CHAPTER -I

INTRODUCTION

Conceptual Framework:

Women Empowerment:

The term “empowerment” has been used for more than a decade now. There is no fixed or authoritative definition of the term, but it is frequently used to describe a process wherein power is given to certain underprivileged section of the society. The word ‘empowerment’ cannot be understood without understanding the word ‘power’. Empowerment is clearly concerned with power and particularly with changing power relationships and redistribution of power between individual and groups.

Power can be defined as control over materials, human and intellectual resources. Such resources can be land, water, forest, people and their labour and skills, knowledge, information, ideas, money and access to money. Power is dynamic and relative and is unequally distributed. When power is defined as control often confers decision making power. This power to decide is exercised in three basic ways: to make decisions, make others implement one’s decision, and finally, influence others decisions without any direct intervention. Power is closely related to the term ‘ideology’ for every power structure requires a separate power ideology to justify and perpetuated the existing pattern of control and distribution of resources. Ideology itself is a complex structure of beliefs, values, attitudes and ways of perceiving and analyzing social reality. The survival of power structure is dependent on the acceptance and participation of all these segments including the powerless. Through power can be perpetuated initially through coercive means. Subsequently ideology of the dominant group is seen to take over and produce a rational for inequality. Such inequality through such ideology is widely disseminated and enforced through all social, economic, political and religious institutions and structures.¹

The distribution of power unfavorably to women arises from, the ideology of patriarchy. Patriarchy is nothing but male dominance, where ownership, control and inheritance of all assetis in the hands of men, males exercise the rights of all major decision making whether in the family or in the political structure.
Women’s empowerment is the challenge of the ideology of patriarchy and the gender based discrimination against women in all institutions and structures of society. Women’s empowerment is the transformation of the structures of subordination, including changes in the law, civil codes, property and inheritance rights, control over women’s bodies and labour and the social and legal instructions that endorse male control.

The process of women’s empowerment begins in the mindset of women by changing their beliefs about themselves and their rights, capacities, and potentials need to change. But this change of mindset is possible initially by laws made by the Government.

The 73rd Amendment and other government initiatives are to have this desired effect, i.e. of empowerment of women, referring to the social and economic status of women as compared to men.

Women’s empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building leading to better participation, more decision making power and greater control to initiate actions. For women’s empowerment, there is a need that women re-examine their lives critically, recognize the structure and sources of power and subordination. They need to discover their strengths, and alter their self-image, acquire new skills and information challenge the existing ideology structure, and gain more control over resources.²

Empowerment is envisaged as an aid to help women achieve equality with men or at least reduced the gender based discriminations considerably. Empowerment would enable women to perform certain social roles that they cannot perform without it. Gender equality, political, economic or social is enshrined in the Fundamental Rights under the constitution together with equality of opportunity to employment and appointment to office. Political equality includes not only equal right to franchise but also more importantly, the right to gain access to the institutionalized centers of power.³

On the basis of these definitions, one can perceive that women empowerment is a process in which women gain control over their own lives by knowing and claiming their rights at all levels of society. It is an ongoing process and not an end by itself.⁴
Empowerment is defined as a process by which women gain greater control over resources (income, knowledge, information, technology, skills training), challenge the ideology of patriarchy and hence participate in leadership, decision making process.\(^5\)

The National Policy for Empowerment of Women, 2001 has shortlisted certain basic inputs for Women Empowerment. These inputs are -

1. Creation of such an atmosphere by implementing positive social and economic policies so that women can beware of their potential for full development.
2. Access to all fundamental rights of freedom and all human rights and ensurance of both dejure and defecto rights for women.
3. Equal opportunity of women in socio-economic and political fields and equal participation of women with men in decision making at all levels.
4. Ensurence and strengthening of legal systems to stop all kind of gender discrimination.
5. Bringing changes in the social and community approaches towards women.
6. Liquidation of all kinds of repression and suppression against women.
7. Adoption of an integrated approach towards empowering women through effective convergence of existing services, resources, infrastructures and man power in women specific and women related sectors.

Women Empowerment and the Constitution of India:

After independence, the Constitution of India has empowered women in India. The Preamble, the Fundamental Rights and Directive principles of State Policy have empowered women in India. According to our constitution, the unit of the Government of India is the individual irrespective of male and female. Article 14 says “The state shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India” while Article 15 says “the state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, sex, place of birth or any of them.” Likewise, Article 16 provides equal opportunities to women in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the state. No women, on ground of sex be ineligible for, or discriminated against in respect of, any employment or office, under the state.
Under the Directives Principles of State Policy, the State shall, in particular, direct its policy towards –

a) That the citizen, men and woman equally, have the right to an adequate means of livelihood.

b) That there is equal pay for equal work for men and women.

c) That the health and strength of workers, men and women, and the tender age of children are not abused and that citizens are not forced by economic necessity to enter a vocation suited to their age or strength.

d) The state shall make provisions for securing just and human conditions of work and maternity relief.

Welfarism of Indian State has also facilitated the process of women empowerment the concept of employment of women has been a centre point of developmental process during the last 60 years. Several changes came under way in the policies in this direction. Up to the seventies the concept of “welfare” was the root point while “Development” took the centre stage during eighties and ultimately the empowerment has got momentum during nineties.

Development of women has remained top priority of the government at the centre and states. In general, following measures have been taken to protect the rights and privilege of women and bring them at par with men in every walk of life.

**Women empowerment during the plan period:**

The government of India attended to the women development aspects since the first plan (1951-56) period, though the approach was through various welfare programmes related to primary health and child development. The Central Social Welfare Board was set up in 1953 as an apex body at national level to promote voluntary sections specially at the grossroot level to take up welfare related activities for women and children. The Second to Fifth plans (1956-79) continued to which reflect the vary same welfare approach, besides giving priority to women’s education and launching measures to improve maternal and child health services, supplementary, feeling for children and expectant and nursing mothers. The fifth plan
emphasized on the need for vocational training for women and also on provision of working women’s hostel in large cities.

The Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-85) adopted a multi-disciplinary approach towards women related issues for the first time. Certain measures under it are mentioned below:

i) Special tribunal for violations of human rights,

ii) Statutory women’s panchayats at the village level with autonomy and resources for the management and administration of welfare and development programmes for women and children,

iii) A major change in the content and organization of education to counteract traditional belief in inequality between sexes.

iv) Provision for special leave without pay to enable women to devote full time for the care of their family,

v) On divorce or separation, wife should be entitled to at least one third of the assets acquired at the time of and during the marriage,

vi) Family courts which will adopt conciliatory methods and informal procedures,

vii) Party of rights on grounds of divorce for husband and wife.

viii) To enhance employment of women, certain other recommendations have been made like,

Equalization of ways:

   a) Reservation quota for women in training and employment.

   b) Part-time employment through suitable revisions in recruitment rules and service conditions.

   c) Provisions for re-entry.

   d) Enforcement of laws Protecting Woman Work

These documents highlighted on the prevalence of discrimination against women and recommended various measures for the advancement of women. A number of states have also come out with policies and Action Plans for women. The central /state Social Welfare Boards, State Developments of Woman’s Development and women’s Development Corporations, National Commission for Women and several State Commissions for Women have been set up to improve the status of women and to safeguard their legal rights. A number of Schemes and Programmes have been initiated.

During the seventh plan (1986-1991)

The National Development Council Approved the draft of Seventh FYP on November 9, 1985. The plan laid emphasis on development, equity and social justice through the achievement of self reliance and efficiency. The seventh plan emphasized the policy for increasing employment opportunities and achieving full public participation in developmental works along with promoting active involvement of all sections of society in the development process.

The seventh plan also gave promotion to beneficiary oriented programmes for women in different development sectors.

The Eight Plan (1992-97) with human development as its major focus, played a very important role in development of women. The National Commission for women, the first statutory body to deal with women issues, has been set up in 1992. It has received various women related laws among other activities and documented women related crimes and violences. The open adalats conducted by the commission have been very effective in instrumenting social Checks and balances in women related violences.

The Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK) set up in 1993, is a national level mechanism to meet the credit needs of poor and assetless women in the informal sector. Woman Development Corporations have been set up in several states to help the women entrepreneurs with support from the RMK, which also supports the women’s cooperative societies and other women headed organizations. The most
noteworthy achievement of the RMK is that it has maintained a recovery rate of 90 percent and above through all these years.

The Ninth Plan (1997-2002) made two significant changes in the conceptual strategy of planning for women. Firstly, the focus has shifted from development to empowerment, the beginning of which was noticed during the Eight Plan period. Women empowerment has been one of the nine primary objectives of the Ninth Plan. Secondly, the plan tried to converge the existing services available to both women specific and women related sectors. It directed both the Centre and the states to adopt a special strategy of women’s component plan through which not less than 30 percent of benefits flow to women from all the general development sectors. A special monitoring mechanism at the instance of the Prime Minister’s office is effective in this regard.

The initiatives during Eight plan and Ninth plan towards empowerment of women through comprehensive programmes of access to credit, property rights, setting up of micro-enterprise, etc. is reflected in various other programmes and schemes, i.e., Swa-Shakti, Swayamsidha, Sevadhar etc., as well as setting up a Task Force on women under the chairmanship of Sri K.C. Pant, Deputy Chairman, Planning Commission, to review the existing, women specific and women related legislations and suggest necessary recommendations. The adoption of National policy for Empowerment of women (2001) marks the official Stamp of approaching the goal in the new century.

The Tenth Plan (2002-07) reaffirms the major strategy of mainstreaming the gender perspectives in all sectoral policies and programmes as well as preparing a National Plan of Action for Implementation of policy on women. The Department of Woman and Child Development in the Ministry of Human Resources Development is identified as the nodal agency. It will select the partners, specify the Action points in all the women-related development sectors, develop an in-built mechanism for effective co-ordination and monitoring as well as evaluate the impact in improving the status of women, based on a Gender Development Index. It also suggests a three-fold strategy for empowering women through social empowerment, economic empowerment and gender justice. The Tenth Plan proposes to support that the process of empowerment of women becomes truly people’s movement. The National Council
for women, being set up under the Chairmanship of the Prime Minister and the Parliamentary Committee on Empowerment of Women was set up in 2000, will oversee and review from time to time the progress made by women in achieving gender equality.

Eleventh plan (2008 - 2013)

A few measurable planning goals also will have direct bearing on women’s welfare. Some of the goals to be adopted in the proposed action plans are as follows:

a) Reduction of poverty ratio by five percent by 2007 and by 15 percent by 2012.
b) All children in school by 2003, all children to complete five years of schooling by 2007.
c) Reduction of IMR to 45 per 1000 live births by 2007 and to 28 by 2012.
d) Reduction of Maternity Mortality Rate (MMR) to two per 1000 live births by 2007 and to one by 2012.

It is also recognized that the government institutions by themselves are not adequate to achieve empowerment of women in its various dimensions. These efforts need to be supplemented by civil society organizations, a large number of which have already emerged throughout the county.

The National Housing and Habitat policy (1998) lays special emphasis on involving women at all levels of decision making and enabling them in formulation and implementation of housing policies and programmes.

A substantial emphasis is laid on addressing the special needs of women headed household, single and working women and women in difficult circumstances. It recognizes that the building industry is the biggest employer of women casual workers and is perhaps their biggest exploiters in terms of wages and working conditions. Skill upgradation, induction of women at supervisory level, encouraging women contractors and providing necessary training to women on a preferential basis would improve the situation. The policy further stipulates that the plans of housing complexes and industrial estates must include a provision for hostel accommodation for working women, crèches and day care centres.
It is well known to that period of globalization and scientific development; though, the clouds of darkness loom large over the horizon in regard to inequality and discrimination against women yet there are some silver lining. Against this background, National Commission of Women was set up in 1993, Mrs. Mohini Giri was the chairperson of National Commission.

Not only the above issues, number of VO’s like SEWA, CWDS, and MANUSHI are also actively involved in the works of women’s upliftment and fighting against the exploitation and torture of women at grass-root level. The Chipko movement of women of Garhwal has saved the Himalayan forests from destruction and also helped to preserve ecological diversity. In Andhra Pradesh women have done lot of hard work to upheld the antiliquor movement. Women of rural West Bengal are largely associated with Self-Help groups and self-employment generation movements. All these works done by them are positive action to bring transformation and development in women’s lives.

Political empowerment in the form of participation in decision making process at various levels of political activity is also very important in a democratic county. Since 1994, 33% seats have been reserved for women in the elections to urban and rural local bodies, i.e. municipal bodies and village panchayats. As a result of this about one million women at grass root level have received political power. At first it was noticed that those women who were elected could not act on their own but were mere puppets in the hands of their men folk. Secondly, male members of panchayats did not accept these women as equals, leave alone work under them if they happened to be the sarpunch. But gradually women have learnt to assert themselves, use their power for the good of the community and show achievements. Devaki Jain writes, ‘No one even remotely anticipated the level of commitment displayed by the women who entered politics as a result of 33% percent reservation at panchayat and municipal levels. The emergence of these women disproved the ‘belief that women are not ‘available’ for politics. Many of them won in non-reserved constituencies too. They have shown that they know what power and politics is all about, however illiterate or ignorant of governance, they may be having tested power, they are unlikely to give it up.’
The 73rd constitutional Amendment Act 1992 aimed at transforming the structure and pattern to Panchayati Raj System by inserting a new part (part xi) in the constitutions. The new system has been given a constitutional status and by which it had got performance in the Indian Political System as a three tier government. Namely, district level, middle level and Village Panchayat. This new system has been vested with the power of taking decisions on twenty nine subjects listed in the 11th schedule. One of the important aspects of the 73rd Amendment declared that not less than one third of total seats (33%) in every Panchayat institution shall be reserved for women and such seats have to be allotted by rotation to different constituencies (wards) of the Panchayat. The 33% reservation of seats for women has led a number of women in the decision making positions at the local level. The reservation of 33% seats for women in all tiers of Panchayats on a rotational basis has facilitated representation of women in the Panchyati Raj Institutions. conducted soon after the conformity laws were passed by the states. 

Gandhiji into reality, “My idea of village swaraj is that it is a complete republic independent of its neighbours for its vital wants and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence are necessary. Here there is perfect democracy based upon individual judgement.” By review of Panchayati Raj Institutions women is an individual actor in democracy. With a purpose of democratic decentrlisation and empowerment of women SC, ST.

The Rajiv Gandhi Government introduced the 64th constitutional Amendment Bill in 1989 seeking to strengthen the PRIs. It faced stiff resistance from the opposition and was criticized on various grounds. The Bill was reintroduced and finally passed in Parliament as the 73rd constitutional Amendment on December 23, 1992 and came into force from April -24, 1993.

New Panchayati Raj System in Assam:

In confromity with the 73rd Amendment Act, 1992. The State Government of Assam promulgated Assam Panchayati Act, 1994 (Assam Act –xviii of 1994) with effect from 5th May 1994. In this Act provisions for delegated legislation has been made for its successful implementation at the grass root level and with reservation of
seats for SC, ST and women. Gaon Sabha has been introduced and Mahakuma Parishad has been replaced by Anchalik Panchayat and Zila Parishad.

Relevance of the study:

The 73rd Amendment Act is a landmark for the local self-governing institutions. In order to ensure empowerment of women in political arena, the issue of reservation of 33% of seats for women in grass-root level organization was upheld by different womens organizations. Accordingly, the Parliament of India Passed the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. in 1992. The Act Provide 33% reservation of seats for women all levels of local elected bodies. In the same way one-third positions of Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons in local bodis have been reserved for women mainly to ensure their participation which will lead to their empowerment and make them effective partner in the development process.

The present study “Women Empowerment and Panchayati Raj Institutions : A study of Nagaon District”, is taken up with an objective to know the impact of the reservation of seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions for women upon the Assamese Society.

Review of Literature:

A number of studies have already been undertaken both on women empowerment and panchayat Raj institutions in India.

‘Empowering Women’ (Arun Kumar 2002) deals with the empowerment strategy which is today emerging as an unique India response to the challenges of equality, development and peace.

Author mentioned While Indian women are slowly emerging as active agents participating in and guiding their own destinies, there are certain global developments with major domestic implications which again threaten to marginalize women economically and technologically. Free market economy, today have the potential of imposing a disproportionately high burden on poor women. During the last few years, this has emerged as an area of concern both within the government as well as outside."


‘Role of Women in Panchayati Raj (S.Nagendra Ambedkar, Shilaja Nagendra, 2006) states that. The presence of women in large numbers in panchayati Raj Institutions will not only make the panchayati Raj institutions more representative but also make them more efficient, honest, disciplined and more responsible. The book tries to analyze the views and perceptions of the women panchayati Raj members on various issues pertaining to the Panchayti Raj Institutions.\textsuperscript{10} This study mainly focus on 73rd Amendment Act rather than its impact on the society.

Political Empowerment of Women at the Grassroots (K.C.vidya. 1997), revealed that, reservation of seats is one of the important instrument of political empowerment of women. The book also discussed about the various aspects of women’s functioning in the Panchayati Raj Institutions and its impact on the overall development of women especially in the rural areas. The author examined the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in the cause of women’s development and effective participationof women in the decision making process, their influence in the behavior and attitude of rural women after their entry into these institutions. This book is concerned only with the foundation step for women for entry in the local-self government not with the concept of women empowerment.\textsuperscript{11}

Women Empowerment and PanchayatiRaj Institutions in Kerala (M.samad, 2007) is a study on women empowerment through Panchayati Raj Institutions. In Kerala participation of women in political activities is more than the other parts of the country. The study proclaimed that revolutionary change were brought out by the provision of the 73rd. Constitutional Amendment Act.\textsuperscript{12} The study is concerned only with the reservation policy not with the theory of Panchayati Raj Institutions and Women Empowerment.

‘Participation of Women in the Panchayati Raj System’, (G.S. Mehta, 2002) revealed that, there is no satisfactory progress for improving the socio-economic conditions and empowering women in India. This book has studied only about the implementation of reservation policy not its impact on the society.\textsuperscript{13}

Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions : A case study in Goa (P. Seema Salgoankar 2000) highlighted that women have been deprived of participation in decision making process of Panchayati Raj Institutions. There are several factors are responsible for women’s less participations in decision making of the governance, the
most important are illiteracy, traditionalism, prejudices, economic dependency and unfavourable political opportunity structure with the high rate of male domination in the decision making process.\textsuperscript{14}

In Women’s Participation in Panchayati Raj Nature and Effectiveness, (Pamela Singla 2007), held the view that the provision of the 73rd Amendment Act. of the Indian constitution has definitely empowered women in terms of numbers. Here the participation is studied not only from the angle of the elected women members themselves but also from the angle of elected male members, the public and most importantly by attending the Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad meetings.\textsuperscript{15}

Empowering Women through Political Participation: the Experience of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Kerala (A suhama Devi, 2007) is the study which throw light on political participation of women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions in Kerala. The study found that it is a step towards decentralization at the grassroots level and reservation of seats for women has helped in developing more genuine voice of women to some extent. The study also pointed out that decentralization process has undoubtedly given women opportunity to women, but at the same time factors like low consciousness, prevailing political culture, growing violence, character assassination, unscrupulous struggles for power, lack of economic security and supportive structure needed for preventing political actors which are deterring women from effectively participating in political life.\textsuperscript{16}

‘Education and Women’s Empowerment’: (A. Henia; 2008) discussed the role of education in women empowerment giving them knowledge, skills and self confidence, necessary to be full partners in the development process.\textsuperscript{17}

Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, (Amal Mandal-2003).points out that with the provision of 73rd. Amendment Act of the constitution, more than million rural women are now assumed panchayat seats as member and one third of them as Chairperson in almost all States and Union Territories. But the very integration of women has evoked conflicting waves-elation, euphoria particularly in print and public pronouncements and apprehension and even enmity in social and political parlance. This empirical study examined the social, economic and political background of Women members only in one district of West-Bengal. It also studied the both positive
and negative aspects of reservation policy for women. The book is basically a report of a fact-finding mission on women Panchayat members of a district and much a theoretical discourse.\(^{18}\)

Women in Decision Making: Experiences From Two States in North East India (Manoranjan Pal, Bholanath Ghosh, Premananda Bharati, 2008) The author pointed out empowerment and decision making are taken almost synonymous in this paper. In this study the authors investigated empowerment of women in Tripura and Meghalaya through opinion survey of the heads of the families on their decision making process. They have found while in Tripura, most of the heads of families agree that there should be equal pay of men and women whereas it is just the opposite in Meghalaya. In regard to the question of inheritance of properties, surprisingly, no heads did not disagree it in Meghalaya. In Tripura also, most of them agreed.\(^{19}\)


Bardhan and Klasen (1999) criticized Gender Empowerment Measure as an inadequate index of measuring women empowerment at aggregate level. In a paper prepared for the World Bank by Malhotra et.al. (2002), tried to highlight the methodological aspects of measurement and analysis on women empowerment.

The edited volume of Aparna Mahanta (2002) ought to explain the question of women’s access to or deprivation of basic human rights as the right to health, education and work, legal right, rights of working women’s besides issues like domestic violence, all the while keeping the peculiar socio-cultural situation of the North-East in mind.\(^{20}\)

Institute of Social Sciences and South Asia Partnership, Canada organized a workshop in (2003) which dealt with women’s empowerment through political participation wherein presentations were made on various theoretical works and case studies. The workshop addressed issues like ‘Proxy women’ which was the shorthand term used by some who perceived that women elected to panchayat bodies were merely ‘proxies’ or puppets in the hands of their husbands, relatives and other male panchayat members. So deconstructing the idea of proxy Women members, the workshop emphasized on training programme for elected women for their capacity building. In the keynote address Mathew (2003) viewed that the equity and
empowerment approaches merged together to form the ‘gender and development concept’.21

Assam Human Development Report (2003) threw focus on inequality in the achievement between men and women of Assam in different spheres of life. The report also viewed that poverty, violence and lack of political participation were the main issues of concern for South Asian Women, and Assam was no exception of it.22

Findings of Sunita Kishor and Kamala Gupta (2004) revealed that average women in India were disempowered absolutely relative to men, and there had been a little change in her empowerment over time. The authors viewed that there were several powerful and pressing reasons for evaluating, promoting and monitoring the level of women’s empowerment in India, not the least of which was that household health nutrition was generally in the hands of women and their empowerment was necessary for ensuring not just their own welfare, but the wellbeing of household. They also asserted that empowerment was critical for the very development of India, as it enhanced the quality and quantity of human resources available for development.23

Rac Leser Blumberg (2005) viewed that economic empowerment of women was the key option to achieve gender equality as well as wealth and wellbeing of nation. The author opined that financial autonomy would enhance women’s capacity of decision making in various arenas of life. Moreover, it would lead to less corruption, less armed conflict and less violence against female in the long run.24

In the January 2008 issue of ‘Kurukshetra’: A journal on Rural Development, focussed on women’s empowerment’ and revealed that although women were the active agents for sustainable development, and their empowerment was very important for the process of development, they had not actively participated in their own emancipation mainly due to low economic independence.25

Participatory Democracy and Women’s performance in Panchayati Raj Institutions: Evidence from Madhya Pradesh (Yatindra Singh Sisodia, 2006) proclaimed that with the provision of 73rd Amendment Act of the Constitution, the participation of women in the political process has been increased and they are now playing a constructive role in development and welfare activities of the country. The study revealed that with the change of time women leadership is progressing in a
positive direction. They have become more assertive, independent of various constraints and aware of the systematic process. This will lead to positive changes in the entire socio-political system.\(^{26}\)

Status and Working of Decentralised Bodies in Andhra Pradesh: (Babu, Dvendra M 1998) points out that. 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.\(^{27}\)

Dynamics of Women’s Participation in Grassroots, Democracy: the Haryana Experience (K.K. More, 2005) revealed that after the Haryana Panchayati Raj Act, 1994, the number of women members in panchayatis 18356, women members in panchayat samiti is 842 and women members in Zila Parishad is 109.\(^{28}\)

Susheela Kaushik’s study on Panchayati Raj Institutions in Haryana revealed that most of the women members were illiterates, poor and mostly engaged in domestic work and 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 imported to them by government and non-governmental organizations enabled them to know a little about their roles and duties as a members 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.\(^{29}\)

‘Women in Politics’, (Abha Chauhan, 1998) has described the reservations of seats of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions after the Gujrat Panchayat Act 1993.\(^{30}\)

A study carried by ‘Unnati’ (status of Panchayat 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, 58 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 role 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 Panchayati Raj Institutions in Gujarat has created a process of change.\textsuperscript{31}

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 in Gram Panchayat is 13578, out of elected members are 2168, and out of 649 Zila Parishad member in Tamil Nadu, women members are 216.\textsuperscript{32}

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. The experience suggests that periodical training, orientation and sensitization can help the women leaders to respond to the socio-political challenges in the society, they are to be supported by the organizations and institutions which are working for empowerment of women.\textsuperscript{33}

Decentralized Governance and Planning in Karnataka (N. Sivanna, 1998) History of rural Local Government suggests that Karnataka has a significant bearing on decentralized planning and governance. The Karnataka panchayat Act, 1993, provides for a three tier structure of panchayti Raj with zila panchayat at the district level. Taluk panchayat at intermediary level and Gram panchayats at the village level. While all three panchayats are directly elected bodies\textsuperscript{34}
This study on the position of women in political Institutions with 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 through 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.

Women’s Empowerment through PRI: (Nelima Desmukh, 2005) stated that, the 73rd Amendment Act in Maharashtra has made a powerful impact on women by enabling them to enter in to the decision making sectors.

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

Local Democracy and Development; People’s Campaign for Decentralised Planning in Kerala (T.M. Thomas Isaac and Richard W. Franke, 2000) revealed the 73rd constitutional 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 is an opportunity to lakhs of rural women in Kerala to be encouraged as leaders and decision makers at the grass-root level and to enter in public life.

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. Kerala’s patriarchal institutions has shown itself to be a powerful force against equality.

‘Pradhanis in New Panchayats’ (Sudha Pai 1998) has proved that. The level of women empowerment has been very low and the status of women rural leaders is far from satisfactory level in Uttar Pradesh.
Studies have shown rural women elected to different tiers of Panchayat in Uttar Pradesh felt neglected even after being elected. Most of them are 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. Sudhapai’s study in Meerut District tends to show that illiteracy and dominance of husbands impede women’s participation.\(^{38}\) 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.\(^{38}\)

(R. Letha Kumarie’s 2006) “Women in Politics: Participation and Governance”, discussed that women all over the world were kept out of the socio-political realm as a marginalized section of the society. They are still isolated from the mainstream and subjected to all types of discriminations. They are exploited economically, politically and socially and are excluded from the governance of the nation. This book render a powerful way to understand political socialization of women. Gender gap in political attitudes, women’s political capabilities and patterns of women’s political participation. It also provides comparative information on how women can enhance democracy and good governance, and how to promote the participation and representation of women in political life.\(^{39}\)

“Local self-Government in India”, (V. Venkata Rao and Niru, Hazarika 1980) discussed about the Panchayati raj Institutions and their governance with special reference to Assam. Since 1950s various commissions have been appointed to investigate and recommend measures for the improvement of local administration. The book dealt with all aspects of the subject, both theoretical and practical.\(^{40}\) This book studied about the local-self government of India with special reference to Assam but it did not focus on women in local self government.

“The Assam Panchayati Raj Act with Rules”, (B.K. Ghosh-2008), is an attempt to make up the deficiencies as provided by the 73rd Amendment of the constitution of India, the proposed amendments for reservation of seats for schedule caste, schedule tribes and women, for president, vice-president of Zila Parishad have been formulated in the new Act. This book also dealt with “The Assam Panchayat (Administrative) Rules, 2002”, “The Assam Panchayat (constitution) Rules, 1995” with amendment Rules, 2001, Amendment Rules, 2002 alongwith notifications.\(^{41}\)
This book is concerned only with the rules not with any theory or fact finding research.

Studies reveal that effective women leaders are able to fight for themselves and also against the existing adverse social norms. “They not only have been able to activate the gram sabhas and Panchayats but extract better participation of people in these meetings as compared to the male headed Panchayats. Villagers express that women are more sensitive to their problems and encourage discussions. The agenda of the meetings are more related to the people’s problems women sarpanch as are seen to have made better attendance of the panchas and there is also a change in the attitude of the government officials for the better. Though, the larger picture of women leadership in G.P.s may not very overwhelming, the fact that so many have been able to make a difference and emerge as strong and effective leaders in such a short span with little exposure to the democratic political process, is an indicator of the potential of these women representatives.42

Studies also reveal that there are cases of both effective and weak leaderships. The weak leadership bows down to the anti forces such as the male up-sarpanch, especially when the women belong to either the SC category or do not have a male member in the family. Effective women leadership has shown that these women have to fight for them themselves. But effective women sarpanch has are able to fight existing social norms which otherwise disarm them in becoming effective. At the individual level, education, exposure, initiative, understanding of roles and responsibilities, decision making capacity are the enabling factors while illiteracy, compliance with social restrictions, shyness, weak articulation are some of the inhibiting factors. Positive environment such as family support, cooperation by the fellow Panchayat members, community support, active back-up by government functionaries and proactive role of NGOs function as catalysts while dominant males, dominant caste and gender considerations, indifferent government functionaries, inefficient Panchayat secretary are inhibitors.

**Research gap:**

From the above review of literature, it is clear that a large number of studies have already been undertaken on women empowerment and Panchayati Raj Institutions, but the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in women empowerment and
the impact of women empowerment on Assamese Society has not been studied in any of the work so far. The present study is an attempt to fill up the gap.

**Objectives:**

1) To study the socio-economic background of elected women members in Zila Parishad, Panchayat Samiti and Gaon Panchayat of Nagaon District in Assam.

2) To study the performance of elected women members in the decision making process of Panchayati Raj Institutions and implementation of the decisions.

3) To study the role of women members in the rural development programmes in the district.

4) To examine the perception of women voters about the role of elected women members in Panchayati Raj Institutions in Nagaon District.

5) To examine the impact of reservation of seats for women, and their empowerment on society.

**Research questions:**

This study has the following research questions:-

1. To what extent the reservation of seats for women under the 73rd constitutions Amendment Act has empowered women?

2. How far the women members in Panchayats are successful as administrators in the local self-government?

3. Is there any positive impact of the reservation of seats for women in Panchayats upon the social life of women in society?

**Hypotheses:**

On the basis of the above research question the study will try to test the following hypotheses

1. The Provisions of the 73rd amendment regarding the 33% reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions of the Nagaon district have facilitated the process of Women Empowerment.
2. Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions has made the Panchayati Raj Institutions less corrupt and more transparent, accountable and responsive to the public.

3. Reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions has enabled women population to participate actively in rural development and self-help groups.

Methodology:

The methodology followed in the research is empirical and analytic method. Data have been collected from primary as well as secondary sources. Random sample survey method was followed for the collection of data from the field. A questionnaire schedule has been prepared to ascertain the performance index of elected women members in three tiers of the panchayati Raj Institutions in Nagaon District of Assam.

Source of Data:

1. Primary sources: The primary source includes the interview to the sample respondents with the help of an interview schedule. A part of the unpublished administrative reports of Panchayati Raj Institutions have from the primary source of this study.

2. Secondary sources: Secondary source include the books, journals magazines, papers and others published materials of the political parties and the Government offices of Assam.

Study Area:

Nagaon Zila Parishad have been selected as study area The Universe of the study is the elected women members of PRI’s at the level of three tiers in the district of Nagaon Assam. For sampling apart from 1 (one) Zila Parishad i.e Nagaon Zila Parishad, 10% of the Anchalik Panchayats and 10% of the Gaon Panchayats of Nagaon sadar Sub-Division, Hojai Sub-Division and Kaliabor Sub-Division of Nagaon district have been selected through simple random sampling as study area.
Sample size and selection of Respondents:

In the study area there are three tiers Panchayati Raj system in Assam. This institutions are (a) Gaon Panchayat at the village level (b) Anchalik Panchayat at the block level and (c) Zila Parishad at the district level.

There are one Zila Parishad in the study area, i.e., Nagaon Zila Parishad. Altogether there are 22 elected women zila parishad members and 19 zila parishad male members respectively and all of them have been selected as respondent of the study.

There are 19 Anchalik Panchayats in three sub-division of Nagaon district, (Nagaon sadar sub-division-10, Hojai sub-division-5, and Kalibor sub-division-4) and 10% of the Anchalik Panchayats have been selected through simple random sampling method as study area. Accordingly we have selected 3 Anchalik Panchayats from (Nagaon sadar sub-division-1, Hojai Sub-division-1, and Kalibor sub-division-1) for the study. Altogether there are 17 selected women Anchalik Panchayat members and 14 elected male members respectively and all of them have been selected as respondents.

There are 239 Gaon Panchayats in the study area. In Nagaon sadar sub-division-122, Hojai sub-division-67 and Kalibor sub-division-50) and 10% of the Gaon panchayats have been selected through simple random sampling method as study area. Accordingly we have selected 24 Gaon Panchayats for the study. Altogether there are 120 elected women members and 117 elected male members respectively and all of them have been selected as respondents of the study.

Name of the Zila Parishad :- Nagaon Zila Parishad.

Name of the selected Anchalik Panchayats in Nagaon Sadar Sub-Division :

Dolongghat Anchalik Panchayat.

In Nagaon sadar sub-division there are ten Anchalik Panchayats and out of ten Anchalik Panchayats, 10% of Anchalik Panchayat have been selected through simple random sampling method as study area. 10% of the Anchalik panchayats i.e, one Anchalik panchayat viz, (1) Dolongghat Anchalik panchayat have been selected.
Name of the selected Gaon panchayat in Nagaon Sadar Sub-Division:

In Nagaon sadar sub-division there are one twenty two (122) Gaon panchayats and out of one twenty two (122) Gaon Panchayats 10% of the Gaon Panchayats have been selected through simple random sampling method as study area. 10% of the Gaon panchayats i.e., twelve (12) Gaon panchayats have been selected as study area. Name of the selected G.P. are (1) Hatijujua G.P. (2) Raidongia G.P. (3) Kakamari G.P. (4) Hatichung G.P. (5) Maj Jajari G.P. (6) Aibheti G.P. (7) Jamuguri Kujidah G.P. (8) Dagaon Dhinggaon G.P. (9) Alitangani Jaramari G.P. (10) Kandhulimari G.P. (11) Balikatia G.P. (12) Sonaibera simulati G.P. have been selected as study area.

Name of the selected Anchalik panchayats in Hojai Sub-Division:

Odali Anchalik Panchayat

In Hojai Sub- Division on there are Five Anchalik panchayats, 10% of Anchalik panchayat have been selected through simple random sampling method as study area. 10% of Anchalik panchayat i.e., one Anchalik Panchayat viz, (1) Odali Anchalik Panchayat have been selected.

Name of the selected Gaon Panchayats in Hojai Sub-Division:

In Hojai Sub Division there are sixty seven (67) Gaon panchayats and out of sixty seven(67) Gaon panchayats 10% of the Gaon Panchayats have been selected through simple random sampling method as study area. 10% of the Gaon panchayat i.e., seven Gaon panchayats have been selected. The selected G.P. are (1) No-1 kaki G.P. (2) Puruna Kaki G.P. (3) Odali G.P. (4) Ranipukhuri G.P. (5) Kandura Buragaon G.P. (6) Bamungaon G.P. (7) Ajarbari G.P. have been selected as study area.
Name of the selected Anchalik Panchayats in Kaliabor Sub-Division:

**Kaliabor Anchalik Panchayat**

In Kaliabor Sub Division there are Four Anchalik Panchayat and out of Four Anchalik panchayat 10% of the Anchalik panchayat have been selected through simple random sampling method. 10% of the Anchalik panchayat i.e. one Anchalik Panchayats viz, (1) Kaliabor Anchalik panchayat, have been selected as study area.

**Name of the selected Gaon Panchayats in Kaliabor Sub-Division:**

In Kaliabor Sub-Division there are Fifty (50) Gaon panchayats and out of Fifty(50) Gaon panchayats 10% of the Gaon panchayat have been selected through simple random sampling method. 10% of the Gaon panchayats i.e., Five Gaon panchayats have been selected. The selected G.P. are (1) Kuwaritol G.P. (2) Kuthori G.P. (3) Jakhlabandha G.P. (4) Amguri G.P. (5) Sikoni Borhula, have been selected as study area.

**Organization of the Research:**- The study have been organized into six chapters:

- **CHAPTER-I:** Introduction
- **CHAPTER-II:** Socio-economic and political background of elected women Members in PRIs.
- **CHAPTER-III:** Political participation of the elected women members of PRIs
- **CHAPTER-IV:** Role and level of participation of elected women members
- **CHAPTER-V:** Impact of Reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions
- **CHAPTER-VI:** Conclusion
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