
Chapter 6

Conclusion: Overcoming The Challenges

In the previous chapter, I have discussed in details the studies regarding the experiences of the women members and heads of offices of the local self- government institutions both rural and urban i.e. panchayats comprising of gram panchayats, panchayat samitis and zilla parishads and urban local bodies comprising of municipalities and corporations. I have also tried to make an assessment through the interviews with women respondents among whom there have been heads of offices such as the chairperson or Sabhadipati of Howrah Zilla Parishad, chairpersons or Pradhans of Anulia and Basantapur gram panchayats located in the district of Howrah, members and heads of committees of Amta panchayat samiti ,Basantapur gram panchayat and Kanpur gram panchayat. Women Councillors of two wards under Kolkata Municipal Corporation were also interviewed.

A plethora of views have emerged, from which I have tried to explore the challenges faced by the women representatives while discharging their duties in their respective positions in their offices. There are a number of factors which actually inhibit the active engagement of

women in the sphere of local governance and broadly speaking in the political sphere.

Firstly, I would like to refer to the deeply entrenched stereotypical norms laid down by patriarchy which relegate women to the domestic space as a result of which their engagement in public affairs become severely restricted. Almost all the surveys conducted by the scholars across the state has documented women members who repeatedly refer to the fact that the act of striking a balance between the duties and obligations on the domestic front as well as in the public arena is an uphill task. Asim Mukhopadhyay in his work has termed this as a case of identity crisis of women members of gram panchayat in one of his chapters.¹ Most of the women representatives he met barring only a few who had the privilege of belonging to a small family with a supportive life partner complained about the difficulties which they face every day in order to do justice to both roles as a home maker and a panchayat worker. Family responsibility is a factor which comes more in the way of younger women who are married and mothers of small children. Widows and single women or women being left by

their husbands stand in a relatively better position but are again vulnerable to character assassination.² According to these women they have a competing task due to their triple productive, reproductive and community managerial responsibilities and thus were left with little time to participate actively in politics. Sometimes they suffer from extreme stress while trying to play these triple roles effectively and smoothly. The state too in a way enforces women's dependence on men through lending support to a specific family system, which is dependent largely on a male bread- earner and female domestic-servicing i.e. a system in which the primary work of women is 'reproductive' in the sense of bearing –rearing of children and giving service to other members of family. This is evident in the selection of training and skill acquisition projects selected for women as they tend to think only of household crafts e.g. tailoring, sewing, embroidery or marginal handicrafts and the prevalent bias which regards women's income as only supplementary, to be taken up only when they are free from their household chores, which is still regarded as their primary occupation. Therefore by not challenging the traditional structure of

family the state has perpetuated the traditional structure of family which has made the services of subservient wife democratically available practically to the whole male population.³ All things, considered, the husband's approval and encouragement is the green signal for the women to decide how far she should involve herself in the functioning of these bodies.

In the document entitled, *Nari O Sishu Unnayan O Samajkalyan Upasamiti* (Women And Child development and Welfare of Society Subcommittee), of the State Institute of Panchayat, Government of West Bengal, Kalyani, Nadia, certain factors amongst which low level of education, lack of financial security, lack of decision making power are termed as the major handicaps which adversely affect women's progress. Low level of education especially among the rural women is a reality which cannot be overlooked. Though presently the government is trying to bridge the gap between male and female literates through a number of schemes and has placed them under the supervision of the panchayats, still there is a lot more to be done. Even if various incentives are given in order to encourage people to send the girls to

schools, very often these institutions lack the infrastructure to accommodate them in a proper manner. Here it is mentioned that absence of separate toilets for girls especially in their adolescence is a cause for their discontinuation in studies. The educational institutions are sometimes located at distant places, far away from homes. In remote areas the girls are compelled to leave the institutions for lack of security. Therefore this low level of education hampers the work of women when they enter the panchayats as they find it difficult to read and comprehend all the important papers related to the working of the panchayat.

Another constraint needs to be mentioned here is the financial constraint which proves to be a serious impediment to the empowerment of women representatives in the villages. The record available at SIPRD shows that most of the women members do not have independent means of earning and they are grossly dependent on their husbands or other male members of the family. Some of them do have services or other specific vocational engagements, but few of them are principal earners in their households.⁴ In very few cases it is found that the women have the freedom to spend their

earnings entirely by themselves. In most cases it is handed over to the male members of the family. Instances of women owning property mainly lands in villages is a rarity. In many cases it is borne out by the surveys that the day to day work in the panchayat office has been affected due to the inability of the woman Pradhan to attend office daily due to financial problems primarily in the family. Poverty is a universal phenomenon, but the brunt of it has to be borne entirely by the women members of the family. In my interactions with the women members I found that a majority of them except for those who belonged to well to do families, complaining of a very meagre sum as allowance which forces them to think of alternative avenues of income in order to support their families. Therefore maintenance of their livelihood pose a serious challenge to their regular and effective participation in political process.

In the section on 'Political Parties and Women', the historic 'Towards Equality Report' of 1974 made an observation that women constitute a backward section of the society to whom special privileges should be granted to bring them at par with men. It also mentioned that parties agreed

that the existing gap between men and women should be reduced to the minimum possible. In the section 7.56, it refers to the Indian National Congress and its pledge to implement the principles of the Constitution. In section 7.77 on mobilisation by political parties, the report observes that, 'It has been observed during all elections that political parties used women both as instruments of campaign and objects(women's welfare) set forth for achievement. The handbills, posters and public meetings emphasise the specific promises for women in the party's manifestoes.'⁵ In the Election Manifesto of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) before holding of the ninth assembly election in 1982 in West Bengal, published on 10th April, 1982⁶, reference has been made to ensure a continuous supply of drinking water in villages especially for the women folk who often suffer from severe water borne diseases due to unavailability of pure, clean water. Since women are the primary users of domestic water which they use in their key food production roles, it became an important issue and therefore women could relate very well to such promises made. Again prior to the tenth assembly elections held in

1987, the election manifesto which was published on 28th December, 1986⁷, contained reference to various measures to be undertaken for the development of the vulnerable sections of society i.e. the aged, widows, non-active and women and children in general. It was made clear that women's issues shall receive the highest priority and all sorts of discriminatory practices will be put to an end with stern measures and social rights of women shall be safeguarded and expanded as much as possible.⁸ By alluding to these above points what I would like to argue is that political parties have always made an all-out effort to convince the women population generally before elections are held. This is perhaps because by targeting the women population the parties find it much easier to penetrate the households, of which the women is an integral part. This kind of affinity which develops between the women population and the political parties however assumes a completely different dimension when the same political parties are voted to power. Women who subsequently enter the political domain find themselves to be bound by principles of loyalty and trust to the party whom they consider as their caretaker and a sort of

patron-client relationship comes into existence. Thus they are much more vulnerable to the wishes and whims of the party who makes changes in their ranks and files without paying any heed to their sentiments. Thus a woman representative even after proving her worth and efficiency does not always get a chance to serve in the same position or in a better one if the party leadership does not approve it. Asim Mukhopadhyay made an important observation in this regard. According to him, none of the political parties wants its active members who are also the members of panchayat to cross the limits, objectives and agenda of the party and act according to their own will and this he feels is the contradiction and limitation of the institution of panchayat in the present system of parliamentary democracy.⁹ This kind of highhandedness and interference on part of the party, along with the already existing system of rotation of seats, is a negative trend and can be labelled as a constraint or challenge to the full -fledged empowerment of the women in local government institutions. Through my interactions I have already raised this issue in the previous chapter and it has

been brought to the fore by the surveys as is evident from the above examples.

It is also pointed out that bureaucratic apathy towards women participation in local governance is a challenge faced by the elected women representatives. A substantial number of bureaucrats also do not like women as heads of offices; they hardly supervise women related development schemes heartily; take little interest to form strengthen self-help groups; rarely attend gram sansad meetings and scarcely organise training arrangements for women.¹⁰

Though there are limitations and imbalances in the system which hinder women's participation in the effective decision making in the local bodies as evident from the above discussion, there are some bright areas where the women are making great strides and the governmental policies are being so designed and executed so as to strengthen them economically, socially, empowering them to fight against the prevalent inequalities imposed by patriarchy.

The Self- Help Groups or SHGs as they are popularly known is a holistic programme of micro- enterprises covering

all aspects of self-employment, organization of the rural poor into self-help groups and their capacity building, planning of activity clusters, infrastructure build up, technology, credit and marketing. It further refers to self-governed, peer controlled, informal group of people with same socio-economic background and having a desire to collectively perform common purposes. Here poor people voluntarily come together to save whatever amount they can and mutually contribute to a common fund and lend to the members for meeting their productive and emergent necessities.¹¹

Here a group is formed by the community women, which has specific number of members like 15 or 20. The poorest women could come together for emergency, disaster, social reasons, and economic support to each other.¹² It is an informal association which has as its primary focus the enhancement of financial security and other areas which can benefit the entire community. The very existence of SHGs is highly relevant to make the people living below the poverty line hopeful and self-reliant. It acts as a catalyst for bringing this section of society into the mainstream.¹³

Women form a vital part of the Indian economy comprising about one-third of the national labour force. Women's earnings stay unnoticed as much of it gets used up for basic family maintenance, and the impact of poverty falls directly upon them. In an agricultural country like ours women form the backbone of agricultural operations and majority of agricultural labourers are women. The post-harvest and processing tasks are primarily their sole responsibility. The areas where women are mostly involved are animal husbandry, dairy production etc. They form an extremely significant component but unfortunately an invisible one. This remained unchanged until the Ninth Plan Document (1997-2000) envisaged 'inclusion of an identifiable women component plan in the programmes of the respective ministries right from the planning process, and to monitoring and implementation of programmes to ensure the reach of benefits to women.'¹⁴The same plan also laid emphasis on the participation of people in the planning process, and the promotion of self-help groups. The self-help group (SHG) is thus recognised as a homogeneous group of poor women. This group is a voluntary one formed on areas of common

interest so that they can think, organise and operate for their development.¹⁵

In the light of the above facts the linkage between SHGs and panchayat assumes an important dimension and it is this relationship which I feel holds a lot of promise and prospect for the women and enable them to exercise actual decision making power.

West Bengal panchayats have thirty- three percent reservation of seats for women. Considering generally poor participation of women in politics, it is often difficult for political parties to find women candidates to contest these reserved seats. Strong self-help groups (SHGs) thus become handy for political parties to choose a suitable candidate.¹⁶ It is observed that, 'nowhere in the country except perhaps Kerala has such natural progression towards institutional linkage between self-help groups and panchayats as local governance institutions has taken place as it is seen in West Bengal.'¹⁷ This has surely to do with strong presence of panchayats as the nearest tier of governance from the community, whose doors are more accessible to these groups than any other mainstream institutions.¹⁸ This was more or

less a new concept and it assumed popularity from the late 2002 when such a linkage between the panchayat and the self-help groups came to the forefront. One particular programme that had immense contribution to this changing outlook was Community Based Disaster Management Project popularly referred to as CBDP.¹⁹ This project started its journey in April 2001, after devastating floods swept much of West Bengal with just five non-government organisations(NGOs), namely *Swanirvar* (Selfsufficient) in North 24Parganas, *Sreema Mahila Samity* (Holy mother's Women's Organisation), *Ranaghat Cultural Unit*, *Catholic Charities Krishnanagar* and *SPADE* (Calcutta Society for Professional Action in Development) in the district of Nadia.²⁰ This project which was spearheaded by UNICEF (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund) attempted to raise community's preparedness against another onslaught of flood. In order to create a sustainable impact by which people would be protected in future from similar hardships, a disaster preparedness plan which would be eventually integrated with panchayat plan was made and the self-help groups were recognized as the main players in

the project. Thus in the process, gram sansad became a critical element where these plans had to be placed, discussed and passed.²¹ Community Based Disaster Management Project (C.B.D.P) probably have been pioneer in showing the way. SHGs provided vocal women candidates in panchayat elections in areas which came under the purview of the project. The names of Mina Parvin in Mohinsura gram panchayat in Nabadwip block (Nadia district), Supriya Mandol in Andulia gram panchayat in Kandi Block (Nadia District), Lakshmi Biswas, Charulata Biswas and Bilkis Tarafdar of Ranaghat II block (Nadia district) were probably the first women candidates to come from self-help group leadership.²²

A close relationship developed between self-help groups and women mostly when matters such as mapping of the resources of the village, construction of bridges, cutting of drains etc. were performed.²³ According to a report on the evaluation of the department of panchayat, wherever the women belonging to the self-help groups have been included in the planning of the gram unnayan samitis (village development committees), the works have been done in a

better way and in those villages the response of the people has been more spontaneous than others.²⁴ Thus on the whole the self-help groups in West Bengal seems to have been successful in using the potential of women in panchayats and I have tried to substantiate my argument with the experiences of women, documented below.

In Lalgola Block in Murshidabad, one Self-help group namely 'Kalmegha Muskan Syambhar Goshti' prepares a nutritious supplement named as 'Bhorer Alo' (light of the dawn) which comprised of packets containing wheat and pulses. According to Manwara Begum, who is the secretary of this group, the gram panchayat purchased those packets from them directly. On Saturdays particularly meetings were held where the ways of increasing the sale of these packets were discussed and then implemented accordingly.²⁵

Another Self-Help Group namely Damodarpur Chandni Swayambhar Goshti (self-sufficient community) under the leadership of Chandbanu Bibi had acquired training from the doctors of Krishnapur Village hospital in Murshidabad. They have manufactured sanitary napkins with the brand name 'Chetana' (consciousness). Those packets were sold in the

market at twenty rupees each while the manufacturing cost is eighteen rupees per packet. Apart from selling this product they have also undertaken the task of raising consciousness about its use from health camps. They also conducted visits to schools, spoke with adolescent girls, their teachers and explained to them the hazards associated with the usage of other materials found in home during the period of menstruation. This endeavour has met with huge success and the secretary of this group Chandbanu Bibi spoke about increasing the quality of the product with the help of technical assistance and modern equipments.²⁶

Another self-help group namely *Basantapur Rani Rashmoni Bahumukhi Mahila Sangha Prathamik Samabay Samiti Limited*, (multifaceted women's group and primary cooperative committee) located in Basantapur village in the district of Howrah has been personally visited by myself. The secretary of this group is Rehana Midda and she is assisted by Mira Ghorui (assistant secretary), Rupa Pakhira (treasurer) and Jhumpa Hazra (group leader). I found these ladies extremely systematic in their work. They are much updated about the meetings held and it seemed to me that

such meetings were held at regular intervals. What struck me most was the very special annexe building which was built in order to provide space for meetings of the self-help group. I found the room of this building to be full. Women of all ages, assembled together and all of them were listening attentively to the discussions which were going on. A variety of activities ranging from putting zari on sarees, fisheries, tailoring, setting up of shops in markets for selling mobile phones, poultry farming and many others were on the list. Each and every member responded and expressed their views about the kind of income generating activity they wanted to get themselves involved. To me it seemed that this exactly is the place where women are taking positive strides. The ability to decide how to use one's potential in a productive manner is the first step towards gaining real decision making power. I have observed that women's participation in these groups resulted in greater awareness about their political roles. Such groups provided a forum for women to come together and discuss various problems, as well as to generate income for themselves and also establish their identities firmly.²⁷ Loans were given to the women to start small scale businesses,

mention about which is made above. Decisions about loan beneficiaries were also taken by the members themselves without being influenced by any external agencies and this to me seemed as a good exercise in deliberation and decision making on part of the women. It will be relevant to mention the statement made by a woman member of a gram panchayat in this respect. She said, 'We, the women members, are active in forming self-help groups. Many of us are working as secretaries of self-help groups. Since we are related to the economic activities of the groups, we are getting some opportunities of earning which is important for poor members like me. As a result, we can sustain our interest in panchayati activities. For women members of poor families like mine, getting related to panchayati activities is almost a luxury. But works in self-help groups give economic dividends. This is helpful in sustaining our activities with regard to panchayats.'²⁸

I must also mention here about the SHG project for poor women namely Anandadhara (flow of happiness) which started its journey in our state on 17th May, 2012, aiming to

promote self-employment and women's entrepreneurship in order to get women into financial flow.

Some other bright areas where women are taking affirmative action and are speaking out are issues related to mother and child health. Being *Sanchalaks* or convenors of the upa-samiti (sub-committee) on women and child development they have the freedom to take certain decisions for the welfare of women in their respective localities. They are well informed about the government schemes and try to use them efficiently.

Another area which directly touches women's daily lives is availability of water and even the women members of panchayat as well in urban areas are concerned with the issue. A woman carrying a water pot on her head, walking for long distances is a familiar scene in a village especially in the interior ones where communication facilities are still not up to the standard, whereas in the urban areas the problem consists in having access to clean drinking water under grossly unhygienic conditions especially in urban slums. Women members of gram panchayats, female Pradhans, and Councillors often raise these issues in the meetings and get

things done accordingly. Installation of tubewells, has been often mentioned by the women during the meetings held in panchayat. Water supply and proper sanitation facilities are the priority issues for the female councillors of the wards as is proved by the surveys. In a survey conducted by Raghabendra Chattopadhyay and Esther Dufflo in 2004 it was shown that the women of West Bengal had registered maximum complaints regarding the scarcity of drinking water and bad condition of roads.²⁹ The women Pradhans (chairpersons) had spent mostly on water and roads whereas the male Pradhans concentrated on school education.³⁰ Thus it is not always easy to understand the contributions of women if viewed ordinarily. In many cases women silently change the policies and set priorities accordingly. In this manner a woman unconsciously becomes an agent of transformation of the society.³¹

Women members in all the local governmental institutions are therefore speaking up about a number of issues related to infrastructure and are slowly overcoming their initial hesitation. However they need to work with more determination, update themselves in order to reduce

dependence on others and also try to develop a kind of camaraderie with other women respondents or heads of offices cutting across party lines. This interaction will prove beneficial as it will give them strength through the solidarity thus fostered. A woman must not let herself to be used by the patriarchal machinery as its sole spokesperson. Only, then women and her experience in local governance shall yield the desired results.

Local government is that level of government where women can enter political life with ease, as the costs of mounting election campaigns are relatively low and issues at the local level tend to motivate women to enter politics so that they can play a major role in decision making. Unless women are actively involved in the decision and policy-making process at local level, changes in rural women's political and to some extent social and economic status will continue to be marginal. Keeping these aspects in mind, adequate provisions has been made in shape of constitutional amendments and rules and regulations in panchayati raj system to encourage and ensure the participation of women in the local governance system. It has been argued that the

‘politics of presence’ can provide such groups with guaranteed representation in public institutions such as quotas in law making bodies so that they may effectively represent their needs and interests.³²

The passage of Seventy Third and Seventy- Fourth Constitutional Amendments, which were the most substantive amendments since the adoption of the Indian constitution in 1950, had helped the panchayats and the urban civic bodies to attain constitutional status, emerging as the third tier of governance. This synergy, thus created between representative and direct democracy and participatory governance has resulted in the deepening of democracy at the grass roots level and has provided a much needed space for inclusive democracy in India.

The concept of women empowerment has gained wide recognition after the two successive enactments and the women empowered at the local level (rural & urban), has shown encouraging results. The women who have gained access to the panchayats, municipalities, and corporations have been able to prove their capability. The increased political participation has yielded positive results. Issues

central to development including health, nutrition, family income, education received priority by the women who got a chance to participate in the *panchayati raj* institutions at all the three tiers, village development boards and other governance structures. Women in the civic bodies gain expertise in dealing with problems which affect the urban population. However, the question as to whether reservation of seats for women in the local government institutions in India has ensured their participation in the political decision making process forms the central theme of the present thesis. Through this work a humble attempt has been made to provide a suitable answer in the context of West Bengal.

Thus evolution of local governance in West Bengal vis-à-vis India, has been analysed and at the same time the commencement of women's political empowerment in the state through participation in the local government institutions has been addressed. While making a brief review of several field studies, some areas have been identified which impede women's effective participation at the local level. However, at the same time, a dent in the patriarchal set-up appears distinct. The self-confidence, attained by

women after passing through the initial learning phase definitely made a difference. Even in the midst of male-centric issues, women try their best to talk about water, fuel, sanitation, health, child-care, education which directly affects their day to day lives. Thus women are speaking up. However, equal partnership in decision-making is still a dream which awaits realization in reality.

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