

CHAPTER - 5

SOCIO ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF WOMEN

The socio economic and political background of women panchayats is likely to indicate the nature of their representation. A person's antecedents have decisive impact on her role performance. Though it needs stressing that such background, by itself, does not ensure effective participation particularly for women because of their subordinate status, male ideology, long political inexperience and so on, The significance of this Chapter lies in the fact that it will help in visualising impact, if any, of any specific socio economic variable on political participation in later part of the study.

In this Chapter we have looked into the personal background of the women in terms of age, caste/community, marital status, education, occupation (Section-I), family background in terms of education, occupation (Section-2) and political background in terms of political affiliation and experience (Section - 3). At the end we have looked into the emerging trends for panchayat women in view of our information (Section - 4).

1. PERSONAL BACKGROUND

1.1. Age. Age is a vital factor for various reasons. Panchayat women are to deal with people and their problems. As village transportation is usually by foot, it requires more physical vigor and mobility, comparatively higher age is likely to forbid women from succeeding leadership and prove strenuous for public works. On the other hand higher age commands greater respect in traditional Indian society and higher recruitment age reaffirms traditional attitude of society in granting political opening for youngsters.

We may categorise different age groups into three classes - younger with upto 32 years, middle with 32 to 44 years and older with 44 +. It is found from Table 5.1(in next page) that there are 31% younger , 48 % middle and 21 % older women. The mean age of them is 38.4 years. Mathabanga PS (I) has the lowest mean of 28.2 years and second lowest is Putimari GP with 35.2 years. Among all, 3 women are of 60+ and 5 are of 55 + years of age. Among Tiers, GP has the largest (38%) presence of youngsters while PS and CP have more middle aged women. As to the parties, CPM has about 15% more older and 9 % less of younger members than Congress.

1.2. Marital Status. Six respondents are unmarried, one is widow and the rest are married. Marital status indicates that women take political career as an extension to their domestic roles. The mean age of marriage is 17.2 years which though below legal prescription is not unusual in rural areas. More unmarried (4 of 6) women are in the Congress party and the widow belongs to the CPM.

Marital status and age of marriage are closely related to the number of children . The lower the age of marriage higher is the fertility rate. Data show that the average number of children of women is 2.5. The members of GP have the lowest (2.2) and PS has the highest (2.9) number of children.

Early marriage is significant for the reason that it forces women in rather early part of life in acquiring family responsibility and within short span to child bearing and rearing roles . It thus confines them to four walls, deprives outside mobility and obstructs in evolving fuller personality, As mean age is 38.4 years and mean marriage age is 17.2 years, women, on an average, have entered family life about 21 years ago. Thus during their early reproductive period awareness level, family planning norms and facilities etc. were obviously lesser than present times. As such the overall scenario as to their number of children is not so dejecting.

Table No. TABLE 5:1
Women by Age group, Tier and Party

Age Group (Years)	Tier				Party			
	GP :	PS :	CP :	Total	CPM :	Cong.	Others	Total
Below 20	—	1	1	2 (2.2)	2 (3.6)	—	—	2
20 - 26	3	2	—	5 (5.6)	2 (3.6)	2 (8.0)	1 (10.0)	5
26 - 32	9	9	3	21 (23.3)	11 (20.0)	7 (28.0)	3 (30.0)	21
32 - 38	9	12	6	27 (30.0)	17 (31.0)	6 (24.0)	4 (40.0)	27
38 - 44	5	8	3	16 (17.8)	8 (14.5)	7 (28.0)	1 (10.0)	16
44 +	6	7	6	19 (21.1)	15 (27.3)	3 (12.0)	1 (10.0)	19
Total	32	39	19	90 (100)	55 (100)	25 (100)	10 (100)	90

Table No. 5:2
Caste/Community of Women

Party	Caste/ Community			
	General (GEN).	Muslim (MUS)	SC/ST.	Total
CPM	11 (20.0)	5 (9.0)	39 (71.0)	55 (100)
Congress	6 (24.0)	7 (28.0)	12 (48.0)	25 (100)
Others	1 (10.0)	-	9 (90.0)	10 (100)
Total	18 (20.0)	12 (13.3)	60 (66.7)	90 (100)

Compared to West Bengal the district has remarkably larger presence of SC/STs. And their representation in PR in 1993 PR election is 42% (1169 out of 2817 seats) and SC women's share is 20% of total seats. Among SC seats women have 58%, 57% and 88% in GP, PS and ZP respectively. In the sample 67% are SC women, 13% Muslim and 20% General caste (2 Brahmin, 16 Kyastha) (Table 5.2). It may be noted that Muslim representation in CP group is marginal and Congress party has lesser portion from SCs (Table 5.3)

1:3 Family : In agricultural society joint family is the norm but for economic and other causes it is slowly but steadily breaking down as is reflected in 72% joint family among respondents (Table 5:3). Smaller families - with husband, wife, their offspring and often father or mother of husband - may be less restrictive for women. But it is equally significant that here cooperation especially of husband assumes importance as wife has to shoulder more family responsibilities.

Table 5:3
Family, Education and Caste/Community of Women

Teir	Family Type			Education*				Caste/Community**			
	Joint	Small	Total	Low	Medium	High	Total	GEN	MUS.	SC/ST	Total
GP	25	7	32	22	6	4	32	7	5	20	32
				(68.8)	(18.8)	(12.5)	(100)				
PS	26	13	39	13	17	9	39	6	6	27	39
				(33.3)	(43.6)	(23.1)	(100)				
CP	14	5	19	6	9	4	19	5	1	13	19
				(31.5)	(47.4)	(21.0)	(100)				
Total	65	25	90	41	32	17	90	18	12	60	90
	(72.2)	(27.8)	(100)	(45.5)	(35.5)	(19.0)	(100)				

* Low Education = upto class X, Medium Education = upto class XII, High Education = above class XII.

** GEN = General, MUS = Muslim, SC = Scheduled Caste, ST = Scheduled Tribe

1:4 Education : Education in general, though not panacea, is that catalyst that helps to form creativity, capacity,, attitude, values and status. In any rural society female literacy suffers most. In 1991 female literacy was just 39% compared to 63% of male in India, It may also be doubtful as to what extent education has the importance as an independent variable.

We can cite two instances from this district. One GP woman (in Mathabanga) having class V education demonstrated unilaterally and successfully before the Minister concerned when the sanctioned electric connection to her ward (Constituency) was hiked by her male counterpart. Another GP woman (Cooch Behar) having BA degree has developed such a fell that led her to consider public works as filthy job.

Table No. 5 : 4
Party and Education of Women

Party	Education			
	Low	Medium	High	Total
CPM	32 (58.2)	15 (27.2)	8 (14.6)	55 (100)
Congress	7 (28.0)	13 (52.0)	5 (20.0)	25 (100)
Others	2 (20.0)	4 (40.0)	4 (40.0)	10 (100)
Total	41	32	17	90

As revealed by earlier Table 5:3 total 46% have low, 36% medium and 19% high level of education. As to Tiers, GP like elsewhere, has the highest share of lowly educated women (69%). In other words, 55% have education ranging from class X onwards. It is also uncovered (Table 5:4) that 58 % of CPM have low education and 15% high or it has 30% gain over Congress in fielding lowly educated women. However, majority of Congress (52%) have middle type of education. Other parties have respondents with overtly higher education.

1: 5 Occupation : Economic independence helps in freeing women mentally and physically from control of families, shaping assertive personality and permitting greater access to decision making, Equally, it neither permits time/ energy for other additional responsibility nor women tend to prefer any extra role.

In the sample total 9 women - 4 from GP and 5 from PS- are gainfully employed mostly in Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). Others are simply housewives and as such dependent on family which in turn bestows little status, if any, for public role performance. Of the latter group a remarkable portion particularly at GP, is engaged in economic activities like Bidi making, sewing etc. which have definite impact on household economy.

2. FAMILY BACKGROUND

Specifically for women family background plays pivotal role as their status is ascriptive. Socio political values and involvements of woman are formed or conditioned by the mooring and standing of their families and for woman they cast all encompassing and sometimes obfuscating clutches.

2.1 Education

Table No 5:5
Education of Women's Families* by Tier and Party

Education**	Tier				Party			
	GP	PS	CP	Total	CPM	Cong.	Others	Total
Low	21 (65.6)	14 (35.9)	4 (21.0)	39 (43.3)	28 (50.9)	10 (40.0)	1 (10.0)	39
Medium	7 (21.9)	8 (20.5)	6 (31.6)	21 (23.3)	9 (16.4)	8 (32.0)	4 (40.0)	21
High	4 (12.5)	17 (43.6)	9 (47.4)	30 (33.3)	18 (32.7)	7 (28.0)	5 (50.0)	30
Total	32 (100)	39 (100)	19 (100)	90 (100)	55 (100)	25 (100)	10 (100)	90

* Woman's families include husband for married and father for unmarried.

** Low education = up to class X, Medium = up to class XII and High = above XII.

Higher education is explicit in CP (47%) and PS (44%) and low education in GP is marked (Table 5:5). Closer look reveals that of the 39 in low educated group, one has no education at all and 20 have educational level from class III to class V. Partywise majority of CPM and Congress families have low educational profile and for other Parties higher level is observed.

If personal education of woman (Table 5:3) is seen along with their families education it is discernable that GP has significant portion of low education of woman and their families. And CPM has categorically lower education profile than Congress even though both have no important difference as to higher level of education.

When we compare educational level both of woman and their families another absorbing dimension is as follows. More woman (36%) have medium education than their families (23%). But for the high category woman's share is just 19% while their families have 33% (Table 5:3 and 5:5). Thus woman are lagging behind at 14%. It can be observed that families of women have higher education than woman themselves, As to the parties (Table 5:4 and 5:5) Congress party families have distinctively lower education (40% low and 32% Medium) than CPM and other Party women.

2.2 Occupation

Table No 5:6
Occupation of Women's Families* by Tier and Party

Occupation	Tier				Party			
	GP	PS	CP	Total	CPM	Cong.	Others	Total
Only Agriculture (Agr.)	12	17	4	33 (36.7)	21	10	2	33
Only Business (Bus.)	6	1	2	9 (10.0)	8	1	—	9
Only Service (Ser.)	13	17	11	41 (45.6)	22	13	6	41
Arg. + Bus.	1	2	1	4 (4.4)	2	1	1	4
Ser. + Bus.	—	2	1	3 (3.3)	2	—	1	3
Total	32	39	19	90 (100)	55	25	10	90

* Like earlier occasion, women's families imply husband for married and father for unmarried women

Service (mainly School Teaching and partly State Government employment and Police) accounts for larger proportion of occupation (46%) and CP group is almost dominated by it (58%) (Table 5:6) Similarly, in all parties non agriculturists have clear domination. For women the all India trend is that non agriculturists find more share in rural power structure¹.

It is also prominent that 7 out of 13 service holders in GP Tier are from one GP alone - Guriahati. Perhaps its proximity to the district town and demographic nature more like Municipal Ward could explain it. In other GP - Andaran Fulbari - 2 service and 5 business families are found. Thus majority of service and business families for GP are concentrated in two GPs alone.

1. 12% women families are from agriculturists in Kerala. Bhaskar. M (1997: ws 20) Women Panchayat Members in Kerala. *Economic & Political Weekly*. 26 April.

Table No 5:7
Occupation and Education of Women and their Families

Occupation	Education of Women				Education of Families			
	Low	Medium	High	Total	Low	Medium	High	Total
Agriculture (AGR)	24	4	5	33	22	8	3	33
Service (SER)	8	26	7	41	8	9	24	41
Business (BUS)	7	2	-	9	7	2	-	9
AGR + BUS	1	-	3	4	1	1	2	4
SER + BUS	1	-	2	3	1	1	1	3
Total	41	32	17	90	39	21	30	90

X² Value - 43.27. D.F. 8
Table Value - 15.51
at 0.05% level

X² Value - 29.5. D.F. 8
Table value - 15.51

From Table 5:7 agricultural and business groups are found to have lower educational level both for women and their families. And for the Service group the trend is just reverse. Thus there is significant correlation between education and occupation. It seems that because of higher education service families in particular are not only conscious of the importance of political power but also are capable of garnering it because of accessibility and other advantages.

Table No 5:8
Land Holding of the Family of Women by Tier and Party

Holding (Acre)*	Tier				Party			
	GP	PS	CP	Total	CPM	Cong.	Others	Total
No land	11	3	5	19 (21.0)	9	8	2	19
0 - 2	12	9	3	24 (26.7)	16	6	2	24
2 - 4	3	9	5	17 (18.9)	14	2	1	17
4 - 6	3	10	2	15 (16.7)	10	3	2	15
6 +	3	8	4	15 (16.7)	6	6	3	15
Total	32	39	19	90 (100)	55	25	10	90

* 1 Acre = 43.566 square Feet

Larger holding size is not marked, Only 17% (Table 5,8) have more than 6 acre of land. Of them 2 have more than 8.3 acre of land and 8 have their land irrigated by own pump sets. Congress and other Parties have greater representation in this category. A significant portion of GP and CP families have either no land or low holdings while PS has almost descending order of holdings. It is also seen that 27% of total have fairly low holdings of which CPM has the major chunk. But if occupation is considered together with land holdings we get another dimension.

Table No 5:9
Land Holding and Occupation of Families of Women

Holding (Acre)	Occupation					
	Agriculture	Service	Business	AGR+BUS,	SER+BUS	Total
No Land	-	16	3	-	-	19 (21.1)
0-2	8 (24.2)	12	3	1	-	24 (26.6)
2-4	10 (30.3)	4	2	1	-	17 (18.9)
4-6	9 (27.3)	2	1	1	2	15 (16.7)
6+	6 (18.2)	7	-	1	1	15 (16.7)
Total	33 (100)	41	9	4	3	90 (100)

Table 5:9 unravels that in the low holding group (0-2) only 8 (33%) out of 24 have agricultural occupation but majority (50%) are in service. Only in the middle range (2-6) predominance of agriculturists can be observed. On the other hand, in the higher scale of holding non agriculturists have clear sway.

Table No 5:10
Land Holding of Agriculturists by Party

Holding (Acre)	Party			
	CPM	Congress	Others	Total
0 - 2	6 (28.6)	1 (10.0)	1 (50.0)	8 (24.2)
2 - 4	8 (38.0)	2 (20.0)	-	10 (30.3)
4 - 6	6 (28.6)	3 (30.0)	-	9 (27.3)
6+	1 (4.8)	4 (40.0)	1 (50.0)	6 (18.2)
Total	21 (100)	10 (100)	2 (100)	33 (100)

Altogether 33 have agricultural occupation. Among them fairly low holding of upto 2 acre is only for 24% (Table 5.10) and they are mainly from CPM. The majority (58%) have more or less middle range of land holdings.

2:3 Family Domination: In the survey reports it is more often found that panchayat women are recruits from families who are/were either members of PR or influential in village politics. Such families have usurped reservation policy to retain or defend their hold over PR through clever manipulation of their women. In this context it is observed in this district that not a very significant portion of women are recruits from families who have/had earlier family representation in PR (Table 5:11). Only 40% women have their family members - husband family (32%) for married and parental family (8%) for unmarried in PR. For the parties, 44% of CPM, 28% of Congress and 50% of other party women are from such families. For the CP group it is striking that total 58% are not new breed in terms of family. As in elsewhere, the executive positions are special preserve of prominent families / leaders and position of authority is not easily or instantly being conceded to ordinary or in consequential family members to any remarkable extent.

Table No : 5 :11.

Family Members of Women who are / were members of PR by Tier and Party

Type of Family Members	Tier				Party			
	GP	PS	CP	Total	CPM	Cong.	Others	Total
Husband (HUS)	4	4	5	13	8	2	3	13
Father in Law (FL)	2	5	1	8	6	1	1	8
Brother in Law (BL)	1	-	5	6	4	2	-	6
FL + BL	1	-	-	1	1	-	-	1
HUS+BL	-	1	-	1	1	-	-	1
Father	2	2	-	4	3	-	1	4
Others	2	1	-	3	1	2	-	3
Total	12 (37.5)	13 (33.3)	11 (57.9)	36 (40.0)	24 (43.6)	7 (28.0)	5 (50.0)	36
Herself First Time	20 (62.5)	26 (66.7)	8 (42.1)	54 (60.0)	31 (56.4)	18 (72.0)	5 (50.0)	54
Grand Total	32 (100)	39 (100)	19 (100)	90 (100)	55 (100)	25 (100)	10 (100)	90

3. POLITICAL BACK GROUND

3.1 Party Membership

Table No : 5 :12
Party Membership of Women

Tier	Party Membership Grade*			
	Low	Medium	High	Total
GP	20 (64.5)	7 (22.6)	4 (12.9)	31 (100)
PS	17 (50.0)	8 (23.5)	9 (26.5)	34 (100)
CP	9 (47.4)	2 (10.5)	8 (42.1)	19 (100)
Total	46 (54.8)	17 (20.2)	21 (25.0)	84 (100)

* We assign grade for party membership as Low to those who are primary members of party for 1 to 3 years, Medium who are members for 3 to 5 years and High who are members for more than 5 years.

Total 6 women are not party members at all (majority from CPM). Table 5:12 discloses that majority women have taken primary membership of parties only during or after PR posts. As usual, CP accounts more for higher grade of membership and GP the lower. The Table does foresee that at least some women (25%) have politically been active long before PR incarnation. It certainly allows one to be optimistic implying that they are not as passive as is usually supposed to be. Also CPM respondents have distinctly superior membership grade.

In the political analysis higher rank is generally awarded for frequent participation in party meeting. For women panchayats such participation will not only show the intensity of involvement in politics but will also help to develop awareness and opinion formation which will certainly bolster panchayat role performance, It is found that except for two, all are regularly attending party meetings. Efforts to measure the pitch of their commitment in this front indicated that 43 % attended meetings in the span of last one month from the date of response and only 27 % attended more than 3 month ago. Of course this information has to be qualified by the frequency of meetings held in their locality.

Table No 5:13
Women's Membership of other Organisations

Organisation	Tier			
	GP	PS	CP	Total
Mahila Samity	28	27	17	72
Cooperative	2	2	5	9
Farmers Organisation	5	6	-	11
Others	1	3	1	5
Total	36	38	23	97

Multiple affiliations

In contrast to women, men are found to seek more membership of voluntary organisations and they have 13 percentage gain over women in this sphere (Country Paper : 1985 :56). If this is the trend for general women, the significant aspect is whether panchayat women do have any inclination to utilise and enhance their electoral roles. If they tend to join other organisation besides political party their participation would both be broadbased and wide-spread.

It is found that only 7 women are not member of any voluntary organisation. And majority are members of Mahila Samity - womens' forum for women cause but basically parties frontal cell for women mobilisation (Table 5:13), Some others are members of Kishan (Farmers) Sabha and Religious Trusts etc. More GP and CPM women are members of Mahila Samity and CP group is marked more for affiliation to other organisations.

3:2 Public Address : Proficiency in public addressing skill is highly conducive for political role performance. Addressing public in our case denotes the event or occasion when PR women deliver formal speech to public gathering whether big or small.

Table No 5:14
Women who Address by Party

Tier	Party			Total (90)
	CPM (55)	Congress (25)	Others (10)	
GP (32)	8	3	1	12 (37.5)
PS (39)	9	7	1	17 (43.6)
CP (19)	15	-	2	17 (89.5)
Total	32 (58.2)	10 (40.0)	4 (40.0)	46

* Figures in Brackets are Percentage to Tier and Party total.

It is found that 46 or 51 % of total women do possess this competency (Table 5:14). Almost all of CP, 44 % of PS and again less of GP (38%) women have addressed gatherings mainly of village women under the fold of Mahila Samity. One can not disparage the implication of it. We have had the opportunity to be present in one GP Meeting and one District Training Camp. We observed there, perhaps as a corollary of addressing ability, a large section of women raising and defending their views. All these together substantiate that they have shaken off traditional reluctance and this will surely ensure firm treading in PR.

4. EMERGING TREND

This section is devoted to summarise all information of earlier sections and comprehend what may be the future trends of nature of women's representation.

GP accounts more for younger, lower land holdings, low level of education and lower party membership grade. PS caters to more of middle age group, medium education, more first time recruits from respective families. Reversely CP has more older age group, higher educa-

tion, almost dominated by service occupation, higher party membership grade and public addressing ability. The CP group is singularly characterised by their family involvement in PR posts. In contrast to CP, GP and PS have greater quantum of new recruits from families. Agriculturists are found equally in GP and PS and majority of business families come from GP. Also landless families are significant for GP and CP but not for PS. Thus like PR itself, socio economic and political background of women follow top down pattern where CP stands at the higher and GP the lower. Some writers² argued that majority of working class and peasant women are found in left parties and women here are politically more active, vocal and trained. Our information corroborate some of the contention. For the district CPM has favoured more from older age group, subordinate education though not far a way from Congress regarding higher educational level. Plethora of CPM women's families are owner of middle type of land holdings. However, 62% of its members have non agricultural occupation though it has lesser proportion of service occupation. Though major portion of non party women come from CPM alone, it has at the same time lion's share in higher grade of party membership and addressing quality. On the other hand majority of younger and middle aged members come from Congress as well as other parties including medium educational background. Congress accumulates more of the agriculturists even if closely followed by CPM. Equally, Congress has not only majority in fielding more from landless families but it is second to other parties in the share of larger holding size. Congress has overweening representation in recruitment for the first time from families thus lesser domination by family.

Though CPM women have more matured political background, in socio economic terms not so lower orientation. Considered in terms of land holdings, occupation and education, data confide that women have aptly not upper category of background (we deliberately avoid class exposition for women for various reasons). It also suggests that the section which is comparatively educated and conscious is likely to be more visible in power configuration. While the lowest segment of population tends not only to be ignorant about available avenues and handicapped by sheer consideration of survival struggle but is also more amenable to be put to silence.

The question thus is whether women having this type of background can adequately represent all sections of women. If we confine ourself to independent India, women throughout have been represented by their higherups. Even if it is one of the reasons why they have failed to uphold gender interests, one is not likely to be mistaken to be circumspective about any better beginning especially for socio cultural and economic reasons.

Power structure usually reflects the ascriptive social base but with the introduction and maturing of democratic process, power structure and political recruitment have to readjust in the context of realignment of social forces and legitimacy. Despite differences in degree, present trend in leadership pattern is of middle "class" orientation unsettling traditional ascriptive land owning class. Women representation tends to substantiate this trend also.

2. Das Gupta. S. (1970:322) *A Study of Women in Bengal*. Indian Publication, Calcutta.

Despite top down hierarchy and conspicuous disparities among Tiers and parties, considered as a whole, women are younger in age, devoid of illiteracy and majority providing new source of leadership. Representation of peasantry as such is not so dominating. Almost all are members both of party and other Organisations. A significant portion has acquired skill of addressing people and hopefully it would foster efficacy as it indicates that they have overcome docility and have acquired ability to apprise and lead others.