CHAPTER -III

Governance of Women in Panchayat Raj in Indian Context.

The question of women’s share and participation in decision making process had been given a little importance. In the world, the issue of women’s participation in politics began to assume real importance only in the 20th Century. The global concern for women participations was on the surface during 1975 when United Nations declared the decade as the decade of women development and adopted some resolutions in favour of the issue. The Nairobi Conference of 1985 called upon the participating countries to adopt measures for women’s participation in electoral politics through 35% seats in all level of elections.

The UN Human Development Report of 2002 revealed that the women account for less than 14% of the members in the lower houses of parliaments in worldwide. In the whole world only 10 countries were found to have 30% of women members in their respective parliaments. Another 10 countries were found to have no women representatives in their parliaments. During 1995-2000, 103 countries found to have increased the number of women’s participation in their national electoral politics. 17 countries found to make no changes in the field of women’s participation in politics. In 40 countries, the situation declined from the earlier position. The position of women in electoral representation was also very low during independence in India.

During the year 1929, Mahatma Gandhi said, “Women must have votes and equal legal status. But the problem does not end there. It only commences at the point where, women begin to effect the political deliberations of the nation”. The Ministry of Panchayat Raj, in its mid-term Appraisal Report\(^1\) (2006-2007) on the status of panchayat raj in India, claims that there are more elected representatives in India than the rest of the world. The report also claims that ‘no less than one million women are in our panchayat raj institutions, comprising 37% of all those elected and as rising as high as 54% in Bihar which has 50% reservation for women’.
Undoubtedly, the women are now being elected to local council in an unprecedented numbers as a result of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment which mandate the reservation of seats and many other advantages for women in local government. Since the year 1994 the country has experienced several round of panchayat election and thus it is necessary to assess the impact of women’s entry into the formal structure of government from the point of view of their role in grassroots governance.

Scholars are divided on the issue that whether the New Panchayat system has been a success or not with reference to the mandatory inclusion of large women in rural governance. In the opinion of Devaki (1996)², Panchayat Raj Institution in India is a success story which lies in the possibility of women transforming the state within. This new arrangement provides the first step to converting grassroots leadership into state leadership which may be felt to be the key to ushering in equitable and people-led development. But the study by Poornima and Vysulu(1999)³ does not agree to call the new panchayat a complete success. Some people make synthesis of these divergent views on the issue. As Mohinder (2003) says, ‘the role of women in the socio economic and political development of the country is great but their contributions are either overlooked or deliberately minimized by the local power brookers’⁴.

Grassroots Governance is all about the process of how local government bodies ensure that they are doing the right things, in the right way, for the right people in a timely inclusive, open, honest, accountable and transparent manner. It comprises the systems and processes for the direction and control of local authorities and resources through which they account to, engage with and lead their communities to the desired path of development. In order to grow such a system it is necessary that people take part in the political process. The process of participation is complex and comprehensively inclusive. It is complex in the sense that it is not possible to assume that all sections of population take effectively in the political process of a country. But at the same time it is inclusive because it has to ensure minimum representation from every inevitable section such as women population.

Good Governance and Panchayat Raj : Role of Women in Tripura.
Women constitute almost half of the total population in any society but they are less mobile than men are. So unless specific opportunities are created women will get it very difficult to effectively participate in the existing political process which has been a male dominating one. The reasons for these are gender specific. Moreover, women have domestic responsibilities which puts limit on their rights to political participation. Nalini (2003)\(^5\) opines that in our social system ‘women are inclined to perform duties, sacrifice and entertain almost every members of family in different forms, which in itself violates some basic human rights of women.

So, when woman comes to politics she is not free from those duties and so called sacrifices and that hinders her from being politically mature’. No doubt, grassroots democracy has been promoted in India by number of constitutional amendments from the centre. Provision of reservation for women is there not because of any mass movement of people. It was also not because women projected for their due share in political power. It happened because of the pressure of law arose out of the very spirit of constitution.

Therefore, it happened almost suddenly and women were not prepared by this development. This development did not allow women to be aware of the complex factors of political participation. To quote Kumar\(^6\) the ‘conscious-rising approach asserts that women’s empowerment require awareness of complex factors causing women’s subordination’ but such an awareness of understanding the complex issue of participation is almost absent in the women.

It is more evident from Datta and Ghosh\(^7\) (2002), who have found out that women members cannot play their role properly in the panchayat mechanism mainly due to the low level literacy rate among the women members which made them dependant on the implementing bureaucrats in regards to many development programs. They also opines that quite a lot of women entered in panchayat politics due to reservation policy, but back up support from both rural level administration, block level bureaucracy and family is inadequate.
Economic deprivation and lack of exposure in understanding their position in society also made them almost inactive to discharge their duties as people’s representative. Class and caste identity of elected women members were also responsible for poor realization of new panchayat mechanism. As Mehta (2002)\(^8\) pointed out that deeply developed division of population according to caste, religions and the groups of people formed according to different political parties had been the main cause behind poor functioning of women members in their respective panchayats. He also mentioned that majority of the women members have been either motivated or forced to contest the election. As in the most cases women take part in politics not with their political maturity or self spontaneity, so they allow their male counterpart to do them some favours.

But, in most cases women are found unorganized and un-empowered in placing their demands and discussing issues in the meetings, which amounts to the official ignorance of some crucial issues. The lack of proper empowerment among the women made them to leg behind the men folk.

No doubt in the fact that empowerment of socially and politically marginal groups especially women is an essential precondition of the success of rural governance. Simply, ‘empowerment’ is the development of skills and abilities of people to enable them to manage themselves towards a given responsibility. However the qualitative elements of empowerment as suggested by Rahaman(1990)\(^9\), indicate that empowerment can best be realized in the organized self-control of under privileged people. Social awareness and a sense of self-reliance also lead a powerless community towards empowerment.

Empowerment may assume a variety of nature which may be group specific or situation specific. Sushma(1998)\(^10\) referred nine categories of empowerment which are: empowerment for marginal groups; process-oriented nature of empowerment; holistic nature of empowerment; empowerment for dealing with strategic rather than practical gender interests; cognitive, psychological and economic components of empowerment;
empowerment for decentralization; empowerment for understanding the native character of literacy that empowers; context-specific nature of empowerment and empowerment for sustainability.

However, Kumar (2007)\textsuperscript{11} has mentioned three approaches to empowering women in South Asia. They are \textit{integrated} development; \textit{economic} empowerment and \textit{consciousness-rising}. The integrated approach views women’s development as fundamental to advancement of family and community and that help women gain self-esteem. This approach precedes either by forming women’s collectives that engage in development activities and tackle social problems.

The economic approach attributes women’s subordination to lack of economic power. It focuses on improving women’s control over material resources and strengthening women’s economic security. The conscious-rising approach asserts that women’s empowerment require awareness of complex factors causing women’s subordination.

But Vijaylaxmi (1997)\textsuperscript{12} believes that in order to achieve the process of empowerment threefold strategy should be followed which are: \textit{education} that promotes positive self image and self confidence among women and develops the ability to think critically; \textit{skill development and employment} for economic self sufficiency; and \textit{increasing awareness} that promotes women’s participation in the process of social change. Dandekar (1998)\textsuperscript{13} has also described empowerment as a multifaceted process that involves four parallel aspects, which are: the women’s \textit{economic/resource base}; the public/\textit{political arena allowed to her} by the society; \textit{family structure}, the strength and limitation it imposes on her; and psychological/ ideological sense about women in her society, which in turn shapes her own perception of herself and the option she allows herself to consider.
In regards to women empowerment it is argued that there are five levels of equality by which women development should be measured. As such Longwe\textsuperscript{14} prescribes few yardsticks for women’s equality measurement, for example; 

- \textit{welfare} which addresses that basic need of women should be ensured. At this point women are only the passive recipients of welfare benefits.
- \textit{Access}, which involves equality of access to resources, such as education, opportunities, land and credit etc. The path of empowerment is initiated when women recognize their lack of access to those resources.
- \textit{Conscientization}; it means there must be recognition that the problem of women stem from inherent structural and institutional discrimination, so it is necessary to douse structural or institutional gender inequalities.
- \textit{Participation} is the point where women are taking decision individually or collectively alongside men equally and that will lead to greater control.
- \textit{Control}; here the balance of power between men and women is equal and neither party has dominance over other.

In the entire process of new panchayat system most of the theoretical and conceptual elements may be found absent, but none could refuse the reality that the sheer number of women that PRI has brought into the political system has made a great difference. By the year 1994, 330,000 women had entered politics as a result of the constitutional change (73\textsuperscript{rd} Amendment), which is now rises to more than one million. The inclusion of large number of women in various levels of politics, from 4-5% before PRI to 25-40% after PRI, has brought both quantitative and qualitative differences. As Mazumder\textsuperscript{15} points out that ‘gradually women are becoming aware of their victimization, exploitation and marginalization’ and can understand the complex factors of politics.

But the increasing number of representation of women has not automatically led to raise the profile of all of women’s needs and interests in the policy agenda. Sometimes it is found that elected women act as proxies for men’s opinions at the councils, being advised by their male relatives. ‘The reservation of seats for woman in panchayat raj created both interest and anxiety about its effectiveness because of their seclusion, self-disinterest and dependency in different area’\textsuperscript{16}. Along with the success of the PRI the reservation policy also
leads to many myths on its effectiveness. ‘One-third reservation for women lead to some predictions about their entry and likely performance\textsuperscript{17}:

- Their passivity and disinterest in political interest affect political institutions.

- Only the well to do, upper strata women will come through reservation.

- Women’s political connectivity-only kin of powerful politicians will enter panchayats.

- Women are only proxy-namesake members and they do not participate in the panchayats.

Contesting these views, Devaki\textsuperscript{18} argued that in spite of those myths it is now a fact that a good number of ‘women are in politics because of their leadership qualities or feminist consciousness and visible changes in the articulation of ideas and leadership qualities exhibited by these women have been noted in the different priorities and different values espoused by them in politics’. At the same time, it is also recognized that in the successful journey of women in the mainstream of politics there are also obstacles to the realization of PRI’s transformative potentials. Although pre-independent and pre-colonial period, women were steeped in the den of socio-political and economic ignorance and deprivation. After independence, consistent efforts have been made from central level to engender the political process, institutions and issues, which are proved to be very critical to the existing development. Recognizing the traditional maladies, India has passed laws that make it mandatory for local government to include women in the political process.
Women in Grassroots Governance: Indian Context

The establishment of India as a ‘Republic’ in 1947 brought to women the promise of adult franchise and equality of opportunity in social, economic and political activities. The idea was that every adult woman irrespective of their different identities would function as an equal citizen and as an individual in the process of nation building.

The rights as enshrined in the constitution were to serve as instruments for achieving equality of status and opportunities in all spheres of life. Sinha (2004) argues that ‘this equality is inseparable from active political participation, not only using the right to vote but also power sharing, profit sharing, joint decision making and policy making at all level of government’. So, In India, women got the right to vote as a result of the universal adult suffrage as incorporated in our constitution. The right came to them without any struggle. ‘It was the natural outcome of our democracy and the product of the widespread participation by our women folk in the independence movement led by Gandhiji’.

It is a reality now that more than a million women, who have been elected to grassroots governance by the process of classical democracy sustained with universal adult franchise, constitutional changes, and political party campaigns in a multi-party system; and mandatory elections in every five years, are transforming the political system from within. The idea of women’s inclusion and its formal realization in relation the present story of their participation in the political governance started just immediately after national independence in the year 1945. Here we tend to focus some of the milestone events that contributed to the women to be the part of mainstream politics of India.

The formal involvement of women in the national political process started as early as in the year 1946, when 16 women were included in the 150 members Constituent Assembly. It was then the year 1957, when Panchayat Raj got introduced for the first time, the concept was to co-opt two women “who are interested in work among women and children”
(Balwantrai Mehta Committee Report). In 1961 Maharashtra Zila Parishad and Panchayat Samiti Act of 1961 provided for the “nomination of one or two women” to the panchayat bodies “in case women were not elected”.

1973 West Bengal Panchayat Act, also provided for co-opting 2 women. In 1976, The Report of the Committee on the Status of Women (CSWI) demanded representation of women in Panchayat as well as the establishment of “All-Woman Panchayat at village level”. In 1978, in Maharashtra Panchayat, only 6 women were elected although 314 were nominated. In most parts of India, women were brought into panchayat only through co-option.

A remarkable story begins with a law passed in 1983 in the southern state of Karnataka. This law included a clause that 25% of the seats in local councils would be reserved for women. The election to these councils would be reserved for women. Elections under this Act were delayed for various reasons and could only be held in 1987, the Janata Dal (the party that won the election) called a convention of all the 56,000 elected representatives, of which 25% were women. It was a wonderful sight to see 14,000 elected out of 30,000 contested women in the audience, shining bright, 80% of whom, were participating in politics for the first time, thrilled with their victory at the lower rungs of governance.

In 1998, Elections were held in Uttar Pradesh for 74,000 Village Sabhas, the first elections for 22 years. There was provision made for the co-option of only one woman. 1991 Orissa Panchayat Samiti provided for “not less than one third of the total number of seats to be reserved for women”. Elections were held in 1992 and over 22,000 women were elected. In Kerala District Council elections, while 30% seats were reserved for women, 35% were won by women. In 1994, in Madhya Pradesh, 150,500 women were elected to village, block and zila panchayats. 33% of seats were reserved for women in village panchayat and women captured 43% of the seats (Devaki)21.
Besides, the history of women inclusion in rural governance we may look into the fact that how women have been struggling to find their due share in the national governance mechanism of the country. Women participation in panchayat raj undoubtedly boasted up by the 73rd Amendment but this is not applicable to the case of parliamentary election and that is we see a continuous poor participation of women in national political process.

### Table 3.1: Women in National Governance

**Position of Women in the General Election to the House of People (1952-2009)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Election to Lok Sabha</th>
<th>Total Number of Seats</th>
<th>Women Contestant</th>
<th>Women Elected</th>
<th>Percentage of Women Seats</th>
<th>Percentage of Elected Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>489</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>494</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>22</td>
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<td>48.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>31</td>
<td>6.27</td>
<td>46.97</td>
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<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>520</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>5.57</td>
<td>43.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>518</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>24.41</td>
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<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>542</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>27.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>542</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5.16</td>
<td>19.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1989</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5.34</td>
<td>14.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>7.10</td>
<td>11.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>599</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>7.36</td>
<td>06.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>7.91</td>
<td>15.69</td>
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<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>9.02</td>
<td>17.25</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>8.29</td>
<td>12.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>9.29</td>
<td>16.23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Election Commission; India, New Delhi-2008
The diagram shows the comparison between total no. of Seats in Parliament, total number of women contestants, total number of women elected, percentage of women seats and percentage of elected women in Lok Sabha. Since first Parliamentary Election in 1952 to the last Election in 2009, it is found that percentage of seats for women varies from 4.45% to 9.29%, which is very low.
This diagram also shows the number of women contestants in the Lok Sabha Elections since 1952 to 2009. It is seen that percentage of women seats is very low but the percentage of their electoral success is comparatively high.
### Table 3.2: Comparative Position of Men and Women in the General Election to the House of People (1952-2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of election in Lok Sabha</th>
<th>Total Number of Seats</th>
<th>Total Contestant</th>
<th>Total Male Contestant</th>
<th>Total Male Electe</th>
<th>Percentage of Male Victory</th>
<th>Total Female Contestant</th>
<th>Total Female Electe</th>
<th>Percentage of Female Victory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>489</td>
<td>1874</td>
<td>*-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>494</td>
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<td>494</td>
<td>1985</td>
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<td>46.97</td>
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<tr>
<td>1967</td>
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<td>491</td>
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<td>43.28</td>
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<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>518</td>
<td>2784</td>
<td>2698</td>
<td>497</td>
<td>18.42</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24.41</td>
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<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>542</td>
<td>2439</td>
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<td>1980</td>
<td>542</td>
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<td>11.45</td>
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<td>1984</td>
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<td>500</td>
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<td>162</td>
<td>42</td>
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<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>6160</td>
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<td>514</td>
<td>08.62</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>14.65</td>
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<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>8668</td>
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<td>506</td>
<td>06.06</td>
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<td>11.35</td>
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<tr>
<td>1996</td>
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<td>503</td>
<td>03.76</td>
<td>599</td>
<td>40</td>
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<td>1998</td>
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<td>4750</td>
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<td>500</td>
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<td>2004</td>
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<td>09.80</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>16.23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Election Commission; India, New Delhi-2008

Both the tables (3.1 & 3.2) show that the women have never got adequate representation at national level. They have not been considered to be nominated by the major political parties to contest parliamentary election. Nor they have acquired enough power to contest independently. But the fact is true that whenever contested either with support from major political parties or independently, percentage of female victory has
always been remain higher than male victory; as we see the female victory was 48.89% in 1957 against 32.02% of male victory and 12% against 09.80% in 2004 general election. More are visible in the following diagrams:

Fig.- 3.3 : Comparative scenario of male and female seats and percentage of their success in national governance (Lok Sabha).

The Chart shows the total number of seats, total number of contestant, total number of male contestant, total number male elected, percentage of male victory, total number of female contestant, total number of female elected and percentage of female victory in the lower House of Parliament. In every level of the points as mentioned, women representatives leg much behind the male representatives.
Fig.-3.4 : Comparative scenario of male and female seats and percentage of their success in national governance, (Lok Sabha)

Fig.-3.5 : Comparative scenario of male and female seats and percentage of their victory in national governance (Lok Sabha).
Both the above diagrams show the similar situation as it is clear that since the first parliamentary election for Lok Sabha in 1952 to the last election in 2009, percentage of female victory has always been remain much higher than the percentage of male victory.

Although women were given less importance in national governance mechanism, but scenario of women in village governance in India has been a bit different. From the whole discussion in this chapter, it may be concluded that even before the 73rd Constitutional Amendment came into force, many states in India had introduced panchayat raj with reservation of seats for women, although the percentage of reservation for women in panchayat raj varied from state to state. West Bengal had the highest percentage of reservation of seats for women which was 33% and while Madhya Pradesh had made the provision of only 10%. But after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment almost all the states have changed their respective legislations to meet its innovative provisions which have boasted unprecedented number of women to come into the electoral politics of panchayat raj in India. From the study it has been found that the State of Tripura has fully respected the provisions of this milestone constitutional amendment regarding promotion of panchayat raj system. History of evolution of panchayat raj in Tripura and changing pattern of involvement of women in the system may be discussed in the chapter to come.
References:


17. ibid, p-807.


