

CHAPTER – IV

THE ROLE OF WOMEN PANCHAYAT MEMBERS IN DECISION MAKING PROCESS

4.1 Introduction

For development, it is necessary to participate effectively in the political and democratic processes of society by all sections of the population. But unfortunately it is not possible particularly for women, because women face multiple hurdles like less mobility than men, take more domestic responsibilities than men etc. which put limits on the time what they can spend in social development processes. Besides the Constitutional rights (every citizen to contribute to the decision making process by the articles 14, 15 and 39) and opportunities, political participation of women was severely limited due to a nexus of traditional factors, these were the domination of Indian politics by considerations of caste, class religion, feudal and family status etc.

Reservation for women in local self-government is a step towards the improvement of status of women. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 introduced the in the Indian Constitution for the panchayats and laid down the reservation principles in composition of panchayats. As far as women are concerned, in terms of Article 243-D, not less than one-third of the total number of seats are to be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a panchayat. The Amendment provides for reservation of offices of chairpersons in the panchayats.

The Eighth Plan has recognized the importance of participation and involvement of women in decision-making process. It said “-----the strategy for women’s development will be on the formation and strengthening of grassroots level women’s groups which will articulate local women’s needs and play an important role in decentralized planning and implementation.” Before Eighth Plan, in 1957, in the post-Independence India, a nationwide community development programme had been launched under a study team headed by Balwantrai Mehta to aim at all-round economic development in rural area. This study team is popularly known as the Balwantrai Mehta Committee. Earlier (even after independence) Panchayat system had not get constitutional status and recognition whereas village panchayats play an important role in social transformation and implementation of development programmes and it was happened because of urban and rural elite classes and their representatives in politics.

But the Government of India realised that real progress in India will come only by rural development which is related with entire community of village, their responsibility and

through necessary leadership for implementing development programmes. The recommendations of the Balwantrai Mehta study team, favouring democratic decentralisation, accelerated the pace of constituting panchayati raj institutions in all the states and this committee recommended first the co-option of two women from amongst those who were interested in works among women and children in panchayat body and recommended also establishment of a three-tier panchayati raj. During this stage, the term “pnachayati raj” came into vogue conceptually as a process of governance. In the sphere of national democracy Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru visualised panchayat system as an organic and intimate relationship between the gram sabha and the Lok Sabha. Jawaharlal Nehru inaugurated independent India’s first panchayati raj on 2 October 1959 at Nagaur in Rajasthan. By 1959, all the states had passed panchayat acts and by the mid-1960s, panchayats had reached all parts of the country.

At the initiative the Balwantrai Mehta pattern i.e. Panchayati Raj Acts was generally followed in most states. But unfortunately, after the mid-sixties decline of interest in and support of Panchayati Raj was started. In some states, parallel bodies came to be set up at the district level, thus reducing the role of the PRIs in development, planning and implementation.

To improve the situation, a committee was set up under the Chairmanship of Asoka Mehta in 1978. This committee re-emphasised the importance of Panchayati Raj but recommended a two-tier structure – Zilla parishad at the district level and Mandal psnchayat at taluk level. After this committee’s recommendation (1978) certain states either introduced Panchayati Raj Institutions or revised their existing panchayat acts or passed new acts.

This committee also emphasised on women participation in the Panchayati Raj System at village level. For giving special attention to the role of women in the democratic process this committee recommended that allowed the women participation more actively in PRI through the election process.

In this second generation panchayats, West Bengal Government took the initiative to follow the Asoke Mehata committee’s recommendations for giving a new life to its panchayats. The main thrust of the 2nd phase was that the emphasis of development shifted from the bureaucracy to the political elements and the states.

To need the transfer of power of the state to democratic bodies at the local level, in June 1986, the Govt. of India set up a committee, headed by L.M.Singhvi to prepare a concept paper on the revitalisation of the PRIs. This committee recommended that the PRIs should be constitutionally recognised, protected and preserved by the inclusion of a new Chapter in the Constitution and suggested a Constitutional provision to ensure regular, free

and fair elections for PRIs. Accepting these recommendations of the committee, the Central Govt. brought in the Constitution 64th Amendment Bill in 1989. This PRIs system was like three-tier Panchayati Raj system at the village, intermediate and district level in all the states and union territories; reservation of seats for SCs, STs and women; guaranteed duration of five years for the panchayats at all levels etc. This bill was passed by Lok Sabha on 10 August 1989 but unfortunately, this bill was not approved by the Rajya Sabha.

The National Front Government introduced the 74th Amendment Bill (a combined bill on panchayats and municipalities) on 7th September 1990 which provided reservation of “not less than one third” seats for women in panchayats at all levels. But this bill was introduced in Parliament during its short tenure in office but it was never taken up for discussion.

In September 1991, the Congress Government under Narasimha Rao introduced the 72nd (Panchayats) and 73rd (Nagarpalikas) constitutional amendment bills. The two Constitution Bills were finally passed on 22 December 1992 in Lok Sabha and in the Rajya Sabha on the 23rd December 1992. By the time the Parliament passed the two bills, their sequence changed to 73rd and 74th respectively. The President gave his assent on 20th April 1993. The Seventy-third Amendment Act, 1992 has come into effect from 24th April 1993.

Thus the journey from the Balwantrai Mehta Committee headed by Balwantrai Mehta to the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, took approximately thirty three years to give birth (constitutionally recognition) of panchayati system and give the opportunity to women to participate in decision making process in local self-government for local level development.

The percentages of women at various levels of political activity have shifted dramatically as a result of the constitutional change, from 4-5% before to 25-40% after. The reservation of seats in the 1993-94 elections has brought in about 8, 00,000 women into the political process in a single election.

The panchayats in West Bengal are unique in many respects. It is the first and only major state which has had timely panchayat elections on party lines since 1978. The second generation (after the Asoke Mehta committee’s recommendations) of Panchayati Raj Institutions started when the West Bengal Government took the initiative in 1978 to give a new life to its panchayats on the lines of the Asoke Mehta Committee’s recommendations.

The panchayat system in West Bengal has been highly acclaimed for first of all regularity in holding panchayat election (from 1978) and introduction of Panchayati Raj along with innovative land reform measures which broke the traditional power structure of rural areas, represented by big landowners and paved the ground for the emergence of a new type of leadership of “lower-middle-class” origin. It is a good sign of West Bengal panchayat

that the power has transferred from the landlords to the lower middle class through the three-tier panchayati system. Before 1993, it was the concept that political arena was a natural domain for the males. After introducing 73rd Amendment Act the official power is transferred from male community to the women community. Even the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1992 made provisions for reservations in the West Bengal Panchayats even before the constitutional amendment. However, the reservation of office bearers was introduced subsequently and separately by another amendment in 1994.

While the states have restricted themselves to giving only the minimum mandated one-third reservation for women in panchayat membership and the chairpersons' positions, some of the states like Orissa and Assam have given them reservation in the position of vice-chairperson too.

In West Bengal, the vice-chairperson's post also has reservation for SC/ST and women on the same lines as for the posts of chairpersons. In West Bengal, the State Government endeavors to encourage the process of participatory development through amendments in the West Bengal Panchayat Act or through dictum of government orders. For example, before, the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992, the State government introduced the concept of Gram Sabha in the functioning of the Gram Panchayats. After the 73rd Amendment, the State Government amended the West Bengal Panchayat Act to extend the scope of people's participation to the village level and called it Gram Sansad.

Panchayat is the only way through which it is possible to reach the grassroots level's people. For grassroots development government can not be taken the proper decisions because it would be difficult to judge the actual needs of people. So the decentralisation of governance is very important for identification of schemes and selection of beneficiaries. The panchayats can provide guidance and act hand in hand with the government officials to serve the interests of the rural people, with bias in favour of the poor. The intention of the State Government is that the panchayats "act as a bridge between the people and the State Government thereby ensuring greater public participation in all developmental efforts of the state".

Women constitute nearly 50 percent of the population of the world, but when it comes to their representation at higher levels of political positions in the government, they account for only less than 10 per cent. Poor participation of women in politics, administration as well as managerial positions reflects, development process is half done. Until and unless women participate spontaneously in all the higher levels (political, administrative and managerial), full development cannot be reached in any country. In India, it took 43 years for realization and recognition that without women's contribution development cannot happen.

After 73rd Amendment Legislative changes in the state panchayat laws were followed by elections and by 1998, with the fresh election held after these legislative changes, more than eight lakh women had entered these newly mandated panchayats in twenty states and four union territories. At the village panchayat level, women panchayat not only play the role of chairing the meetings of the local body but also of an executive authority with a major role in successful working of the Panchayat.

In India women are in much worse position than men in terms of sex ratio, literacy rate, workforce participation, life expectancy etc. Since access to political opportunities and participation in political decision making process are important components of capability, so it is the scope for women to establish their talents and efficiency and decision making power for all round development of the country.

It is obvious that after 73rd Amendment Act participation of women in PRIs in terms of number has increased but it is very necessary to see, whether participation of women in terms of quality has improved or not. By qualitative improvement it means whether in reality women panchayat members do really participate in the local level decision making process for village development programmes or not. In the above context, the present study has been conducted with the following objectives:

- 1) To examine whether the women members attend the panchayat meeting or not;
- 2) To understand the role of women panchayat members, it is examined whether they take part in decision making process by giving their valuable opinion in the meetings or not;
- 3) To examine whether their (women panchayat members) suggestions have been accepted in the panchayat meetings by other members for development purpose or not;
- 4) To analyse their participation in the Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad;
- 5) To assess the importance of participation of women members coming from poor families.

The above objectives are relevant to assess the qualitative participation of women in local self-government.

4.2 Ways for Increasing Awareness Level for Taking Proper Decision by Women Panchayat Members

73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in India focused on political structures of rural India and gave importance to vulnerable group of population of rural area. Rural women also belong to a vulnerable group. The political awareness of this group is a safeguard of

deprivation from their right. Awareness among the women also plays important role in strengthening this system. This awareness can be improved only through knowledge. The first step towards gathering the knowledge to carry on the good governance is to become aware about their roles, responsibilities and various development programmes, issues, procedures, schemes, projects, ways of management and power. If they have more knowledge then they will be more aware about their panchayat work and they can assert their views and take decision.

4.2.1 Watching T.V.

There are various ways through which awareness level can be upgraded, like media and social interaction. Through the T.V. channels, radio and newspaper etc. people can enrich their knowledge because it provides diversified information. From different programmes, news and advertisement people can enrich themselves in diversified knowledge. To be aware of their work T.V. is one of the best media for which there is no need to know how to read and write. If panchayat members form their habits of listening to news, it would be beneficial for them and they will be more confident and conscious about their work. The following Tables present data to gather whether women panchayat members are regularly connected with updated news or not.

Table 4.1 Regularly Watching T.V. by Women Panchayat Members in Cooch Behar District

Blocks	G.P.s	No	%	Yes	%	Grand Total
Cooch Behar-II	Madhupur	6	46.15	7	53.85	13
	Patlakhawa	10	66.67	5	33.33	15
	Pundibari	4	44.44	5	55.56	9
	Sub-total	20	54.05	17	45.95	37
Dinhata-I	Gitaldaha-II	2	50.00	2	50.00	4
	Goshanimari-I	2	28.57	5	71.43	7
	Putimari-I	4	57.14	3	42.86	7
	Sub-total	8	44.44	10	55.56	18
Mathabhanga-I	Bairagirhat	1	16.67	5	83.33	6
	Pachagar	3	50.00	3	50.00	6
	Shikarpur	3	50.00	3	50.00	6
	Sub-total	7	38.89	11	61.11	18
Tufangan j-I	Balarampur-I	2	50.00	2	50.00	4
	Chilakhana-II	1	25.00	3	75.00	4
	Deocharia	3	42.86	4	57.14	7
	Sub-total	6	40.00	9	60.00	15
Total		41	46.59	47	53.41	88

Source : Field Survey

From the above Table it can be seen that at Cooch Behar –II in Cooch Behar subdivision panchayat members watch T.V. in lesser numbers compared to the district average because of non-availability of T.V. sets and due to availability of less time for entertainment and listening to news. 45.95 per cent people in Cooch Behar-II block do watch T.V. mainly for entertainment purpose. In Dinhata-I, Mathabhanga-I and Tufanganj-I more women panchayat members do watch T.V. for the purposes of entertainment as well as to listen to news. This is good for raising awareness and they also attend Gram Sangsad and Gram Sabha meeting in larger numbers. Some are not interested to watch T.V. news but they are interested in watching T.V. serials. It is also good for them because within the serials watching advertisements, related with health, education, sanitation etc. can give them the idea of social development work.

Table 4.2 Regularly Watching T.V. by Women Panchayat Members in Nadia District

Blocks	G.P.s	No	%	Yes	%	Grand Total
Harin ghata	Birohi-I	00	00	5	100.00	5
	Haringhata-I	2	22.22	7	77.78	9
	Mollabelia	1	10.00	9	90.00	10
	Sub-total	3	12.50	21	87.50	24
Karim pur-II	Dhoradaha-II	3	60.00	2	40.00	5
	Nandanpur	3	50.00	3	50.00	6
	Rahamatpur-II	3	37.50	5	62.50	8
	Sub- total	9	47.37	10	52.63	19
Krishna nagar-II	Dhubulia-I	00	00	3	100.00	3
	Nowapara-II	2	50.00	2	50.00	4
	Sadhanpara-II	00	00	3	100.00	3
	Sub-total	2	20.00	8	80.00	10
Rana ghat-II	Baidyapur-I	1	20.00	4	80.00	5
	Duttaphulia	2	22.22	7	77.78	9
	Raghunathpur Hijuli -II	2	40.00	3	60.00	5
	Sub-total	5	26.32	14	73.68	19
	Total	19	26.39	53	73.61	72
Cooch Behar+ Nadia (Grand Total)		60	37.50	100	62.50	160

Source: Field Survey

From the above Table it can be seen that except Dhoradana-II GP in Karimpur block, women panchayat members watch T.V. It is a good sign for improving awareness level.

Comparing Tables 4.1 and 4.2 above, it would be clear that percentage of women panchayat members in Nadia district watch more T.V. than Panchayat members of Cooch Behar district.

The reasons for the difference are as follows:

- i) From the Table 2.9 in chapter-2, it can be seen that in Nadia district illiteracy rate is lower than Cooch Behar district and the panchayat members in Nadia district are more educated than Cooch Behar. So for increasing their knowledge and awareness level they always try to update their knowledge and for that, they use more resource related with panchayat activities.
- ii) Non availability of electricity [near about 40 per cent women panchayat members has no electricity in their houses in Cooch Behar district. (from Table 3.20 in chapter-3)] is also a reason for non-watching T.V. in Cooch Behar district.
- iii) In Cooch Behar district women panchayat member want to enjoy their free time as a leisure time, i.e. want to take more rest that the women panchayat members of Nadia district.
- iv) Due to proximity to Metropolitan city Kolkata, its influence also affects the daily life behaviour of Nadia district's people and it automatically helps in improving their consciousness.

4.2.2 Newspaper Reading Habit

People who read newspaper daily have wider general awareness. Newspaper reader gets more information than any other electronic media users like T.V. viewers, Internet users etc. The level of consciousness increases with newspaper reading. These consciousness helps the people as well as panchayat members to take the good decision for villagers / village.

The following Tables show the newspaper reading habit of women panchayat members in selected GPs of both Cooch Behar and Nadia districts.

Table 4.3 Number of Newspaper Reader of Women Panchayat Members in Cooch Behar District

Blocks	G.P.s	No	%	Yes	%	Grand Total
Cooch Behar-II	Madhupur	6	46.15	7	53.85	13
	Patlakhawa	8	53.33	7	46.67	15
	Pundibari	5	55.56	4	44.44	9
	Sub-total	19	51.35	18	48.65	37
Dinhata-I	Gitaldaha-II	3	75.00	1	25.00	4
	Goshanimari-I	5	71.43	2	28.57	7
	Putimari-I	5	71.43	2	28.57	7
	Sub-total	13	72.22	5	27.78	18
Mathabhanga-I	Bairagirhat	5	83.33	1	16.67	6
	Pachagar	00	00	6	100.00	6
	Shikarpur	2	33.33	4	66.67	6
	Sub-total	7	38.89	11	61.11	18
Tufanganj-I	Balarampur-I	1	25.00	3	75.00	4
	Chilakhana-II	3	75.00	1	25.00	4
	Deocharia	6	85.71	1	14.29	7
	Sub-total	10	66.67	5	33.33	15
Total		49	55.68	39	44.32	88

Source : Field Survey

From above Table it can be seen that only Pachagar GP in Mathabhanga-I block in the Cooch Behar district, all panchayat members get news from newspaper. Panchayat members in Dinhata-I block, have very poor newspaper reading habit. In Cooch Behar-II and Tufanganj –I blocks more than fifty percent women panchayat members have newspaper reading habit. But all over Cooch Behar district, less than fifty percent women panchayat members have newspaper reading habit.

Table 4.4 Number of Newspaper Reader among Women Panchayat Members in Nadia District

Blocks	G.P.s	No	%	Yes	%	Grand Total
Harin ghata	Birohi-I	2	40.00	3	60.00	5
	Haringhata-I	3	33.33	6	66.67	9
	Mollabelia	6	60.00	4	40.00	10
	Sub-total	11	45.83	13	54.17	24
Karim pur-II	Dhoradaha-II	3	60.00	2	40.00	5
	Nandanpur	4	66.67	2	33.33	6
	Rahamatpur-II	5	62.50	3	37.50	8
	Sub- total	12	63.16	7	36.84	19
Krishna nagar-II	Dhubulia-I	00	00	3	100.00	3
	Nowapara-II	2	50.00	2	50.00	4
	Sadhanpara-II	2	66.67	1	33.33	3
	Sub-total	4	40.00	6	60.00	10
Rana ghat-II	Baidyapur-I	1	20.00	4	80.00	5
	Duttaphulia	3	33.33	6	66.67	9
	Raghunathpur Hijuli -II	1	20.00	4	80.00	5
	Sub-total	5	26.32	14	73.68	19
	Total	32	44.44	40	55.56	72
Cooch Behar+Nadia (Grand Total)		79	49.38	81	50.63	160

Source: Field Survey

From the above Table it can be seen that except Karimpur-II block, in all blocks more than 50 per cent women panchayat members have newspaper reading habits. Even in this district more than fifty percent women panchayat members have newspaper reading habits.

By comparing both the Tables 4.3 and 4.4 it is clear that Nadia district panchayat members have more newspaper reading habits than Cooch Behar district. The reasons are as follows:

- 1) The education level of women panchayat members in Nadia district are higher than the Cooch Behar district. Those who are more educated, they will be more interested to read the newspaper and collect the information.

- 2) Nadia district is very nearer to Kolkata in comparison to Cooch Behar district. So its political-social-economic fame comes very soon to Nadia district which motivate people to go detail and update themselves in news through the news media.

4.2.3 Social Interaction

Social interaction is one of the good ways to collect information and get aware. Panchayat members have the opportunity to interact with the people and they are responsible for solving different kinds of social problems when people come to them (panchayat members) for taking different kinds of facilities, that time also they can come to know as a panchayat what kind of things they can do for villagers and how much power they have for doing the good things. Beyond the panchayati work, improvement of awareness level of women panchayat members can be possible by interacting with villagers and for that it does not required to know reading and writing.

The following Tables 4.5 and 4.6 show the degree of social interaction of women panchayat members in Cooch Behar and Nadia districts.

Table 4.5 Public Interaction of Women Panchayat Members in Cooch Behar District

Blocks	G.P.s	No interaction with local people beyond the panchayati work with % distribution		Interaction with local people beyond the panchayati work with % distribution		Grand Total
Cooch Behar-II	Madhupur	11	84.61	2	15.39	13
	Patlakhawa	13	86.66	2	13.34	15
	Pundibari	8	88.90	1	11.10	9
	Sub-total	32	86.49	5	13.51	37
Dinhata-I	Gitaldaha-II	3	75.00	1	25.00	4
	Goshanimari-I	5	71.43	2	28.57	7
	Putimari-I	7	100.00	0	00	7
	Sub-total	15	83.33	3	16.67	18
Mathabhanga-I	Bairagirhat	5	83.33	1	16.67	6
	Pachagar	5	83.33	1	16.67	6
	Shikarpur	5	83.33	1	16.67	6
	Sub-total	15	83.33	3	16.67	18
Tufanganj-I	Balarampur-I	2	50.00	2	50.00	4
	Chilakhana-II	4	100.00	0	00	4
	Deocharia	5	85.71	2	14.28	7
	Sub-total	11	73.33	4	26.67	15
Total		73	82.95	15	17.05	88

Source : Field Survey

From the above Table it can be seen that women panchayat members in Cooch Behar district maintain their social interaction through their panchayati work. Only in Mathabhanga-I block women panchayat members (27.78 percent) maintain their social

interaction beyond their panchayat work. With the social interaction panchayat members can do their development work easily and to know what the actual problems of village are.

Table 4.6 Public Interaction of Women Panchayat Members in Nadia district

Blocks	G.P.s	No interaction with local people beyond the panchayati work with % distribution		Interaction with local people beyond the panchayati work with % distribution		Grand Total
Harin ghata	Birohi-I	5	100.00	00	00	5
	Haringhata-I	7	77.78	2	22.22	9
	Mollabelia	9	90.00	1	10.00	10
	Sub-total	21	87.50	3	12.50	24
Karim pur-II	Dhoradaha-II	2	40.00	3	60.00	5
	Nandanpur	4	66.66	2	33.34	6
	Rahamatpur-II	2	25.00	6	75.00	8
	Sub- total	8	42.10	11	57.90	19
Krishna nagar-II	Dhubulia-I	1	33.33	2	66.67	3
	Nowapara-II	1	25.00	3	75.00	4
	Sadhanpara-II	1	33.33	2	66.67	3
	Sub-total	3	30.00	7	70.00	10
Rana ghat-II	Baidyapur-I	3	60.00	2	40.00	5
	Duttaphulia	5	55.55	4	44.45	9
	Raghunathpur Hijuli -II	3	60.00	2	40.00	5
	Sub-total	11	57.89	8	40.28	19
	Total	43	59.72	29	40.28	72
CoochBehar+Nadia (Grand Total)		116	72.50	44	27.50	160

Source: Field Survey

From the above two Tables 4.5 and 4.6, it can be seen that comparatively Cooch Behar district's women panchayat members' interact less with local public than Nadia district. This social interaction is one of the best ways of gathering of knowledge as well as increase the awareness level in the way of exchanging views. But many members do maintain their public interaction through their panchayati work like giving residential certificates or income certificates or attestation of any valuable certificate etc. Most of the panchayat members told that they do their social work combinedly. Women members, located at Bangladesh border area of Dinhat block are also handling border related problems.

4.2.4 Degree of Freedom of Movement of Women Panchayat Members

Freedom movement of women is an indicator of women autonomy which influence their abilities to take decision independently. They can use their power rightfully and can handle any kind of situation very confidently. Women themselves can feel empowered and act in an empowered manner. Women's autonomy has a significant impact on their abilities. But in the patriarchal society if women do not listen to male members of their family, there is a possibility of domestic violence. This autonomy is required for women panchayat members also because their free movement (at any time in day and night) is related to give free service for any kind of social incidence in their village.

From the following tables the degree of free movement of women panchayat members in both the Behar and Nadia districts can be seen.

Table 4.7 Freedom of Movement Women Panchayat Members in Cooch Behar District

Blocks	G.P.s	Freedom movement (without taking permission) with % distribution	Restricted movement(with permission) with % distribution	Grand Total
Cooch Behar-II	Madhupur	2(15.39)	11 (84.61)	13
	Patlakhawa	6 (40.00)	9 (60.00)	15
	Pundibari	4 (44.44)	5 (55.56)	9
	Sub-total	12 (32.43)	25 (67.57)	37
Dinhata-I	Gitaldaha-II	1 (25.00)	3 (75.00)	4
	Goshanimari-I	4 (57.14)	3 (42.86)	7
	Putimari-I	3 (42.86)	4 (57.14)	7
	Sub-total	8 (44.44)	10 (55.56)	18
Mathabh anga-I	Bairagirhat	1 (16.67)	5 (83.33)	6
	Pachagar	3 (50.00)	3 (50.00)	6
	Shikarpur	1 (16.67)	5 (83.33)	6
	Sub-total	5 (27.78)	13 (72.22)	18
Tufangan j-I	Balarampur-I	3 (75.00)	1 (25.00)	4
	Chilakhana-II	1 (25.00)	3 (75.00)	4
	Deocharia	2 (28.57)	5 (71.43)	7
	Sub-total	6 (40.00)	9 (60.00)	15
Total		31 (35.23)	57 (64.77)	88

Source: Field Survey

Note : Percentage figures are within the brackets.

From the above Table it can be seen that in all the blocks of Cooch Behar district the percentage of restricted movement of women panchayat members is higher than the free

movement except in two GPs of Goshanimari-I in Dinjata-I block and Balrampur-I in Tufanganj-I block. It implies that women panchayat members cannot give their hundred percent effort in panchayati work or there is a possibility of dependence on male members' kindness. It is also creates uncertainty in the matter of attending the gram sabha – gram sangsad meetings.

Table 4.8 Freedom Movement of Women Panchayat Members in Nadia District

Blocks	G.P.s	Freedom movement (without taking permission) with % distribution	Restricted movement (with permission) with % distribution	Grand Total
Harin ghata	Birohi-I	3 (60.00)	2 (40.00)	5
	Haringhata-I	8 (88.89)	1 (11.11)	9
	Mollabelia	7 (70.00)	3 (30.00)	10
	Sub-total	18 (75.00)	6 (25.00)	24
Karim pur-II	Dhoradaha-II	3 (60.00)	2 (40.00)	5
	Nandanpur	5 (83.33)	1 (16.67)	6
	Rahamatpur-II	7 (87.50)	1 (12.50)	8
	Sub- total	15 (78.95)	4 (21.05)	19
Krishna nagar-II	Dhubulia-I	-	3 (100.00)	3
	Nowapara-II	-	4 (100.00)	4
	Sadhanpara-II	1 (33.33)	2 (66.67)	3
	Sub-total	1 (10.00)	9 (90.00)	10
Rana ghat-II	Baidyapur-I	2 (40.00)	3 (60.00)	5
	Duttaphulia	4 (44.44)	5 (55.56)	9
	Raghunathpur Hijuli -II	1 (20.00)	4 (80.00)	5
	Sub-total	7 (36.84)	12 (63.16)	19
Total	Total	41 (56.04)	31 (43.06)	72
CoochBehar+Nadia (Grand Total)		72 (45.00)	88 (55.00)	160

Source: Field Survey

Note : Percentage figures are within the brackets.

From the above Table it can be seen that there is a freedom movement of women panchayat members in all G.P.s in Haringhata and Karimpur-II blocks but the opposite picture can be seen in Krishnanagar-II and Ranaghat-II blocks. The state reports of NFHS-2 states that the freedom movement of women depends on various factors like age (less

limited in the older ages), religion (lower movement for Muslim women); earning (less restriction for earning ladies); areas (urban women enjoy more freedom than rural area) and obviously household standard of living.

In Nadia district Haringhata block is very nearer to city of Kolkata and fifty percent women members belong to 35-45 age group (from table 1.2). So, according to NFHS-2 report, there is a possibility of free movement of women members and from the above table 4.10 it is clear that in Haringhata block, 75.00 per cent women panchayat members can go freely without family restrictions. Karimpur-II block is a literate block (from table 1.8) and 63.16 per cent women members belongs to 35-45 age group. According to NFHS-2 report Karimpur-II block will be free movement for women panchayat members. The above table 4.10 states the same as NFHS-2 report. But in Nadia district other two blocks Krishnanagar-II and Ranaghat-II give the opposite picture i.e. there is a restricted movement more. Table 1.2 shows that in Krishnanagar-II block 70.00 per cent women members belong to 25-35 age group which is a young group. It is the reason for restricted movement (90.00 per cent) of women panchayat members in this block. Ranaghat-II block has also less free movement for women panchayat members whereas the highest women members belong to age group 35-45 (84.21 per cent). But due to interior and remote place are the reason of less free movement which is the similar area concept of NFHS-2 report.

From the above Table-4.8 it can be seen that all over Nadia district free movement of women members is higher than restricted movement. It is related to women autonomy which we will be discussed below.

4.3 Attending Different Public Meetings by Women Panchayat Members

To understand the decision – making process at gram panchayat level it is necessary to study their (women members) participation in their (panchayat) different meetings including (specially) panchayat and sansad meetings.

4.3.1 Attendance in Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad Meetings

From the thinking of social audit government introduced the Gram Sabha in the amendment act in 1992. The gram sabha is the only forum which can ensure direct democracy. It offers equal opportunity of direct participation of the people in the planning process as well as monitoring elected representatives. The amendment of 1992 made it obligatory on the part of the gram panchayat to hold at least two meetings of this body in a year and gave it statutory recognition.

The gram sabhas have the power to identify beneficiaries for various poverty alleviation programmes, propose annual plan, discuss the budget and audit reports and review progress etc.

In 1994 amendment of the state Act introduced a two-tier structure for facilitating direct democracy. The name of the bodies were gram sansad. At least two meetings of the sansad are compulsory – one in the month of May and the other in November. It is obligatory on the part of every gram panchayat member elected from the concerned constituency to attend such meetings. An annual meeting of the gram sabha in the month of December is compulsory.

The gram sansad has been given the following powers and responsibilities:

1. To guide and advise the gram panchayat with regard to the schemes for economic development and social justice;
2. To identify or lay down principles for fixing priority of schemes for economic development;
3. To identify or lay down principles for identification of beneficiaries of poverty alleviation programmes;
4. To constitute beneficiary committees for ensuring people's participation in implementation and maintenance of schemes;
5. To record objections for failure to implement any development scheme properly or without the active participation of the people;
6. To deliberate upon and to give suggestions and recommendations on the budget, audit report, yearly administration report and half – yearly report of the gram panchayat.

The gram panchayat shall consider the resolutions of all the sansads and place the same before the gram sabha together with its own views on them and a report on actions taken or proposed to be taken by it on such resolutions.

Table: 4.9 Nature of Attendance of Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad Meetings of Women Panchayat Members in Cooch Behar district

Blocks	G.P.s	Regularly attend	%	Not regularly attend	%	Grand Total
Cooch Behar-II	Madhupur	13	100.00	00	00	13
	Patlakhawa	9	60.00	6	40.00	15
	Pundibari	7	77.78	2	22.22	9
	Sub-total	29	78.38	8	21.62	37
Dinhata-I	Gitaldaha-II	4	100.00	00	00	4
	Goshanimari-I	7	100.00	00	00	7
	Putimari-I	6	85.71	1	14.29	7
	Sub-total	17	94.44	1	5.56	18
Mathabhanga-I	Bairagirhat	5	83.33	1	16.67	6
	Pachagar	6	100.00	00	00	6
	Shikarpur	6	100.00	00	00	6
	Sub-total	17	94.44	1	5.56	18
Tufangan j-I	Balarampur-I	4	100.00	00	00	4
	Chilakhana-II	3	75.00	1	25.00	4
	Deocharia	5	71.43	2	28.57	7
	Sub-total	12	80.00	3	20.00	15
Total		75	85.23	13	14.77	88

Source: Field Survey

The above Table shows that in Cooch Behar –II block 21.62 per cent women panchayat members are not regular to attend the Gram Sabha or Gram Sangsad meeting. Because they said that for housekeeping work they do not get time and sometimes they feel their male family members are attending the meeting regularly. So, it is no need to go to attend the meeting regularly. But the interesting picture that has been shown in the above table is that Mathabhanga women panchayat members are more politically conscious than others.

Table: 4.10 Attending Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad of Women Panchayat Members in Nadia district

Blocks	G.P.s	Regularly attendance with %		Not regularly attendant with %		Grand Total
Harin ghata	Birohi-I	5	100.00	00	00	5
	Haringhata-I	9	100.00	00	00	9
	Mollabelia	10	100.00	00	00	10
	Sub-total	24	100.00	00	00	24
Karim pur-II	Dhoradaha-II	5	100.00	00	00	5
	Nandanpur	6	100.00	00	00	6
	Rahamatpur-II	8	100.00	00	00	8
	Sub- total	19	100.00	00	00	19
Krishna nagar-II	Dhubulia-I	3	100.00	00	00	3
	Nowapara-II	4	100.00	00	00	4
	Sadhanpara-II	3	100.00	00	00	3
	Sub-total	10	100.00	00	00	10
Rana ghat-II	Baidyapur-I	5	100.00	00	00	5
	Duttaphulia	9	100.00	00	00	9
	Raghunathpur Hijuli -II	4	80.00	1	20.00	5
	Sub-total	18	94.74	1	5.26	19
	Total	71	98.61	1	1.39	72
Cooch Behar + Nadia (Grand Total)		146	91.25	14	8.75	160

Source: Field Survey

From Tables 4.9 and 4.10 it can be said that the total women panchayat members participation is not less in Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad meetings in both the districts is more than 90 percent. In Cooch Behar district the participation is less than that of Nadia district. From the data presented in the above six Tables 4.1 to 4.6 it can be said that awareness level of the women members of Nadia district is higher than that of Cooch Behar district. It implies that the participation rate of women members in Gram Sabha and Gram Sangsad is higher in Nadia district than Cooch Behar. Lower degree of awareness of members might have resulted in their less participation in Gram Sabha and Gram Sangsad meetings. Another reason for more participation of women panchayat members in gram sabha and gram sagsad meetings in Nadia district is higher freedom of movement of women panchayat members in Nadia district (Tables 4.7 and 4.8) than Cooch Behar. Even after all the above findings women panchayat member's attendance in both the Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad meetings is high which indicates a good sign. If social constraint is met up then it will be 100 per cent attendance.

4.3.2 Attendance in Party Meetings

The 73rd Amendment Act not only has started a new era in PRI, but also in the lines of more than one million women in rural area. Earlier the value of womenfolk was in domestic domain not in public affairs but this reservation increases their importance, their values in the public as well as well in the political parties. Before 1993 or 1992 women especially rural women were neither allowed to gain political information nor there was any political post available from political parties.

After 73rd Amendment all women members contested PR elections under party symbol and under the sponsorship of political party. But it is very obvious that due to no connection with intricate critical public lives and no previous experience of political roles, there should not be any expectation from the women members that they would understand responsibilities of PR and carry out successfully the PR roles. For understanding the PR roles and responsibilities, party has responsible to give the information and guidance how to play their PR roles.

Table 4.11: Attendance of Party Meetings by Women Panchayat Members in Cooch Behar District

Blocks	G.P.s	Attendance of Party meetings with %	Non attendance of Party meetings with %	Grand Total
Cooch Behar-II	Madhupur	10 (76.92)	3 (23.08)	13
	Patlakhawa	5 (33.33)	10 (66.67)	15
	Pundibari	6 (66.67)	3 (33.33)	9
	Sub-total	21 (56.76)	16 (43.24)	37
Dinhata-I	Gitaldaha-II	1 (25.00)	3 (75.00)	4
	Goshanimari-I	7 (100.00)	-	7
	Putimari-I	7 (100.00)	-	7
	Sub-total	15 (83.33)	3 (16.67)	18
Mathabhanga-I	Bairagirhat	6 (100.00)	-	6
	Pachagar	6 (100.00)	-	6
	Shikarpur	6 (100.00)	-	6
	Sub-total	18 (100.00)	-	18
Tufangan j-I	Balarampur-I	4 (100.00)	-	4
	Chilakhana-II	3 (75.00)	1 (25.00)	4
	Deocharia	5 (71.43)	2 (28.57)	7
	Sub-total	12 (80.00)	3 (20.00)	15
Total		66 (75.00)	22 (25.00)	88

Source: Field Survey

Note : Percentage figures are within the brackets.

From the above Table 4.11 it can be seen that in Cooch Behar district women panchayat members are attending political party meetings in higher proportions in Mathabhanga-I and Dinhata-I blocks than Cooch Behar-II and Tufanganj-I blocks. But the grand percentage in Cooch Behar district is 75.00 per cent which is lower than the attendance percentage in Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad meetings (85.23 per cent). Thus, it is apparent that in Cooch Behar district, attendance of Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad meetings are more important than attendance at party meetings to women panchayat members.

Table 4.12: Attendance of Party Meetings by Women Panchayat Members in Nadia District

Blocks	G.P.s	Attendance of Party meetings with %	Non Attendance of Party meetings with %	Grand Total
Harin ghata	Birohi-I	5 (100.00)	-	5
	Haringhata-I	9 (100.00)	-	9
	Mollabelia	10 (100.00)	-	10
	Sub-total	24 (100.00)	-	24
Karim pur-II	Dhoradaha-II	4 (80.00)	1 (20.00)	5
	Nandanpur	3 (50.00)	3 (50.00)	6
	Rahamatpur-II	5 (62.50)	3 (37.50)	8
	Sub- total	12 (63.16)	7 (36.84)	19
Krishna nagar-II	Dhubulia-I	3 (100.00)	-	3
	Nowapara-II	3 (75.00)	1 (25.00)	4
	Sadhanpara-II	3 (100.00)	-	3
	Sub-total	9 (90.00)	1 (10.00)	10
Rana ghat-II	Baidyapur-I	5 (100.00)	-	5
	Duttaphulia	9 (100.00)	-	9
	Raghunathpur Hijuli -II	5 (100.00)	-	5
	Sub-total	19 (100.00)	-	19
Total	Total	64 (88.89)	8 (11.11)	72
CoochBehar+Nadia (Grand Total)		130 (81.25)	30 (18.75)	160

Source: Field Survey

Note: Percentage figures are within the brackets.

From the above table it can be seen that nearly 89 per cent women panchayat members in Nadia district are attending party meetings which is higher than Cooch Behar district (75.00 per cent). So it can be easily said that women panchayat members are politically more active in Nadia than Cooch Behar district. Comparing Tables 4.2 and 4.12 it can be said that women panchayat members of Nadia district are also giving more importance in attending Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad meetings (98.61 per cent) than party meetings (88.89 per cent).

One interesting point to note here is that in Haringhata and Ranaghata-II blocks of Nadia district women panchayat members' attendance is 100 per cent in party meetings and women members attendance in party meetings in Dinhat-I and Mathabhanga-I blocks in Cooch Behar district is 100 per cent. Geographically Ranaghat-II block in Nadia district and Dinhat-I and Mathabhanga-I blocks in Cooch Behar district are very remote place. But the party meeting attendance is 100 per cent in these three blocks. So it is a very interesting finding that women members from remote areas are interested enough to attend the party meetings.

4.3.3 Attendance in Panchayat Meetings

Every Gram Panchayat is required to hold meeting at least once in every month. Such meeting shall be held on such date and at such hour as the Gram Panchayat may fix at the immediately preceding meeting. If the Gram Panchayat does not fix at any meeting the date and the hour of the next meeting or if any meeting of the Gram Panchayat is not held on the date and the hour fixed at the immediately preceding meeting, the Pradhan shall call a meeting of the Gram Panchayat on such date and at such hour as he thinks fit.

The Pradhan or in his absence the Upa-pradhan shall preside at the meeting of the Gram Panchayat; and in the absence of both the members present shall elect one of them to be the President of the Meeting. [Sec. 16]

Different records of the meetings are kept at the office of the Gram Panchayats. The activities of the gram panchayats are reflected in these documents. The meeting of the Gram Panchayat is so important that without a meeting the GP cannot do anything. For any decision they sit in a meeting, discuss and then take decision. Ghose observes that even in the case of preparation of beneficiary lists the panchayat members themselves take decision in the meeting if the lists are already prepared at the gram sansad level. There are various provisions of West Bengal Panchayat Act regarding GP meetings.

In West Bengal Panchayat Act sub section 7 of section 32A (introduced in 1997), it is mentioned that each upa-samiti shall hold at least six meetings in a year in the office of the

GP. There is a norm in the West Bengal Panchayat Act that a GP has to hold a meeting at least once a month. In case of upa-samiti meetings this rule is also followed.

From the field survey it has been seen that the women panchayat members used to go to office of the GP once a month specially when panchayat meeting is arranged. From the field survey it has been observed that in Cooch Behar district, out of 88 members 12 members go to GP office once a month only for attending the panchayat meeting and 37 members go to panchayat office twice a month specially for attending panchayat meeting and for other work. The frequency of attendance in the panchayat office reflects that panchayats interact more with panchayat office members and from the office members they can receive the updated information.

In Nadia district out of 72 selected women panchayat members only 10 members go to panchayat office once a month only for attending panchayat meeting and 14 members go to panchayat office twice a month specially for meeting and other work also. So remaining 48 members used to go to office of panchayat more than twice a month which indicates they are interested to knowing their responsibility for panchayati and officework. Comparatively women panchayat members in Cooch Behar district (44.32 per cent) used to go to the office (twice a month) less than Nadia district (66.67 per cent). So it indicates that in Nadia district women panchayat members are more active, more conscious about the panchayati work and want to know more about office work etc. than those of Cooch Behar district.

It has also been revealed in the field survey that all women panchayat Pradhan are coming to their office six days or sometimes five days a week. Another thing is that all the selected members (160) in this research study they attend the panchayat meetings. This is a good sign and good achievement for 73rd Amendment Act.

But it is not a sufficient to attend the meeting only, it is required to feel them that they have a power to involve themselves in the village development process and they are the representative of villagers. Because of that they can deliver their opinion in the panchayat meetings in front of the all panchayat members and they can take the decision.

The question is that can they place their opinion in the panchayat meetings even with their hundred percent attendance? The researcher also collected the data on this matter.

The following two Tables present whether women panchayat members have expressed their opinion freely in their panchayat meetings.

Table 4.13: Whether Women Panchayat Members Place Their Opinion in Their Panchayat Meetings in Cooch Behar District

Blocks	G.P.s	YES	NO	Grand Total
Cooch Behar-II	Madhupur	13 (100.00)	-	13
	Patlakhawa	10 (66.67)	5 (33.33)	15
	Pundibari	7 (77.78)	2 (22.22)	9
	Sub-total	30 (81.08)	7 (18.92)	37
Dinhata-I	Gitaldaha-II	3 (75.00)	1 (25.00)	4
	Goshanimari-I	7 (100.00)	-	7
	Putimari-I	7 (100.00)	-	7
	Sub-total	17 (94.44)	1 (5.56)	18
Mathabhanga-I	Bairagirhat	4 (66.67)	2 (33.33)	6
	Pachagar	6 (100.00)	-	6
	Shikarpur	6 (100.00)	-	6
	Sub-total	16 (88.89)	2 (33.33)	18
Tufanganj-I	Balarampur-I	4 (100.00)	-	4
	Chilakhana-II	3 (75.00)	1 (25.00)	4
	Deocharia	5 (71.43)	2 (28.57)	7
	Sub-total	12 (80.00)	3 (20.00)	15
Total		75 (85.23)	13 (14.77)	88

Source : Field Survey

Note : Percentage figures are within the brackets.

The above Table shows that more than 85 per cent women members taking part to place their opinion in front of all panchayat members (male and female). This is the place where panchayat members express their opinion and place their demand for their village development whereas in party meeting only party leaders direct them how they follow their (leaders) order.

Table 4.14 : Whether Women Panchayat Members Place Their Opinion in their Panchayat Meetings in Nadia District

Blocks	G.P.s	Yes	No	Grand Total
Harin ghata	Birohi-I	5 (100.00)	-	5
	Haringhata-I	8 (88.89)	1 (11.11)	9
	Mollabelia	10 (100.00)	-	10
	Sub-total	23 (95.83)	1 (4.17)	24
Karim pur-II	Dhoradaha-II	4 (80.00)	1 (20.00)	5
	Nandanpur	6 (100.00)	-	6
	Rahamatpur-II	7 (87.50)	1 (12.50)	8
	Sub- total	17 (89.47)	2 (10.53)	19
Krishna nagar-II	Dhubulia-I	3 (100.00)	-	3
	Nowapara-II	4 (100.00)	-	4
	Sadhanpara-II	2 (66.67)	1 (33.33)	3
	Sub-total	9 (90.00)	1 (10.00)	10
Rana ghat-II	Baidyapur-I	5 (100.00)	-	5
	Duttaphulia	7 (77.78)	2 (22.22)	9
	Raghunathpur Hijuli -II	4 (80.00)	1 (20.00)	5
	Sub-total	16 (84.21)	3 (15.79)	19
	Total	65 (90.28)	7 (9.72)	72
CoochBehar+Nadia (Grand Total)		140 (87.50)	20 (12.50)	160

Source: Field Survey

Note : Percentage figures are within the brackets.

The above Table states that more than ninety per cent women panchayat members place their opinion in the panchayat meeting. In all 87.50 per cent women panchayat members place their opinion in front of the panchayat members. The panchayat members cannot do anything without panchayat meeting. This process is good from decentralization point of view. In the meeting all members discuss about the different matters and then take decision. But many of the members said that the overall guidance comes from the party.

From the above Table 4.14 it can be seen that more than 87 per cent panchayat members are placing their opinion in the panchayat meeting. But it does not mean that their opinion will be accepted by their male counterpart. Many of the panchayat members said that the main decision is taken by political party and they only comply with their (party's) direction. Bandyopadhyay observes that: "it is common knowledge that different tiers of panchayats are controlled by different levels of the party hierarchy" whoever will be in power

(Bandyopadhyay, 2003). Bhattacharyya had shown in his paper that the local organisations of the CPI(M) retain total control over panchayats and also said that local party unit take the important decisions at the grass roots level of the panchayat sub-committee (Bhattacharyya,1998). Another Bhattacharyya has shown that the real authority of panchayat lies with the appropriate party unit (Bhattacharyya, 2002). Elected representatives only endorse and implement parties' decision. Ghose and Kumar (1996) said in their article that PRIs in West Bengal are controlled through the network of party organisations because they had shown that according to CPI(M) guidelines, the activities of zilla parishad are controlled by the party's district committee and gram panchayats by the local committee of the party.

4.4 Participation of Women Panchayat Members in Decision- Making Process at Household Level / Autonomy

According to Mathur (2013) legislative representation is relatively easy than participation which is more complex and challenging task. He also said that proper representation does not automatically lead to proper participation. Participation depends not only on institutional constraint but also social constraint. The barrier to the participation of women in decision-making are embedded in historical practices of social exclusion. In the patriarchal society women are used to spend more time in household work (which will discuss in chapter-6) and follow the opinion of other members in the family for domestic decisions.

According to Tyagi and Sinha (2004), the assumption of 33 per cent reservation for women in the New Panchayati Raj Act i.e. 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, since rural women play a significant part in livelihood activities of rural households and they also have better understanding of household related matters, their participation will broaden the development activities undertaken by PRIs.

Women participation in the decision making process at panchayat level is likely to be influenced by their status of decision making at household level. The degree of participation of women in decision making at household level depends upon favourable conditions prevailing at their houses and extended by the family members. Inability in taking decision within the family not only affects decision making instinct within the women but also affects the participation in decision making process at wider level for examples, in panchayat work.

In the present research study we shall discuss about women's participation in decision making at household level, taking six indicators such as purchase of domestic goods, expenditure on self, freedom of savings, freedom to go other places for earning, freedom of movement and freedom of family planning. The degree of participation in

decision making at household level signifies the women's autonomy. Autonomy is a status symbol and it is an important component of empowerment. Women autonomy and empowerment are directly related (NFHS-2). Women's autonomy has a significant impact on their ability.

For women empowerment, restructuring of gender relations both within the family and in society at large is the urgency. So the decision taking power and management within the family creates a self-image which includes realisation of one's capabilities and the potentialities and confidence within for taking action in one's life.

4.4.1 Purchasing of Domestic Goods

Purchase of domestic goods independently is a part of measuring autonomy of a person. Here we will see, whether women panchayat members can take decision independently in the case of purchase of goods for household purpose.

Table 4.15: Degree of Decision Making of Women Panchayat Members in Purchase of Domestic Goods in Cooch Behar district

Blocks	G.P.s	Her self	%	Husband	%	Others	%	Grand Total
Cooch Behar-II	Madhupur	4	30.77	9	69.23	-	-	13
	Patlakhawa	6	40.00	9	60.00	-	-	15
	Pundibari	2	22.22	7	77.78	-	-	9
	Sub-total	12	32.43	25	67.57	-	-	37
Dinhata-I	Gitaldaha-II	-	-	4	100.00	-	-	4
	Goshanimari-I	4	57.14	2	28.57	1	14.29	7
	Putimari-I	1	14.29	6	85.71	-	-	7
	Sub-total	5	27.78	12	66.67	1	5.56	18
Mathabhan ga-I	Bairagirhat	1	16.67	5	83.33	-	-	6
	Pachagar	1	16.67	4	66.67	1	16.67	6
	Shikarpur	-	-	6	100.00	-	-	6
	Sub-total	2	11.11	15	83.33	1	5.56	18
Tufanganj-I	Balarampur-I	2	50.00	2	50.00	-	-	4
	Chilakhana-II	3	75.00	1	25.00	-	-	4
	Deocharia	2	28.57	5	71.43	-	-	7
	Sub-total	7	46.67	8	53.33	-	-	15
Total		26	29.54	60	68.18	2	2.28	88

Source : Field Survey

The above table shows that for domestic purchase in majority cases decisions are taken by husbands. Decisions taken by the women panchayat members in domestic purchase is remarkably less in all blocks and especially in Shikarpur GP. Shikarpur GP in Mathabhanga-land Gitaldaha-II GP in Dinhat-I block, husbands take all the decisions in domestic purchases. It is to be mentioned that in both the GPs women panchayat members are less educated and some are illiterate also (Table 3.7) and most of the women panchayat members' age is below or equal to 35 years. These may be the reasons why husbands are not allowing their wives to take part in decision in respect of purchasing the goods for domestic purpose. Only 29.54 percent of women panchayat members are taking part in purchase in domestic goods.

Table 4.16: Degree of Decision Making of Women Panchayat Members in Purchase of Domestic Goods in Nadia district

Blocks	G.P.s	Her self	%	Husband	%	Others	%	Grand Total
Harin ghata	Birohi-I	1	20.00	4	80.00	-	-	5
	Haringhata-I	2	22.22	7	77.78	-	-	9
	Mollabelia	3	30.00	6	60.00	1	10.00	10
	Sub-total	6	25.00	17	70.83	1	4.17	24
Karim pur-II	Dhoradaha-II	2	40.00	3	60.00	-	-	5
	Nandanpur	1	16.67	5	83.33	-	-	6
	Rahamatpur-II	2	25.00	6	75.00	-	-	8
	Sub- total	5	26.32	14	73.68	-	-	19
Krishna nagar-II	Dhubulia-I	-	-	3	100.00	-	-	3
	Nowapara-II	-	-	4	100.00	-	-	4
	Sadhanpara-II	1	33.33	1	33.33	1	33.33	3
	Sub-total	1	10.00	8	80.00	1	10.00	10
Rana ghat-II	Baidyapur-I	1	20.00	3	60.00	1	20.00	5
	Duttaphulia	5	55.56	3	33.33	1	11.11	9
	Raghunathpur Hijuli -II	-	-	5	100.00	-	-	5
	Sub-total	6	31.58	11	57.89	2	10.53	19
Total		18	25.00	50	69.44	4	5.56	72
CoochBehar+Nadia (Grand Total)		44	27.50	110	68.75	6	3.75	160

Source : Field Survey

The above table shows that two GPs in Krishnanagar-II block and one GP in Ranaghat-II block, husbands are not giving any space to their wives to participate in reaching decisions to purchase the domestic goods. Among these three GPs' into two GPs' the education level of women panchayat members are better, some are passed out the X-th standard and some are more than that (from Table 3.8). Considering participation in decision making for domestic goods purchase it does not matter whether wives are educated or not. It is the perpetually perceived conviction that women's options are of less weight in decisions related with domestic matter. The above Table also shows that 72.50 percent of women are not involved in the decision regarding what they (husbands and others) purchase for domestic purposes.

4.4.2 Freedom of Doing Work Outside

Freedom to move outside is a part of economic independence of women. If women are engaged in productive activities then they can enjoy financial autonomy. According to Stromquist: "Poor women are busy women. Not only they do spend much time and energy responding to family needs, but they also face conditions such as rigid authoritarian spouse control, that limit their physical mobility" (Stromquist, 1993).

Table 4.17: Freedom of Doing Work Outside (far from the village) by Women Panchayat Members in Cooch Behar District

Blocks	G.P.s	No	%	Yes	%	Grand Total
Cooch Behar-II	Madhupur	12	92.31	1	7.69	13
	Patlakhawa	13	86.67	2	13.33	15
	Pundibari	8	88.89	1	11.11	9
	Sub-total	33	89.19	4	10.81	37
Dinhata-I	Gitaldaha-II	4	100.00	-	-	4
	Goshanimari-I	5	71.43	2	28.57	7
	Putimari-I	7	100.00	-	-	7
	Sub-total	16	88.89	2	11.11	18
Mathabhanga-I	Bairagirhat	6	100.00	-	-	6
	Pachagar	5	83.33	1	16.67	6
	Shikarpur	4	66.67	2	33.33	6
	Sub-total	15	83.33	3	16.67	18
Tufanganj-I	Balarampur-I	4	100.00	-	-	4
	Chilakhana-II	4	100.00	-	-	4
	Deocharia	6	85.71	1	14.29	7
	Sub-total	14	93.33	1	6.67	15
Total		78	88.64	10	11.36	88

Source : Field Survey

The above Table shows that women can not even take the decision about earning for the families by going outside. Only 11.36 percent women panchayat members can take the decision independently to go outside for earning purposes. So it is one kind of domination of male priorities over female as expected in a male dominated society. Frequent interactions with the world beyond the four walls of the household brings to women some respite from the drudgery and boredom of household chores spanning from early morning to late night.

Table 4.18: Freedom of Doing Work Outside (far from the village) Work by Women Panchayat Members in Nadia District

Blocks	G.P.s	No	%	Yes	%	Grand Total
Harin ghata	Birohi-I	4	80.00	1	20.00	5
	Haringhata-I	8	88.89	1	11.11	9
	Mollabelia	8	80.00	2	20.00	10
	Sub-total	20	83.33	4	16.67	24
Karim pur-II	Dhoradaha-II	5	100.00	-	-	5
	Nandanpur	6	100.00	-	-	6
	Rahamatpur-II	7	87.50	1	12.50	8
	Sub- total	18	94.74	1	5.26	19
Krishna nagar-II	Dhubulia-I	3	100.00	-	-	3
	Nowapara-II	4	100.00	-	-	4
	Sadhanpara-II	1	33.33	2	66.67	3
	Sub-total	8	80.00	2	20.00	10
Rana ghat-II	Baidyapur-I	5	100.00	-	-	5
	Duttaphulia	7	77.78	2	22.22	9
	Raghunathpur Hijuli -II	5	100.00	-	-	5
	Sub-total	17	89.47	2	10.53	19
	Total	63	87.50	9	12.50	72
Cooch Behar+Nadia (Grand Total)		141	88.13	19	11.88	160

Source: Field Survey

The above Table shows that the status of women panchayat members in Nadia district is not so different with that of Cooch Behar district so far as taking decision regarding going outside for earning purpose is concerned. So the women's condition within the four walls of their houses is more or less the same irrespective of their locations whether it is situated nearer to metropolitan city or not.

4.4.3 Freedom of Doing Savings

Concept of saving is related with income. Saving is a future security. Even if women earn money then also they have no freedom to save their money in their name or their in children's names. The following Table shows whether they have a freedom to do saving or not.

Table 4.19: Freedom of Doing Savings of Women Panchayat Members in Cooch Behar District

Blocks	G.P.s	No	%	Yes	%	Grand Total
Cooch Behar-II	Madhupur	9	69.23	4	30.77	13
	Patlakhawa	11	73.33	4	26.67	15
	Pundibari	6	66.67	3	33.33	9
	Sub-total	26	70.27	11	29.73	37
Dinhata-I	Gitaldaha-II	2	50.00	2	50.00	4
	Goshanimari-I	3	42.86	4	57.14	7
	Putimari-I	6	85.71	1	14.29	7
	Sub-total	11	61.11	7	38.89	18
Mathabhanga-I	Bairagirhat	3	50.00	3	50.00	6
	Pachagar	3	50.00	3	50.00	6
	Shikarpur	5	83.33	1	16.67	6
	Sub-total	11	61.11	7	38.89	18
Tufanganj-I	Balarampur-I	3	75.00	1	25.00	4
	Chilakhana-II	2	50.00	2	50.00	4
	Deocharia	6	85.71	1	14.29	7
	Sub-total	11	73.33	4	26.67	15
Total		59	67.05	29	32.95	88

Source : Field Survey

The above table shows that women panchayat members cannot do savings for their own or for their children without their husbands' consent. Only 32.95 percent women panchayat members have this freedom. Situation in all the blocks is more or less the same. In total about 67 percent women members cannot take the decision about their monetary security for their future.

Table 4.20: Freedom of Doing Savings of Women Panchayat Members in Nadia District

Blocks	G.P.s	No	%	Yes	%	Grand Total
Harin ghata	Birohi-I	3	60.00	2	40.00	5
	Haringhata-I	3	33.33	6	66.67	9
	Mollabelia	6	60.00	4	40.00	10
	Sub-total	12	50.00	12	50.00	24
Karim pur-II	Dhoradaha-II	3	60.00	2	40.00	5
	Nandanpur	5	83.33	1	16.67	6
	Rahamatpur-II	7	87.50	1	12.50	8
	Sub- total	15	78.95	4	21.05	19
Krishna nagar-II	Dhubulia-I	3	100.00	-	-	3
	Nowapara-II	4	100.00	-	-	4
	Sadhanpara-II	3	100.00	-	-	3
	Sub-total	10	100.00	-	-	10
Rana ghat-II	Baidyapur-I	1	20.00	4	80.00	5
	Duttaphulia	5	55.56	4	44.44	9
	Raghunathpur Hijuli -II	2	40.00	3	60.00	5
	Sub-total	8	42.11	11	57.89	19
	Total	45	62.50	27	37.50	72
Cooch Behar+Nadia (Grand Total)		100	62.50	60	37.50	160

Source: Field Survey

Table 4.20 above shows that Nadia and Cooch Behar districts have more or less same situation. But one thing is noticeable that in Krishnanagar-II block, not a single woman enjoys the freedom of saving for the future. This Table also shows that in total more than 62 percent women panchayat members cannot take the decision about savings for own and for their children.

4.4.4 Freedom of Doing Expenditure

Doing expenditure independently is a symbol of autonomy. Freedom of expenditure is related with the concept of purchase things as per their choice.

Table 4.21: Freedom of Expenditure of Women Panchayat Members in Cooch Behar District

Blocks	G.P.s	No	%	Yes	%	Grand Total
Cooch Behar-II	Madhupur	6	46.15	7	53.85	13
	Patlakhawa	11	73.33	4	26.67	15
	Pundibari	3	33.33	6	66.67	9
	Sub-total	20	54.05	17	45.95	37
Dinhata-I	Gitaldaha-II	3	75.00	1	25.00	4
	Goshanimari-I	1	14.29	6	85.71	7
	Putimari-I	4	57.14	3	42.86	7
	Sub-total	8	44.44	10	55.56	18
Mathabhanga-I	Bairagirhat	3	50.00	3	50.00	6
	Pachagar	2	33.33	4	66.67	6
	Shikarpur	3	50.00	3	50.00	6
	Sub-total	8	44.44	10	55.56	18
Tufangan j-I	Balarampur-I	1	25.00	3	75.00	4
	Chilakhana-II	1	25.00	3	75.00	4
	Deocharia	5	71.43	2	28.57	7
	Sub-total	7	46.67	8	53.33	15
Total		43	48.86	45	51.14	88

Source : Field Survey

The above Table shows that in Cooch Behar district about 51 percent women panchayat members can enjoy freedom of expenditure of their own. The above Table shows that among four blocks only Cooch Behar-II block gives different scenario, i.e. more than 54 per cent members have no freedom of expenditure. From this result one thing is clear that women panchayat members of Patlakhawa G.P. in Cooch Behar-II block have very less opportunity to do expenditure freely.

Table 4.22: Freedom of Expenditure of Women Panchayat Members in Nadia District

Blocks	G.P.s	No	%	Yes	%	Grand Total
Harin ghata	Birohi-I	2	40.00	3	60.00	5
	Haringhata-I	1	11.11	8	88.89	9
	Mollabelia	5	50.00	5	50.00	10
	Sub-total	8	33.33	16	66.67	24
Karim pur-II	Dhoradaha-II	3	60.00	2	40.00	5
	Nandanpur	3	50.00	3	50.00	6
	Rahamatpur-II	5	62.50	3	37.50	8
	Sub- total	11	57.89	8	42.11	19
Krishna nagar-II	Dhubulia-I	3	100.00	-	-	3
	Nowapara-II	3	75.00	1	25.00	4
	Sadhanpara-II	2	66.67	1	33.33	3
	Sub-total	8	80.88	2	20.00	10
Rana ghat-II	Baidyapur-I	1	20.00	4	80.00	5
	Duttaphulia	1	11.11	8	88.89	9
	Raghunathpur Hijuli -II	1	20.00	4	80.00	5
	Sub-total	3	15.79	16	84.21	19
	Total	30	41.67	42	58.33	72
Cooch Behar+Nadia (Grand Total)		73	45.63	87	54.38	160

Source: Field Survey

The above Table shows that in Nadia district more than 58 percent women panchayat members are enjoying freedom of expenditure. However, in comparison to Cooch Behar, Nadia district's women panchayat members enjoy more freedom for doing expenditure but women panchayat members in some GPs in Nadia district has poor condition about freedom of expenditure than Cooch Behar district's GPs members.

4.4.5 Freedom of Taking Decision about Family Planning

Family planning is a very important modern concept of fertility control. Large number of children in a family affects many things like education, domestic violence, domestic work load, status of the family and it directly affects the economic condition of a family. Birth of a baby is linked to the health condition of a lady. So discussion is very much required between husband and wife to take a decision about having number of children.

Table 4.23: Freedom of Taking Decision about Family Planning of Women Panchayat Members in Cooch Behar District

Blocks	G.P.s	No	%	Yes	%	Grand Total
Cooch Behar-II	Madhupur	7	53.85	6	46.15	13
	Patlakhawa	9	60.00	6	40.00	15
	Pundibari	6	66.67	3	33.33	9
	Sub-total	22	59.46	15	40.54	37
Dinhata-I	Gitaldaha-II	2	50.00	2	50.00	4
	Goshanimari-I	4	57.14	3	42.86	7
	Putimari-I	5	71.43	2	28.57	7
	Sub-total	11	61.11	7	38.89	18
Mathabhanga-I	Bairagirhat	5	83.33	1	16.67	6
	Pachagar	3	50.00	3	50.00	6
	Shikarpur	2	33.33	4	66.67	6
	Sub-total	10	55.56	8	44.44	18
Tufanganj-I	Balarampur-I	3	75.00	1	25.00	4
	Chilakhana-II	2	50.00	2	50.00	4
	Deocharia	3	42.86	4	57.14	7
	Sub-total	8	53.33	7	46.67	15
Total		51	57.95	37	42.05	88

Source : Field Survey

The above table shows that as regards family planning, in total, more than 57 percent women panchayat members' opinion in Cooch Behar district is not considered by their husbands.

Table 4.24: Freedom of Taking Decision about Family Planning of Women Panchayat Members in Nadia District

Blocks	G.P.s	No	%	Yes	%	Grand Total
Harin ghata	Birohi-I	2	40.00	3	60.00	5
	Haringhata-I	4	44.44	5	55.56	9
	Mollabelia	8	80.00	2	20.00	10
	Sub-total	14	58.33	10	41.67	24
Karim pur-II	Dhoradaha-II	2	40.00	3	60.00	5
	Nandanpur	3	50.00	3	50.00	6
	Rahamatpur-II	4	50.00	4	50.00	8
	Sub- total	9	47.37	10	52.63	19
Krishna nagar-II	Dhubulia-I	3	100.00	-	-	3
	Nowapara-II	4	100.00	-	-	4
	Sadhanpara-II	3	100.00	-	-	3
	Sub-total	10	100.00	-	-	10
Rana ghat-II	Baidyapur-I	4	80.00	1	20.00	5
	Duttaphulia	5	55.56	4	44.44	9
	Raghunathpur Hijuli -II	4	80.00	1	20.00	5
	Sub-total	13	68.42	6	31.58	19
	Total	46	63.89	26	36.11	72
Cooch Behar+Nadia (Grand Total)		97	60.63	63	39.37	160

Source: Field Survey

The above table shows that more than 63 percent women panchayat members' opinion in Nadia district about family planning is not considered by their husband. Compared to Nadia district, the status of women panchayat members regarding opinion of family planning considered by their husband is better in Cooch Behar district. In fact the condition of women panchayat members in all GPs in Krishnanagar-II Block is worse than any other GP's.

**Table 4.25: Ranking of Six Indicators of Women Panchayat Members' Regarding
Autonomy in Domestic Matters in two Districts, Cooch Behar and Nadia**

Domestic Indicators	Cooch Behar		Nadia		Cooch Behar + Nadia	
	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank
Purchase of Domestic goods	29.54	5	25.00	5	27.50	5
Free movement	35.23	3	56.04	2	45.00	2
Doing work outside the village	11.36	6	12.50	6	11.88	6
Savings	32.95	4	37.50	3	37.50	4
Expenditure	51.14	1	58.33	1	54.38	1
Family planning	42.05	2	36.11	4	39.37	3

Source : Tables 4.15, 4.16, 4.17, 4.18, 4.19, 4.20, 4.21, 4.22, 4.23 and 4.24

Note : Percentages are already calculated in respective Tables

From the above Table it can be seen that women have considerably lower autonomy in comparison with men except free movement in Nadia district and expenditure for self in both the districts. Overall women participation in household decision is the highest in the case of expenditure for the self. Throughout the world women constitute the poor, unemployed and socially and economically disadvantaged. Women's autonomy in the families plays an important role in taking decision at panchayat level because it contributes directly for confidence building within. With the enhanced decision taking capability at the household level, women can repeat the same ability in the wider platform.

Mathur (2013) has observed that gender disparity in all respects like sex ratio, literacy rate, enrolment rate for girl children and boy children is one of the reasons for the depressed status of women. This may have adverse impact on the levels of their participation in panchayats and discharging the requisite responsibilities enshrined in the Constitution of India.

So women's participation in decision making process of the panchayat system not only depends on the constitutional legislation but also depends on her ability to take decision on various matter at family level and on the social attitude of the people at large.

4.5 CHAPTER SUMMARY

For development at grassroot level proper decisions are required to be taken on the basis of actual needs of the people. This chapter has discussed the role of women panchayat members in decision making process. From the primary data we have seen that 85.23 per cent of women panchayat members in Cooch Behar district attend Gram Sabha / Gram Sansad meetings regularly and in Nadia district 98.61 per cent of women panchayat members attend the same regularly. The presence of panchayat members at the meetings makes them conscious and improve their knowledge and confidence for taking proper decisions.

53.41 per cent of women panchayat members in Cooch Behar district watch T.V. regularly and 44.32 per cent members read the newspaper which increases their awareness and gives them current information about various issues. In Nadia district 62.50 per cent members watch T.V. regularly and 55.56 per cent members' read Newspaper regularly.

Public interaction is a strong way of finding the real problems of their areas and it is the way to come close to the public and exchange their knowledge or experience to get on the fine path to carry on the good governance. In Cooch Behar district, public interaction is upto the extent of 17.05 per cent and in Nadia district, 17.05 per cent of women panchayat members do maintain interaction with local people beyond their panchayati work.

They also attend party meetings. In Cooch Behar district 75 per cent women panchayat members attend the party meetings and in Nadia district 88.89 per cent women panchayat members attend the same. These meetings also provide them information about panchayat activities.

The above things increase level of awareness of panchayat members which helps them to increase confidence to place their opinion in front of the places where it is required. 85.23 per cent women panchayat members are saying that they place their opinion in the panchayat meetings and in Nadia district 90.28 per cent members place their opinion in the panchayat meetings. But the women panchayat members have a doubt whether their opinion will be incorporated in the final decision or not.

Family support is essential to provide such confidence to women members. Ability to decide independently within the family also gives them necessary confidence to take decisions. Lack of family support, restricted movement, banking on male members of family for all important decision leads to weak participation in taking decisions at the outside of home also. Household status of women in any area is almost same irrespective of the area where she belongs to.