

## Chapter-IV

### **Caste, Class and Power Structure of the Panchayat Members in Respect to Rural Development in a Backward Region Cooch Behar.**

#### **Introduction:**

Panchayati Raj Institutions based on adult franchise is aimed at not only increasing local participation in rural development programmes but also establishing an egalitarian power structure by breaking the traditional power structure in rural areas <sup>(1)</sup>. These institutions are designed to empower the poor to bring the poor collectively into the process of local government and rural development ensuring their adequate representation in power structure<sup>(2)</sup>. Earlier since the formation of the Panchayat system in the late 1950s the big landlords controlled the power structure in the countryside and people of higher caste. Scheduled caste, scheduled tribe, small peasants, agricultural labourers and other poorer sections of the society had not been expected to enter public arena on equal terms and they had not been given decision making power <sup>(3)</sup>. In West Bengal, the LFG, through land reforms and Panchayat raj institutions has transferred the power in rural areas to small landowners and helped to generate social and political awareness among the people facilitating the development of new leadership <sup>(4)</sup>. Prof. G.K. Lietaer from his study on Bardhaman district has proved that there has been marked increasing visibility of those groups who hitherto had been neglected to come into power structure and decision making <sup>(5)</sup>. Neil Webster, from his study on Kanpur-II gram panchayat and Saldya gram panchayat in the same district observed that there is now significant representation in the gram panchayats from among the poorer and more marginal social groups <sup>(6)</sup>. Prof. Arabinda Ghosh also concluded that there is adequate representation of the weaker sections in the power structure and the implementation and monitoring of all development programmes in the villages of the

district (Bardwan) have progressively been taken over by the organisations of poor themselves <sup>(7)</sup>. Many other studies like an independent survey conducted by NIRD, Hyderabad on Nadia, Midnapore and Jalpaiguri districts proved that power structure in the villages still is dominated by middle and elite class <sup>(8)</sup>. The official report of Mukharjee and Bandyopadhyay on the functioning of panchayets in West Bengal concluded that middle class new comers still occupy the key positions in power structure in the villages <sup>(9)</sup>.

Keeping all studies in view and to arrive at positive conclusion, the present chapter on caste, class, & power structure of panchayat representatives in respect to rural development in a backward region Cooch Behar has been divided into two sections viz. Section-I & section – II. In section – I the matter is studied at macro level (district as a whole). In section – II, it is studied at micro level (with reference to two G.P.s).

### **Section – I**

#### **a) Caste of Gram Panchayat Members in the District of Cooch Behar.**

Prior to 1978, higher caste – class character among the panchayat members was quite evident in the district of Cooch Behar. As the district is highly concentrated with the scheduled caste population so there has been a reasonable number of scheduled caste (Lower Caste) Panchayat members in the panchayat body. But the distinguishing feature is that they have sufficient landholding under their possession (nearly Jotedars). From 1978 panchayat election Power structure in rural areas of West Bengal had altered considerably. As a result, instead of empowering the already powerful panchayats placed power in the hands of the new comers who could be relied upon to implement land reforms measures faithfully <sup>(10)</sup>. In the district of Cooch Behar also, from 1978 onwards, in the consecutive panchayat elections, as a policy of LFG mainly CPI (M), more non-Bhdrolok people of the lowest groups have been elected

as panchayat representatives and the ratio has been changed remarkably. There has been marked a breakdown of caste hierarchy to the working of the panchayat system.

In the district of Cooch Behar there are 128-gram panchayats. The total number of gram panchayat members is 1879. Cooch Behar Zilla Parishad had conducted a study in the 1998 on socio-economic conditions of the elected members of gram panchayats in the district. It was found from the study that there is remarkable representation of weaker sections namely lower caste people (SC) in the Gram panchayats of the Cooch Behar district. Table 4.1 shows 54.76 percent gram panchayat members belong to Scheduled caste and 44.92 percent members belong to general caste. Scheduled caste women representation accounted to 20.38 percent which is much higher than general caste women representation (15.01 percent). Thus caste system in the villages of Cooch Behar has lost significantly the stigmatic and discriminatory meaning. Analysing the place of caste in power structure we find that the lower caste people remarkably have come into power structure.

**Table – 4.1**  
**Representation of Weaker Sections in Gram Panchayats in Cooch Behar district (1998)**

<b>Caste</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Total</b>
Scheduled Caste	383 (20.38)	646 (34.38)	1029 (54.76)
Scheduled Tribe	2 (.11)	4 (.22)	6 (.32)
General Caste	282 (15.01)	562 (29.90)	844 (44.92)
Total	667 (35.50)	1212 (64.50)	1879 (100.00)

N.B- Parenthesis indicates percentages.

Source:- Study report of Cooch Behar Zilla Parishad (1998)

**b) Class of the Panchayat Members :**

The class of the panchayat members of the district of Cooch Behar has been studied in terms of i) land holding ii) occupation & iii) educational status.

i) **Land Holding:** Another dimension of rural power structure is seen in terms of control of land holding of the panchayat

representatives in the district. Until mid 1970 rich peasants and landlords had a big control over rural politics and power structure in rural areas of the district Cooch Behar. They remained at key position in power structure. The agrarian reform programmes of LFG has remarkably weakened the strong rich peasant bases in West Bengal and have protected and promoted the class interest of the weaker sections <sup>(11)</sup>. The district of Cooch Behar is not of its exception. From 1978 panchayat election it has become quite evident that majority panchayat representatives in the district of Cooch Behar now belong to weaker section. Their direct involvement in planning and implementation in rural development programmes restructured the old power relations in the villages and let to tremendous politicisation of the poorer sections in the villages of Cooch Behar. Table 4.2 shows the landholding pattern in the family of gram panchayat members of Cooch Behar district. It is seen that 11.70 percent of them are from landless family, 4.2 percent belong to the patta holders and 54.95 percent have a family holding of land upto 2.49 acres (marginal farmers). On the other hand 20.99 percent of them hold land in the range of 2.49 to 4.59 acres, 6.89 percent in the range of 5.0 to 9.99 acres and only 1.27- percent hold land 10 acres and above.

**Table – 4.2**  
**Family Wise Land Holding of the Gram**  
**Panchayat Members of the Cooch Behar District (1998).**

Land Holding	Number
Landless	220 (11.70)
Patta – Holders	79 (4.20)
Up to 2.49 acres	1033 (54.95)
2.5 to 4.99 acres	394 (20.99)
5 to 9.99 acres	129 (6.89)
10 acres & above	24 (.27)
<b>Total</b>	<b>1879 (100.00)</b>

N.B –Parenthesis  
indicates percentages

Source:- Study report of Cooch Behar Zilla  
Parishad (1998)

Thus table 4.2 confirms the significant representation of poor people in the gram panchayats of Cooch Behar district.

ii) **Occupation:** Occupational categories are considered as an indicator to understand the class background of the elected representatives in the panchayat body. It will also help us to see the changing class character in public life and whether there is adequate representation of poor people in the rural power structure & decision making or not. Table 4.3 shows the occupational categories of the gram panchayat members in the district of Cooch Behar.

**Table – 4.3**  
**Distribution of members of Gram Panchayats in Cooch Behar District according to Occupational Categories(1998).**

Occupation	Number
Agricultural Labourers	85 (4.57)
Bargadars	21(1.12)
Marginal Cultivators	1103(58.70)
Rural Artisans	25(1.35)
Fishermen	8(.45)
Animal Husbandry	4(.23)
Small Shop owners	48(2.55)
Other Business	124(6.60)
Teachers	114(6.07)
Other Services	122(6.45)
Students	7(.37)
Others	62(3.29)
Unemployed	133(7.05)
Social Workers	23(1.20)
<b>Total</b>	<b>1879(100)</b>

N.B –Parenthesis indicates percentages

Source:- Official records of Cooch Behar Zilla Parishad, Panchayat Election, 1998.

It is found from the above table 4.3 that 58.70 percent of the gram panchayat members are marginal farmers, 4.57 percent are agricultural labourers and bargadars are only 1.12 percent. Marginal farmers, agricultural labourers & bargadars combinely accounted to 64.39 percent. Only 6.07 percent gram panchayat members are schoolteachers. As the district is absolutely rural in nature and agriculture is the main pursuit of the people of Cooch Behar so most of the gram panchayat members are from agricultural sector having lower economic status. Thus

table 4.3 confirms the alarming representation of the poor people in rural power structure in the district.

**iii) Educational Status:** - Educational status is highly correlated with caste, class character of the individuals. It is normally presumed that literacy rates and educational levels are usually high among the socially and economically better groups and dominant castes would certainly exhibit higher literacy. On the other hand educational level are usually low among the socially and economically disadvantaged groups and lower caste would certainly exhibit lower literacy and educational levels<sup>(12)</sup>. So, it is pertinent to see the educational status of gram panchayat members in the district of Cooch Behar.

Table 4.4 shows that 39.43 percent of the gram panchayat members have an educational qualification upto upper primary level, 21.29 percent upto lower primary level, 18.37 percent upto secondary level, 8.5 percent upto higher secondary level, 7.65 percent are post graduates. So from the educational status of the gram panchayat members. It is evident that power structure in panchayats is heavily in favour of lower classes who have low educational status and who emerge from the locally lower castes.

**Table-4.4**  
**Educational Status of Gram Panchayat Members in Cooch Behar District. (1998).**

<b>Educational Status</b>	<b>Number</b>
Illiterates	6(.30)
Neo- literate	23(1.20)
Literates	39(2.09)
Upper Primay	740(39.43)
Lower Primary	400(21.20)
Secondary	345(18.37)
H.S.	161(8.55)
Graduates	141(7.65)
Post Graduates	21(1.12)
<b>Total</b>	<b>1879(100.00)</b>

N.B –Parenthesis indicates percentages

Source:- Official records of the Cooch Behar Zilla Parishad results of panchayat election, Cooch Behar 1998.

## Section -II

### c) Caste of Gram Panchayat Members in Khagrabari G.P.

Khagrabari gram panchayat (in Cooch Behar Block-II) is relatively more developed than that of Sikarpur gram panchayat (in Mathabhanga Block-II). Here we find higher numerical strength of general caste population (63 percent) than that of scheduled caste population (37 percent) <sup>(13)</sup>. There are a good number of higher caste Hindu families namely Brahmin families in this G.P. In different consecutive panchayat election it had been found that most of the candidates have been elected mainly from CPI (M) party having low social and economic status as opposed to INC candidates being elected. Particularly in last two panchayat elections (1993-1998) the representation of the Sc. Candidate (Lowest in caste hierarchy) was remarkable. In 1978 panchayat election 5 SC. candidates were elected (35.72 percent) and a candidates were elected from general caste (64.29 percent). In 1983 the percentage of SC. representation increased to (40.00 percent) i.e. out of 20 seats, 8 candidates were elected from SC. category In 1988, 13 candidates were elected form general caste (59.09 percentage) and 9 candidates were elected from lowest graded group (40.90 percent). In 1993 panchayat election 14 SC. Candidates were elected (56.00 percent) and 11 candidates were elected from general caste (44 percent). In last panchayat election of 1998, the percentage of SC. representation was 52.18 percent. So, it is quite evident that there is adequate representation of lowest graded groups (in caste hierarchy) in Khagrabari G.P. Table 4.5 will speak for the truth.

**Table 4.5**  
**Representation of Weaker Sections in Khagrabari Gram Panchayat in different Panchayat election (1978 – 1998).**

<b>Election Years</b>	<b>General Caste</b>	<b>Scheduled Caste</b>	<b>Total Seat</b>
1978	9 (64.29)	5(35.71)	14
1983	12(60.00)	8(40.00)	20
1988	13(59.00)	9(40.90)	22
1993	11(44.00)	14(56.00)	25
1998	11(47.82)	12(52.18)	23

N.B –Parenthesis indicates percentages Source: - Official records of Khagrabari G.P.

**d) Class of the Gram Panchayat Members in Khagrabari G.P.**

The class of panchayat members in the sample G.P.s viz. Khagrabari & Sikarpur has also been studied in terms of i) Landholding ii) Occupation & iii) educational Status.

i) **Land Holding:** Khagrabari gram panchayat is absolutely dominated by CPI (M) panchayat members (previously shown in chap-3). The study of economic background of gram panchayat members in this G.P. reveals that there is significant representation of poor people in power structure. Most of the panchayat members are from landless families. A reasonable representation is shown from marginal farmers. The representation of middle and big farmers who had an absolute control over local policies and rural power structure are almost absent in this G.P. Table 4.6 shows the landholding pattern of the gram panchayat members in Khagrabari G.P. In 1978 panchayat election representation of landless families was 50 percent followed by 60 percent in 1983. In 1988 the representation of landless families again was 59.09 percent followed by 56 percent in 1993. In the last panchayat election of 1998 the representation of landless families was accounted to 65.22 percent. On the other hand, marginal farmer's



representation in the year 1978, was 21.43 percent followed by 25 percent in 1983 and 27.27 in 1988. In 1993 panchayat election marginal farmer's representation was accounted to 28.00 percent followed by 26.08 percent in 1998. The representation of landless families and the members having land upto 2.49 acres combinely accounted to 71.43 percent in 1978 followed by 85 percent in 1983 and 86.36 percent in 1988. In 1993 and 1998, this combined representation accounted to 84.00 & 91.30 percent respectively. Thus it can be concluded that Khagrabari G.P. is highly represented by poor.

**Table 4.6**  
**Land Holding Pattern of the Gram Panchayat Members in Khagrabari G.P**

Size of Landholding	No. of members.		No. of members.		No. of members.		No. of members.		No. of members.	
	1978	%	1983	%	1988	%	1993	%	1998	%
Land Less	7	50.00	12	60.00	13	59.09	14	56.00	15	65.22
Upto 2.49 acres	3	21.43	5	25.00	6	27.27	7	28.00	6	26.08
2.5 to 4.49 acres	2	14.29	1	5.00	2	9.09	2	8.00	1	4.35
5. to 9.99 acres	1	7.14	-	-	1	4.55	1	4.00	-	-
10 acres & above	1	7.14	2	10.00	-	-	1	4.00	1	4.35
<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source : 1) Official records of Khagrabari Gram Panchayat 1978-1998  
2) Official records of Block Development Office, 1978-1998

ii) **Occupation:** The panchayat member's occupations, as the indicator of their class location, better reveals the socio-economic background of the members. In Khagrabri gram panchayat, we find the presence of different occupational categories such as marginal & small peasants, agricultural & other labourers, medium & big peasants, teachers, small shop owners & small business, unemployed, housewives & other services. In the last five Panchayat elections (1978-1980), the representation of elected members in this G.P. mostly have come from the occupational background of marginal & small peasants, housewives, teachers, small shop owners & small business, unemployed. In last two panchayat elections, housewives representation was quite prominent because of female candidate reservation (33 per cent of total seats). It is worth noting here that most of the elected housewife members have come from the families of marginal peasant and landless families. The representation of agricultural & others labourers is not satisfactory. Medium & big peasant's representation has been reduced considerably. In the last five panchayat elections (1978-1998), it was found from the table 4.7. that on an average 22.70 percent of the gram Panchayat members are marginal & small peasants, 20.75 per cent are housewives, 14.81 percent are teachers, 10.69 percent are small shop owners & small business, 10.20 percent are unemployed, 9.71 percent are other services, 8.41 percent are agricultural labourers, 7.87 percent are other labourers, 7.43 percent are medium and big peasants. So, the occupational pattern of panchayat members in Khagrabari G.P. highly confirms the adequate representation of poor people in power structure. Table 4.7 Speaks for the truth.

**Table- 4.7**  
**Occupational Distribution of Gram Panchayat Members in Khagrabari G.P (1978-1998)**

Size of Landholding	No. of members.		No. of members.		No. of members.		No. of members.		No. of members.	
	1978	%	1983	%	1988	%	1993	%	1998	%
Agricultural Labours	-	-	-	-	1	4.55	3	12.00	2	8.70
Other Labours	2	14.29	1	5.00	-	-	-	-	1	4.34
Marginal & small peasants	4	28.57	5	25.00	6	27.27	6	24.00	2	8.70
Medium & big peasants	2	14.29	2	10.00	1	4.55	1	4.00	1	4.34
Teachers	2	14.29	4	20.00	5	22.72	1	4.00	3	13.04
Students	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Small shop owners & samll businers	1	7.14	4	20.00	3	13.04	1	4.00	2	8.70
Unemployed	1	7.14	1	5.00	4	18.18	3	12.00	2	8.70
House wives	1	7.14	-	-	2	9.09	8	32.00	8	34.78
Other services	1	7.14	3	15.00	-	-	2	8.00	2	8.70
<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source : 1) Official records of Khagrabari Gram Panchayat 1978-1998  
2) Official records of Block Development Office, 1978-1998

**iii) Educational Status:** The link of education with human capital and with human capabilities has been emphasised in recent development literature. In both areas education plays a crucial role in village dynamics and power relations<sup>(14)</sup>. As such the analysis of educational status of gram panchayat members in the sample G.Ps is highly significant.

Analysing the educational status of gram panchayat members in Khagrabari G.P. we find that most of the panchayat members are well educated – secondary passed and graduate and also belong to general caste. Quite a reasonable number of members have been found from lower primary and upper Primary level. This G.P. is comparatively more developed than Sikarpur G.P. and better educational facilities are available here. Table 4.8 shows the educational status of the gram Panchayat members in Khagrabari G.P. over last five panchayat elections (1978-1998).

It is found from the table 4.8 that members having educational qualification secondary & graduate level combined accounted to 35.71 percent in 1978, followed by 45 percent in 1983, followed by 61.18 percent in 1988. In 1993 it was accounted to 48 percent followed by 65.23 in 1998. On the other hand members having qualification lower primary and upper primary level combinely accounted to 57.14 percent in 1978, followed by 40 percent in 1983, followed by 22.73 percent in 1998. In 1993 it was accounted to 48 percent followed by 30.42 percent in 1998. There is no illiterate panchayat member.

**Table 4.8**  
**Educational Status of Gram Panchayat Members in KHAGRABARI G.P.**

Educational Status	No. of Members		No. of Members		No. of Members		No. of Members		No. of Members	
	1978	%	1983	%	1988	%	1993	%	1998	%
ILLITERATE	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
LITERATE	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
LOWER PRIMARY	4	28.57	4	20.00	2	9.09	6	24.00	5	21.73
UPPER PRIMARY	4	28.57	4	20.00	3	13.64	6	24.00	2	8.69
SECONDARY	3	21.43	5	25.00	8	36.36	5	20.00	7	30.43
HIGHER SECONDARY	1	7.15	3	15.00	2	9.09	1	4.00	1	4.35
GRADUATE	2	14.28	4	20.00	7	31.82	7	28.00	8	34.80
POST GRADUATE	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source :- Official record of the Gram Panchayat for the years.

On an average, 26.64 percent members are secondary, 25.78 percent are graduate, 21.54 percent are lower primary, 18.98 percent are upper Primary & 8.80 percent are Higher Secondary. Thus it is quite evident that the local leaders who are in Power structure have good educational background.

**e) Caste of Gram Panchayat Members in Sikarpur G.P. :** Sikarpur gram Panchayat (in Mathabhanga Block-II) is highly concentrated with scheduled caste population 75.70 percent. <sup>(15)</sup> Here we find a good number of Muslim families. CPI (M) has a strong hold over this gram panchayat and almost all panchayat members had been elected on CPI (M) ticket with low economic profile. On the other hand INC has no organisational base here. Most of the Muslim families are the supporters of INC having higher economic profile. The results of different panchayat elections (1978-998) in Sikarpur G.P. exhibits that the under privileged class has been institutionalised into power structure by breaking the traditional hierarchy and the increasing role of lower castes in public life has been ensured to a significant extent. In 1978 panchayat election, out of 15 seats, 14 candidates were elected from SC community (93.33 percent) and 1 candidate was elected from general caste (Muslim). In 1983 the representation of SC candidates was accounted to (60 percent) whereas general caste representation was (40 percent). Out of 6 general candidates elected 4 were from high Hindu caste and rest 2 were from Muslim caste. In 1988 representation of SC candidates was increased to 88.24 percent whereas general caste representation was only 11.78 percent. In this year two general caste candidates were elected from Muslim community. In 1993 out of total seats of 21, 19 were elected from SC community (90.47 percent) and rest two candidates were elected from Muslim Community (9.53 percent). In the last panchayat election of 1998 SC representation was accounted to 93.75 percent followed by general caste

representation is only (6.25 percent). In 1998 only 1 panchayat member was elected from general caste (Muslim).

So, from the above analysis it is quite evident that there is significant representation of SC members (lowest group in caste hierarchy) in Sikarpur gram panchayat. Table 4.9 delineates the fact.

**Table 4.9**

**Representation of Gram Panchayat Members by their castes in Sikarpur Gram Panchayat.**

<b>Election Years</b>	<b>General Caste</b>	<b>Scheduled Caste</b>	<b>Total Seats</b>
1978	1 (6.67)	14 (93.33)	15
1983	6 (40)	9 (60)	15
1988	2 (11.76)	15 (88.24)	17
1993	2 (9.52)	19 (90.48)	21
1998	1 (6.25)	15 (93.75)	16

N.B. Parenthesis indicates percentages

Source: Official records of Sikarpur Gram Panchayat.

**e) Class of the Panchayat Members in Sikarpur G.P. :**

- i) **Land Holding:** - Sikarpur gram panchayat is also highly represented by CPI (M) Panchayat members over five panchayat elections held to date (1978-1998). The class location of the elected panchayat members in terms of



**Table 4.10**  
**Land Holding Pattern of the Gram Panchayat Members in Sikarpur G. P. (1978-1998)**

Size of Landholding	No. of members.		No. of members.		No. of members.		No. of members.		No. of members.	
	1978	%	1983	%	1988	%	1993	%	1998	%
Land Less	-	-	-	-	1	5.88	2	9.52	2	12.50
Upto 2.49 acres	3	20.00	4	26.66	4	23.53	6	28.57	5	31.25
2.5 to 4.49 acres	6	40.00	7	46.67	6	35.29	9	42.86	6	37.50
5 to 9.99 acres	4	26.67	3	20.00	5	29.42	4	19.05	3	18.75
10 acres & above	2	13.33	1	6.67	1	5.88	-	-	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source : 1) Official records of Sikarpur Gram Panchayat 1978-1998  
2) Official records of Block Development Office, 1978-1998

land holding in this GP exhibits a different picture than that of Khagrabari G.P. firstly, here we find that most of the members are marginal and small peasants instead of landless. Cultivation is their principal occupation of livelihood. Secondly majority of them belong to scheduled caste community. A sizeable minority representation has been found from middle peasants. Big farmer's representation gradually declined and in last two panchayat elections (1993-1998) it became absent. Table 4.10 shows the landholding patterns of the gram Panchayat members in Sikarpur G.P. over successive panchayat elections. 60 percent panchayat members have land upto 4.49 acres in 1978 followed by 73.33 percent in 1983 and 58.82 percent in 1988. In the year 1993 this figure accounted to 71.43 percent followed by 68.75 percent in 1988. On the other hand members holding land in the range of 5 to 9.9 acres accounted to 26.67 percent in 1978, followed by 20 percent in 1983, 29.42 percent in 1988, followed by 19.05 percent in 1993 and 18.75 percent in 1998, members holding land 10 acres & above accounted to 13.33 percent in 1978, followed by 6.67 percent in 1983, and 5.88 percent in 1988. Members from landless family had no representation in first two panchayat elections. In 1988, this representation was 5.88 percent, followed by 9.52 in 1993 and 12.50 percent in 1998. So, it may be concluded that this G.P. is also represented by the down trodden.

**ii) Occupation:** The occupational categories of gram panchayat members in Sikarpur G.P. in last panchayat elections show that this G.P. is absolutely represented by the cultivators. Among the cultivators mainly marginal and small cultivators predominated in all panchayat elections. Medium

**Table 4.11**  
**Occupational distribution of Gram Panchayat members in SIKARPUR G.P (1978-1998)**

Size of Landholding	No. of members.		No. of members.		No. of members.		No. of members.		No. of members.	
	1978	%	1983	%	1988	%	1993	%	1998	%
Agricultural Labours	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other Labours	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Marginal & small peasants	9	60.00	10	66.66	10	58.82	10	47.62	6	37.50
Medium & big peasants	6	40.00	3	20.00	4	23.53	2	9.53	2	12.50
Teachers	-	-	1	6.67	3	17.65	1	4.76	1	6.25
Students	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Small shop owners & small businers	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Unemployed	-	-	1	6.67	-	-	-	-	1	6.25
House wives	-	-	-	-	-	-	7	33.33	6	37.50
Other services	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	4.76	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source : 1) Official records of Sikarpur Gram Panchayat 1978-1998  
2) Official records of Block Development Office, 1978-1998.

and big farmer's representation gradually shows a declining trend. In comparison to Khagrabari G.P. here we find relatively richer farmers are in power structure. There is no representation of members from landless families, agricultural & other labourers or small shop owners & small businessmen. Teacher's representation is negligible. All of them are primary school teachers. They are also cultivators but they rarely work in the fields themselves merely supervising the work of hired labour. Housewives representation is quite promising from the panchayat election of 1993 because of female candidate reservation in panchayat body. Mostly the female candidates have come from the families of marginal and small farmers. Table 4.1 shows the occupational background of the gram panchayat members in last panchayat elections (1978-1998) in Sikarpur G.P. It is found from the table that on an average 54.12 percent gram panchayat members are marginal and small peasants, 21.11 percent are medium and big peasant, 7.06 percent are teachers, 6.46 percent are unemployed, 35.41 percent are housewives. Thus, the occupational pattern of the gram panchayat members in Sikarpur G.P. also confirms the poor people's representation in power structure.

**iii) Educational Status:** The educational background of the gram Panchayat members in Sikarpur G.P. exhibits somewhat different picture than that of Khagrabari G.P. This G.P. is comparatively more under developed and better educational facilities are not available here. Almost all panchayat members in this G.P. belong to schedule caste community and their educational status is much lower than Khagrabari G.P. Majority of panchayat members has been found from the

**Table 4.12**  
**Distributions of Gram Panchayat Members by Educations in SIKARPUR G. P. (1978-98)**

Educational Status	No. of Members		No. of Members		No. of Members		No. of Members		No. of Members	
	1978	%	1983	%	1988	%	1993	%	1998	%
Illiterate	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Literate	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Lower primary	4	27.00	4	26.67	3	17.65	2	9.52	2	12.50
Upper primary	11	73.00	7	46.66	9	52.94	14	66.67	11	68.75
Secondary	-		3	20.00	4	23.53	3	14.29	2	12.50
Higher secondary	-		-		-	-	-	-	-	-
Graduate	-		1	6.67	1	5.88	2	9.52	1	6.25
Post graduate	-		-		-		-		-	
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source :- 1) Official records of Sikarpur Gram Panchayat (1978-1998)  
2) Official records of Block Development Office(1978-1998)

educational qualification upto upper primary level. A good number of panchayat members have been found from the educational qualification of lower primary and secondary level. Very few members are found having qualification upto graduation level. There is no illiterate panchayat member. Table 4.12 shows the educational background of the panchayat members in Sikarpur G.P. over last five panchayat elections (1978-1998).

It is found from the table that members having educational background upto upper primary level alone accounted to 73 percent in 1978, followed by 46.66 percent in 1983 and 52.94 percent in 1988. In 1993 it was accounted to 66.67 percent, followed by 68.75 percent in 1998. On the other hand, members having educational background of lower primary and upper primary level combinely accounted to 100 percent in 1978, followed by 73.33 percent 1983 and 70.59 percent in 1988. In 1993 it was accounted to 76.19 percent, followed by 81.25 percent. So, it is quite evident that the members having relatively lower educational status than that of Khagrabari G.P dominate Sikarpur G.P.

On an average 61.60 percent members have educational background upto upper primary, 18.66 percent are lower primary, 17.58 percent are secondary and 7.08 percent are graduate.

### **Summary:**

This chapter focuses light on caste, class and power structure of the Panchayat members in respect to rural development in a backward district Cooch Behar. Both from macro & micro level studies it has become quite evident that there is remarkable representation of weaker section people in rural power structure in the district. Regarding caste of the Panchayat member's table 4.1 shows that 54.76 percent gram panchayat members belong to scheduled caste and 44.76 percent belong to general caste.

Scheduled caste women representation accounted to 20.28 percent which is much higher than general caste women representation (15.01 percent). Thus lower caste people remarkable have come in power structure and caste system in the villages of Cooch Behar has lost significantly the stigmatic and discriminatory meaning.

The class character of the Panchayat representatives in terms of landholding, occupation and educational status (Tables 4.2, 4.3, 4.4) also provide alarming results. Regarding landholding pattern in the family of gram panchayat members it has been observed that 11.70 percent are from landless family; 4.2 percent are patta holders; and 54.95 percent have a land upto 2.29 acres (marginal farmers). In terms of occupational pattern marginal farmers, agricultural labourers & bargaders combinely accounted to 64.39 percent. Educational status of the gram panchayat members shows that 60.72 percent members have an educational qualification up to lower & upper primary level. So it can easily be concluded that rural power structure in the district of Cooch Behar is heavily in favour of weaker section who have low educational status and who emerge from the locally lower caste.

The same result has also been obtained at micro level with reference to two sample G.P.s of the district. Regarding caste of the panchayat representatives tables (4.5, 4.9) show that on an average 46 percent gram panchayat members in Khagrabari G.P. are scheduled caste whereas in Sikarpur it accounted to 85.16 percent in last five panchayat elections. It is quite evident that there is significant representation of lowest graded groups (in caste hierarchy) in both the G.P.s in rural power structure.

The class character of the panchayat members in terms of land holding and occupational distribution & educational status in the sample G.P.s also confirms the adequate representation of poor people in rural power structure and decision making on equal terms. In Khagrabari G.P. on an average 58.04 percent members belong to

landless families and 26.6 percent members have the landholding up to 2.49 acres (marginal farmers) in last five panchayat elections (Table 4.6). On the other hand, in Sikarpur G.P., on an average 66.46 percent members have the landholding up to 4.49 acres (marginal and small farmers) (Table 4.10). The representation of elected members in Khagrabari G.P. mostly have come from occupational background of marginal & small peasants (22.70%), housewives (20.75%); teachers (14.81%); small shop owner & small business (10.69%), unemployed (10.20%), other services (9.71%), agricultural labourers (8.41%) & other labourers (7.43%) (Table 4.7). Most of the elected housewife members have come from the families of marginal and landless farmers. On the other hand in Sikarpur, mostly the elected members have come from the occupational categories of marginal and small peasants (54.12%), medium & big peasants (21.11%), teachers (7.06%), unemployed (6.46%) & housewives (35.41%) (Table 4.11). In Khagrabari G.P. local leaders who are in power structure have better educational qualifications than that of Sikarpur G.P. In Khagrabari 26.64 percent members are secondary, 25.78 percent are graduate, 21.51 percent are lower primary, 18.98 percent are upper primary & 8.80 percent are H.S. (Table 4.8). On the other hand in Sikarpur, 61.60 percent members are upper primary; 18.66 percent are lower primary, 17.58 percent are secondary and 7.08 percent are graduates (Table 4.12).

Thus it may be concluded that through different panchayat elections it has become quite evident that majority panchayat representative in the district of Cooch Behar now belongs to weaker section and their direct involvement in different rural development programme restricted the old power relations in the villages with tremendous politicisation.



## References:

1. D. V. Raghava Rao, *Panchayats & Rural Développement*, Ashis Publishing House, New Delhi, 1980, P. 24.
2. Neil Webster, *Panchayati Raj and the Decentralisation of Development Planning in West Bengal*, K. P. Bagchi, Calcutta, 1992, P. 96.
3. G. K. Lieten, *Development Devolution and Democracy; village Discourse in West Bengal*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, P. 115.
4. Nirmal Mukarji and D. Bandyapadhyey, *New Horizons for West Bengal Panchayats:- A report of the Govt. of West Bengal*, Govt of West Bengal, Department of Panchayats, P. 35.
5. G. K. Lieten, *Development, Devolution and Democracy, Village Discourse in West Bengal*, Sage Publication, New Delhi, 1996, P-115.
6. Kuldeep Mathur, *Development Policy and Administration*, Sage Publication, New Delhi, 1996, P. 246.
7. Arabinda Ghosh, *Panchayats and Rural Development in West Bengal*, Journal of Rural Development, Vol 15(4), NIRD, Hyderabad, P. 535-537.
8. Röss Mallick, *Development Policy of Communist Govt. West Bengal since 1977*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, P.-137.
9. Nirmal Mukarji and D. Bandyopadhyay, *New Horizons for West Bengal Panchayats:- A report of the Govt. of West Bengal*, Govt. of West Bengal, Department of Panchayats, P. 15.
10. Nirmal Mukarji and D. Bandyopadhyay, *New Horizons for West Bengal Panchayats:- A report of the Govt. of West Bengal*, Govt. of West Bengal, Department of Panchayats, P. 3.
11. S. K. Bhaumik, *Tanancy relation and Agrarian Development*, A study of West Bengal, Sage Publication, New Delhi, (1993), P.-50.
12. D. V. Raghava Rao, *Panchayats & Rural Development*, Ashis Publishing House, New Delhi, 1980, P. 51.
13. *Annual Report of Khagrabari Gram Panchayats*, 1998, P. 2.
14. G. K. Lieten, Ravi Srivastava, *Unequal Partners:- Power relations, Devolution and Development in Uttar Pradesh*, Sage Publication, New Delhi, 1999, P. 118.
15. *Annual Report of Sikarpur Gram Panchayats*, 1998, P. -3.