

CHAPTER – I

INTRODUCTION

Democratic decentralization serves as an instrument of development from below. The rationale behind democratic decentralization lies in the mass participation in local socio-political and economic affairs affecting the local people and thus it generates a leadership at a very base. Contemporary thrust of development discourse has also shifted from the traditional trickle down approach to the modern bottom-up approach with more emphasis on people's participation. Panchayat Raj institutions are the foundations of democratic decentralization in India as they seek to ensure planning and execution of development at local level.

In West Bengal, the Left Front Government injected a new life into the Panchayat Raj institutions since 1978. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act is seen as a landmark in this direction as the former has rendered constitutional sanction to the Panchayat Raj institutions. However, the objective of Democratic Decentralization is to involve cross-sections of the people including women in the process of decision making and development. But, in spite of this formal constitutional mechanism for ensuring participation and empowerment of all sections of the society, women's participation and empowerment are said to be not satisfactory. Hence, the effect of the development has been, and is bound to be, lopsided.

Objective of the Study:

Given this background, the primary objective of the present research is to study the various aspects and dimensions of empowerment in general and

women empowerment in particular. For women, empowerment is the restructuring of gender relations within both family and society at large, and it is society's recognition of women's equality with men in terms of their worth to society as independent persons (Hapke, 1992). Women became empowered through collective reflections and decision making (GOI, 1986). The empowerment process is facilitated by creating awareness about ones rights and responsibilities and socio-economic and political opportunities (Pandey 1993). Empowerment implies a fundamental redistribution of power, which also enables women to renegotiate their existence on equitable basis (Bannerjee 1992).

As far as India is concerned, observers notice conflicting views on empowerment. While some feel in India that though various development policies and programmes particularly through the panchayats for empowerment of the people have taken place, there is also the view that empowerment in real sense of the term has been in the papers only. Similarly, women constitute an important segment of the society. Hence, if this segment continues to lag behind and not empowered this will constitute an imbalance in the overall process of social development. On this realization, a number of policies, programmes and actions has been taken to ensure empowerment of women in India. Under the circumstance, the present research seeks to focus on this as to whether empowerment of women has been achieved and if not, what are the reasons that came in the way of empowerment of women in India.

Conceptual Framework:

"Empowerment" is seen as a process where outcomes would lead to renegotiations to gender relation, enhance women's access and control over human, material, financial and intellectual resources. Empowerment of women section can be understood as a process which enables women to question and analyze the basis of their subordination, to articulate this problem, ways of addressing their problems and to take decisions, to make forward and act upon. Empowerment does not end with election but to decision making, planning,

implementation of development programme, monitoring and evaluation of the programme and sharing the benefits of development. Women participation in to politics at local bodies through reservation is certainly a positive development but to make it work needs sincere efforts from different quarters. Something more than participation is required to which the term empowerment focuses. It is concerned with women empowerment through ideas, education and consciousness. The empowerment is frequently stimulated through participatory rural appraisal exercise giving women a clear sense of how they can improve upon their lives in practical way.

With constitutional and the legislative support, it was hoped that the process of decentralization as well as women empowerment would gather momentum, but despite various movements and legislative guarantee and despite the increase in out lay for development projects, women's empowerment remains to be achieved. Thus, the framework that is suggested here is that, mere political empowerment does not ensure overall empowerment in general and empowerment of women in particular.

Survey of Existing Literature:

There is enough literature on democratic decentralization but less on empowerment of women is available. A number of scholars have undergone empirical and field survey on the basic concept of decentralization and women empowerment as well. Decentralization does not merely denote division of the functions between state government and local bodies; the purpose is to train local leadership to assume responsibilities and to serve the people with maximum efficiency.

Gandhian values too give emphasis on the development from the bottom. Decentralization is not dilution or devolution alone. It is strengthening through a process of broad basing the decision making which enables the most active and knowledgeable participation of the people.

According to Appleby (1962), Democratic decentralization appears to suggest that decentralization axiomatically enhances democracy. Decentralization

curbs the powers of bureaucracy, which not only stultifies the initiative of the people but also curbs people's participation in development process. It is said by Henry Maddick (1975), that, decentralization embraces both devolution and decentralization.

Richard. C. Crook (1998), with an in depth knowledge of the area argue that decentralization did provide real benefits to poor peasants and disadvantaged group, women a lesser extent.

Iqbal Narain (1964), on Democratic decentralization and Rural leadership, observes that, political affiliations were relatively insignificant, a material benefits oriented leadership based on control over distribution of village goods and services have emerged.

Norman Uphoff (1986), refers decentralization as the physical dispersion or shifting of the offices or the seats of decision making, whereby decision makers are located closer to the activities and persons for whom they work but to be accountable to the central authority.

Decentralization to Neil Webster (1992), as a political phenomenon is interpreted as a means to make the state more responsive and adaptable to the local needs than that it could be with concentration of administrative powers and responsibility of the state.

David Beetham (1995) finds a system of elected local government as important to the vitality of a democratic system that greatly expands the opportunities for taking part in public decision-making. Iey K. John (1997) and G Padmaja (1997) admit the basic issues at the grass root level to prepare and implement programme and direct involvement of the people in the process of development. Decentralization and delegation of economic power have finally come to be accepted as the path to further progress, since development process is found to be impossible through the strategy of centralized decision making.

Democratic decentralization, to P.R. Dubhashi (1970), in simpler term, would be "free popular management of local affairs". To Abdul Aziz (1998), for the healthy growth of decentralized governance system provisions of constitutional amendments is very much essential. It is believed that the panchayat is treated as a meaningful mechanism for initiating grass root

democracy. Yet, Sudhir Krishna (1993) shows that panchayats have more often remained as showpiece of democratic decentralization.

The scope of decentralization is not only to ensure the democratic character of the government, opined by Baidyanath Mishra (1996), but also improves the effectiveness of planned development of the country.

Scholars like P.R. Dubashi (1960), Ensminger Douglas (1961), LC Gupta (1965), PI Mathur (1965), Bharat Bhushan Gupta (1968) and DS Chauhan (1977), opined that the institutions in democratic decentralization and various bureaucratic adjustments need to be made for its effective functioning. Keeping in view the administrative problem and practical feasibility as well as actual planning, it would have bigger units which could strengthen the local authorities and also regional level to facilitate the formulation of comprehensive plan. Thus, it considers the importance of democratic decentralization and the institution of local self-government in programme implementation.

To S.S. Meenaskhisundaram (1994), the concept of "Decentralization, Democracy" and "Local government" which are essential to this study would be acceptable universally. Democracy, as concluded, is not a form of government but a way of life; applies as well to democratic decentralization or "local self government"; so called "transfer of power" to the people cannot be brought about overnight; should be accompanied by a real change in social and production relationship.

Sweta Mishra (1994), in her book under review calls "phase of hectic activities", from the mid-1980's oriented to strengthening local bodies and achieving the goals of democratic decentralization. Nirmal Mukherjee (1993) in his article opined that the fundamental question before the panchayats everywhere in the country has, for long been whether they are there for development functions only or for the purpose of self-government.

The Mehta team recommended democratic decentralization to a three-tier panchayat structure. Kamta Prasad (1990), a noted economist, feels that more and more involvement of the people will rejuvenate the sagging spirit of self-help in the process of democratic decentralization as ultimate goal of development. Mention may be made of the observations of Bharat Bhushan

Gupta (1968) that, democratic decentralization takes the concept of popular government at grass-root democracy and involves people directly in administration.

A question appears in the writings of V.R. Gaikwad (1979), regarding the role of the paid functionaries in the welfare and economic development of rural people. BS Bhargava (1979) hold the view that political development and democratic growth depends on the local leadership and its functioning in the Panchayati Raj institutions. In the book of Abdul Aziz (1996) it is found that decentralization and securing the participation of the people through democratic institutions at levels lower than the national is the emerging political culture. In view of the sad plight of various economic development programmes, Sunil Kumar (1990) examines the need for re-engineering the process of development, which has its roots in indigenous perception of democratic decentralization.

There have been a large number of micro studies on decentralized planning. To mention a few, Sweeta Mishra (1997), SP Ranga Rao (1997), I Satya Sundaram (1997), Mahinder Singh (1997), MA Oommen (1997) -- all these focus on development planning "from below". To them, it is a system through which planning process is brought close to the people who are the beneficiaries of development and they formulate plans independently by them. The need for decentralized planning emerges to get rid of the ills of centralized planning.

In a simple term, BK Thapliyal (1990) mentions, the ultimate objective of the development planning is to maximize welfare of the people, in which, planning is attempted at different politico administrative and executive levels, so that there is greater integration between the developmental needs and priorities of smaller areas. Aneeta Benninger (1991) analyses the problems and evolves a methodology for operationalising participatory decentralized planning.

Towards the mid fifties the need to properly develop them with a view to entrusting them with the task of rural reconstruction, was felt in certain quarters, which consequently led to the establishment of Panchayat Raj, the propounder of the scheme originally described it as democratic decentralization stated by S Bhatnagar (1978). Local level planning, to RP Mishra (1983) is another term for planning from below, the local development as planning and development roles

are essentially played by the governmental agencies under the edxisting system of planning.

LC Jain (1993) points out that if decentralization remains confined to the political level without constructive component of area planning, the negative aspect of decentralization would doubtlessly emerge. PN Sharma (1987) on participatory planning, Durgadar Ray (1988) and Savitri Sharma (1988) on decentralized planning provide a common suggestion for a viable model for the decentralization of our planning process. Therefore, people's participation in the rural development at the grassroots level should be given more serious attention.

A study by SK Singh (1987) and Kamta Prasad (1980), on planning and development brings out contribution of Panchayat Raj as an institutional support for development administration and democratic decentralization as well as major factors responsible for impeding the development of this grass root institution. Bupendra Hooja (1980), VG Nandedkar (1979) and SG Deogaonkar (1980) present excellent studies on rural development as they feel that the overall management and development of the local village lands, water resources, forest and mineral and the development of agricultural and allied activities should be entrusted to the care of local village panchayats or a group of panchayats. They also highlight the role of village level worker in the effective implementation of community development programme. Participation in politics is only one dimension of people's participation in socio-economic development. Participation is development of mans essential powers – including human dignity and respect and making themselves responsible for developing their powers of deliberate action, believes RP Mishra (1983).

AK Guha (1980) tried to make it clear that the involvement of people in local self- government, so-called decentralized governance was to invoke the initiative from the hands of bureaucracy to the representatives of the people to solve their own problems. In the opinion of MA Muttalib (1982), the local government in a decentralized process is a body, representing a particular set of local views, conditions, needs and problems, depending on the characteristics of population and the economic elements. LC Jain was interviewed by Nirmal Ganguli (1989) and expressed the view for a rational distribution of functions

and responsibilities among authorities from the village up to the center and opined that what the village can do for itself should not be done by an authority at a higher level.

The Panchayati Raj institutions in India are the prime instruments of decentralization at the grass root level. Even though the constitutions 73rd Amendment Act has added a new dimension to the concept of Panchayat Raj democratization of our pluralistic society cannot be ensured automatically. To Rajni Kothari (1991), it is clear that only alternative to a decentralized and genuinely democratic political system in a country like India is the gradual dissipation, erosion and ultimate disintegration of the nation. But Md. Habibur Rahman (1989) believes that, decentralization is the redistribution of administrative powers and responsibilities only within the central government, it is only shifting of workload.

Prabhat Dutta (1994) observes that democratic decentralization associates people with local administration, and recognizes the rights of the people to initiate and execute decisions in an autonomous way.

SN Mishra (1995), G Dhawan (1995) say that there is need to transfer much of the allocation of decisions to the local authorities as financial arrangement is the life breath of all self government. AK Dubey (1998) reveals that the outcome of decentralization efforts, surprisingly turn out to be quite contrary to its intended objectives due to various factors. It is believed by G Thimmaiah (1998) that, democratic decentralization as it has been envisaged under 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution was prompted by the political compulsion of the 1980s.

The Macro study on Panchayat Raj by S Narayansamy (1998) held the view that as we march towards 21st century, grassroot level institutions must be strengthened and the Raj must be commanded by the poorest of the poor. Sharat Kumar (1997) made a comprehensive study and found under Article 243-G and 243 ZE that the Panchayat Raj have been assigned the responsibilities for preparation and implementation of plans for economic development. Under decentralization, instead of conceiving Panchayat Raj as an agent of

development, we have to conceive development as an agent of Panchayat Raj, i.e., of people's power, noted by Raj Singh (1998).

Noted by Hans Raj (1992) that, since independence the governments are proceeding in this direction and the panchayats have been given wide powers and made active participants in the talks of rural reconstruction and democratic decentralization. Ranbir Singh (1970) advocated that, the Panchayat Raj failed to bring about qualitative change in the rural society.

Scholars like B.M Chitlangi (1998) M Nagaraju (1999), CP Vittal (1998) and K.R.Sastry (1999) made detailed study on decentralized Panchayat raj bodies and conclude that the government should overcome narrow political considerations and strengthen the middle tier of Panchayat Raj by increasing its size and the Panchyats are to be strengthened as institutions of self government, and not merely as agents of state plan implementation. C Narasimhan (1989) has an extensive experience of the implementations of Panchayat raj in its initial years but laments over its gradual decline. In his opinion, rural development is inseparably linked with the Panchayat raj, which provides innumerable opportunities for self-help and self-reliance to the rural mass.

To believe Panchayat Raj as a process of decentralization for rural development Jaganath Pathy (1980) on Panchayat Raj and decentralization of political power, Debesh Chakroborthy (1981) on Panchayat Raj and decentralization, Nageshwar Prasad (1986) on decentralization in historical perspective and B.N.Sahay (1989) on Decentralization: the Nagaland way, put forth the view that decentralization of power through Panchayat Raj institutions has not been successful but all except Jaganath pathy have expressed their positive attitude towards Panchayat Raj institutions as an instrument of decentralization of power by directly providing plans and funds to the villagers, thereby increasing their competence to plan and implement development schemes.

The 73rd amendment act intends to provide meaningful role to Panchayat Raj bodies in the country, which will promote decentralization of power to the people at the grass roots level by creating responsive village panchayats, believes Hoshier Singh (1995). Talking on panchayat leadership, Basu (1981) and G.K.

Lieten (1988) finds that the forces of regression are strong in the rural areas. Leadership is not very efficient and people are hypothetical to make progress and it is local institutions to take the initiatives. It is noted that, women have not increased their visibility in panchayat leadership.

R.K. Dar (1995) questioned on the inter-relationship between the different tiers concerned with the wide range of sectors which now fall within the competence of the Panchayat Raj Institutions. V Ramachandran (1993) points out the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats and then suggests certain measures for making the 73rd amendment a true instrument of change for the better. M.Sam Roy (1995), keeping in mind a negative view, recognized that it is imperative for the poor and the weaker sections to compete for and occupy positions in the Panchayat Raj institutions.

M.R. Biju and J.N. Panda (1991), Satya Sundaram (1994), Ajinder Jain (1997), believe that in a vast country like India, decentralized planning through Panchayat Raj institutions assumes special significance from the point of view of decentralization, growth and social justice. Devolution of power to sub-state levels and a greater involvement of the people in the process of governance and policy planning would go a long way in development. Prabhat Datta (1995) says, a vibrant system of Panchayat Raj cannot be ensured simply by giving it constitutional sanction. He laments that the Panchayat Raj institutions' acts in some of the states have paved the way for bureaucratic centralization rather than democratic decentralization.

P.V. Narasimha Rao (1993) remarks – "Our Democracy cannot become strong unless the democracy at the village level is strong and the genuine development of rural areas can take place only through a process of decentralized planning and implementation fully involving the local people". To S.C. Vajpayee (1993), the backdrop of establishment of Panchayat Raj will be incomplete without the mention of the constitution 64th amendment bill for the introduction of the Panchayat System in almost all states.

A comprehensive study on self-government, and rural development by PC Mathur (1991), Nirmal Mukherjee (1994) and Swapan Kumar Pramanic (1994) bring out the idea of self government of any kind that must have not only

a clarity of democratic field activities but also instruments for rural development. It was further held that, through panchayat election on the power would be decentralized and only with organized forces of the village poor to establish the power of the people curbing that of centralism.

The studies conducted by C.P Vitthal (1998), R Gangadhar Reddy (1998) and P.L.D.V. Padmakar (1998) on Panchayat Raj and Decentralization concluded that, the 73rd Constitution Amendment has opened new avenues for the strengthening of the panchayat bodies, which will gather momentum on the process of devolution of finance. In the changing scenario, Panchayat Raj has to exclusively devote itself to the task of development, which was a watershed in decentralization as it provides a share for weaker section and women in particular.

S.P Ranga Rao (1998) holds that Panchayat Raj bodies are not only local bodies in the traditional sense but involves popular participation in development and socio-economic reconstruction of rural India. Besides these, Jitendra Kumar Sinha (1999), believes that the decentralized system is functioning well, the accountability and efficiency of the administration have got a fillip. But above all SS Meenakshi Sundaram (1999), noted the importance of administrative reforms in the cleansing of the environment. To her, the need to restore the sense of idealism and a spirit of dedication among the bureaucracy will remain a real challenge in the Panchayat Raj Institutions for the long time to come.

Chitra Sen Passayat and Sarmistha Barik (1998) hold the view that the functionaries of Gram Panchayat should maintain transparency and make the villages aware of the development works being undertaken at the panchayat levels.

Panchayati Raj institutions, to Shrawan Kumar Singh (1994), were considered as an important vehicle for rural economic development because de-bureaucratization and decentralization of power will encourage local initiative for development.

To Manoranjan Mohanty (1995), it is both the economic and social terms, the most productive policies and investments are these, which empower people to maximize their capacities, resources and opportunities. Kameshwar

Chaudhary (1998) shares the view with Mohanty on empowerment, which 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.

Empowerment, to Eva Soren Sen (1997), implies that democratic strategy must propose the institutionalization of democratic procedures, which ensures both the aggregative, and the integrative aspects of democracy.

Empowerment, to the experience of N.K Bannerjee (1995), is autonomy --both collective and individual; it is autonomy and control over one's life. Empowerment implies redistribution of power between different groups; it is an emancipatory movement not only to provide a sufficient and equitable access to economic resources, but also to provide at emancipation from oppressive social and political forces. It can also be said as a process of building capacities and confidence for taking decisions and gaining control over the sources of power.

C.B Muthamma (1996) puts more emphasis on education and developmental schemes to empower the people to run their own affairs to make country progress further and faster. Swapan Garain, (1996) made a comprehensive study and believes that development implies change, which can be brought about through the process of conscientisation followed by collective action, necessarily to start all the grass root level with the consciousness of empowerment.

Andre Beteille (1999), made a specific strategic perspective by stating the view on the Indian way of securing power meant for the unempowered seems to be by the safe way of providing, as extensively as possible, quotas on the basis of the community, caste and gender.

T.V Lucy (1995), B.Meena Rao (1997), Sangeetha Purushothaman (1998), Mazhar Ali Sabri (1998), worked on women empowerment and discussed in detail about the empowerment of woman and felt that the improvement of their status in social-economic and political fields is a highly important end in itself. The eighth five-year plan (1972-1997) emphasized ensuring the benefits of development and that women must be enabled to function having empowered in all the fields.

Kiran Saxena (1994), Nitya Rao (1996), Uma Joshi (1997) and Kameshwari Jandhyala (1998) analyzing the various factors of empowerment concluded that economic emancipation is one of the crucial factor but self-enlightenment, renegotiation of gender-relation, enhance women's access and sustain the process of empowerment. Sujatha Viswanathan (1997) holds the view that economic empowerment would have major implication on overall empowerment, social empowerment and a more participation in decision making and active participation would improve political acumen and eventually help successful empowerment. P Anandharajkumar (1995) also realizes that an honest and continuous attempt in ensuring women's economic independence is the need of the hour.

Usha Narayanan (1998), as the first lady of regional steering committee expressed that the eradication of poverty and the empowerment of women in society go beyond the question of credit. K Subha (1995) experienced that mere learning about the functioning of Panchayati Raj is not enough to empower women. Mere physical participation in the formal political institutions like elections or political parties, Social movements or demonstrations are not enough, experienced by Susheela Kaushik (1993). Sakina Hasan (1997), opines on women's empowerment as gaining autonomy and control over one's life including economic, social and political empowerment.

The issues like ethnic and economic are intermingled in India where the majority of the population belongs to the lower social strata and women section may predominate. Therefore, grass root mobilization has emerged, believed by Ghanashyam Shah (1987). The problems faced by women cut across all regions, caste and class lines and yet, there is a controversy over the question of uniform civil code granting equal rights to women, stated by Sadhana Arya (1997). Shashi Shukla (1996) and Justice M. Fatima Beevi experienced that Muslim women have not been able to take full advantage of modernization due to social conservatism. Many of the problem faced by the Muslim women arise out of ignorance of law as well as from lack of will to assert their rights.

Pruthi Raj (1995), K Manju Devi (1997) and Jyothi Mitra (1999) made an attempt to collect and collate the informations from various sources to discuss

the different aspects of socio-economic and political problems faced by Indian women. They believe that lack of socio-economic empowerment continue to place women as backward citizen of India.

Maveen Soars Pereira (1998) holds the view that economic empowerment involves changes in power relationships in both, the economic sphere and in the social and political spheres. Arti Sawhny (1994) finds out the emergence of local women's organization as contributing to the process of empowerment.

Arabinda Ghosh (1997) and MN Roy (1995) makes a detailed descriptive study of West Bengal panchayat and finds women as the contributors to development rather than as the beneficiaries of welfare services. Biplab Dasgupta (1989) holds the view that, on the whole, it has been a highly fruitful and meaningful experience and experiment in an uncharted area in the Indian context and a great deal has already been achieved. But Promesh Acharya (1993) believes that despite the apparent "success" of Panchayati Raj in West Bengal under Left Front rule, the overall domination of the privileged classes over the rural power structure remains unchallenged. SK Singh (1993), also realizes genuine development, regenerating growth and panchayats are the only suitable institutional vehicle for social and economic development and empowerment of women. If reservations for women in Panchayat Raj system are to lead to the empowerment, social, economical and political conditions, which encourage their participation need to be created, says - Bidyut Mohanty (1995).

Prava Debal (1998) and Dina Abbott (1997) believe that, entrepreneurship in renewable resources can serve as an effective look for economic empowerment of women through radical breaks from traditional top-down patronage. Irene Tinkar (1997) holds the view that the economic rights of women in India and other developing countries can be guarded by organizations, which empower women, and work towards supportive politics. Same opinion is shared by Nitya Rao (1996) as women's organizations have reacted by shifting their emphasis from welfare to empowerment.

Women have always been man's dependent, if not his slave, the two sex have never shared the world in equality. The political participation of women was negligible. It is said by Rabindra Chaudhary (1997) that women are not the

ornamental showpiece for human being, they have the equal right to level for their uplift in the society. To focus on the political empowerment of women BS Bhargava (1992) puts his view that empowerment gives women the capacity to influence the decision making process by integrating them into our political system and other related socio-economic forum.

It is opined by Ahuja Ram (1992) that, political awareness and political participation of women varies with the level of education, degree of urbanization and quality of local leadership. There is no denying the fact that the economic empowerment of women is also very important for raising their status in the society, viewed by BK Pattanaik (1996). Aparna Basu (1996) puts a question on the fourth world conference, in September (1995), on women proclaimed on equality, development and peace.

Susheela Kaushik (1993) contends that political empowerment of women can be achieved only through their socio-economic advancement and increase in number. Scholars like Nirmala Deshpande (1989) agree with the process of reservation but hold a strong view that, women are not inferior or a second class citizen. Debel Kumar Singha Roy (1998) opined that, contemporary institutionalized mobilization has provided positive shifts to preexisting social, cultural and political institutions that have caused women's subordination. Aloka Sharma (1998) has agreed that India government has made various efforts to work for women empowerment.

Shahida (1998) and Saraswati Haider (1998) argued that political equality is meaningless in India where traditional attitude regard women as physically intellectually and socially inferior to men.

Number of studies by G.N. Reddy (1995), Miatrayee chaudhari (1995), Neerja Ahlawat (1995) and Nandini Azad (1996) concluded that empowerment of women requires action on many fronts as demographic and socio-economic variables on planned economy. Mahipal (1999) believes that awareness and psychological empowerment of women are indispensable for building confidence among them to play the role effectively at grass root level.

Sweta Mishra (1995) holds the view that land reforms have a positive bearing on the condition of women empowerment economically and socially as

well as politically. Anita Jhamtani (1995), Uma Joshi (1995) Meenakshi Anand Choudhary (1996) and B.K. Pattanaik (1997) made a specific strategic perspective by looking into the economic empowerment of women with economically productive work, which will enhance their contribution to rural development. For that purpose, a multi-pronged effort to make even the poorest of the poor woman active participants in the decision making bodies at village levels is to be undertaken.

Snehalatha Panda (1993) and Ramanbrahman (1990) hold the views that political efficiency and personal control in the political system has great influence on their socio-economic and other personal pursuits. However, there are structural and other constraints, which keep women away from actively participating in the work of panchayats. Uma Joshi's (1999) experiences show that women are as good or bad politicians as men are, even women do better.

According to Manu Bhasker (1993), women are the oppressed sex, exploited on the job by their employers and oppressed at home through family servitude. Indian women's involvement in politics started in the late eighteenth centuries. In the second half of the 1980s the government began to use other policy mechanisms to promote women's integration into development, but the religious fundamentalism jeopardizes women's movement. JK Das (1997) and Amal Mondal (1999) conclude in their writings with a hope that combination of constitutional provision, social actions and self-awareness will bring at least half of the women into mainstream of political power and decision making.

Reeta Chaudhary (1998), Mahipal (1998) and Nutan Sinha (1991) deal with the women empowerment and observed that the goal of women empowerment depends on going beyond the traditional study of the state and its structure where the state as a sources of modernization performing a constructive role or the state as a passive actor, representing the interests of dominant class and the male gender. Amar Jesani (1990) makes a detail descriptive study on women empowerment and finds that, participation does not in itself lead to empowerment where not only does the labor market favour men over women.

Parul Rishi (1997), SH Patil (1997), Ariz Ahmed (1999), and Abha Chauhan (1998) made an analytical study and realize that if a large number of rural woman are to vote independently, Indian Planers should ensure social equality, economic independence and adequate education to rural women. Their empowerment and access to decision making will certainly lead to a sustainable future for the country. Women's participation in decision-making bodies has the potentiality of raising the debates and discussion from the ethereal to the practical side as experienced by Usha Narayanan.

Rohini Gowankar (1999), Aditya Sen (1994) Uma Joshi (1994) and M Seetharaman (1994) made a specific strategic perspective by looking into the role of women in Panchayat Raj Institutions and concluded stating that the village women have a capacity to grasp the things if they are explained to them. However, women have a wealth of experiences in the basic skill of management, so reservation may be treated as an entry point for women but is not an end in itself.

Kirtikumar (1994), B.S Bhargava and K Subha (1995) and Rashmi Mishra (1998) have experienced the grass root level women who have to be empowered to participate effectively in the political process because the decisions of the local government have profound effect on the problems of women. Main drawback is the male relatives of women representatives who are sometimes taking active part in their official activities. Moreover, subordination of women in our society acts as a structural constraint to their empowerment. Sahadev Chaudhary (1995) noted that, being illiterate present lady members may serve as proxies but entry of more literate women of the next generation is bound to make great contribution in the deliberations of these bodies.

KB Saxena (1989), SV Saran (1993), Kamta Prasad (1994), Ashok Gupta (1994), Neela Mukherjee (1994) and Mahipal (1998) made a comprehensive study on women in panchayat and hold the view that women are not adequately empowered to play an effective role because of social, economic and political factors. However, it is possible to turn the tide in favour. Inspite of reservation actual role have been performed by male members.

Though 73rd Amendment Act empowers women in decision-making but in view of the reality in the quagmire of illiteracy, poverty and ignorance, effective participation of women in Panchayat Raj Institutions will not materialize if the Panchayat Raj system does not operate in a democratic way without a proxy, as viewed by Mahipal (1994), SS Meenakshi Sunderam (1995), Sweeta mishra and SN Mishra (1995), and Linda MG Zerilli (1998). It is believed by Madhu Kishwar (1996) that marginalisation of women is integrally linked to the marginalisation of all decent people from our party politics and thus we need wide spectrum electoral reforms that will curb the role of muscle and money power in democratic decision making and ensure a sensible proportional representation for women without mechanical reservation.

Hazel d'Lima (1993) reminds us that those who had power earlier, still want to retain their hold. So they like to see their women in that position where he can have a say in decision making. It is, however, concluded in the analytical study on 73rd amendment and women by G.Ramathilagam (1995), SN Mishra (1996), and T Rajendran (1998) that women have to improve themselves through education, take an interest in public and socio-political affairs, if they have to take an active part in the politics and administration overall to have the empowerment.

Justification of the Study:

From the overview of the existing literature, it appears that most of the studies deal in most cases with Panchayat Raj Institutions. There has been little focus on empowerment of women. Here in lies the research gap. Thus, the present research seeks to measure through an in-depth study of a district (MURSHIDABAD) in West Bengal the process and level of empowerment of women. This has been done in line with the broad theoretical framework that there is interrelationship between democratic decentralization and empowerment and the two are heavily interdependent. As such, the present research enhances the existing body of knowledge on empowerment in general and in the Indian context in particular, helps to list the research questions thus helping to evaluate

the theoretical framework, identifies the factors and forces that tend to come in the way of empowerment in India, and finally, suggests measures along which future courses of action need to be undertaken to ensure and strengthen the process of women empowerment.

Research Question:

Given the broad objectives as outlined above, the present research seeks to address to the following specified research questions.

- (a) What are the formal as well as the operational conceptualization of empowerment?
- (b) Given the norm of conceptualization, what were reasons for, and form of empowerment, during the period preceding 1978?
- (c) What are the structural institutional changes pertaining to women in the period under study in the social, economic, political and cultural fields?
- (d) What are the functional behavioural changes about women in the period under study in social, economic, political and cultural fields?
- (e) Given the basic parameters of empowerment, can it be regarded that women have been empowered?
- (f) If yes, what are the conditions that helped the process of empowerment?
- (g) If not, what are the factors that come in the way of the process of empowerment?

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