

CHAPTER – I

INTRODUCTION

1.1: Introduction

People's participation through decentralized governance and making of institutions for the purpose is a perennial quest for thinkers. While the traditional thinking on decentralisation both in the East and the West has been to restrict and limit the centralised power of the coercive state, the modern search for decentralisation is focused on the bottom-up process of decision-making. In second half of the twentieth century, democratic decentralisation gained importance in the backdrop of development, which was supposed to be the 'panacea' for all the newly independent countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. India, after independence on 15th August 1947, ventured for a federal polity. The Constitution, however directed the State in Article 40 to take steps to organize village Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of local self-government. After forty years of experiments in democratic decentralisation, the constitutional directive was taken seriously and by 73rd (Amendment) Constitution Act of the Constitution, the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) were accorded Constitutional sanction. In order to ensure effective participation of the people in line with the requirements of local democracy as well as to revitalize and reorient the civil society, new institutions in the form of Gram Sabha were brought into being. The state of West Bengal pushed the idea of local democracy a step further by devising another institution below the Gram Sabha, namely, Gram Sansad to ensure more effective and more functional grassroots democracy.

Consequently, people's participation in democratic processes as well as developmental activities assumed new and challenging dimensions.

1.2 Objective of the study:

Under the circumstances, the present study seeks to identify and measure the level of people's participation in the grassroots democratic institutions particularly in the newly devised institution of Gram Sansads. In fact, with the introduction of the Gram Sansad below the Gram Sabha, there have been claims and counter claims regarding the kind, nature and extent of participation in the Gram Sansads. Given these, it was found pertinent to make an objective assessment of the kind, nature and extent of participation in these grassroots democratic institutions, particularly that of women so that a generalization could be drawn as to the operational aspect of the Gram Sansads and as to the feasibility of this novel institution to become a model to be replicated.

In fine, the present study seeks to explore and evaluate the empowerment of women through decentralised governance in the light of the experiences of the participation of the people in general and women in particular in the newly created institution of Gram Sansad in West Bengal.

1.3 Conceptual Framework:

Participation, Decentralised Governance and Empowerment- these three concepts are mainly used for analysis the proposed study. These concepts are elaborately discussed in following paragraphs.

1.3.1 Participation

Various scholars define participation in different way. Macpherson's view on participation is that participation, as empowerment is both a goal of change and a method of change (Macpherson, 1973).

Micheal Kaufman states that, participation is a means to tap and harness the energies of the population to: identify human and material resources; recognize problems as they emerge; and mobilize the population to find solution, whether at a workplace, school, neighborhood, or beyond (Kaufman, 1997).

According to Kliksberg, participation entails increased productivity, higher morals, cost reductions, better customer service, more innovation and creativity, reduced absenteeism and personnel turnover in the present day organizations. It is a bottom-up approach resulting from the shared and collective responsibility of the workers in the organization. According to Kliksberg, participation takes into account the historic, cultural and distinctive aspect of the population. This helps the community to identify and priorities its needs, know the cultural barriers and the opportunities that lie within the local culture and get a contract feedback, which will help in future planning. It creates a climate of trust by getting vital input from the workers and the clientele. It enhances self-esteem, collective responsibility, shared vision, solidarity and trust. (Kliksberg, 2001)

According to Burkey, People's Participation is development activities that should be seen not only as a means to an end, but also as an end in itself. (Vayunandan and Mathew, 2004)

K. S. Venkateshwari's view on the Participation of women is that, the politics on women upliftment are often reflected in election manifestoes of political parties. In Indian socio-political setup, it is unfortunate, women are not only deprived and by-passed but

marginalized in decision making. Needless to say, it has accelerated gender injustice, thus defeating the objective of attaining equality. To overcome the problem of gender injustice, it is desirable that women should get enough representation in governance- national and regional. Participation of women in politics may influence the government and act as a process of social transformation. Collective involvement of women in politics can make all the developments of the government and can raise the question against gender blindness. (Venkateshwari, 2009)

According to Moamenla Amer, Political awareness has been shown to play a significant role in explaining variation in Political Participation. It is generally assumed that the higher level of political awareness, the higher would be the level of participation in electoral activities. As one increase, so does the other. (Amar, 2009)

Participation, as defined in a UNESCO document, is 'collective sustained activities for the purpose of achieving some common objectives, specially a more equitable distribution of the benefit of development. (UNESCO, 1979)

Participation means that people are closely involved in the economic, social, cultural and political processes that affect their lives. (Human Development Report, 1993, pp 21) The Human Development Report 1993 puts it, any proposal to increase people's participation must pass the empowerment test-does it increase or decrease people's power to control their lives? This test applies to all institutions that organize or affect human lives.

According to N.C.Saxena, Participation should include the notions of contributing, influencing, sharing, or redistributing power and the control, resources, benefits, knowledge and skills to be gained through beneficiary involvement in decision making. Participation is a voluntary process by which people, including the disadvantaged (in income, gender, caste, or

education), influence or control the decision that affect them. The essence of Participation is exercising voice and choice, and developing the human, organizational and management capacity to solve problems as they arise in order to sustain the improvement. Participation should not only stop at information sharing or consultation, but decision making and initiating action are important and essential component of participation. Self-initiated actions are clear sign of empowerment. People Participation can contribute to the achievement of four main objectives; effectiveness; efficiency; empowerment; and equity. There are three outcomes of participation- learning, empowerment and a vibrant organization. (Saxena, 1998)

Vayunandan and Mathew define People's Participation that, participation here is referred to the consultation, involvement and empowerment of the people. It implies that people participate in decision making, design, formulation, implementation, evaluation and monitoring of various programmes and development projects concerning them. According to Cohan and Uphoff, participation is the involvement of the people in the decision-making processes, in implementing the development programmes, sharing the benefits and evaluating such programmes. (Vayunandan and Mathew, 2004)

The Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) considers people's participation not just the process of involvement of people in project activities but rather it is the process by which rural people are able to organize themselves and are able to identify their own needs, share in design, implementation and evaluation of participation action.

Vigoda finds that participation is becoming the strategic goal of modern democracies. It flows partnership and collaboration between multiple actors, i.e., the citizens, government and other social players. According to Jagannathan, 'involvement' may be the more appropriate

and acceptable concept than 'participation'. He elaborates stating that while participation implies sharing, involvement connotes a 'sense of belongingness'. (Sastry and Kumar, 1990)

According to Giri, Women's participation in political process is important for strengthening democracy and for their struggle against marginalizing, trivialization and oppression. Emergence of women as a strong group would change the prevailing political practices, the nature and content of debates in the legislature and women's issue can be taken care of from the feminist perspective both in policy formulation and implementation. In general, participation at local level can be viewed from two agenda-quality and quantity. As far as the qualitative aspect is concerned, there are three level of quality of participation; passive participation, active participation and decision-making participation. It can be said that, 33% reservation for women in PRIs is a good step but it should be supplemented with effective measure that ensure the qualitative aspect of women's participation. The message of women's empowerment and social development should be clearly sent across the masses. To influence and lead effectively, women representatives must develop and use legitimate power. The empowerment of urban as well as rural women can be made possible not only through reservation but it also requires removal of the causes of disempowerment whether social, cultural, economic, political or psychological. (Giri, 2010)

1.3.2 Decentralised Governance

Decentralization is the process of redistributing or dispersing functions, powers, people or things away from a central location or authority. (Wikipedia, 2014)

Sundaram (2008) found that decentralization necessary to ensure active and collective involvement in decision making; effectively utilize locally available resources give due importance to interests of different groups, and ensure sustainability of the process and

investments. Decentralized planning alone can make plans relevant to local needs and conditions. It can increase community involvement in provision of public services. It also increases people's control over their own lives and livelihoods. It can help community based action. The grater virtue of decentralized planning is that it ensures transparency and accountability among stakeholders. It also defines the true role and responsibility of the stakeholders. It has the great merit of inclusiveness and openness. In fact, decentralized planning also can lead to the empowerment of the people. (Sundaram, 2008)

According to K.K.Mor, the democratic decentralization can lead to good governance only if the Gram Sabha is strengthened. It is only this institution which can ensure the transparency and accountability of the elected representatives and officials of the Gram Panchayats. Hence, the capacity building on the Gram Sabhas through their empowerment and training is utmost essential. (Mor, 2010)

Decentralization has for some time been seen as a means by which the state can be made more responsive, more adaptable to regional and local needs than is the case with a concentration of administrative power and responsibility in the central state. No least it moves administration out from the capital to the region cities, towns, and the villages. But decentralization of government in itself does not necessarily involve devolution of power. The extension of the state outwards and downwards can equally serve the objective of consolidating the power of a state at the center as well as that of devolving power away from the central state; can both extend the state's control over people as well as the people's control over the state and its activities. Decentralization is a two edged sword. (Webster, 1992)

According to M. R. Biju, decentralization both political and administrative is the means of promoting people's participation and cooperation in the process of democratic decentralization, democracy and development. (Biju, 2007)

Sivaram (2007) describes that decentralization, the transfer of authority of plan, make decisions and manage public functions from the national level to any organization or agency at the sub-national level. Thus a clear role with adequate power and finances, accountability to the higher level of administration as well as to the public and public participation constitutes the hallmark of decentralization. The concept of autonomy is an important component of decentralization and that for autonomy to be meaningful; the PRIs should take over administration, finance and delivery system. (Sivaram, 2007)

In fine, decentralization denotes the transfer of power and responsibilities from the state to the para state agencies and organizations for the sake of rational decision making, efficient administration and effective distribution of benefits to the deserved section of the society.

1.3.3 Empowerment

According to Koko, empowerment may be described as a process which helps people to assert their control over the factors which affect their lives. (Koko, 1992)

According to Pamecha and Khatik, empowerment of women means developing them as more aware individuals, who are politically active, economically productive and independent and are able to make intelligent decisions in matters that affect them. (Pamecha and Khatik, 2005)

Pinto found empowerment is the development of skills and abilities of people to enable them to manage themselves. The process of empowerment includes many components and being with economic independence, knowledge and awareness is the second component and the

third self image and the final is autonomy. Empowerment of women puts emphasis on their education, health and employment. (Pinto, 1995)

Empowerment as a concept was introduced at the International Women's Conference in 1985 at Nairobi, which defined it as redistribution of social power and control of resources in favour of women. (Thakur, 2010)

Saxena states that, empowerment is a result of participation on decision making. An empowered person is one who can take initiative, exert leadership, display confidence, solve new problems, mobilize resources, and undertake new actions. Empowerment, it is hypothesized, is an important outcome of high level participation involving control over decision for a range of activities. Empowerment is a leading outcome of successful capacity building at the individual and institutional level. (Saxena, 1998)

V. M. Rao, emphasizes the importance of empowerment of women in India's inclusive growth and development. It presents a brief review of recent societal changes creating preconditions favorable for empowerment of women and of trends indicating growing empowerment of women though the pace that is still low and some barriers are still present. (Roa, 2010)

According to Lakshinarayan, empowerment means giving legal and moral power to an individual in all spheres of life- social, economic, political, psychological, religious and spiritual- which are essential for the survival and overall development of the mankind. Every society has known racism, sexism, authoritarianism, xenophobia-depriving men and women of their dignity and freedom. In broader terms empowerment is nothing but a religious, cultural and legal struggle against oppression, injustice and discrimination. Empowerment expresses the bold idea that all people have claims to social arrangements that protect them

from the worst abuses and deprivations and secure the freedom for a life of dignity. It is also a process of enhancing human capabilities to expand choices and opportunities so that each person can lead a life of respect and value. In other words, it refers to giving power to individual in all spheres of life which are essential for the survival and overall development of the mankind. (Lakshminarayan, 1999)

1.4 A Brief overview of Existing Literature:

Prabhat Dutta viewed that Panchayat is the next-door institution serving the people. Sensitivity towards ordinary people is necessary. Some lacuna in this respect is observed. The news of death due to hunger in rural West Bengal that come to us through newspapers are happening because of this lack of sensitiveness. The sensitiveness which helped the Panchayats to resist the fatal flood of 1978 must be alive everywhere. A recent study shows that a portion of the population in some backward districts cannot rely on the Panchayat system. This is alarming news. Panchayat is the next-door institution for government and self-rule. Panchayats should analyze why such incidents occurred. What we need is more committed, pro-people, sensitive and class conscious Panchayats. (Dutta, 2008)

The Mukarjee-Bandhapadhyay Report pointed out how the strong hold of the landowners had already received a joint through massive drives in 1967-70 under the two United Front Governments for detaching and taking over lands that had been clandestinely retained by landowners, violating the land ceiling laws. Over a million acres of good agricultural land was taking over during 1967-70. This considerably weakened the hold of the big landlords who had traditionally led the rural society. Thus, when the first Panchayat election took place in 1978, the power structure of the rural area had already altered considerably. As a result, instead of empowering the already-powerful Panchayats in West Bengal place power in the

hands of newcomers who could be relied upon to implement land reforms measures faithfully. In this way, land reforms and Panchayats supported each other. In turn the Panchayats played an active role in the enforcement of the agrarian reform programme of the Left-Front government administration. This involved identifying the beneficiaries, supporting them against possible threats by the landlords, and helping the land bureaucracy register the leases of sharecroppers so as to enable them to take advantage of the tenancy laws. (Bandhpadhyay and Mukharjee, 2004)

From the view point of Ramachandran that the important feature of West Bengal Panchayats is that many people from the lower and middle range of the rural society, poor peasants, sharecroppers, agricultural labourers and school teachers for the first time came to hold seats of power and resource distribution in the rural areas. Sample surveys conducted after the 1978 election representatives of village councils came from household owing less than two acres of land. (Ramachandran, 1997)

Gazdar and Sengupta observed that the responsibilities of the village council have changed over time but typically include administration of public health, primary education, drainage and sanitation, provision of drinking water, maintenance of public utilities, agricultural extension, irrigation, poverty alleviation, land reform, electrification, and housing provision. Resources for various poverty alleviation programmes are now distributed through the Panchayats instead of the state level ministries. More than half of the development expenditure of the state is made through the Panchayats. (Gazdar and Sengupta, 1997)

Benarjee conducted a study carried out in the four districts in West Bengal on 50 Gram Panchayat women members asked women to describe their contribution to community development. Most of women (60 per cent or 30 women) claimed to have played an active

role in maintenance of roads, tube well construction, and maintenance of school buildings, drainage system and water supply. Some of them had tried sincerely to work towards women's empowerment by taking initiative in providing loans to rural women, protesting against injustice like divorce, child marriage and molestation and helping villagers in general. The remaining 40 per cent were not involved and the reasons given were that male resistance prevented their active participation, not allow them to work in the Gram Panchayats. This implies that in the absence of such resistance women who were not active would have been equally able to contribute towards the overall development of their communities. (Banarjee, 1995)

Ghatak and Ghatak observed that the experiences of West Bengal under the Panchayat System stands in sharp contrast with that of other states and, together with land reform, it has been credited for playing an important role in the impressive economic turnaround of the state since the mid 1980s. West Bengal is the first and the only major state to have had timely Panchayat elections on a party basis regularly every five years since 1978. However, despite its pioneering status in terms of reforms of the Panchayat System, West Bengal lags behind several other states today in terms of devolution of power, finances and functions to the Panchayat. Also, the extent of people's participation in the planning process is significantly less compared to that in Kerala where under the ambitious People's Plan Campaign launched in 1996 villagers were directly empowered to prepare detailed development plans that are then put to vote in popular village assemblies. It is true that the very durability of the Panchayat reforms in West Bengal has enabled detailed studies to reveal many of its weakness compared to Kerala where the reforms started almost two decades later. Nevertheless, the need for reforms that will bring the Panchayat System in West Bengal

closer to the ideal of participatory governance, something that goes beyond the mere right to vote elected officials out of power every five years, is wider recognized. The village constituency meetings are being held in West Bengal only for the last couple of years. Since 1998 meetings have been regularly held in practically all of the around forty-five thousand constituencies over the state. (Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002)

Erik Bryld believed that good governance and decentralization have become two of the main development pillars, relied on by both international development agencies and the authorities in developing countries in the quest for successful development. In India steps have been taken to increase the participation of the weaker sections of the society in new arrangements for decentralized local decision-making through rules of reservation. He discloses the potential and the pitfalls of increasing participation through decentralization by analyzing the Indian Panchayat Raj system. It is shown how technocratic regulations are not sufficient to ensure genuine empowerment for all in democratic decision-making. The question whether decentralization can be justified as one of the main means to development remains to be observed. (Bryld, 2001)

K. Suman Chandra established that the devolution process of democracy to people in the real sense should mean that the 'Panchayat' functions as the executive body to give concrete shape to the wishes and aspiration of the village community as represented by the Gram Sabha. The objective of Panchayati Raj, thus, is to establish a participatory democracy so that at the village level, the Gram Sabha, consisting of all adult resident of the village, should not only deliberate, but also participate in Gram Panchayat in planning and implementing various programmes for economic development and social justice. On the basis of experiences derived from the functioning of the Panchayati Raj System over the years it was felt that it

needs constitutional backing with main trust on reservation to marginalized section and participation of people through Gram Sabha and hence resulted in 73rd Amendment. But in spite of 73rd Constitutional Amendment there are numbers of social hurdles in terms of political space for everyone to participate equally. A ripple has been created by the spirit of 73rd Constitutional Amendment in terms of reservation of seats and ensuring of regular conduct of Gram Sabha. This has created counter waves against existing dominant forces in the rural areas. A new 'social dynamism' is likely to surface if the people actively participate in Gram Sabhas. Reservation for the weaker sections at the grass root level built into the system will operationalise only when there is a congenial atmosphere among the people. In spite of the limitation this will help the marginalized sections to move up the ladder in governing their own affairs in the rural areas. Keeping in view of the above facts few recommendation/ suggestions are prescribes by the author, which will help, in better ensuring of participation of weaker sections in Gram Sabha. The difficulties of implementation of the provisions of 73rd Constitutional Amendment should not deter us from finding solutions to make sure that marginalized sections will have their due say in the process of direct democracy. (Chandra, 2002)

Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2003, 2004) used village-level data collected in a single district (Birbhum) in West Bengal, and a single district (Udaipur) in Rajasthan, to study the impact of minorities' leadership on policy decisions. They found that women Pradhans elected to reserved seats invested more in drinking water and roads in Birbhum and drinking water in Udaipur. Women residents expressed greater concerns for these public goods compared to others. Hence the reservations helped move spending on different public goods in line with women's preferences.

Bardhan and Mookherjee observed that the experience of West Bengal with respect to Panchayat Raj has been unusual in many respects relative to many other Indian states. With the advent of the Left Front dominated government at the state level since 1977, a functioning three level Panchayat System with mandated elections every five years was instituted since 1978. Significant responsibilities previously in the domain of the state bureaucracies were devolved de facto to these Panchayats. These include responsibility in implementing land reforms, identifying beneficiaries for land transfers, IRDP loans, agricultural extension programs, employment programs (such as NREP, RLEGP, JRY), housing and other welfare programs, raising local revenues from taxes and non-tax sources, and administering local infrastructure projects. West Bengal thus has experience with a functioning Panchayat System for over a quarter century, well in advance of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments passed in 1993. This long experience provides a unique opportunity to study how well the Panchayats have implemented programs of poverty alleviation, by measuring targeting (the fraction of resources that were delivered to intended beneficiaries), observing changes in targeting over time within villages, and how these have been associated with changing patterns of inequality of land, literacy and gender, and of political competition in Gram Panchayat elections. (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2005)

Manu Gouraha (2006) shows in his paper the ground realities that women leaders face in the process of functioning of the Panchayati Raj Institution. The paper deals with the problem in three sections. First section provides glimpses of the trends in the emergences of new leadership. Reservation provided avenues for women to fill in the vacuum that had existed through centuries. Caste equations and affiliation rather than qualification is the name of the game. Weber's bureaucracy, wherein he claims that the modern bureaucracy is to be

governed by persons having appropriate skills required for the job, seems to fail here. Even disguise leadership in the form of ‘Sarpanch Pati’ was found in the course of collection of data for this study. Second section concerns the leadership challenges that the newly elected women leaders face. This section evaluates how traditional values dominate over modern values. A clear case of ‘cultural lag’ is conspicuous when women’s participation in the functioning of Panchayat is concerned. This can be observed in their decision making process also. Finally, in the last section, the paper covers the changes needed for ‘real’ empowerment of women. An over-all attitudinal change coupled with awareness and education can bring about environment conducive to changes.

Deepika Gupta (2006), views that the New Panchayat Raj System was considered to be a model of self-rule. However, the working of Panchayats in the last decade proved to be abusive of the desired objectives. One of the reasons for this phenomenon has been the structural weakness. She analyzes the structural aspects of Panchayat Raj in Madhya Pradesh. She examines the process and the emerging form of Panchayat Raj Institutions at the lowest level of the system, i.e., Village Panchayat level. It also [asks] which should be the prime structure in the set-up of the Panchayat Raj System to give effect to the ideas of implementing Panchayat Raj: Gram Sabha, Gram Panchayat and its committees .

S.S.Sree Kumar (2007), in his article entitled on ‘Women Empowerment through Panchayati Raj Institutions: A Study’ concludes that, with the passing of 73rd Amendment Act., almost all the states in India have enacted laws to establish the new patterns of Panchayati Raj System. Three institutions work as pillars for citizen participation in development administration in rural India. Advent of new setup at the local level increased people’s participation especially women at the grassroots level. It helped women to know their rights

and to gain awareness and orientation regarding the fact that they are in no way backward in the society. The important Constitutional Amendment and the other statuses followed surely help to improve the position of rural women. Empowerment in the real sense would be attained when women are actively induced in the larger struggle for social change. Entry of women into decision-making process can change the existing situation. If women are associated at different levels, it is bound to affect public policy. The role of women in political participation and social welfare activities results in reducing gender disparity which will lead to better human development.

Sisodia viewed that from the point of view of women reservation it is a landmark decision that 33% of the seats are reserved for women. Women are being considered as a backward class because of their negligible representation in political process. As a result of this statutory provision of reservation for women, situations have dramatically changed. It is generally believed of the rural women that their responsibilities are confined merely up to kitchen and farms. This prolonged myth is changed as a result of big number of women joining the Panchayat Election. (Sisodia, 2007)

Nupur Tiwari's (2008) in her study "Women in Panchayati Raj" pointed out that the traditional institutes of local governance have not given space for women. The implementations of reservation of Panchayats women have got an opportunity to raise their concerns and opinion in Gram Sabha. Their experiences in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIS) have also been varied and at times startling. Nevertheless, women in Panchayati Raj Institutions still lack the capacity and capability to raise voice against the various issues. The opportunities relating to raising issues and participating in decision making process need to be strengthened by adequate training and capacity building. This may help these women

representatives tide over the social and economic disadvantage and face male domination and bureaucratic apathy. (Tiwari, 2008)

Bardhan, Dilip Mookherjee and Monica L. Parra Torrado in their study entitled on “Impact of Political Reservation in West Bengal Local Governments on Anti-poverty Targeting” observed that political reservation for disadvantaged groups is believed to be a way of improving targeting of publicly provided goods to those groups. This paper examines the impact of political reservations for women and scheduled castes and tribe (SC/ST) candidates in local governments in West Bengal, India between 1998-2004 on targeting to landless, low caste and female-headed households. It differs from existing literature by differences in geographic coverage, time span, and use of self-reported household benefits across a broad range of programs. Reservation of chief executive (pradhan) positions in local government for women was associated with a significant worsening of within-village targeting to SC/ST households, and no improvement on any other dimension of targeting. Reservation of Pradhan posts for SC/ST members was associated with a significant increase in benefits received by the village as a whole, improvement in intra-village targeting to female-headed households, and to the group (SC or ST) of the Pradhan. The effects of women’s reservations are not consistent with simple citizen-candidate or elite capture models of electoral politics. They are consistent with a more complex hypothesis of capture-cum-clientelism which is weakened by election of politically inexperienced women to reserved pradhan posts. (Bardhan, P., Dilip Mookherjee and Monica L. Parra Torrado, 2009)

Neelima Deshmukh (2005) described that, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. intended to provide greater opportunities for women to participate in this progression and paved the way for women social and political empowerment. She also mentions that, there is a felt need

to identify and emphasize the empowerment levels such as education, welfare, access to resources, participation and social dignity, to achieve the desired level of women's empowerment. The empowerment levels, such as, welfare, access to the resources, conscientisation, participation and control are to be identified and increased equally, will automatically lead to increased empowerment. As the Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs highlights, the woman's needs are to be met categorically and priority-wise. Unless the basic ones are fulfilled one cannot move to the next step of the hierarchy.

Kaul and Sahni (2009), in their study of "Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj Institution", noted that Panchyati Raj Institutions have always been considered as a means to good governance and 73rd Constitutional Amendment was effected in the hope that it would lead to better governance and provide political space to the disadvantaged section of the society like schedule caste, schedule tribes and women. They try to know the extent of participation of women elected representative in Panchayat and the problems faced by them. The findings of the study revealed that neither the reservation for women or their actual presence in the Panchyat have become any more sensitive to the problems related to the village women. The women who are elected are not always treated with due respect. Many elected women complained that their suggestions were not considered seriously nor were they consulted while decisions were being made. Some felt that their views were ignored only because they are women. At times they were pressurized by their husbands to approve their decisions made by the male dominated Panchayats.

Anupama Kaushikm (2010), her study entitled "Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions: A Case Study of Chittorgarh District Council" observed that the participation of Indian women in the freedom movement led by Gandhi as well as enlightened leadership of India ensured

that Indian women got equal political rights in the constitution of free India. However, in reality despite some successes, the majority of Indian women were left far behind man in enjoyment of these rights. Hence, bringing woman in political sphere through reservation was felt and 33 percent seats were reserved for women in the local self-governing bodies. This brought hundred thousand women into active politics, but question was repeatedly raised regarding their competence. This empirical study tries to find out ground level reality of women is capability as Panchayat members in Chittorghar district.

Satyanarayana Sangita (2010), pointed out on his article, “Decentralization, Women Empowerment and Inclusive Growth: State and Civil Society Perspective in India” that, Democratic decentralization empowers the rural people to articulate their interests and improve the livelihoods. Democratic decentralization makes participation easier and makes empowerment more feasible at the local level than it would be at the nation level, especially for minorities and vulnerable groups.

According to S.P.Jain, the Gram Sabha were constitute in a number of States. But, in the absence of statutory provision and lack of direction, they did not function in most places and remaining dormant. (Jain, 2011)

1.5 Significance of the Study:

The literature survey thus suggests that even though there have been lots of studies made on decentralisation in general and in the context of Panchayati Raj in particular, there is still dearth of studies on the grassroots democratic institutions and particularly on Gram Sansads. In fact, there is virtually no study undertaken so far to evaluate the level of participation of women in the Gram Sansads and correlate that with the level of empowerment of women. Here in lies the research gap and the present study seeks to fill that research gap.

1.6 The Research Question:

Given broad objective the conceptual framework and the review of literature outlined above, the present study aims at addressing the following specific research questions:

1. What is the nature and extent of participation of the people in general in the decision making process at the village level through Panchayati Raj Institutions?
2. What is the nature and extent of participation of the people in general in the decision making process through the Gram Sansad?
3. What is the nature and extent of participation of women in the decision making process through the Gram Sansad?
4. What is the level of awareness of women at the village level regarding participation in the decision making process in general and through Gram Sansads in particular?
5. What is the nature of perception of women about the structural and operational part of the Panchayati Raj Institutions including the Gram Sabha in general and Gram Sansads in particular?
6. What are the factors that contribute / hinder the Gram Sansads to emerge as an effective institution of local democracy?
7. To what extent has the participation of women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions in general and the Gram Sansads in particular been contributory in the process of the empowerment of women?

1.7 Research Methodology:

The present research has proceeded along with an eclectic research design combining the descriptive and diagnostic research design besides being exploratory too as per the requirements of the objective of the study and the research questions that were to be

addressed. Exploratory method has been followed for identifying the conceptual and theoretical supplements of participatory decentralized governance, development, empowerment, local democracy etc. The study was descriptive as it aims at portraying objectively the state of decentralized governing process, its correlation with development and empowerment and the kind and nature of local democracy. Finally, the study was going to be diagnostic as it aimed at finding out causes of participation / non-participation of women in the local democratic institution of Gram Sansad as well as the contributory / non/anti-contributory role of participation / non-participation on empowerment of women.

The study is going to be a micro study conducted in two selected Gram Panchayats of Jalpaiguri district. All the Gram Sansads of the selected Gram Panchayats were studied by way of attending the meetings of the Gram Sansads in person (Observation) and there was a sample of women members of each Gram Sansad, interviewed on the basis of a schedule. Besides, a sample of male members of the Gram Sansads was also interviewed to supplement and substantiate the information relating to the participation / non-participation of women having a bearing on empowerment of women. Indeed, the selection of the sample respondents has been judgment based but was taken to make it objective as far as possible.

Locate of the Study:

The study was conducted in the district of Jalpaiguri. For the purpose, two Gram Panchayats were selected. The selection of two Gram Panchayats was on the basis of-

- i. **Location:** One being just outside of the location of district headquarters, direct influence of the urban life is reflected on the population of the Gram Panchayat at large and the other Gram Panchayat is in a completely rural area.

ii. **Demography:** One Gram Panchayat exhibits a mixed demographic configuration mainly Hindu dominated with a sizeable section of tribal population while the other is predominantly inhabited by the Muslim.

iii. **Index of Development:** One Gram Panchayat is comparatively developed in terms of infrastructural opportunities of health, education, employment and various social amenities while the other is slightly backward.

1.8 Organization of Chapters

The present study proceeded along with the following chapters:

Chapter - I: Introduction.

Chapter - II: Evolution of Decentralized Governance in the Indian Context with Special Reference to West Bengal

Chapter - III: People's Participation in Decentralized Governance: The Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad Experience in West Bengal

Chapter – IV: Participation of Women in Decentralized Governance and Empowerment: The West Bengal Experience

Chapter-V: Participation of Women in the Gram Sansads of Selected Gram Panchayats and Empowerment: The Survey Experience.

Chapter -VI: Summary of Findings and Concluding Observations.

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