CHAPTER III

SOME ISSUES RELATED TO EMPOWERMENT AND WOMEN IN INDIA

Empowerment of Women and Gender Equity

The social and economic roles of women have developed through age-old traditions, religious practices and social mores. The women internalize those roles from their childhood to conform to the norms prescribed by the male dominated society. In traditional societies like India, this is made easier by denying women some of the essential inputs for achieving their individual potentials. Thus, they suffer from inadequate nutrition and healthcare and face lack of access to education and other resources. Those are coupled with restrictions imposed on them to participate in economic activities outside their homes or to interact freely in the society and strong regulation of their conduct within the household. Due to strong cultural conditioning the woman, as the mother-in-law, themselves speak in the voice of the patriarchs. All those make them to accept the subordinate position and to maintain the ‘culture of silence’. They are compelled to justify the patriarchal social order by drawing examples from various female characters projected as ideal women in the social myths. Thus men and women face widely different experiences, one as the dominant and the other as the dependent, in the society. This is achieved by enforcing division of labour, defining appropriate social roles for women, confining women in the domestic sphere, male domination in inheritance of property, ascription of different disabilities to women and prescribing various social practices for them. The difference in enjoying powers between men and women is made legitimate by social construction or even by legislation. In the process of such structuration and gender role stereotyping, women are relegated to lower social-status (Singha Roy, 1995). Empowerment of women, therefore, is essentially changing the prevailing gender relations in favour of women. Such relations are characterized by differential access to social, economic and
Women can gain more power through organized bargaining in different spheres starting from within their household as well as outside the household. The process of empowerment of women, therefore, starts from appreciation of gender relations that exists within and outside the household by reflecting on their experiences and to bargain, in an organized manner, to change such relations in favour of women. Thus critical consciousness about existing gender relations and how those relations have been constructed in the society to influence different aspects of the life of women is an essential component for empowerment of women. This has to be followed by acquiring ability to organize and bargain for changing those relations for achieving equity with men.

Achieving equity with men by women should be judged in terms of their respective capabilities and functionings. As discussed earlier, capabilities measure the extent of freedom one enjoys to choose an achievable set of functionings and the latter is the actual combinations of doings and beings, which are achieved. There is wide divergence between men and women, particularly in traditional societies like India, in terms of their capabilities and functionings.

**Empowerment for Augmentation of Capabilities and Functionings**

Larger capability space for women entails more freedom of choice out of a wider set of possible functionings. In traditional societies like India, the possible set of functionings for women is very limited. They are allowed to perform mostly reproductive jobs within the domestic sphere. Their socialization centres round internalizing values what are good for a housewife and they develop mostly those skills that are relevant for the domestic sphere. Lower level of education, pressure of domestic works and poor access to the market leave little scope for their participating in activities outside the domestic sphere. All these severely restrict the possible set of 'beings' and 'doings' by women. The situation is worse in the rural area where the market is very small.
in size and there is little growth of economic and social institutions. In fact, economic activities of rural women are mostly restricted to participating in agricultural and allied activities, to work as maidservants or to get engaged in some other works, which are graded as quite low in the job market and not preferred by men. There is little growth of organized sector in the rural area and whatever jobs are available in this sector, like working as a primary school teacher, is mostly cornered by men. So, women have very limited options in participating in economic activities (Duvury, 1989). The traditional social institutions are male dominated and their membership is also very limited. Modern social institutions based on new professions or other common interests are yet to grow in rural areas. So, women in rural areas get hardly any scope to participate in any social activity and thereby develop new roles outside the domestic sphere and achieve some higher level of functionings. In political sphere also, there was very little participation of women till the 73rd and the 74th Amendment of the constitution. New space has been created there exclusively for women by those amendments. However, women are occupying those spaces more due to legal compulsion and such participation by women will not be effective without gaining more power in the economic and social spheres as well as their political mobilization. Therefore, creations of new space in social and economic spheres, which can be occupied by women and their mobilization are essential to increase their possible set of functionings.

Although women remain busy the whole day in performing various reproductive activities but when judged by 'beings' and 'doings' their achievement is very limited. The situation is made worse by assigning lower value to their contributions. Their agency aspects, promoted by the process of socialization, play a crucial role in this case. They are taught to sacrifice for other members of the family and their actual sacrifice begins from their childhood. Thus it is the girl who are enrolled in schools in much lesser percentage compared to boys and it is they who are made to drop out of school to help the mothers. Most of the girls, particularly in rural areas, are brought up merely to get married because the parents have no alternative to choose. Thus
enhancement of capabilities of women is crucially linked with the increase in their age of marriage and allowing them that vital time to develop their human resources and enhance their functionings. Equality between girls and boys in terms of their educational attainment and building up attitude free from gender stereotype is crucial for attaining equality between men and women. State policy in enlarging the scope for women's education and promotion of economic and social activities, where women are encouraged to participate, therefore, becomes extremely important.

**Empowerment of Women and the Domestic Sphere**

To augment the capability of women their endowments and exchange entitlements are to be enhanced. Also, their worth has to be perceived by the household to remove bias against the girl child. Thus, it is the household, which has to play the most crucial role in shaping the future capabilities of the girls. It is a complex process as to how decisions related to girls are taken in the household. However, such decisions are certainly influenced by the perception of the household about the roles to be played by the girl in future, resources that a household controls and dependence of the parents on the girl in their old age.

The vicious cycle in which the mothers, with strong cultural conditionings and impaired capabilities, compel their daughters to recreate the gender stereotype in their life cycles has to be broken or at least weakened. Whether the gender stereotyped behaviour of the mothers would exactly be replicated by the daughters or there will be improvement of the same over time and over generations depends on several factors. Normally it is not the same vicious cycle, which is exactly replicated. The new cycle adapts some features, which are more favourable to equity with men. There is also enhancement of the individual capabilities of the daughter compared to the mother. The point which becomes relevant here is what are the possible interventions which facilitates this improvement of daughter's capabilities in comparison to that of her mother. Women themselves play a major role in giving their daughters or
daughters-in-law more freedom and support for achieving higher level of functionings.

Possible augmentation of functionings within the domestic sphere may be seen to grow in stages. In the first stage, better functionings means to be able to play the role of the traditional housewife in a more capable way. This often reduces to taking care of the domestic work, childcare and status building activities with more competence and authority. Increase in age at marriage, education, lower fertility rate and more exposure to the outside world may substantially reduce the household drudgery. That will be further facilitated by better access to food, water supply, sanitation, fuel, health care etc. through public institutions. All these do not necessarily reduce intra-household disparities. Next stage of empowerment is to be able to reduce intra-household inequality. The patriarchal norms and the male domination within the household are still not challenged. The gender disparity within the household is merely reduced through bargaining. Access to independent income, better perception of their contribution in generating household resources and better understanding of their own well-being help women to bargain better and to have more say in decision making process within the household. In the final phase the patriarchal norms are challenged and women are able to play roles free from gender stereotype within the household. Empowerment within the domestic sphere is also related to the phase in the life cycle of the woman.

**Empowerment of Women and the Public Sphere**

Empowerment is ultimately achieving new functioning. These are to be achieved by women mostly through acquiring new roles in the public sphere. It could be in the economic sphere, political sphere, in participation for community benefit, participation for promoting other common interests and so on. This includes occupying the spaces, which are already available but social constraints prevent women from doing so as well as to create new space for women.
The next questions are who creates those spaces and how the women are to be mobilized to get due share of the new opportunities? The major problem in this regard is that the women have to come out of the domestic sphere and organize themselves. They should acquire adequate knowledge and abilities to influence the existing institutions of the community and the state to promote their interests. Also, there should be networking of all the efforts taken up by various groups in different places so as to strengthen the process and to have wider mobilization on the issues concerned. The existing cultural norms do not permit women to come out freely in the public sphere and strive for achievement. So, it is obvious that initially the women should organize themselves for activities that do not directly challenge the patriarchy and improve their position within the existing social order. As they gain strength they may venture for addressing more difficult issues, which lead to change in existing social order. Their human resource base such as their level of education, exposure to public life and other exchangeable entitlements are to be augmented to enable them to interact with the outside sphere including the market. Organizational strength and material resources, including financial resource base, under their command should be adequate to tackle the problem. The same should grow to address more difficult issues. Poor resources of either type takes a longer time to have a break-through for regenerating growth. The family burden which women share has to be relieved so that they are in a position to devote more time for promotion of their organized activities. Expansion of the economy by opening up new areas of employment and reduction of social barriers in allowing women to participate in economic activities outside the domestic sphere are essential for promotion of women's economic activities. Flexibility of working hours, easier way of discharging domestic responsibilities, reduced burden of pregnancy, good health, higher education and acquisition of skill by women are crucial for enabling women to participate in activities in the public sphere. Empowerment of women is also closely associated with the process of expansion of rights as citizen (Beteille, 1999). The traditional Indian society is highly hierarchical where the rights and
social roles and responsibilities are predetermined, which lead to inherent discrimination among individuals. Empowerment in public sphere entails identical freedom for every individual to reach a level of functionings as per one’s choice. These freedoms are to be ensured for every citizen irrespective of their identities in terms of other social divisions. Such freedoms are essentials not only on moral ground of equality but also from the point of view of efficiency. The state policy in India, which draws the basic principles from the Constitutions, is to uphold individual rights as citizen. But what has been desired through enactment of the Constitution and subsequent policy statements has not been achieved through any social transformation. Therefore, the conflict between the existing social values based on hierarchy, with total disregard to individual rights as a member of the society, and equality demanded through equal rights of individuals as citizens in the state policy is yet to be resolved. Marshall identifies three basic elements of citizenship: civil, political and social. ‘The civil element, according to him, as composed of the rights necessary for individual freedom; the political element consisted of the right to participate in politics through representative institutions; and the social element comprised certain basic rights to economic welfare and social security’ (quoted in Beteille, 1999: 591). None of these rights have been achieved in India by large-scale mobilization as has happened in the Western World. So, the values of individual have not transformed to internalize equality of citizenship as some thing non-negotiable. Empowerment in the public sphere is thus closely connected with the expansion of rights of citizen, which every individual values and ensures the same for others to enjoy. Those rights are established slowly as a continuous process of social transformation. In the context of a particular group of people this may mean their effort to establish a particular type of right which is the subset of entire domain of rights associated with the citizenship right. The members of the society create and recreate the value system and the rights of the citizen are established as a social norm over a long period, which Beteille describes as a ‘laborious process’ (ibid). Empowerment for gender equality may be seen as a part of the broader process of establishing individual rights as citizen.
Empowerment and the Poor Rural Women

The immediate issues with which most rural women are concerned are their poverty, isolation, the family burden and the overall hopeless situation in which they are immersed. The social and economic disparities which are faced by many of the rural household become more important to its members including women compared to the intra-household disparities which are faced by women of those households. This issue of equality between men and women becomes less significant compared to the issue of economic and social inequalities which all the members of those households face together. Similarly, social hierarchy, which is still quite strong in the rural society, makes it difficult for the women to come forward for establishing rights of women as citizen when the same is not established even for male members of those households. Apart from all these difficulties their isolation, poor mobility and heavy burden of work makes it difficult for them to organize themselves for augmenting their functionings.

Empowerment of women in the above context will not only include their achieving equity with men, which is the strategic gender need but also satisfy their practical gender needs such as food, water, shelter and so on (Moser, 1993). The latter is associated with social and economic deprivations that the household faces together. The sufferings of women are further aggravated by the intra-household disparity. There are evidences to suggest that intense poverty weakens the male bond of affection and the cultural norms to support women by the male are violated. Women in such cases have to depend more on their own support (Chen, 1986). The feminist agenda takes a back seat in such cases and day to day survival becomes the urgent issue. There is tension between feminism and grass root development need in such circumstances (Kalegaonkar, 1997). It is argued that the same can be eased by making development participatory and to focus more on the process. That helps to internalize the need and the women themselves to prioritize the same and to prepare the plan of action. As the process of development advances the
shift takes place from the practical gender needs to strategic gender needs. The process of empowerment has to be a long drawn one in such cases. Though such process is a continuous one it may be visualized to have three phases. In the first phase the women merely become able to play their traditional roles more easily and redress their sufferings in discharging those roles. Such roles are mostly concerned with the practical gender needs of the members of the family. For poor rural women this involves augmenting their capacity to gather inputs like food, water, fuel, fodder as well as to earn for ensuring supply of those items, to take care of the sick members of the household, particularly the children. These are mostly the socially prescribed agency roles, which they see for themselves due to their cultural conditioning. Their effort to discharge these roles may even lead to their increased suffering in the areas of personal well-being. For example, if they have to start earning out of any economic activity outside home, they may have to extend their working hours to take care of their domestic responsibilities in addition to their outside responsibilities. Poor rural women have very little endowment and very little market to exchange even that for realizing their entitlements. Provision of exchange independent entitlement by the State becomes, therefore, vary crucial for well-being of poor women.

The next phase starts after the women gain some confidence and come out of absolute dependence in discharging their prescribed roles. They are in a position to question various social prescriptions and are in a better position to bargain for their own entitlements and well-being. This process is facilitated by their access to knowledge on various matters concerning their existence, exposure to lives of other women, particularly who are in similar socio-economic situation, and interaction with them on issues of their common interest. They start reflecting on their experiences and internalize the various factors which causes both inter and intra-household disparities. They are in a position to organize action to reduce all forms of disparities faced by them and are able to demand and ensure some improvement in their personal wellbeing. Their perception starts changing and they start discovering their own worth.
However, they are yet to challenge the patriarchal norms and they seek improvement without directly confronting the social order.

The last phase is concerned with the strategic gender need and it starts with challenging the gender stereotype. They have clear perception about their worth, their contribution and their entitlement. The influence of the socially prescribed roles start declining and they are guided more and more by their objective thinking as a free citizen not immersed in the role of a wife or a mother. The most important component is their consciousness of not transmitting the deep-rooted patriarchal norms through their children, particularly the girls. The mother actively helps the girl child to grow with freedom and liberty without being prescribed the gender stereo-typed behaviour and to receive education at par with boys. Apart from socialization within the household, the girls pick up lot of inputs from their peer groups, the social institutions with which they get the opportunity to interact and the community in general. Number of such institutions where rural girls can interact freely with others is very limited. Inputs, which are available to girls from the few institutions like schools and ICDS (Integrated Child Development Service) centres, which exist in rural areas is very vital in breaking the vicious cycle.

Institutional support for facilitating the process of empowerment continues to be crucial in subsequent stages of women’s life. By association with such institution they achieve some identities and find new roles beyond the domestic sphere. At least a small space is created where they can think and act together beyond the strict control of patriarchal values. They can pursue their interests in economic and social spheres for their own well-being as well as well-being of the other members of the household or even for the community in general. Thus they become members of the Panchayats, DWCRA groups, the Micro-Credit societies, the Forest Protection Committees and so on. Their struggle within the household to have better bargaining power and their mobilization outside for achieving common goal helps each other in an iterative way. In order to appreciate the process in the correct perspective it is necessary
to understand the household dynamism within such rural household. Before elaborating the same the various aspects of the household domain is presented below.

The Household Domain

The word ‘household’ is a term used in the Census that includes all persons who share the same hearth. It is seen primarily as a unit of economic activity by the economist. The ‘family’ is a sociological concept, which depicts the kinship structure and provides its members values, norms and social positions. Generally, it is a family or parts of it which lives in a household (Krishnaraj and Chanana, 1989). In this report the two terms have been used interchangeably. The process of socialization starts in the household and the same is very crucial from two different aspects - the nature and quantum of input that is received in the household including the extended kinship structure and the formative age at which those inputs are received. While allocation of resources among different households depends on market forces and state policy, similar distribution within the household is decided by socio-cultural norms. Discrimination that women face emanates substantially from within the household. The household decides both the individual shares of resources available with it and the access to various social and economic opportunities to its members. Differential access to education by boys and girls of the same household, medical attention available to male and female children, difference in school drop-out rates of girls and boys are all clear evidences of household based discriminations. There are empirical evidences of bias against female children in providing nutrition (Sen and Sengupta, 1983; Dreze and Sen, 1995). Division of labour within the household and roles and responsibilities assigned to different members are instrumental in subordination of women and continuation of the same. Thus the household as an institution is a source of inequality between men and women. Nature of intra-household disparities and mechanism for continuation of such disparities are, therefore, extremely important to understand gender-based inequalities in the society.
Literature on household dynamics

Review of literature has been covered in general in the chapter on theoretical perspective. This section specially concentrates on the review of literature available on various aspects of household dynamics, which have bearing on the empowerment of women. The most important aspect of functioning is to live a long and enjoyable life. Survival of women depends on perceived worth of women’s life. Poor worth of women’s life and preference for son operate, against survival of women even before birth which is corroborated by disproportionately high number of female foeticide. Mortality rate of female child far exceeds the corresponding rate of male child because of male bias in providing food and nutrition and health care. Allocation of resource by the household in India, judged by the differential survival rates of boys and girls has been found to depend on relative market opportunities, which is much higher for boys (Rosenzweig and Schultz, 1982). Empirical studies have shown that the bias against female child exists in countries like Bangladesh and India, particularly in the northern part (Sen & Sengupta 1983; Miller, 1989 and UNICEF, 1991). Similarly, female child has less access to public health services compared to male child (Kynch & Sen, 1983; Chatterjee, 1990). The bias against female child results in differential child mortality rates between male and female child. In India such bias is most prominent in the northern part of the country (Agnihotri, 1996). Female infanticide is also practiced in some communities in India. Neglect of women and high maternal mortality continues to aversely affect the sex ratio. Outcome of all these are lower sex ratio in the country as well as its continuously declining trend.

The household also decides the extent of labour force participation of the women in the public sphere. The process of sankritization withdraws women from outside labour and confines them within the household. Thus women get debarred from acquisition of wealth which has exchange potential. This is coupled by the patrilineal system of inheritance which deprives most of
the women to have unmediated control of land or other productive assets (Agarwal, 1994). Thus, the household compels woman to have very limited endowment and whatever endowment is achieved is not allowed to be exchanged for augmenting their entitlement and functioning. All these factor together result in poor well-being of women not only in India but also in other Third World Countries. Analysing data from seventy-nine such countries, Dasgupta found presence of some common features among women of those countries. As observed by him, ‘high total fertility rates, high rates of female illiteracy, low age of marriage for women, low share of paid employment for women, high percentage of women working as unpaid family worker – all these hang together’ (Dasgupta, 1993 : 307). However, when it comes to sharing the total burden of work for generation of allocable resources, women bear a relatively higher share. This is corroborated by the striking difference in the pattern of allocation of time between work and leisure for men and women. Women work, on an average, for a longer time each day than men do. A recent study conducted by the C.S.O. in six States found that, the average time men devote to unpaid family responsibilities is roughly one tenth of the time spent by women (Sing, 2000). How time is spent by men and women is structured through social relations of gender. For men the time spent for household work is almost fixed and whatever time is saved from outside productive labour is enjoyed as leisure. For women the choice is generally between paid and unpaid work.

The literature in general reports about the empirical findings on the extent of discrimination and deprivation faced by women as well as identifies the social parameters on which such discriminations and deprivations are more glaring. It is also reported that there is a general decline of the extent of female deprivation. Existing literature fails to identify the precise social process responsible for such changes. Put in a different form there is little effort to identify the dynamism within the household, which facilitates such change. It could be that the progress related to gender is taking place at random in different households or there are also certain characteristics of the households,
which are positively helping such changes. Such understanding would be of
great consequence in designing possible interventions to facilitate the changes
to ameliorate the conditions of the women. The present study is aimed to
precisely understand that process. Since the social context in which the process
is to be studied is also extremely relevant, the situation of women in India and
West Bengal is briefly presented below.

Status of Women in India

An important feature of the Indian society is the existence of a high
degree of female subordination. Patriarchal values prevail in various forms and
regulate sexuality, household production as well as the social institutions. Such
subordination exists in the public domain as well as within the household. The
patriarchal forces are so strong behind such subordination that in spite of
several interventions by the state, the situation has hardly improved. The
committee on status of women in India observed in their report in 1974 that,
‘women are still very far from enjoying the rights and opportunities guaranteed
to them by the Constitution’ (GOI, 1974). The situation has not changed much
in the last twenty-six years. Deprivation of women in India is alarming also in
comparison to the rest of the world. India is placed at 103rd rank among 123
countries in terms of Gender Deprivation Index (G.D.I.). Such disparity varies
widely among different states (Pradhan et al. 2000). Persistence of
extraordinary high level of gender disparity and female deprivation is among
India’s most serious social failures (Dreze and Sen, 1995). The women are
made to justify the lower social position through the gender-stereotyped process
of socialisation, which attempts to legitimise discrimination based on gender.
Myths and rituals support these imposed norms. They are compelled to remain
confined within their homes to take care of the reproductive needs of the
household. Lower social status of women in the society results in their poor
access to education, inadequate skill formation, restricted mobility, little
opportunity to participate in the market related economic activities and neglect
to their welfare like nutritional and health-care needs. Their pervasive
deprivation restricts their well-being, which is clearly reflected in various data for the country. For example, the sex ratio of the country, which was 972 in 1901, has declined to 1927 in 1991. Thus the chance of survival of women in India is not only low in comparison to men, but the same is also declining over the decades. Literacy rate of women as per 1991 Census was 39.2%, which is quite low compared to literacy rate of men which was 64.2% during the same period. The mean year of schooling of women of age above 20 years during 1992 in India was 1.2 years which was merely one-third the corresponding figure for men (UNDP, 1994). Thus average educational attainment of women in India are still very low in both absolute terms as well as relative to men. Work participation rate of women in India is merely 19.8%, which is very low compared to that of women in even other developing countries. Proportion of wage labourer is very high among the working women. Most of them are unskilled, ill paid and have no job security (Jose, 1989; Bardhan, 1985). This is partly because of cognitive problem of identifying women as workers, who are mostly engaged in household mode of production and the limited options they have in participating in the market. 'India invests far less in its women workers than in its working men. Women also receive a smaller share of what society produces' (World Bank, 1991: p.xv). Also, they have very little ownership and direct access to land and other productive resources. All these severely restrict their access to independent income, which has important bearing on their dependence on men. Level of well-being of women in India is generally less compared to that of men in India. Micro-level studies have found, in general, the existence of higher rates of malnutrition among women and girls than among men and boys in the same age group (Chatterjee, 1990). Women in India have less access to health services and nutrition than that compared to men (Bennet, 1992). Marriage is the first career choice for most women; particularly in rural India. Protection provided by marriage is, however, illusory (Mukhopadhyay, 1998). Child marriage was quite prevalent in India. The mean age at marriage of girls in India improved from 13.04 years in 1901-1911 to 17.90 years in 1971-1981 (Audinarayana, 1998). Substantial percentage of women in rural India is still married below the age of 18 years, the legal age of
Many of them even become mothers before attaining that age and have high fertility rate (UNICEF, 1991). Net worth of a woman was traditionally assessed by the number of male children she gave birth. There was social compulsion to become mother as early as possible. Early motherhood and repeated burden of child bearing, with inadequate nutrition, result in high maternal and infant mortality rates and poor health of the mothers and children. The latter factor further aggravates the burden of the mother. Women from poor families suffer from the double burden of poverty and other inequalities faced by women. Other disquieting features of the Indian society are that the crime against women and social evils like practice of dowry are on the rise. Thus, ordinary women in India continue to have low social status, have limited opportunities, face deprivation and discrimination as compared to men, share higher burden of miseries and suffer from ill-health and insecurity. The girl child also moves into similar vicious cycle in due course, which is often before their attaining the adulthood.

**Women in Rural Bengal**

There are broad similarities between the women in West Bengal and those in not of India in respect of their social status and roles and responsibilities within the household. However, every region has its own characteristic features, which is the result of the history of social and economic development of the respective areas. The society in Bengal remained highly divided in terms of class and caste. Women had low status and those particularly belonging to higher class and caste mostly remained confined at home. The advent of Muslim rule in the medieval period reinforced and further restricted the women within the domestic sphere. Confining them at home was considered essential for maintaining the status and purity of the clan. This also led to the practice of child marriage. The girls were married before attaining the puberty. Women were merely thought to provide ground to hold seed of the male which maintained the clan (Inden, 1976). The purpose of marriage was only confined to that and was not seen as a process in which two individuals
from opposite sexes were to unite for a family life. Women who lived with their husbands were not allowed to even talk to their husbands in the daytime or in presence of the elders. Polygyny was rampant particularly among them. There are reports up to around hundred number of marriages by any individual (Chakrabarty, 1995). Most of the wives in such cases never lived with their husband and were much younger to the husband. Therefore, widowhood was very common. The widows lived in misery and neglect. Practice of Sati was very much prevalent particularly among the higher castes. The girl child had very low status and they received little care. They faced severe inequality and the same continued in the society through a vigorous process of socialization to uphold the patriarchal norms. The code of socialization was more elaborate for the caste Hindu girls (Bagchi, 1993).

The situation started changing with spread of education during the British period. Female education was felt necessary to satisfy the need of educated husbands from the second half of the 19th century. Such education was to be suitable for women and decency appropriate for women had to be maintained. This was, however, resisted by a section of the society who even argued that women lacked intelligence, female education was not prescribed in the scripture and women would become ill behaved with education. It was even argued that education would bring widowhood and, therefore, highly inauspicious. However, education started spreading among women and the same was recognized by allowing women to write examination of Calcutta University from 1878. The process of westernization also started influencing a section of the elite in the society. The pattern of conjugal life started changing with relaxation of some of the restrictions without reducing the overall patriarchal control. Public life of ordinary women in rural areas remained mostly unaffected.

This period referred to above has seen a big change in the economic sphere of the region. Permanent settlement and presence of intermediaries led to the pauperization of the rural society. The traditional household industries also
were severely affected due to industrialization in the West and India acting as their market. The women bore the burnt of the poverty. Social prescription and their helplessness had tremendous impact on their nourishment and health.

Political mobilization in West Bengal before and after independence had tremendous influence on the people. Mass movement against British rule and peasant uprising like 'Tebhaga' movement influenced the life of ordinary women in Rural Bengal (Basu, 1976). They participated in large number in the freedom movement, particularly the Non-cooperation movement and the Civil disobedience movement, and in the peasant movements. Tebhaga movement in Bengal is seen as the primary work of landless and poor peasant women (Custers, 1987). However, outlook of political parties organizing the movements was patriarchal and gender discrimination was never any agenda of any such struggle. Movement for land reforms and decentralisation of governance through the Panchayats had important impact on the life of the rural people in the state. The intensity of poverty in the rural areas has come down substantially. However, substantial number of households still lives below the poverty line. This is corroborates by the low level of earnings reported by many households selected for the survey. High incidence of poverty put extra burden on the life of the women living in those areas.

Life of women in rural Bengal depends much on the class and caste coordinates of the family. The upper caste women abstained from any outdoor work, which became a symbol of social status. Women belonging to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes were mostly engaged in agriculture as seasonal wage labourers. Households, whose position was in between, had their women mostly engaged in activities allied to agriculture in the domestic sphere. Some of them, depending on their social status also worked in their own field. However, female work participation rates remained low.