

PREFACE

Decentralization has been a popular theme in development thinking and practice for last few decades. In recent years there has been a dramatic flowering of decentralization initiatives among Third World Countries. India has been one of the Third World Countries who adopted the decentralized governance system after its independence.

But decentralized governance or the Panchayati Raj System is not a new phenomenon in our country. Since ancient periods, India had developed a number of self-governing village communities or local bodies. But due to several factors this system could not survive for long time.

Later, during the reign of the British, the objective of decentralized governance could not be achieved due to bureaucratic non-cooperation, non-legality of the Panchayat bodies and the basic feudal structure of our society. But it is true that until and unless local level administration can be made democratic in its functioning, a true democratically administered country cannot be setup. Understanding this reality it was necessitated after independence that laws are to be passed in regard to Panchayat bodies to ensure people's participation in the administration of local bodies through direct election and decentralization of power from bottom to top.

Though the Indian Constitution embodied equal rights to women in regard to take part in politics, the reality is that Indian women have to face various obstacles that have mostly excluded them from taking part in formal politics. Moreover, the women of weaker sections and Muslims have to face serious constraints, at their home and in the broader area of the society. Without removing these constraints, women in general, and women of S/C and Muslims in particular, cannot participate in politics. Though the Left Front Government in West Bengal has injected a new life in the process of decentralized governance, and though it has taken various measures for the upliftment of women of all sections of society, still the women of Bengal are not fully empowered in all spheres of their life.

It is conceived that decentralized governance would ensure development on sustainable manner and thus empowerment will take place and will be sustained. In this way, women's empowerment has become a global issue. In India also, emphasis has been given on empowerment of women through development programmes by Panchayati Raj Institutions.

But various development programmes reveal that even after five decades of planning in India, women are far behind their male counterparts. One of the main reasons for this type of backwardness of women is their non-involvement in politics and non-participation in decentralized governance and development through Panchayat Institutions.

However, the 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 has enabled women through reservation of 33% seats to take part in Panchayati Raj Institutions. After the enactment of the 73rd constitution Amendment, the Indian women are trying to exert themselves in taking part in the decentralized governance system. But the burning social problems, like, illiteracy, poverty, unemployment, male domination, religious orthodoxy, superstition, conservatism and lack of awareness about politics and their

rights and dignity, are coming in the way of their functioning. In most cases, women Panchayat members are projected as the mother, wife, widow or sister of renowned rural party leaders. In some cases, women are performing a leading role in the process of rural development through the local governing system. It is worthy to note that several State Governments and Central Government are taking various measures to remove those constraints so that women can be empowered. As a result of that, rural women in a good number are taking part in the decision-making process and planning in the decentralized governing system. Besides government initiatives, several Non-Governmental Organizations, voluntary groups etc. are taking initiatives for the participation of women in decentralized governing system and empowerment of women, in a proper way.

The present study focuses mainly on empowerment in the context of decentralized governance in general and empowerment of women of the weaker sections and the Muslims in particular. The study is based on the Cooch Behar District in West Bengal where empowerment of women in general, and empowerment of women of the Scheduled Castes and the Muslims in particular, is still a distant dream. Empowerment is a multi-dimensional process which enables individuals and groups understand their full destiny and power in all walks of their life. Women can be empowered only when they are conscious and aware of their rights, potentials and capabilities. In a patriarchal society, women must be aware of socio-cultural and political forces, they must understand political empowerment and economic development of society. And socially women should be uplifted, otherwise they can not fight against the age-old male domination on them, deprivation of their rights and so on.

The rural area of Cooch Behar district is basically characterized by low literacy rate, lack of industry, non-availability of irrigation system in agricultural production, dependence mainly on rain based agricultural system, low rate of employment and socio-political hurdles. For all these reasons, the concept of women's empowerment could not spread out all over the district in a proper manner. Though a good section of rural women have been involved in local level politics and to some extent, became the part of decision-making process, a large number of rural women of the Scheduled Castes, particularly the Muslim women still remain far away from the decision-making centre of the local self-government Institutions. The socio-economic constraints on rural women of the Scheduled Castes and Muslims in this district has placed them in a low status and even they do not think of themselves in a high image every where in the society.

But the decentralized government system through Panchayat bodies can only be successful if all sections of people including the women of the weaker sections and the Muslims have an equal representation and participation to these bodies. Reservation of seats for women is not only the remedy of this problem, unless socio-economic constraints are overcome. Socio-economic, cultural and religious factors are coming in the way as hindrances in the process of women's empowerment. Domination of male guardians on women Panchayat members, control of political party leaders on women Panchayat members etc. have posed a barrier on the process of women's empowerment. So, it is not easy for women members of the S/Cs and the Muslim communities to fight against all these odds. Though it is true that, a good

number of women politicians of the weaker sections and the Muslims have been emerged in the district, but the vast majority of them are still lagging behind. To achieve this goal properly, legal and administrative measures should be taken adequately, and the women Panchayat members of the S/Cs and the Muslims have to be given literal as well as political education. By doing this, women's empowerment can be achieved.

Keeping in mind the above noted scenario, the present study seeks to find out the level of empowerment of women of the S/Cs and the Muslim community in the district of Cooch Behar. The study further aims to explore the obstacles of women's empowerment, with an expectation that findings of this research work along with its recommended suggestions would be able to offer a fresh outlook and valuable inputs to the government policy-formulators in their future course of action on women's empowerment through decentralized governance.

The entire study has been divided into six broad chapters which include several sections and sub sections covering the specific dimensions of the study. **CHAPTER-1** has provided introductory information of the study, discussed objective of the study, research questions, theoretical framework, review of existing literatures, research gaps, methodology of research work, rationale for selecting the district and two Blocks, data processing, significance of the study and limitation of the study. **CHAPTER-2** has focused on the evolution of Decentralized Governance in India. **CHAPTER-3** has discussed an overview of Decentralized Governance, Development and Empowerment in India. **CHAPTER-4** has analyzed an over view of Decentralized Governance, Development and Empowerment in West Bengal during the period 1978-1998. **CHAPTER-5** has examined Decentralized Governance, Development and Empowerment in the Cooch Behar district in West Bengal. This chapter has discussed the specific objective of this study that is, the extent of participation and role of the women of the weaker sections (S/Cs) and the Muslims in the decentralized governing process of two selected Blocks in Cooch Behar district. This Chapter has further studied the impact of the participation and role on the over all Empowerment of Women of the weaker sections, that is the Scheduled Castes and the Muslims in two selected Blocks in the district of Cooch Behar of West Bengal. **CHAPTER-6** is the concluding chapter, where all the findings of the study have been summarized. This chapter has made concluding observations drawn on the basis of the findings along with some recommended suggestions having implications for policy-making and further research.