

CHAPTER 3

THE SETTING OF THE STUDY

A brief description of demographic, social, economic and political features and overall position of women in the district is presented in this Chapter intending mainly to relate the findings of this study in right perspective.

THE DISTRICT

Cooch Behar, the north eastern district of Jalpaiguri Division of West Bengal, lies in between 26° 32' 20" and 25° 57' 40" north latitude and between 89° 54' 35" and 80° 47' 40" east longitude. The total area of the district is 3369.38 square K.M. with 1166 mauza, 128 Gram Panchayat, 12 Panchayat Samity and 6 Municipality.

Cooch Behar, a compound of two words, meaning the land of Koch, a race of people inhabiting a large track of north east of Bengal province. From ancient times upto the reign of Khenes about 400 years ago this territory was part of kingdom of Kampur (now Assam). To one account Koch kingdom was founded by Visasingha sometimes during closing part of 16th century and during his rule Koches became Hinduised and accepted the name 'Rajbansi', that is of royal race. It was the only Princely House in Bengal during Mughal period. When King of Bhutan invaded, King of Cooch Behar sought British help in 1778 and from 1779 it remained, until independence, one of the protected Native Princedom.

When India attained independence, Art. 8 of the Independence Act envisaged that Princely States could join either of the dominion of India or Pakistan. A period of suspense prevailed whether Cooch Behar would cede to India or Pakistan. Finally on August 28, 1949 Koch King declared its merger with India and it was handed over to India on September 12, 1949. Central Government first declared it as Union Territory. Then the confusion was whether it would be included in West Bengal or Assam State. With the active insistence of the then West Bengal chief minister and Congress party, it was the last princely state to have merged and formed a district of West Bengal.

The Demography. Total population of the district is 21,71,146 in 1991. Total 92.19% population live here in rural areas as against only 3/4 population of West Bengal. Here Hindu population is 79% and Muslim 20.8% of total population. The density of population is 644 per square K.M. and maximum number of villages have less than 500 people. Table 3.1 gives comparative picture of density, distribution of SC/ST and sex ratio of Cooch Behar and West Bengal.

Table No 3.1

Population Density, Community / Caste and Sex Ratio in Cooch Behar (COB) and West Bengal (WB) in 1991.

	Total Population		Urban population		Rural population	
	COB	WB	COB	WB	COB	WB
Population Density (per sq.km)	644	677	5648	-	596	-
% of SC /ST.	52.36	27.3	19.61	14.28	56.14	39.60
Sex Ratio (' 000 male)	934	917	960	858	933	940

Compared to India's 927, Bengal's 917, the district has 934 female per 1000 male. Thus sex ratio is obviously higher and it has all along remained more or less uniform. Another distinguishing feature during 1951-61 was higher sex ratio for rural areas which was mainly due to migration of males to urban areas in search of education and employment.

The district has had a spurt of population growth (2.5 times compared to last 90 years put together) during the decades 1951-71. After partition of India huge influx of immigrants from East Pakistan and considerable number of migration from Assam state accounted for this alarming growth rate. But now it seems to have stabilised and in 1991, rate of growth (22.5%) is lower than that of West Bengal (24.6%).

Table No 3.2

Ethnic Composition in Cooch Behar by Sex (in Percentage)

	Hindu	Muslim	Jain	Others	SC	ST
Male	51.7	51.4	59.6	57.2	51.6	52.4
Female	48.3	48.6	40.4	42.8	48.4	47.6
% to total Population	79.0	20.8	0.1	0.1	51.8	0.6

SC/ST figures are of 1991 and others of 1981

The ethnic composition of the district is shown in the Table 3.2. It reveals that in contrast to West Bengal's 23.6% and 5.8% the district has 51.8% and 0.6% of SC and ST population respectively. Both in rural and urban areas Rajbansi alone forms the majority of SC population. Namasudra and Jalia Kaibarta are the next large SC communities. The district has about 13275 Schedule Tribe population belonging to 15 different categories. Oraons have the maximum number followed by Garos and others.

Muslim population has two separate segments those from erstwhile Bengal province and local converts from Rajbansi, Koch and Mech. The latter outnumbers the former and mostly live in rural areas and depend on agriculture.

Society Culture and Economy : The district has 186 and 168 th rank in terms of rural literacy and female literacy respectively according to Human Development Index for 372 Indian district ¹. Table 3.3 makes it clear that its literacy rate is really unpalatable particularly compared to West Bengal figure. Further break-up suggests that among SC population Rajbansis are the most literate section and urban Rajbansi women distinguish themselves with 42% literacy rate (1961 Census Report).

Table No 3.3
Comparative Literacy Rate in 1991 by sex (in Percentage)

	Male	Female	Total
India	64.13	39.29	52.21
West Bengal	67.81	46.56	57.70
Cooch Behar	57.40	33.30	46.80

Rajbansis have a rich and complex history though their precise origin, status and folk history remain obscure². To one anthropological view³ "Koches are non aryan in origin". Some of them adopted Hinduism and become Rajbansi. To other interpretation they are extension of Bodo of Assam and East Bengal. Chowdhury⁴wrote " it is taken as an established theory that Rajbansi is the same tribe as the Koch and both are a mixed race". He also wrote that they were not regarded as pure Hindu and use of pork, widow marriage etc. accorded them lower status in Hindu hierarchy. Rajbansi intellectual, however, strongly refute any affinity between them and Koches, Palyas or Bodos.

Rajbansi hindu society is patrilineal and patrilocal but position of women is distinguishingly better than others. Women can divorce, remarry and live with men of their choice even without formal ceremony⁵ and they actively participate in economic and other activities.

Among Mech Tribe bride price is paid by groom and hence widow marriage is in vogue. But according to social custom, males do not eat with women and male inheritance of property is followed.

1. *Panchayati Raj Development Report*. 1995. ISS. New Delhi. p 53
2. An account of this Community can be found in Mukherjee, RS. 1997. *The Rajbansis of North Bengal. - A demographic Profile. North Bengal University Review*, 1997.
3. Sanyal Charu (1965:13). *The Rajbansis of North Bengal*. The Asiatic Society. Calcutta.
4. Chowdhury Haren (1903 : 125) *Cooch Behar State and its land Revenue system*. CES Press. Cooch Behar.
5. Sanyal Charu (1965 : chapter IV). *ibid*.

Garos are darker and timid compared to Mech. After marriage bridegroom ordinarily becomes member of the bride's family and lives and works for its welfare. Widows are permitted remarriage and matrilineal inheritances is followed.

Table No 3.4

Percentage Distribution of Main Workers in Cooch Behar and West Bengal in 1991.

Type of Worker	Cooch Behar	West Bengal
Main *	30.55	30.20
Marginal *	1.97	2.17
Cultivator **	48.30	28.42
Agricultural labour **	26.05	24.53
Household Industris **	2.72	-

* Figures are % to total population.

** Figures are % to Main Workers.

Source. *Census of India* 1991. Series I. Part III

According to 1931 Census Report only 29% of total people of Bengal were workers. That situation has not improved much even today as only 32% are workers (Table 3.4). It indicates a huge dependent population. Situation becomes even more grim when it is found that 48% of the main workers are cultivators and 26% are agricultural labours in this district. Dependency on agriculture can thus easily be comprehended. Only about 0.96% of the total population are working in organised sector like School Teaching (total 10155 people) and Government Services (total 10700). Any industry worth mentioning is virtually non existent except some agro based establishment. The share of household industries is also negligible.

Table No 3.5

Operational Land Holding Size and class in Cooch Behar in 1985-86.

Size/Class: (In Hectare)	No. of Holding.	Area of Holding	Average Holding size
Upto I / Marginal	160974 (60.9)	70121 (26.2)	0.43
1-2 / Small.	66853 (25.3)	92506 (35.6)	1.08
2-4 / Semi Medium.	31295 (11.8)	79702 (29.8)	2.54
4-10 / Medium.	5240 (2.0)	25141 (9.4)	4.79
10+/Large.	-	-	-
Total.	264362 (100)	267470 (100)	1.01
In West Bengal	6128295	3763920	0.61

Source - *Agricultural Census* 1985-86. Directorate of Agriculture. Socio Economic and Evolution Branch. Govt. of West Bengal.

If agriculture is the main occupation, information about operational holding size make the situation still more worse. (Table 3.5). Not only average land holding size is low (1.01 hectare), near absence of medium to large holdings (2%) is likely to have negative effects on production output and household economy.

For centuries agriculture was not only the way of life but it was family centred, need based and was not conceived of in terms of technology. Rice (Tobacco and Jute in few pockets) could sustain family centered economy. But after independence huge immigration created severe pressure on the then self sufficing food front. The habit of average peasant of easy, simple life, two frugal meals a day and little care for future had to be readjusted in view of the new pressure. With some minor regional variations, soil here is not of alluvial formation and has a large admixture of sand. Thus ploughing is not so difficult and cultivation so laborious. The only requirement was to change the age old mentality and adopt new agricultural technique to boost production. Immigrant people here provided the necessary impetus. People from East Pakistan began to utilise expertise for improving quality of jute and tobacco for instance. And from 1970 onwards rapid improvement is being evident in agricultural technology, production output and changes in agrarian relations. The yielding rate of rice has now increased to 512 K.G. per hectare, cropping intensity has increased two fold. The noteworthy trend is found in the emphasis on cash crops. From importer the district has now emerged as major exporter to neighbouring states of crops like tomato, cabbage, cauliflower etc. The extensive use of fertiliser, high yielding varieties of seeds, irrigation facilities all have really revolutionised the productivity in almost all areas.

All these have vastly improved the economic condition of agriculturists both big and to some extent marginal farmers. Marginal farmers and agricultural labourers begin to be owner class as well. Ever increasing requirement of labour for present labour intensive agriculture providing working days and wages. To one estimate purchasing power of 80% population has increased considerably. Most pertinently family centered economy has been replaced by market economy. However, the increasing profit motive seems to have increased the supply than demand, thus lowering the crop prices. Market intermediary class has also emerged, further depriving the producer farmers.

Position of Women: As to the status of women in Cooch Behar in 19th century Chowdhury wrote⁶ that women did the largest share of household duties. They assisted in weeding, transplantation, cutting and thrusing of crops, husk paddy, cut and gather fuel fetch water, weave and wash cloth, attend sick and invalid. Women were "generally more intelligent and better informed in all matter than the men". They had almost full liberty both within and outside the home. In a fair or market place the sellers were mostly women. "The women although not positively respected, are not ill treated". They possessed "authority in the household which was inseparable from their influence". This description is more apt for Rajbansi women and the catchwords being not positively respected and not ill treated.

6. Choudhury Haren (1903:131-2). *ibid.*

A remarkable portion of present day women have joined in service sectors as in government offices, teaching profession, ICDS (Integrated child development service) etc. Especially for younger women educational level is rapidly improving. Enrolment rate for school education for girl's has jumped to 71.5% in 1981. Among educated married women fertility rate is believed to have dropped considerably. Daily experience suggests that regarding household affairs like purchasing plot, construction design, children marriage, familial relations to be maintained women have increasing, if not exclusive, control. Major share of domestic works are being taken over by a new class of the poorest section - the maid servant. Because of smaller family, career demands and time constrain the submissive wives of two or three generation ago are paving ways for assertive ones. In any market place or public gathering women constitute significant portion. In party activities, meetings and even public addressing they are found actively involved in large numbers.

The above description is not the broad and uniform pattern but mostly appropriate for educated and enlightened section of urban and rural women. Contrasting picture can be found in other part of rural and outskirts of town areas. Among the women of these areas, the general health, nutritional level etc. can be guessed even from their physical appearance itself. The number of children they have is quite awful indeed. Any bus journey in any sub-divisional town areas would authenticate all these.

Lowie⁷ observed that conditions involved in the relations of men and women are compounding. Treatment of women, legal status, public activity and labour participation are of more diverse and complex pattern. He noted that Toda women who are well treated have lower status and metaphysical and legal position of Chinese women could not prevent them from exercising supremacy in household and other affairs. Similarly, in this district though not ill treated, women do not have elevated social status. They are in fact integrated into family obsession and have clear family orientation. In some festival-- like HUTUM DEOR for Rajbansi women beseech to god for family welfare and not for themselves. Generally women wait for family members for dining and lastly take all that is left over.

It should not be construed that outside activities, economic participation and female inheritance of property (as among Garos) have ensured autonomy for women and established egalitarian social status. It has to be noted that there is no one to one correlation between women's economic contribution and their status. It is not sufficient condition for the development of female status wrote Sandy⁸ Sengupta⁹ also found that irrespective of economic factors women had a place in general social pattern. A Hazda woman in Tanzania contributes little but has high status while Tiwi women in Northern Australia provide bulk of wealth but have less independence (Kessler: 1976: 51). The study¹⁰ of Jalari women (fishing community in Andhra

7. Lowie Robert (1949: 178-79) *Primitive Society*. Routledge and Kegan. London.

8. Sandy Peggy (1973:169). Towards a Theory of Status of Women. *American Anthropology*. vol. 75 (3)

9. Sengupta Sankar (1970: 322). *A Study of Women in Bengal*. Indian publication. Calcutta.

10. Sridevi (1989) The Fisherwomen Financier. *Economic & Political weekly*. 29 April.

Pradesh) indicates that despite sufficient economic activities and independence, women's status is derived from cultural norms and their exclusion from political power is as conspicuous as elsewhere.

As equality depends on structural arrangement, ownership and management of property¹¹, all these do not necessarily ensure autonomy within the family¹². As such, inequality is as pervasive here as in other agrarian societies and lack of sufficient awareness, education and other factors further aggravate the prospect of getting inequality redressed. Thus, both in terms of culture and economy the district has no remarkable departure from rural societies elsewhere.

Women and Political Layout : Despite being protected Princely State, rural administration of Cooch Behar was to some extent exclusive. Cooch Behar Village Chowkidari Act (Act 111 of 1893) established glimmer of Panchayat system. Under this Act for a village or combination of villages Panchayat was formed with 3 - 5 members nominated by Criminal Ahilkar (like present subdivisional officer or SDO). Its responsibilities were to maintain peace, stop immigration of undesirable people, to provide water supply, public health, education, birth and death registration or any other function delegated by the King . An amendment to the Actⁱⁿ 1941 provided for the post of President for such Panchayat. Detailed provisions were provided for village Chowkidar (guard) whose main function was to perform the role of village police. He was appointed by Criminal Ahilkar, got fixed monthly salary out of annual tax collected from villagers.

After independence, following West Bengal Panchayat Act 1957 four tier system was introduced and election held in 1959. The total strength of each tier then was - Gram Sabha 582, Anchal Panchayat 105, Anchalik Parishad 11 and Zilla Panchayat 1 . That system was replaced by three Tier Panchayat - GP, PS, ZP - by the Act of 1973 and continuity and vigour categorically imparted since 1978.

The district has one Parliamentary seat and nine Assembly seats. Among Assembly seats the Left Front has secured six, AIFB (S) infact two as one independent is supported by it and Congress just one seat in 1996 election. The lone Parliamentary seat is held by left front. The district may be one bastion of the Left Front because out of total 13, 19851 electorate, it has, like in earlier elections, 44.1 % support and Congress has 32.3 %, AIFB (S) 15.6%, BIP 5.6% and other Parties 2.4 % support.

For women's participation it may be asserted, even with out documentary evidence, that they do not remarkably lag behind in participating and exercising voting rights in successive elections. For last 19 years one Assembly seat was held by one AIFB woman and for the Parliamentary seat one woman of Congress party has unsuccessfully been contesting for last two elections. For the panchayats, women were of course nominated to different tiers and a

11. Das Bina (1976 : 144). Indian women, Work, power and status. *In nanda (ed)*

12. Dasgupta, Ranajit (1992 : 18) *Economy Society & Politics*. Jalpaiguri 1869 - 1947 . Oxford University Press. New Delhi.

handful even contested in the elections. As we have noted already, 21 women were elected in 1988 PR election.

It is discernable from the previous discussion that the district has an absolute rural background and women in general have no improved socio economic status. On this backdrop then, when women in so large number are now integrated into political process of PR, women's participation and PR role performance would be worth examining. It would both be revealing and absorbing especially when we know that they are here for the first time, without sufficient exposuer and above all are to operate in somewhat dioristic socio political environment.