

## PREFACE

Panchayati Raj is not a novel phenomenon in the country. Its illustrious history goes back to more than thousand years. Panchayati Raj as a formal administrative set up at the local level, however, has been almost defunct for many decades. The avowed goal of democratic decentralisation has met with very limited success for it was superimposed on the basic feudal structure of the Indian society. Unless the administration at the lowest level becomes democratic in its functioning it would not be possible to create a true democratically administered country. The need was to enact laws relating to Panchayati Raj to have people's representatives in the administration through direct election and decentralisation of power at various levels of administration, from bottom upward. Although never at any period of Indian history was it said that women could not join politics, the fact is that women have to come out of the various constraints that bind them and one may feel that without achieving these, women cannot participate formally in politics. In West Bengal there has not been any apparent case of the Leftist Government having been discriminatory against women in its political activity but projected a new life in the process of democratic decentralisation.

Different development indicators show that even after five decades of planning in India, women are far behind their counterparts. One of the main reasons for such backwardness of women has been their non-involvement and non-participation in decentralised governance and development through Panchayats. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment Act has enabled women to partake in these important political institutions. Women have been trying their best to make themselves assertive in local governance. However, the realities such as illiteracy, poverty, unemployment and lack of awareness constrain them. The experiences gathered about women's participation in Panchayats show that they have been projected as mother, or wife, or sister, or widow of any other renowned personalities. On the other hand, there are cases where women played a leading role in rural development. There is a positive relationship between removal of these constraints and women's effective participation in decentralised

governance. The government has taken many steps to remove those constraints and to empower the women section. Many programmes are working for the socio-economic upliftment of women besides constitutional provision for political empowerment of women.

The study focuses mainly on empowerment in the context of decentralised governance in general and women empowerment in particular. This study is based on the Murshidabad district in West Bengal where women empowerment is still a far cry. The process of empowerment is multi-dimensional and it enables individuals and groups to realise their full destiny and power in all spheres of life. A women's empowerment brings with consciousness and perceptions about herself and her rights, her capabilities and her potentials, awareness on socio-cultural and political forces, political empowerment, economic development and thus, social upliftment of women is necessary to fight countless forms of patriarchal domination, exclusion and alienation. Murshidabad district in West Bengal having low rate of literacy, low rate of employment and socio-cultural constraints does not provide any bright idea of women empowerment. Although women have entered the political arena, they still remain invisible in decision-making. The subjugation of women of this district in the socio-economic spheres has resulted in a low status and an even lower self-image for them. Democracy at the grassroots level can only be successful if there is representation of all section of people. Reservation cannot bring about drastic changes unless supported by the socio-economic parameters. Socio-cultural factors are acting as a deterrent in this district. Thus, coming out of the domination of men, whether at home or at the panchayats, will not be an easy task for women panchayat members. Though some have already taken a lead, the majority of women have not yet attained it. It has to be fought legally and administratively for which women panchayat members have to be conscientized adequately.

Against the outlined scenario, the present dissertation seeks to find out the level of women empowerment particularly in the context of political empowerment in Murshidabad district. The study seeks to unfold the constraints of women empowerment, with the expectations that the result of this research work and the specific suggestions of the study could offer fresh insights and valuable inputs to the public policy-makers in their future policy-makings. The objective of the

study becomes more rational in the context of the year 2001 being declared by the Government of India as the 'Year for Women's Empowerment'.

The study has been divided into seven chapters covering many sections and sub-sections of the study. Chapter-I introduces the objectives of the study, conceptual framework, survey of literature, justification of the study and research questions. In Chapter-II, the methodical aspect of the study is discussed in detail with a brief profile of the selected nine blocks of the district Murshidabad. Chapter-III provides an analysis of democratic decentralisation In India: Historical perspective, Chapter-IV makes a detail study on democratic decentralisation and development in India in historical perspective. Chapter-V provides detailed analysis on democratic decentralisation, development and empowerment in India: historical perspective. Chapter-VI is concerned with democratic decentralization, development and empowerment in Murshidebad district. The chapter is based on the field data collected from the selected blocks. Chapter-VII is the concluding chapter. The Chapter summarizes the findings, makes concluding observations on findings and suggestions having implications for policy-making and further research.