

ABSTRACT

Gandhiji said "if the village perishes India will perish too". In India about 70 per cent population live in rural area and among them 48.6 per cent population are female. Rural women in India participate heavily in agricultural activities. 75 per cent women are engaged in agricultural sector. In 2009, nearly 94 per cent of female agricultural labour force in crop cultivation were engaged in cereal production (Census, 2011). Despite their dominance in labour force in rural areas women in India still face extreme disadvantage in terms of pay, land rights, health and others. Due to lack of empowerment they face negative externalities such as lower educational attainment, poor health, less opportunity to become representatives of any kind of organisations, low power to take decision inside as well as outside of their houses etc.

Our economy can be changed from developing to developed only by utilising properly women capabilities-energies-knowledge and dedication as human resource for development purposes. This is possible only if women community themselves become conscious socially, economically and politically. Now a days political position is the weapon of power of development. In rural area, Panchayati Raj is an institution of power of politics. Panchayat representatives are the medium of implementing these powers in grassroot levels. Women panchayat members including Pradhans can use their power for rural development through the socio-economic development of rural women. 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) gave this opportunity to rural women by introducing 33 per cent reservation in the three-tier panchayati system.

In this study, researcher has found out whether women panchayat members are interested to improve the socio-economic conditions of rural women by implementing different governmental socio-economic development policies and programmes which has far reaching effect on rural economy. Main objectives of the present study are as follows:

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 different 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 for girls 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;

For the purpose of carrying out the study the researcher has made an attempt to find out answer to some research questions which are given below:

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?

Researcher has used the following methodology for her study.

The research study is based on micro level investigation in two districts i.e. Cooch Behar in North Bengal which is near about 700 km far from state capital, Kolkata and Nadia in South Bengal which is about 123 km far from Kolkata. From each district we have considered equal number of subdivisions i.e. four subdivisions. In Cooch Behar district these are Cooch Behar Sadar, Dinhata, Mathabhanga and Tufanganj sub-divisions. From Nadia district these four sub-divisions are Kalyani, Ranaghat, Krishnagar Sadar and Tehatta. One block has been chosen randomly from each subdivision of the districts. 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 members only. In Cooch Behar district total number of selected women Panchayat members are eighty eight (88) including Pradhans and in Nadia district, total number of selected women panchayat members are seventy two (72). Thus, total number of selected women panchayat members (including Pradhans) in two districts is one-hundred sixty (160).

For getting the perception of villagers, three villagers have been selected from each constituency of women member taken as samples. In Cooch Behar district total number of selected constituency is eighty eight (88) and total number of selected villagers are $88 \times 3 = 264$ (two hundred sixty-four). Similarly in Nadia district it is $72 \times 3 = 216$ (two hundred sixteen). Total number of selected villagers in both the districts is $264 + 216 = 480$ (four hundred and eighty).

The study contains eight (8) chapters.

First chapter is introductory chapter in which objectives, methodology, research questions and chapterisation are there.

Second chapter contains literature review from where we have identified research gap. This research work is different from other studies related to women panchayat members, because it studied not only the comparative position of participation of women in three tier panchayati system in two different districts in different regions based on distance from state capital but also there is a focus on how much women panchayat members are able to do development work for rural women by using their political and administrative power, knowledge, capability, efficiency etc.

Third chapter deals with socio-economic condition of women panchayat representatives. Women panchayat representatives mostly come from lower income group. Educational qualification of women elected members in Cooch Behar district is lower than Nadia district. But most of the women panchayat members' education level is up to 8th standard. For analysing socio-economic condition of women panchayat members, we use other factors also like caste, minimum age at marriage, number of children, electricity connection, marital status etc.

Fourth chapter deals with the role of women panchayat members in decision making process. From this chapter it can be seen that more than 90 per cent of women members are attending Gram Sabha, Gram Sansad and Panchayat meetings. We have

seen that in some constituency, 100 per cent women panchayat members are attending these meetings. They not only attend the meetings but also place their opinion during the meetings. But they are not sure whether their opinions are considered for implementation in development and ensuring social justice. From the analysis of this chapter we have seen that within the family women panchayat members are less important to take decision on household matter. 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 matters at family level and on the social attitude of the people at large.

Chapter five deals with the role of women panchayat members in improving the plight of rural women. This chapter analyses women panchayat representatives' performance in almost all women and child development related government programmes. In this chapter we have seen that Nadia district is more successful in SHGs' economic activities in comparison with Cooch Behar because 27.72 per cent women panchayat members in Nadia district keep contact with SHG members whereas in Cooch Behar district only 12.28 per cent women panchayat members keep contact with the SHGs members. From the field survey we come to know that women panchayat members do not know about the special facilities of women beneficiaries under NREGA. They only know that rural women can do work under NREGS project by showing their Job Cards. Women panchayat members in Nadia district had allotted more IAY to the names of women only than Cooch Behar district women panchayat members. Form the primary data we get that women panchayat members in Cooch Behar district are giving less importance to latrine facilities than drinking water for rural women but opposite is true for Nadia district. According to women panchayat members' opinion more girls get married before attending the age of 18 years in Cooch Behar district than Nadia. According to women panchayat members' opinion, pregnant ladies in Cooch Behar district still do not go to any health institutions for antenatal check-up as well as for giving birth of a baby. This chapter brings out that women panchayat members are doing their work but are not able to do up to their expectation. The reasons are male members' interference due to women panchayat members' lack of knowledge and unawareness and constraint of domestic work.

Sixth chapter has discussed about the impact of reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions on their lives and livelihood. From this chapter after thorough analysis, we find out that most of the women representatives spend more than 70 percent time in their domestic work rather than their panchayati/public work. It leads them (women panchayat members) to become more dependent on others specially to male counterpart.

Chapter seven deals with perception of villagers about the contribution of women panchayat members to village development. From this study we have seen that only 8.54 percent of villagers answered affirmatively about/for women panchayat member's performances related with women development issues. But it is not expected to get genuine answer from the villagers because some might belong to opposition party, thereby giving wrong answer about the performance of women panchayat members. On the other hand, if the respondent belongs to same party as that of the women panchayat member, then there is a chance that he or she will give answer exaggerate. So it is difficult to draw actual picture about the performance of women panchayat members.

Last chapter i.e. **chapter eight** has provided the summary, conclusions and suggestions. Panchayat members are public representatives. The first objective of panchayat is to facilitate socio-economic development and ensure social justice. To do their work properly it is required to understand the situation of the village and the government policies and programmes. Due to better work at grassroot level it is required that at least 10th standard pass candidates get chance to nominate their names for panchayat election.

If number of children of women panchayat members is high then workload at house is also high. So it is required to maintain maximum two children irrespective of caste and religion of the members and if it is maintained then it will also be the good message to the other rural women.

From the primary data we have seen that most of the panchayat members are coming from low economic status. To minimize the issue of corruption and to increase the frequency of attendance of members in the Anchal office, it is essential to increase monthly honorarium for Panchayat Pradhans as well as members.

For making the women's participation compulsory in the decision making process, it would be better to make it mandatory for every women member to express her opinion in the meeting and minutes of their opinion during the meeting have to be recorded thereafter.

Some members' houses are situated in the interior place where communication is almost non-existent. To enable the members to visit their office regularly, it would be in the interest of society to provide them bi-cycle.