

Chapter VII

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This thesis starts with the assumption that women are a social and not a biological category. Thus women must be considered in conjunction with men in the social division of labour i.e., in their roles, rights and obligations. Moreover, these sex specific roles, rights and obligations are not just different; they also tend to be unequal. In almost every sphere of human life, the roles defined for women are subordinated to those defined for men. An unequal relationship between men and women imply that men can exercise greater power than women. It is in this context that concept of women empowerment becomes relevant. Empowerment refers to getting power leading to change in power relation and it is a multi-faceted processes which has the following dimensions (a) Social dimension having information and awareness about institutions of change, (b) Political dimension having the capacity to effectively engage in decision making processes and participating in collective decision making, (c) Psychological dimension having confidence and ability to initiate development.

The 73rd Amendment (1993) to the Constitution of India provided for one third (now raised to 50 percent) reservation of seats in the local bodies or panchayats for women. Increasing the representation of women in panchayats by the reservation of seats was not an end in itself; it was a means to an end -the end being the participation of women in decision making and development. Representation of women in panchayats was a necessary but not a sufficient condition for their empowerment. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act heralded a new chapter ensuring the representation of a large number of women in panchayats at all levels, it was not at their own volition but it was sponsored by the state. Representation of women in panchayats could be real and effective only if they participated in decision making and development i.e. they were empowered. It is necessary to study women's representatives in Panchayati Raj particularly after the passing of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act to find out the extent to which their representation is real and effective i.e. the extent to which they are empowered to be able to participate in decision making and development and the factors and the impediments to their

empowerment. This is study of West Bengal and it has been selected for the study because it has been in the forefront in successful implementation of Panchayati Raj.

The few studies that are available on the women participation in Panchayat Raj Institution in West Bengal revealed that ever since the election to the panchayat in 1978 in West Bengal, an insignificant number of women have been elected to the panchayats but after the 73rd Amendment this has significantly increased (40 percent to 50 percent) the representation of women in all three levels of Panchayati Raj in West Bengal; young and middle aged women participate in elections; most of the members are housewives and so are economically dependent on their male counterpart; most of the women in panchayats are not educated enough to be able to read and write and discharge their duties and they come from low income families; the reservation of seats for women has increased their number in panchayats but not their effectiveness as shown by the fact that a significant number women do not attend panchayat meetings and do not participate in decisions and do not implement development programmes; most attend meetings accompanied by their husbands or male relatives and they attend meetings as a proxy and take all the decisions; women panchayat members do not have knowledge of the gram panchayat manuals, their rights, their responsibilities, development work, old Panchayat Acts, 73rd Amendment Act and state Panchayat Act; women members fill up seats in panchayat for their husbands or other male relatives who cannot stand for elections because of reservation of seats; the problems face by women are of lack of exposure to the world outside the four walls of their house, lack of freedom from household responsibilities which their husbands and male relatives do not want to share, lack of proper training for doing Panchayat activities, and the mindset of the people which favours women being confined to the four walls of the house and restricts them from participating in public space.

To understand the level of women's participation in local governance it is necessary to evaluate the extent of their participation historically. Women's representation in panchayats has been finally included at one third of membership and chair person's position after a long journey in British period and post independence period. The local government bodies as statutory institutions had their beginnings in the local self government laws enacted in pursuance of Lord Mayo's Resolution of 1870 and Lord Ripon's Resolution of 1882. These resolutions focused on

administrative and financial decentralisation to local self government institutions. The village panchayats came into effect in the 1920s after recommendations of the Royal Commission on Decentralisation in India of 1909 and the Government of India Act of 1919. In the initial legislation on panchayats in British period only the male residents who paid rent, land revenues or tax or had stipulated annual income were eligible to contest elections. In keeping with the dominant ideology, women were neither voters nor candidates for panchayat elections even where these bodies had elected members. The Panches were elected from male owners of houses and proprietors or tenants, permanently residing in a village of the panchayat circle. The word male was deleted only by an Amendment in 1934.

The history of Panchayati Raj Institutions after independence started with the formation of the Balwantrai Mehta Committee in 1957 which reported that there was a lack of popular initiative and recommended the decentralisation of power to local elected representatives at three levels with *Village Panchayat* as a base, *Panchayat Samiti* as the intermediate tier and *Zila Parishad* at the apex. The Asoka Mehta committee constituted in 1977 to take a fresh look at the Panchayati Raj Institutions recommended that there should be a two tier system with the Zila Parishad at the district level and the *Mandal Panchayat* to cover a group of villages. The Chief Ministers' Conference in 1979 rejected the idea of two tier system and favoured the continuation of the three tier system. Balwantrai Mahta study team in 1957 suggested a token co option of two women members. The same is reflected in different state laws which either just provided for a grudging reservation of two seats to be filled by cooption or nomination of up to two women, if no women came through by election. When the Asoka Mehta Committee reviewed the Panchayati Raj system in 1978, it continued with the women's token representation but suggested that if no women were elected, two women who get the highest number of votes would become members. In the event of no women coming forward for election, two women might be co opted.

The demand for greater representation of women in political institutions in India was not taken up in a systematic way until the Committee on the status of women in India (CSWI) published its report "Towards Equality" in 1974. It expressed concern over the difficulties experienced by women in obtaining adequate representation in panchayats and stressed the need for improving the political status of

women in view of the ineffectiveness of token representation of women in panchayats. It recommended constituting a separate women's statutory panchayats at the village level. National Perspective Plan for Women in 1988 recommended that reservation should be made of 30 percent seats from panchayat to Zila Parishad level. The 73rd Amendment of the Constitution revived Panchayati Raj Institutions and came into force on April 24 1993. It introduced reservation for women of one third seats of members as well as office bearers of panchayats at all three levels.

The origin of Panchayati Raj system in West Bengal can be traced to Bengal Chawkidari Act which was passed by Lord Mayo in 1870, the resolution issued by Lord Ripon in 1882, Bengal Local Self Government Act of 1885, Bengal Village Self Government Act of 1919 and West Bengal Panchayat Act of 1957. Initially Chawkidari Panchayats were constituted in the villages; Ripon Resolution led to Bengal Self Government Act of 1885 providing for a three tier structure for rural Bengal in which the lowest level was the union committee followed by local board and district board; in 1919 Bengal village Self Government Act combine the functions of the Chowkidari Panchayat and the Union Committee leading to the birth of the Union Board; the act of 1957 replaced the union board by introducing two tiers- *Gram Panchayats* and *Anchalik Panchayats* and *district boards* continued as *Zila Parishad*; the Panchayat Acts of 1977 and 1992 continued with *Gram Panchayat* and *Zila Parishad* and the *Anchalik Panchayat* was renamed as *Panchayat Samiti*. Before 1993 elections which were held on the basis of reservation one third seats for women, there were less than 1 percent women members elected to different panchayat bodies in West Bengal. If they were not elected, then they were nominated. It was found that after the nomination of women members to the Gram Panchayats women's representation in these bodies stood at less than 10 percent, in Panchayat Samiti it was around 5 percent and in Zila Parishad, it was 4 percent. After 1993, the number of women representatives increased to 35 percent in Gram Panchayats, 33 percent in Panchayat Samiti and 34 percent in Zila Parishad.

Case studies of 30 women Pradhans and women members revealed that most of them were young in the age group of 21 to 35 (21 women), few were middle aged 36 to 50 (8 women) and there was only 1 old women in the age group of 51 to 65. Out of 30 women most were from joint family (21 women) and only 9 women belonged to nuclear family. Out of 30 women most of them belonged to scheduled

castes (13 women) and general castes (10 women) while there were only 4 women belonging to other back ward castes and 3 scheduled tribes. Out of 30 women most were married (25 women) and only 3 were unmarried and two were widow/divorced. Out of 30 women, most were house wives (21 women). Out of 30 women, most had done primary or middle schools (16 women) and there were 14 women who were secondary schools pass or graduate. It was found that women who had done primary or even middle schools (up to class 9) were unable to read and write and so had to be regarded as uneducated for the purpose of this study. Those having education above class 10 (secondary schools pass and graduates) were regarded as educated because only they had ability to do panchayat work. Out of 30 women most had a family income less than 10000 (25 women) which showed that they belonged to low income families.

The interpretation of 30 case studies of women Pradhans and members as well as 10 men Pradhans and members and 5 key informants (panchayat secretary and executive assistant) of Gram Panchayat reveal that there are three factors which facilitate the empowerment of women. These factors are Education, Political Experience and Role of Party. The case studies also reveal that there are six problems which are impediments to the empowerment of women. These problems are Interference by Political Parties, Patriarchy in the family and the party, Ineffectiveness of Training Programme, Low Income and Inadequate Monthly and Travelling Allowance, Distance of Panchayats and their Timing and Role Conflict between the Role in Panchayats and Role at Home.

The factors which facilitate the empowerment of women are:-

1. **Education:** Education at least up to secondary level is most important for empowerment of women indicated by their awareness, participation in decision making and ability to initiate development. Education enables them to read and write and discharge their duties in the panchayat effectively without depending on others. They can fill up the forms for panchayat election, understand the rights and responsibilities of panchayats members, know the rules and regulations of panchayats, become aware of different programmes and policies, check their mails, read documents, reply to letters and prepare the agenda for meetings. They can actively participate, raise issues, put proposal

and involve themselves in decision making. Educated women can handle development work and carry out welfare activities. Without education, women are just name sake members of panchayats and their husband and other male relatives become proxy Pradhans and members to carry out panchayat work on their behalf while women sign on the dotted line. Education is so important that many members emphasis need for making education up to secondary level mandatory for standing for election to panchayat office.

2. **Political Experience:** Political experience is vital for the empowerment of women in Panchayati Raj because in these way even women lacking in education become active and empowered. Their political experience as members of the party enables them to manage panchayat work. They participate in meeting of political parties in which they have to become aware of programmes and policies, conscious of rights and responsibilities, acquire confidence to speak in public and to develop the ability to read and write. They attend the panchayat meetings regularly and raise issues, put proposal and participate in decision making. They fill up the form themselves and campaign from door to door and address rallies and processions which are organised by the party. They do a lot of development work in their village and initiate a number of welfare measures and able to answer questions put to them about it.
3. **Role of Party:** Political party plays a prominent role in the Panchayati Raj Institutions in West Bengal. Even though there is reservation for women, it is the party which enables women to get seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions by giving them tickets. Thus the party is indispensable for inducing women to come out from their homes for participating in public life. The party is everything in West Bengal so that Pradhans and members are there in the panchayats because of the will of the party and will cease to be there if the party does not want them. It also helps them to contest the elections by organising rallies and processions and in carrying out development work. Party helps by giving advice and by making priority list of problems for Gram Sabha. The party is a mentor which constantly guides panchayat Pradhans and members particularly women.

The problems which are impediments to the empowerment of women are:-

- 1. Interference by Political Party:** Although Political party is indispensable for empowerment of women, it also interferes with their empowerment by taking all the decisions itself without giving women any autonomy. Before Gram Panchayat meeting, women are directed about the programmes to be undertaken, beneficiaries to be covered, and decisions to be taken by the leaders of political parties. In this way, the party acts as an impediment to women empowerment because they have to work under pressure from the party and as directed by it. Women have no freedom in panchayats matters and they become just puppets of political parties.

Involvement of political party in the selection of women is also an impediment for putting up suitable candidates. Party selects those women who are kin of its male members and prevents deserving women from being candidates. In this way, many capable, efficient and active women are eliminated and, instead unsuitable, passive and inefficient women are elected into Panchayats.

Members owe their primary loyalty to their party which has brought them in to politics and not to the people by whom and for whom they have been elected. Members belonging to opposition party are not empowered because they are not allowed to participate in panchayat work by the ruling party. Pradhan, who belong to the ruling party, deliberately excludes them from panchayat work. They cannot attend panchayat meetings because the Pradhans consciously do not send them the notice on time as they do not want any opposition members to be present in panchayat meetings. Even if opposition members somehow manage to attend meeting, the Pradhans ignore what they propose and see to it that the work is not done. They also do not assign any panchayat duties to them and so opposition members cannot carry out development works and welfare activities among the people who elected them.

- 2. Patriarchy in the Family and the Party:** In spite of reservation of seats for women in panchayats in West Bengal, women have to depend on their male kin in order to contest election. These women members enter into politics for protecting the constituency of their male relatives who cannot contest the

elections because of the reservation of seats for women. In such case women members are forced into politics by their family against their own wish. These women members are always prepared to vacate the seat for their male relatives as soon as it is de reserve. They do not have any real power but rather it is the male relatives who are empowered on their behalf and they merely serve the patriarchal interest of family.

There is also patriarchy in the party since there are very few women members in political party and even fewer in key positions. Thus party is dominated by men both in numbers as well as in key positions in decision making. When political parties take decision upon all crucial matters of the local Gram Panchayats, it is not women who are taking these decisions. Female panchayat members are force to yield to male dominated political party and it does not lead to the empowerment of women. It just strengthens patriarchal interest within the party.

3. **Ineffectiveness of Training Programme:** Training programme for women representatives are necessary for learning how to carry out panchayat work because most of the women members have no experience about panchayats and there is no one to guide them in performing their duties. Ineffectiveness of the existing training programme is a major problem for women representatives in performing their role at the Gram panchayat. The programme is too short to be able to give adequate training to new members.
4. **Low Income and Inadequate Monthly and Travelling Allowance:** In West Bengal, land distribution to the rural poor and marginal farmers in Operation Barga shifted power, to a great extent, in favour of the rural poor by bringing them in large numbers into Panchayats. This means that the women elected under reservation also belong mostly to poor family. Most of the women are unemployed housewife from family of low income group of below rupees 10 thousand per month. The problem they face is that of spending a lot of money on monthly expenditure and conveyance which they cannot afford. The monthly and travel allowance which is paid to them is inadequate to cover monthly expenditure and cost of conveyance.
5. **Distance of Panchayat Meetings and their Timing:** Women find difficult to attend meetings that are held far away from their homes which often continue

till late in the evening. These problems are not faced by their male counter parts but women need a male escort and so they cannot be as effective in panchayat work as men. It is necessary to adjust the distance and timings of panchayat meetings so that women can attend them and this will go a long way for the empowerment of women.

- 6. Role Conflict between the Role in Panchayats and Role at Home:** The major problem preventing the empowerment of women is role conflict because women have to perform their role in panchayats along with their role in performing household chores and sometimes supplementing the income of the family by taking up jobs. They face difficulty in rearing their children and cooking food for the family and at the same time coming to panchayat meeting and earning money for the family. This problem can be resolved if the male kin can share some of the burden of household chores while women are doing panchayat work.

Suggestions and Policy Guide Lines for the Empowerment of Women

1. Education up to secondary level is to be recommended for those standing for election to panchayat office.
2. It must be mandatory for parties to have 50 percent women members who can become candidates in panchayat elections because political experience as members of party enables them to manage panchayat work and to become aware of programmes and policies.
3. Party must be encourage to put up independent women candidates in elections who are willing, active and deserving but it must be discourage from forcing those dependent women to stand for elections who are kin of its male members and passive, in efficient and incapable.
4. Party should recruit more women as members and more key positions must be filled by women.
5. Party can act as guides to women Pradhans and members in particular, women members belonging to opposition party must be allowed to attend meetings and their proposal must be considered and they must be permitted to carry out

- development programmes in their Gram Sansad because they are representative of the people who elected them. They must be prevented from taking all the decisions of the panchayats without giving it any autonomy.
6. Training programme must be made more effective by increasing their duration and enhancing the quality of training. It is better to give training to the women members at their locality so that they can attend it regularly while performing their household chores. Training programme should be redesigned keeping in view the needs of the elected members particularly those who are unable to read and write. The training programme should be based on both audio and visual containing comprehensive and relevant information about the aims and objective of the panchayats, various development schemes and welfare programmes, and the strategies of implementations.
 7. Travelling allowance paid to members after each meeting must be increased and they must also be paid an adequate sum of money as monthly allowance for panchayat work.
 8. The timing of panchayat work must be adjusted to that of women so that they can perform household chores and a job and the chance of role conflict is minimised. This problem can be resolved if the male kin can share some of the burden of household chores while women are doing panchayat work.
 9. Since a lot of women coming into panchayat, organisation of these women will make them more effective and efficient in panchayats. Individually a woman feels weak, shy and vulnerable but when they organised they can fight for their rights. If any association of elected women representatives at block level can be formed then it would be helpful for women representatives to interact on any issues and getting solutions. The Mahila Mandal in the villages can be effectively used as instruments to mobilise and organise them for this purpose.
 10. Pradhans and members of selected villages or regions should be taken to those panchayats of other region or district where visible success in the implementation of development programmes and welfare schemes has been achieved. It has been observed that there are certain very active women at all the levels of panchayats who have raised their voice and taken decisions in

panchayat meetings. It will certainly encourage other women and their success stories and good practices will serve as role models for them.

Limitations of the Study

This is the study based on one district (Burdhaman) but there is need to cover all the districts of state. The study based on Gram Panchayats but there is need to conduct study of all the three level of Panchayati Raj Institutions. This is a study of perceptions and experiences only of men and women Pradhans and members and also officers but there is need to study perceptions and experiences of villagers about the women empowerment.

This is an exploratory study using qualitative method depicting the empowerment of women through Gram Panchayat in West Bengal with special reference to Burdhaman district. The empowerment of women needs to be examined further because there is dearth of research oriented literature on women's empowerment and Panchayati Raj Institutions in West Bengal. Hence, planned and systematic sociological study is needed in order to assess the situation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions at all three levels in all district of West Bengal. Such a study can be done by formulating precise hypotheses and a descriptive research design using quantitative method to cover the all districts of West Bengal. Stratified random sample can be selected from women at different levels in Panchayati Raj Institutions in each district for a comparative study of all the districts to present comprehensive understanding of West Bengal as a whole. Such research will provide more precise policy guide lines for the empowerment of women through Panchayati Raj Institutions.