

Research Study

On

**Women's Empowerment, Good-governance and
Decentralisation : Assuring Women's Participation in
Panchayats of Two Backward Districts of Northern Part of
West Bengal.**

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Submitted by

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P R E F A C E

The study was undertaken at the initiative of the Honourable Vice-Chancellor, University of North Bengal and with the financial support from Department of Women and Child Development, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. The study focused on the factors and forces behind the participation of women in Panchayat Structure specially after the seventy third Constitution Amendment Act. The role performance, role awareness and role perception of the elected women Panchayats have been explored to understand the impact of socio-economic variables and legal impetus on electoral participation and the impact of such variables on attitudinal variables on political participation. Nearly five hundred elected women representatives of different tiers, viz., Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad of two selected districts, namely, Cooch-behar and Jalpaiguri of Northern part of the state of West Bengal have been thoroughly interviewed with both structured and unstructured questionnaires to understand the ground realities. The study does not claim to cover all aspects of women's political life. It has sought to examine some of the major aspects of women political participation at the grass-root in the context of empowerment, decentralization and democratic good-governance.

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(DILIP KUMAR SARKAR)
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Chapter-I

Experiencing Participation of Women in Panchayats

Women share roughly half of the world's population. According to Population Reference Bureau, 2004, World Population Data Sheet, The United Nations, out of 3209 millions women living in world, the share of India is 531.9 millions. This amounts to nearly half of India's total population. As per Census, 2001, ratio of females in per thousand males is 933. Different statistics suggest that this half of the humanity possesses 1/100th of the world's property. Nearly seventy percent of the women are living below the poverty line. Two-thirds of them are illiterate. According to the Human Development Report 1995, "Poverty has a women's face. Of 1.3 billion people in poverty, 70 per cent are women". Taking the economy as a whole, Indian women perform two-thirds of the work, but, earn only one-tenth of the income. Women do have unequal access to land and property rights. Nearly 89 percent of women population earn their livelihood from agriculture. Women do have heavy work load with dual responsibility for farm and household production. Compared to male members, women have low life expectancy at birth, low educational attainment, low income and gender disparities.⁽¹⁾ In 2005, women made up of just twelve percent of the World's Parliamentarians, while for India the share is only eight percent. Studies on Indian women in politics, in aggregate, indicate that women in Indian society have been deprived of fundamental social, economic and political rights. The social hierarchies and inequalities that exist in Indian society deter the women for centuries to play an active role in the societal functions including participation in political institutions.

Women constituting half of the population of our country have been an integral part of our social structure principally due to their contribution to the socio-economic spheres of life. Notwithstanding the fact, women in India have been treated discriminately because of the gender bias of the prevalent patriarchic values of Indian society. The dominant patriarchy has denied women equality of status and opportunities in socio-economic and political spheres. Amidst such patriarchic bias Women in India can not be treated as a homogeneous unit. There are differences amongst women in terms of class, caste, status, space (rural-urban divide) etc. Several studies have revealed that social, economic and political empowerment of Indian rural

women is comparatively much lower than that of their urban counterparts. Rural Indian Women have still been treated as “Object” of development rather than the “Subject” of development.

The involvement of women in the development process and political decision making process has always been advocated by social and political thinkers. The Report of the Committee on status of women in India (CSWI: 1974), which is considered as a significant document on the socio-economic conditions of Indian women says, “though women’s participation in the political process has increased, their ability to produce an impact on the political process has been negligible because of the inadequate attention paid to their political education and mobilization by both political parties and women organizations. Parties have tended to see women voters as appendages of the males. Among women, the leadership has become diffused and diverse having sharp contradictions with regard to inequalities that affect the status of women in every sphere – social, economic and political.”

The United Nations after declaring 1975-85 as the Decade for Women Development observed that “Women perform two-thirds of the world’s work but receive only ten per cent of the world’s income and only one percent of the means of production. Women are thus the world’s largest ‘excluded category’.”⁽²⁾ The U.N. Report on Women observes: “The scales of world’s equality are out of balance. The side marked ‘women’ is weighed down with responsibility, while the side marked ‘men’ rides high with power. Tilting first under rules that say women must do all domestic work, the scales are lipped further by men’s greater opportunities to earn wages. Advantage builds on advantage until today they are tilted so steeply that almost all of the world’s wealth is on men’s side, while most of the work is on women’.”

It has now widely been recognized that women should have their entitled share in enjoying the basic rights with the males. Women shall have the equal rights to political participation and right to involve in the process of political decision making. The issue of women’s participation in local level politics may be viewed from the general understanding that women are subjugated in many ways and such state of subordination has affected negatively the development process. The situation took turn with the passage of liberal ideas. The issue of women’s participation in political decision making assumed importance only in the late twentieth century, it is now on the international agenda and permeating many regional and national plans of action. The

United Nations adopted the Convention on the Political Rights of Women in 1952. The world-wide concern for women's participation was noticed in 1975 when the United Nations declared the decade as the Women Development Decade and adopted resolutions accordingly. In 1975, the World Plan of Action, adopted in the First World Conference held in Mexico City, put forward various suggestions for the recruitment, nomination and promotion of women in various branches of government, public bodies, trade unions and pressure groups. In Copenhagen, in 1980, further steps were recommended to promote international cooperation and strengthen peace through women's participation.

The Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies, adopted in the Third World Conference on Women, Nairobi (1985) stressed that "Women by virtue of their gender, experience discrimination in terms of equal access to the power structure that controls society and determines development issues and peace initiatives". It was further resolved that "For true equality to become a reality for women, the sharing of power on equal terms with men must be a major strategy. The importance of governmental and non-governmental organizations in educating women to exercise their newly own civil, political and social rights was emphasized. In this process of consciousness raising efforts would have to be made to fix definite time-bound targets and even resort to a quota system.

The issue of women's political empowerment had gained momentum in the global debate for women's rights at the time of the Fourth World Conference on Women held at Beijing in 1995. The issue continued to hold centre-stage of all discussions on gender justice and equality. Women's equal access to, and full participation in decision making was emphasized in the Platform for Action, as one of the critical areas of concern. It unequivocally declared "Women's equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the general process of advancement of women. Women's equal participation in decision making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account". It also affirmed that women should have at least a thirty percent share of decision making positions".

The issue of providing adequate space for women's political participation has also repeatedly come up in the NGO Meetings of South Asia Watch, Asia Pacific Women's Watch as a priority issue and more categorically at the Regional Meet on

Commemorating Beijing III organized by the UNIFEM. (Third Beijing Biennial South Asia Regional Ministerial Meeting, Organised by UNIFEM, Maldives, Sept. 26-27; 2000). The Maldives Outcome Document recognized the “continuing invisibility of women in higher levels of governance, political leadership and civil service and the continuing resistance of mainstream political parties to provide space for women in politics”. It further recommended, “sharing of experiences of affirmative action at grass-root levels as well as at national level; studying of different electoral systems and creation of a shared political agenda for women.” The need to increase women’s participation in political decision making has been a common issue for all International and Regional Conferences relating to women held so far which means that women’s political empowerment has been at the centre-stage of attention for all discourses on women’s issues. (Information taken from Promilla Kapur; Empowering of Indian Women, Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India, New Delhi, 2001) Correspondingly, various initiatives have been undertaken in India for enabling women to participate in the political process.

In the face of globalization and corroborative Structural Adjustment Programme, women have become the best sufferers. There has been the policy of state minimalism and market maximalism. Under such a situation, there has been a growing reduction of public sector investment. Women have not been finding proper place in the public sector. Moreover, the increase in unorganized sector and the increase of women workers in this sector enhance vulnerability of women workers in the labour market. The Report of the Working Group on Women’s development for the Ninth Plan admitted that “Women operate in a vicious circle of subsistence, deprivation and survival.” There has also been sharp increase in female casual employment for over the decades. In addition, ninety-six percent of women work in the informal sectors following the last one decade. Agricultural wages have also declined in real terms which means more women entering into lower paid jobs. The hire and fire policy, downsizing and disinvestments in the recent past have affected women most. According to the data served by National Commission on Self-employed Women (1998), there are 63 million female workers in India of which 28 million (45 percent) are agriculture labourers. In spite of their crucial role in agricultural production, the earning of the women are less than their male counterparts. Women get half or two

thirds of the wages of male agriculture labourers. The legal impetus like “Equal Remuneration Act”, “The Minimum Wages Act” seem to be futile and meaningless.

The concern of this study is to explore women’s participation in Panchayats, let us have a quick browse to the status of rural women in India. Rural women constitute seventy-five percent of the total female population. By any means of human development indicator, the rural women is disadvantaged compared to her urban counterpart. Access to information, assets, opportunities of life are also low for rural women. What Indian rural women need is a radical overhauling of their status. Empowerment in every aspect of life for Indian rural women has been the only answer. The strategy is to adopt an integrated approach towards empowering women in all fronts like social, economic, political and legal. The Government of India has also prepared a National Policy for the empowerment of women in 1996 which recommended adoption of the policy along with gender development index. Further, a special strategy of earmarking of funds as “Women Component” also adopted and to ensure flow of funds and benefits for women both at central and state levels.⁽³⁾

The seventy-third Constitution Amendment Act (1993) has ushered in watershed in the history of state initiatives with regard to political empowerment of rural women. The Parliament of India in April 1993 passed the Seventy Third Amendment Act, providing thirty three percent reservation in all tiers panchayat structure for all rural women. The Act has provided a definite space for women to participate in Panchayat politics and to involve in local political decision making process. This legislative innovation has enabled women to participate in decentralized governance, planning and development. Consequently, there have been around eleven lakh elected women including women belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, as members and Chairpersons all the three tiers of Panchayat Raj structure. It is said that such an arrangement has created scope for women forming ‘Critical Mass’ whereby they can raise their voice felt in a regimented manner. (The ‘Critical Mass’ is a concept originally derived from nuclear physics and refers to a quantity needed to start an irreversible chain reaction. Its basic tenet in this context is that a certain number of women must be present in order to be able to effect change. Alternatively thirty-three percent reservation of seats in Panchayat structure for women, although still minority, is an effective size of minority to effect change). However, if any one subscribes to the view that a ‘critical mass’ of women will introduce changes in

politics, the scope for that is less at the local than at the national level, where more far reaching policy formulation takes place.

It is, therefore, timely to explore to what extent these new arrangements have contributed change to the position and status of women in India. Have they been actually empowered or do they live in the same state of subordination and deprivation? Empowerment, in common parlance, means empowering women socially, economically and politically so that they can break away from patriarchic domination and claim equality with their male counterpart. It is being increasingly felt that empowerment of women will enable a greater degree of self confidence, a sense of independence and capacity to resist discrimination imposed by the male dominated society. Precisely, it means, enabling women to decide on every aspect of socio-economic and political life which includes household activities, economic activities, socio-cultural activities and political activities. Women are to be made partners in common development in shaping up collective future by means of active and direct involvement.

Politics has been the principal pillar of empowerment. The more the participation of women in politics, the more they can change the modalities and outcomes of politics. Several studies on post-seventy third Amendment suggest that after the introduction of the seventy-third Amendment Act, rural women although, are participating in large numbers in rural grass-root level institutions, they still remain largely outside the realm of power and decision making. The gender difference in rural participatory politics is still very high. Many interrelated factors affect women's ability to participate in politics. The social hierarchies and inequalities that exist in Indian society deter the woman for centuries to play an active role in the societal functions including participation in political institutions.⁽⁴⁾

Despite the existence of multiple hurdles and presence of multidimensional constraints for women in Indian rural canvas, it has been established unquestionably that the seventy third Amendment has created space for women's needs within the structural framework of politics and has legitimized the women's issues. The study⁽⁵⁾ of the Institute of Social Sciences has revealed women's disadvantaged position in all spheres of life. In the midst of such maladies, Women's success in Panchayats are creating an encouraging trend all over the country. Women in India have been able to influence social choices and decisions affecting rural society. The Seventy-third

Amendment Act has provided rural women a sense of recognition and respect as equal citizens and human being with a contribution to make for the society. An account suggests that out of 29.2 lakh elected representatives of Panchayats at various levels, about 10 lakhs are women. A large majority of them has been elected for the first time for any political representation. The reservation of seats in rural political institutions has greatly contributed to the political empowerment of women and marginalised communities in the rural society. The seventy-third Amendment Act, in the ultimate analysis, has thrown open political opportunities in the different tiers of Panchayat decision making. However, their representation in terms of numbers does not add much to the quality of governance unless this is reflected in the efficient delivery of services to the poor and needy.

Mention should be made that a few number of Indian states had introduced reservation of seats for women by bringing state level legislations before the introduction of Seventy Third Amendment Act. The percentage of reservations so introduced, however, did have no national uniformity. It varied from state to state ranging from 10 percent reservation for women in Madhya Pradesh to 33 percent in West Bengal. The Constitutional mandate of providing 33 percent reservation of seats in Panchayat for women by the enactment of Seventy Third Amendment has brought uniformity among the states to reserve 33 percent seats in Panchayat for women. The state legislations have been enacted/modified in accordance with the Constitutional guideline. Elections have been held after keeping conformity with the reservation mandate. Such arrangements have constitutionalised women's entitlement to participate in local political decision making process in a much larger way than before. It is extremely important to mention that the reservation of seats for women in Panchayats is not an end in itself, it is a means to an end, the end being the effective realization of involving women constituting nearly half of India's population, in the decision making process and total empowerment of rural women.

A study or the findings of inter-state researches on the impact of seventy third Amendment Act is not out of place to mention here. Even before the introduction of the Amendment Act, the importance of the study of women in India had been realized by the Government of India.⁽⁶⁾ The principal purpose of the study was to assess the impact of constitutional, legal and administrative provisions on the social status of women, their education and employment. The study began with a demographic profile of Indian

Women and presented a vivid description of education, employment, participation of women in politics and laws specifically related to women.

Studies on women leadership in Panchayat made by Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA, New Delhi, 1997) have revealed some important findings: (a) Majority of the women are in the age group of 34-45 years; (b) the proportion of unmarried women is negligible; (c) only 20 to 40 percent of the women are literate; (d) Incidence of joint and nuclear families is almost equal; (e) Less than 20 percent of them are heads of the domestic households (f) About 40 percent of the members work in the field; (g) The educational and economic background of the chairpersons are better than the ordinary members; (h) More than 20 percent come from the families of Panchayati Raj members; (i) About 40 percent stood for elections on the insistence of their husbands and 20 percent on that of the Community (Caste) etc. (j) 25 percent notice change in their status in the family after being elected; (k) About 60 percent would like to encourage women to contest in elections; (l) About 60 percent of these elected would contest next elections.

A number of micro-studies have documented the profile and experience of the emancipated rural women and perceptions about their new role. The studies have reflected variety of experience and participation of women in different groups. It is seen that women have to use the new political space in the Panchayats in the face of unspoken opposition or at least reservation. A study⁽⁷⁾ in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh noted that the reservation for women immediately led to four myths about their entry and likely performance; (a) their passivity and disinterest in political institutions; (b) only the well-to-do, upper strata women come through reservation, (c) Women's political connectivity – only kins of powerful politicians enter Panchayats to keep the seats for them and finally, (d) Women are only proxy – 'namesake' members and they do not participate in Panchayats. Nirmala Buch in her study has exploded these myths without discounting existence and behaviour of some women who would fit into this patriarchy oriented framework. The participation of women in Panchayats has had an impact on their sense of self. The data on their perceptions, recognition, respect, enhanced status, confidence levels, enhanced levels of mobility and exposure, their increased political perceptions and community's perceptions and evaluation of their performance are seen as markers of empowering process for women.

The post-73rd Amendment experiences suggest that Panchayats have shown emerging leadership of rural women and they have moved ahead from the initial learning phase over the decade. Women are also slowly learning how to build alliances with other social collectives, with other women and with other sections to build on their initial entry in public life. The positive outcome of the induction of women in the Panchayats is also felt in the pro-poor, especially pro-women welfare programmes pursued by women Panchayat members and women Chairpersons at different tiers of Panchayat structures. Studies reveal that in places where young and energetic women assumed chair position, special attention has been paid to promote income generating activities to rural women. Women leaders have shown a great degree of dedication and honesty in their activities and performed a number of welfare programmes benefiting community.⁽⁸⁾ Some state specific studies may be mentioned to understand the nature of political empowerment of women in post-73rd Amendment perspective.

Andhrapradesh

The composition of Gram Panchayats in Andhra Pradesh is governed by the Andhra Pradesh Gram Panchayats Act, 1964 as amended time to time. Andhra Pradesh Mandal Praja Parishad, Zilla Praja Parishad and Zilla Abhivrudhi Sameeksha Mandal Act, 1986 had a provision for reservation of minimum of two and a maximum of four seats for women in Gram Panchayats and some percentage in Mandal Praja Parishad and Zilla Praja Parishad. Some percentage of the posts of Chairperson of the Zilla Parishad were also reserved for women. As a result of the 73rd Amendment a large number of women belonging to different castes and communities have been elected as members and chairpersons in the Panchayats. Although the Act has mandated one third reservation for women as members as well as chairpersons at different tiers of the Panchayats, in Andhra Pradesh, women have captured more than one third seats. The representation of women at this level has been 33.84 percent.

In Andhra Pradesh, the visibility of women in decision making positions has been ensured by the protective discrimination measures. There are about 73513 women members at G.P. level, 4776 at MP level and 361 at ZP level. The post Amendment phase in Andhra Pradesh has proved beyond doubt that women in Panchayati Raj moved from peripheral to leadership role. However, a Ford Foundation-sponsored study in the District of Kurnool in Andhra Pradesh mentions that a large number of

elected members of the local bodies especially women are not actively participating in the meetings of the Panchayats.⁽⁹⁾

Haryana:

Haryana had only a two-tier Panchayati Raj System at village and block level till 1995 and the third tier could only be revived in 1995 after the enactment of 73rd Amendment Act. The State Government replaced the Punjab Gram Panchayat Act 1952 and the Panchayat Samiti Act, 1961 and enacted the Haryana Panchayati Raj Act, 1994. At present, the number of women Panchayat is 18356, women members in Panchayat Samiti is 842 and women members in Zilla Parishad is 109.⁽¹⁰⁾

In Haryana a study with a sample of 100 elected members in four districts over two years indicated the beginning of a discernible revolution.⁽¹¹⁾ A majority of the women members were illiterate when elected to office. After two years in office they demanded literacy skills and became concerned about their daughters' education. The MARG did a study in the Kamal district of Haryana in 1997. The study revealed that the elected members were not given any training regarding their power, functions and duties. They were little aware of fiscal powers, sources of funds and the reason for reservation of seats for women. Manju Power's study⁽¹²⁾ of women Sarpanchas conducted in four Gram Panchayats in Haryana brought out that except one others have little knowledge about the power and functions of the Panchayati Raj Institution and about the governmental schemes.

Susheela Kaushik's study on Panchayati Raj Institution in Haryana revealed that most of the women members were illiterates, poor and mostly engaged in domestic responsibilities. Due to these disabilities these elected women have not been performing their role effectively. In order to perform their duties they had to depend on members of their families. However, this experience has made them conscious about their importance of education in human life. The training imparted to them by government and non-governmental organizations enabled them to know a little about their roles and duties as a member and chairperson of the Panchayat. Some of them were so conscious about their posts that they desire to recontest the election for the post of chairperson even if their posts were dereserved.⁽¹³⁾ Sri Mahi Pal has also conducted a study of seventy-five women elected leaders at all tiers in Rewari, Mahindragarh and Faridabad districts of Haryana. He concluded that one-third reservation for women has

enabled them to participate in decentralized governance and development at the local level.

Gujarat :

In conformity with the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act 1993, the Gujarat Panchayat Act 1993 came into force on 15th April 1993. The Act continues the three tier Panchayati Raj structure at the village, block and district levels. There is provision for reservation of seats for SCs and STs in all Panchayats in proportion to their population and ten percent reservation for the socially and economically backward classes / other backward classes along with reservation of one third of the total number of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions at all three levels. The Gujarat State, according to the law, has 13316 Panchayats, 25 Zilla Panchayats and 210 Taluka Panchayats. Out of total 64052 elected Gram Panchayat Members, the share of Women is 21351, out of 3765 elected Taluka Panchayat 3765 are women and out of 764 Zilla Panchayat members women's share is 254.⁽¹⁴⁾

A study carried by 'Unnati' (Status of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Gujarat (1995-2000), Ahmedabad (2001)) revealed that sixty percent of Women Gram Panchayat members are illiterate; six percent of them belong to the age group 21-35; about ninety percent of them are married and shoulder the household responsibility; 85 percent of them do not have any previous experience of working with Panchayats. A close look at the profile of the elected women members at the block and district levels brings out a different picture particularly in terms of literacy. 91 percent at the block level and 97 percent at the district level are literate. Notwithstanding the high literacy rate, 35 percent of them have poor understanding about their roles and less than 25 percent are aware of the financial situation of Panchayat bodies they are attached to. It has been an overall impression that space for women in Panchayat Raj Institutions in Gujarat has created a process of change.

Tamil Nadu:

The Gandhigram Rural Institute's study on rural women leaders in Tamil Nadu has revealed that as per the perception of the leaders they are elevated to the position through election on the basis of their caste, party affiliation, organizational affiliation, family, community, par group. Majority of the leaders have exhibited their

determination to occupy public space. The women have assumed the leadership at grass-roots level governance.

Out of total 40734 Gram Panchayats members, the number of women Gram Panchayat is 13578 out of total 6504 Panchayat Samity members, women elected members are 2168 in number and out of 649 Parishad member in Tamil Nadu is 216.⁽¹⁵⁾

One third reservation of seats for women in local bodies through the constitutional amendments has opened a channel in the power structure for women from different strata of the society to occupy a legitimate space.⁽¹⁶⁾ Women rural leaders need orientation, sensitization, capacity building, information and counseling continuously through organizations. The experience suggests that periodical training, orientation and sensitization can help the women leaders to perform the assigned role in a better way. When the women leaders are responding to the socio-political challenges in this society, they are to be supported by the organizations and institutions which are working for empowerment of women.⁽¹⁷⁾

Karnataka:

History of rural local government suggests that Karnataka has had a significant bearing on decentralized planning and governance. Since the late 19th Century to the present, the state has witnessed several Acts on rural governance under different regimes. Indeed, Karnataka has been the first state to pass a 'conformity' legislation necessary to bring the provision of the seventy third Amendment into force – the Karnataka Panchayat Act, 1993. The Act provides for a three tier structure of Panchayati Raj with Zilla Panchayats at the district level, Taluk Panchayats at intermediary level and Gram Panchayats at the village level. While all three Panchayats are directly elected bodies, the Act stipulates that elections to Gram Panchayats should not be held on a party basis. To facilitate people's participation in governance and planning, the Act stipulates that the Gram Sabha be convened twice in a year with the functions of mobilizing voluntary labour and contributions, identifying beneficiaries for development schemes and rendering assistance in the implementation of programmes / schemes pertaining to the village.⁽¹⁸⁾

A detailed study⁽¹⁹⁾ on the position of women in Political Institutions with reference to Panchayati Raj System in Karnataka was under taken during early nineties has revealed that sixty percent of the women elected to different tier of Panchayat

belong to younger age group. The argument that the younger generation lacks political experience, does not hold good in the case of women to whom their involvement in the political sphere itself is new. It has also been observed that though women have now come to stay as a political force they have to go a long way before they can really become a significant political force. Moreover, traditional attitudes and values regarding women's roles continue to dictate women's political role. The study⁽²⁰⁾ undertaken by George Mathew revealed that women have social handicaps and constraints of various kinds, but with experience their effectiveness improves. Even when Bangarappa government suspended Panchayats, women groups started watchdog committees to monitor the working of bureaucracy. The researches on Karnataka rural women leaders show that regardless of the situation obtaining today, the awareness and participation of women in governance can grow leading to positive change in Caste, Class and family relationships.

Maharashtra:

In Maharashtra, the 73rd Amendment Act has made a powerful impact on women by enabling them to enter into the decision making sectors. Out of 303545 elected members to Gram Panchayats 100182 are women (33.88 percent), out of 3525 elected member to Panchayat Samiti 1174 are women (33.31 percent) and out of 1762 elected District Panchayat Members 587 are women constituting 33.31 percent. The study⁽²¹⁾ revealed that women through Panchayati Raj Institutions are making the state sensitive to issues concerning poverty, inequality and gender justice. Women have infused confidence and inculcated sense of empowerment by enabling them to exercise control over resources, officials by challenging the male authority and monopoly. Maharashtra rural women have endeavoured to bring about the changes by raising the issues such as health, sanitation, education, water scarcity, alcohol and domestic violence.

It has been observed that elected rural women in Maharashtra have found the role and work exciting due to recognition and status gained as individual. The barriers to executing programmes include lack of cooperation, misappropriation of power, interference of political parties, corruption and non-cooperation etc. Women Panchayats have a far more gender sensitive agenda. They want to start biogas plants, open schools and take other welfare measures.

Kerala:

In addition to long practiced movement for local democracy, the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act has marked a watershed in the field of advancement of rural women in Kerala as they have been ensured one third of total seats in all elected bodies of Panchayati Raj Institutions. This provides an opportunity to about lakhs of rural women in Kerala to encourage as leaders and decision makers at the grass-root level and to enter in public life.

In Kerala, the introduction of People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning created new condition for women empowerment. Before the People's Campaign, Kerala had done little to emancipate women. The substantial gains women had made in Kerala in education, low birth rates, and fairly equal treatment in health care and nutrition – all came as by-products of the general Kerala model of development. The Left in Kerala does not have a history of struggling for women's rights in the same way it has fought for peasants and workers.⁽²²⁾ All this changed with the People's Plan Campaign. From the beginning, it was realized that the campaign needed women's participation to make decentralization democratic and effective. While few men have openly opposed these interventions, the general weight of Kerala's patriarchal institutions has shown itself to be a powerful force against equality.⁽²³⁾

Moreover, the gender dimension of decentralization assumes a special relevance in the context of the one-third reservation of the seats and offices in the local self governing institutions for women. The Kerala experience reinforces the correctness of affirmative action in elections and is supportive of the extension of affirmative action to higher levels of government. According to the self assessment made by the elected women representatives, women leaders perceive improvement in their capabilities as a result of the campaign. The Kerala experience⁽²⁴⁾ shows that in-depth and continuous capacity development programmes targeting the elected women representatives should accompany affirmative action. Isaac and Franke concludes that "formal training programmes can only be one element of empowerment; success depends on creating a favourable environment in the Panchayat. It is assessment that the campaign and the synergies released by it helped propel women into more active public roles and sets the stage for further women's empowerment in the immediate future.

The state has empowered the PRIs to the extent that they may prove since models of decentralized development. The state of Kerala initiated the Jana Abhiyan (People's Campaign) on 17th August, 1997 which aimed at maximum participation of the local people in planning process for development at the grass-roots level. In Kerala, Panchayats can take loans at their own level.

Uttar Pradesh:

The state of Uttar Pradesh demographically occupies highest position, however, performance-wise it is a backward state. The level of women Empowerment has been very low and the status of women rural leaders is far from satisfactory level. Out of total 682670 elected Gram Panchayat members, women Panchayats constitute 25.55 percent. The total Women Gram Panchayat is 174410 which is much below the mandatory reservation for women. Out of total 58165 Panchayat Samity members the total number of elected Women Panchayat is 14002 constituting 24.07 percentage – below than the stipulated reservation mandate. 587 women have been elected to District Panchayat out of total 1762 elected members to the District Panchayat constituting 33.31 percent reservation for women.

Studies have shown rural women elected to different tiers of Panchayats in Uttar Pradesh felt neglected even after being elected. Most of them are very very poor and mostly economically dependent on their husbands. For attending the meetings they have to ask for bus fare from their husbands or male members of the family. Sudha Pai's study in Meerut District tends to show that illiteracy and dominance of husbands impede women's participation.⁽²⁵⁾ In the recent years, women Panchayat leaders have shown a considerable progress in the political empowerment process. Most of the other states do possess more or less the same features of Uttar Pradesh Panchayat experience.

General Observations for the Cross-State Studies:

The general experience of the studies of some important states suggests that the Indian states have adopted / enacted / modified Panchayat legislations keeping in line with the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act. This important national Act has ensured the representations of one-third women in Panchayat Raj Institutions. This has augmented the power of participation of women in the policy making bodies. Women have been accorded more and more importance in various spheres of socio-economic life. The experience of the states is very encouraging in this new phase of Panchayati Raj.

Kerala, Hariyana, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and to name few, have also gone ahead in this direction. However, in some of the states the picture is not so bright. In many states state level leaders do not seem to be interested in sharing power with the women representatives of the PRIs even after it had been made mandatory by the Constitution.⁽²⁶⁾

Different state level studies have shown that women through PRIs are making the states sensitive to the issues concerning poverty, inequality, gender injustice etc. They are also helping the women to change their perceptions about themselves. They have been infusing sense of empowerment by enabling them to exercise control over resources by challenging male authority and dominance. The women march continues irrespective of hundreds and thousands of socio-economic and political bottlenecks and lack of practical trainings and operational modalities involved in the administrative functioning.⁽²⁷⁾

The post-colonial societies like ours are still dominated by social norms and customs. They dictate the terms of social life, movement and behaviour. The environment within which they operate has such inherent problems as crimes against women which keep them under restraint and restrict their free movement. Moreover, women's organizations are not very strong in most of the states. In short, the experiences of the various states suggest that women leaders do have low human development indices such as illiteracy and low educational level, compliance with social restrictions, constructed shyness and submissiveness, lack of comprehensive understanding of their roles and responsibilities, weak articulation skills and negative perceptions of male political leaders and bureaucracy on women.

Participation of rural women in Panchayat politics has come a long way since independence. Women are now committed, despite limitations, to effect the local development policy decisions and programmes and have been able to make them gender sensitive and gender specific being a part of decision making process.⁽²⁸⁾

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Chapter – II

Women in Panchayats : The West Bengal Experience

The fourteenth largest state in India in size (88,752 sq. km.) with a population of 80,176,197 (Census 2001) of which 41,465,985 males and 38,710,212 females having the sex ratio of 934, West Bengal is the fourth most populous state situated in the eastern region of India. The state of West Bengal is a very high population density state which is three times that of the Indian average. Heterogeneities of socio-economic factors have determined the high density population in the state. The partition of India and internal migrations from the neighbouring states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan etc. give an indication of the enormity of migration. Precisely, with a population density of 904 persons per sq. km. (as per Census, 2001) West Bengal is currently the most densely populated state in the country. West Bengal holds 2.7 percent of India's geographical areas but about 7.8 percent of the country's population. This extremely high population density obviously affects per capita resource allocation and such other corresponding human development indices per caput.

The rural West Bengal accounts for a total population of 57,784,946 (Census, 2001) out of which the total numbers of males and females respectively are 29,616,009 and 28,132,937 with a sex ratio of 950. Thus seventy two percent of the total population in West Bengal live in rural areas. The percentages of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe population are 28.6 and 5.8 percent respectively in rural areas and 19.9 and 1.5 percent respectively in the Urban areas. Gender discrimination ranging from infant mortality rate, literacy, health, education, work-force participation to other socio-economic and political development riders, has been an important feature of economic and social processes in West Bengal. Despite the declining trend in the recent past, it still remains significant. Despite gender differences, women's participation in Panchayats of West Bengal has been greater and more substantive than in many other states.⁽¹⁾

The total number of identified villages in West Bengal is 37,955. The number of Gram Sansad is 43245. The total number of Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samity and Zilla Parishad respectively are 3354, 341 and 17 (including Siliguri Mahakuma

Parishad). The total numbers of elected members in the three tier Panchayati structure are : Gram Panchayat : 51142; Panchayat Samities : 8579 and Zilla Parishad : 723. The total elected women members in Gram Panchayats is 18721, in Panchayat Samity 3039 and in Zilla Parishad 246. Out of total elected women members in Gram Panchayats in West Bengal, the shares of women members belonging to scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes categories respectively are 5657 and 1496. The number of general caste category women elected to Gram Panchayats is 11568. Out of total elected women in Panchayat Samities, the shares of Schedule Caste, Scheduled Tribes and General categories of women respectively are 923; 228 and 1881. The same Picture for Zilla Parishads in West Bengal is 66; 21 and 159 respectively. Thus rural women in West Bengal share 35.56 percent seats in Gram Panchayats, 35.14 percent seats in Panchayat Samities and 34.02 percent in Zilla Parishad respectively. (Data collected from Panchayat Update, June 2005)

West Bengal has had a history of representation of Women in Panchayats well before the seventy third Amendment was passed by Parliament. The West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act 1992, provided for reservation of one third of the total seats in different tiers of Panchayati Raj system for women. The Panchayat elections (1993) in the state were held on the basis of reservation of seats for women and the women now constitute nearly 36 percent of the total members in the Panchayat bodies. However, till early eighties West Bengal's record in respect of Women's participation was not encouraging. Before the 1993 Panchayat elections which were held on the basis of reservation of seats for women there was less than one percent women members elected to different Panchayat bodies in the state. It was found that after the nomination of women members to the Gram Panchayats women's representation stood at least ten per cent, in Panchayat Samiti it was around five percent and in Zilla Parishad it was four percent. The Left Front Government in West Bengal, since eighties, has take steps for more participation of women in the Panchayati Raj System through reservation. Mention should be made, however, that there has not been any apparent case of the Left Front Government of West Bengal having been discriminatory against women in its political activity. But it also can not claim that it has been singularly conscious about women. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) – the leader of the Left Front in West Bengal has never made gender an issue of politics while Class / Mass has always been the central guiding force of the Left Parties

including CPI(M). The women wing of CPI(M), Paschim Banga Ganatantrik Mohila Samity has always been raising voice against the exploitation of women. This, however, has not made the situation any better in emancipating women against injustices done to their position in the political scene, in terms of their contesting elections or getting elected.

It is to noted that the objective condition in rural West Bengal appears to be largely conducive to women participation in Panchayats through community convergence. The West Bengal Panchayati Raj Institutions as they stand, at present, are well ahead of their counterparts in many other India states due to the fact that Panchayats in West Bengal constituted under party-based democratic elections have had an history of uninterrupted regular Panchayat elections since 1977. The most recent Panchayat elections in 2003 have created even more gender balance because of the active policy of the ruling Left Front in terms of more women elected leaders in all the three tiers of Panchayati Raj System. The positive ambience set in the rural front has created a space for women's participation in politics. Panchayats in West Bengal are free from the clutches of the landed gentry and from upper caste dominance. The successful implementation of the land reform programme has brought about a change in the rural socio-economic structures. The relatively successful working of the pro-poor Panchayats have led to "the churning of the sub-merged humanity".⁽²⁾ Resultantly, social roots of political democracy has been widely extended in West Bengal's rural society ensuring free and fare participation of the depressed people such as Scheduled Castes, Tribes and Women at large way.

While largely accepting the impediments rooted both within and without which includes resistance to accept women as a considerable force ('Critical Mass') in the decision making process of rural local institutions, class interests, the duality that exists to take Panchayats as a people's organization or / and as an arm of the government etc., it can well be argued that the comparatively much better participation of the women, their growing maturity, the positive political ambience, honest political will of the state government, active and vigilant role of the women's organization, gradually withering away of the inertia of resistance at the local level etc. are some of the bright silver linings on the horizon in rural West Bengal as they create conditions conducive to women's participation in rural politics and politico-administrative decision making.

For over two decades, the state government has been pursuing the policy of democratic decentralization realizing that the power of the state be flown from democratically elected body to the democratically elected lower level democratic bodies. If decentralization is the end, Panchayats are the means to realize such ends. Many significant social changes have taken place while realizing the principle of democratic decentralization and one of such major social changes has been the empowerment of rural women. The participation of women in Panchayats tends to have dynamic effects on the social and political empowerment of women and has been seen to have positive effects on the general functioning and responsiveness of Panchayats to people's needs. The rural women leaders have emerged through this process, transforming their own lives and those of the society around them, and altering both social attitudes towards women and their aspiration. What is inspiring is the proliferation of young women Panchayat members from poor and socially disadvantaged back-grounds, who are increasingly more articulate and empowered, able to express the concern of women in public platforms, and conscious of the need to influence policy making. The potential for social change in such a process is enormous, and the effects are likely to be felt very markedly in the next generation.⁽³⁾

Research works on women in the rural political process in West Bengal and in addition, recent academic interest on women's issues have resulted in the publication of a large number of Books and published papers highlighting different aspects of women's political life. More specifically, studies on Women Panchayats in West Bengal so far undertaken have been of three varieties: (a) Women as elected members including office bearers at the village / Gram Panchayat, Block / Panchayat Samity level: (b) the position of women as office bearers in proportion to their representation at all the three tiers of Panchayat system and as members of the corresponding standing committees at District / Zilla Parishad / Block / Panchayat Samity levels and (c) Women as elected members and office bearers of all women Panchayats / Village Panchayats. Moreover, macro surveys and micro-surveys conducted by the state Institute of Panchayats and Rural Development need to be mentioned.⁽⁴⁾ The study conducted by the Development Dialogue covered four districts – Birbhum, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur and Murshidabad.⁽⁵⁾ It was indicated that women's participation was peripheral. The traditional outlook in the rural areas, lack of education and awareness and access to information are the primary reasons for the

continued tilt of the balance of power against women even after the reservation of one third of the seats for them in the Panchayats. Assetlessness and lack of personal income are some other important impediments to their empowerment. Except in few cases rural women leaders had no experience in public life.

The study undertaken by Joshi – Adhikari Institute of Social Studies⁽⁶⁾ to assess the impact of Women's empowerment revealed that the reactions from the general public tend to show that they have better sense of time management, better capability and greater understanding. The women leaders are playing their roles properly. The incidence of attendance of women in Panchayat Meetings and proposals initiated by them are high. The same had been the case with regard to women involvement in major programmes of the Panchayats such as DWCRA. The study also noticed marginalisation of women in some Panchayats not due to gender discrimination but rivalry among the political parties. Moreover, the study has convincingly brought out that the empowerment has created space for augmenting the mobilizing potential of women Panchayat functionaries. Such a situation has also brought about positive change of attitude in respect of women's role in society. The study concluded with a caution that the gains of empowerment are to a greater extent neutralized by the discouraging trends towards dowry, torture and violence against women and discrimination between male and female children.

In his study on women Panchayat Members as Heads of Offices Sri Dilip Ghosh has found a very disappointing status of women rural leaders. Investigation of the extent of participation of women Panchayat members as Heads of offices brought to light that the level of participation has been very low. They need to be motivated, trained and made fully aware of their rights, duties, powers and responsibilities. The elected women Panchayat leaders need to learn and accept new advocacy, leadership and decision making roles which are different from the traditional roles in order to be effective and efficient leaders. Without full and informal participation of women in politics, social and economic aspects, empowerment among them could be a difficult task. The National Perspective Plan for Women (1998-2000) examined all possible aspects relating to women's political participation and decision making and expressed concern about the insignificant role of women in the formal political decision making process. The policy of reservation of one third of all seats and posts of chairpersons for women in institutions of local governance ensures shared power and responsibility

between men and women in the governance of public affairs. The study concluded with the observation that women have made a strong dent in the rural power structure and they have taken it as an opportunity, not only to promote the interests of women, but also to work for the development of villages.

The study⁽⁷⁾ of one all women Gram Panchayat of Kultikari village of Sankrail Block in Midnapore district, undertaken by Jaytilak Guha Roy, revealed that despite their inexperience in the Panchayat works and constraints of socio-economic backwardness, the elected women of this first and foremost mahila (women) Panchayat of West Bengal has done appreciable work in literacy, poverty alleviation and development programmes during their tenure. It was further that women although poor, unlettered and inexperienced have contributed considerably in rural development. However, cases have been there where some women also worked under the shadow of their husbands. Where the elected women representatives were associated with the women organizations or any other local NGO, they performed better than those who have not been associated with such organizations.

Another study⁽⁸⁾ of all women Panchayat has been conducted. After the election in 1998 one more such Panchayat has been added and it is located in the same district of Midnapur. It has been observed under women leadership, the socio-economic scene has undergone a basic change. All the women leaders including women of schedule caste and scheduled tribe categories are alert, articulate, inquisitive and determined. They do not have any significant academic background, neither they have adequate political experience. The performance of the women led Panchayat was indeed appreciating. The IRDP loans were given to fifty three persons. The Panchayat has leased out ponds to mobilize resources. It has arranged all infrastructural facilities to start training-cum-production centres of readymade garments for the economic empowerment of the women.

The study⁽⁹⁾ conducted by the Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata, has identified that the women members are capable not only of identifying the problem areas in their locality but also of playing active role in pursuing the programme. The honour of the women panchayat members in the society has been augmented. They have become conscious of their legal rights. They are attaching more importance to the protection of the rights of women either in property related or in matrimonial cases. The problems identified by the women respondents include financial dependence on their male folk

who often exploit this weakness, lack of attitudinal change in all spheres of life and the like.

In their study on “Empowerment of Women through Panchayats in West Bengal: an Empirical study of the District of Burdwan, Professor Prabhat Datta and Smt. Panchali Sen, it has been observed that a large number of the women members who have been elected to the Gram Panchayats are neo-literate. Women found difficult to play their role as elected representatives they have the added difficulty of coming from poor families. Their role-awareness is weak and role perception is far from satisfactory level. At the social and political levels there are quite a few problems. There is a lack of political support. The meetings are held without notice or inconvenient hours. Women members found difficult to attend such meetings. The study further indicated that women members experienced some inhibiting factors at the individual level. However, at the environmental level the women do not face many of the difficulties particularly because of politicized Panchayats and strong women’s organizations backed by the particular political parties. Despite constraints, it has been observed that the upsurge of women’s power in Panchayati Raj structure in West Bengal is very much noticeable.

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Chapter – III

The Research Design

Research Gaps:

The existing literature, so far attempted in Chapters I and II on political participation of rural women in some important Indian states in general and West Bengal in particular, reveals some significant research gaps, although valuable contributions of scholars and researchers to this field can not be underestimated. Most of the studies have not had sufficient reference to the actual behaviour of women and the relevance of important social, economic and cultural variables to the participation and the decision making by women. Political participation of women and their attitude towards politics can properly be understood not from an analysis of their political activities and attitudes alone, but perhaps much more clearly from a through multidimensional analysis. Studies conducted so far have paid little attention to the problem of participatory conflict and that of personal influence. Exploring the factors and forces behind the participation of rural women in the electoral process of grass-roots level has not been attended considerably so far. Researches conducted so far have examined the impact of socio-economic attributes and individual attitudes and beliefs on political participation, but to what extent the individual's attitude and belief are shaped by socio-economic attributes have not been thoroughly explored. Moreover, there are only few studies on the political participation of women in West Bengal in general and district/block level studies in particular. To be precise, there is no micro-level study on the participation of women in Jalpaiguri and Cooch-behar districts situated in the northern part of West Bengal. The macro-myths and micro-realities have not been bridged so far these two districts are concerned.

Principal Objectives of the Study:

This present study is almost restricted to assess and explore the following objectives:-

- a) To understand the factor and forces behind the participation of women in Panchayats electoral process of the two districts such as Cooch-behar and Jalpaiguri of the state of West Bengal specially after the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act.

- b) To explore the impact of socio-economic variables and legal impetus on electoral participation and the impact of such variable on attitudinal variables on political participation;
- c) To explore the extent to which rural women participate in different spheres of political activities ranging from decision making to exercising the right to vote.
- d) To assess the perceptions of Women Panchayat members about the Panchayat system in general and about their role in particular in their respective tiers of Panchayat structure.
- e) To identify the problems posing challenges to play their role as elected members.
- f) To assess the impact of training of the women elected representatives at different tiers of Panchayat.
- g) To understand the changed status, if any, before and after their elections.
- h) To know the nature of role-performance of the elected women.
- i) To identify the factors that hinder the process of Women's political empowerment at grass-roots level.
- j) To understand the perception of rural women on women's empowerment.

Hypothesis of the Study:

In order to get hold of the issues and problems raised and for further examination through survey following hypotheses may be projected:-

- 1) Historically, women have been excluded from participation in politics and institutions of politics.
- 2) Political participation of women is very low and participation of women is rather passive, they are influenced by the male members of the family.
- 3) Political participation, political interest, political awareness and sense of political efficacy are positively associated with socio-economic variables like age, marital status, nature of family, higher caste status, a higher level of

educational and occupational status, a higher level of family income and with the membership of women's organizations.

- 4) Illiteracy, lack of awareness, domestic responsibility and economic dependence prevent women from participating in active politics.
- 5) The idea that seventy-Third Constitutional Amendment and other legal and administrative and arguments ensured the coming of women to the leadership and decision making positions does not always hold truth.
- 6) The reservation of seats for women in Panchayats have created a space for the formation of "Critical Mass".
- 7) In order to be gender-equal in decision making, women will have to be far more participatory in creating ideologies, structures and institutions.
- 8) Women need to link citizenship with legal rights, while demystifying patriarchal law and deconstructing gender-oppressive structures.
- 9) To ensure Women's participation in rural politics and institutions male members with a human face are coming forward.
- 10) Women although poor, unlettered in some cases and inexperienced have contributed considerably in rural development activities.

Methodology of the Study :

The study is definitely having a strong empirical bias. The scientific method has been followed to design the whole content of the study. Constraints of doing scientific social research has been strictly adhered to. Both the explanatory variables having dependent and independent quality and extraneous variables having controlled and uncontrolled nature have been given due consideration for analyzing the problem of the study. Different testing methods for identifying different sets of relationship have also been executed. The study is both explanatory and experimental. Data have been collected so far through schedules and a thorough scrutiny of the so far assembled data has been made. Data have been classified properly through the process of establishment of categories. Required tools and methodologies have been chosen and applied depending on the types and nature of work. Some tools and methods have also been

needed to devise and develop to cater to the situational development and design as presented as under :-

Items	Methods / Tools
Selection of local	Pre-Review Assessment through Pilot Survey, Social Mapping, Focused Respondents.
Study of secondary sources of information	Specimen Data collected through pilot survey, Extensive Library Research on the available literature of the field of study.
Selection of Respondents	Stratified random sampling, Semi-structured and structured schedule
Analytical Aspect	Case-studies, different statistical methods and tools as applicable.

The study may have following constraints / limitations:-

1. Since the population of the study has been confined to elected women representatives of three tier Panchayats of two Districts, viz., Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar, the generalization of the findings shall be limited to the area / region specific only.
2. The finding of the study are based on the qualitative and quantifiable data collected from the study area. Hence the objectivity of this study is limited to the abilities of the respondents (elected Women Panchayats at different tiers of Panchayat system of the two Districts) to express and also to their honesty in furnishing the required information.
3. Due to lack of data qualitative analysis could not always be associated with the quantitative measurements.

The Field Survey

The study was initiated during the month of April, 2005 soon after the receipt of the first installment of the project Grant from the Department of Women and Child Development, New Delhi. Since the time coverage of the study is only ten months, the village Panchayats under two Panchayat Samities each of two Districts have been

brought under survey. The Panchayat Samities / Blocks so identified are Mathabhanga II and Cooch Behar II of the District of Cooch behar and Alipruduar II and Maynaguri of the District of jalpaiguri. The village (Gram) Panchayats surveyed in details may be presented as under :-

Cooch Behar District

Name of the block / Panchayat Samity	Name of the Village Panchayats surveyed	Number of Respondents (Elected Women Panchayats)
Mathabhanga II	Fulbari Gram Panchayat	06
Do	Barasolmari	06
Do	Unisbisha	07
Do	Latapota	06
Do	Ghoksadanga	05
Do	Nishiganj I	05
Do	Nishiganj II	04
Do	Premerdanga	05
Do	Raidanga	06
Do	Angarkata – Paradubi	06
Cooch Behar-II	Patla Khawa	06
Do	Bara-rangrash	04
Do	Marich-bari Khotta	07
Do	Ambari	05
Do	Gopalpur	06
Do	Pundibari	07
Do	Madhupur	06
Do	Takagach – Rajarhat	06
Do	Khagrabari	08
Do	Chakchaka	08
Do	Baneswar	06
Do	Khapaidanga	06

Jalpaiguri District

Name of the block / Panchayat Samity	Name of the Village Panchayats surveyed	Number of Respondents (Elected Women Panchayats)
Alipurduar II	Turturi	04
Do	Samuktala	06
Do	Mahakalguri	06
Do	Parokata	06
Do	Majherdabri	07
Do	Tatpara I	04
Do	Tatpara II	04
Do	Bhatibari	06
Do	Chapererpar I	05
Do	Chapererpar II	05
Do	Kohinoor	03
Maynaguri	Saptibari I	05
Do	Saptibari II	04
Do	Barnesh	06
Do	Maynaguri	08
Do	Churabhandar	07
Do	Madhabdanga I	04
Do	Madhabdanga II	04
Do	Padamati I	05
Do	Padamati II	04
Do	Dharmapur	05
Do	Ramshai	06
Do	Amguri	07
Do	Domohani I	04
Do	Domohani II	05
Do	Khagrabari I	05
Do	Khagrabari II	04

In addition to above, all elected women members of Zilla Parishads of both the Districts and women members of some randomly selected Panchayat Samities of both the Districts have been brought under survey. The selected Panchayat Samities / Blocks are as under :-

Cooch-behar District

Name of the Panchayat Samities	Number of Respondents (Elected Members to Panchayat Samities)
Mekhliganj	06
Haldibari	05
Mathabhanga I	09
Mathabhanga II	09
Sitalkuchi	08
Sitai	05
Cooch-behar I	15
Cooch-behar II	13
Dinhata-I	13
Dinhata-II	11
Tufanganj-I	11
Tufanganj-II	10

Jalpaiguri District

Name of the Panchayat Samities	Number of Respondents (Elected Members to Panchayat Samities)
Alipurduar-I	10
Alipurduar-II	10
Falakata	12
Kalchini	10
Kumargram	09
Madarihat – Birpara	09
Jalpaiguri Sadar	13
Dhupguri	17
Mal	11
Maynaguri	13
Metaili	05
Rajganj	11
Nagrakata	05

Data, observation, information so collected have been processed and analysed. Concerned libraries of Kolkata, North Bengal University, Centre for Women Studies both at Jadavpur, Kolkata and University of North Bengal and Indian Institute of Public Administration, New Delhi, State Institute of Panchayat and Rural Development, Kalyani have been consulted with. Journals / Research Materials of the field have been studied thoroughly. Admittedly, the Report has been attempted after an understanding of the issues both operationally and conceptually.

Chapter – IV

The Field of Research

The two districts under study, that is Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri, belong to northern region of the State of West Bengal. Comprising six districts of the state of West Bengal this region is popularly called North Bengal. Within North Bengal districts three sub-regions can be identified: (a) The districts of Malda and Dakshin Dinajpur; (b) The districts of Darjeeling, Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri and (c) The “Chicken neck” of the district of North Dinajpur. These three agro-ecological zones also have cultural associations. These northern districts of the state of West Bengal had reasonably good communication links with the rest of the state through erstwhile East Bengal (Now in Bangladesh). But after partition in 1947, these links were severed which disrupted both road and rail lines resulting inaccessibility. However, rail roads and road systems were again interlinked with the rest of the state after construction of Farakka Bridge. Thus the development history of North Bengal region has a pre-Farakka and post-Farakka dimensions. Another distinguishing feature to note that the proportions of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe population are higher in the districts of North Bengal region, with Scheduled Caste segment concentrated in Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri districts and the tribal population in Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling districts.

The six districts of North Bengal cover an area of 21,368 sq.km and has a combined population of nearly 1.3 crore or around 24 percent of the area of West Bengal with nearly 18 percent of the total population of the state. The female population of the North Bengal districts amounts to nearly 49 percent of the total population. Despite the region being subject to less population pressure than South Bengal and having a more equitable gender ratio, social statistics for North Bengal are rather poor. The districts of North Bengal have a definite rural bias. Nearly 14 percent of the population of the region live in urban areas. Around 27 percent of the North Bengal population is Muslim. Another 42 percent comprise other socially depressed segments of which 31 percent scheduled caste and 10 percent Scheduled Tribe population. Thus nearly seventy percent of the regional population overall belong to underprivileged communities.

The presence of depressed communities in the regional population has precipitated considerable social and gender backwardness in North Bengal. The entire region of North Bengal is identifiably the most asset-poor region of the state and has been designated as most backward in respect of low levels of female literacy, low contraceptive prevalence and high fertility, and low child immunisation rates and high infant mortality rates. (P.N. Mari Bhat and Francis Xavier, Findings of National Family Health survey, Economic and Political Weekly; 34 [42 and 43] : 3008 – 3032 [1999]). The region is not drought prone, but suffers from floods and soil erosion. The region is characterised by higher incidence of land less labour as compared to landowning cultivators. (Report on comparative backwardness of North Bengal Region, Institute of Applied Manpower Research, New Delhi, Nov. 2002). With each of these social indicators directly or indirectly reflecting disadvantages for women, it appears quite evident that women in North Bengal districts have to suffer for poverty and other social and gender backwardness. Thus women's situations in North Bengal have been a major theme of research studies inviting attention of scholars of multi-dimensional fields.

The District of Cooch Behar

Cooch Behar, one of eighteen districts of West Bengal, until January, 1950, was a feudatory state. The accession of Cooch Behar to India was made complete through a merger agreement which was signed on September 12, 1949 between the Maharaja of Cooch Behar and the representative of the Government of India. During 1947-49 Cooch Behar was administered through a Chief Commissioner under the Government of India and was placed in Part-C of the First schedule of the original Constitution of India (Amendment of the First and Fourth schedule, source, District Recorder, Cooch Behar). Cooch Behar became one of the Districts of West Bengal through an Act known as "Assimilation of state laws" with effect from January 1, 1950 (Constitution Amendment Act, 1950, Amendment to the First Schedule.) In view of its distinctive cultural heritage and administrative system inherited from Maharajas, the district presents a case of *suigeneris*.

The district of Cooch Behar is inhabited by a population of nearly 22 lakh among them nearly 92 percent live in rural areas. Another salient feature of the District is that the scheduled caste population outnumbers the general caste population. Cooch Behar town is the administrative head quarters of the district of Cooch Behar. The district consists of five sub-divisions, eleven police stations, twelve Blocks – each of

which has one Panchayat Samity, One Zilla Parishad and 128 Gram Panchayats. The district has six towns having municipal status. The annual population growth rate during 1991-2001 census was 1.4 percent. For Cooch Behar, the Health Index is 0.50, Income Index 0.41, Education Index is 0.65, altogether Human Development Index value is 0.52. Compared to other seventeen district of the State, Cooch Behar ranks 11 in Human Development Indices Value, while in terms of Gender Development Indices by districts, the district of Cooch Behar ranks 13. (West Bengal Human Development Report, Development and Planning Department, Government of West Bengal, May, 2004)

Two Blocks / Panchayat Samities of the district of Cooch Behar have been selected for the survey work. These are Cooch Behar II Panchayat Samiti and Mathabhanga – II Panchayat Samiti. The Cooch Behar – II and Mahabhanga – II Panchayat Samities do have 13 and 10 Gram Panchayats respectively. All the women members of Gram Panchayats under the selected Panchayat Samities along with Zilla Parishad have been extensively surveyed for the purpose of the study. All the Women elected leaders of these three tiers of Panchayat have been interviewed. The details of representation at different tiers Panchayati Raj structure of the district may be shown in the following tables :

Cooch Behar District

Items	Zilla Parishad	Panchayat Samiti	Gram Panchayat
Total Members	27	339	1880
Scheduled Caste Members	14	182	1030
Scheduled Tribe Members	00	01	04
Women Members	09	118	667
Scheduled Caste Women Members	05	66	383
Scheduled Tribe Women Members	00	01	02

Category of Panchayat Samiti Members
District – Cooch Behar

Name of the Panchayat Samiti	Schedule Caste			Schedule Tribe			General			Men	Women	Total
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total			
Cooch Behar – I	12	07	19	00	00	00	16	08	24	28	15	43
*Cooch Behar – II	11	06	17	00	00	00	14	07	21	25	13	38
Dinhata – I	08	06	14	00	00	00	18	08	26	26	14	40
Dinhata – II	09	05	14	00	00	00	11	06	17	20	11	31
Sitai	06	04	10	00	00	00	03	01	04	09	05	14
Tufanganj – I	10	07	17	00	00	00	12	04	16	22	11	33
Tufanganj – II	11	05	16	00	01	01	07	04	11	18	10	28
Mekhliganj	10	05	15	00	00	00	03	02	05	13	07	20
Haldibari	05	03	08	00	00	00	03	02	05	08	05	13
Mathabhanga – I	13	07	20	00	00	00	05	03	08	18	10	28
*Mathabhanga – II	12	06	18	00	00	00	06	03	09	18	09	27
Sitalkuchi	09	05	14	00	00	00	07	03	10	16	08	24
Total	116	66	182	00	01	01	105	51	156	221	118	339

** Surveyed Panchayat Samiti*

Cooch Behar District

Sl. No.	Name of the Panchayat Samiti	No. of Seats in Zilla Parishad	No. of Seats in Panchayat Samiti	No. of Gram Panchayats in Panchayat Samiti	No. of seats in Gram Panchayats
01.	Cooch Behar – I	03	43	15	228
02.	*Cooch Behar – II	03	38	13	237
03.	Dinhata – I	03	40	16	204
04.	Dinhata – II	03	31	12	184
05.	Sitai	01	14	05	81
06.	Tufanganj – I	03	33	14	184
07.	Tufanganj – II	02	28	11	141
08.	Mekhliganj	02	20	08	102
09.	Haldibari	01	13	06	66
10.	Mathabhanga – I	02	28	10	148
11.	*Mathabhanga – II	02	27	10	160
12.	Sitalkuchi	02	24	08	144
	Total	27	339	128	1879

** Surveyed Panchayat Samiti*

Cooch Behar District
Cooch Behar Sub-Division

Sl. No.	Name of the Panchayat Samiti	No. of Seats in Zilla Parishad	No. of Seats in Panchayat Samiti	No. of Gram Panchayats in Panchayat Samiti	No. of seats in Gram Panchayats
01.	Cooch Behar – I	03	43	15	228
02.	Cooch Behar – II	03	38	13	237
	Total	06	81	28	465

Cooch Behar – I Panchayat Samiti

Sl. No.	Name of the Gram Panchayat	No. of Constituencies	No. of Seats
01.	Guriahati – I	14	15
02.	Guriahati – II	13	15
03.	Dawaguri	14	16
04.	Ghugumari	17	18
05.	Suktabari	13	14
06.	Dewanhat	12	16
07.	Jiranpur	10	12
08.	Parisala	14	15
09.	Moamari	11	11
10.	Patchhara	12	14
11.	Chilkirhat	15	15
12.	Falimari	16	17
13.	Putimari-Fuleswari	16	17
14.	Chandamari	15	15
15.	Haribharga	16	18
	Total	208	228

Cooch Behar – II Panchayat Samiti**

Sl. No.	Name of the Gram Panchayat	No. of Constituencies	No. of Seats
01.	Patlakhawa	18	18
02.	Bararangrash	12	13
03.	Marichbari-Kholta	21	22
04.	Ambari	12	14
05.	Gopalpur	16	18
06.	Dhangdringuri	17	17
07.	Pundibari	19	21
08.	Madhupur	18	18
09.	Takagachh-Rajarhat	17	18
10.	Khagrabari	21	23
11.	Chakchaka	19	23
12.	Baneswar	15	16
13.	Khapaidanga	15	16
	Total	220	237

** *Surveyed Panchayat Samiti and Gram Panchayats*

Cooch Behar District

Dinhata Sub-division

Sl. No.	Name of the Panchayat Samiti	No. of Seats in Zilla Parishad	No. of Seats in Panchayat Samiti	No. of Gram Panchayats in Panchayat Samiti	No. of seats in Gram Panchayats
01.	Dinhata – I	03	40	16	204
02.	Dinhata – II	03	31	12	184
03.	Sitai	01	14	05	81
	Total	07	85	33	469

Dinhata – I Panchayat Samiti

Sl. No.	Name of the Gram Panchayat	No. of Constituencies	No. of Seats
01.	Gosarimari – I	15	15
02.	Gosarimari – II	12	12
03.	Matalhat	16	16
04.	Bhataguri – I	10	10
05.	Bhataguri – II	13	13
06.	Putimari – I	14	14
07.	Putimari – II	07	07
08.	Patla	20	20
09.	Barasoulmari	13	13
10.	Okrabari	21	21
11.	Gitaldaha – I	10	10
12.	Gitaldaha – II	10	10
13.	Bara Atiabari – I	11	11
14.	Bara Atiabari – II	11	11
15.	Dinhata Gram – I	08	08
16.	Dinhata Gram – II	13	13
	Total	204	204

Dinhata – II Panchayat Samiti

Sl. No.	Name of the Gram Panchayat	No. of Constituencies	No. of Seats
01.	Burirhat – I	08	10
02.	Burirhat – II	12	13
03.	Nazirhat – I	10	12
04.	Nazirhat – II	11	14
05.	Barasakdal	15	18
06.	Bamanhat – I	12	13
07.	Bamanhat – II	08	11
08.	Sahebganj	14	17
09.	Chowdhuryhat	18	21
10.	Sukarurkuthi	14	17
11.	Gebrachara- Nayarhat	20	22
12.	Kishmat Dasgram	15	16
	Total	157	184

Sitai Panchayat Samiti

Sl. No.	Name of the Gram Panchayat	No. of Constituencies	No. of Seats
01.	Sitai – I	14	14
02.	Sitai – II	11	12
03.	Chamta	18	20
04.	Adabari	14	17
05.	Brahmattar Chatra	14	18
	Total	157	184

Cooch Behar District
Tufanganj Sub-division

Sl. No.	Name of the Panchayat Samiti	No. of Seats in Zilla Parishad	No. of Seats in Panchayat Samiti	No. of Gram Panchayats in Panchayat Samiti	No. of seats in Gram Panchayats
01.	Tufanganj – I	03	33	14	184
02.	Tufanganj – II	02	28	11	141
	Total	05	61	25	325

Tufanganj – I Panchayat Samiti

Sl. No.	Name of the Gram Panchayat	No. of Constituencies	No. of Seats
01.	Natabari – I	12	13
02.	Natabari – II	09	10
03.	Chilakhana – I	13	14
04.	Chilakhana – II	08	09
05.	Maruganj	16	17
06.	Balarampur – I	14	15
07.	Balarampur – II	07	10
08.	Deocharai	18	20
09.	Balabhut	11	12
10.	Nakkatigachh	19	22
11.	Andarar Fulbari – I	06	08
12.	Andarar Fulbari – II	08	09
13.	Dhalpal – I	10	12
14.	Dhalpal – II	10	13
	Total	161	184

Tufanganj – II Panchayat Samiti

Sl. No.	Name of the Gram Panchayat	No. of Constituencies	No. of Seats
01.	Salbari – I	13	14
02.	Salbari – II	08	10
03.	Mahishkuchi – I	10	10
04.	Mahishkuchi – II	10	11
05.	Rampur – I	11	14
06.	Rampur – II	12	15
07.	Falimari	08	09
08.	Bhanu Kumari – I	15	17
09.	Bhanu Kumari – II	13	14
10.	Barakodali - I	13	14
11.	Barakodali - II	11	13
	Total	124	141

Cooch Behar District

Mekhliganj Sub-division

Sl. No.	Name of the Panchayat Samiti	No. of Seats in Zilla Parishad	No. of Seats in Panchayat Samiti	No. of Gram Panchayats in Panchayat Samiti	No. of seats in Gram Panchayats
01.	Mekhliganj	02	20	08	102
02.	Haldibari	01	13	06	66
	Total	03	33	14	168

Mekhliganj Panchayat Samiti

Sl. No.	Name of the Gram Panchayat	No. of Constituencies	No. of Seats
01.	Jamaldaha	15	15
02.	Uchhalpukuri	18	18
03.	Ranirhat	10	11
04.	Changrabandha	14	16
05.	Bhtbari	07	09
06.	Niztaraf	08	08
07.	Bagdokra Fulkadabri	09	10
08.	Kuchlibari	14	15
	Total	95	102

Haldibari Panchayat Samiti

Sl. No.	Name of the Gram Panchayat	No. of Constituencies	No. of Seats
01.	Uttar Bara – Haldibari	14	14
02.	Baxigunj	10	12
03.	Dakshin Bara Haldibari	07	07
04.	Dewangunj	11	11
05.	Hemkumari (Hemkumari)	12	12
06.	Per Mekhliganj	09	10
	Total	63	66

Cooch Behar District

Mathabhanga Sub-division

Sl. No.	Name of the Panchayat Samiti	No. of Seats in Zilla Parishad	No. of Seats in Panchayat Samiti	No. of Gram Panchayats in Panchayat Samiti	No. of seats in Gram Panchayats
01.	Mathabhanga – I	02	28	10	148
02.	Mathabhanga – II	02	27	10	160
03.	Sitalkuchi	02	24	08	144
	Total	06	79	28	452

Mathabhanga – I Panchayat Samiti

Sl. No.	Name of the Gram Panchayat	No. of Constituencies	No. of Seats
01.	Kedarhat	14	15
02.	Gopalpur	17	18
03.	Nayarhat	17	17
04.	Bairajirhat	15	15
05.	Shikarpur	15	16
06.	Kurshamari	12	12
07.	Jorepatki	13	15
08.	Hazrahat – I	11	13
09.	Hazrahat – II	09	11
10.	Pachagarh	14	16
	Total	137	148

Mathabhanga – II Panchayat Samiti*

Sl. No.	Name of the Panchayat Samiti	No. of Constituencies	No. of Seats
01.	Fulbari	15	18
02.	Barasolmari	15	18
03.	Unishbisha	17	20
04.	Latapota	15	17
05.	Ghoksadanga	10	13
06.	Nishiganj – I	11	13
07.	Nishiganj – II	10	11
08.	Premerdanga	13	15
09.	Ruidanga	15	18
10.	Angarkata – Paradubi	14	17
	Total	135	160

** Surveyed Panchayat Samiti and Gram Panchayats*

Sitalkuchi Panchayat Samiti

Sl. No.	Name of the Gram Panchayat	No. of Constituencies	No. of Seats
01.	Khalishamari	18	18
02.	Borokaimari	15	16
03.	Bhawerthana	16	17
04.	Chhotosalbari	19	20
05.	Gosairhat	15	17
06.	Lalbazar	18	18
07.	Golenowhati	14	15
08.	Sitalkuchi	22	23
	Total	137	144

The District of Jalpaiguri

Once a part of the feudatory state Cooch Behar, the district of Jalpaiguri was formally constituted in 1869. The population of the district consisted overwhelmingly of Hinduized and Islamised autochthons and immigrant tribals like Oraons, Mundas and Santals. They constituted the basic producers, while Bengali Hindus and Muslims immigrating from East Bengal dominated services and professions and Maswaris, wholesale and retail trade. Thus the society in Jalpaiguri has been a plural society by considerable socio-cultural differentiations (Rajit Dasgupta, Society, Economy and Politics of Jalpaiguri (1869-1947), Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1990). The district consisted of two well defined tracts which differed in physical features, history administrative arrangement, types of economic activities and production system. One tract had been the riverine plains, the other has been the Duars. The Duars tract is famous for tea plantation since late nineteenth century. A huge number of migrants from the neighbouring states (mostly tribes) has settled in the Duars region as tea plantation workers.

The district of Jalpaiguri is, at present, inhabited by a population of 3403204 among them nearly 82 percent live in rural areas. One of the principal features of the district is that a large majority of scheduled castes and scheduled tribe people live here. Taking scheduled caste and scheduled tribe population in to account, the district is

having nearly fifty percent of its population. The district of Jalpaiguri consists of six sub-divisions, fourteen Police Stations, thirteen Blocks, each of which has one Panchayat Samiti, one Zilla Parishad and one hundred and thirty six Gram Panchayats. The district has nine towns having Municipal status. The annual population growth rate during 1991-2001 Census periods was 2.2 percent. For Jalpaiguri, the Health Index is 0.61, Income Index is 0.38, Education Index is 0.60. Taking all the indices into consideration Human Development Index value for Jalpaiguri is 0.53. While comparing with the values of Human Development Index of the rest of the districts of the state, Jalpaiguri ranks tenth and on the same comparison of values of Gender Development Index, Jalpaiguri ranks eleventh. (West Bengal Human Development Report, Ddevelopment and Planning Development, Government of West Bengal, May, 2004)

Two Block's / Panchayat Samities of the district of Jalpaiguri have been selected for survey work. These are Alipurduar – II and Moynaguri Panchayat Samities. These two Panchayat Samities do have 14 and 11 Gram Panchayat respectively. All the elected women leaders of these Panchayats, Panchayat Samities and Zilla Parishad have been extensively interviewed with questionnaires for the purpose of the study. The details of representation at different tiers of Panchayat Raj structure of the district may be shown in the following tables :

Jalpaiguri District

Items	Zilla Parishad	Panchayat Samiti	Gram Panchayat
Total Members	32	388	2342
Scheduled Caste Members	13	160	606
Scheduled Tribe Members	07	83	320
Women Members	11	136	836
Scheduled Caste Women Members	05	55	350
Scheduled Tribe Women Members	02	31	189

Category of Panchayat Samiti Members
District – Jalpaiguri

Name of the Panchayat Samiti	Schedule Caste			Schedule Tribe			General			Men	Women	Total
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total			
Jalpaiguri	17	07	24	01	02	03	07	04	11	25	13	38
Dhupguri	16	08	24	06	03	09	12	06	18	34	17	51
Mal	06	03	09	07	04	11	07	04	11	20	11	31
Matiali	02	00	02	03	03	06	03	02	05	08	05	13
*Maynaguri	17	09	26	00	00	00	08	04	12	25	13	38
Nagrakata	01	01	02	04	02	06	03	02	05	08	05	13
Raiganj	10	07	17	02	00	02	08	04	12	20	11	31
Alipurduar – I	08	06	14	04	01	05	06	03	09	18	10	28
*Alipurduar – II	09	03	12	03	03	06	06	04	10	18	10	28
Falakata	07	06	13	05	01	06	10	05	15	22	12	34
Kalchini	03	01	04	07	05	12	10	05	15	20	11	31
Kumargram	06	03	09	05	03	08	06	03	09	17	09	26
Madarihat - Birpara	03	01	04	05	04	09	09	04	13	17	09	26
Total	105	55	160	52	31	83	95	50	145	252	136	388

** Surveyed Panchayat Samities*

Jalpaguri District

Sl. No.	Name of the Panchayat Samiti	No. of Seats in Zilla Parishad	No. of Seats in Panchayat Samiti	No. of Gram Panchayats in Panchayat Samiti	No. of seats in Gram Panchayats
01.	Jalpaiguri	03	38	14	221
02.	Dhupguri	03	51	18	320
03.	Mal	03	31	12	207
04.	Matiali	01	13	05	83
05.	*Maynaguri	03	38	16	232
06.	Nagrakata	02	13	05	90
07.	Raiganj	03	31	12	189
08.	Alipurduar – I	02	28	11	150
09.	*Alipurduar – II	02	28	11	155
10.	Falakata	03	34	12	199
11.	Kalchini	03	31	11	204
12.	Kumargram	02	26	11	142
13.	Madarihat - Birpara	02	26	10	148
	Total	32	388	148	2340

** Surveyed Panchayat Samities*

Jalpaiguri District
Jalpaiguri Sadar Sub-Division

Sl. No.	Name of the Panchayat Samiti	No. of Seats in Zilla Parishad	No. of Seats in Panchayat Samiti	No. of Gram Panchayats in Panchayat Samiti	No. of seats in Gram Panchayats
01.	Jalpaiguri Sadar	03	38	14	221
02.	Dhupguri	03	51	18	320
03.	Mal	03	31	12	207
04.	Maynaguri	03	38	16	232
05.	Matiali	01	13	05	83
06.	Raiganj	03	31	12	189
07.	Nagrakata	02	13	05	90
	Total	18	215	82	1342

Jalpaiguri Sadar Panchayat Samati

Sl. No.	Name of the Gram Panchayat	No. of Constituencies	No. of Seats
01.	Barapatia-Nutanbas	08	12
02.	Patkata	15	15
03.	Paharpur	22	25
04.	Belakoba (Belakoba)	21	21
05.	Arabinda	15	15
06.	Kharia	20	21
07.	Garalbari	13	15
08.	Mandalghat	15	15
09.	Boalmari-Nandanpur	12	14
10.	Nagar Barubari	11	13
11.	Kharija Barubari – I	10	11
12.	Kharija Barubari – II	08	10
13.	Dakshin Barubari	14	15
14.	Bahadur	17	19
	Total	201	221

Dhupguri Panchayat Samati

Sl. No.	Name of the Gram Panchayat	No. of Constituencies	No. of Seats
01.	Sakoajhara – I	24	26
02.	Sakoajhara – II	12	14
03.	Jharaltagram – I	16	17
04.	Jharaltagram – II	08	10
05.	Gadheyarkuthi	16	17
06.	Magurmari – I	13	16
07.	Magurmari – II	11	13
08.	Dhupguri – I	14	16
09.	Dhupguri – II	16	18
10.	Barogharia	21	21
11.	Gadong – I	12	15
12.	Gadong – II	14	15
13.	Banarhat – I	30	30
14.	Banarhat – II	17	20
15.	Salbari – I	13	13
16.	Salbari – II	10	11
17.	Chamurchi	22	25
18.	Binnaguri	19	23
	Total	288	320

Mal Panchayat Samati

Sl. No.	Name of the Gram Panchayat	No. of Constituencies	No. of Seats
01.	Odlabari	29	29
02.	Tesimla	08	09
03.	Kumlai	17	17
04.	Changmari	12	12
05.	Rajadanga	21	22
06.	Kiranti	16	16
07.	Lataguri	10	11
08.	Moulari	10	11
09.	Chapadanga	09	09
10.	Bajrakote	21	21
11.	Damdin	25	25
12.	Rangamatee	25	25
	Total	203	207

Maynaguri Panchayat Samati**

Sl. No.	Name of the Gram Panchayat	No. of Constituencies	No. of Seats
01.	Saptibari – I	11	13
02.	Saptibari – II	09	11
03.	Barnesh	16	17
04.	Maynaguri	20	23
05.	Churabhandar	18	20
06.	Madhabdanga – I	10	12
07.	Madhabdanga – II	11	12
08.	Padamati – I	12	13
09.	Padamati – II	08	11
10.	Dharmapur	11	13
11.	Ramshai	18	18
12.	Amguri	18	20
13.	Domohani – I	10	11
14.	Domohani – II	11	14
15.	Khagrabari – I	12	13
16.	Khagrabari – II	08	11
	Total	203	232

** *Surveyed Panchayat Samiti and Gram Panchayats*

Matiali Panchayat Samati

Sl. No.	Name of the Gram Panchayat	No. of Constituencies	No. of Seats
01.	Bidhannagar	13	13
02.	Matiali Batabari – I	18	20
03.	Matiali Batabari – II	12	13
04.	Indong Matiali	18	20
05.	Matialihat	17	17
	Total	78	83

Rajganj Panchayat Samati

Sl. No.	Name of the Gram Panchayat	No. of Constituencies	No. of Seats
01.	Dabgram – I	06	07
02.	Dabgram – II	15	23
03.	Fulbari – I	12	17
04.	Fulbari – II	12	15
05.	Sannyashikata	10	11
06.	Majhiali	11	12
07.	Binnaguri	24	24
08.	Martadari	12	13
09.	Shikarpur	20	20
10.	Panikouri	17	17
11.	Sukhari	15	15
12.	Kukurjan	13	15
	Total	167	189

Nagrakata Panchayat Samati

Sl. No.	Name of the Gram Panchayat	No. of Constituencies	No. of Seats
01.	Angrabhasa – I	06	07
02.	Angrabhasa – II	12	12
03.	Sulka para	18	20
04.	Champaguri	25	25
05.	Looksan	24	26
	Total	85	90

Jalpaiguri District
Alipurduar Sub-division

Sl. No.	Name of the Panchayat Samiti	No. of Seats in Zilla Parishad	No. of Seats in Panchayat Samiti	No. of Gram Panchayats in Panchayat Samiti	No. of seats in Gram Panchayats
01.	Alipurduar – I	02	28	11	150
02.	Alipurduar – II	02	28	11	155
03.	Falakata	03	34	12	199
04.	Kalchini	03	31	11	204
05.	Kummargram	02	26	11	142
06.	Madarihat-Birpara	02	26	10	148
	Total	14	173	66	998

Alipurduar – I Panchayat Samati

Sl. No.	Name of the Gram Panchayat	No. of Constituencies	No. of Seats
01.	Topshikatha	13	13
02.	Parapar	13	15
03.	Banchukamari	13	15
04.	Vivekananda – I	13	14
05.	Vivekananda – II	15	16
06.	Salkumar – I	09	11
07.	Salkumar – II	09	13
08.	Purba-Kanthalbari	14	16
09.	Patlakhawa	07	09
10.	Chakowakhati	16	20
11.	Mathura	07	08
	Total	129	150

Alipurduar – II Panchayat Samati**

Sl. No.	Name of the Panchayat Samiti	No. of Constituencies	No. of Seats
01.	Turturi	11	11
02.	Samuktala	15	16
03.	Mahakalguri	16	18
04.	Parokata	14	16
05.	Majhardabri	21	21
06.	Tatpara –I	10	11
07.	Tatpara –II	10	11
08.	Bhatibari	17	17
09.	Chapararpar – I	12	14
10.	Chapararpar – II	11	13
11.	Kohinoor	05	07
	Total	142	155

** *Surveyed Panchayat Samiti and Gram Panchayats*

Falakata Panchayat Samati

Sl. No.	Name of the Panchayat Samiti	No. of Constituencies	No. of Seats
01.	Guabar Nagar	20	22
02.	Deogaon	18	19
03.	Jateswar – I	15	16
04.	Jateswar – II	14	16
05.	Salkumar	17	18
06.	Moiradanga	16	19
07.	Falakata – I	14	16
08.	Falakata – II	20	24
09.	Parangarpar	09	11
10.	Dhanirampur – I	13	14
11.	Dhanirampur – II	13	15
12.	Dalligaon	09	09
	Total	178	199

Kalchini Panchayat Samati

Sl. No.	Name of the Gram Panchayat	No. of Constituencies	No. of Seats
01.	Jaigaon – I	13	16
02.	Jaigaon – II	18	26
03.	Satali	13	16
04.	Mendabari	11	11
05.	Latabari	19	21
06.	Dalsingpara	13	13
07.	Malangi	25	25
08.	Chuapara	17	19
09.	Kalchini	25	25
10.	Rajabhatkhawa	10	10
11.	Garopara	22	22
	Total	186	204

Kumar Gram Panchayat Samati

Sl. No.	Name of the Gram Panchayat	No. of Constituencies	No. of Seats
01.	Turturi Khanda	12	12
02.	Kumargram	17	17
03.	Chengmari	10	10
04.	Bhalka Barobisha – I	13	16
05.	Bhalka Barobisha – II	10	10
06.	Khairdanga – I	11	11
07.	Khairdanga – II	09	10
08.	Kamakshyaguri – II	11	13
09.	Kamakshyaguri – II	12	16
10.	Rydak	11	12
11.	Newlands Kumargram Sankosh	14	15
	Total	130	142

Madarihat-Birpara Panchayat Samati

Sl. No.	Name of the Gram Panchayat	No. of Constituencies	No. of Seats
01.	Birpara – I	23	23
02.	Birpara – II	10	11
03.	Rajgali Bazna	16	17
04.	Khoirbari	13	14
05.	Madarihat	17	17
06.	Totopara Ballalguri	05	05
07.	Bandapani	09	10
08.	Sishujhumra	17	20
09.	Larkapara	14	15
10.	Hartapara	13	16
	Total	137	148

A Comparative view of the elected members of different categories of the two districts along with West Bengal may be presented.

West Bengal

(Panchayat at a Glance)

Elected Members (1998)

Sl. No.	Category (Stages of Panchayats)	Nos.	Total	Schedule Caste	Schedule Tribe	Women
01.	Gram Panchayats	3330	50345	14131 (28.06)	3755 (7.45)	17907 (35.56)
02.	Panchayat Samitis	341	8579	2410 (28.09)	613 (7.14)	3015 (35.14)
03.	Zilla Parishads	17	723	279 (38.58)	68 (9.40)	246 (34.02)

Cooch Behar / Jalpaiguri

Total Number of members in PRIs

District	Zilla Parishad	Panchayat Samiti	Gram Panchayat
Cooch Behar	27	339	1880
Jalpaiguri	32	388	2342

Number of Scheduled Caste members in PRIs

District	Zilla Parishad	Panchayat Samiti	Gram Panchayat
Cooch Behar	14	182	1030
Jalpaiguri	13	160	606

Number of Scheduled Tribe members in PRIs

District	Zilla Parishad	Panchayat Samiti	Gram Panchayat
Cooch Behar	00	01	04
Jalpaiguri	07	83	320

Number of Women members in PRIs

District	Zilla Parishad	Panchayat Samiti	Gram Panchayat
Cooch Behar	09	118	667
Jalpaiguri	11	136	836

Category of Zilla Parishad Members (Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri Zilla Parishad)

Name of the Zilla Parishad	Schedule Caste			Schedule Tribe			General			Men	Women	Total
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total			
Cooch Behar	09	05	14	00	00	00	09	04	13	18	09	27
Jalpaiguri	08	05	13	05	02	07	08	04	12	21	11	32

Category of Gram Panchayat Members District wise (Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri)

Name of the District	Schedule Caste			Schedule Tribe			General			Men	Women	Total
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total			
Cooch Behar	647	383	1030	02	02	04	564	282	846	1212	667	1880
Jalpaiguri	606	350	956	320	189	509	580	297	877	1506	836	2342

From the tables presented, it is revealed that both the districts of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri do have nearly 36 per cent representation of Women in Panchayati Raj Structure. Another distinctive feature of the Women's representation in Jalpaiguri Panchayat Raj structure has been the representation of tribal women in a considerable number. For Cooch Behar, the scheduled caste women have represented large number of seats in different tiers of Panchayati Raj structure. This reflects a poor and depressed section representation at the grass-roots of the local democracy.

The study will concentrate principally on four Panchayat Samities (two each for Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts and Gram Panchayats of those identified four Panchayat Samities. Besides, women members of the other Panchayat Samities of both the districts and Zilla Parishads have been randomly interviewed through questionnaires. Let us have a quick look to the status of the infrastructural facilities of the identified Panchayat Samities of these districts on a comparative scale. Among such infrastructural facilities, access to health care centres, and schooling are important for human resource development. Variables such as hospital, primary health centres, sub centres, drinking water, electricity, roads, irrigation, number of schools at various level available per unit of population and the students-teachers ratio is expected to represent social infrastructure. The impact of such access to infrastructure would then be reflected on output indicators such as infant mortality, child-women ratio and proportion of children attending schools. The following tables so objectively designed would corroborate the arguments.

Drinking Water Sources Amenities of The Surveyed Panchyat Samities

Name of the District / CD Block	Block Code	Total No. Villages	Total No. of Inhabited Villages	Total No. of Uninhabited Villages	No. of Villages Having Drinking Water Source within the Village							
					Tap		Tube well		Well		Other Sources	
					1991	2001	1991	2001	1991	2001	1991	2001
01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13
West Bengal	341	40794	37956	2838	1431	3422	29367	31675	29367	13748	110	319
Jalpaiguri	13	756	742	14	116	228	417	573	417	570	00	12
Alipurduar – II	0009	79	79		08	18	69	71	69	57	00	
Maynaguri	0012	86	79	07	06	17	63	75	63	77	00	06
Cooch Behar	12	1202	1138	64	68	168	1099	820	1099	374	01	10
Mathabhanga – II	0004	93	92	01	00	11	92	86	92	14	00	01
Cooch Behar – II	0006	115	115		17	20	116	14	116	04	00	

Medical Amenities of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar District

Name of the District / CD Block	Block Code	Total No. Villages	Total No. of Inhabited Villages	Total No. of Uninhabited Villages	No. of Villages Having Health Centre Within the Village		No. of Villages having Allopathic Dispensary within the Village		No. of Villages having Primary Health Centre within the Village		Distance Range of Nearest Primary Health Centre if Not Available within the Village			No. of Villages Having Primary Health Sub-centre within the Village	
											< 5 km.	5-10 km.	10 + Km.		
					1991	2001	1991	2001	1991	2001	2001			1991	2001
01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
West Bengal	341	40794	37956	2838	564	537	1018	2963	692	999	10083	15324	11550	1887	4575
Jalpaiguri	13	756	742	14	22	66	48	159	10	44	152	273	273	72	188
Alipurduar – II	0009	79	79		09	02	20	15	04	02	20	37	20	12	25
Maynaguri	0012	86	79	07	01		03		01	05	19	25	30	11	25
Cooch Behar	12	1202	1138	64	54	40	52	38	112	55	315	433	335	147	201
Mathabhanga – II	0004	93	92	01	03	02	01	02	00	05	33	36	18	01	10
Cooch Behar – II	0006	115	115		00	01	01	02	00	04	32	52	27	18	30

Road Amenities of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar District

Name of the District / CD Block	Block Code	Total no. Villages	Total No. of inhabited Villages	Total no. of uninhabited villages	No. of villages having approach by paved road		No. of villages having approach by metal road	
	2001				1991	2001	1991	2001
01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09
West Bengal	341	40794	37956	2838	31204	17710	9033	
Jalpaiguri	13	756	742	14	473	496	308	
Alipurduar – II	0009	79	79		77	49	29	
Maynaguri	0012	86	79	07	63	56	31	
Cooch Behar	12	1202	1138	64	953	519	342	
Mathabhanga – II	0004	93	92	01	60	43	32	
Cooch Behar – II	0006	115	115		72	62	42	

Electric Power Amenities of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar District

Name of the District / CD Block	Block Code	Total no. Villages	Total No. of inhabited Villages	Total no. of uninhabited villages	No. of villages having Electric Power for domestic Use		No. of villages having Eclectic Power for Agricultural use	
	2001				1991	2001	1991	2001
01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09
West Bengal	341	40794	37956	2838	11921	23344	3056	12598
Jalpaiguri	13	756	742	14	202	500	18	274
Alipurduar – II	0009	79	79		15	38	05	29
Maynaguri	0012	86	79	07	25	56	03	25
Cooch Behar	12	1202	1138	34	342	570	00	283
Mathabhanga – II	0004	93	92	01	19	52	00	27
Cooch Behar – II	0006	115	115		86	73	00	69

Total cultivable land, land forest, irrigated land, unirrigated land and total culturable waste of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar District

Name of the District / CD Block	Block Code	Total No. Villages	Total No. of Inhabited Villages	Total No. of Uninhabited Villages	Total Area (in hectares)	Total land under forest		Total area under cultivation		Total cultivable area under irrigation		Total cultivable area not under irrigation		Total culturable waste	
	2001					1991	2001	1991	2001	1991	2001	1991	2001	1991	2001
01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
West Bengal	341	40794	37956	2838	7997167.36	601917.76	630135.06	5427431.90	5450679.18	1891512.11	2334257.49	3535919.79	3116421.69	365634.33	398687.74
Jalpaiguri	13	756	742	14	594252.29	97588.81	106215.45	234231.44	297467.26	46340.22	76826.77	187891.22	220640.49	27780.4	33474.97
Alipurduar – II	0009	79	79		31739.17	0.00	411.20	28262.62	28184.02	2236.41	4020.32	26026.21	24163.70	00	310.00
Maynaguri	0012	86	79	09	51821.93	4898.43	3887.56	21276.02	33259.97	6515.14	3916.13	14760.88	29343.84	909.76	5436.52
Cooch Behar	12	1202	1138	64	334699.95	3170.29	4391.41	310304.06	248761.53	22433.16	40002.94	287870.9	208758.59	13264.13	15608.28
Mathabhanga – II	0004	93	92	01	30998.92	430.39	329.36	16655.37	18453.32	1456.28	2746.32	15199.09	15707.00	1268.86	1055.06
Cooch Behar – II	0006	115	115		37969.05	0.00	801.07	63377.17	29035.14	996.4	2531.82	62380.77	26503.32	147.4	1741.49

Educational Amenities of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar District

Name of the District / CD Block	Block Code	Total No. Villages	Total No. of Inhabited Villages	Total No. of Uninhabited Villages	No. of villages having primary school within the village		Distance range of nearest primary school if not available within the village			No. of villages having middle school within the village		Distance range of nearest middle school if not available within the village			No. of villages having secondary school within the village		No. of villages having senior secondary school within the village		No of villages having college within the village		Distance range of nearest college if not available within the village		
							< 5km.	5-10 km.	10 + km.			< 5km.	5-10 km.	10 + km.							< 5km.	5-10 km.	10 + km.
					2001		2001			2001		2001			2001		2001		2001		2001		
01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
West Bengal	341	40794	37956	2838	27138	28185	8369	1308	94	2971	5541	18628	12649	1138	2958	3411	00	999	547	138	2894	8172	26752
Jalpaiguri	13	756	742	14	603	700	38	03	01	119	181	291	196	74	49	107	00	24	05	05	40	141	556
Alipurduar – II	0009	79	79		74	74	05			12	20	28	27	04	10	09		03	01		02	21	56
Maynaguri	0012	86	79	07	63	76	03			12	20	33	08	18	06	08		02	00		08	13	58
Cooch Behar	12	1202	1138	64	917	922	189	27	00		184	603	283	68	87	120	00	39	11	05	99	261	773
Mathabhanga – II	0004	93	92	01	73	73	15	04		09	17	46	27	02	08	09		04	00	01	01	13	77
Cooch Behar – II	0006	115	115		104	107	07	01		13	28	69	18		18	17		04	01		06	42	67

Out of nearly five hundred plus respondents of the identified village Panchayats, Panchayat Samities and Zilla Parishad of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri districts 480 data sheets have been found to be valid for empirical research. Data extracted from filled in questionnaires may be presented for analytical findings. The principal purpose was to assess the nature of women leadership in the villages including their socio-economic characteristics, awareness about powers and duties of Panchayat, election process related aspects, role and participation in decision making, level of participation, types of obstacles faced, role in general development of the village, attitude towards decision etc. It is to be mentioned that the responses so far presented have been the outcome of aggregated data of the Gram Panchayats of the four selected Panchayat Samities of the districts of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri (Detailed list of Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samities and Zilla Parishad has been presented at the beginning of this chapter as well as in the chapter on Research Design). Since the tables ranging from Table – 1 to Table – 11 have been self explanatory, it is relevant to reflect the results of the table in the chapter entitled Findings of the study. The tables are presented by way of compartmentalising the ‘Attributes’, ‘Category’ ‘Frequency’ and Percentage for a general understanding of the readers on the responses from the respondents so far received. Tables are presented as under in the following categories.

Table – 1
Socio-Economic characteristics of the Respondents

Attributes	Category (N – 480)	Frequency	Percentage
Age (year)	18 – 39 (Younger Age Group)	84	17.5
	40 – 50 (Middle Age Group)	344	71.7
	51 – 60 (Old Age Group)	52	10.8
Religion	Hindu	384	80.0
	Muslim	68	14.2
	Christian	12	2.5
	Other	16	3.3
Caste	Higher Caste	144	30
	Scheduled Caste	131	26.6
	Backward Caste	149	30.1
	Scheduled Tribe	56	13.3
Family Type	Joint	192	40
	Nuclear	288	60
Family Size	Small	128	26.7
	Medium Family	232	48.3
	Large Family	120	25
Education	Illiterate	68	14.2
	Up to Primary	268	55.8
	Matriculate	96	20.0
	Graduates / Post Graduate	48	10.00

Table – 2
Socio-Economic characteristics of the Respondents

Attributes	Category (N – 480)	Frequency	Percentage
Land Ownership (Acres)	Landless	172	35.8
	Up to 2.5	116	24.2
	2.6 – 50	92	19.2
	5.1 – 10.0	80	16.6
	Above 10	20	4.2
Occupation (Family)	Farming	308	64.2
	Casual Labourer	92	19.2
	Service	80	16.6
Annual Income (Rupees)	Less than 25,000	172	35.8
	25,001 – 50,000	116	24.2
	50,001 – 75,000	100	20.8
	75,001 and above	92	19.2
Servicing Women	Yes	28	5.8
	No	452	94.2
Relatives in Politics	Yes	116	24.2
	No	364	75.8
Exposure in Politics before getting elected	Yes	92	19.2
	No	388	80.8

Table – 3
Nature of Election Process of the Respondents

Attributes	Category (N – 480)	Frequency	Percentage
Mode of Election	Ballot	424	86.7
	Uncontested	56	13.3
Number of Times Elections Contested	Once	384	80
	Twice	96	20
Type of Entry into Panchayati Raj	Voluntary	116	24.2
	Motivated	364	75.8

Table – 4
Cause of Success in Election of the Respondents

Attributes	Category (N – 480)	Frequency	Percentage
Personal Capacity	Yes	100	20.8
	No	380	79.2
Help by Family	Yes	336	70.0
	No	144	30.0
Help by Relatives	Yes	88	18.3
	No	392	81.7
Help by Political Party	Yes	424	86.7
	No	56	13.3
Good Reputation	Yes	384	80
	No	96	20
On the basis of Performance	Yes	364	75.8
	No	116	24.2

Table – 5
Awareness About Powers / Duties of the Respondents

Attributes	Category (N – 480)	Frequency	Percentage
Powers			
1. Judicial	Yes	24	05
	No	456	95
2. Administrative	Yes	116	24.2
	No	364	75.8
3. Financial	Yes	92	19.2
	No	388	80.8
4. Legislative	Yes	56	13.3
	No	424	86.7
Duties			
1. Construction of Village Streets	Yes	420	87.5
	No	60	12.5
2. Maintenance of Roads	Yes	424	86.7
	No	56	13.3
3. Settlement of Disputes	Yes	36	7.5
	No	444	92.5
4. Education	Yes	316	65.8
	No	164	34.2
5. Women and Child Development	Yes	384	80
	No	96	20
6. Public Health and Family Welfare	Yes	116	24.2
	No	364	75.8
7. Rural Housing	Yes	56	13.3
	No	424	86.7
8. Rural Electrification	Yes	28	5.8
	No	452	94.2
9. Other Rural Development Schemes	Yes	308	64.2
	No	172	35.8

Table – 6
Participation of Women in Panchayat Decision Making

Attributes	Category (N – 480)	Frequency	Percentage
Invitation for Decision Making	Every Time	176	36.7
	Frequently	84	17.5
	Rarely	128	26.7
	Never	92	19.1
Level of Participation	Full	100	20.8
	Just as Spectator	64	13.3
	To fill the quorum	68	14.2
	None of these	248	51.7
Types of Obstacles Faced	Dominance of Males	288	60.0
	Illiteracy	56	10.8
	Non-recognition of Opinion	40	9.2
	Other Social and Economic issues	96	20.0
Attitudes Towards Decisions	Agree	404	84.2
	Disagree	76	15.8

Table – 7**
Participation in General Development

Attributes	Category (N – 480)	Frequency	Percentage
Role in General Development	Education	320	66.7
	Sanitation	292	60.8
	Rural Health	176	36.7
	Women's Health	188	39.2
	Child Development	152	31.7
	Welfare of Villages	288	60
	No Role	92	19.1

**** This Table has multiple responses.**

Table – 8
Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj

Attributes	Category (N – 480)	Frequency	Percentage
Women as Voters	Active and Interested	176	36.7
	Passive and Non-interested	152	31.7
	Motivated	144	30.0
	None of the these	08	1.6
Women as members of Political Parties	Independent of Parties	84	17.35
	Dependent on Party	288	60
	Active in Party	68	14.2
	No Effective Role in Party	40	8.3
Women as members of Women's Organization including NGO's	Yes	424	86.7
	No	56	13.3
Women as member of Different Committees of Panchayat Governance	Yes	188	39.17
	No	292	60.83
Family of respondents interfere in Panchayat Work (Pressure from males)	Often	188	39.7
	Occasionally	176	36.7
	Never	116	23.6
Conventional role of Women Compells them to become proxy member	Agree	84	17.5
	Disagree	396	82.5
In addition to household activities Panchayat work create adjustment problem in home life of the respondents	Agree	176	36.7
	Disagree	304	63.3

Table – 9
Extent of Participation of Women members in nine major functions of PRIS

Attributes	Category (N – 480)	Frequency	Percentage
Social Functions	Very High	Nil	Nil
	High	54	10.2
	Medium	396	82.5
	Low	21	4.6
	Very Low	09	2.7
	Nil	Nil	Nil
Economic Function	Very High	06	1.3
	High	24	05
	Medium	288	60.0
	Low	128	26.7
	Very Low	21	4.2
	Nil	19	2.8
Political Functions	Very High	Nil	Nil
	High	19	4.8
	Medium	384	80.0
	Low	43	7.8
	Very Low	28	5.7
	Nil	06	1.7
Educational Functions	Very High	06	1.7
	High	21	4.2
	Medium	176	36.7
	Low	152	31.7
	Very Low	76	15.6
	Nil	49	10.1
Public Work and Civil Amenities	Very High	06	1.3
	High	21	4.2
	Medium	288	60.0
	Low	128	26.7
	Very Low	21	4.2
	Nil	16	3.6
Agricultural Functions	Very High	06	1.3
	High	24	5.0
	Medium	288	60.0
	Low	128	26.7
	Very Low	21	4.2
	Nil	19	2.8
Trade and Commerce	Very High	Nil	Nil
	High	Nil	Nil
	Medium	54	10.2
	Low	21	4.6
	Very Low	396	82.5
	Nil	09	2.7
Sanitation and Medical Relief	Very High		
	High	64	13.3
	Medium	248	51.7
	Low	100	20.8
	Very Low	68	14.2
	Nil		
Judicial	Very High	Nil	Nil
	High	Nil	Nil
	Medium	Nil	Nil
	Low	380	79.2
	Very Low	50	10.4

	Nil	50	10.4
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Table – 10
Perceived Improvement of States of Women Panchayats

Attributes	Category (N – 480)	Frequency	Percentage
Access to Resource	Low	288	60
	Medium	192	40
	High	Nil	Nil
Control over Resource	Low	396	82.5
	Medium	84	17.5
	High	Nil	Nil
Perceived Improvement of Status	Low	176	36.7
	Medium	240	50.0
	High	64	13.3

Table – 11
Political Attitudes and Political Participation of Women Panchayats

Attributes	Category (N – 480)	Frequency	Percentage
Level of Political Ambition	Low	96	20
	Medium	380	79.8
	High	04	0.2
Level of Political Efficacy	Low	128	26.7
	Medium	345	72.2
	High	07	1.1
Level of Sense of Political Efficacy	Low	288	60
	Medium	192	40
	High	Nil	Nil
Level of Sense of Political	Low	305	63.5

Knowledge	Medium	168	35.4
	High	07	1.1

In the sphere of attitude towards women's participation in politics, a significant association can well be observed with the marital status, size of the family, occupation, education, family income and membership of associations. Involvement in participation is found to have significant association with education, family political background, party influence and membership of association. It has a positive association with family size and economic capacity as well as occupation. The detailed findings extracted from the tables so far presented have been taken up in the following chapter.

Chapter – V

Findings from the Field Study

From the field survey made in the preceeding chapter, the important findings may be incorporated as under :

- 1) Despite favourable legislation women's participation in the Panchayat Raj Structure of the two districts has not been made effective. Reservation of seats at different tiers of Panchayat has increased the number of elected women representatives but not their effectiveness. The associated enabling interventions have been absent in the remote villages as well as at the Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad levels. It is therefore important to look beyond numbers as an indicator of the level and quality of women's participation. With the Seventy-third Amendment Act and corresponding state legislations apparently the barrier has formally collapsed which tends to over look certain social realities which stand in the way as hidden barriers to women's political participation.
- 2) The legislative arrangements of reservation of one third seats for women in all Panchayat bodies and reservation of one third of the total number of offices of chairpersons in the Panchayats for all women including women belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes have created atleast a political space for rural women to participate in politics and in local level decision makings. The survey experiences suggest that most members of the Panchayat are really educated, they are becoming aware of their rights and the problem. Rural women in both of the districts are being encouraged to voice their opinion and decision making powers. They are gradually gaining strength to fight for their

rights. No less important, the women panchayat leaders were no longer what they were at the beginning – a bewildered and confused lot – but grew out of this experience as mature, confident leaders who are trusted by the people.

- 3) It has been observed that in both the districts, at the initial stage a great deal of resistance to this change in rural administration come from the rural administration, who saw in this institution a threat to their own power, privilege and authority. They ignored the Panchayat women members on the ground that they are not educated. The survey experience suggests that such attitudinal resistances have taken a back seat despite the lack of formal education of most of the elected women panchayat members, most of them are highly intelligent individuals, and what they lack in terms of education is more than made up by their enthusiasm and concern for their own locality as also the detailed knowledge regarding local environment, cropping pattern and people. There are also administrative obstacles to be overcome. It has been observed from the field experience that the current administrative framework has a departmentally –administered sectoral funding pattern which conflicts with the women-led, area-derived programmes arising from Panchayat Raj Institution. There is a need to cut through the existing system of development finance to find more flexible approaches capable of responding to the new priorities that are expressed.
- 4) Since the district of Cooch-behar is having more than fifty percent Scheduled Caste population out of total population (Mostly belonging to Rejbanshi Caste), the women respondents of the district of Cooch-behar are mostly drawn from scheduled caste community (nearly sixty five percent). The district of Jalpaiguri on the other has a considerable number of Scheduled Tribe population (Rava, Mech, Mochari, Santhal, Totos and others). The Blocks / Panchayat Samities so identified have been mostly based on Scheduled Tribe population. Nearly forty percent of the respondents of Alipurduar-II Panchayat of Jalpaiguri are drawn from Scheduled Tribe community.
- 5) Nearly forty percent of the elected women members of different tiers of Panchayat of the two districts responded that at the time of elections they were

projected as some ones mother, sister, wife etc. and not as party nominees. They have entered into Panchayat politics due to mandatory provision of reservation. Nearly seventy percent of the elected women interviewed had been of the opinion that they held from a non-political background and entered into politics due to persuasion by their family members or pressure from the village community. However, the important aspect is that women who reluctantly entered into politics showed greater maturity in outlook, enthusiasm, increasing political consciousness and increasing perception of their role and responsibility. This new space has led women to emerge as a potential force in village politics.

- 6) It has been observed that there has been representation, as per legislative stipulations, of women in general and scheduled caste and scheduled tribe women in particular in both the three tiers of Panchayats of two districts under study. There is very high negative correlation between the level of education and poverty. Nearly forty-five percent of the members have an educational qualification up to primary level, nearly forty up to high school level, only seven percent are graduates, eight percent are illiterate and nearly one percent are post graduates. So from the educational status of the Gram Panchayat and Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad members it is evident that there is a considerable representation of the poorer sections of the society in the Panchayat Raj structure of the two districts. The educational attainment of women members of Zilla Parishads disproves the general perception that panchayats are handicapped because of the under-education of the members. Indeed, illiteracy, inexperience etc. have been the handicaps prevalent in Gram Panchayat level.
- 7) The occupational pattern of panchayat members of the two districts under study vary from each other. While in Jalpaiguri district twenty six percent of women Gram Panchayat members are tea-plantation labourers, in Cooch-behar nearly twenty percent are agricultural labourers, four percent are bargadars and sixteen percent cultivators. In Jalpaiguri, on the other hand, the percentage is five percent and nineteen percent respectively. A considerable number of women panchayat members are housewives. Moreover, out of total four hundred plus

respondents, ten percent are involved with agriculture labour and twelve percent are with tea garden labour. Only 0.05 percent are with teaching or any other governmental jobs. So the occupational pattern of the gram panchayat members confirms the adequate representation of the poor people in the rural power structure. Nearly forty-one percent of the women panchayats are from landless family, six percent belong to the family of patta-holder and nearly thirty-nine percent have a family holding of land upto 2.5 acres. It confirms the presence of poor people in the panchayat leadership of both the districts. The study identified that most of the land ownership were in the name of the male-members of the family of the respondents. Only 5 percent reported land ownership in their own name. the study also revealed that the absolute majority of the respondents at the Gram Panchayat level did not have experience of service. One-fourth of the respondents held that their relatives were already in politics while most of them responded negatively.

- 8) One of the major objectives of the study was to find out the degree of awareness about their powers and duties among the respondents. Surprisingly, not even a single respondent was found totally aware of the old Panchayat Acts, Seventy-Third Amendment Act and corresponding state Panchayat Act. When associated with different socio-economic variables (like age, caste, education, income) to find out the degree of awareness about powers, most of the respondents especially at the Gram Panchayat of both the districts of Jalpaiguri and Cooch-behar responded that they were not at all aware of their power. Even the respondents of Panchayat Samiti level of the two districts held that they were aware though partially about their duties. They held that their main duty was to help the village panchayat for construction and maintenance of village streets, drainage system and development schemes of their respective constituencies. The other duties, of which they were aware, include looking after the education of the villagers, improvement of public health and family welfare, women and child development, settlement of disputes etc.
- 9) Though women members of Panchayat Samities and Zilla Parishad of both the districts were aware about their duties but the required level or degrees of awareness was quite low. Only twenty percent of such respondents had high

level of awareness, majority had minimum level awareness. The study further revealed that there has been a low level participation of the respondent in the meetings of Panchayats in both the districts. 21 percent respondents participated fully and a considerable number did not participate at all, however a considerable majority of the respondents occasionally attend the meetings of the Panchayats.

- 10) During the field study, some of the women panchayat members responded grudgingly that male members of the Parties hardly recognized their worth. Women members could not play their role due to various social, economic and psychological problems. Usually, respondents were consulted after the male members of the Panchayat had taken the decision. Most of the respondents normally agreed with the decision taken by the other members. The role played by women members in the general development of their respective villages was mainly in the field of education, sanitation etc. It has been observed that nearly thirty percent of the total women respondents at the Panchayat level and panchayat samiti level had never contributed towards any development issues of their respective villages/constituencies.
- 11) Age is an important variable in determining the character of emerging leadership. The data on the age group profile of Zilla Parishad, Panchayat Samiti and Gram Panchayat members of these two districts indicate the emerging trend of younger leadership of Panchayati Raj Structure in West Bengal. Out of all women members of the three tier Panchayati structure of these two districts thirty one percent are in the age group of less than 31 years, forty percent in the age groups of 31 to 40 years and twenty percent in the age group of 41-50 years. The strong reasons for this trend of the emergence of younger leadership are : (a) The reduction in the voting age (from 21 years of age to 18 years of age); (b) A good majority of the electorate is drawn from the rural youth who have favoured the election of young leaders; (c) The young women are more politically vulnerable to be nominated as Party Candidates; (d) The aspiration of the young women to become leaders of rural level governance for gaining respect and power in the society.

- 12) Another important finding of the study is that religion and caste do not have any role in determining the women leadership in panchayat politics in these two districts. By and large women are elected to different tier from the thirty three percent reserved quota including women belonging to schedule caste and scheduled tribe categories. In some of the Gram Panchayats even the women got elected from unreserved constituency, that is why percentage of women in the panchayat leadership in these two districts is little higher than the stipulated percentage of reservation of seat. However, both the districts do not have any additional percentage of women members at the Zilla Parishad and Panchayat Samiti level. This suggests that the principal bearing of leadership of the rural society is still held by the male members of the society. However, women have made a significant dent in the village level power structure cutting across caste and religion and have their presence felt in the decision making process.
- 13) Data gathered and analysed so far suggest that nearly sixty percent of women members of Zilla Parishads and Panchayat Samities do have a political background and nearly thirty percent had either their father / relations experienced in local politics and more than ten percent did not have a political family background. A majority of the elected Panchayats had political experience either as a political party workers or Panchayat / Panchayat Samiti members, members of local organizations or members of cooperative societies. A comparative analysis of the data suggests that while all the women representatives of Zilla Parishad members of Jalpaiguri and Cooch-behar are almost exposed to politics, in the case of Panchayat Samiti nearly thirty eight percent had prior experience of politics, at the Gram Panchayat level, most of the members have no such prior exposure in politics. This reflected that stipulated reservation has helped more women to contest in the election. Irrespective of tiers, female representatives stated that they had entered panchayats to render social service and it was an opportunity to render service for the development of women and weaker sections.
- 14) The status and position in social and political institutions are regarded as important variables in determining the quality of leadership in a democratic system. Data suggest that nearly ninety percent of women representatives of

Zilla Parishad of both the districts of Jalpaiguri and Cooch-behar had held position before they became members of Zilla Parishads. Only ten percent of them did not hold any position before they became members. Women Zilla Parishad members of both these districts are mostly politically trained with a considerable amount of social exposure. However, at the Gram Panchayat level, the picture has been just reverse. Nearly eighty percent of elected women of the Panchayats under study did have no social or political exposure. In the case of Panchayat Samities the responses have been mixed. Nearly fifty percent of women members of Panchayat Samities under study of these two districts did have earlier exposure in societal institutions and as members of Gram Panchayats. Social Institutions include local cooperative societies, women organizations, Women Credit / Thrift Societies, non-governmental organizations etc. This suggests altogether that the ice-burg of women's marginalisation has started breaking at the rural society.

- 15) Almost every women elected member irrespective of tiers had a serious concern for and desire to develop their own constituencies / localities. Out of total respondents nearly forty nine percent have shown interest in such welfare activities as improving the conditions of the weaker sections, including women, organizing awareness programmes for health, sanitation, self-employment etc. Nearly forty percent were interested in providing such expenditural facilities such as village roads, drainage, sanitation, electricity, primary education in their respective areas.
- 16) For both the districts, aspiring women representatives possessing required enthusiasm and ability to take leadership are resisted by their male counterparts. Forty eight percent of the total elected members so far interviewed have given an impression that they can take independent decision in Panchayat activities. However, still the majority of women members are subjected to male political leaders or husbands/influential male member of family while attempting to take decisions on Panchayat development activities. Majority of the respondents at the Gram Panchayat level do not have knowledge on panchayat Act and emerging rural developmental programme of the Government undertaken by both Central and State Governments. Nearly six percent of the women members

of Gram Panchayat are to depend on officials and experienced male Panchayat Members. However at the Zilla Parishad level and Panchayat Samiti level of both the districts women members are comparatively knowledgeable in dealing with the Panchayat Act and Governmental programmes. Another important finding is that office bearers (Pradhans, Upa-Pradhans, Sabhapatis, Sabhadhipatis of the Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samities and Zilla Parishad of these two districts are all literate and educated. There had not been a single case of respondent holding on office in the three tier Panchayat system who is an illiterate. However thirty percent of the office bearer at the village panchayat level have expressed their ignorance on Panchayat Act. Nearly twenty-two percent of the respondents have been trained under Panchayat Leadership and Awareness Development Programme; but continuous process of training for required updating is absent. The district of Cooch behar has a full-fledged Panchayat Training Centre but the district of Jalpaiguri does not have such training centre.

- 17) An interesting finding of the study is that nearly ninety-nine percent of the women panchayats of the three tier Panchayat structures of both Cooch-behar and Jalpaiguri are married. Out of more than four hundred plus respondents, a little more than one percent belong to the category of 'unmarried', widow, etc. Comparatively younger women panchayat members get larger scope in the development activities and they show greater interest too in such activities. Women panchayat members who are daughters of the soil are treated as 'daughter of the village', usually get greater scope to do panchayat workers. Most of the married women on the other hand, have been given a restrictive space to work and they are designated as "wife of the village". Most of the women respondents have much more clearer ideas of village development as they are closed to grass-roots realities. Most of the Women Panchayat members could not express on the women's critical needs of literacy, legal rights, health, wage equality etc. However, sixty-five percent of the total respondents do have some kind of constraints or the other which prevent them partaking effectively in grass-root level democratic process. Some of the constraints so identified are : (a) family poverty, (b) social powerlessness; (c) inadequacy of functional

literacy and continuing education; (d) non-awareness of Panchayat Act; (e) resistances in tacit form of the male dominated rural society; (f) reluctance of the male counterpart to share panchayat power; (g) traditional outlook; (h) lack of access to information; (h) Assetlessness; (i) lack of personal income; (j) non-ownership of land holding in most of the cases etc.

18) Majority of the respondents both at the Gram Panchayat and Panchayat Samiti level of these two districts admitted, unequivocally, to their facing strong opposition from the male members both at home and outside of home. Their household responsibilities continued unchanged. A large number of women respondents expressed that they received the support of the family for contesting the elections but they have not been spared after the election in respect of household activities. The household responsibilities prevent the women members from playing their role in panchayat effectively. Except in few cases, women members at the Gram Panchayat level had no previous experience in public life. Resultantly, women members can not contribute effectively in the meetings of the Panchayats. Quite a few asserted that they had no liberty to act independently as the political parties dictate as to what to do and what not to do. However, at the Panchayat Samiti level (Block) and zilla Parishad level (District), the women elected members have been playing their role comparatively in a much better way. It has been reported that nearly sixty percent of the clients approach women office bearers with their problems and issues and the rest make their way to get access either through male functionaries or through political parties. Women members at all the levels of panchayat structure seldom raise issues. From the available data it captures our attention that women's participation in the electoral process has shown a steady increase, but their ability to produce an impact on the political process has still been negligible.

19) It has been identified that elected women members, at different tiers of panchayats of these two districts, who are associated with social activities as members of non-governmental organizations or women self-help groups or any other women's organization, are performing better than those who have not been associated with such organizations. For the elected women representatives,

in most of the cases, especially for those who did not have any prior exposure, their perception about the role of the panchayats, in general, and their role in particular, had been confused. From the information it has been identified that women's participation in the electoral process has shown a steady increase, but their ability to produce an impact on the political process has still been negligible. Although women of the districts of Cooch-behar and Jalpaiguri take part in Peasant Movements through Peasant Organisations and labour movements through Tea Plantations worker's Organisation, no women has been brought to the leadership of these organizations. In both the districts, women have a negligible role in providing leadership in Peasant Movements or Tea labour movements. The political parties (since the Panchayat election in West Bengal is purely party-based), it is identified, are not serious on gender justice and equity ensuring women's representation at all levels of party hierarchy and as a result, the qualitative participation of women at all levels of rural governance in the districts has not been adequately ensured. Since the women at village level of these two peripheral districts are mostly domesticised and not properly educated, there is no awakening as to their political interests, which they can aspire for, however at Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad level, a few of them have some awakening and think of reaching higher levels of political structure. There has been no mass awakening in women at the rural society for their political rights so far.

- 20) Most of the respondents have answered that there is no security problem while working for panchayats. A negligible few have answered in the affirmative. Most of them have agreed that it is also not possible to give security guard to all of them, however they felt urgent need of constituting women defence group at different levels of panchayat structure. The respondents also viewed that police must be instructed to have strict vigilance and may provide security arrangement where it is imminently necessary. Women representatives are also aware of growing criminalization of politics. It is more dangerous at local level, because supporters of the criminal element are at one place all the time and in villages there is no police force to control them. Most of the women respondents in villages face this difficulty. However at the Panchayat Samiti level and Zilla

Parishad levels things are not so hopeless, though, to some extent, they are also affected by this vice.

- 21) Data of the field study suggest that awareness of Women representatives to the Gram Panchayats of the two districts about sources of finance, different sub-committees, plan schemes and development departments is reasonably low. However, women respondents at the panchayat samities and Zilla Parishad have been much more aware of the above issues. Obviously, compared to village level panchayat women members, their participation level in decision making, planning process and programme monitoring is reasonably high. It is, however, intriguing to identify that women respondents in all the three tiers of Panchayats of both the districts have neither comprehended rightly or fully the decisive role that the women have under the new legislations, nor have they comprehended fully their own determining role to play in rural local governance.
- 22) Despite so many negative findings, the provisions of Seventy Third Amendment Act and corresponding amended legislations of the state of West Bengal, have been a good beginning in the right direction for emancipation of rural women and to make them equal partner in local politics with their male counterparts. The policy of reservation has been hailed by women community and it has inspired confidence in them that one day they will be able to take active part in ruling the country, though at present, they are unable to get out of the strong clutches of male population because of their comparative ignorance and dependence. To day they may be few in number but they have a vision and mission either of their own or because of some political background of their family members. The only remedy for which most of the respondents affirmed positively is to make the women aware by imparting to them training about local governance and the environment in which they are living. Another important identification from the women respondents is that attitude of men towards women's participation is one of the most important factors in the empowerment process of women. It was found to be negative in the studied areas. Thus for overall empowerment of women, it is the finding that the strategy has to be two-pronged aiming at eliminating the effect of factors which are external to the women (i.e., those which are in the social environment) and

secondly, at developing rural women by way of enhancing their psychological orientation towards themselves as well as towards development work so that they become assertive and take on their new role effectively.

This project is principally concerned with the political participation of women in two peripheral districts of the northern part of West Bengal. It has explored the impact of socio-economic variables on electoral participation, the impact of socio-economic variables on attitudinal variables on political participation. The study is based principally on the data collected from the field. In addition, official data and secondary sources have been used for an overall correct appraisal. Some of the hypotheses formulated at the initial stage of the study have been corroborated with the findings of the study, some have to be partially reformulated, while a few stand vindicated.

To the first category belong the hypotheses that historically women have been excluded from participation in politics and in institution of politics; political participation of women is very low and participant of women is influenced by the male members of the society; illiteracy, lack of awareness, domestic responsibility and economic dependence prevent women from participating in active politics; the reservation of seats for women in Panchayats have created a space for the formation of 'critical mass'. Moreover, the hypothesis that political participation, political awareness etc., are positively associated with socio-economic variables like age, education, economic condition, marital status, occupation, membership of women's organization etc. has been significantly proved.

To the second category belong the hypothesis that are proved partially valid by the study is that the idea that the seventy third Constitution Amendment Act and other legal and administrative arrangements have ensured the coming of women to the leadership and decision making process does not always hold truth. It has been proved that the said Act and corresponding legislations and other measures have created a definite space for women's participation in politics and in the process of rural decision making. The study further proved that the hypothesis that "to ensure women's participation in rural politics and institutions male members with a human

face are coming forward” is not wholly true. Despite resistances, a portion of the male members are coming forward.

To the third category belong the hypothesis that were not supported at all by the present study. The hypothesis that “women although poor, unaltered in some cases and inexperienced have contributed considerably in rural development activities” has been disapproved by the study. Another hypothesis that in order to be gender equal in decision making only women will have to be far more participatory in creating ideologies, structures and institutions stand vindicated. Another hypothesis that lack of awareness, domestic responsibility and economic dependence prevent women from participating in active politics – needs thorough overhauling.

With references to the major findings of the study and both from survey data and official statistics, it has been found that women’s political mobilization is increasing but their participation in politics is still much lower while compared to their male counterparts. This gender hiatus, however, is gradually diminishing. It is also interesting to highlight that some of the findings regarding the association between some political factors and socio-economic variables are contrary to some common assumptions which may reveal new areas for further investigations.

Chapter – VI

Study Recommendations

It is acknowledged that the analysis so far made is limited by data unavailability, data inaccuracies and limited purpose as well as time constraints. It is true that PRIs by way of the New Panchayati Act has offered an opportunity for active participation of hitherto suppressed rural women in socio-political life and this has certainly resulted in increased numerical participation of women. However, the fact to be realized is that if PRIs were to become a vibrant vehicle for the empowerment of rural women, a lot more needs to be done. In sum and substance following recommendations may be suggested for future policy formulation and policy implementation.

- (1) The specificities of women's situation in the two districts of North Bengal and related constraints can not be captured by the relatively aggregated picture and thus it requires particular attention not only with respect to the constraints faced by women, but especially from the perspective of multidimensionalism of women's empowerment.
- (2) A major aspect of lack of women's development has been the very inadequate infrastructural development. In this region specially for the two districts under study, a critical felt need is that of women specific development institutions which requires the intervention of both the State and Central Government. The areas which can be identified for the purpose are: (a) Economic Institutions to assist women engaged in agriculture, for example in activities such as credit provision, prohibition of village money lenders, food-processing and marketing, especially the local produce; (b) Education/training Institutions for better utilization of women human resources; (c) Special assistances to women for better performance in extension services; (d) Conditions of women

peasants in Cooch-behar district and Women labour on the tea estates of Jalpaiguri are cause for some grave concern. There have been increases in labour productivity, but a simultaneous increase in the casualisation of labour, especially of women workers. While women workers (mostly in the form of casual labour) face very difficult circumstances wherefrom, the realization of empowering women both politically and economically have remained a distant cry. This area needs to be addressed with care. (e) The experience of North Bengal especially of the two districts, therefore, highlights three policy areas relevant for improving women's development and empowerment: (i) the role of infrastructure in redressing development imbalances (women and girls child affect most adversely for such imbalances); (ii) the importance of institutions, in a range of areas such as banking, marketing, education, health, agri-based industrial development; (iii) the simultaneous significance of both decentralization, good-governance and coordination ensuring women's participation in institutional politics and decision making process.

- (3) Mainstreaming of women involves recognition of women's perspectives as a valid component within all academic and applied discourse. Thus policies relating to every asset distribution and every allocation of resources should also be formulated from the women's perspective too. The protective discriminatory practices of the state build powerful arguments for women's rights enabling to bring a balance in social power equations. A state sponsored continuous advocacy for women's rights at every decision-making level can well ensure resetting of women's position – a process extending well beyond the political empowerment of women.
- (4) Education especially elementary education must be made compulsory for ensuring equal participation of women in all walks of life. Training programmes on health education, small savings, developing skills etc., may be arranged by government and non-governmental organizations for women to realize their responsibilities and to develop character and personality. This may enable the women to give command and extract respect as well as supplement government efforts so as to offer the women choices and alternatives. National Literacy Mission and other organizations engaged in the

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan should also be assigned the responsibility of educating the rural women in particular regarding the significance of Panchayati Raj and empowerment of women.

- (5) Training of women and access to information is essentially urgent for realization of women's involvement in Panchayat politics and decision making. It is also essential that along with training of women in political activities, programmes must be undertaken to sensitise both men and women. Women's involvement in local governance can be promoted with the support of men. It is important for men to realize that grassroots development based on household economics requires the active participation of women. Therefore, if the Panchayats have a future in development work then certainly women have a future in Panchayats and in public offices. There should always be a gender sensitization of the bureaucrats working at different levels of government.
- (6) The success of the process of political empowerment of women through local bodies will depend on organizational and policy changes for revitalization of PRIs, electoral reforms, sustained drive for political education, gender sensitization campaign, enlargement of employment opportunities for rural women, availability of supportive services and above all male enlightenment about the gender equality and justice. Both the National and State government must create healthy environment for active leadership generating participation which would ensure women's voice. An essential condition of empowerment is the adoption of equal opportunity and affirmative action measures which includes the removal of direct and indirect discriminatory practices and adoption of targets or quotas, electoral systems supportive to women's participation. Special mechanisms must be introduced in order to induct women at all levels of decision making to ensure that they form of critical mass and contribute to policy planning and implementation.
- (7) The state governments should invest in capacity building of the women Panchayats enabling them to participate in planning process at the Gram Panchayat and Panchayat Samiti level. There is need of complete overhauling

of the existing rules and practices of plan formulation, participatory implementation and monitoring. The participation of women in grassroots democracy is a multivariate function of many determinants operating at the ground level. The ground level constraints which hamper women's participation need to be addressed both by the government and local civil society. The policy makers should give a serious thought to understand that the specific and strong provisions of the law pertaining to the safeguards of women would not improve the situation until and unless the delivery mechanism is improved. Workshops for smaller group of women should be organized in which a detailed training among others, in resource mapping and participatory planning could be imparted. In these workshops, issues like devolution of functions and powers to Panchayats, financial resources, village, Block, Zilla Parishad Plans and their enmeshing in the overall plan of the district should be discussed threadbare. In this context, the mass-media, especially radio and TV must reorient their presentations.

- (8) Subject Committees like those for social justice, health and welfare, education and land management should be constituted immediately so that through these Committees women could participate effectively in their development. In decentralized planning top priority should be given to education, health, water and sanitation facilities as these directly effect society's welfare and the women of the community at large. Economic independence is another major pre-condition for political empowerment of women. They are to depend on the husbands or male members of the family even for the bus fare to attend the Panchayat meetings. In such a situation, it is not possible for them to play and effective role in both politics and society. They should be atleast engaged in some society specific gainful economic activities and the government and banking institutions should come forward to provide them grants and loans. Women Self Help Groups be given additional incentives so that women can engage more and more in numerous enterprise activities. Such as making files and folders, soft toys, fruit processing, sewing, pickles, bamboo and cane related cottage industry, leaf made utensils, animal husbandry, fishery, horticulture, floriculture etc. Self-Help Groups be given additional care so that

they can expand scope and agenda from economic empowerment to incorporate social and political empowerment too.

- (9) Studies on women in politics have emphasized that contact with outside world makes women more alert and active in the political process. There are two ways of doing it : Firstly interaction between enlightened rural women and illiterate elected women leaders be encouraged. Secondly, these women could be taken out to urban areas and their interaction with educated urban elected women representatives be arranged.
- (10) Lack of proper devolution of functions, funds and functionaries has been revealed as one of the major impediments. Such impediment has discouraged the elected women representatives from taking interest in the process of democratic decentralization. For removing this drawback, the Government should ensure devolutions of funds, functions and functionaries through statutory provisions. Incentives play a vital role in ensuring the participation of elected representatives in decision making. Women elected leaders at different tier of Panchayat who have been successfully implementing the development schemes and have ensured overall development of their constituencies need to be encouraged by publicizing their leadership qualities and honouring them in public meetings. It will certainly encourage their counterparts elected to different tiers of Panchayati Raj structure and their success stories and good practices will get replicated.
- (11) The unfinished agenda of women empowerment be completed by enacting an Amendment for providing reservation for women in the national Parliament and the state legislatures. The reservations at local level are not enough for women empowerment unless the issue is addressed both at national and state level. To realize good governance, both the Indian State and the State Governments must create a congenial ambience for active leadership generating participation which would ensure women's role in governance and politics. Leadership needs to be transformational effecting changes in institutions of governance. Women, on the other, are required to be actively involved in defining the political, economic and social agenda. Women's

qualitative and quantitative participation at all levels of governance is importantly essential for their empowerment. Decentralization and women's empowerment would be rendered meaningless if women, constituting more than forty-eight percent of India's population, are not facilitated to participate both in the governance and development process. This is only possible if gender equity is ensured at all the levels of the body polity.

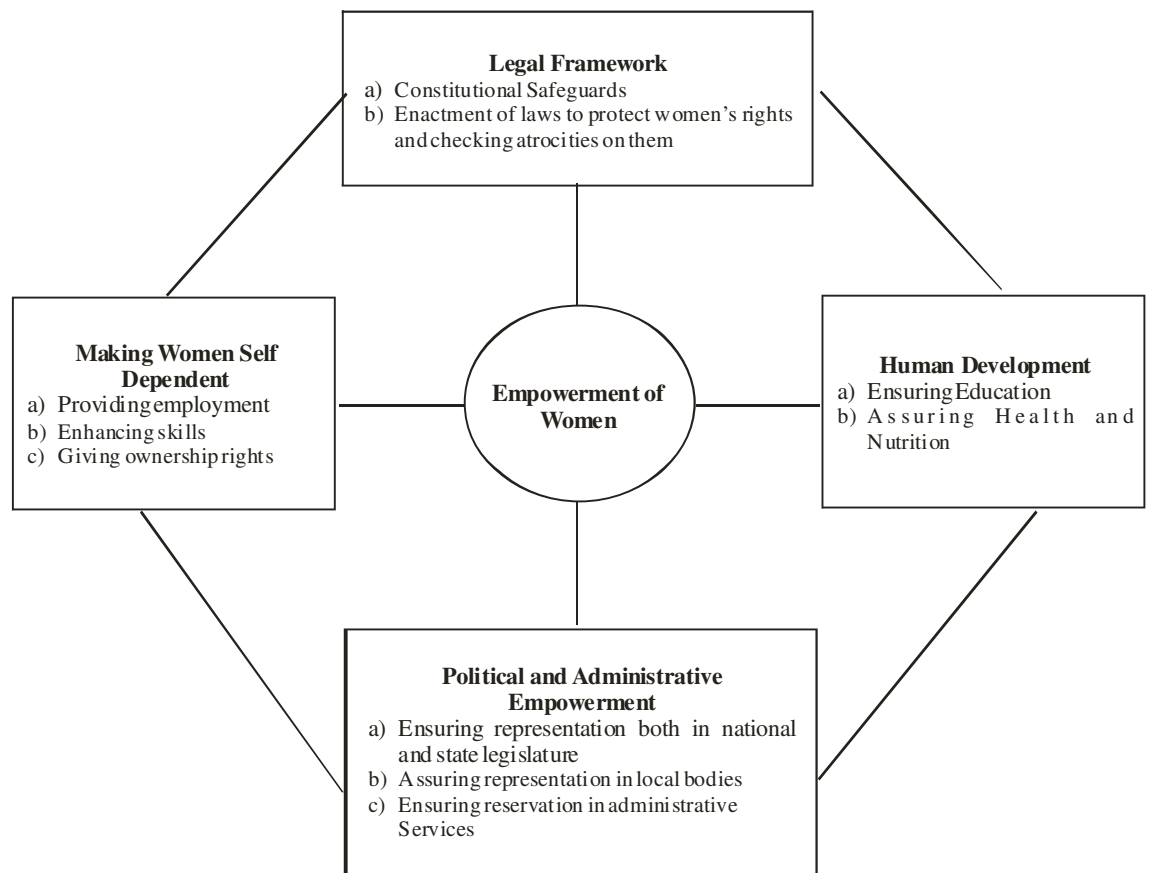
- (12) The Action Plan for women in wage employment and self employment has identified some areas of interventions. The identified interventions may be recommended for the realization of women's empowerment at the grass-roots level. In the field of wage employment for women the Action Plan stipulates:
(a) Both central and state government departments should determine the direction and the method by which the participation of women could be increased in different occupations; (b) villages and women – intensive industries, which provide employment to women should be promoted in the economic development plans. Increased participation of women in promotion and management of such enterprise should be encouraged; (c) The maximum age of entering services for women in government and public sector should be raised to 35 years; (d) special assistance for provision of credit facilities and development of specific plans of action to encourage women's participation in self-employment activities.
- (13) The adoption of a special plan component and the recognition of Self Help Groups as ideal institutional arrangement for the socio-economic and other forms of women empowerment have been the major efforts towards addressing women's economic marginalization in West Bengal. Nevertheless, as local level initiatives to generate employment and work participation of women, these efforts do have certain limitations. These efforts are being viewed primarily as antipoverty efforts and those who are coming under these programmes should essentially belong to the economic category of 'poor'. Women from the Above Poverty Line (APL) families were not allowed to become members of the specified self-help groups. Such a division between families below the poverty line and those above poverty line is vague. Under such division, a large number of village women are excluded. It is in this

context, the question of inclusion of APL women into these programmes has to be re-looked.

- (14) Role and responsibilities of elected representatives in different tiers of Panchayat should clearly be defined in the Act / Rule relating to Panchayat. The new faces of leaders such as elected women representatives should be given intensive training in public activities, leadership, communication, group dynamics, team building, equal rights, gender organizational behaviour, various departmental schemes with a view to develop women's leadership so that they can play an effective role in mobilizing people's participation and involve them in developmental schemes.
- (15) The male dominated rural social structure is still not reconciled to the women's participation in politics. The positive attitudinal changes is urgently called for whereby the male folk in the rural society should rather encourage and offer their unreserved cooperation and support to women folk. The political empowerment of women demands that they must be able to think and act according to their conscience. The state government should provide functional literacy to the illiterate and semi-illiterate elected women members of the panchayats soon after the election. There is also an important need for continuous campaigning because most of the women elected members are not aware of the uniqueness of the West Bengal Panchayat system neither they are aware of the existing Act, rules and practices on Panchayat. This kind of Panchayat sensitization has been extremely important because panchayats are vanguards of decentralized grass-root level participatory democracy. Women elected members at the one hand, are required to be actively involved in defining the political, economic and social agenda, while the political parties (since Panchayat election in West Bengal is purely party based) must be committed to gender justice and equity ensuring women's representation at all levels of party-hierarchy. Women's qualitative and quantitative participation at all levels of governance is importantly essential for their empowerment.
- (16) Following three models may be recommended for overall empowerment of rural women. The first model has been developed by Dr. Shyam Sundar Singh

Chauhan and Gaurav Banyal (“Various Dimensions of Women’s Empowerment”, Social Welfare, Aug. 2002, Vol.49, No.5, p.13), while the second model has been developed by Sri Manoj Pant (“Women Empowerment – Perspective and Approach, The Administrator, Vol.45, No.2, December, 2002, p.77 and Third has been developed by Dr. Dilip Kumar Sarkar (Education, Employment and Empowering Women, Anil Bhuiinmali (Edtd.), Serials Publications, New Delhi, 2004, p.317). The Models may be presented to have future policy interventions.

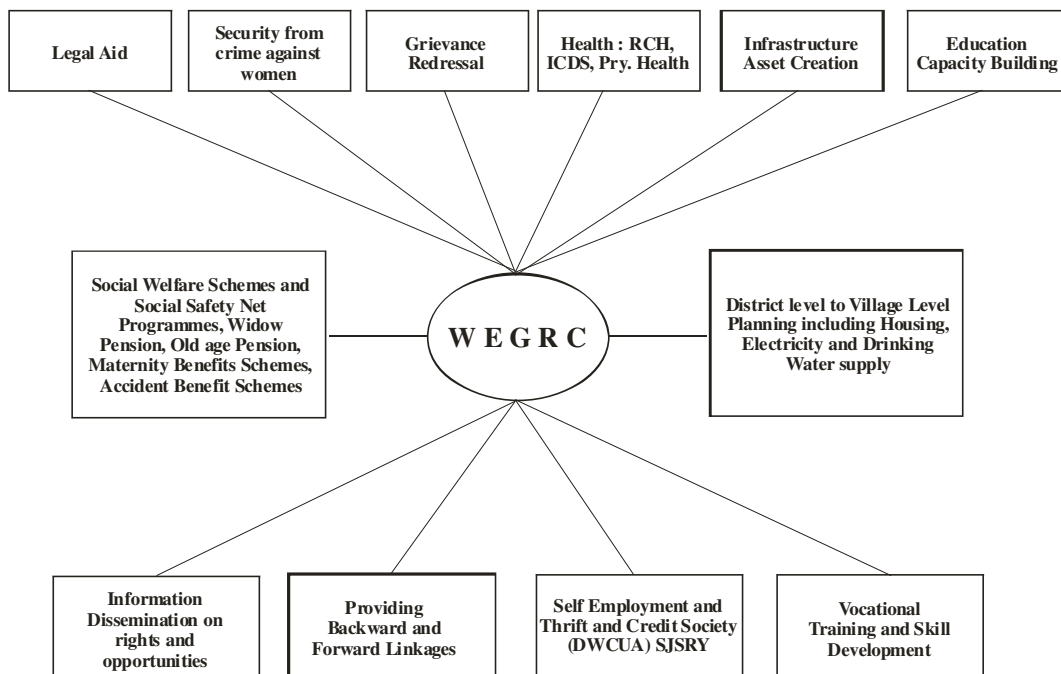
First Model



Second Model

As a single window approach towards women empowerment and grievance redressal, it is recommended to set up in every district a centre which will act as Nodal Centre for addressing those issues and contribute in managing and mitigating the socio-economic and gender issues. The proposed nodal centre can be termed as Women Empowerment and Grievance Redressal Centre (WEGRC). The head Office or Centre can be opened at the district head quarters level with its sub-centres as per requirement or may be a part of the administrative network at the District, Sub-division, Block Headquarters. The existing official machinery with some additional duties and realignments be used so that there could be no financial involvement. A society may be formed under Registration of Societies Act to give the centre a legal sanction. Active members of various non-governmental Organisations working on such issues may be co-opted in the society. The proposed

WEGRC shall be an enabling mechanism to meaningfully address gender related issues and ensure gender equalities by making poor women groups aware of their rights and opportunities and acting as a Resource Centre on gender issues. The schematic networking can be shown as below :-

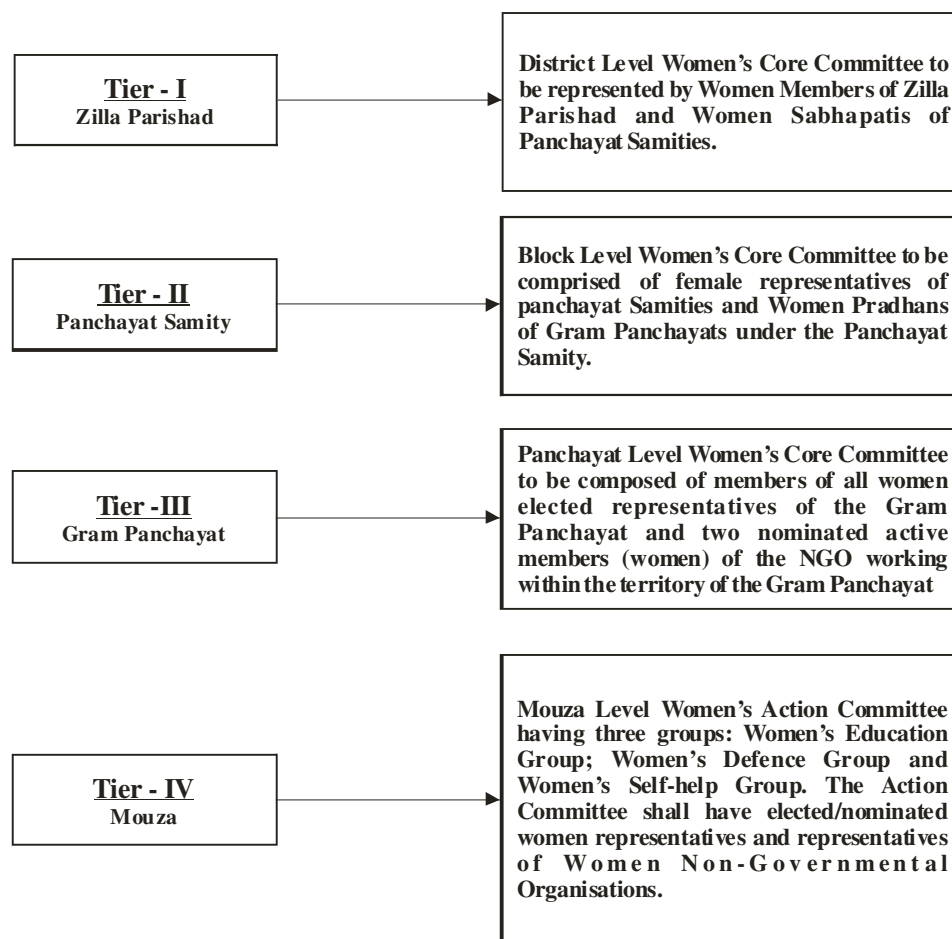


This proposed Women Empowerment and Grievance Redressal Centres shall work on Single Window Clearance Approach and thereby provide timely and adequate services and relief to women.

Third Model

Undoubtedly women are to be empowered, enfranchised and enabled to take part in decision making and to exert control over resources. Problems faced by women have been more or less identified and areas of discrimination have to be addressed operationally. Empowering women both economically, socially and politically needs a viable platform or structure. Since District is the most viable administrative unit (in terms of resource and infrastructure) and District based Panchayati Raj structure is the most legitimize political vehicle to realize democratic decentralization and development ensuring Women's participation, women's empowerment calls for a viable structure at the district level with an intrinsic networking of sub-structures at the sub-Division / Block, Panchayat and

Mouza levels. Thus an integrated model for empowering rural women may be suggested.



N.B. - For making the above three Groups viable inter-mouza cooperation may be sought.

To provide material support for capacity building to the four tier committees, a concerted action oriented and development oriented Women's Development Plan has to be formulated at the district level and to be percolated down to the grass-root level for implementation. In order to make such plan valid, viable and relevant, it is indeed to have detailed information and statistics of each constituency of every Gram Panchayat. Socio-economic survey and livelihood studies of each constituency is also urgent to gather information data bank for future plan formulation and implementation. The state of West Bengal has activated the

District Planning and Coordination Council in each district (DPCC). Such Council may corroborate with District level women's core committee to have Women's Development Plan for the District. There must be women component in each developmental planning for the district. To provide material resource support, the respective Lead Bank of the district be moved to create a District Women's Development Bank. Such Bank so created may collaborate with District Industrial Centre (DIC). The DIC should open a separate window for women for providing supports and training for opening small cottage industries and such other economic initiatives. This separate window shall also provide support relating project formulation, project funding, project implementation and repayment of loan. Undoubtedly, women's needs are radical and the response of the society to address those needs has been mostly moderate. What is urgently called for is to bring radical reforms to address the burgeoning socio-economic and political needs of Indian rural women. Moreover the above model requires the support of the state to ensure the affirmative actions causing / creating space for rural women to participate effectively both in socio-economic and political process of the rural matrix and in the dynamic decision making process.

To conclude, representation of women in Panchayati Raj structure or elsewhere is not a sufficient condition for their effective political participation, although it is undoubtedly an essential one. Despite being members of these democratic bodies or even their head, Women's political participation may be severely constrained by various socio-economic pressures. It would therefore be prudent to supplement formal representation in institutional structures with other measures such as mobilization of women and involvement of Panchayats on specific economic and social issues which affect women exclusively such as development and protection of fuel wood, plantations, drinking water resources, child health and nutrition programmes, protection of dignity and honour of women. In this regard, it is highly relevant to mention the words of Veena Majumdar (The Hindu, Sunday, 25 Nov., 2001), eminent scholar and Secretary to the First Committee on the Status of Women in India, "The state has no option but to take note of the critical mass of human resource. As the empowerment process is already

on, it is time for a step forward to acknowledge them as the agents of social change and development.”

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