

CHAPTER II

PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS AND PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN TRADE UNIONS OF TEA GARDENS

PRE-INDEPENDENCE ERA

Through the ages the Indian population has had ingrained value of grassroots democracy spanning across villages. Even during eras where monarchy was largely prevalent, village level democracy was always a driving force. Indian monarchy through the ages did not interfere with the village democratic system. Thus the present day *panchayati raj* system is thus an extent of the largely prevalent village democracy which has been a mark of grassroots democratic system in Indian society for ages. It is hard to believe that without the backdrop of this grass root democracy, Indian political system would have been able to embrace the concept of the *panchayati raj* system.

Panchayati system in India has an ancient heritage that draws its lines much before Indian independence. Gandhiji laid stress on implementation and active participation of the *panchayati raj* system in his vision of India. This thought process was amalgamated into the vision of India even prior to independence. According to Gandhiji autonomy of villages, each acting as a republic on its own was a compulsory and active deterrent to the evils of the centralised state. Autonomy and participation in active decision-making process is a mandatory element for successful democracy in a wide and varied state like India.

Implementation of *panchayati raj* system, according to Gandhiji, would render the vertical structure of society, where each person is weighed by his social and political position, redundant. If the basic unit of administration is bestowed with *panchayats*, political and social empowerment is reached to the lowest strata of society, thus rendering a sense of equality between the highest echelons of powers in form of central and state government and lowest power hubs endowed with *panchayat*.

Majority of Indian population, even in this era, lives in villages. In the form of *panchayati raj*, Gandhiji envisaged villages which are socio-politico-economically independent entities. The close knit social fabric of villages will thus facilitate consensus in decision-making process. The primary pillars of democracy will thus be a chain of self-sufficient

villages. Role of elected parliamentary bodies will thus be just to aid these *panchayati* institutions. Impetus for growth and major decision-making will be primarily with the bodies under *panchayati raj* system, central and state governments only helping in implementation and aiding of such policies and decision formulated by the *panchayati raj* bodies. Every village thus has to be self –sustained and capable of managing its own affairs.

Gandhiji's concept of decentralisation could effectively function only in real decentralisation where political power is bestowed in small units. The draft constitution completed in February made no mention about the *panchayat*. Gandhiji's attention, upon being drawn to this omission, resulted in him giving an observation regarding this to Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the President of the Constituent Assembly. Ambedkar, the main architect of Indian Constitution condemn a village as a 'sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow mindedness and communalism'. Nehru wrote to Gandhi 'a village, normally speaking is backward intellectually and culturally, and no progress can be made from a backward environment. Narrow minded people are much more likely to be untruthful and violent.' In view of strong resentment of various members of the Constituent Assembly towards Ambedkar's views on villages per say (like H.V.Kamath and K.Santhanam) ultimately the following amendment was moved: 'The state shall take steps to organise village *panchayats* and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-governance.' This was accepted and incorporated in Article 40 of the Constitution.

Mahatma Gandhi encouraged *panchayat raj* as the heart of India's political system. There has to be a decentralised form of government where each and every village would be answerable for its own affairs. The term for such a vision was *gram swaraj* (village self – governance). There are significant differences between the traditional *panchayati raj* system, that envisioned by Gandhi, and the system formalised in India in 1992. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi pictured an alternative system shaped on the traditional wisdom of our ancestors, who succeeded their lives and affairs by themselves without much of outside intervention. It was a village oriented approach of life and control which Gandhi called as inner *Swaraj* and outer *Swaraj*. According to him higher the level of inner *Swaraj*, the

necessity for outer *Swaraj* will be minimal. Although he talked of his predilection for the state of rational anarchy, he never rejected the importance of outer *Swaraj*.

Gandhi wanted revolutionary changes based on the original system of the village life and its governance. He was fully aware that centralised administration becomes the background of exploitation and corruption. Further it also kills the basic spirit of democracy. It was very well revealed in his writings on a model village system. Gandhiji portrayed the picture of an ideal village of his dreams which would be self-sufficient and self-reliant in its actual nature. He wrote: 'My idea of village *Swaraj* is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its own vital wants and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is necessary. Thus, the first concern of every village will be to grow its own food crops, and cotton for its cloth. It should have a reserve for its cattle, recreation and playground for adults and children. Then, if there is more land available, it will grow useful money crops, thus excluding *ganja*, tobacco, opium and the like. The village will maintain a village theatre, school and public hall. It will have its own waterworks ensuring clean water supply. This can be done through controlled wells or tanks. Education will be compulsory up to the final basic course. As far as possible, every activity will be conducted on the co-operative basis. There will be no castes such as we have today with their graded untouchability. Nonviolence with its technique of Satyagraha and non-co-operation will be the sanction of the village community. There will be a compulsory service of village guards who will be selected by rotation from the register maintained by the village.' (Harijan 26-7-1942).

Community Development Programme (CDP) initiated in 1942 is a precursor to *panchayati raj* in India. Coupled with National Extension Service (NES), these programmes laid the foundation for economic empowerment of the village. Community development blocks was set in as a new unit of administration at the grass root levels as a remarkable innovation. This was aimed at catering to hundred or so villages with a population of around eighty thousand. The post of a multi-purpose village worker known as the *gram sevak* was created who was supposed to provide the final link in a chain that ran from state capital and from Delhi right through the remotest area.

POST-INDEPENDENCE ERA

After independence the most important task before the government was to restructure the socio-economic set-up of the country. The true picture of the country was that India was living in the villages. More than ninety per cent of the population was rural. Thus the upliftment of the people was possible only if the government concentrated its efforts in rural areas. For the development of the rural areas centre and state governments took many programmes and schemes for the community development.

Block Advisory Committees were constituted in 1955. These consisted of 'all the block level officer and leading known officials, progressive agriculturist leading co-operators, representatives of voluntary organisation, heads of educational institutions in the block, representatives of local authorities and members of parliament and of the state legislature assembly from the area'. These advisory committees were created for advising the Block Development Officers (BDO) for stream lining development programmes that they could effectively cater to local needs and requirements.

The block advisory committee was converted to block development committee in 1957. Under this chairmanship was passed from the BDO to non-official persons. This committees consisted of all the presidents under the jurisdiction of the block, representatives from the co-operative societies, representatives from the organisation of women and other social service organisation, and MPs and MLAs representation the constituencies under the block. *Panchayats* at that time were authorised to execute local works the cost of which did not exceed Rs. 3000/-. Co-ordinating committee of officers at the district level was enlarged to incorporate representatives of the blocks, both official and non-official and MPs and MLAs. The purpose was to blend official and fringe un-official elements in the process of administration.

After 1952 the CDP actively emphasized on the need for public participation in implementation of the development programmes especially in the country side. However, there were glaring inadequacies of the old *panchayat* institutions or of their post-independence successor. Fourth conference of the development commissioners who were the administrators for the community development reported that working through and with the village *panchayat* had not in some case proved to be satisfactory.

The Balwantray Mehta Committee Report:

The second five year plan raised serious concern on the effective expenditure of the CDPs. The then finance minister (in 1956-57) stressed on the need for avoiding wastage arising from delays and inefficiency in transaction of public business by CDPs. Subsequently a committee on plan project (popularly known as Balwantray Mehta Committee) was appointed by National Development Council (NDC) under 'with a view to economy and efficiency, with special reference to problems connected with the organic linking of village *panchayat* with popular organisations at a higher level' and secondly, aimed at reorganisation of district administration 'so that democratic bodies should take over the entire general administration and development of the district or the sub-division perhaps other than such functions as law and order, administration of justice and certain function pertaining to revenue administration'.

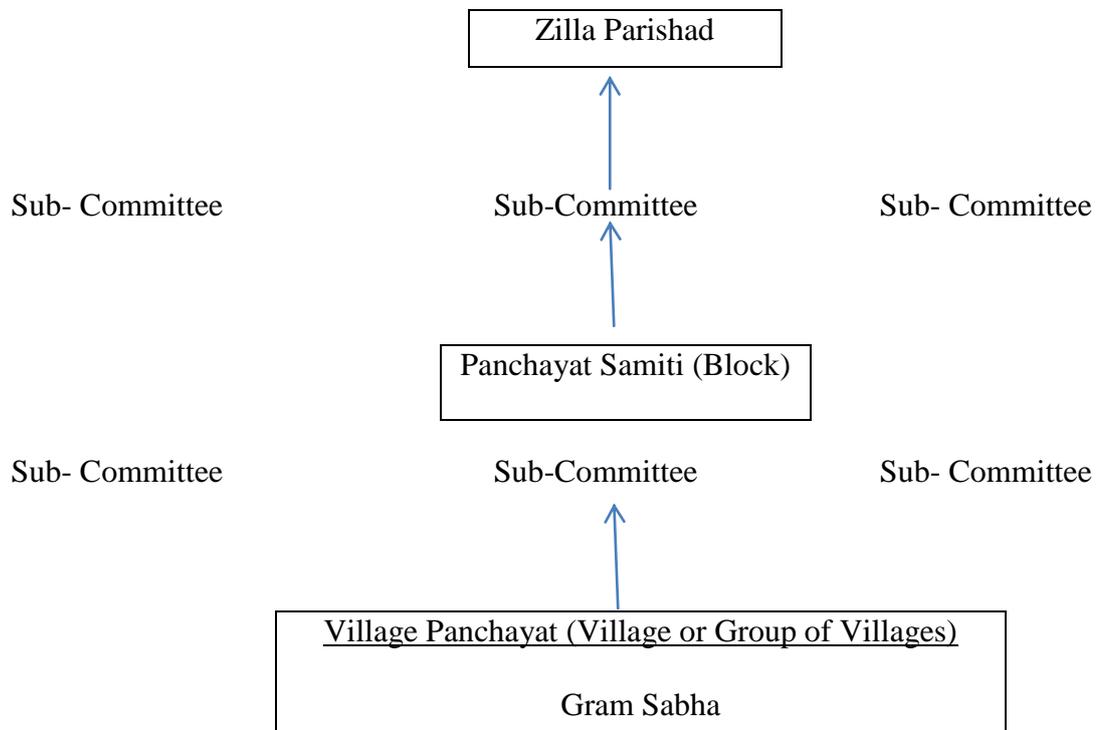
In the second five year plan the Planning Commission stressed on the need for administrative reorganisation in the interest of development. Principle recommendations of the Planning Commission in this regard included:

- a. Establishment of organic linkage between village *panchayat* and higher level popular organisations and
- b. Gradual taking over of the bulk of general administration and development functions in districts and sub-districts by the democratic bodies.

The research team questioned the role of adhoc advisory bodies. They concluded that in order to evoke local interest it was necessary 'to discover or create a representative or democratic institution invested with adequate power and appropriate finance.'

The Balwant Ray Mehta Committee (1957) observed that the failure of CDP was due to the noticeable absence of people's participation. In order to streamline this, the Committee suggested that 'a set of institutional arrangement' would have to be created to make the participation meaningful and effective. A suggestion for a three tier structure of rural local self-government was given by this team- the *panchayat* at the village level, *panchayat samiti* at the block level and *zilla parishad* at the district level to organise and manage the rural development activities.

Three tier Structure of Panchayati Raj (All India Pattern)



Panchayats were to be directly elected with special provisions for representation of women, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Sources of income for the *panchayats* were projected as: property or house tax, tax on markets and vehicles, octroy or terminal tax, conservancy tax, water or lighting rate etc. *Panchayats* were supposed to perform compulsory duties such as provision of water supply, sanitation, lighting, maintenance of roads, land management etc. Thus began a new experiment in the sphere of rural development administration to formulate and execute developmental process through the participation of people.

Village *panchayat* in the block were supposed to elect members who would constitute the *samiti*. Further each municipality could also elect one member to the *samiti*. The representatives of the *samiti* were supposed to comprise of a stipulated number of persons belonging to scheduled castes, tribes, workers, directors of co-operative institutions and local residents who have apt experience in public life and rural development. *Samities* were expected to cover the development of agriculture in all its aspects, the improvement of cattle and local industries, public health, welfare work, administration of primary

schools and collection and maintenance of statics. Furthermore they were given the duty of acting as agents to implement the special schemes of the state governments.

The team failed to give specific direction about the district tier, i.e. the *zilla parishad*. The major functions being assigned to the *panchayats* and the *samities*, the team thought that very little would be left for any higher body other than the government. An indirectly elected *zilla parishad* was thus proposed which would consist of presidents of the *samities*, MLAs and MPs, and district level officers of the state government including the collectors. It was basically thought of as a non-executive, co-ordinating body bestowed with functions such as general super vision of *panchayat samiti* activities within the district, distribution of state funds and approval of their budgets.

Table 2.1: Women representation in the Panchayati Raj Institutions

States	Panchayats	Panchayat Samitis	Zilla Parishad
Andhra Pradesh	2-4	2	2
Assam	2	-	1
Bihar	-----	2	2
Gujurat	2	2-3	3-5
Haryana	1	2	-
Himachal Pradesh	1-2	2	2
Jammu & Kashmir	1	-	-
Kerala	1	-	-
Karnataka	1-2	2	1
Madhya Pradesh	2	2	-
Maharastra	2	1	2
Orissa	-	1	-
Punjab	2	2	4
Rajasthan	2	2	2
Tamil Nadu	1	3	-
Uttar Pradesh	-	5	3-5
West Bengal	2	2	2

Note: The details in the table show the position during the year 1978. Subsequently, states like Karnataka, Kerala and Orissa introduced reservation of seats for women in their respective Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Source: Report of the Committee on Pachayati Raj Institutions, Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, Government of India, New Delhi, 1978. Pp. 215-26.

A second variant was also suggested wherein the state government, in view of their differential circumstances might like to have a larger body which is jurisdiction conglomerating with the district. Such a body was proposed as an executive body operating directly in areas where community development programmes was not sanctioned. This body would consist of members of *panchayats* within each *samiti* area to be elected by the *panchayat* members. A third variant which the team realised was ‘a purely elective body with perhaps a few co-opted members.’ This scheme of democratic decentralisation was approved by the NDC in January 1958. The council decided that under ‘each state should workout the structure which suited its conditions best and consequently there was no need to insist on uniformity between the different parts of the community.’ These guidelines were however supposed to be in abeyance:

- a. A three tier structure of local self-governing bodies from village to district level with an organic link from lower to higher bodies;
- b. Transfer of power and responsibilities should be genuine;
- c. Financial resources should be a plenty with these bodies so that they are able to carry out the task assigned to them;
- d. Development programmes assigned to the grass root level should be rooted through these bodies;
- e. The system should evolve in such a manner so as to ensure further decentralisation of power in future.

Though the community development programme elicited quite a genuine interest from many state governments, it was ridden with corruption, careless expenditure and administration inefficiency. The Congress party being in power in the centre and most of the state at that time tried its best to push through *panchayati raj*. Nehru said ‘*panchayati raj* would bring about a revolution in the entire rural life of India’.

Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh were the first to implement the three tier system of *panchayat* as envisaged by the Mehta Report. By March 1965 it was at least set in motion in the majority of states and union territories.

73RD AMENDMENT ACT OF THE CONSTITUTION, 1992

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act came into effect on April 23, 1993. This Act made a provision of 33 per cent seats to women in *Panchayats*. The main objective of this amendment were to address the inability of *panchayati raj institutions* to acquire status and dignity of viable and responsible and people's bodies due to a number of reasons including absence of regular elections, prolonged super sessions, inefficient representation of weaker sections like scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and women, inadequate devolution of power and lack of financial resources. Elections to these bodies were made compulsory and stipulated time frame was provided for, for conducting of elections to these bodies. The governor was given the power to involve the State Election Commission for conducting of free and fair election. Avenues for generation of funds for the meaningful conduct of functioning of these bodies were put in motion. Proper and proportional representation of the weaker sections of the society like scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and women were ensured through this act to the extent that even the post of heads of these bodies like *pradhans*, presidents of *samities* and *zilla parishads* were reserved for candidates belonging to these sections. Majority of Indian population, being rural based, most of the political parties were forced to comply with the provisions of this Act as they were otherwise in danger of being delineated from the rural population. Although the onus of meaningful implementation of this Act lies primarily with the state governments, there are not enough provisions to compel the state government to comply with the laid down directives in letter and spirit. It must still be admitted that majority of state governments do try to comply with the laid down directives because implementation of this Act leads to a favourable disposition of the majority rural masses of India. The Constitution 73rd Amendment Act 1992 mandates for:

1. Establishment of a three tier structure (village *panchayat*, *panchayat samiti* and *zilla parishad*);
2. Establishment of *gram sabha* at village level and regular election to *panchayat* at every five years;
3. Proportionate seat reservation for SCs and STs;
4. Reservation of not less than one third of seats for women;
5. Constitution of state finance commission to recommend measures to improve the finances of the *panchayats*.

As per statistics available, more than 8-lakh women had entered in *Panchayats* in 20 States and 4 Union Territories by 1998. They also sufficiently held the position as chairpersons. Statistics published in '*Kurukshetra*', March 2001, shows the picture of elected women representatives in *Panchayat Raj Institutions* in the table (3.2) given below:

Table 2.2: Showing the Percentage of Women Representation in Panchayat Raj Institutions

Category of P.R. Institutions	Total No. of P.R. Institutions	Women Representatives	Percentage Representation
Gram Panchayats	24,49,759	7,68,582	31.37%
Panchayat Samities	1,29,871	38,582	20.71%
District Panchayat	12,671	4,039	31.80%

Despite the 73rd Amendment 1993, this gave 33 per cent reservation to women, who came forwards and accept challenges. This is revolutionary step and a landmark in the history of women's development as women could now participate in decision-making and in political process in the country at least at the grass-root level. With the Amendment women's representation in *Panchayati Raj* bodies increased in many States from almost 2-3 per cent to at least 30 or 32 per cent. This was a major achievement. The following table (3.3) shows some important achievement.

Table 2.3: Women's Participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions Before 1985 and After 1995 Comparison

States	Overall per cent in GPs 1985	Overall per cent in 1995
Gujarat	Only 2 women	33.3%
Haryana	Only 1 woman	33.1%
Karnataka	Only 1-2 women	37.0%
Madhya Pradesh	2 women	38.0%
Kerala	1 woman	38.2%
Punjab	2 women	30.2%
Rajasthan	2 women	32.4%
West Bengal	2 women	35.4%
Uttar Pradesh	0 women	29.6%

Source: Panchayati Raj Development Report 1995.institute of Social Science, New Delhi.

DECENTRALIZED PLANNING AND PANCHAYATI RAJ IN WEST BENGAL

West Bengal Panchayat Act was introduced in 1957. The village government in Bengal was, however, formally inaugurated in 1870 with the passing of the Bengal Village

Chowkidari Act. It may be mentioned here that three pre-independence Acts e.g. the Bengal Village Chowkidari Act, 1870; the Bengal Local Self Government Act, 1885, and the Bengal Village Self-Government Act, 1919, governed the rural administration in Bengal until 1957. A two tier system of rural local system with *gram panchayat* at the village level and *anchal panchayat* at the union level were put in place. *Zilla parishad* Act was passed in 1963 resulting in emergence of four tier *panchayat* system. *Zilla parishad* at district level and *anchalik parishads* at block level was established. The United Front which voted to power in 1967 put forward its own scheme of *panchayats*. Subsequently the congress party which was voted to power in 1972 introduced the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973. This Act was not however put into effect by the Congress government. The Left Front came into power in 1977 and took up the task of organising village *panchayats* in a concerted and serious manner. Elections to the bodies of *panchayati raj* were held in 1978. Following the elections there came into being 15 *zilla parishads*, 324 *panchayat samities* and 3242 *gram panchayats*. This great democratic exercise had a voter turnout as high as 75% . The declared policy of the state government of the time was to decentralise power through *panchayats* and other such bodies. The left front government decided to utilise the *panchayats* for benefit of the under privileged.

Table 2.4- Particulars of Panchayati Raj Institutions in all tiers of West Bengal (As on 2003)

Sl No.	Name of Tier	No. of Bodies	Total No. of Directly Elected Members	Break-up of Members					
				ST		SC		General	
				Women	Open	Women	Open	Women	Open
1.	Gram Panchayat	3,358	51,201	1503	1969	5199	8445	11571	22514
2.	Panchayat Samiti	341	8,579	310	294	784	1599	1923	3669
3.	Zilla Parishad	18+1 (Siliguri Mahakuma Parishad)	723	16	51	74	202	156	224

Source: State Institute of Panchayat and Rural Development, Department of Panchayat and Rural Development. Government of West Bengal, Kalyani, Nadia, W.B.

Table 2.5: Category of District wise Gram Panchayat Members in West Bengal

Name of District	Scheduled Tribe			Scheduled Caste			General			Men	Women	Total
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total			
Bankura	141	152	293	538	321	859	1085	505	1590	1764	978	2742
Birbhum	103	67	170	454	286	740	960	491	1451	1517	844	2361
Bardwan	199	128	327	878	547	1425	1803	905	2708	2880	1580	4460

Cooch Behar	2	2	4	647	383	1030	564	282	846	1212	667	1880
Dakshin Dinajpur	47	70	117	74	121	195	534	163	697	655	354	1009
Hooghly	103	63	166	598	372	970	1506	776	2282	2208	1211	3418
Hawrah	1	1	2	303	209	512	1362	696	2058	1666	906	2572
Jalpaiguri	320	189	509	606	350	956	580	297	877	1506	836	2342
Malda	27	64	91	108	152	260	1234	610	1844	1369	826	2195
Midnapore	360	304	664	754	458	1212	3496	1816	5312	4610	2578	7188
Murshidabad	28	16	44	354	200	554	2298	1263	3561	2680	1479	4159
Nadia	53	25	78	595	381	976	1324	674	1998	1972	1080	3052
North 24 Parganas	76	52	128	619	365	984	1391	730	2121	2086	1147	3233
Purulia	244	189	433	253	144	397	851	434	1285	1348	767	2115
South 24 Parganas	38	25	63	1116	681	1797	2014	1030	3044	3168	1736	4904
Uttar Dinajpur	56	44	100	326	187	513	645	337	982	1027	568	1595
Total	1798	1391	3189	8223	5156	13380	21647	10990	32656	31674	17557	49225

Source: SIPRD, Government of West Bengal, Kalyani, Nadia, W.B.

Table 2.6: District wise distribution of numbers of the members in the Zilla Parishad (as on 1998)

Sl No.	Name of District	Total of ZP members	No. of SC members	No. of ST members	No. of Women members	No. of Open Seats
1	Bankura	42	13	5	14	10
2	Birbhum	35	11	3	12	9
3	Bardwan	68	22	5	23	18
4	Cooch Behar	27	14	0	9	4
5	Dakshin Dinajpur	15	5	3	5	2
6	Hooghly	47	15	2	16	14
7	Hawrah	34	7	0	12	15
8	Jalpaiguri	32	13	7	11	1
9	Malda	33	6	2	11	14
10	Midnapore*	108	18	10	36	44
11	Murshidabad	60	8	1	20	31
12	Nadia	41	13	1	14	13
13	North 24 Parganas	50	15	2	17	16
14	Purulia	34	7	7	12	8
15	South 24 Parganas	67	24	1	23	19
16	Uttar Dinajpur	23	7	1	8	7
17	Siliguri Mahakuma Parishad (Darjeeling)	7	2	1	2	2
18	Total	723	200	51	245	227

*Information on undivided Medinapore district.

Source: Information on West Bengal Panchayats, SIPRD, Govt of West Bengal, Kalyani, Nadia, WB.

Table 2.7: Reservation pattern of the office of Sabhadhipati, Sahakari Sabhadhipati, Zilla Parishad, West Bengal, 1998

Sl No. Name of District	Office	Open	Women	SC	SC Women	ST	ST Women
1. Bankura	Sabhadhipati		√				
	Sahakari Sabhadhipati	√					
2. Birbhum	Sabhadhipati			√			
	Sahakari Sabhadhipati	√					
3. Bardwan	Sabhadhipati	√					
	Sahakari Sabhadhipati					√	
4. Cooch Behar	Sabhadhipati				√		
	Sahakari Sabhadhipati	√					
5. Dakshin Dinajpur	Sabhadhipati			√			
	Sahakari Sabhadhipati	√					
6. Hooghly	Sabhadhipati	√					
	Sahakari Sabhadhipati			√			
7. Hawrah	Sabhadhipati				√		
	Sahakari Sabhadhipati	√					
8. Jalpaiguri	Sabhadhipati		√				
	Sahakari Sabhadhipati	√					
9. Malda	Sabhadhipati		√				
	Sahakari Sabhadhipati	√					
10. Midnapore	Sabhadhipati					√	
	Sahakari Sabhadhipati	√					
11. Murshidabad	Sabhadhipati			√			
	Sahakari Sabhadhipati	√					
12. Nadia	Sabhadhipati	√					
	Sahakari Sabhadhipati			√			
13. North 24 Parganas	Sabhadhipati	√					
	Sahakari Sabhadhipati		√				
14. Purulia	Sabhadhipati	√					
	Sahakari Sabhadhipati				√		
15. South 24 Parganas	Sabhadhipati		√				
	Sahakari Sabhadhipati	√					
16. Uttar Dinajpur	Sabhadhipati	√					
	Sahakari Sabhadhipati				√		
Total	Sabhadhipati	6	4	3	2	1	0
	Sahakari Sabhadhipati	10	1	2	2	1	0

Source: State Institute of Panchayats and Rural Development, Govt. of West Bengal, Kalyani, Nadia, W.B.

Table 2.8: District wise distribution of numbers of the members in the Panchayat Samitis (as on 1998)

Sl No.	Name of the District	Total No. of PS Members	No. of SC Members	No. of ST Members	No. of Women Members	No. Open Seats
1	Bankura	496	153	52	172	119
2	Birbhum	422	125	32	141	298
3	Bardwan	743	232	57	251	203
4	Cooch Behar	339	182	1	118	38
5	Dakshin Dinjapur	178	56	32	62	28
6	Hooghly	577	163	27	196	191
	Hawrah	433	74	0	142	217
8	Jalpaiguri	388	160	83	136	9
9	Malda	385	72	24	131	158
10	Midnapore	1296	215	123	445	513
11	Murshidabad	700	90	6	240	364
12	Nadia	504	157	12	173	162
13	North 24 Parganas	549	165	21	190	173
14	Purulia	391	72	82	135	102
15	South 24 Parganas	843	310	10	290	233
16	Uttar Dinajpur	272	88	18	93	93

Source: SIPRD, Government of West Bengal, Kalyani, Nadia, WB.

Table 2.9: Reservation pattern of the office of Sabhapati, Panchayat Samiti West Bengal, 1998

DISTRICT	Unreserved	Women	SC including women	SC Women	ST including women	ST Women	Total No.
Coochbehar	4	2	6	2	0	0	12
Jalpaiguri	3	2	5	1	3	2	13
Uttar Dinajpur	4	1	3	1	1	1	9
D. Dinajpur	3	1	2	0	2	2	8
Malda	8	3	3	1	1	1	15
Murshidabad	15	8	3	1	0	0	26
Nadia	8	4	5	2	0	0	17
North 24 Parganas	9	5	7	3	1	0	22
South 24 Parganas	12	6	11	4	0	0	29
Howrah	7	4	3	1	0	0	14
Hooghly	8	4	5	2	1	0	18
Midnapore	27	13	9	3	5	2	54
Purulia	8	4	4	1	4	2	20
Bankura	8	5	7	1	2	2	22
Burdwan	12	7	10	2	2	2	31
Birbhum	8	7	6	3	1	0	19
Total	144	73	89	28	23	14	329

Source: SIPRD, Govt. of West Bengal, Kalyani, Nadia, W.B.

Table 2.10: Reservation pattern of the office of Sahakari Sabhapati, Panchayat Samiti West Bengal, 1998

DISTRICT	Unreserved	Women	SC including women	SC Women	ST including women	ST Women	Total No. of offices of Sahakari Sabhapati
Coochbehar	8	0	4	2	0	0	12
Jalpaiguri	10	0	0	0	3	1	13
Uttar Dinajpur	5	0	3	1	1	1	9
D. Dinajpur	5	0	1	1	2	0	8
Malda	8	3	3	1	1	1	15
Murshidabad	15	8	3	1	0	0	26
Nadia	10	2	5	2	0	0	17
North 24 Parganas	13	1	7	3	1	0	22
South 24 Parganas	17	1	11	4	0	0	29
Howrah	7	4	3	1	0	0	14
Hooghly	10	2	5	2	1	0	18
Midnapore	31	9	9	3	5	2	54
Purulia	8	4	4	2	4	1	20
Bankura	14	0	6	3	2	0	22
Burdwan	19	0	10	3	2	1	31
Birbhum	11	1	6	2	1	1	19
Total	191	35	80	31	23	8	329

Source: SIPRD, Govt. of West Bengal, Kalyani, Nadia, W.B.

Table 2.11: Reservation pattern of the office of Pradhan, Gram Panchayat, West Bengal, 1998

DISTRICT	Unreserved	Women	SC including women	SC Women	ST including women	ST Women	Total No. of offices of Pradhan
Coochbehar	40	20	67	23	1	0	128
Jalpaiguri	37	19	59	19	33	12	148
Uttar Dinajpur	41	20	32	11	6	2	99
D. Dinajpur	22	11	20	2	12	9	65
Malda	72	36	28	9	11	4	147
Murshidabad	145	72	34	11	4	2	255
Nadia	82	41	59	20	5	2	187
North 24 Parganas	87	44	61	21	8	2	200
South 24 Parganas	130	64	114	39	4	1	312
Howrah	84	42	31	11	0	0	157
Hooghly	94	46	59	19	11	5	210

DISTRICT	Unreserved	Women	SC including women	SC Women	ST including women	ST Women	Total No. of offices of Pradhan
Midnapore	254	128	86	31	46	13	514
Purulia	68	35	32	7	35	15	170
Bankura	72	36	61	21	21	7	190
Burdwan	112	56	88	27	21	10	277
Birbhum	69	34	52	20	12	2	167
Total	1409	704	883	291	230	86	3226

Source: SIPRD, Govt. of West Bengal, Kalyani, Nadia, W.B.

Table 2.12: Reservation pattern of the office of Upa Pradhan, Gram Panchayat, West Bengal, 1998

DISTRICT	Unreserved	Women	SC including women	SC Women	ST including women	ST Women	Total No. of offices of Pradhan
Coochbehar	88	0	39	13	1	0	128
Jalpaiguri	111	0	17	5	20	8	148
Uttar Dinajpur	58	3	32	11	6	2	99
D. Dinajpur	43	1	10	4	11	4	65
Malda	86	23	28	9	10	4	147
Murshidabad	146	71	34	12	4	1	255
Nadia	111	12	59	19	5	3	187
North 24 Parganas	113	18	61	20	8	3	200
South 24 Parganas	182	12	114	37	4	3	312
Howrah	84	42	31	11	0	0	157
Hooghly	116	24	59	18	11	6	210
Midnapore	301	81	86	29	46	15	514
Purulia	69	34	32	13	35	10	170
Bankura	118	0	51	17	21	7	190
Burdwan	165	3	88	32	21	5	277
Birbhum	98	0 doubt	51	16	11	5	167
Total	1889	331	792	266	214	76	3226

Source: SIPRD, Govt. of West Bengal, Kalyani, Nadia, W.B.

Table 2.13: Result of Panchayat Election, 2003 in West Bengal

Sl No.	Tier	Total No. of Bodies	Total No. of Members	Office bearers
1	GP	3220	49140	Pradhan 3320/Upa Pradhan 3320
2	PS	329	8500	Sabhapati 329/Sahakari Sabhapati 329
3	ZP	17	713	Sabhadhipati 17/Sahakari Sabhadhipati

Sl No.	Tier	Total No. of Bodies	Total No. of Members	Office bearers
				17

N.B. These results do not include the district of Darjeeling. Result of election to the SMP, 4 Panchayat Samitis and 22 Gram Panchayat are not included here.

Source: Dept. of P. & RD, Govt. of WB, Kolkata (www.siprd.org).

Lump grants to Zilla / Mahakuma Parishad for Scheduled Castes 2000-2001- Lump provision for grants to Zilla Parishad for infrastructure development for the Welfare of the SCs & STs during 2000-2001 has been made. A statement below shows the amount allotted to the Zilla Parishads during the year 2000-2001.

Table 2.14: Lump grants to Zilla / Mahakuma Parishad for Scheduled Castes 2000-2001

Name of the district	Total Allocation
Coochbehar	Rs. 2,73,70,000
Jalpaiguri	2,32,30,000
Siliguri	1,38,00,000
Uttar Dinajpur	1,24,20,000
D. Dinajpur	98,90,000
Malda	1,10,40,000
Murshidabad	57,50,000
Nadia	1,15,00,000
North 24 Parganas	1,38,000
South 24 Parganas	1,84,000
Howrah	59,80,000
Midnapore	1,38,00,000
Purulia	94,30,000
Bankura	1,84,00,000
Birbhum	1,61,00,000
Burdwan	1,08,10,000
Hooghly	1,08,10,000
Total	Rs. 23,00,00,000

Table No. 2. 15: Lump grants to Zilla / Mahakuma Parishad for Scheduled Castes 2000-2001

Name of the district	Total Allocation
Coochbehar	5,10,000
Jalpaiguri	1,60,20,000
Siliguri	25,40,000
Uttar Dinajpur	28,00,000
D. Dinajpur	56,00,00
Malda	48,30,000
Murshidabad	7,60,000
Nadia	12,70,000
North 24 Parganas	22,90,000
South 24 Parganas	10,20,000
Howrah	2,50,000
Midnapore	91,60,000
Purulia	1,17,00,000
Bankura	78,80,000
Birbhum	22,90,000
Burdwan	50,90,000
Hooghly	22,90,000
Total	7,63,00,000

Source: Govt of WB, Annual Report of Backward classes Department,2000-2001

Self-government that was introduced for the first time in Bengal covering districts and villages has suffered from many serious shortcomings which seem to have hindered the subsequent functioning of the Act. The *first* weakness was that the Act tried to introduce a system of local self-government in Bengal, but the experiment started from the district and the village was made completely dependent and subservient to the district authorities and this was contradictory to the spirit of self-government. *Second*, despite there being a provision for extensive use of elective principles under the Act, the Bengal Administrative Report of 1891-92 has shown that the elected members were minority. A related shortcoming that also needs mentioning is that an extremely limited electorate, selected on the criteria of age, place of residence, taxation and education, elected members who constitute an insignificant portion of the total number of members in the body. *Third*, Ripon's declaration that the elected non-officials shall be made the Chairman of the local government was not followed in the implementation of the Act.

Fourth, the Act could not create any effective organization at the villages. Until 1908, only 147 Union Committees were created and upto 1898 there was no Union Committee in Bengal. *Fifth*, nominal functional and financial decentralization provided to the local bodies also acted as a cause of their unpopularity. Local bodies had no fixed important roles and had to depend upon very limited grants and subsidies. As a result, they were abolished shortly.

The entire story has been well summarized by Webster (1992). He has put forth, "While the idea might have been to establish self-governing bodies with an element of democracy in their constitution, in reality they were little more than minor appendages to the administration, a limited extension of the colonial state into the districts with the aim of appeasing the nascent nationalism of an elite capable of mobilizing local political power. It was a thinly disguised attempt to incorporate them into a formal relationship with the colonial government's existing administrative framework ... At the district level real power was retained by the District Officer appointed by the colonial state and the denial of funds and responsibilities of the boards reflected their real status in government thinking as being largely peripheral."

WEST BENGAL PANCHAYAT ACT, 1957

The West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1957 comprised of altogether 120 sections and divided into three parts. Different structures associated with the system of *panchayats* described in the Act were *Gram Sabha*, *Gram Panchayat*, *Anchal Panchayat* and *Nyaya (Justice) Panchayat*. Measures for enhancing PRIs:

A number of steps can be taken to overcome the factors that militate the effective participation and management of *panchyats* at all levels by women. They can be:

1. Imparting training in administration and management so as to give meaning to their empowerment. In fact, this is the fundamental requirement for women entering PRIs. They have to be trained in such areas the roles and responsibilities of *panchayats* how to priorities the problems, make plan and execute them. Training is also needed to develop leadership skills in them. This means how to lead *panchayats* to the path of development and inspire others to work untidily for implementing community based programmes.

2. Role of NGOs: NGOs and other voluntary organisations can play pivotal role in spreading awareness among the women of rural areas. This will help them to contest elections in greater numbers against men and enter the PRIs.
3. A concerted movement for building public opinion is required to be launched by the state government.
4. The role of media: More and more media coverage should be given where women have entered the PRIs and have started working either in the capacity of members or chairpersons. A continuous communication must be maintained through media between the government, *panchayats* and the people. (Singh, Balram, 2005, “The Impact and Challenges of the 73rd Amendment on the Status of Women”, in J.L. Singh (ed.), *Women and Panchayati Raj*, New Delhi, Sunrise Publications. Pp. 53-66)

In the structural arrangement of the Act, first came the *Gram Sabha*. The State Government was to constitute the *Gram Sabha* and to determine its area, name and extent of jurisdiction. The entire fabric of the village *panchayat* was built up on this basic body composed of all persons whose names are included in the electoral roll of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly for the time being in force pertaining to the area for which the *Gram Sabha* has been constituted. The functions assigned to this statutory general body were to elect the *Gram Panchayat* for a period of four years, to hold one annual and one half-yearly general meeting mainly to consider the budget of the concerned *Gram Panchayat* for the following year and to consider the report submitted by it on the work done during the previous year and the work proposed to be done during the next year.

The *Anchal Panchayat*, located between the block and the village level was the second executive tier in the state's *panchayat* system covering roughly about seven to ten *Gram Panchayats* and a population of about eight to ten thousand. Thus it had similarity with the Union Board under the Village Self-Government Act of 1919, but as far as its composition, powers and scope of activities are concerned, it largely differed from the board. Regarding composition, the Act stated that the State Government shall establish *Anchal Panchayat* and shall fix by notification the number of contiguous *Gram Sabhas* that should be included within each *Anchal Panchayat*. The system of election at the *Anchal Panchayat* stage was made indirect.

Third, the Act provided special responsibility and power to *Anchal Panchayat* by providing functions pertaining to rural police, rural finance and rural justice. Over and above, they had an important say over the *Gram Panchayat* budget. Funds of the *Gram Panchayat* were distributed through the *Anchal*. Thus rural leadership has been invested in the *Anchal* than in the *Gram Panchayat* but curiously enough, this body would be elected indirectly by the Gram Panchayat and not by the village people. This was certainly undemocratic for indirect election at such an important decision-making body might pave the way for coterie rule and undermine the capacity of *Gram Sabha*. The tax structure and financial provisions were, no doubt, improved, but still it remained inadequate and unsatisfactory because no thinking was provided whether village people would be able to bear the additional burden or not. Despite these shortcomings, the village people in West Bengal appear to have broadly greeted the new self-governing system of the state. Compared to other states, the *Gram Panchayats* of West Bengal enjoyed lesser power and scope of activities as they were transferred to the *Anchal Panchayats*.

The first phase

The devastating flood in 1978 resulted in entrustment of the *panchayat* bodies with the execution of three important programmes, namely, food for works programme, rural development programme and rural reconstruction programme.

Second phase

In November in 1980 second phase of the programme devolution was under taken under the National Rural Employment Programme (NREP). The *gram panchayats* rendered financial assistance to the homeless to enable them to build their houses at a very minuscule interest rate. Poor cultivators, earmarked by the *panchayats* were given loans by the state governments through nationalised commercial banks. Rural goddowns were created along with marketing committees for the crops with representatives from the *panchayats*. Rural marketing outlets were setup at the block levels in districts, owned and managed by the *samities*. *Panchayats* were also amalgamated into the programme of eradicating rural illiteracy. Financial constraints of the local bodies were tried to be met with by proposals such as:

1. Granting a certain percentage of land revenue collected by the district administration to the *panchayat samities*,

2. Empowering the *panchayat samities* to control the *haats*, *bazars* and fair services and levy rates upon them,
3. Crediting the entire collection of road cess, public work cess and rural development cess directly to the funds of *zilla parishads*.

Democratic decentralisation of power in the true sense was implemented by left front government in West Bengal. Land reforms was the key element aimed towards empowerment of the lesser privileged class of the society. The underprivileged and economically deprived sections of the society by having the privilege of holding their own lands, gained a lot of socio economic prowess. This ensured that a meaningful participation in *panchayati raj* system was possible. Thus an attempt was made to truly involve the down trodden masses of the society.

While the constitutionally laid down three tier *panchayati raj* system could flourish in rural Bengal lacunae were many. One of the primary problems was the rampant political influence which slowly became part and parcel of the grass root politics represented by the *panchayats*. Political parties during the course of time pride their utmost to have an impact in the *panchayati raj* system. In order to shape out the grass root politics in a positive manner *panchayati raj* system was of a paramount importance. However one of the major crisis felt by the village *panchayat* was the lack of economic funds, thereby restricting the whole of the *panchayat* bodies. Though the constitutional guarantee for upholding the *panchayati raj* institutions has always been there, lack of measures towards provision of economic freedom of the *panchayati raj* institutions has been a huge hindrance. The *panchayati raj institutions* have to often depend on the benevolence of local state governments for generating revenues to implement their agendas at the grass root level. Political true will towards making these *panchayati raj* institutions economically vibrant decision-making bodies is truly lacking. Embroiled in unfortunate political conflicts, this powerful concept of *panchayati raj* system has failed to realize its true potential. Though the constitution provides with measures aimed to tie over the economic depravity of *panchayati raj* institute, success at the ground level still is very much dependent upon funds provided by the respective state governments for enactment of their various programmes. Thus many of enterprising *panchayati raj* institutions have always to fall back upon political influences, principally in the form of ruling parties in the state governments. *Panchayati raj* system, it fully implements in letter and spirit, is a very powerful step towards these centralisation of power.

INFILTRATION OF PANCHAYATI RAJ SYSTEM INTO TEA GARDENS OF NORTH BENGAL

North-east India is home to diverse ethnic groups. *Panchayats* were included in Article 40 under the directive principles of the Constitution of India. In 1989 Rajiv Gandhi government introduced the bill for amending the Constitution for giving constitutional status to panchayats. But the bill could not be passed. Subsequently in 1992 the Constitution was duly amended by P.V. Narshimha government by introducing the 73rd Amendment. The tribal dominated states under 5th and 6th Schedule of the Constitution were however given option either to introduce *panchayati raj institutions* or to continue with their traditional self-government institutions. All the states included under 5th and 6th Schedule except Jammu and Kashmir, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mijoram amended their Panchayati Raj Act to accommodate the provisions of 73rd Amendment Act.

TRADE UNIONS IN TEA GARDEN

Traditionally trade unions in tea garden of north Bengal have been dominated by unions affiliated to ‘leftist’ parties. The Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) has had substantial influence in trade union movements across all tea garden in north Bengal with certain pockets of influence of other left leaning political parties. The influence of these trade unions towards betterment of living conditions of tea garden labourers cannot be denied. Right from fixing of minimal labour wages to ensuring proper living and health standards of tea garden labourers owe a lot to these leftist trade unions. In recent times however, political institutions such as the *Adivasi Bikash Parishad* have managed to infiltrate amongst the tea garden labourers, thereby making their presence felt even amongst the trade union movements.

However the fact remains that tea garden labourers trade union movement largely remains dominated by the political parties who wailed political power at the state level. It is therefore not a surprise that majority of trade unions in tea garden have changed their affiliation to Trinamool Congress (TMC) after change of the governing political force at the state level. Instances of tea garden trade union leaders changing their affiliation with changing political times are galore. It however is debatable as to the real grass roots benefits that a common tea garden labourer has managed to incorporate vis-à-vis his daily life.

While there remain inspiring stories about tea garden trade union leaders who have remained enshrined towards promoting and looking after the interest of the tea garden workers, their number is definitely not substantial. Standing under the present scenario where so many tea gardens are threatened with the closure, thereby threatening the very means of livelihood of workers, it is disheartening to note that trade unions representing these workers seldom have a strong voice to protest. Tea garden labourers' trade unions have largely lost their way in the quagmire of politics, thereby rendering themselves incapable towards redressal of real workers' issues.

Personal case studies of tea garden trade union leaders of Chalsa Tea Garden bear testimony to the fact that personal clout is the predominant driving force for these trade union leaders. These trade union leaders have thus been reduced to being stooges for furtherment of the political agendas of the ruling political establishments. A prime example for this is one prominent trade union leader named Bishnu Chhetri, who had huge socio-political clout within the tea garden labourers. For the majority of his life, he was enrolled as a member of CITU, i.e. the trade union wing of CPI(M). With changing political scenario and the advent of other political forces like AVP (Adivasi Bikash Parishad) and the trade union wings of TMC (Trinamool Congress), these new political institutions invested their energies into tea garden leaders like Bishnu, who had a huge sway amongst the tea garden labourers. Thus the personal clout of a grass root political leader was aimed to be sub-served by the political parties to further their own interest. The shifting of allegiance to various political formations is therefore quite common, whereby, grass root political leaders often end up as being sub-servant to the dominant political party.

Table No. 2.16: Major Trade Unions in North Bengal Tea Zone

S.No	Names of Union	Affiliation	No.of Tea Estates
1	Progressive Tea Workers Union (PTWU)	AVP	159
2	Darjeeling Terai Dooars Plantation Labour Union (DTDPLU)	GJMM	128
3	Cha Bagan Majdoor Union (CBMU)	CITU	121
4	National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW)	INTUC	113
5	Darjeeling Cha Bagan Workers Union (DCBWU)	UTUC(BB)	66
6	Terai Dooars Plantation Workers Union (TDPWU)	INTUC	40
7	Darjeeling District Cha Kaman Mazdoor Union (DDCKMU)	CITU	35
8	Trinamool Tea Plantation Worker Union (TTPWU)	INTUC	30

S.No	Names of Union	Affiliation	No.of Tea Estates
9	Tea Employees Association of West Bengal (TEAWB)	CITU	24
10	West Bengal Tea Garden employees Association (WBTGEA)	Not Affiliated	27
11	West Bengal Cha Mazdoor Sabha (WBCMS)	HMS	19
12	West Bengal Cha Shramik Union (WBCSU)	HMKP	10
13	All West Bengal Tea Garden Labour Union (AWBLU)	AIFTU (New)	7
14	North Bengal Cha Bagan Employees Union (NBCBEU)	UTUC(BB)	5
15	Jatiya Cha Mazdoor Congress (JCMC)	Not Affiliated	4
16	Zilla Cha Bagan Workers Union (ZCBWU)	AITUC(CBI)	4
17	Rastriya Cha MazdoorCongress (RCMC)	Not Affiliated	3
18	Pachim Banga Cha Bagan Shramik Karmachari Union (PBCBSKU)	Not Affiliated	2
19	Progressive Plantation Workers Union (PPWU)	Not affiliated	2
20	Terai Sangrami cha Shramik Union (TSCHU)	AICCTU	2
21	Himalayan Plantation Workers Union (HPWU)	GNLF	2
22	North Bengal Tea Plantation Employees Union (NBTPEU)	UTUC(LS)	1

Trade unions have always had the sole objective of protecting the interest of the workers. This specially bears relevance towards organised fringe industries like tea gardens. Though the tea industry in India is quite a force to reckon with, it still cannot compete with other industrial setups in various other fields such as textile and leather. The remote locations if tea garden further isolates the industry from socio-political purview. They are thus left to fend for themselves. Labour's right thus always tend to be compromised in such a predominantly remote setup. It is thus of paramount importance that labour unions in tea garden undertake a major role so as to ensure and protect the rights of tea garden labourers. A strong trade union movement is thus extremely important in a tea garden set up.

1. AICCTU- All India Central Council of Trade Unions (Communists Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation)
2. AITUC- All India Trade Union Congress (Communist Part of India)
3. AIUTUC- All India United Trade Union Centre (Socialist Unity Centre of India (Communist))
4. BMS- Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, wing of Bhartiya Janata Party)
5. CITU- Centre of Indian Trade Unions (Communist Party of India (Marxist))
6. HMS- Hind Mazdoor Sabha (Unaffiliated)
7. INTUC- Indian National Trade Union Congress (Indian National Congress)

8. LPF- Labour Progressive Federation (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam)
9. NFITU- National Front of Indian Trade Unions (Unaffiliated)
10. SEWA- Self Employed Women's Association (Unaffiliated)
11. TUCC- Trade Union Coordination Centre (All India Forward Bloc)
12. UTUC- United Trade Union Congress (Revolutionary Socialist Party)

The INTUC (Indian National Trade Union Congress) was the largest union in terms of absolute numbers till 2007. From 2008, as per the 2002 round of verification, the BMS (Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh) is the largest trade union federation having a verified membership of around 6.2 million.

During the course of many years trade unions in tea gardens have managed to bring forth meaningful and positive contribution towards protection of labour rights. However existence of a vast plethora of trade unions affiliated to various political parties has diluted the influence of trade unions. Concerted efforts emerging out of a single committed political forum aimed towards protection of labour rights has thus taken a back seat. Tea garden trade unions have thus rendered as means of furthering political agendas various political parties, thereby resulting in dilution of their main focus that is protection of labour rights in tea gardens.

It is to be noted that there remains isolated participation of women in trade union movement spanning across various tea gardens. It still remains a fact that majority of tea garden unions have predominantly male members in their decision-making bodies. Though women are equal if not more, affected by living conditions existing in tea garden vis-à-vis their male counterparts, there still largely remains fringe elements in tea garden trade union political set up. Thus they remain largely isolated and disconnected with this important aspect of labour empowerment through trade union movements. Men folk of tea gardens have continued over ages to wield power through these trade union movements, thus rendering women tea garden labourers defunct.

Thus an already diluted tea garden trade union movement has over the years lost its potency and effectiveness to deliver on genuine issues concerning the tea garden labourers as majority of the women tea garden labour force has miniscule say towards implementation of proper labour reforms. This two pronged attack namely, dilution of

trade union through involvement of diverse political parties and exclusion of women tea garden labourers from active political participation has rendered tea garden trade union movement largely ineffective through the course of years. Thus rendering tea garden trade unions nincompoop.

Recent forced inclusion of women into grass root political set ups through reservations of seats for women extending right from grass root political set ups to the state and national levels have provided women with a platform to get incorporated into political decision-making process. It is heartening to know that even amongst remote and isolated societies like tea gardens, a substantial percentage of women population have come forward to effectively use these reservations and participate in the democratic setup.

We thus find quite a percentage of women folk who are elected political representatives, having a desire to effectively contribute towards emancipation of women and betterment of society at large. Though there are many instances of these women of political stature being largely influenced and controlled by their male counterparts, there remain a healthy population of elected women political representatives who have an endeavour to pursue independent political agendas devoid of the influence of their male counterparts. These women have largely tried to make a meaningful difference towards the socio-political status of women positively.

Trade union politics has over ages not been able to bring forth women leaders, barring a miniscule of exceptions. Thus, though the value of trade unions cannot be belittled, projection of women into positions of power within this movement has been largely unsuccessful. Constitutionally guaranteed provisions like reservation of seats for women, right from the grass root political level has had a much more effective influence towards catapulting women into positions of power.

Though it is a reality that majority of women who get elected into this positions of power eventually adorn just ornamental posts, there remain quite a substantial percentage of women who are actually willing to come forward and make a positive political impact. Thus, though the trade union politics can be epitomised as a means of safeguarding the social-economic interests of labour class at large, it definitely cannot absolve itself from its failure to project the women leaders. It is only through constitutional and legal

provisions that a traditionally patriarchal society has been forced to give political space to women. Bhowmik (1999) in his studies shows that lack of education restricts choices of alternative occupations but this is not all. They are also marginalized in the area which tend to make them group together in their own communities in the plantations. Hence they look towards the plantation for employment in the present and the future.

It is heartening to note that, though the percentage may be substantial, many elected women political representatives do come forward in galvanising women oriented issues specially for belonging to labour class in any industry. Labourers working under tea gardens were largely an unorganised sector of workforce, thereby deprived of their very basic labour right. Trade unions spanning across various tea gardens in north Bengal, definitely have had a meaningful role in organising this motley group of tea garden labourers under one umbrella and working relentlessly to promote their basic labour rights. many basic issues such as determining a hours of work, minimum labour wages and other fringe but necessary labour benefits are ensured, have been the outcome of relentless struggle of various tea garden trade unions.

Though it has to be admitted that allegiance to a vast plethora of political parties spread across a wide spectrum in a country like India, has definitely resulted in weakening of the thrust of trade union movement, it still remains a fact that the positive impact of trade union towards protection of workers' rights cannot be denied.

A note - worthy lacunae in this influential trade union movement spread across tea gardens is the absence of meaningful women participation. It is remains a fact that any trade union movement relies on women workers participation. But transgressing into positions of power in this trade union setup has still been extremely restricted for the women workers. They still remain confined to just mustering up of the numbers. It is however noteworthy that certain progressive tea gardens have managed to inculcate institutions like Mother's Club which really serve to give voice to the aspirations of women tea garden labourers. Though they cannot claim to have positions of power in the trade union, they certainly do have an influencing factor towards channelizing the face of trade union movement. Institutions like Mother's Club actively pursues social issues like controlling alcohol abuse which rampant in a tea garden society, ensuring proper anti-natal care, helping in implementation of various vaccination programmes for neo-natal,

putting stress on universal education programme so that the girl child is not devoid of education rights, and in general working tirelessly towards propagation of better living standards of tea garden as a whole.

While discussing about the marginalisation of tribes Bhowmik (1999) further opines that the main problem of the tea garden workers is rooted in the fact that they were migrants to the areas of Dooars and Terai and were levelled low social status. Though, the tea garden workers are responsible for building up the wealth of the state through their labour in the tea industry they have been kept out of the mainstream society. This can be seen from the fact that though these communities are numerically large in the region they have never been politically effective. This large section of the population has been kept in isolation and they can hardly articulate their interests on their own. Non-worker, non-tribal trade union leaders (mainly belonging to the dominant Bengali community) continue to lead the trade unions and take decisions on behalf of the tribal workers. Isolation and lack of employment opportunities in the area has made these people dependent on the plantation system or on subsistence agriculture in the vicinity for their subsistence.

Our studies shows that though, they may not actively wield power within the trade union setup, they definitely are an influencing force towards giving direction for trade union movements. While fringe tea gardens that are not associated with large business houses still are deprived of active and meaningful participation of women workers, it is heartening to note that in certain big tea gardens women workers have tried to venture into grass root political levels and have managed to positively influence the political agenda. However, a large population of women tea garden workers remain deprived of this chance to set the agenda for their upliftment. Trade union still largely remain confined within a patriarchal set up where women get little space to reach up to the highest rungs of leadership.

Under the aegis of Plantation Labour Act (1951), there has been a concerted effort to protect the rights of tea garden labourers. The PLA was passed by parliament in 1951 but it came into effect in 1955. This act stipulates a number of guidelines relating to living and working conditions of plantation workers. According to this Act the employers must provide workers with permanent structures as houses, there should be sanitary facilities

and supply of drinking water in the labour lines (quarters). The plantation must afford free primary education to children of plantation workers through primary schools within the plantations. There are also provisions for recreation and cheap canteens for the workers. Bhowmik (1999) opines that the lives of plantation workers would improve substantially if these provisions were implemented. In reality, there is not a single tea plantation in the state that has fulfilled all provisions of the act.

Trade unions at large have used this act to enhance and protect their labour rights. However the most subjugated and exploited section of tea garden labourers i.e. the women workers, still find themselves at the mercy of a predominantly patriarchal social setup whereby trade union movements at large continue to formulate laws without meaningful participation of the women workers. Thus genuine issues involving the women workers yet remain to be meaningfully addressed. The need of the hour is thus to encourage and ensure women participation in trade union movements so that a wholesome social perspective is reached.

Though women participation in grass root political setup has been tried to be addressed through political measures such as reservations for women candidate in grass root political institutions like *panchayats*, meaningful involvement of women in trade union movement will definitely ensure a much more galvanising influence towards participation of women at the very basic and core level of the society. Nurturing of institutions such as the Mother's Club, which primarily serve as platform for women to give strong and meaningful voice towards shaping of society, is of paramount importance. Institutions such as these can serve as stepping stone towards an active participation of women workers in tea garden trade unions.

The women working force in various tea gardens can definitely contribute and have a much more positive influence towards laying down a positive way forward for the tea garden workers as a whole. The various rights of tea garden workers enshrined within the Plantation Labour Act (1951) can definitely be better protected and nurtured with an active participation of women workers within the tea garden setup. As they comprise of almost half of the tea garden working population, any means to protect the workers right will lose its relevance without active involvement of women workers.

During the course of my study I have noticed these huge lacunae that exists vis-à-vis a trade union movement towards participation of women workers. Any trade union movement can never succeed without active participation of the women workers. The provisions of the Plantation Labour Act are many, but lack of women workers participation renders most of these provisions futile. Thus means to ensure women workers participation have to be thought of so that true deliverance of provisions within the Plantation Labour Act is ensured.

It thus suffices that true political empowerment of women hinges upon that active and meaningful participation within the aieges of tea garden trade union movement. Grass root level democracy amongst the women tea garden workers can never be accomplished without significant incorporation of women. Involvement of women within the tea garden trade union movement can definitely serve to have a positive political impact. It is therefore of prime importance to actively pursue and ensure women participation amongst various tea garden trade unions. Their meaningful participation will definitely render a positive socio-political environment.

The enormous role of trade unions cannot be denied vis-à-vis their role in ensuring proper working conditions for labourers. A female perspective into this would however been much welcome as females do constitute 50 per cent of the labour force. Denial of a meaningful representation of women in tea garden labour unions has deprived a political voice for women. They have been thus reduced to a state of just making of numbers for various political agendas. True women empowerment at the very grass root level has thus been always compromised. Women populace thus continue to be viewed upon as a mass that a fit for only adding up numbers to any agitation. True redressal of issues concerning the women tea garden labourers still remains a distant dream.

Predominant women issues like pre-natal and anti-natal, provision of a healthy family environment, gender equality in terms of providing education to her children, equal wages as compared to her male counterparts, creation of a healthy socio-familial environment, etc. are never brought to the forth as there is a constant neglect of the aspiration of women workers in various trade union movements. An active and meaningful participation of women in trade union movement has to be ensured so as to bring about a wholesome

change in the status of tea garden labourers. Any movement that ignores the aspirations of half of its population can never achieve its goal.

Even before constitutionally guaranteed reservations for women in grass root *panchayat* level, it is necessary to focus on women empowerment in trade union movements. Involvement of women in trade union movements across all tea gardens can of course have a far reaching and meaningful impact, which will thus ensure socio-political upliftment of women. During the course of my studies, absence of powerful women trade union leaders has been a lacuna which should concern all social engineers. It points out to the glaring fact that meaningful women political leadership can never develop spontaneously and that it is still under the realms of targeted women reservations. These targeted women reservations can of course serve as precursor to real women empowerment at the grass root level, for many of the women who, being beneficiary of women reservation policy, have arisen to politically important positions at the grass root *panchayat* level.

While many of these women have subjugated themselves and work as mere tools in the hands of their male counterparts, there still remain a substantial percentage of these elected women representatives who have managed to overcome all adversities and put forward their socio-political agendas at the forefront, primarily directed towards women empowerment.