

CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The present study aims to analyse political participation of the underprivileged tribal women residing in Dooars and Terai region of North Bengal. Tribal women of these region have been, over the ages, been largely socio-politically subjugated. Certain measures such as reservations for these women have been instruments of change whereby an attempt has been made to incorporate these women into positions of effective political decision making process. These measures have definitely put women in political positions. But my study aims to judge and comment upon truly effective political participation of these tribal women.

Present study aims to analyse the positive influences emerging out of socio-political reservation primarily aimed at encouraging the voices of tribal women and the effectiveness of such measures. It is an attempt at critical analysis of the prowess of the neo-tribal women leaders. It is also a study directed towards actual effectiveness of reservations which through up new tribal women to the forefront. The various hindrances that these women evolving women representatives face towards making an effective space has been included in my narrative.

we have, during the course of study utilise numerous personal interactions, statistical data and an analysis of an effective government measures for critical appraisal of the ground scenario. The data for the present study have been drawn from historical sources and from primary as well as secondary sources. Both quantitative and qualitative data have been made use of. Collection of information has been done from the references of historical materials from secondary sources, Census Reports, documents, Government Reports, Government Offices records, published materials and the manuscripts.

The basic principle of democracy rides upon the fact that the most weakest strata of the society are representative in the frame work of democratic process. No democracy can succeed without the most vulnerable sections of it social setup. Women are by far the most compromised sections of the Indian political scenario tribal women constitute a section of society that remain amongst the most backward and unrepresented part of the

Indian demography. Empowerment of this section of the society is therefore a primary requisite for true political representation. There should be an encouragement for all measures which are aimed at empowerment of tribal women. Though there remain hindrances towards bestowing of true political power to the tribal women, measures aimed at empowerment of tribal women should always remain the priority for realisation of democratic credential of a pluralistic social setup as India. It cannot be denied these women have not ripped the benefits of reservations at large, there still remain a substantial populace amongst these tribal women who have managed to give true and positive philip towards furthering of the causes of women upliftment at large. There remain quite a population of tribal women who, when empowered with positions of decision-making have managed to bring forth their independent and positive views which have contributed towards women empowerment. These women have managed to cut across political lines and solely have managed to give a direction towards powerful and effective measures for women upliftment. Patriarchal and political influences have always endeavoured to downplay the role of these tribal women representatives. But it remains a credit to these women folk who have pride relentlessly to put the social agendas to the forefront, thereby carving a niche for themselves and their society at large.

Women's role in positive participation in local governance is yet an evolving process in Indian society. Certain Amendments which were instituted largely to further women's participation in local governance have definitely resulted in a positive paradigm shift. In the socio-political set-up of a country like India which has been through the ages predominantly a patriarchal society, it is necessary to introduce political measures aimed at giving women their own voice at local governance.

The Constitutional Amendments which were initiated to encourage political involvement at the grass root levels through panchayati raj system were given a further flip by measures such as women's reservations and particularly so for the women belonging to marginalised and under privileged sections of our society. The 73rd Amendment of the Constitution was primarily brought forth to further this motive. While there can be no contest about the fact that measures such as these have definitely helped to push women of these socially handicapped background to the forefront, actual women empowerment still remains a far flung dream in a predominantly patriarchal society like India. Moreover, despite efforts, panchayati raj system is yet to evolve as a politically

independent structure in India, whereby powerful political parties wield a dominant influence, thus stripping the panchayati raj movement of its primarily a political nature.

However, it is heartening to note that quite a substantial percentage of elected women political representatives at the grassroots level have endeavoured to bring their own independent political agendas to the fore, thereby contributing positively towards meaningful and effective political participation.

We have tried to analyse the socio-political credentials of elected women members specially belonging to the tribal community thereby attempting to have a analysis vis-à-vis the progress that these women have made versus the lacunae that still remains to be filled. There are particular fields through which I have tried to formulate my inferences regarding these tribal women representatives; those being their educational status, socio-political background, avenues for expressing their social concerns, political interference, family and spouse support towards rendering of their duties as representatives, their own zeal to pursue their respective social perspectives and their motivation to further enhance their future political participation for completion of their unachieved social goals.

Education

Education is one of the forerunners for election of tribal women representatives. There is no denying the fact that educational levels amongst the tribal women are at an abysmal low level in spite of more than half a century of independence. A woman deprived of basic education definitely lacks a broader socio-political understanding, thereby not being able to have a positive influence towards furtherance of their immediate society. Majority of women whom I interviewed during the course of my studies boast of at least a middle school education, which remains a dream for quite a substantial population of tribal girls. While there are a miniscule percentage of these elected tribal women representatives who have gone to pursue higher education, a middle school educational status still holds a dominant and influencing force which is enough to sway the voters. It is my conclusion that investing in tribal women education will yield positive result and produce more competent tribal women political representatives. Thus the primary endeavour should be directed towards educating the tribal girl child so that they can grow into effective political leaders in the future. There is no dearth of talent amongst these women, the only lacuna is proper political wherewithal to further and nourish education of the tribal

girl. This investment of the nation as a whole will only help to strengthen the weakest sections of the society, thereby cementing a strong socio-political basis for building of our nation as a whole.

Majority of the tribal women political representatives when I interviewed though being only middle school educated, have left no stone unturned towards their zeal to bring about a social change. Imagine the scenario when these tribal women leaders are empowered with education, whereby they are ready to bring forth really strong credentials towards fulfilment of their socio-political dreams. I again emphasise the need to educate the tribal girl is of paramount and vehement need. If backed up by a strong educational background they can take full advantage of political amendments such as the 73rd Amendment, to have a forceful and strong contribution towards nation-building.

Social deprivation of the girl child

While the social deprivation of the girl child spans across the whole of Indian society, the impact is much more profound for the societies which are socio-economically challenged. In tribal societies, primarily amongst the tea gardens, it is the common phenomena where the girl child's educational rights are compromised so that the male child can have a better go at pursuing his education. In a society like the tea gardens where in majority of the households men and women both end up working, the girl child is often deprived of any education and pushed towards the role of looking after her siblings and family while her parents are engaged in their duties. There remain very few families who take the extra step and employ measures so that the girl child is not deprived of her family and society at large.

In the modern dynamics of rapidly developing society, influenced by globalisation, lack of education is a primary hindrance towards any meaningful socio-political contributions.

Health

It remains a fact that in Indian society women are largely the under privileged sector. They are repeatedly made to feel as “second-class” citizens, spanning across all social spectrums, more so amongst the tribal society. Right from their birth the female child are deprived in every spectra of life. A robust health care system primarily targeted towards upliftment of the underprivileged women section of the society is the primary need of the

hour. Women being socio-economically compromised seldom reap the benefits of health schemes. Thus their health status is largely at loggerheads vis-à-vis the social functions that they are expected to perform. A strong woman political representative can never evolve out of a health system which is primarily prejudiced against women at large. Primary and basic health care thus have to be made available to the women population. Devoid of such measures, the women populace will always be handicapped.

A healthy woman can contribute towards a healthy family and a healthy society at large. Thus, emphasis towards nourishing of female health status is a primary requisite towards formulation of a healthy and productive society.

Majority of tribal women population in North Bengal, specially in Dooars and Terai region, are employed as tea garden workers. It is pathetic to note that majority of these tea gardens seek to deprive their women workers of rights towards health. These include deprivation of such rights such as rights to crèche facility for new borns, proper antenatal and post natal care for women, proper education towards nutritional requirement of pregnant women and providing pregnant women with adequate antenatal medical care.

Amongst this vast population of tribal women the priorities of a girl child is still at an abysmal low level. Their primary utility is still largely predefined by the service that they can provide for looking after and nurturing the family in absence of the girl child's parents. Their own socio-educational upliftment always takes a backburner. Proper emphasis towards health issues of tribal women is thus a necessary measure to inculcate a sense of positivity amongst the tribal women population. Without the redressal of issues pertaining to the overall health of tribal women, it is impossible to see the emergence of strong tribal leaders. Primary health care starting from a robust antenatal programme spilling over to measures such as proper facilities for the new born child in terms of effective crèche care will go a long way towards instilling a sense of security amongst the tribal women folk.

Another issue which needs an effective and immediate redressal amongst all tea gardens is the issue of provision of portable water. Large population of tribes engaged as workers in tea gardens still are deprived of avenues to avail a safe portable source of water.

Traditionally, the male tribal tea garden workers are susceptible to hazards such as rampant consumption of alcohol. Appreciably the tribal women workers have managed to form groups which have tried to educate the male working population towards the ill effects of drinking, thereby trying to bring a semblance of positive social influence.

To conclude, there has been a positive influence of elected tribal women representatives towards redressing of these health issues. The result is an emergence of a large number of women self-help groups spanning across the multitude of tea gardens in North Bengal who have undertaken measures to guarantee a better crèche facilities, better antenatal care, proper implementation of universal immunisation programmes for neonatal and reduction in the alcohol related hazards. While there still remains scope of improvement, these women self-help groups sprouting across the tribal diaspora is definitely a leap forward.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE

It has to be admitted that bareoft reservations, the tribal women could never have gone into political leadership position. The down trodden women could never have found a platform for expression of their socio-political narratives. In a predominantly male dominated patriarchal society like India, males from even the tribal societies, are unwilling to forego their dominance over the women folk. But for the reservations for women, it would have been extremely difficult to unearth talents amongst the tribal women folk. These elected tribal women representatives are subjected to constant levels of scrutiny. Despite the best of their efforts to inculcate positive attitudes amongst the tribal women population, the majority of these tribal women representatives confess to the fact that their untiring efforts to bring about a social change is largely undermined by political influence of the ruling party.

Furthermore, as my study includes, a substantial percentage of these tribal women confess to have entered the political arena just to passively make use of women reservation policies. They are thus elected as candidates just for fulfilling the constitutional obligations. The primary thrust to encourage political involvement comes from their family. In many cases, these tribal women political leaders confess to the fact that the actual powers are bestowed in their political capacity are largely manipulated by the men folk of their society like husband's fathers and brothers.

Indian social scenario seldom allows the proliferation of an independent voice. It is however heartening to note that there remain a substantial percentage of these women political representatives who have managed to put their social agendas to the forefront and have thus managed to override the predominantly male gender bias. Tribal women at large have two predominantly important battles to fight- 1) being from a tribal community and 2) being women. While it remains a fact that there has been rampant misuse of reservations for tribal women candidates, it has still to be accepted that a percentage of tribal women leaders who are a product of this reservation policy have managed to acknowledge a positive and influencing agenda aimed primarily towards empowerment of the tribal women. It cannot however be denied that the patriarchal social setup aims to miss utilise provisions of these reservations so that the actual power remains within the male social setup.

Through the process of reservations, sections of underprivileged women have been brought to the forefront. Though, these novice women tribal leaders are largely enveloped by the patriarchal nature of our society, it is heartening to note that few of these women leaders have managed to brake the patriarchal setup, thereby envisaging a paradigm shift. Positive and socially encompassing measures by such leaders have put the political participation of these tribal women into a positive perspective. Measures such as ensuring seats for the tribal women aimed primarily at uplifting the participation of tribal women in the primary democratic process, is definitely a welcome step forward. The fact cannot be denied that many amongst these groups of tribal women are endowed with their capacity to emerge into effective social roles. Capacitated with measures such as reservations, these tribal women are bestowed with measures which can help to enhance their free, independent and effective socio-political endeavours. It is heartening to note that quite a substantial percentage of these tribal women have managed to overcome socio-political constraints and have endeavoured to work for true upliftment of their social clan.

Primary issues affecting the progress of tribal women political leaders in local bodies:

- Patriarchal bias: as in majority of Indian population, the tribes largely remain a predominantly patriarchal society. For a woman to rise and make a socio-political impact, there remain a huge gender obstacle which they have surmount. Though measures like reservation of seats for tribal women are a welcome steps, the

ground reality is that they are often reduced to being stooges for the male members of their society. Unless and until gender equality is brought into practical realm, such reservations will continue to be ornamental measures only.

- Education: a woman deprived of education can never endeavour to surmount all the negativities that are primarily directed towards excluding her from political participation. Tribal women education has to be the driving force towards empowering women so that they can have a meaningful and balanced outlook towards positive deliverance of the problems that encompasses their society. The present study, spread across the spectrum of these women tribal elected representatives in the local bodies brings forth the fact that majority of them have not been able to transgress into higher educational standards. A few of them however have claim to university education. If endowed with proper higher educational levels, it is my firm believe that these tribal women representatives have it in them to have a much more strong and positive socio-political impact. Furthermore, an educated female member of the society definitely can claim to have a much more forceful impact spanning across a familial-socio-political environ.
- Familial support towards performance of political duties:the present study found that a predominant majority of women claim to have the support of their families. This includes the support of their spouses whereby they claim to have the support of their husbands in commuting to their places of work. Their erratic work schedules have been amply understood by their family members. They claim to have active and effective familial support towards discharging of their political duties. A miniscule percentage of these women however claim to have no support from their families. Being the gram panchayat member the pressures of discharging their duties where solely and wholly borne by themselves, devoid of any constructive help from their immediate families. It is heartening to note that majority of these tribal panchayat members have had the fortune of having an active family backup.
- Financial constraints: though these elected panchayat member at grass root political level are guaranteed certain economic remunerations, a vast majority of

these tribal poor women complain of either the inadequacy of their remuneration or the delay in providing of their legitimate financial rights. This is huge hindrance for involvement of tribal women into the political process as they feel lack of socio-economic incentives which will propel them towards enthusiastic political participation. The present study found out that the majority of these women are thus impelled towards considering their positions as grass root political representatives as more of a social work rather than position that entitles them towards financial gains. Measures need to be undertaken so that the legitimate financial rights of these poor downtrodden women are protected so that the zeal of these women for political participation is not compromised. It is heartening to note that majority of these women have not ventured out into the political field with the purpose of enhancing their financial status. But the basic financial remuneration that is bestowed upon them as being political leaders has to be taken care of.

- Role of reservations towards encouraging tribal women participation at grass root level: majority of these women accept the fact that, devoid of reservations, it would not have been feasible for them to be elected and rise up to the level of influencing political platforms. Patriarchal nature of the Indian society at large would never have given them the space for expression of their socio-political views. Their emergence as effective political personnel owes a lot to the reservations, aimed primarily at securing the political voices of the downtrodden women. Without the aid of these complimentary reservation policies, it would not be possible to reach up to the path breaking levels of political leadership, as they have achieved. Thus these effective political measures have definitely gone a long way towards encouraging the underprivileged women towards political participation. It still remains a fact that primarily reserving certain seats for the tribal women at the grass root level is not sufficient. A primarily patriarchal society as in India has managed to effectively go round across such measures thereby initiating ways of bypassing the effects of such reservations. It is a tendency of menfolk, cutting across political lands, to promote women within their families to these posts, so that the ultimate political prowess still remains in their hands.

- Women as ‘rubber stamp’ or proxy: it remains a fact that tribal women have managed to adorn positions of political power only courtesy of reservation policies. The ground reality is these reservations have forced the hands of the men to relinquish their vice-like grip on politics. The fact remains that these men, used to being harbingers of political prowess for generations together are extremely reluctant to relinquish these positions for the women folk. Thus, arises a scenario whereby these men have tended to choose women amongst their kith and kins, so that the power still continues to remain in their hands. Thus, at the ground level local bodies a substantial percentage of these tribal women are reduced to being occupying just ornamental posts, whereas the men still continue to wield the actual power.

- Balancing act between socio-familial and political duties: a vast majority amongst the tribal women representatives in local bodies emerge out of the widely littered tea gardens across this region. The present study observed that majority of these women is also employed as workers in tea gardens. Once elected as political leaders, they are forced at times to choose between attending political initiatives as political members and their domain as tea garden workers. The harsh reality is that attending meetings as elected panchayat representatives many a times robs them of their basic livelihood which they earn as being tea garden workers. This economic consideration has a large role to play towards their prioritization of their roles. This scenario is further complicated by the fact that the majority of these tribal women have a family to look after. Thus, it is extremely difficult for these women to participate whole heartedly into the political process, keeping their socio-familial status at stake.

- Subjugated tribal women being indirectly privy to corruption: the fact of the matter is that corruption is still widely prevalent amongst the Indian bureaucracy. Though faced with concrete evidences of corruption these tribal women remain novices thereby portrayed as being handy accomplices for furtherance of corruption. These tribal women often are made to be the unwilling accomplices for furtherance of corruption by the powers that be. Any social initiatives being undertaken by the political dispensation are always magnanimised by economically powerful houses. These tribal women being from backwards classes are always

forced to tow the line. These women thus end up being unwilling accomplices towards perpetuation of corrupt practices. The tribal women have little say towards measures aimed at implementation of social schemes. The powerful upper caste smothers them and gets their unwilling nod for getting their head into grass roots social projects.

- Political interference: none of these tribal women can claim to have an ascendancy into power without a political patronage. The economic and manual prowess of a political party does play an important role in their upliftment towards their elevation at levels of political positions. They thus remain indebted to these political parties. They are unable to break the shackles of these political parties whom they represent, ultimately ending up as being stooges to this political overload. Independent voices of these tribal elected leaders thus get smothered by overwhelming influence of the political parties that they represent. They have therefore no other options but to tow the line of their respective political parties, even though they may at times be contrary to their socio-political believes

THE WAY FORWARD

Despite the numerous problems that the tribal women face towards effective performance of their political duties, it is heartening to note that quite a substantial promotion of these women have managed to welcome the various obstacle and have managed to put forth a positive stride forward. A study into how these women have managed to positively overcome the various hurdles is actually the way forward for effective and positive participation of tribal women at the grass roots political levels. The way forward has to be definitely derived from examples of these successful tribal women who have managed to overcome all odds and carved out a niche for themselves.

- ❖ Stress on Education: the fact cannot be contested that women empowered with education definitely have an edge when confronted with the question of deliverance as political representatives. The present study have confirmed this fact as majority of these tribal women who are successful in harnessing their potentials as prospective political leader, do have a strong educational background to fall back upon. Education creates an ambience for critical understanding of the overall socio-political spectrum. Creation of a genre of vibrant and intelligent tribal

women leaders can only be made into a reality if proper emphasis upon education of the tribal women is made a reality. Measures such as caste reservations can only bear fruit they are coupled by endeavours to enhance the educational standards of tribal women. Government efforts have to be set into motion, which are directed primarily at providing means of education for these women of the tea gardens. Mere reservations will ultimately turn out to be symbolic and hollow instruments for women empowerment if not backed up by efforts at the educational fronts. The fact cannot be contested that an educated woman brings a much more positive aspect to the table towards dealing with socio-economic problem that her society, at large faces. Prioritizing of education has to be a major government initiative, devoid of which, caste reservations for underprivileged women, will never be able to meet its true potential.

In the specific context of North Bengal majority of the tribal population is here working in tea garden. Quite a substantial portion of these tea gardens are located in remote and far flung areas. Thereby, they are often cut off from areas of society which provide basic schooling facilities. It is therefore of utmost importance that these tea gardens are provided with atleast primary school facilities within their premises is that the children of these tea garden workers can avail of basic schooling. The unpalatable fact of the matter is that quite a majority of these tea gardens do not have these basic schooling requirements for the families of their workers. It is here that government schemes abated by social NGOs have a huge role to play towards ensuring that basic education is reached to this tribal population. Social programmes aimed towards enlightening the tribal population towards the benefits of education are a must.

- ❖ Way forward to overcome demerits of Panchayat Act of West Bengal (1993) – the measures under the 1993 Panchayat Act of West Bengal were primarily aimed at diversifying the effects of reservations, so that they are reached amongst a wider spectrum of these populations. It was proposed that seats reserved for tribal women will rotate among the populace so that a more substantial percentage of these women can be incorporated into the political system. While this has its own merits, my interactions with various tribal women representatives have brought forth the fact that, devoid of the assurance of representing the same constituencies,

which they have nurtured through their tenure, the desire to work meaningfully towards betterment of their dependent communities is definitely diminished. The present study has found that there is a need for these tribal women to feel entrenched to their constituencies so that they can carry forward their impetus, unhindered by the concerns about the fact that whether they will be able to retain these constituencies. A fair run has to be ensured so that the socio-political visions of these tribal women representatives are given enough time-frame to succeed. My studies portray the fact that majority of these tribal women start up as novices. These women largely complain about the fact that a period of five years is just about sufficient to learn about the intricacies of the bureaucratic political functioning. By the time they are in tune with the nitty-gritties of the political system at large, their term draws to a close. My opinion is that an extended run for these tribal women in political positions has to be ensured so that they can do justice to their socio-political aspirations of bringing about a positive change.

- ❖ Measures aimed at ensuring health of tribal women- women spanning across all social background can never rise to meaningful social positions if they are devoid of primary health facilities. Women, ultimately being a mother, require a comprehensive health coverage whereby she is covered primarily during her prenatal and antenatal periods of lives. In the context of tribal women residing in North Bengal majority of whom are employed as tea garden workers, effective antenatal, prenatal, and post natal medical coverage is of prime importance. Proper knowledge about importance of various vaccination schedules for the neo-natals is of essential importance, which has to be imparted to the would be mothers. Without the involvement of the tribal women towards various health initiatives, an enlightened women cadre can never be built. Empowered with the knowledge of modern medicine, tribal women can not only ensure a trouble-free pregnancy, but also can go a long towards bringing forth a healthy future population by effective participation in child immunisation programme. An enlightened tribal woman representative can go a huge step forward toward ensuring better health parameter for her family and immediate society. A welcome initiative amongst many of the North Bengal tea gardens is the emergence of organisations such as “Mother’s Club” which are primarily aimed towards addressing the various health related issues confronting the tribal society at large.

Measures aimed at strengthening and propagating such measures as initiation of institutions such as mothers club are definitely an effective and indigenous means to positive propagation of health related ethos amongst the tribal populations. These groups not only help to ensure coverage of the tribal population by modern medicine, but also play an important role in redressal of rampant social nemeses such as alcoholism and women abuse. The present study recommends that institutions like Mother's Club should be strengthened by effective political measures so that they can perform a path breaking role towards betterment of the tribal society at large.

- ❖ Socio-political backdrop: the fact of the matter is, even in tribal societies, which in various positions can claim to be more lenient towards women at large, it is a fact that absorbing the political powers to the women folk is still not a pleasant way forward for most of the tribal societies in North Bengal. Being forced to play their hands straight, through reservation policies, a majority of the tribal male population are still unable to look towards a scenario where the womenfolk of their society can be encouraged to have independent political voices. Thus, there is a propensity for the men of these tribes to use womenfolk as political rubberstamps, thereby the actual power still remain bestowed with the men. Thus, many of these entrenched male tribal leaders end up projecting women candidates within their own familial set up so that they can wield active political influence. Women tribal political representatives are thus rendered to being nothing but political slaves, who are largely dictated and controlled by males, subserviently. True empowerment of these tribal women aimed primarily towards providing them with measures targeted towards freedom from male dominance area primary requisite. Various socio-political scheme should be aimed towards creation of a women populace, laced with the actual socio-political capabilities. While it is imperative that the strong political parties predominantly aimed towards inhalation of a social set up, whereby the actual power remains vested within the men folk, measures aimed towards sustenance of socially active tribal women should be the primary way forward. Just caste link reservations for these tribal women, can never be the blue print for social change. The utopian thought of a panchayati raj system devoid of political influence, has to be made a reality. Specific measures have to be true empowerment of these women tribal

representatives have to be initiated, so that they can be insulated from the influence of political parties.

- ❖ Positive bureaucratic involvement: quite a substantial number of these tribal women representatives at the grass roots democracy meetings scheduled for the ground level political organisations as gram panchayats are not convened within the time frame. Though these representatives have effective points towards way forward, devoid of proper political platforms, their views are often not put to the forefront. The way forward is bestowed upon the bureaucracy so that they can increase the frequency of meetings which will provide avenue for these women to air their views on a much more frequent basis. Majority of these women feel that if such meetings could be convened on a weekly basis, it would really help them to put forward their agendas much more effectively. The onus therefore lies with the bureaucracy so that measures to increase the frequency of needs of the political representatives are met with.
- ❖ Measures to increase finances of local government bodies: it remains a fact that local grass roots level political bodies still remain deprived of financial funds to implement their socio-political schemes. Though with certain constitutional measures they are entitled to political positions, it remains a fact that they are still highly dependent upon state government for release of finances. The way forward will be to initiate measures so that these grass roots levels political institutions can be financially independent. Certain proportion of the revenues earned by the state government have to be channalised into these local government institutions so that they can function as financially strengthen individual bodies.
- ❖ Basic training facilities: devoid of measures towards enhancing of the quality of tribal women representatives, enhancing of the financial spectrum will not serve the purpose. Various government initiatives backed up by the NGOs, have to be in force so that proper training is provided for these women so as to enhance their working potential. A woman encompassed with effective training can definitely contribute much more effectively towards realisations of the socio-political goals aimed towards empowerment of the backward strata of the society.

- ❖ Addressal of corrupt practices keeping into the panchayat bodies: it is a fact that being a panchayat member is not economically lucrative proposition. It is a fact that majority of these tribal people come from economically deprived sections of the society. The remuneration that they get as the panchayat member is miniscule. Being panchayat members, they are confronted regularly with situations that require them to invest economically. Furthermore, being in panchayat often leads them to be compromised with their bread earning professions. Thus the economic hardships that they encounter are further compounded by their political positions. This thus paves the way for corruptions. During my field studies, I came across a classic example of this where there is rampant corruption up to the grass roots levels of panchayat centreing around projects aimed towards allocations of housing facilities under Indra Awas Yojna for the poor. The way forward to overcome this obstacle will be to provide adequate socio-economic compensation to the panchayat members so that the tendency towards becoming corrupt can be arrested.

- ❖ Measures aimed ensuring political participation of the weakest strata of the society: though constitutionally guarantee reservation for the tribal women are in place, it remains a fact that even after so many years the desired levels of participation are yet to be achieved. The reasons are many fold. The only way forward to bring about an effective and comprehensive political participation of the lowest and socially most deprived sections of the society is through initiation of incentives under various fields. There can be measures aimed at rewarding those panchayat bodies that are primarily represented by tribal women, based on their performance. These measures will drive them towards trying to fulfil their potentials.

- ❖ Stress upon utilising technological platforms: in the modern world that is powered by technology, e-governance is rapidly coming to the forefront. Panchayati raj institutions, unless propelled to new levels technological expertise, will tend to lag behind. For a successful transition to the advent of technology, it is imperative that panchayat members are brought in sync with these modern developments. The way forward should be to integrate the panchayat bodies with the newest

technological break-throughs. But this can never be achieved without measures aimed towards technological up gradation of individual panchayat members. Government policies here have a huge role to play, so that they are channelized towards providing modern technological for the panchayat members at grass root levels.

- ❖ Creation of awareness towards various developmental projects: it is a fact that majority the developmental projects initiated at the top most echelons of power do not trickle down to the grass root panchayat bodies. My study reflects this stark reality that majority of the tribal women in positions of power are not aware of the various projects that are aimed towards upliftment of their society. Means to achieve synchronisation amongst various stratas of the political set up has to be the way forward so that the panchayat members are also aware of existence of various developmental projects.
- ❖ Financial Implication affecting the proper functioning of panchayat bodies: panchayat as grass roots hermits of power existed in Indian society for long. The idea to institutionalise and give it constitutional credence was first mooted by rajcagnadhi. In the history of panchayati raj in India, on 24th April 1993, the constitutional (73rd Amendment Act 1992) came into force to provide constitutional status to panchayati raj institutions. The provision of finances to these panchayati raj institutions so that they can carry out their social agendas has been a constant source of debate. Various amendments have thence been past to empower these panchayat bodies economically. They have ranged from specific demarcation of the levies that can be collected by the stat governments and the panchayats. These measures have been largely aimed at providing the panchayat bodies with economic independence, whereby they don't have to be always at the mercy of state and central governments for implementation of their various schemes. The ground reality as exposed by my studies still reflects a scenario that the panchayat bodies continue to be under the influence of state governments for allocations of various funds. The way forward would be to strictly enforce the various guidelines laid down to guarantee financial independent for the panchayat bodies. Thus they can be truly rid of the influences of political parties.

- ❖ Proper conduct of panchayat election process: in the present Indian political scenario, the fact cannot be denied that control of grass roots level panchayat bodies is an important step towards affecting the electoral process for elections of higher bodies such as state legislative and national elections. Therefore, there is an active political battle which is endorsed by the various political parties so that active measures are taken by these parties to influence upon the panchayat election. It is extremely difficult for individual political representatives to rise above the political platforms created by various political parties. The way forward can only be promulgation of measures aimed at insulating the grass roots political elections from forced means by political parties of the day to have an influence on these elections. While it cannot be denied that while it cannot be denied that panchayat election process cannot be insulated from political influence altogether, measures have to be initiated so that the predominant political influence of powerful parties can be reduced to the minimum

To conclude it cannot be denied that granting of constitutional status to panchayati raj furthered by reserving seats for the socio-economically deprived women have definitely paved the way forward for empowerment of tribal women. The tribal women of North Bengal have definitely reaped the benefits of these strategies. There however remain a lot of lacunae towards realisation of the goal for real empowerment of women of these backwards strata of society. During the course of my study I have sincerely tried to highlight issues which, if addressed earnestly, will go a long way forward towards realisation of this goal.

It thus goes to suffice that when armed with proper political and legislative backing, tribal women can dare to venture out into the hitherto male dominated bastion of politics and contribute positively towards bringing forth a social change. Despite prevalent socio-political constraints, they dare to venture out into uncharted territories thereby reflecting a strong desire to have a say in the socio-political set-up at the grass roots levels. Various measures such as reservations for women candidates percolating down at the micro level has undoubtedly heralded a social revolution of sorts.

These measures have to be further strengthened during coming years so that tribal women feel embolden to participate in the political process. Effective implementation of these women reservations scheme is a primary pre-requisite for effective empowerment of

tribal women. Though there has been a progress in terms of granting constitutional legitimacy to these women reservation policies, there still remain lacunae which result from the struggle to dismantle a largely patriarchal socio-familial set-up.

It still remains a fact that under the garb of tribal women representatives, quite a substantial percentage of these seats end up as projecting women faces as just stooges, whereby the actual power continues to be wielded by the men. Furthermore, it is extremely difficult for these tribal women to take a stand which is different from the political dispensation of the state. Independence of these panchayat bodies is thus under question as individual tribal women representatives do not have the power and wherewithal to fight against the political party in power at the state level. The various positive social agendas that these women may have are thus diluted by various socio-political pressures. Many of these women thus disenchanted with the whole panchayati raj system, thereby becoming reluctant to pursue their relevant political agendas. It cannot be denied that these tribal women largely belong to economically deprived sections of the society, thereby being gullible to economic corruption which the bureaucracy uses to subvert their well thought out social initiative.

The present study finds out that if such reservation policies are not coupled with measures towards educating and empowering the girl child, the actual purpose of these reservations can never be realised. There is no dearth of intellectually capable women amongst this tribal society who can really work as a catalyst for upliftment of their society. But without proper government initiative aimed towards propelling these women to new heights, these tribal women can never reach their true potential. Primary emphasis thus has to be on protection of the girl child, measures aimed at providing equal opportunities to the girl child and measures aimed at largely treasuring the girl child as a whole. Devoid of such measures, merely reserving seats for the backward women can never bring forth a meaningful social change. It has to be accepted that owing to reservations, quite a substantial percentage of the tribal women have been imbibed into the political process. But the point of contention is whether such participation is just of ornamental value or is capable of bringing forth a forceful and positive social change. Government of any day, whether it be a national or a state government cannot wash away its responsibilities to ensure effective political empowerment of these tribal women. Owing to the extreme backwardness of these tribal women, especially in the area of North Bengal, this remain a

challenging task, which can only be overcome by genuine measures by the political parties entrenched in power. Without a wholesome socio-political approach, proper progress and effective political participation of these tribal women will continue to remain a distant dream.

This whole scenario acquires a different proposition amongst the tribal women of North Bengal primarily because the tribal population in this area is largely working in tea gardens which are primarily located in remote and far flung areas. Any truly effective government measures aimed towards upliftment of the tribal women of this area are at large difficult to percolate down to the grass roots level. Thus, measures aimed at upliftment of tribal women of North Bengal have to be cushioned by active involvement of various non-governmental organisation, that work in sync with various government initiatives so that government programmes can be effectively reached up to the far flung and remote locations of North Bengal. This unique geography of North Bengal causes problems that require an innovative approach. Mere implementation of benevolent government measures may not be sufficient to touch the lives of the tribal women residing in North Bengal. The predominantly tea garden dependent tribal population has its unique sets of problems which can only be solved through specifically directed initiatives aimed towards betterment of this society.

The fact cannot be denied that West Bengal was one of the first states to implement Panchayati raj at the grass roots level. But over the course of time extreme political indulgence by the various political parties that are in power have resulted in viciation of the grass roots political atmosphere. A crucial issue to be considered in describing the various political processes at work in panchayati raj institutions relates to the role of political parties in these institutions. According to Jay Prakash Narayan a distinction must be made between the parliamentary and panchayati raj system. To the pointed and straight question of whether panchayati raj was devised to facilitate and further the interests of political parties or those of the people, he opines that the political parties should find other ways of influencing the political spectrum rather than exploiting panchayati raj for party ends. There ofcourse is a counter view wherein EMS Nambrudipal, of the CPI(M) argues that in the name of non-partisanship at any cost, it disarms the common people in their fight against the local gentry who would thus transform the panchayati raj into their instrument. HC Mathur who was member of administrative commission of India, while

accepting that the panchayat samities and zilla parishads may function on the party lines because it would be difficult to keep politics out of these bodies, pleads that the panchayats at least should not be drawn into the vortex of politics.

The fact cannot be denied that for the majority of the political parties control of grass roots political institutions like the panchayati raj bodies is an essential means to further their political clout to higher echelons of power. While it cannot be denied that devoid of political patronage, it would be extremely difficult for the panchayati raj institutions to function effectively, over indulgence of political parties in these institutions may also prove to be detrimental towards independent functioning of the panchayats. Thus a fine line has to be drawn whereby extreme political indulgence is not allowed to subvert effective and independent functioning of the panchayati raj institutions. Ideally, freed from influences of political parties, panchayats may really turn out to be tools to bring about social development at the grass roots level. The way forward is to encourage measures aimed at furthering avenues to reduce political influence at panchayat levels so that the true potential of panchayati raj institutions can be realised.