

PREFACE

The political empowerment of women and their substantial presence in the formal structure of governance is an essential component of a vibrant democracy where their meaningful participation and active engagement in the political process may assure effective functioning of democratic framework and institutions. Participation of women in decision making process in different levels of governmental activities is the key to political empowerment of women. Good political institutions and procedures have substantive impact on the socio-economic status of women in a given context which may eradicate factors inducing inequality and discrimination while realizing the objective of political empowerment. The constitution of India provided equal rights for men and women and also prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex. The 73rd Constitution Amendment Act has been considered as watershed in the history of state initiatives regarding political empowerment of rural women. While securing 33% reservation of seats in all tiers of Panchayati Raj Institution the Act provided a definite space for women to participate in rural politics for planning and development of the locality. It provided also an opportunity for rural women to steer the local level governance through the process of decentralization. It, therefore, prepared the context for women's contribution in the effective governance at the local level leading to their political empowerment and effective functioning of the system.

Against the backdrop, the present study attempts to locate the status of political empowerment of the elected women representatives in the tea garden panchayats of Jalpaiguri district. It attempts to reveal the actual position of the elected women representatives and their role in functioning of tea garden panchayats in the District. The study seeks to understand also the relationship, if any, between the women's empowerment and the implementation of

developmental programmes and schemes of panchayats against the backdrop of recent crisis prevailing over the tea gardens in the District. The study also attempts to understand the gender-differential impact on the implementation of these livelihood schemes as well as developmental activities in the overall context of political empowerment of women in tea gardens of Jalpaiguri District. The context of the study is unique in itself as women in the tea garden areas constitutes 50% of the workforce and they tend to involve in trade union politics regularly along with the male workers and so their level of political awareness is expected to be higher than the non-tea garden areas which seems to be resulting in their more and more active involvement in the working of the Panchayats.

In so far as the observation and findings of the present study is concerned we divided the whole thesis into six consecutive chapters while attempting to answer all the research questions under study. The 'Introductory Chapter' which attempts to connect women's political participation and empowerment to the study of local self governance in the tea gardens areas of Jalpaiguri District. This chapter provides a general statement of our research problem, the conceptual framework to understand it and the methodological techniques required for its investigation at the field level. In so far as the observation and findings of the present study is concerned we divided the whole thesis into six consecutive chapters while attempting to answer all the research questions under study. The 'Introductory Chapter' which attempts to connect women's political participation and empowerment to the study of local self governance in the tea gardens areas of Jalpaiguri District. This chapter provides a general statement of our research problem, the conceptual framework to understand it and the methodological techniques required for its investigation at the field level. Chapter 2 attempts to provide an evolutionary framework of women's empowerment and some of the problem areas of women participation in decision-making process which acts as a backdrop behind the policy evolution regarding women empowerment in India. Chapter 3 contextualizes the concept and issues of women empowerment in the tea garden panchayats of Jalpaiguri

district. It provides a brief overview of the growth of the tea industry in the pre-independence and post-independence period and evolving of different Acts and Rules which had their direct bearing upon the condition of tea workers in general and women workers in particular. Chapter 4 examines issues of women empowerment in the tea gardens of Jalpaiguri district while discusses the growth of tea industry and its evolution in the post independence period and also focuses upon the impact of recent tea crisis in the overall process of empowerment. Chapter 5 attempts to answer concerning effectiveness of women pradhan at the field level in compared to their male counterpart in implementing different schemes. It shows relationship between greater empowerment of women representatives and better implementation of schemes and impact of women empowerment (EWR), if any, on prioritizing scheme implementation process in the rural development and attempts to examine the overall performance of Panchayats having female Pradhan compared to Panchayats having male Pradhan. Chapter 6 finally summarizes the main findings of study and presents the concluding observation of the thesis.

In doing this mammoth work I owe an enormous debt to my supervisor Professor Manas Chakraborty for providing consistent support, encouragement and not losing faith on me. Without his support I cannot complete my work. I also extend my deep gratitude to all of my teachers in the Department of Political Science, University of North Bengal who gave me valuable suggestion from the very beginning of this work.

My thanks are also due to the staff of Central Library of North Bengal University (NBU), and the Center for Women's Studies, NBU, particularly to the Director and Project Officer for providing necessary arrangements and supportive materials required for this study.

I must express my heartiest gratitude to let Mr. Shankar Chhetri, the leader of NFFPFW, North Bengal from Birpara, Mr Laxmi Nayak, worker and Trade Union Leader of Dooars, and Lal Sing Bhujel, Convenor NFFPFW from Rajabhatkhawa

for their immense help during my field work without their active support it was impossible to critical data from the field. I am also grateful to Mr Avijit Roy, Secretary, North Bengal Tea Plantation Union for introducing me in those remote places. I am indebted to all the Pradhans, Upa Pradhans, EWRs and Executives of concerned Tea Garden panchayats in the study area who extend their active cooperation and assistance during my field work.

I am also obliged to Mr Subhra Chakraborty, WBCS, Govt. Of West Bengal for his valuable suggestions regarding the sources of information and also obliged to Mr Rana Chanda, Executive Jalpaiguri Zilla Parishad for providing necessary data and information. I am also thankful to the officers and staff of Publication Division, Tea Board, Kolkata for extending their support whenever necessary. I would like to thank to the Principal and all the colleague of the KGT Mahavidyalaya for their constant support and encouragement throughout the period.

Last but not the least I am greatly indebted to my parents, Mr. Swapan Chakravorty and Mrs. Anita Chakravorty for their sincere and continuous support all along the way to make the work possible. I wish to express my heartfelt thanks to my husband Mr. Sourish jha who always stood beside me with lots of hope and always encouraged me not to stop and my little and most beloved daughter Miss Soubarna Jha who encouraged me with her joyful and energetic presence.