



## INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN COMMERCE, ECONOMICS AND MANAGEMENT

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## PANCHAYATS AND EMPOWERING THE RURAL POOR SPECIALLY THE WOMEN: THE WEST BENGAL EXPERIENCE

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### ABSTRACT

The study on 'Gram Panchayat' requires exploring the knowledge about empowerment of rural poor and weaker section of the community, particularly the women, as gram panchayat itself symbolizes power at the grass root level. The term empowerment refers to a psycho-social and econo-political process by which it is possible to improve the strategic position and quality of life of the poor, marginalized and powerless people through horizontal integration so as to throw a new light on the existing structure of power relationship or on the existing form of the hegemony. In this study empowerment is defined as the participation in decision making process and institutions. If one does not participate in the process of decision making, he/she is unable to enjoy power. In our study, we would like to see whether West Bengal's Panchayati Raj has the capability to improve the political and social power among the less privileged sections of the society, particularly the women. For the purpose of this study we have undertaken a field survey at 8 No. Saraboth Gram Panchayat of Garbeta Block-II in the district of Paschim Midnapore in West Bengal. From this study it is found that panchayat representation from the poor and weaker section of the community has been increased to a large extent but so far as organizational representation is concerned, it has been found a disappointing picture where most of the decision makers in different levels of political organization are from rich peasant or from businessmen. The absence of the poor, marginalized and weaker sections in the party level does not signify any radical restructuring of the rural power structure. It is also found that there is no revolutionary transformation in regard to women liberation.

### KEYWORDS

Panchayat, Rural India, West Bengal.

### INTRODUCTION

Improving the political control which the powerless have over their own lives is important both as an end in itself, and as a mean by which economic empowerment can be achieved" **John Friedmann (1992)**

Any study on gram panchayat needs an exploration of the concept of empowerment as gram panchayat itself symbolizes power at the grass root levels. Empowerment has become a slogan because so many organizations have taken up the cause of empowering the rural people, of which gram panchayat is an important agency. The concept of empowerment comes from the basic concept of power. According to Talcott Parsons, "Power resides with members of the society as a whole, and power can increase in the society as a whole, as the society pursues collective goals like economic development"<sup>1</sup>. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, power is, "possession of control or command over others; domination; rule; government; sway; command; control; influence; authority"<sup>2</sup>. The very dictionary meaning of power is indicative of two divergent, positive and negative senses in which it can be used.

olding of power in society is not something fixed but variable; increase in the power of one group would by definition, lead to a decrease in the power of other groups in a relational situation. For instance, if land would be redistributed from the rich landlord to the landless poor, the latter group would be gaining power at the expense of the former class. Power, so conceived, involves relationships between those who have more of it and those who have less. What gram panchayat in West Bengal has been doing for decades is to decentralize power from the upper hierarchy of the society to the lower or weaker section. Therefore, empowerment means to throw a challenge to the existing structure of power relationship or to challenge the existing form of the hegemony.

### EMPOWERMENT: ITS MEANING AND DEFINITIONS

The term 'empowerment' has different connotations in different social and political aspects. It does not translate easily into all languages. "Local terms associated with empowerment include self-strength, self-control, self-power, self-reliance, own choice, life of dignity in accordance with other's on value, capable of fighting for one's rights, independence, self-decision making, being free, awakening and capability"<sup>3</sup>. It has both intrinsic and instrumental values. It is relevant at the individual as well as collective levels. Hence there are many possible definitions of empowerment. In a broad sense, "empowerment refers to the expansion of freedom of choice and action to shape one's life. It is a process by which the poor and powerless people exercise greater control over resources and decisions of their lives. It is a means to improve the position of poor, marginalized and powerless people by providing them materials, intellectual and socio-political rights in the society and state"<sup>4</sup>.

Empowerment is essentially, an emancipatory concept. It is a new term used in the theories of social development. In every theory of social development the poor gives emphasis on the ongoing struggles for power and the disadvantaged groups in their search for bring about improvement in their quality of life. Empowerment is a process to change the distribution of social power in favour of the underprivileged both in the arena of interpersonal relations and in societal institutions. This concept of empowerment grows out of a fundamental criticism of the existing social, economic and political order.

Empowerment as a concept had come to lime light in development literature during the late 1970s, and it continues to be used in relation to the development exercise at the grass root levels. The presumption is that small grass root communities are weak to survive on their own unless they are integrated into bigger and more powerful entities. This is necessary for them to gain access to the economic and other resources supportive of their development. It is assumed that through various developmental programmes powerless can be powerful.

In this connection, Michel Foucault's path-breaking analysis of power needs to be cited here for better understanding of the concept. According to Foucault, in common parlance, power has been viewed in reductionist term. It is the top-down vision that has always looked at the power as a striking force—a visible and

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Mohit Bhattacharyya (1997): In Perspective in Political Science, Burdwan University.

<sup>2</sup> Oxford English Dictionary.

<sup>3</sup> Puthenkalam John Joseph (2004); Empowerment : Sustainable Human Development Strategy for Poverty Alleviation, Rawat Publication, New Delhi, P-328.

<sup>4</sup> Narayan, Deepa (2005) ed. Empowerment and Poverty Reduction, Rawal Publication, New Delhi.

effective form. Those who hold power at the top are in favourable station to take advantage of a number of apparatuses and devices – particular techniques, knowledge, and modalities of intervention and discourse—that facilitate production of political power. In other words, they have the means of power to which they have access because of the strategic positions they occupy. Power, in his view, is not what and where people think in reality, it is the expression of hundreds of micro-process defining various currents coming from a multitude of different sources.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, in a nutshell, empowerment refers to a psycho-social and econo-political process by which it is possible to improve the strategic position and quality of life of the poor, marginalized and powerless people through horizontal integration so as to throw a new light on the existing structure of power relationship or on the existing form of the hegemony.

In our study we define empowerment as participation in decision-making processes and institutions. If one does not participate in the process of decision-making he/she is unable to enjoy power. 'An empowering approach to participation treats poor people as co-producers, with authority and control over decisions and resources devolved to the lowest appropriate level. Inclusion of poor people and other traditionally excluded groups in priority setting and decision-making is critical to ensure that limited public resources built on local knowledge that lead to change. Participation can take different forms. At the local level, depending on the issue, participation may be direct; representational, by selecting representatives from membership-based groups and association; political, through elected representatives'.<sup>6</sup>

## CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS

To facilitate, more participation by the people at the grass root levels, especially SC, ST and women section, in 1992, was enacted the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment which became operative from 24<sup>th</sup> April, 1993. This Legislation provides for reservation for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) at all levels in proportion to their total population of the area. One third of the seats are to be reserved for women. Reservation will be on rotation basis in respect of backward classes and enabling provision has been made in the Act. Post of chairman in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) at all levels is to be reserved for SCs and STs in proportion to their percentage in the total population of the area. Similarly, not less than one-third of the offices of chairmen are to be reserved for women on rotation basis. Another unique feature of the Act is the concept of Gram Sabha, which has been introduced first time in that Act. It will be a body consisting of all persons registered as voters in the panchayat area at the village level and may exercise powers entrusted to it by the State Legislature. Therefore, we find that 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act is made to extend the area of participation at the different levels of PRIs by the backward as well as the weaker section of the rural society. This amendment was made to empower the powerless through participation in decision-making bodies. The concept of Gram Sabha introduced in that Act may act as a panacea to the powerlessness of the poor people at the grass root levels. After thirteen years of passing the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment we are now in a position to evaluate empowerment in reality in rural society.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of the study are:

1. to know the process of empowerment of the rural poor, marginalized and weaker section of the community;
2. to evaluate the extent of decentralization of decision making power of the poor specially the women through panchayats; and
3. to assess the role of panchayats run by dominant political party and its allies with their agenda regarding the women liberation in radical regime of West Bengal.

## METHODOLOGY

Relevant data have been collected from both primary and secondary sources of information. Primary data are collected directly from the field of enquiry by means of structured interview method. Panchayat office records, organizational records at different levels and administrative report of the government of West Bengal have mainly been used as secondary sources of information. Different journals, periodicals, conference proceedings and statistical reports have also been used to supplement the data. Our study area covers the geographical boundary of 8 No. Saraboth Gram Panchayat of Garbeta Block-II in the district of Paschim Midnapore in West Bengal.

## EMPOWERMENT OF THE POOR: THE WEST BENGAL EXPERIENCE

In the context of contemporary West Bengal, both government-led redistribution of land and subsequent sustained growth of agricultural output could potentially contribute much to the economic empowerment of the rural poor. The activities of political parties and their representatives in the local areas, and conflicts over these activities are clearly an important part of micro-politics. This is essentially true in West Bengal where, theoretically, the devolution of power in the panchayats gives many people easy access to government and opportunity to take part directly in the formal political system.

By way of assumption we may say that by participating in the decision making bodies at the institutional level like PRIs does not prove that the rural mass becomes really powerful. Until and unless they participate in the decision making processes at the organizational level i.e. at the party levels they cannot be powerful in real sense. Thus, panchayat representation is a necessary condition for empowerment of the rural poor. It is not a sufficient condition for the empowerment. The sufficient condition for empowerment is that the rural poor must be included and their role should be recognized in the political party to which they belong. Unless and until they can exercise effective control over the panchayat system and the party system simultaneously, real power cannot be said to be handed down to the poor people. We have undertaken field studies to evaluate how far the rural people find their places in decision-making organs, such as at the level of party where real decisions are taken.

In West Bengal's Panchayat system, where the communist party holds the majority, decisions are made primarily in internal party meetings. Hence, it is desirable that the poor should involve themselves in different party organizations like Local Committee, Gram Committee, Guide Committee etc, where decisions regarding allocation of development funds between different villages and different people are settled. As soon as the village gets the development funds, the Gram Committee (constituted at the village level with active party supporters) immediately calls a meeting to distribute these funds in different development projects and also among different poor and needy households belonging to the target groups. The decision taken at the Gram Committee meeting is finally assessed and approved by the panchayat. Actually, the ultimate outcome of the decision about the distribution of development fund is percolated from party organization to the Panchayati Raj system.

Panchayat is an institution, which no doubt helps to improve political empowerment of the rural poor. According to party documents, the CPI(M)—the single largest party of the Left Front in West Bengal, has the following three important objectives for its rural development policy which is supposed to be implemented through the panchayat:

- i) to involve the entire people in the process of development by democratic decentralization of the power structure;
- ii) to bring about a change in the correlation of class forces in favour of the poor and working people; and
- iii) to raise class-consciousness through struggles over development."<sup>7</sup>

The Panchayati Raj Programme is central to achieving these development aims by instituting a system of democratic local self-government. It is expected that the programme could ensure mass participation in the panchayats and could be able to increase the class-consciousness amongst the rural masses.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault, M. (1980); *Power/Knowledge*, Harvester Press.

<sup>6</sup> Puthenkalam John Joseph (2004); *Empowerment: Sustainable Human Development Strategy for Poverty Alleviation*, Rawal Publication, P-338.

<sup>7</sup> Mishra S.K. (1991); *An Alternative Approach to Development: Land Reforms and Panchayats*; Department of Information and Cultural Affairs, Government of West Bengal P-9.

In West Bengal's Panchayat experience, it is well known to all that panchayat members are not representative of their entire community as much as they are the party's. The poorest of the poor families will be benefited only when their representation in different party organization is satisfactory and sufficiently large in numbers.

The implementation of a democratic local administration is not in itself enough to ensure this empowerment if the discourse of micro-politics and the value system upon which it is based, is left unaltered. In this section we would like to see whether West Bengal's Panchayati Raj has the capability to improve the political and social power among the less-privileged sections of the society particularly the women. For this purpose we have undertaken a field study at 8 no. Saraboth Gram Panchayat of Garbeta Block-II in the district of Paschim Midnapore in West Bengal.

### FIELD STUDY REPORT FROM 8 NO. SARABOTH GRAM PANCHAYAT

We have made a fieldwork at 8 No. Saraboth Gram Panchayat of Garbeta Block-II in the district of Paschim Midnapore in West Bengal and the results are shown in Table-1.1. From-1.1 it is seen that in 1978 Panchayat election total number of seats was 11 out of which 7 seats were owned by Left Front Party and 4 seat by others. The corresponding figures for the panchayat election 1993, 1998 and 2003 were 6 and 5, 5 and 5 and 6 and 5 respectively. The Left Front party includes Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)], Communist Party of India (CPI), Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and Forward Bloc. Others include Congress, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Trinamul Congress (TMC). In our study area Forward Bloc and RSP had no contesting candidates and thus no representation. Here it should be mentioned the most realistic situation that Left Front politics in West Bengal is too much strong and CPI (M) is the most powerful political party in the state particularly at the village level.

**TABLE-1.1: GRAM PANCHAYAT REPRESENTATION IN 8 NO. SARABOTH GRAM PANCHAYAT**

Year of Election	Total Elected Members	Caste composition (Left Front)								Caste composition (Others)								Class composition (Left Front)			
		General		SCs		STs		Total (L.F)		General		SCs		STs		Total		Rich Peasants	Middle Peasants	Poor and Marginal Peasants	Landless agricultural labourers
		M	F	M	F	M	F			M	F	M	F	M	F						
1978	11 [SC = 0 ST = 2 (18.18%) F = 0]	5 (72%)	0	0	0	2 (28%)	0	7 [SC=0 ST=2 F=0]		4	0	0	0	0	0	4		4 (57%)	3 (43%)	0	0
1993	11 [SC = 2 (18.18%) ST = 2 (18.18%) F = 2 (18.18%)]	3 (50%)	1 (16.7%)	1 (16.7%)	0	1 (16.6%)	0	6 [SC=1 ST=1 F=1]		3	0	0	1	1	0	5		0	4 (66%)	2 (34%)	0
1998	10 [SC = 4 (40%) ST = 3 (30%) F = 4 (40%)]	0	2 (40%)	2 (40%)	0	0	1 (20%)	5 [SC=2 ST=1 F=3]		1	0	2	0	1	1	5		0	3 (60%)	1 (20%)	1 (20%)
2003	11 [SC = 3 (27.27%) ST = 3 (27.27%) F = 3 (27.27%)]	2 (33.3%)	1 (16.7%)	1 (16.7%)	1 (16.7%)	0	1 (16.6%)	6 [SC=2 ST=1 F=3]		2	0	1	0	2	0	5		0	3 (50%)	1 (17%)	2 (33%)

Source: Own survey, 8 No. Saraboth G.P. Office, 2007

Here LF means Left front, SCs means Scheduled Castes and STs means Scheduled Tribes, F = Female and M = Male.

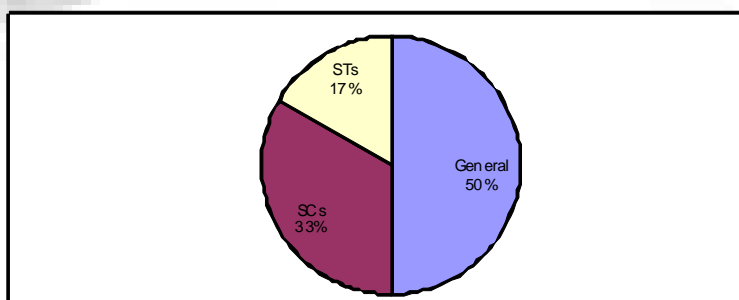
\* **Category** **Land Holdings**  
(in acres)

Rich peasants >7.5  
Middle peasants 5.0 – 7.5  
Poor peasants 3.0 – 5.0  
Marginal peasants <3.0

\*Source: Mukherjee Nirmal and Bandopadhyay, D (1993); New Horizons for West Bengal's Panchayat, Government of West Bengal

Table-1.1 also shows that the earlier panchayat of 1978 was dominated by the general upper caste, rich and middle peasants. Lower caste representation that is representation from ST categories to the panchayat was only 18.18% in totality, no representation of SC categories was found here. In the last three Panchayat elections in the years 1993, 1998 and 2003 after 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment of the Indian Constitutions, it is found that General Caste representation were 66%, 40% and 50% as compared to 72% in 1978 in case of Left Front. In totality these percentage were 64%, 30% and 46% respectively. The current panchayat is dominated by the middle, poor and marginal peasants (50%) and landless agricultural labourers (33%) in case of Left Front. It is also found that female representation in 1993 was 18.18%, in 1998 it was 36.36% and it is 27.27% in 2003 (the last panchayat election). This indicates that the representation of women is recognized at the institutional level as prescribed by 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment. The caste composition of the ruling combine in 2003 panchayat election can also be clarified in Figure-1A.

**FIGURE-1A: CASTE COMPOSITION OF RULING COMBINE IN 2003 PANCHAYAT ELECTION**



Pie diagram is drawn on the basis of data represented in Table-1.1.



From the comparison on the basis of panchayat representation in different successive elections one important point is clear that **there has been a shift of power from upper general caste to lower caste and also from rich and middle peasants to middle peasant and poor/landless agricultural labourers. It is also clear that the role of the women is recognized at the institutional level for empowering the women section. With the passage of time, there is a radical change in the distribution of power in the panchayat institution and thus, this can be seen as a good symptom of the political empowerment of the rural poor particularly the women section of the society.**

Gram panchayat is an institution which has a guide committee<sup>8</sup> to decide on different aspects of its functioning. We have studied the composition of the Guide Committee (which is shown in Table-1.2) where panchayat level decisions are taken.

**TABLE-1.2: GUIDE COMMITTEE REPRESENTATION IN 8 NO. SARABOTH GRAM PANCHAYAT, 2003**

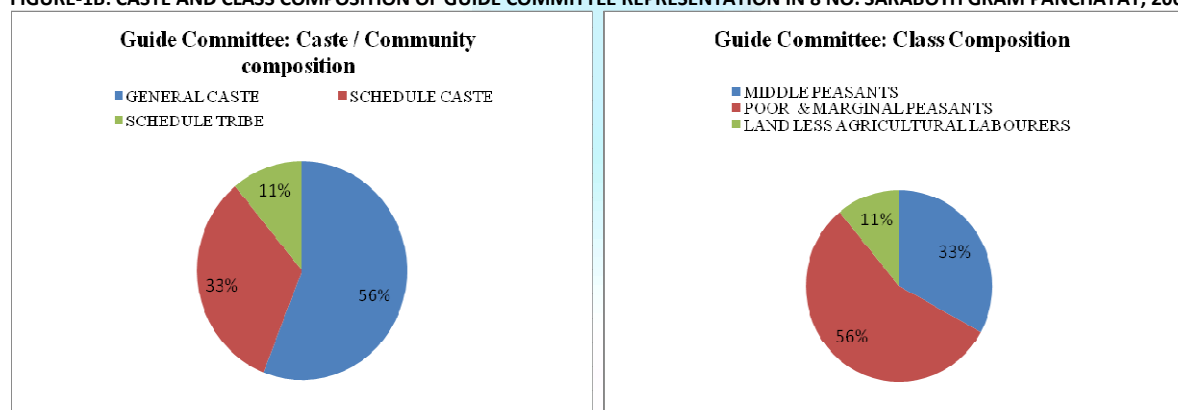
Caste/community	Total	Male	Female	Class composition		
				Middle peasants	Poor and Marginal peasants	Landless Agricultural labourers
General castes	5 (56%)	5 (100%)	—	3	2	—
Scheduled Castes	3 (33%)	2 (67%)	1 (33%)	—	2	1
Scheduled Tribes	1 (11%)	1 (100%)	—	—	1	—
Total	9 (100%)	8 (89%)	1 (11%)	3 (33%)	5 (56%)	1 (11%)

Source: CPI (M) Local Committee, own survey – 2007

In Table-1.2 we have 9 guide committee members in 8 No. Saraboth Gram Panchayat. Here we find that general caste representation is 56%. All members are male in this caste, which indicates that there is no female representation and in this case there is 100% male representation. The scheduled caste representation to the panchayat guide committee is 33% out of which 67% from male and 33% from female. In case of scheduled tribes, guide committee representation is only 11%, all of which from male, none from female.

Thus, it is observed that 8 No. Saraboth Gram Panchayat Guide Committee is dominated by the General Castes. **It is also observed that the male domination is significant in all the cases. It does not therefore signify empowerment of the female at the grass root levels.** The caste and class composition of the guide committee representation in 8 No. Saraboth Gram Panchayat in 2003 is also clarified in the following pie diagram (Figure-1B).

**FIGURE-1B: CASTE AND CLASS COMPOSITION OF GUIDE COMMITTEE REPRESENTATION IN 8 NO. SARABOTH GRAM PANCHAYAT, 2003**



Each of the Pie diagram is drawn on the basis of data represented in Table-1.2

If we analyse the class composition of the said guide committee we find that 33% of total members are middle peasants; 55% of total members are from poor and marginal farmers; and only 11% members are landless agricultural labourers. Thus, it is clear that the landless agricultural labourers have a very low level representation to the 8 No. Saraboth Gram Panchayat. But the majority of the total members of the guide committee are from the poor and marginal farmers. It may be a significant step to empower the rural poor.

It should be noted from our table that one of the decision making arena of the CPI(M)'s organization (i.e. Guide committee) is significantly poorly represented by the landless agricultural people. **It is a clear indication of their powerlessness at their grass root levels. Moreover, female representation is considerably low and the representation from the socially untouchables i.e. Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), etc. is also very poor. If this situation prevails at the decision making level how can we expect the rural people specially women to be empowered at its desired levels?**

The relationship between caste, class and politics should also be analysed to get an overall idea about how power is distributed in different political organizations from poor and landless families. Politics may always be seen as power located in various structural arrangements of the society. The following table certainly shows that there has been a radical change in the distribution of power in favour of the poor and socially as well as economically backward families.

Let us now see the position of the poor and the lower caste in terms of organizational representation or party representation. In 8 No. Saraboth Gram Panchayat areas there are 8005 Krishak Sabha members in CPI (M)'s peasant wing. Their caste and class composition is exhibited in Table-1.3 and also clarified the same in Figure -1C.

**TABLE-1.3: CASTE AND CLASS COMPOSITION OF KRISHAK SABHA MEMBERS IN 8 NO. SARABOTH GRAM PANCHAYAT AREA, 2003**

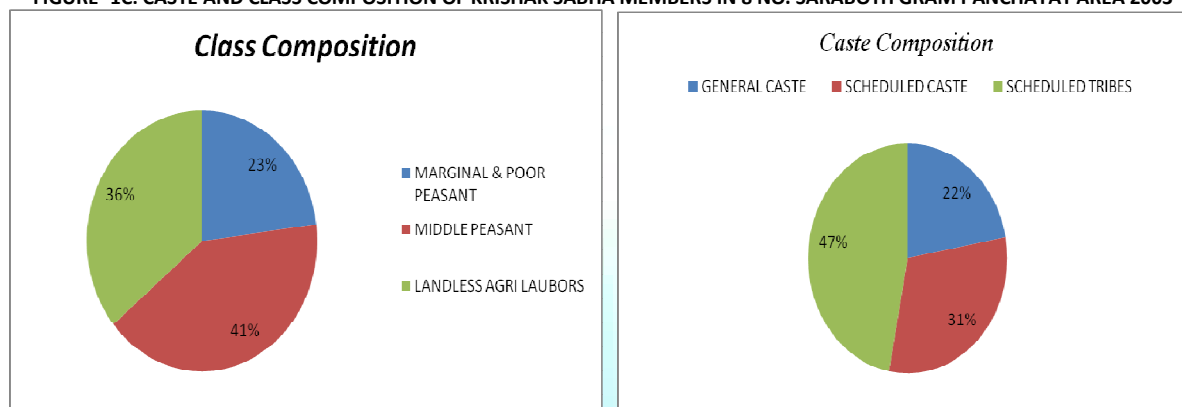
Members (in numbers)	Caste-wise break up			Class-wise break up		
	General Castes	Scheduled Castes	Scheduled Tribes	Marginal & poor peasants	Middle peasants	Landless agri. labourers and share croppers
8005	1765 (22%)	2472 (31%)	3768 (47%)	1841 (23%)	3282 (41%)	2882 (36%)

Source: Own survey in 8 No. Saraboth Gram Panchayat area, 2007

<sup>8</sup> Panchayat guide committee is the decision-making unit for implementing different projects and for selecting the beneficiaries. Guide Committee deals with the allocation of resources among different villages on the basis of their needs and also on the basis of their population sizes and geographical areas.

In ruling party's peasant wing, Krishak Sabha, it is seen that only 36% members are from landless agricultural labourers and share croppers. Here lower caste representation is 78% (=31% + 47%), which is significantly high. Kishan Sabha members have practically no decision making power and due to that high percentage of Krishak Sabha member does not indicate their empowerment at all.

FIGURE -1C: CASTE AND CLASS COMPOSITION OF KRISHAK SABHA MEMBERS IN 8 NO. SARABOTH GRAM PANCHAYAT AREA 2003



Each of the Pie diagram is drawn on the basis of data represented in Table-1.3

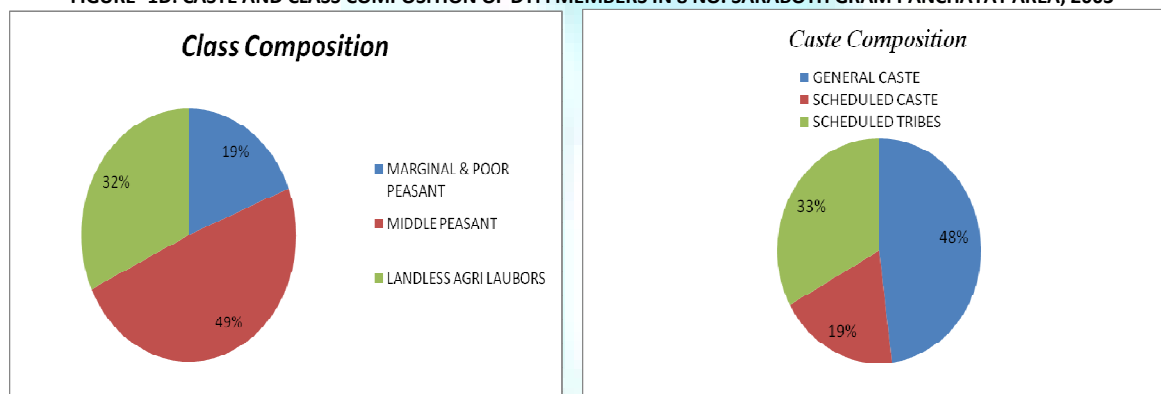
TABLE-1.4: CASTE AND CLASS COMPOSITION OF DYFI MEMBERS IN 8 NO. SARABOTH GRAM PANCHAYAT AREA, 2003

Members (in numbers)	Caste composition			Class composition		
	General Caste	Scheduled Caste	Scheduled Tribes	Poor and marginal peasants	Middle peasants	Landless agricultural labours
1900 (48%)	904 (48%)	367 (19%)	629 (33%)	361 (19%)	931 (49%)	608 (32%)

Source: Own survey in 8 No. Saraboth Gram Panchayat area, 2007

From Table-1.4 it is evident that in the youth wing of the Party, the dominant partner in the Left Front general caste representation is 48% whereas lower caste representation is 52%. Most of the survey villages are dominated by scheduled castes and Scheduled Tribes people and the Assembly Constituency as well as Lok Sabha Constituency is a reserved one. Hence lower caste representation should be much more than 52% and therefore, lower caste representation is relatively low as compared to upper caste representation. This class and caste composition of DYFI is also clarified in Figure-1D below:

FIGURE -1D: CASTE AND CLASS COMPOSITION OF DYFI MEMBERS IN 8 NO. SARABOTH GRAM PANCHAYAT AREA, 2003



Each of the Pie diagram is drawn on the basis of data represented in Table-1.4

In terms of their landholdings 19% members are from poor and marginal peasant families, 49% members from middle families and 32% members are landless agricultural labourers. Here it is seen a conspicuous absence of youth from the class of landless agricultural labourers who constitute the single largest group in the village.

Let us consider the caste and class composition of Mahila Samity Members (Table-1.5)

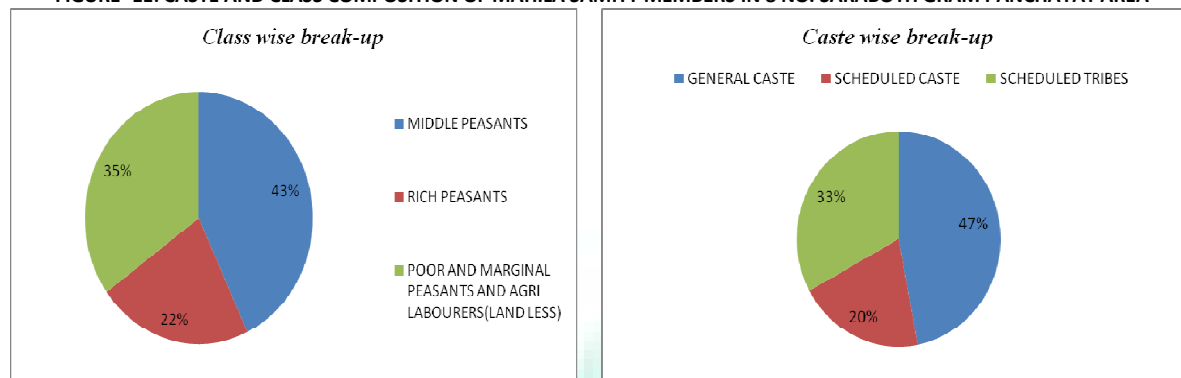
TABLE-1.5: CASTE AND CLASS COMPOSITION OF MAHILA SAMITY MEMBERS IN 8 NO. SARABOTH GRAM PANCHAYAT AREA

Member (in numbers)	Caste-wise break up			Class-wise break up		
	General Caste	Scheduled Caste	Scheduled Tribes	Rich peasants	Middle peasants	Poor and marginal peasants & agri labour (landless)
1600	746 (47%)	329 (20%)	525 (33%)	352 (22%)	688 (43%)	560 (35%)

Source: Own survey in 8 No. Saraboth Gram Panchayat area, 2007

From Table-1.5 the Mahila Samity, the women wing of CPI(M) Party, is represented by 53% from the lower castes (SCs and STs) and 47% from the upper castes. Lower castes representation should be higher than 52% because scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) people dominate most of the villages in this gram panchayat area.

In terms of their land holdings, 22% members are from rich peasant families, 43% from middle peasant families and 35% from poor, marginal and landless agricultural labourers. Thus, **it is found that upper caste (rich) has the lowest representation (22%). It reveals the obvious fact that the rich (classes) people have the general tendency not to allow their wives and other female members to become members of Mahila Samity. It may be due to psychological or other barriers though it is subject to be probed.** Middle to lower class people have the higher representation (88%) in the CPI (M)'s Mahila Samity. This composition is exhibited in Figure-1E as under:

**FIGURE -1E: CASTE AND CLASS COMPOSITION OF MAHILA SAMITY MEMBERS IN 8 NO. SARABOTH GRAM PANCHAYAT AREA**

Each of the Pie diagram is drawn on the basis of data represented in Table-1.5

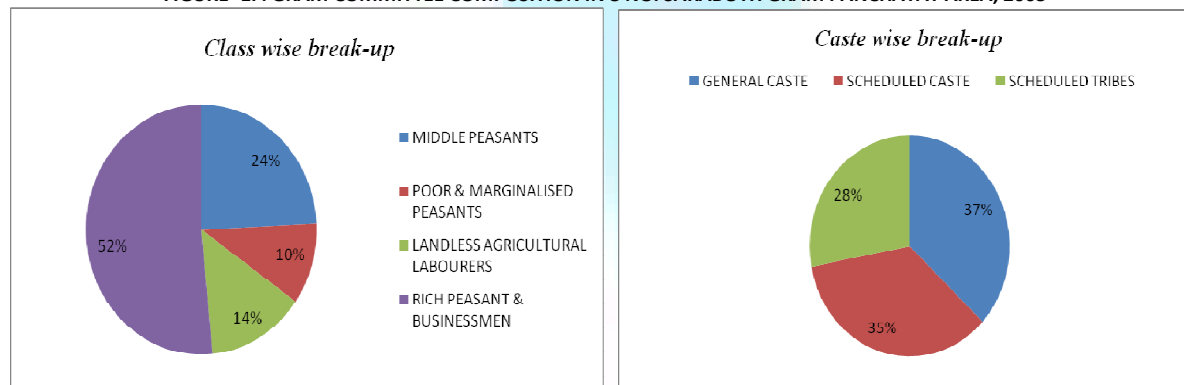
Let us now consider the composition Gram Committee in 8 No. Saraboth Gram Panchayat area, which is shown in Table-1.6.

**TABLE-1.6: GRAM COMMITTEE COMPOSITION IN 8 NO. SARABOTH GRAM PANCHAYAT AREA, 2003**

Members (in numbers)	Caste-wise break up			Class composition			
	General Caste	Scheduled Caste	Scheduled Tribes	Rich peasant & businessmen	Middle peasant	Poor and marginal peasants	Landless agricultural labours.
253	95 (37%)	89 (35%)	69 (28%)	124 (49%)	58 (23%)	25 (10%)	46 (13%)

Source: Own survey in 8 No. Saraboth Gram Panchayat area, 2007

Table-1.6 shows the class and caste composition of the CPI (M) Gram Committee at the village level. In CPI (M)'s Gram Committee rich peasants and businessmen are dominant (49%), the representation of middle peasants, poor and marginal peasants, and landless agricultural labourers is 23%, 10% and 13% respectively. As compared to the population size general caste representation to the gram committee should not be as high as 37%. This picture is also shown in the following Figure-1F:

**FIGURE -1F: GRAM COMMITTEE COMPOSITION IN 8 NO. SARABOTH GRAM PANCHAYAT AREA, 2003**

Each of the Pie diagram is drawn on the basis of data represented in Table-1.6

Same pattern is also found in the composition of Local Committee (L.C) under which 8 No. Saraboth Gram Panchayat belongs to. In CPI (M)'s party hierarchy Local Committee is one of the most important layers in mobilizing supporters at the rural level. For the study a survey on the composition of said local committee have been made shown in Table-1.7 below

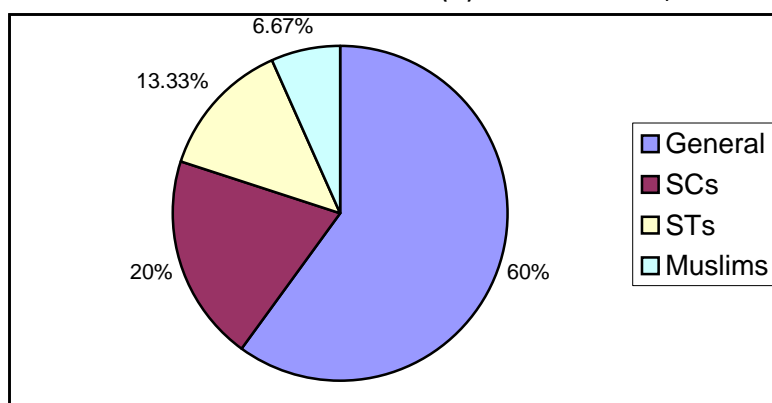
**TABLE-1.7: COMPOSITION OF CPI(M)'S LOCAL COMMITTEE (LC) UNDER WHICH 8 NO. SARABOTH GRAM PANCHAYAT BELONGS.**

Caste/Community	Total	Male	Female	Composition for 8 No. Sarboth G.P. under L.C.		
				Total	Male	Female
General Castes	9 (60%)	8 (88.89%)	1 (11.11%)	2 (66.67%)	1 (50%)	1 (50%)
Scheduled Castes	3 (20%)	3 (100%)	--	--	--	--
Scheduled Tribes	2 (13.33%)	2 (100%)	--	1 (33.33%)	1 (100%)	--
Muslims	1 (6.67%)	1 (100%)	--	--	--	--
Total	15 (100%)	14 (93.33%)	1 (6.67%)	3 (100%)	2 (66.67%)	1 (33.33%)

Source: Local Committee of CPI(M), own survey – 2007.

As it has mentioned earlier while analyzing the composition of the Gram Panchayat that an increasing trend of the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and women section participating in the functioning of gram panchayat as elected members, Table-1.7 does not reflect this trend. From Table-1.7 it is found that out of the total 15 members of the Local Committee under survey 9 members that is 60% of the total members still belongs to the General Caste category. Only 3 members, that is 20%, are coming from SCs and 2 members that is 13.33%, are coming from STs to join gram panchayat as members. The caste composition of local CPI (M)'s committee under which 8 No. Saraboth G.P. belongs to can also be shown in the following pie diagram (Figure-1G).

FIGURE-1G: CASTE COMPOSITION OF CPI (M)'S LOCAL COMMITTEE, 2003



Pie diagram is drawn on the basis of data represented in Table-1.7

It is remarkable also that in the decades of different feminist movement in India as well as abroad only one female member is found in the Local Committee which does not suggest any breakthrough in equalizing gender in the organizational structure of power at the rural level. If we consider that CPI (M)'s Local Committee has been giving leadership over the functioning of the Gram Panchayat it is expected that female members join in this arena of power.

From the discussion so far it is clear that after the passing of 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act, in 1992 one would expect a larger representation of the SCs, STs and women folk at the level of Gram Panchayat. It has happened at the level of gram panchayat as an arena of institutional power. Actually, every political party has to keep provision for the backward sections of the population legally and constitutionally but at the level of the organizational power i.e. at the level of local committee we find a different picture. Therefore, **our study does not suggest any fundamental change in the process of decentralization of power. If legal power is offered to the backward section of the population and then deprives them of the decision-making power at the level of leadership, no fundamental change has taken place. In tune with the slogan of peoples' democracy through dispersion of power to the people residing at the grass root levels, one would expect that organizational power is also decentralized to the backward sections.**

Therefore, it may be argued that while panchayat representation from the poor families as well as from lower caste categories has increased to a large extent over time, but so far as organizational representation is concerned, we find a disappointing picture where most of the decision-makers in different political organizations are from rich peasant or from businessmen. Although SCs and STs people mostly dominate the gram panchayat, general caste representation is relatively high as compared to its population size. The numerical strength of the lower castes and lower classes has been established at the level of panchayat and other organizations but at the leadership level, concentration of power is found in the hands of middle peasantry. It thus creates constraints in the unity of agricultural labourers and poor peasants and the basic principle of people's democracy is violated. At the level of the elected body one would expect a communist party to have a higher percentage of agricultural labourers and poor peasants [Lieten, 1992]. **Our findings show an absence of this group in the party level, which does not signify any radical restructuring of the rural power structure and thus agrarian mobilization loses its momentum.**

In spite of the criticisms we have made above against lop sided nature of political empowerment it is only through participating in PRIs and party organizations, in West Bengal that women group in a large number are now participating in those two arenas of political power particularly after passing out of 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment in 1992. Now we may have a quick glance on other types of women empowerment in certain fields, which are mostly invisible. Other indicators of empowerment, which are now drawing international attention and have partly become a regular part of impact analysis include access and rights to resources and economic opportunities and knowledge (land, jobs, education, health care, etc.), access to service institutions, involvement in household decision-making and representation in public decision-making bodies at the community, state and national levels (which are already dealt with). The case of exclusion of women group from different socio-economic power centres can also be taken into consideration in analysis of women empowerment. The cultural exclusion of women may sometimes take the form of not allowing them to participate in society in the way others are allowed to. "In South Asian countries mainly women, poor and so called low-caste people are excluded from the participation in many socio-economic and political decision-making processes by saying that they are ignorant, uneducated and unwilling to participate"<sup>9</sup>. We have made a field work at 8 No. Saraboth Gram Panchayat to revisit the notion of women's empowerment.

We have conducted a survey on villages—Olui and Derepur under 8 No. Saraboth Gram Panchayat and the data relating to population status is shown in Table-1.8 below:

TABLE-1.8: POPULATION STATUS OF TWO VILLAGES UNDER 8 NO. SARABOTH G.P. AREAS, 2007

Village	Total Population (in number)			Sex Ratio	No. of Couples
	Male	Female	Total		
Olui	330 (50.69%)	321 (49.31%)	651 (100%)	973	176
Derepur	442 (53.51%)	384 (46.49%)	826 (100%)	869	134
Total	772	705	1477	913	310

Source: Own Survey 2007

According to own survey made a later part of 2007, it is found that at present the village Olui has a total population 651 out of which 330 are male (50.69%) and 321 are female (49.31%). This village has 176 couples and the sex ratio in this village stands as 973. Whereas in Derepur, a total of 826 people are residing out of which 442 are male (53.51%) and 384 are female (46.49%). Sex ratio in the village is 869. The number of couples in this village is 134.

In the following Table the economic status of women in comparison with its male counterpart have been briefly analysed. For this purpose, three variables like agricultural labour, land ownership by women and their access to bank/cooperative credit society has been used. The results are shown in Table-1.9.

<sup>9</sup> Acharya Meena and Ghimiri Puspa in Economic and Political Weekly Oct 29, 2005, p-4719



TABLE-1.9: ECONOMIC STATUS OF POOR AND WEAKER SECTION SPECIALLY WOMEN IN TWO VILLAGES UNDER 8 NO. SARABOTH GRAM PANCHAYAT

Village	Agricultural Labourers			Ratio of Female worker to total population	Females engaged in non-agricultural workers (other than household works)		Female having title land ownership		Females having access to bank/cooperative credit	
	Male	Female	Total		Nos.	Ratio to TP	Nos.	Ratio to TP	Nos.	Ratio to TP
Olui [Total population (TP)] = 651	120 (69.4%)	53 (30.6%)	173 (100%)	8.14%	2	0.31%	30	4.61%	0	0%
Derepur [Total population (TP)] = 826	39 (52%)	36 (48%)	75 (100%)	4.36%	6	0.73%	8	0.97%	11	1.34
Total	159 (64.1%)	89 (35.9%)	248 (100%)	6.03%	8	0.54%	38	2.57%	11	0.75%

Source: Own Survey 2007

From Table-1.9, it is found that out of 173 agricultural labourers in the village Olui 120 are male (69.4%) and 53 are female (30.6%). In respect of total population in the village Olui only 8.14% are female workers who are engaged in farming works. Only 30 female (4.6% of total population) are having little of land ownership. There is no female in this village who has access to bank/cooperative credit society. In Derepur on the other hand, it is found that out of total 75 agricultural labourer 36 belong to women (48%). Out of total population it reaches only 4.36%. Out of 36 female workers only 6 are engaged in non-agricultural works (other than their household works). In contrast to village Olui Derepur has 8 female members who have ownership of land and 11 female have access to bank or cooperative credit society. From these data we may say that the share of the farming works by the female in both villages is noteworthy. However, these women take responsibility of running their family business also. In the daytime they are engaged in cultivating land and in morning and night they have to cook meals, look after their children and also to provide care to the older parents of their husbands. Therefore, it is an obvious example of gender discrimination. With regard to ownership of landholdings we found a dismal picture is too. In Olui, only 4.6% women and in Derepur only 0.97% are having title of land ownership. At the village level ownership of land symbolizes empowerment. But we do not see any breakthrough in land distribution favouring women. ***In West Bengal's land reforms policy there is no special provision to distribute 'Khas' (i.e. vested) land in favour of women group, which does not show also that women are liberated by a radical regime in West Bengal.*** It has no agenda for emancipation of women who are being exploited by an age-old practice of patriarchalism. Although a significant figure comes out of the village Derepur where 11 women have access to bank/cooperative credit system for which a new movement of micro-finance for women is started in many South Asian countries of which Bangladesh is a fit case. For women empowerment this radical regime has to redefine its slogan of land reforms movement from 'land to the tiller' to 'land to the women' because only men always till land.

TABLE-1.10: SOCIAL STATUS OF FEMALES IN TWO VILLAGES UNDER 8 NO. SARABOTH GRAM PANCHAYAT

Village	No. of females who could marry on their own choice in last 10 years	No. of females who faces domestic violence on regular basis	No. of females suicidal death or murder due to dowry	No. of cases of abortion held in last 10 years for the reason of seeking male child	No. of suicide committed by the widows	No. of female members in Public Puja Committees
Olui	1	1	0	4	0	10
Derepur	2	3	0	2	1	0
Total	3	4	0	6	1	10

Source: Own Survey 2007

We have found by making field work in villages of the district of Paschim Midnapore that participation by women group in PRIs is significantly increased. It does not mean that women become powerful at par with their male counterpart. For the purpose of studying women empowerment in social sector we have also gone through two villages in Paschim Midnapore. A social study is made incorporating several feminist issues like domestic violence, female suicidal death or murder due to dowry, number of cases of abortion which symbolize women liberation (according to Western feminist View), position of widows in the society and the role of female in several civil societies. In those two villages we have taken the entire women group from the age group of 18 to 40. Some specific questions are put to them to be answered; such as whether grown up ladies can marry or choose their life partners on their own in the last 10 years. Answers to these questions do not signify any changes in the mental make up of the guardians of families. In the village Olui only one case and in village Derepur only two cases are found where females could marry on their own choice. This certainly a backwardness on the part of women particularly educated women who still follow the dictates of their parents.

Table 1.10 also shows that some cases of domestic violence are also found, one in Olui and three in Derepur. On the specific question why such kind of domestic violence they are facing, women groups are unable to answer with all satisfaction. It is found that causes of domestic violence against women in spite of the enactment of Article 498A, are: demands of more dowry, birth of girl child repeatedly, over or under sex of the females or their husbands, poverty, and illiteracy. However there is no case of female suicidal death or murder reported from the study villages in the last 10 years. Demands of male children in both villages are also too high. In the last 10 years 4 cases in Olui and 2 cases in Derepur where abortion held for the reason of seeking male child. It does not also signify any form of women liberation in those study villages. In those cases of abortion male partner has always shown his dominance over his female counterpart. It also symbolizes the practice of patriarchalism, which could not be done away with by radical movements undertaken by the dominant political party and its allies. Left political movements have no specific agenda of women liberation fearing a considerable loss of vote banks in village societies where males are always dominant. The social status of widows has to some extent changed. Presently, they find their proper places in the larger society although there is no case of remarriage of widows in study villages, which can be cited as an example of the introduction of the new ethos of modernity in rural society too. Another significant aspect comes out of the village Olui where 10 females are included in public puja committees as members. This may be cited as an example of female participation in civil society like 'Barwari puja' committee where women voice is also be taken into consideration. Thus it may be said that ***no revolutionary transformation in regard to women liberation has taken place in those study villages. Changes in this regard are taking place in a slow pace due to propagation by the electronic and all other media as women being a part and parcel of human society.***

## FINDINGS

The main findings of our study are:

1. The panchayat representation from the rural poor and weaker section of the society, particularly the women, has been increased to a large extent over time. Therefore with the passage of time, a radical change in the distribution of power at the institutional level has been occurred which is a good symptom of the political empowerment of those sections of the society.



2. So far as organizational representation is concerned, we find a disappointing picture where most of the decision makers at different levels of political organizations are from rich peasants or from businessmen. Our findings show an absence of the poor and weaker sections in the organizational level, which does not signify any radical restructuring of the rural power structure and thus agrarian mobilization loses its momentum.
3. There is no revolutionary transformation in regard to women liberation that has been taken place in our study area. Changes in this regard are taking place in a slow pace due to propagation by the electronic and all other media as women being a part and parcel of human society.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The question of women's participation in politics through PRIs has been seriously taken up by LFG in West Bengal. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment has paved the way for their participation in all panchayat institutions. LFG since 1992 has taken care in ensuring reservations of seats. West Bengal was the first state in the country to enact legislation for the reservation of one-third seats for women in PRIs in 1992 before the Constitution was amended in 1993. Our study shows that women face a lot of difficulties due to the patriarchal outlook of the society, inadequate education and negative attitude of their families. However, their participation in PRIs has exposed the potentiality of the women leaders. It is also found that the gains achieved by women through political participation are marginalized by certain incidence of or trends towards dowry, torture and violence against women. In spite of all these negative sides, women members play important roles in the implementation of all rural development programmes. They have shown their consciousness about their legal rights and encourage the fellow women to claim their rights also. We also notice an improvement in the social status of the elected women members, particularly from SC, ST and other backward categories. Not only women but also the poor villagers belonging to SC, ST i.e. dalit groups have also found empowerment and dignity in the rural society. Inclusion of these age-old backward people of the villages in West Bengal is certainly an event to be reckoned with. Their inclusion in different levels of PRIs has improved their socio-economic status. Whether this inclusion is an authentic one is a big issue to be debated by citing more case evidences from the villages in West Bengal. We have found in our study an upper caste and class biasness of distribution of resources at the levels of PRIs in which ruling party is found dominant. For these reasons poor backward people are found unable to assert newly found political position in PRIs. Therefore, mere inclusion in political process does not symbolize their political empowerment. What they need today is to increase their socio-economic empowerment to concretise their political empowerment. The poor people belonging to SC and ST categories, having no economic resources at their disposal are not in a position to enjoy fruits of political power.

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