with the enactment of the Constitution 73rd amendment (Mandal, 1997). The magnitude of politicisation is low among rural people. Many of them have not yet crossed their primary schooling. It may be one reason for political apathy. Even the attitude of rural society towards women is very orthodox. Not being economically self sufficient political empowerment also lags behind and even capable women also want to be aloof due to caucus politics as they are scared of character assassination.

Although women are elected representatives of Panchayats, they feel neglected. Maximum number of women member said that they don't understand politics so the meetings are attended by their husband or party head. They also agree that lack of time is also the causes of not attending the meetings. Lack of political education and physical inferiority is also the hurdle to their political ability and empowerment. Bureaucracy has not been cooperating in empowering the women, as they feel superior to the elected members. Though in some cases

women are aware about the village problems but they do not know how to prepare the village plan for solving these problems. Economic independence is a precondition for political empowerment of women. In many cases not only women members are dependent but their family is totally dependent economically on the party. So the decision of party head is the decision of that member.

In many cases it is found that besides economic dependence illiteracy among women members and their family, particularly that of the poor and S.T., S.C. family, keep them aloof from political empowerment. Women, being the subject to exploitation, illiteracy, poverty and social tradition would not be able to express herself as empowered. Political parties and government officials fear that women would be reluctant to participate in politics unless allowed by the family. Basic education and political education is also necessary to them or else if the women come forward as per the 73rd Constitution amendment, it would be along the patriarchal whip, under the command and guidance of the males, as proxies, signing on the dotted lines (Mishra, 1997). The proxies owe their primary loyalty to their family, their role in politics merely an extension of their role as housewives. Some proxy women are forced into politics by their family against their own wish, their involvement in politics is not a means of self-actualization and self-expression. Proxies do not enjoy any real power, their presence is indeed counter productive to the cause of women's empowerment. However, the presence of women by their family connections should be treated as an inevitable part of the initial stage of the process of empowerment.

Concluding Observations:

Keeping in tune with the theoretical framework and the field survey on women empowerment, the findings show that due to socio-economic hurdles women are not fully empowered, but a glowing lamp is found in the process of women empowerment. About 90 percent of women in Murshidabad district are still dependent on a male bread earner. The remaining 10 percent women who are economically independent is restricted either by family or society. Majority of

women have their family a history of politics. In the cases where both husband and wife are in politics, there are two consequences—a positive one is that the woman has more exposure and support but the negative one is—if they belong to the same political party there is merely comparison but women are discriminated, even if she is capable, the credit goes to the husband. —

It is universally acknowledged that women at best can provide “supportive service” to males in their exclusive domain of politics. It is found in the district of Murshidabad that majority of women Panchayat members irrespective of party affiliation, are not only unanimous but also vociferously complain of non-cooperation, neglect, hiding of facts and assignment of no work at all. Even at higher level women member voice such allegations of neglect before their counterpart. Even women member of higher level Panchayat bodies i.e., Zilla Parishad, complained against male tendencies to use women counterpart as cosmetics. Leaving a few all members at village level depend upon male guardians or party heads where the guardians are dependent on party heads.

It is likely that the quantitatively increasing number of women would contribute meaningfully in highlighting the specific issues of women and qualitatively perceptible changes in political goal as a result of women’s perspective and priorities would be forthcoming. Some field investigations have revealed that induction of women has resulted in improvement in health measures, domestic planning, social awareness, economic mobility and overcoming social and religious orthodoxies.

Political empowerment of women is considered not only for ensuring political participation in the democratic process but also for realising the developmental goals for women. Participation of women in PRIs involves (a) women as voters, (b) women as member of political parties, (c) women as candidates, (d) women as elected members of PRIs taking part in decision making. —

It is observed during field survey that (i) women are not independent voters, (ii) a majority of them are illiterate, (iii) a majority of women

make their voting choice on the choice of their family members. Lack of sufficient participation of women in politics and at the decision-making levels, are themselves the results of their poor social and domestic status and their exclusion from certain positions and levels of power. Mere physical participation in the formal political institutions like elections, social movements or demonstrations is not enough for their empowerment.

Our study also reveals that women empowerment is not in a zero shape in this district. Few women member of village level and more in higher level of PRIs is quite empowered all the way to social-economic and political fields. They are observed as having educational standard upto matriculation or more, home atmosphere is enough liberal, political attachment of family members, free from religious orthodoxies and more important, that these women were involved in political climax at their school or college life. These women are not totally dependent on male but even can decide better than their male counterpart. Though some of these women are troubled by social constraints, upto the extent of divorce but their empowerment does not allow them to pull back. Most of these women are employed.

It was found during field survey that most of the high performer women were:

- (a) educated upto matriculation or above,
- (b) they are close to urban areas,
- (c) from well to do families, having a good source of income,
- (d) with husband or father holding a prominent social/ political status,
- (e) having muscle power,
- (f) free from religious orthodoxies,
- (g) political involvement during their schooling,
- (h) this number measures 20% of the sample.

Women having low performance are generally:-

- (i) less educated or illiterate,
- (ii) confined to rural set-up,
- (iii) from families having social respect and old patterned high social prestige.
- (iv) having lesser degree of political influence of family member,
- (v) religious minded families,
- (vi) daily wage earner or housewife,
- (vii) poor economic condition of family,
- (viii) from lower caste,
- (ix) first time involvement in politics,
- (x) have no political education

Our experiences show that this was not always true that women are not empowered. In several instances, we learnt that women had overcome initial hurdles and were able to manage well. It is true, of course, that a reservation policy alone is not enough. Various other support mechanisms are required for the empowerment of all the women.

Suggestions:

It must be admitted that today most of the rural women are not in a position to shoulder the heavy responsibility that has been entrusted to them by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992. This unpreparedness can, however, be tackled along the following suggestions :

First:- There is the basic problem associated with illiteracy, which afflicts our society. This rate is higher among women. This is quite impossible for illiterate or very low educated women members to act as decision-makers and executors in a government machinery. A qualifying educational standard should be fixed to be a candidate in PRIs, so that the hurdles of illiteracy among women member can be averted. The literacy programme in the district has failed to reach

its goal but the process must continue to uphold the interest among women to be a literate.

Second:- Besides the educational standard, a political education is also a must for person involving in decision-making process in PRIs. Without the political education women representatives are being bypassed by party leaders or male members at home. At least a provision should be made for these women member to have political education which can enlighten their practical experience in PRIs. Any formal or informal education centre can take the responsibility.

Third:- The need to generate an awareness among the rural masses about empowerment is to be stressed. People in general and women in particular have to be made fully conscious of their rights and responsibilities. The mental set up of the male population in rural areas has to undergo a change to facilitate acceptance of women empowerment in all the socio-economic and political aspects.

The elected members whether men or women would require to be trained to enable them to discharge their functions in an effective manner. The need in this district is more for women because of their lower literacy and less exposure to public affairs and dealing with various agencies. This training should be continuous and spread over different phases rather than once for all. Women members have to be provided with subsequent training related to specific aspects of their functioning.

This task is best performed through a process of political mobilization. It is necessary for the government to implement its plan and programmes and to communicate all its policies to the rural mass not in a sealed files under official cupboards. Government can activate the process of awareness generation through mass media as well as audio-visual camps in every village. Government can develop useful packages in local language and to communicate them honestly at the grass root levels.

Fourth:- It is suggested that the women working as gram sevika can be used as an instrument for creating women awareness among Muslims. They can be projected as examples to the orthodox families and the Muslim women section can be taught in a better way by these employed gram sevika.

Fifth:- Economic independence is a pre-condition for political or social empowerment of women. It may be realised that a major constraint for women specially those coming from poorer families is the utter lack of time. As they have to look after their household work or daily wage earners on public work. It is not easy for a low income women to establish social respect. Efforts can be made to increase the women personnel for work among rural women as Anganwadi workers, gram sevikas etc. A specific suggestion is that these members should be given a handful honorarium.

Sixth :- It is specifically suggested that a moral education is also required to maintain women empowerment at a right direction. It is to avoid capricious activities of women which disrupt the social norms causing domestic life unstable. This moral education also will prevent the young women from their character assassination to uphold the social prestige in public.

Seventh:- There is a need for continuous research, monitoring and follow up. Mistakes are likely to be made in operation. It is not only the government but voluntary agencies also can play an important role in women empowerment.

The NGOs working for empowerment of women should encourage and activise women of various sections belonging to different castes, communities and religions, so that the cake of political empowerment will not be distributed only among the influentials ---- relatives, wives, widows and daughters of formal political leaders. Women are political instruments of rural development and women empowerment will hasten the pace of rural development. It is imperative to state that the indicators of empowerment of women include personal security, rule of law, freedom of expression, equality of opportunity, access to quality education, and technological empowerment besides the socio-economic and political empowerment.

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