

CHAPTER-I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

In India three-tier Panchayati System was in vogue since 1957 when the Balwantray Mehta Committee placed their report to the Union Government. At that time there was no exclusive reservation for women in Panchayat bodies. But there was the system of co-option of women. In making co-option there were some principles also. Only those women were preferred who were interested in works among women and children. Accordingly, different States attempted to provide representation of women in different ways. Some states (like Maharashtra) chose nomination whereas some (like A.P., Punjab, Rajasthan, and Haryana) adopted co-option and some adopted reservation as a mode of providing representation to women in Panchayat body (Tyagi and Sinha, 2004). In Rajasthan, Jawarharlal Nehru first inaugurated independent India's Panchayati Raj on 2nd October 1959 and by 1960s, in almost all parts of the country panchayati Raj was started.

Asok Mehta Committee (1978) also emphasised on women participation in the Panchayati Raj System at village level. In 1978 Asok Mehta Committee could visualise that special attention had to be given to the role of women in the democratic process of PRI's by allowing them to participate more actively in the election process and also by giving them opportunities in decision making process. This Committee realized that development of human resources should be the primary feature in Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) and human resources must be available in the rural area for economic development. Development of rural economy can be possible by involvement of rural women as Panchayat members.

Both the Committees realized that involvement of women in Panchayati Raj System will bring the development programmes for upliftment of women and children.

West Bengal has a long past in development of Panchayati Raj Institutions. In 1957, the West Bengal Panchayat Bill was passed; it introduced two-tier structure at the lowest level Gram Panchayats and Anchal Panchayats in place of the Union board. In 1963 the West Bengal Zilla Parishad Act was passed to provide for the remodelling of local authorities with development activities and bringing about democratic decentralization and people's participation in planning and development. The 1957 Act and the 1963 Act provided four-tier structure of the Panchayati Raj in the State. Due to the political disturbance, unprecedented food crisis in 1965 and Government instability in the State, panchayat system did not work properly. In 1967, the general elections were held in West Bengal wherein the Congress Party was defeated and the United Front (dominated by Left Parties) came to power.

In March 1972, when a new Congress ministry came to power in the state, a new West Bengal Panchayat Act was passed towards the end of 1973, replacing both the earlier Acts of 1957 and 1963. The Act provided for a three-tier Panchayat system which exists still now. With this new Act, the state panchayat system came in line with all India pattern of three-tier system – Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad – each having its own sphere of activities. But after passing the 1973 Act, the Government did not take any step to implement it and till 1977 no elections were held to local self-government bodies. After the Left Front Government West Bengal state was the first and only major state in the country to hold election to the panchayat institutions on the basis of open participation of political parties and at regular intervals. Since 1978 regular elections are held in three-tier panchayati system.

But it is necessary to mention here that before 1973 Act, there was no legal provision in Panchayati System for reservation of seats for women. The 1973 Act provided that the state Government could appoint two women as members in Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti or Zilla Parishad with the condition that-

- (a) No such appointment shall be made if two women were elected to such Gram Panchayat or Panchayat Samiti or Zilla Parishad as the case may be, and
- (b) Only one such appointment could be made if one woman was elected to such Gram Panchayat or Panchayat Samiti or Zilla Parishad.

This provision continued up to 1992 when the state Government amended the West Bengal Panchayat Act to include a provision that not less than one-third of the total seats of each tier of the panchayats were reserved for women. Immediately after 73rd Amendment Act, the West Bengal Government passed its own amendment to the Panchayat Act introducing one-third reservation for women (including SC/ST) at all levels of the Panchayati Raj Institution.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act provides not only the political empowerment of women but also it has given the opportunity to women to take decision, improve capability and efficiency to work. The Act has been instrumental in increasing consciousness and power, establishment of their identity and increased awareness and effective thinking. It has also given the scope to develop village economy through socio-economic upliftment of rural women. Participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) has been considered as the most effective instrument to remove women's inequality, invisibility and powerlessness.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act gave constitutional status to Gram Panchayats. The objective of this Act was to enable panchayats to function as institutions of local self-government, planning and implementing schemes for economic development and

social justice. 73rd Amendment is also the piece of legislation where the women in rural areas have been given the opportunity to participate in politics directly. Of different democratic fora, in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) the women have the backup of the Constitution of India. This became possible from the year 1992 (after forty-five years of political independence) with the passage of the Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act, 1992. The provision of the Act made it obligatory to keep reserved one-third of the total seats in all three tiers of the structure, viz. village, intermediate and district. The provision (Article 243D of the Constitution) runs as follows:

“Not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat” (GOI, 1993).

As far back as in 1974, the Committee on the Status of Women in India recommended “the establishment of statutory women’s panchayats at the village level with autonomy and resources of their own for the management and administration of welfare and development programmes for women and children, as a transition measure, to break through the traditional attitudes that inhibit most women from articulating their problems and participating actively in the existing local bodies”. (GOI, 2001). Our Constitution has given ‘equal’ rights and opportunities to both men and women in the political, economic and social spheres. But after twenty five (25) years, the proclamation of the Constitution, the report (1974) of Committee on Status of Women came out. The report (Towards Equality) brought out the fact that the position of women in India had not made any significant improvement after independence and they (women and girls) remained ‘Second-class citizens’. In June 1986, a committee headed by L.M.Singhavi also prepared a concept paper about the revitalisation of the PRIs including reservation of seats for SCs, STs and women. On the basis of the recommendations of the committee, the Central Government presented 64th Constitutional Amendment bill to Parliament in 1989. The bill stated that “as nearly as may be” up to 30 per cent seats could be reserved in favour of women in the membership to panchayats at all the three levels, including in the seats reserved for SC/ST. But this bill was not passed.

These recommendations achieved the reality through 73rd Amendment of the Constitution in 1992 where at least one-third of the total seats in all tiers of the panchayats were kept reserved for women. In West Bengal, through an amendment in the year 1992 of West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973 not less than one-third seats were reserved for women in all tiers of the panchayat structure. In this amendment, it was also specified that no women shall, if eligible for election to any panchayat tier, be disqualified for election to any seat not

so reserved. This means that any woman can contest from any seat not otherwise reserved. In 1993 panchayat election in the State was held in this line. In 1993 election, the percentage of women representatives at all the tiers of the panchayats crossed the one-third (33.3%) mark. As a result, the number of women representatives increased by a big margin. But the post of chairperson and vice-chairperson, the provision for reservation was not there. Through an amendment of the West Bengal Panchayat Act in 1997, the offices at every tier of the three-tier panchayats were reserved according to the provisions of 73rd Amendment. These offices are Pradhan and Upa Pradhan (Chairperson and Vice Chairperson at village panchayat), Sabhapati and Sahakari Sabhapati (Chairperson and Vice Chairperson at intermediate tier panchayat) and Sabhapati and Sahakari Sabhapati (Chairperson and Vice Chairperson at district panchayat). From 1998 panchayat election, the reservation of offices of panchayats is given an effect. In West Bengal, from 1998 panchayat election all provisions of 73rd Amendment became effective (Ghosh, 2013).

The philosophy behind the enactment of 73rd Amendment is to bring more women in the local bodies so that they can participate in the decision-making process and take decisions for their good. As the representation of women in pre 73rd Amendment days was very negligible, provisions in the Constitution were made to widen their representation. This certainly does not mean that women cannot be considered for the open seats where men and women have equal opportunity to contest. In this backdrop the present study is being undertaken in two districts of West Bengal. The districts are Cooch Behar in northern part and Nadia in Gangetic plains.

Now a day, politics is an opportunity to do work. The researcher has studied how women panchayat members have done their work with this reservation (73rd Amendment) opportunity for the betterment of women community in their villages. The present research study has also dealt with the women panchayat members and their empowerment.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The research study has the following major objectives:-

- (1) To study the socio-economic status of women panchayat members during the period 2003-2008;
- (2) To visualize the role and performance of women panchayat members in the decision making process in panchayat activities;
- (3) To measure the extent of participation of women members in public meetings like Gram Sansad and Gram Sabha;

- (4) To have a view of the autonomy of the women panchayat members in their household decision making;
- (5) To highlight the contribution of women panchayat members in various women development programmes like SGSY, SGRY, IAY, NREGS, SHG, sanitation facility, drinking water facility, fertility, antenatal care, institutional birth, child health care and immunization, educational schemes like Mid-Day Meal, separate toilet at school, girls education and others as implemented by the panchayats and the role of women panchayat members thereof;
- (6) To examine whether women panchayat members are giving due importance to the panchayat work for development of village or are busy doing household chores;
- (7) To study the perception of general people in villages about the role of women panchayat members and their contributions to village and women's empowerment;

With the above objectives a comparative picture of Cooch Behar district in northern part and Nadia district in southern part of the state has been developed in different chapters. These two districts have been chosen on the basis of their geographical location and selected indicators of development. The indicators are mostly related with women related aspects. These are sex-ratio, literacy rate, antenatal care, institutional birth, women participation in work and women beneficiary in different government programmes like- SGSY, IAY and SGRY and others.

According to 2001 census sex-ratio in Cooch Behar district in rural area is 947 and in Nadia district was 942. Female literacy rate in Cooch Behar district was 57.04 and in Nadia district was 60.06. Percentage of female other workers to total female workers was 17.59 in Cooch Behar district and 49.69 in Nadia district according to 2001 census. Percentage of pregnant women for antenatal care in Cooch Behar district is 55.89 in 2002-2003 and in Nadia district was 66.11. The share of institutional deliveries in total deliveries in Cooch Behar district in 2002-2003 was 32.63 per cent and in Nadia district it was 60.85 per cent. In Nadia district the institutional birth rate was almost double of Cooch Behar district. NFHS-1 and NFHS-2 reports showed that the institutional birth rate is lower than the non- institutional birth rate in the Schedule Caste community. For example, according to NFHS-1, there were 21.9 per cent institutional and 78.0 per cent non-institutional birth rate in SC community and according to NFHS-2, there were 43.5 per cent institutional and 56.1 per cent non-institutional birth rate in SC community. It reflects that from NFHS-1 to NFHS-2 institutional birth rate has been increased. It is a good sign for SC community that there has been an increase in institutional birth rate.

These two districts have been chosen for the study because in both the districts SC people is higher. According to 2001 Census in Nadia district SC population was 29.66 per

cent more than the state average of 23.02 per cent and in Cooch Behar district it was 50.11 per cent.

Further in terms of distance of the State Capital, Cooch Behar is far away in comparison to Nadia. It can be said that distance is a factor in the process of development – this is not only true in the case of a state but also in the case of a district. Even with the effect of 73rd Amendment Act the implementation in terms of providing the benefits of development to the people in general have variations among the districts. In the present study this aspects is also captured. For this purpose the comparative study approach has been followed.

In most of the studies only one district or a few villages are taken up on sample basis. But here two districts of a state have been taken up to get a comparative view for assessing the impact of reservation of women in the panchayats. In this way the present study will make a contribution to the research gap in the arena of elected women representatives in Panchayats.

1.3 Research Questions

With the passage of 73rd Amendment of the Constitution it is expected that the women will take a lead in the process of development and can fulfil the expectations of rural women. Due to Constitutional obligations in all three-tiers there are huge numbers of women controlling the affairs of the panchayats. This should be the ideal picture of the panchayats after this amendment. In view of these the present study makes a modest attempt to test the following questions.

- (1) After their election to the political office can all women members take decision independently at various levels?
- (2) Has their status improved within the society as a result of their election to the political office?
- (3) Are women panchayat members taking initiatives for improvement of socio-economic conditions of rural women?
- (4) Do women panchayat members (including Pradhans) make balance between panchayati work and their household work?
- (5) Do the villagers think, women panchayat representatives are better performer than male counterpart?

1.4 Methodology

1.4.1 Sample Selection

The research study is based on micro level investigation in two districts, i.e. Cooch Behar and Nadia in the State of West Bengal. Administratively, Cooch Behar district is divided into five Sub-Divisions. These are: Cooch Behar, Dinhata, Mathabhanga, Tufanganj and Mekhliganj. District of Nadia has four Sub-Divisions which are: Kalayani, Ranaghat, Krishnagar Sadar and Tehatta. But in this study we have considered equal number of subdivisions from each district. For field survey Cooch Behar Sadar, Dinhata, Mathabhanga and Tufanganj Sub-Divisions of Cooch Behar district are selected. From Nadia district these four subdivisions are Kalyani, Ranaghat, Krishnagar Sadar and Tehtta. One block has been chosen randomly from each subdivision of the districts like, from Cooch Behar Sadar, Cooch Behar-II block is selected, from Dinhata subdivision Dinhata-I block is selected and this way others are selected (shown in the following Table-1.1). From each block three Gram Panchayats where there are women Pradhan are selected on the basis of their location (in terms of the distance from the block head-quarters) in the block area. From eight blocks in two districts the total number of gram panchayats are $(8 \times 3 =)$ 24 (twenty four). Women panchayat Pradhans are only considered because the present study is focused on women panchayat representatives only. Pradhan is an important portfolio in the panchayat structure of West Bengal for promoting decentralized decision making and implementation of schemes assigned to them by the State Government. This research has tried to bring out how women panchayat members including Pradhans have used their reservation opportunity through their consciousness, knowledge, confidence and power for their community development.

The following Table 1.1 shows the number of gram panchayat pradhans selected in two districts and number of gram panchayats headed by women are given to show the study coverage.

Table 1.1: Number of G.P.s in Selected Blocks on the Basis of Women Pradhans in Two Selected Districts

Districts	Subdivisions	Blocks	No. of total G.P.	No. of G.P. with women Pradhan	No. of selected G.P.	Percentage of selected women Pradhan
Cooch Behar	Cooch Behar Sadar	Cooch Behar-II	13	5	3	60.00
	Dinhata	Dinhata-I	16	4	3	75.00
	Mathabhanga	Mathabhanga-I	10	4	3	75.00
	Tufanganj	Tufanganj-I	14	5	3	60.00
Nadia	Kalyani	Haringhata	10	5	3	60.00
	Ranaghat	Karimpur-II	10	4	3	75.00
	Krishnagar Sadar	Krishnagar-II	7	3	3	100.00
	Tehatta	Ranaghat-II	14	5	3	60.00
Total		Eight (8)	94	35	24	68.57

Source: West Bengal State Election Commission, Gram Panchayat Election Results, 2003

The following Table 1.2 shows the selection of Gram Panchayats where women pradhans are there, on the basis of distance from the block head-quarters.

Table 1.2: Arrangement of G.P.s in Two Districts on the Basis of Distance from Block Head-Quarters and Number of Women Panchayat Members (WPM) (Including Pradhans)

Districts	Blocks	G.P.s distance and Selected Women Panchayat Members						Total WPM
		Nearest		Middle		Farthest		
Cooch Behar	Cooch Behar-II	Pundibari	9	Madhupur	13	Patlakhawa	15	37
	Dinhata-I	Putimari -I	7	Goshanimari-I	7	Gitaldaha-II	4	18
	Mathabhanga-I	Shikarpur	6	Pachagar	6	Bairagirhat	6	18
	Tufanganj-I	Chilakhana-II	4	Deocharia	7	Balarampur-I	4	15
Nadia	Haringhata	Haringhata-I	9	Birohi - I	5	Mollabelia	10	24
	Karimpur-II	Rahamatpur-II	8	Nandanpur	6	Dhoradaha-II	5	19
	Krishnagar-II	Dhubulia-I	3	Sadhanpara-II	3	Nowapara-II	4	10
	Ranaghat-II	Baidyapur-I	5	Raghunathpur Hijuli-II	5	Duttaphulia	9	19
						G.T	160	

Source: Records Maintained in the Gram Panchayat Offices

In Cooch Behar district total number of selected women Panchayat members are eighty-eight (88) including Pradhans. In the G.P. selected for the study all women members that existed there were taken as sample. In Nadia district total numbers of selected women panchayat members are seventy-two (72). Therefore, total numbers of women panchayat members in two districts are one hundred-sixty (160).

For getting the perception of villagers, three villagers have been selected from each constituency of the women member taken as samples. In Cooch Behar district, four blocks were selected from four subdivisions each. In Cooch Behar district, Cooch Behar-II, Dinhata-I, Mathabhanga-I and Tufanganj-I from four blocks 37, 18, 18 and 15 constituencies were selected respectively. So the total numbers of selected constituencies in Cooch Behar district were 88 and total numbers of selected villagers were $88 \times 3 = 264$. Similarly in Nadia district four selected blocks, Haringhata, Karimpur-II, Krishnagar-II and Ranaghat-II were selected from four subdivisions. From the above mentioned four blocks in Nadia district 24, 19, 10 and 19 constituencies were selected respectively. So the total numbers of selected constituencies in Nadia district were 72 and total numbers of selected villagers were $72 \times 3 = 216$. In this way total selected villagers for the study were $(264 + 216 =)$ 480 (four hundred-eighty).

The following Table 1.3 shows the calculation of selected villagers from each constituency of the two districts.

Table 1.3: Selected Villagers from Each Constituency of Two Districts

Districts	Blocks	No. of Selected Constituency	No. of Selected Villagers
Cooch Behar	Cooch Behar-II	37	$37 \times 3 = 111$
	Dinhata-I	18	$18 \times 3 = 54$
	Mathabhanga-I	18	$18 \times 3 = 54$
	Tufanganj-I	15	$15 \times 3 = 45$
Nadia	Haringhata	24	$24 \times 3 = 72$
	Karimpur-II	19	$19 \times 3 = 57$
	Krishnagar-II	10	$10 \times 3 = 30$
	Ranaghat-II	19	$19 \times 3 = 57$
Total	Eight (8)	160	$160 \times 3 = 480$

Source: Field Survey

Note: Selected constituency includes Prodhans also.

1.4.2 Tools and Techniques of Data Collection

For the present study both secondary and primary data have been used. For the secondary data mainly official published data have been used. For the primary data field survey in both the districts were undertaken through interview method. A pre-designed structured questionnaire was used.

Data on the occupation and income pattern of women panchayat members, their educational status and family background, decision making power in panchayat work, consciousness about health and sanitation, knowledge regarding age of marriage, antenatal check-up, family planning, child immunization, birth place of child, managing time for both household and panchayat work, whether she can take decision independently to go anywhere and to make expenditure, level of awareness about her freedom and power, information about different government schemes on women and children development programmes were collected.

Data on interaction with villagers and maintenance of interpersonal relations have been covered. Data on the extent of help received by the villagers and the prevailing perception of villagers about performance of women panchayat members were collected through the questionnaire.

Various statistical tools have been used for analysing the data.

1.5 Chapterisation

This study contains the following eight (8) chapters:

CHAPTER 1: This chapter is **introductory**. This chapter has delineated the historical background of the entry/reservation of women in the three-tier panchayati system. It consists of objectives of the study, significance and relevance of the study, research hypotheses and research methodology.

CHAPTER 2: This chapter deals with **Review of Literature**. It has presented a brief review of relevant literature and scope of the study in detail. There is part and thematic grouping in this chapter.

CHAPTER 3: This chapter deals with **The Socio-Economic Condition of Women Panchayat Members**. This chapter has analysed about income, health, education, work-participation, house-condition, marital-status, birth place of children, number of children of women panchayat members of two districts.

CHAPTER 4: This chapter has explored **The Role of Women Panchayat Members in Decision Making Process**. This chapter has discussed about the decision making power of women panchayat members in panchayat activities as well as in their household activities of two districts.

CHAPTER 5: This chapter deals with the **Performance of Women Panchayat Members in Improving the Situation of Rural Women**. This chapter has explained the women panchayat members' performance on socio-economic conditions of their village women by implementing government policies and programmes like IAY, TSC, SGSY, MGNREGS, Antenetal care, Mid-Day Meal and others.

CHAPTER 6: This chapter has examined the **Impact of Reservation of Seats for Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions on Their Life and Livelihood**. This chapter has analysed how women panchayat members distribute their whole day on both domestic work and panchayati work.

CHAPTER 7: This chapter deals with **Perception of Villagers about the Contribution of Women Panchayat Members for Village Development on Reservation**. This chapter has discussed about the views of villagers of both the districts about the 73rd Amendment Act and the performance of the women panchayat members.

CHAPTER 8: This chapter is the concluding chapter which deals with the **Summary and Conclusion** of the study.