CHAPTER VI

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In early Manipur under the monarchical system of Government; the administration was highly centralised. The king administered his country in pursuance of the system called, “Lallup”. The entire Meitei population was divided into ‘Pannas’. The Pannas are like districts or sub-division in a modern state.

Later on, the process of decentralisation started in the administration of Manipur. Local self government was introduced in Manipur only after independence in 1947. The responsibility of administration in the Hill was vested in the Maharaja in council and exercised in accordance with the Manipur state constitution Act, 1947 and provisions of the Manipur State Hill People (Administration) Regulation Act, 1947. In the valley local bodies-Gram Sabha, Gram Panchayats and Nayaya Panchayat were introduced in 1960, under the U.P Panchayat Raj Act, 1947.
The people were not happy with the lowest level of panchayats namely Gram Panchayats and Nyaya Panchayats. They demanded for the introduction of higher level panchayats like panchayat Samit and Zilla Parisiahds. Accordingly, to the Manipur Panchayati raj Act, 1975 was passed by the Manipur Legislative Assembly. The Act, came to operate on 10th January 1978. Thus two tier system of panchayat namely Gram Panchayat and panchayat Samithi were introduced. As many as there were 107 Gram Panchayats, 37 Nyaya Panchayats, and 6 Panchayat Samithes. But there was no Zilla parishad at that time. The Act, was made reservation of one seat in the Panchayats for the first time under the provision 15 clause 3. So, many women were come up to participate in Manipur Panchayati Raj system. The reservation given to women in the Act, directly encouraged the women folk to join the electoral process at the panchayat level.

Then the new Manipur panchayati Raj Act, 1994 set up with the contained provisions according to the 73rd Amendment Act, with same spirit and its original intention. The Act was passed by the legislative Assembly of Manipur on 24th June 1994.

The Act has provided two tier system of Panchayat at grass-root level i.e. Gram Panchayat (GP) at village level and Zilla Parishads (ZP) at District
level. There is no provision for Panchayt Samithi at the intermediate level because of population of Manipur is below 20 lakhs. The Act, has provided reservation of seats for women not less than one third of the total number of seats including SCs and STs to be filled by direct election in every G.P. To study the political participation of women at the grass root level in Manipur, we should go deeper into the socio-economic status of women in society.

Women play a key role in development process both in the context of the family and in the society at large including its economy and social system. Manipuri women had been playing responsible and constructive role in the society. They took responsibility of the running of their families in the absence of their menfolk who used to render their service to the rulers of the state under the system of "Lallup". In the early 18th century during the Seven years of war with Burma from 1819 to 1826 the member of menfolk was substantially reduced and caused enormous economic hardships in the state. Such a type of situation obliged the womenfolk to come forward and play a responsible and productive role in the society. Even today they have inherited their social responsibility.

In Manipur women are not only taking important role in the family but also outside the family, in the cultural and religious areas. It may be said
that women and religion are two inseperable things in society. The
worshipping of family God, Sanamahi, is usually done by the eldest female
members of the family. The Manipuri women had also contributing
important role in the field of culture. The success of Manipuri dance may
partly be due to the role played by women in the field of dance. It is said that
a girl, as soon as she is born, know how to dance. Women are contributing
not only in the field of dance drama but also in the field of the literature.
Among the early women writers mention may be made of Thoibi, Kh.
Promodini, M.K Binodini etc. M.K. Binodini won sahitya Akademy award
in 1979, Thoibi Devi was given sahitya Akademy award in 1989 for her
translation work.

The women in addition to family, culture and religious duties, used to
supplement their family income sometime by weaving and selling the home
made products outside family. The selling and buying of home products like
vegetable, handlooms products etc. has become the regular feature of
Manipur women. At present in addition to the women market at
khwairamband Bazar, there are many women markets developing in every
nook and corner of Manipur.
In the history of Manipur we have studied prominent women from monarchical period till the introduction of the democratic government in 1948. The role of these women in the political history of Manipur is also quite remarkable. Linthoingambi in 1443 was the Queen who fought fearlessly against the enemy in the absence of her husband, the king of Manipur. She was also able to maintain the political supremacy of the Meiteis. It shows the women of royal families were given the right to administer the state and participated in the decision making process concerning the political affairs of the state. Women, particularly the members of the royal family played a very important role in maintaining good relationship with neighbouring countries or principalities.

The heroic roles played by Tangjakhombi (1652-1666), Kuranganayami (1769) Induprabha (1804-1831) proved that women of royal families were endowed with courageous qualities and enjoyed more or less equal status with men. They took vital role in the administration of the state.

The common women as a collective force had also played an important role in the political affairs of the state. Since ancient period, women in groups came out and agitated against the authorities if their policies and programmes affect the interest of the people. Women always
worked for the common interest and for the welfare of the people. The women's agitations 1904 and 1939 were against the malpractices in the administration of the British authority. They strongly agitated against the wrong policies of the British authority.

The ordinary common women especially the urban market women asserted their political rights from the grass-root level and had given a political direction to the people of Manipur during the British period. The people of Manipur became conscious of their democratic rights after the Second women movement, 1939 and Second world war 1939-1945. They strongly demanded for the introduction of democratic government in Manipur.

In 1960 modern panchayat system was introduced in Manipur for the first time under the U.P Panchayat Raj Act, 1947 and elected of Panchayat was conducted in the year 1946. Women participation in the panchayat election as a voter and candidate increased in higher number in subsequent panchayat elections. The female voters who belong to the age group of 25 to 45 years age are more energetic and take interest in casting their votes than the older ones. The women take more interest to elect the right candidate of their area than to select anyone. They are found selecting their candidates on
the basis of good personality and who has done good work for their area. Educated people have elected the right and perfect candidate in the election. Education is a very important factor in determined the voting behaviour of the people in panchayat elections. The occupation and economic status of the voters influenced the voting behaviour of the village people. The farmer and women vendors participate in high number in casting vote than others because they participate in the social activities frequently. They know all the candidates who contested in the panchayat elections. They met the candidates directly and were able to understand the nature of candidates.

Women not only participated actively as a voter but also they participate as a candidate in the panchayat elections after the 33 percent seat reservation. Women started to participate as a candidate in the panchayat elections as soon as modern panchayat system was introduced in Manipur. In the first election very less number of women candidates was contested without any reservation of seats. The 1964 election to the panchayat had only four (4) women candidates contested in the Gram Panchayat. But no women candidate was in Nyaya Panchayat. Slowly women participation had increased in the panchayat. The number of women candidates had increased eight (8) in the Second election of Panchayat, 1970.
After the implementation of Manipur Panchayati Raj Act, 1975, the women participation as a candidate in the panchayat elections had increased. The Act provided one seat reservation for women in the panchayats. The reservation of seats provided in the Act, directly encouraged the womenfolk to join the electoral process at the panchayat level. The number of women candidates in the reserved wards was much larger than the women candidate in the unreserved wards.

In the fifth election of Panchayat the number of blocks had increased to nine. So the number of women elected in the panchayathad also increased. And large numbers of elected women panchayat member are from the reserved category.

The 73rd Amendment Act is a major event in the history of democratic decentralisation in Manipur. The Act was a directive for Manipur government to set-up the new Manipur Panchayati Raj Act, 1994.

The Act, have contained provisions similar to the 73rd Amendment Act with the same spirit and its original intention. The Act was passed by the Legislative Assembly of Manipur on 24th June 1994. The Act has provided two tier system of panchayati Raj at the grass-root level i.e. Gram Panchayat at village level and Zilla parishad at District level. There is no provision for
panchayat samiti at the intermediate level due to lesser number of population. The Act, 1994 has provided one third reservation of seats for women.

As a result of the reservation in the Act, the participation of women at the grass root level had increased tremendously. Women who were surrounded by traditional norms started to participate in the electoral politics of the Panchayats, as a candidate and voters.

The 73rd constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 has enhanced the prospect of women participation in the panchayti Raj Institution in Manipur. From the study it is found that most of the women respondents belong to general (Meitei) and some of them belong to schedulr tribe. Schedule caste and Muslims. The selected women respondents are relatively middle aged group. They are mostly married women. The absence of unmarried women in politics may be due to traditional attitudes, custom etc. Most of the elected women respondents belong to the joint families. Joint family usually serves as a predictive enterprise, a moral the community and support group. It also provides variety of social services to the old aged members or at the time of illness which have been taken our in west by social institutions.
Leadership among the elected members of the Gram panchayats and Zilla parishads depend on the caste and community background of their families. Those elected women are found to belong to higher caste, economically sound and having political support. Leadership is found among the elected women members who belong to Meitei community.

Overall educational background of women respondents was somewhat high if not higher. Education provides elected women the means to move from passivity to assertiveness and with it women will be able to participate proactively in social economic and political process which affects their lives. Thus educated women would be able to control the socio-economic and political matters which affect their lives.

The occupation of women respondents is another important variable in determining women’s socio-economic status. Economic independence helps in freeing women from economic and psychological control of families and it helps them in allowing group activity and aggregation of group interest and greater access to decision making. Though entered for the first time in local politics, the elected women respondents will be able to enjoy greater power and influence in policy making at the panchayat and Zilla parishad level.
Regarding information relating to overall awareness of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, providing reservation of seats for women in the local bodies, majority of women respondent have a little knowledge.

The major reason for not knowing the provisions of the constitutional Amendment Act, could be the lack of training, orientation programme etc. so the training of panchayat members especially the women members is very much necessary to make them aware of the Amendment Act and its importance. Training help to identify the needs and problems of people and it also helps the elected women for taking correct decisions in panchayats. Training help the women respondents to understand the new programme, projects and implementation process. Training have also changed the attitude and behaviour of the elected members and increased their skill to perform their duties more effectively. So, Training is the most essential element for skill development. In effect all discussion of women’s public participation revolves around how and to what extent they are adjusting public role with their foremost obligations to family. In view of absence of requisite legislation providing conducive context and proper awareness, family support and also proper awareness, family support and also for strong cultural stigma panchayat women are more likely to be entrapped in a predicament.
Political participation is a complex phenomenon and essentially an outcome of social economic Political and psychological preconditions and circumstances. Despite their numerical strength Women have the rudimentary position in political process simply because everything is conducive to be so.

The ingrained discrimination is manifested in personal, political, systematic and structural differentiation between men and women and it is one of the cardinal causes of invisibility of women in politics.

The participation of women in Panchayat decision making process in terms of attendance, opinion expressed and issue rose in the panchayati Raj meetings, confidence reposed is note worthy. They are not meek or mute spectators or ornaments in decision making process, rather likely force to reckon with. Moreover, they maintained contact with villagers, took villagers demand into cognisance and tried to deliver whatever possible for them. But actual reflection of their views in decisional out put in the panchayts left much to be desired even though harping on exclusion of their points in the decisions so arrived at, might have bearing in the long run.
Women respondents cited lack of reservation as the cause of their absence in earlier elections and Panchayat bodies. Statutory prodding has put forth the political opening for roughly three-fourth of woman respondents who are most likely to embrace and pursue their political career. In other words, without reservation they could not endear political career. Thus statutory reservation has become the way for women to participate in panchayat process.

The apparent proficient participation of women in the district should not be construed as a success story in all embracing sense. The triumph is to that extent that they are not dummy, docile or dormant. Panchayat women are in a quandary. Induction of women in political process has won merits for various reasons; (i) with the felt need of their basic problems they are likely to contribute their perspective in the development process and decisions, (ii) influence others to come and work for women specific problems and motivate fellow women to stand for women's concerns.

At the grass-roots level, the bureaucrats like village level workers have accepted the women's role in the panchaayat though reluctantly. In spite of various provisions made by the Government to enlist women's participation in panchayat and make bureaucracy sensitized towards the
women, the village level worker most of the time ignores these rules. They only want to interact with their male relatives or counterparts.

As women see administration as the power game and male dominated, they are hesitant, less confident and scared in interacting with them, especially at the higher level. It is very important to break the cultural barriers for women’s participation in politics by deconstructing the cultural construction of politics as the male preserve.

The attitude of the bureaucrat towards the women representatives is a very important variable in their participation in panchayats. Whenever the officials are gender sensitise, rural development oriented, less dogmatic and rigid, the women should be encouraged to come out of the social cultural barriers and play effective role.

The voluntary organisation have played vital role in the pre election, election and the Post election periods of the Panchayti Raj Institutions in the rural areas of Manipur. In the pre-election period the members of the voluntary organisations working in the villages can make the villager aware of the role of Panchayati Raj Institution for the development of the village.
The members can also mobilise youths, woman and old people in the villages for their active participation in election and caste their votes.

Voluntary organisations can also conscientise the villagers not to sell their collective decisions made in village meetings, for money offered by contesting candidates in election and for physical and muscle power shown or threats given by local anti-social and economic infrastructure in the village.

The voluntary organisation can also take up awareness and capacity building programmes for the villages that are the members of Gram Sabha and help the members of Gram Panchayats in assessing the needs of the villagers through meetings, socio-economic surveys etc. Likewise the non-governmental organisations also work for the welfare of the rural poor. They also organise programmes in the locality with a brand of integrated rural development which takes consideration of the rural people.

Section 243 G of the 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 envisaged Panchayats as institution of self-government, meaning thereby that they would enjoy functional, financial and administrative autonomy. But the study reveals that the elected representatives are fighting for the devolution of power and for financial and administrative autonomy. The panchayat in
reality have no autonomy to formulate or even implement their development agenda. They are hardly, given any importance in the process of the formulation, implementation and monitoring of plans.

A close co-operation and co-ordination network is to be established among various levels of panchayts to provide the government and the members not only with information of the activities of the panchayats but legislation relating to their functioning. Another point persistently brought to attention by woman members needs serious consideration. Particularly at the G.P. level, women respondents have lower economic standing and background; they are also engaged in subsistence works. For discharging their duties as members of the Gram Panchayats they have to sacrifice economically. Taking into consideration their grievances, some extra allowances may be provided for women members.

The importance and requirement of training are felt in every job for equipping the personnel to discharge their assigned duties in an efficient and effective manner. For the woman panchayat members, training will give greater impact because of their lack of exposure to public affairs and public dealings. Intensive orientation cum training programme is continuously to be organised.
- The women sarpanches and Parmukhs should be involved in the district level planning committee.

- There should be clear demarcation of powers between the bureaucrats and elected representatives.

- There should be constant direct link between the state line department heads and the PRIs, which should also include the periodic exchange of notes between them.

- There is need for arranging interactions between PRI and non PRI departments for better co-ordination and understanding between elected representatives and the non-PRI departments such as police, health, irrigation etc.

- The women groups like self-help groups should be involved in the various committees of the Panchayats so that the elected women representatives get support and empowerment.

- The women members should be encouraged and their work should be appreciated by recognizing their contribution.

- The status of women has to be improved within the family by giving equal property rights, land rights etc. This will also improve their status within the community and strengthen her position in the decision making process particularly at the Panchayat level.
Reservation of seats for women section of society has revolutionised at the grass root level power structure. Women have to empower themselves participate effectively in the political process because the decisions at the local government level have profound effects on the problems of women which might lead them to take up active role in public life.

The lack of the independent source of finance has also crippled the panchayts, they are reduced to merely implementing agencies of the state and centre sponsored schemes. The Gram Panchayats get funds only from the centrally sponsored schemes. But the state shared fund is released to the panchayats at the end of work. The PRIs required three ‘F’s that is fund, functions and functionaries are found tacking in the case of the Panchayats in Manipur. So, due to lack of the three ‘Fs’ women members would not be able to work effectively in the panchayts.

Thus, the performance of women in panchayats has to be investigated and adjudged in wider context with certain parameters such as panchayat process and political dynamics. Functionally PRI provides the compass in which the members have to aspire and accomplish their role. Panchayats are also inseparable part of wider political process and contention or expectation from woman panchayat members. Out of proper context and perspective would only be misleading and it would underservigly led to the crisis of acceptability and vulnerability.