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# The Impact of a Quota System on Women's Empowerment -

A field study in West Bengal, India

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## Abstract

Women's empowerment is thought to be one of the main issues when talking about gender equality, economic growth and poverty in the academic world today. In India many states are using a reservation bill to ensure women's participation in the political decision-making at local level. Is this the right way to go and are women getting empowered due to this? This paper discusses the impact of the 73rd amendment, including reserving 1/3 of the Panchayat seats for women in West Bengal, and its effect on women's empowerment. The result is encouraging where most people welcome this initiative from the State Government and where at least some of the female leaders elected through this quota are considered empowered. This in turn has had positive effects on the village community since women in general find it easier to approach female leaders.

*Key words:* Women's empowerment local democracy leadership power panchayat India West Bengal

## List of acronyms

PRI	Panchayati Raj Institution. Groups of villages functioning as units of self-government
GP	Gram Panchayat, lowest tier of the PRI
ZP	Zilla Parishad
PS	Panchayat Samiti
Pradhan	Elected leader of the GP
Upa-pradhan	Next in line after the Pradhan.
Upa-samitis	Sub-committees under the GP office
Gram Sansad/Sabha	Village meetings with the intention to support the GP and increase village participation
GUS	To further increase the role of the Gram Sansads, the WBPA implemented Gram Unnuayan Samitis (GUS) in each Gram Sansad
SHG	Self-help-groups

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# The Impact of a Quota System on Women's Empowerment

## 1 Introduction

The world of science agrees that the poor and marginalized people in the third world lack most of the attributes needed to really be able to make a difference, both for themselves or for their community. Not being able to participate or make your voice heard, due to oppression, caste, gender or just lack of strength, is something that does not go well together with a democratic society (Deininger 2003:3). It is also agreed upon that economic growth is lagging behind due to not including the masses. The old modernization theory, where the development of backward countries was to be done through transforming them into modern and westernized economies with the assumption that growth and increased income would benefit everybody, is not a good enough assumption now when we have entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Parpart, Connelly and Barriteau 2000, Bagchi 2005:82). Lately, with the emergence of stronger female voice, the world of science has realized that we must not only focus our attention on the poor and rural inhabitants of the developing world, but also especially on the women.

Furthermore, the World Bank has identified empowerment as one of the key constituent elements for poverty reduction, and as a primary development assistance goal. There is an agreement that there should be a promotion of women's empowerment, the reason being twofold: it promotes growth, reduces poverty, and promotes better governance. Furthermore, the social justice aspect alone and its importance for human welfare make women's empowerment worth pursuing (Malhotra, Schuler and Boender 2002:3). My intention in this paper is to study women in one of many areas where their empowerment is necessary, in the decision-making area i.e. in the political world.

A report from the World Bank states that women's political participation is increasing, albeit slowly, but that men still wield control. According to statistics for the year 1980 women occupied only 10 per cent of the world's parliaments and 4 per cent of national cabinets. 2007 women represented 17 per cent of single and lower houses of parliament, which is a 4 per cent increase from 1990. In 1993, of all the governmental leaders in the world only six were women. In 2007 this number increased to 13 (The Millennium Development Goals Report

2007:12pp, Datta & Sen 2003:1pp). The World Bank report also concludes that of all factors that determine women's political participation, e.g. political will, the strength of national women's movements and a continuity in working for gender equality and women's empowerment, no tool is as powerful as gender quota systems (The Millennium Development Goals Report 2007:12pp).

To not be allowed inside when it is time to take decisions, decisions that affect women's life, is not acceptable. Just the fact that women comprise half of the world's population means that there can be no sustainable development without them. Women must have "*both the legal right and access to existing means for the improvement of oneself and of society*" (Parpart 2000:22). In developing countries women face many different kinds of constraints to participate: cultural, institutional and legal to mention some (Datta et al 2003:2). This exclusion or absence of women has, most likely, had an impact on the way we think and create economic theories. How do we identify and integrate the social and economic needs of the women if we do not accept them as the important factor for economic, in particular rural, development that they are? This makes the events taking place in India so much more interesting. West Bengal, one of many states in the world's largest democracy, which just recently became independent, introduced a reservation bill that reserves 1/3 of all seats in the Panchayati Raj for women. The women in India get a chance to become politically empowered!

In India, more specifically in the state of West Bengal, there is no doubt that many people are marginalized and subjugated, especially the poor, rural women. The old dichotomy where women stay at home while the men provide and, more importantly, do the decision-making and are politically active is very much alive here still. This can be seen if you stroll down a street in central Kolkata. Even though the number of people working there, may it be hawking, selling petty wares, dragging a rickshaw, driving a taxi, polishing shoes or cooking various Bengali dishes, is staggering, the clear majority of them are men, with very few exceptions. I for one, during three months stay here, have seen one woman selling *chai* (tea) and that is saying a lot since this is sold in every street corner. The only money income available for women working the streets seems to be either as beggars or selling vegetables, again of course with a few exceptions. This is not just a sign of the fact that India has more men than women<sup>1</sup>. It is to me also a sign that the women in India live their lives behind the men. It is true on the street, in the household and in the political arena. According to Datta

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Sen/Dreze (2002) for further discussion regarding unequal gender distribution.

(2003) women are lagging behind in four major indicators: Sex ratio, mean age of marriage, literacy, and work participation. That there are fewer women than men in India is well known, a problem based on the fact that male children are preferred over female ones. The illiteracy is also known to be a great hurdle for all people in India, especially for women. Work participation, in which I include political work i.e. political participation is being dealt with due to this quota. The question is, does it promote women's empowerment?

The examples given above are taken from an urban area but moving out to the more remote villages where these old social beliefs prosper even more it becomes so much more true. The political system in rural India is based on the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI), which I will talk about later. In short, what it stands for is local democracy i.e. democratically elected politicians running an office with a close connection to the villages and with the intention to be units of self-governments. The reservation bill, introduced with the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment, guarantees certain seats in these Gram Panchayat (GP) offices to women in an attempt to empower them. To again quote Datta (2003): *“ the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment is a historic step of far-reaching implications and with significant repercussions on the political process in rural India ”* (Datta et al 2003:9pp).

## 1.1 Study Objectives

My main objective is to:

- Study the impact of a quota system on women's empowerment

Specific objectives are to:

- Study the reservation bill within the Panchayat system
- Study how the political empowerment of women viewed as a process has been affected by it. Does increased political participation for women lead to empowerment?

## 1.2 Methodology

Semi-structured interviews, participatory observation and governmental statistics are the main data sources in this paper. Interviews, performed in collaboration with a translator were done with various respondents in five Gram Panchayats (GP). By studying and observing different views and perceptions of individuals that are in some way involved and a part of the life of a Pradhan, may it be through work or everyday life, I will create a narrative that will help us understand the different roles and environments a leader, such as the woman Pradhan, has to play and operate within. I have selected four areas or perceptions of interest:

- *The perception of the people.* What are their views of having a female leader? Is it preferable to them or just outright wrong to use a quota system for political positions? Do the village women prefer having one of their own gender in this position?
- *The perception of the employees.* Some work has been conducted that focuses on the importance of the employees in the GP offices. Being the most educated and often outsiders, not hindered by informal bonds or networks, may imply that they are the ones really doing the decision-making. What is their relation to the female Pradhan? Do they prefer working under a woman or a man for any reason?
- *The perception of the political opposition.* Every GP consists of one party having the majority rule, in West Bengal often CPI(M), in my selection of GPs always CPI(M), but there are also other political parties and therefore other views of the quota system and so on. What are their opinions of the Pradhan now having the position?
- *The perception of the female Pradhan herself.* What are her thoughts and experiences of the matter? What does she think of being elected through a quota? Does it matter? Is she aware of her position and powers and does she wield it? Is she empowered?

My method for gathering my empirical data has both positive and negative aspects. First, I am using a qualitative method since there will not be enough data to do any regressions or causality conclusions. This means, according to Holme (1997), that my own perception as a researcher is in focus i.e. I will interpret the data according to my reference, motives or social status. Holme points out some features common for qualitative research methods, which are worth mentioning here:



- Large quantities of information on few objectives.
- Unsystematic and unstructured observations, in my case semi-structured interviews
- An interest in the unique or deviant
- An interest in the consistencies and structures
- The researcher works from within, aware of the fact that he/she affects the results by being present
- Me-you relation between the researcher and the researched.

About the semi-structured way of interviewing; it is seen as more flexible than standardized methods such as the structured interview or survey. Although the interviewer in this technique will have some established general topics for investigation, this method allows for the exploration of emergent themes and ideas rather than relying only on concepts and questions defined in advance of the interview. The interviewer would usually use a standardized interview schedule with set questions which will be asked of all respondents, in my case three different, one for villagers, one for employees and one for the Pradhan. The questions tend to be asked in a similar order and format to make a form of comparison between answers possible. However, there is also scope for pursuing relevant information through additional questions. When using an interpreter this can only be done if he is skilled enough to translate “on the go” so that the researcher can follow the discussion. The interviewer frequently has to formulate impromptu questions in order to follow up leads that emerge during the interview. The interviewer's role is engaged and encouraging but not personally involved. The interviewer makes it easier for the interviewees to talk about their views and experiences in depth but with limited reciprocal engagement or disclosure<sup>2</sup>. One of the strengths of a semi-structured interview is the fact that it resembles an ordinary everyday situation and is just a conversation between two people. This means that the researcher minimizes his effect on the direction of the interview (Holme (1997:99)). When using a translator familiar with the people and area, this is even truer.

In addition to interviews, one of my main tools for gathering data was through observations. Holme (1997) writes that observations imply the researcher is close to the researched, maybe even intruding on their private sphere. This can lead to problems and unwilling respondents since they usually understand that what they say to me will be

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.esds.ac.uk/qualidata/support/interviews/semi.asp>

published and, depending on the nature of the question, that might render them unwilling to answer. Holme separates open and hidden observation and active and passive participation (1997:110-115). In my case the observation was open and active since the respondents knew why I was there and because I to some extent directed my translator if I needed an additional question to be asked.

### 1.3 Limitations

The largest limitation when doing a survey of this kind is the fact that you are interviewing individuals and that you are doing it with the help of a translator. The difficulties and limitations with this kind of methodology will be discussed at length in part II.

The data-gathering, aside from the above mentioned translation problem, struggles with a couple of limitations worth mentioning.

- 1) *Smallness of the study.* The conclusions made in this paper must always be considered against the fact that I visited five villagers and in total spoke to around 70 individuals. On average a GP consists of 10-20 villages with a population of 10-20 000 (Ghosh and Mukhopadhyay, 2008). This is not enough to be able to draw any statistical conclusions or say anything conclusive for an entire village, gram panchayat, state or a nation. What I can do is say something about the small but specific areas I did visit and from the data collected there discuss the hypotheses, which will be discussed further down. To be able to draw conclusions over larger areas and more people can mostly only be done through the use of quantitative methods, which is the strength of that method. In my case it was not important to be able to draw full nation-scale conclusions
  
- 2) Field work in developing countries, in contrast to developed countries can be *physically demanding*, especially in rural areas, due to the lack of infrastructure and poor communication and transportation. This makes it time-consuming<sup>3</sup>. I myself struggled with heat and poor roads.

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Purkayastha, Subramaniam, Desai and Bose (2003).

- 3) There is also the problem with an *insider-outsider mentality* between the researcher and the researched. Since the researcher must actively be involved in the work, this creates power differences, both in the sense of research – researcher, mentioned earlier, but in this case between poor farmer – western student i.e. an economic difference which is present at all times.
- 4) Due to limitations, both economic and time, the study was done in the *eastern area of Kolkata*. These are rural areas but rural areas with decent roads making it possible to reach the city by car within a couple of hours. This may not matter but, nonetheless, the result may have differed if I visited areas with no connection to a modern mega-city. Even though I do not intend to draw any nation-wide conclusion, the data should be considered with this in mind.
- 5) *Consider what questions to ask*. Do they really serve the purpose of this study? This implies having your main objectives and hypothesis in order before going out in the field. In the field you are a stranger and people will sometimes be sceptic to you being there. Therefore you must beforehand consider what questions to ask and what not to ask and always be focused on the task at hand. I myself realized during my fieldwork that some questions were too hard, some too sensitive, some not relevant to my study and some not suitable for a semi-constructed interview.
- 6) Even though the purpose is not statistical generalisations when doing qualitative research, the *selection of respondents* is nonetheless important, according to Holme (1996:101-102). In my case, since my main objective is *women's empowerment*, I wanted to interview female Pradhans, but also female villagers. This was sometimes difficult due to the women often being inside their houses. I consider my sample of respondents to be randomly selected, thus representing a fair distribution of the village population.

All in all, the method used makes it hard to do any generalisations and one can never be certain that the data collected is truthful, relevant or useful for answering one's hypothesis. This is the major drawback of doing qualitative studies. However, by being careful and having the points above in mind, the data certainly serves a purpose.

## 1.4 Structure of the paper

The paper is divided into two main parts. Part one is mainly an attempt to capture and understand the environment in which women, in this case the women Pradhans, have to operate within. This section will contain a brief history review of the role of women in the political decision-making process, a review of the political environment in West Bengal and a theory section where the development of leadership in West Bengal, from informal leaders, basing their position on e.g. charisma or caste, to the panchayat system and political leadership, being the structure used today, will be discussed. Here I will also discuss and theorize empowerment, what it is and how to measure it. The literature and results from this section will be the base of my hypothesis that conclude this part of the paper.

Part two then is the survey where I intend to answer my hypothesis. Beginning with a review of the area, the respondents and some additional limitations of the field study, it continues with my field observations and data gathered through my interviews. This will be applied to the discussion held in part I, and used to answer my hypothesis. This section also contains the final conclusion and results of my study.

# PART I

## 2 Where and what is this PRI?

Since my interviews are with various people who in different ways are connected to the Pradhan; villagers, employees, leaders and other politicians, I will discuss the different arenas in which these operate, more specifically the state and its political situation, the panchayats and the Gram Panchayat administration. This will help us understand the political and administrative environment surrounding the Pradhan and what role and responsibilities are given to the women taking office due to this quota. I will start with some history, starting with the independence of the country and the role Panchayats played at that time, and discuss the strong position of CPI(M) in the state throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I will explain the PRI itself, the structure of it and problems within it. A discussion will follow around the implementation of the reservation bill and its purpose and meaning. Finally, there is a discussion about the administrative structure within the GP office and its clear hierarchy with a Pradhan as highest instance.

### 2.1 The birth of a nation

*“Unless and until our village people are educated, unless and until they become politically conscious, unless they become conscious of their civic rights and responsibilities, and unless they become conscious of their rights and privileges, this Village Panchayat System will do more harm than good”*

*Dr Monomohan Das, West Bengal, nov 1948*

When India freed itself from its colonial bonds the question of how to build a nation became central. India has always been a country where the countryside has played an important role. As opposed to Europe where industrialization pushed the living countryside to the margin

with the help of machines and mass production, India still is a land very much dependant on the poor farmers. This may lead to the assumption that their leaders would like to create a new and free nation with the countryside as its backbone. At least, this was what the founding fathers, led by Gandhi, thought and hoped. The Panchayati Raj, meaning assembly (Panchayati) governance (Raj), an old institution in India, would play a big part during the discussions about how India was to create its new constitution and many hoped for a new beginning for the Panchayati Raj. However, the reality was another. The creators of the first draft of the constitution borrowed political experiences from many countries to shape the future of India, from many countries except their own. This upset many and was the start for debates and discussions about the Panchayats to be or not be in the new India (Dharampal 1962) An increased participation and inclusion of the marginalized, such as women, were not on the agenda in the first years after independence. The mere existence of the Panchayati Raj as an institution was. What was discussed in length was how to address the issue in the constitution. On November the 22<sup>nd</sup> 1948 the following clause was added to the constitution;

*“The state shall take steps to organize village Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government”* (Dharampal 1962:17)

The clause above is somewhat unspecific and therefore easy to interpret ad hoc. The important thing is that the panchayats were added to the constitution and did not disappear as an institution. In West Bengal the politicians, especially the left front, saw the potential of a new, large voter base in the rural countryside. This is one of the reasons for West Bengals keenness on implementing a working Panchayat system. It attracted followers that kept them in power. This will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

The concept of a Panchayat has existed in India for a long time with different roles and importance. Pre-independence colonial rule used the Panchayat system to act as a first buffer wall against complaints and grievance from the village people. During post-independence, the 50s and 60s, the Panchayats developed, at least on paper, with the intent to reflect the aspirations and goals of the people. This failed due to certain flaws in the system<sup>4</sup>. In West Bengal it was not until when CPI(M) came to power in 1978 that this system truly began to flourish. They simplified the structure, making it three instead of four tiers, allowed

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<sup>4</sup> Basically lack of funds and the inability from the PRIs to produce their own revenue. Also due to being regulated/controlled by the appointed executives from the state government

political parties to field candidates and gave these institutes real executive power e.g. financial importance locally (SIRPD, vision document 2008:4pp). Hence the three-tier system with Gram Panchayat, Zilla Parishad and Panchayat Samiti was still in place.

One unique thing about West Bengal is its long and stable political environment, which according to many was the reason for its success in its creation of the Panchayati Raj after independence. This has made it possible to push through various reforms with some success and also make the Panchayats play an important role in the state's development<sup>5</sup>. Ruud (1999) points to three areas where West Bengal has impressive records: implementation of agrarian reforms, breaking agrarian stagnation, reducing poverty and increasing equality (Ruud 1999:238). Kohli (1989) in his book "The state and Poverty in India", claims that states such as West Bengal i.e. well organized and left oriented, are the most effective in implementing reforms (Kohli 1989). But the fact that the party is unrivalled must surely have negative effects as well.

## 2.2 The political situation in West Bengal, India

My intention for choosing this state was not so much intentional as a coincidence, but, nonetheless, the state has some characteristics that make it an interesting area for a field study. That the state continuously has worked for equality through land reforms and decentralization aside, the one characteristic that makes West Bengal stand out is the role played by the communist party. The Left Front Government (LFG), where the communist Party of India (Marxism) (CPI(M)) has a majority position, has kept its position as the number one party in the state since 1978, when it first took power. Below are the Panchayat electoral results from 1978 and forward:

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<sup>5</sup> Land reform and *Operation Barga*, which strengthened property rights for farmers, were some of the reforms pushed through with the help of the local political institutions, see Persson (2007)

Table 1: Political Representation in PRIs since 1978

Party	1978	1983	1988	1993	1998	2003
<b>Gram Panchayat</b>						
Left Front	69%	60%	73%	64%	56%	65%
Opposition	31%	40%	27%	36%	44%	35%
<b>Total seats</b>	<b>46845</b>	<b>46153</b>	<b>52520</b>	<b>61010</b>	<b>49199</b>	<b>49140</b>
<b>Panchayat Samiti</b>						
Left Front	76%	66%	79%	73%	67%	75%
Opposition	23%	34%	21%	27%	33%	25%
<b>Total seats</b>	<b>8467</b>	<b>8664</b>	<b>9128</b>	<b>9453</b>	<b>8515</b>	<b>8500</b>
<b>Zilla Parishad</b>						
Left Front	92%	74%	91%	89%	87%	87%
Opposition	8%	26%	9%	11%	13%	13%
<b>Total seats</b>	<b>648</b>	<b>678</b>	<b>658</b>	<b>656</b>	<b>716</b>	<b>713</b>

Source: State institute of Panchayats & Rural Development, Government of West Bengal, 2008

Note: (i) All Percents rounded off

(ii) Opposition parties include Indian National Congress, Bharatiya Janat Party (BJP), All Indian Trinamul Congress and others

The fact that the Left Front, and CPI(M) in particular, has been in power for so long suggests, according to some theories, that the elected Panchayat leaders merely run their villages as “efficient managers”. The cadres, i.e. party workers/members, control everything, not allowing the people any room for participation or decision-making (Kumar 2006:29). This was also observed by Kohli (1989), who found that the major governmental decisions taken at local level were through informal and formal consultation with the local party representation. This creates room for some speculation around the role women can have in this kind of political structure. As we will see later, people in general and women in particular are very



poorly educated in India. We can also assume that their political experiences are far less than that of a male equivalent<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, due to their cultural position in the Hindu society, their voice may not be taken seriously, especially if they cannot back it up with some kind of authority, such as education, wealth, experience or personal charisma<sup>7</sup>. Since most women in rural India have none or very little of either of the above-mentioned factors, it should affect their ability to have these kinds of connections or relationships.

On the other hand, the stable political environment has ensured that the Panchayat system has lived on since 1978. Compared to other states in India, West Bengal is one of the front-runners when it comes to decentralization and local democracy but also the implementation of the reservation bill. The devolution of power and strong peasant support were the reasons for their successful land reform starting around the same time as the second-generation Panchayat system (Persson 2007). So, this is a dual problem where on the one hand the stable political environment enables the implementation of reforms benefitting, among others, women and, on the other hand, the negative effects arising due to the lack of political competition.

What is the secret then for keeping such a strong grip on power for such a long time? It is not like West Bengal has had incredible sustained growth (decline in agricultural output in the 1990s), that the land redistribution worked out without problems or that everybody has a job that explains the amazing popularity. If we were to look at West Bengal compared to the rest of the country, we would see that it is at best a middle state, at least when looking at education, development and income (Sarkar 2006:341pp). Being poor in West Bengal is not preferable to being poor in many other states in this country. Why is it then that CPI(M) has been in control for so long? Why do people keep voting for them even though the state's performance is at best mediocre? Sarkar (2006) sees an explanation in a dependency on the party. CPI(M) base supporters and voters are poor rural farmers and urban workers. What they have in common is an uncertainty of life. A streethawker, trader or autorickshaw driver work under highly vulnerable circumstances since most of them make their living in the informal sector, hence lacking a formal security net. The job situation in the informal sector is uncertain due to no secure property rights where anybody can take over one's livelihood, be it

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<sup>6</sup> Kira Sanbonmatsu finds that women know less about politics than men (2003). Since women have not been allowed into the political sphere in India until just recently, we can also assume that they have less experience.

<sup>7</sup> I will later discuss the definitions and issues regarding leadership and power. Indian history does carry with it an informal leadership, which in my view is a heavy burden for women in leadership positions.

a street corner shop or rickshaw, at any time. Since the police are too expensive to call for, the only protection is from the party. In the rural areas many small marginal farmers depend on the party, which in a sense has taken the place of a legal and economic security system (Sarkar 2006:342pp). The respect for the party is also very high, at least in the rural areas. My own observations confirmed this since people in the villages unwillingly talked about or against the party in fear of the consequences. The strong grip from the party was obvious. In the end, if we assume that the reasons for the CPI(M) strong grip on power given the above are somewhat correct, this must also affect the female Pradhan and the way she is able to lead. If the party and its representatives are the true leaders, what room is left for the female Pradhans?

The stability and strength of CPI(M) in West Bengal are indeed an interesting but complex issue. My intention in this paper is not to find any answers to this particular question; rather my purpose for discussing it is to give the reader a fuller understanding of the political environment in West Bengal, which will help in interpreting the end result of this paper. In the next chapters I will dig a little deeper into the Panchayati Raj system, the GP office administration and the responsibilities of the Pradhan.

### 2.3 The Panchayati Raj Institution today and its purpose

In the West Bengal Panchayat Act, sub section 3, section 19 reads as follows.

*A Gram Panchayat shall function as a unit of self-government and, in order to achieve economic development and secure social justice for all, shall, subject to such conditions as may be prescribed or such directions as may be given by the State Government, -*

- a. prepare a development plan for the five-year term of the office of the members and revise and update it as and when necessary with regard to the resources available;*
- b. prepare an annual budget for each year by the month of October of the preceding year for development of human resources, infra-structure and civic amenities in the area;*
- c. implement schemes for economic development and social justice as may be drawn up by, or entrusted upon it.*

(The West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973)

To be able to work as a unit of self-government you need autonomy, something that Singh (2001) knew.

*“Just as states desire maximum amount of autonomy from the union, the Panchayat Raj too can subsist and flourish in an atmosphere of trust and goodwill. This, in fact, is the essence of democratic life”*

(Singh (2001:141))

Is this the case in West Bengal? To be self-governmental or autonomous the state government needs to transfer fiscal and decision-making power downward to the panchayats i.e. there is a need for devolution. The reasons for this kind of out-sourcing of resources and decision-making down to local government are many. The closeness between the local government and citizens makes the delivery of services more effective. Local governments simply reflect the needs of the citizens better than a centralized one. However, according to Bardhan (2002), this kind of reform is only effective if the local elite groups are not in power. It is not uncommon that these groups take control when there is devolution of power. This possibility depends on social and economic inequality, voter awareness and how fair elections are, to name a few examples (Bardhan 2002:194). The West Bengal decentralization process must, then, be seen as fairly successful since it did not only have a strong political will from CPI(M) behind it. A land reform took place at the same time, where vested land was redistributed. Even though the impact on inequality and increased productivity may be somewhat lacking, the power base of the former, rich, landowner class was destroyed, which paved the way for the lower segments of society into the political arena. There was also an increase in secure property rights due to the registration of sharecroppers i.e. Operation Barga. The creation of a local democracy, where the politicians were not biased towards the already rich and powerful landowners, was to some degree done. The poor had representatives in e.g. the GP<sup>8</sup>. Later, as we already know, even women were to be included.

Furthermore, the accountability is enhanced when having a devolution compared to the alternative. This means, in theory, a reduced probability of corrupted government employees (Bardhan and Mookherjee 2005:676, Devas and Grant 2003:307pp). Furthermore, Véron and Williams (2005) talk about how a decentralized government is more cost-effective,

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<sup>8</sup> See Persson (2007) for a detailed discussion around these reforms

improves accountability and reduces corruption. Decentralization also reduces the power and authority located at central level, which means a less important role for the state in general but also increased competition within the government and therefore increased control over it (Bardhan 2002:185). This is not true for the State of West Bengal, famous for its lack of political competition. CPI(M) has succeeded in the task of decentralizing decision-power but has at the same time not given up the real power.

Article 243G of the Constitution of India provides for “devolution”, that is, assigning Panchayats with such powers and authority so as to enable them to function as institutions of self-government (Annual Administrative Report 2006-2007:21). The issue of self-government is something that indeed is mentioned quite frequently. However, whether this is something that is achieved is till very much uncertain. As mentioned, decentralization and the existence of GP are needed primarily due to its closeness to the people at grass roots level, therefore creating better decision-making. As written in a report from the state institute of Panchayats and Rural Development; Panchayats should “*work as a bridge between the people and the state government*” (Ghosh & Mukhopadhyay 2007:4). The importance of autonomy, not just fiscal but political, can not be stressed enough. There are several reports from the Government pointing to the fact that the GP are too heavily dependant on funds from the state government. Not having the skill, time or opportunity to raise their own revenue, which is the intention, creates a situation where programs and schemes from state government do not get implemented before the funds start flowing into the GP office. If there is to be some kind of real fiscal autonomy, the GP must be able to create its own revenue, e.g. better tax income. Depending on state government funding makes the Panchayats merely the scheme implementers, not the self-governed institutes they were meant to be. Furthermore, a member of the North 24 Parganas district observed that, “*the Panchayat hears the directive of the party, not the demands from the people*” (Ghosh et al 2007)). They are then not only poorly autonomous economically but in decision-making as well. The idea that the GPs are a bridge closing the gap between the state and people and that its primarily function is to speak and act for the people does not seem to have been properly implemented. That the Panchayats, particularly the Gram Panchayats, would be self-governing does not seem to be the case. As always, there are of course disparities not only among states but also among districts, blocks and villages.

The fact that the GP seems to be poorly autonomous reflects the perception the people have towards this institution. There are surveys showing disbelief directed against the GP when the villagers realize that they cannot meet their demands. The participation in Gram

Sansads is poor since people do not understand its purpose or they just do not have the time (Ghosh et al 2007: 143, Bhattacharaya 2007:97pp). They realize that it is higher instances that run the show. This disbelief is seen all the way down to the administration office. Ruud (1999) finds that administrations that try to implement reforms and programs to promote development often get cut off by politicians where and when there are negative consequences for influential groups or individuals. It seems, he concludes, that individual relationships are more important and play the larger role in this political environment (Ruud 1999:145pp). Furthermore, the fact that the GP itself has no control over either recruitment or promotions of the employees and that all employees, due to orders from their respective departments, have their allegiances towards their departments only<sup>9</sup> erodes the possibility of having fiscal or political autonomy even further.

## 2.5 The administration and Pradhan responsibility

My field study is as mentioned focused on the lowest of the three tiers i.e. the Gram Panchayat (GP). To get a better picture of the work in a GP office I will briefly explain the hierarchy and function of each level in this chapter.

Each GP is led by a Pradhan who has an Upa-Pradhan to help. According to West Bengal Panchayat Act (WBPA 1973), subsection 3 section 34, the Pradhan shall:

- a) *be responsible for the maintenance of the records of the Gram Panchayat;*
- b) *have general responsibility for the financial and executive administration of the Gram Panchayat;*
- c) *exercise administrative supervision and control over the work of the staff of the Gram Panchayat and the officers and employees whose services may be placed at the disposal of the Gram Panchayat by the State Government;*
- d) *for the transaction of business connected with this Act or for the purpose of making any order authorised thereby, exercise such powers, perform such functions and*

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<sup>9</sup> WBPA 207a says: “State Government can if it so wishes place the services of any officers and employees of the state government at GP disposal. Their salary, allowances and other benefits shall be met from the consolidated fund of the state”.

*discharge such duties as may be exercised, performed or discharged by the Gram Panchayat under this Act or the rules made thereunder;*

The sample villages in my study are chosen due to the fact that a woman is holding the position as Pradhan. This in turn means that in the election this year there will be no reserved Pradhan position in these specific GPs. This is a side effect from the rotation system. Furthermore, it has been found that the sharing of responsibilities and workload between the Pradhan and Upa-Pradhan often is unclear. In a study of 49 GPs, no one had an official distribution of work between the two. Also, the same study found that, unofficially, the Upa-Pradhan is the dominant person or leader if he himself is the leader of a party representing the GP or the Pradhan *happens to be a woman* (Bhattacharya 2007:40pp). Clearly there is a need for clarifying these roles.

The Pradhan has help from the other members of the GP office. Under the GP body is the sub-committees, which were implemented through an amendment 1997 (section 32 A). These are called Upa-samitis and consist of one - three members of the elected GP members depending on the size of the GP. There are five sub-committees;

- 1) Artha-O-Parikalpuna upa-samiti (Finance and Planning);
- 2) Krishi-O-Prani sambad bihas upa-samiti (Agriculture and animal resource development);
- 3) Siksha-O-Janasthya upa-samiti (Education and public health);
- 4) Nari, Sisku Unnayan-O-Samaj kalyan upa-samiti (Women, child development and social welfare);
- 5) Shilpa-O-Parikathauna upa-samiti (Industry and infrastructure).

The purpose for having sub-committees is that the GP now can delegate power and decision-making to the Upa-samitis who each have some financial autonomy. The Nari, Sisku Unnayan-O-Samaj kalyan upa-samiti must be composed by at least 50% women. The Pradhan is automatically chairman of the Artha-O-Parikalpuna upa-samiti (WBPA 1973).

Since the purpose of the Panchayats is to create a high degree of people participation, to work as a bridge between the people and the State government, the State government implemented Gram Sabhas in every electoral constituency in 1992. The Gram Sabha was later upgraded to Gram Sansads 1994, which were created in every

electoral constituency of a GP to ensure active participation of all people in all affairs of the GP (Ghosh et al 2007:5, Bhattacharaya 2007:5). The main function of the Gram Sansads is to

*“guide and advise the Gram Panchayat in regard to schemes for economic development and social justice, identification of beneficiaries for various poverty alleviations and food security programmes...A gram sansad may raise objection to action of Pradhan or any other member of Gram Panchayat for failure to implement any development work properly”*

(AAR 2003-2004, Ghosh et al 2007:125)

This village council then works both as an advisor and watchdog for the GP. To further increase the role of the Gram Sansads, the WBPA implemented Gram Unnuayan Samitis (GUS) in each Gram Sansad 2003 (SIRPDI, vision document 2007). The GUS ensures the participation of a variety of members, this to make sure, as well as possible, that all sectors of the people are covered. For example, it includes participation from the party with the second most votes within the GP but also women from Self-help-groups (SHG). The GUS is primarily viewed as a means to identify the local need and available resources of the sansad area, to activate people and initiate the process of planning from below (Bhattacharaya 2007:4pp). However the GUS is found to struggle with problems. Since every political party considers the GUS to be the main source of power every member there is politically chosen (Bhattacharaya 2007:100). This erodes the purpose of the GUS and further increases the majority party's ability to keep the decision-making power. This is a major problem since the participation of the people before not being included is of great importance. Without it the PRI will fail.

The role of the GP employees, the “Pillars of the GP” as some call them, is important for understanding the PRI. First of all, the GPs themselves have no say in selecting employees. This decreases the autonomy of the GP and inhibits the Pradhans role as “boss” since most employees consider themselves more a part of the block administration than the GP administration. Second, due to the lack of education among the elected office bearers, the dependency on employees gets even greater when it comes to interpreting e.g. state government documents (Bhattacharaya 2007:47pp). To my best knowledge, the employees are not subjected to any kind of quota system. This makes me wonder, since the employees are selected by higher instances, whether the female incidences among the employees are near 1/3 or not. If not, this certainly creates some problems when assuming that the employees are

so important for the GPs function. Through my observations I can conclude with some certainty that the clear majority of GP employees are indeed male. For example, I met five secretaries, the employee working closest to the Pradhan, during my field study. All five were male.

Hence, to recap, the hierarchy within a GP is as follows. Pradhan – members of GP – Sub-committees – Gram Sansads - GUS. In the GP the employees play an important role since they often are well educated. The problem here lies in the fact that they not always are loyal to the GP and Pradhan but to higher instances. Furthermore, the amendments and acts implemented to ensure increased active participation from the people could not be seen as successes. The purpose of all this, e.g. the implementation of Gram Sansads and GUS, is obviously to force people to participate and hence make the GP what it is supposed to be, the voice of the people. However, when measuring the attendance at e.g. these Gram Sansad meetings, the results are often poor. Poor public information leads to a lack of awareness and hence poor participation which now is seen as one of the larger problems in WB and its participating Panchayats. GUS is struggling with poor educated members who do not know what to do, hence the GUS inability to function properly. Also, old habits still seem to be alive in certain GPs. There are reports of Gram Sansads being dominated by a few (informal powerful leaders) and where the marginalized are silent women. This if you go there. Many just stay away if not belonging to the ruling party.

## 2.4 Women participation through history and the reservation bill

*“Women will not come automatically, if there is no space for them”*

*(Ghosh et al 2007:166)*

I mentioned in chapter two that after independence there were arguments and discussions about the role the panchayat, as an institution, should have. The constitution added Article 31-A, which said that the State Government should create Panchayats to make them units of self-government. In addition, the constitution of the new free India was to provide for equality of all citizens irrespective of caste, creed, political affiliation, language or *sex* (Bagchi 2005:80). Is this a fact? I have argued throughout this paper that this is not true. Statistics of health,



education, nutrition, and political representation or of the sex-ratio in India speak in clear terms<sup>10</sup>. Women are not treated equally. Women in India are still second-class citizens in many, if not all, spheres. This was to become clear after a report showing that the so called “trickle down theory” i.e. that any economic growth in a country would in time benefit everybody and that any economic growth in a family would benefit every member (Bagchi 2005:83), did not work as thought.

Have women in India at all been involved in the making of its modern history and fight for independence? Some argue that women in India during the freedom fighting did not have to come out and fight for e.g. their right to vote, as for example the suffragettes in Britain did, and therefore they cannot fully appreciate its value or use it for that matter. This may or may not be true. What is a fact is that women did participate on many political important occasions during the decades after the independence. Women’s organisations were formed and their awareness grew. Furthermore, the question about using quotas has also been on the agenda before. When leaders of these organisations were asked whether they would prefer reserved seats in different political assemblies they argued that this was not necessary. With education they would gain better jobs and with time claim political positions as equals (Bagchi 2005:80pp). One woman refused to accept reserved seats since this, to her, implied that they were inferior and needed protection (Datta & Sen 2003:14). History has shown us that reserving seats for women are necessary to break the vicious circle of male dominance. In West Bengal, during the GP elections before 1993, women had no reserved seats but still had some possibility of entering the panchayats. This did not happen. All in all, these experiences pointed to the fact that there was a need for a governmental intervention to get women into the political arena. This paved the way for the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment.

Due to the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment 1993 the inclusion of women began. In subsection 2, section 4 we can read the following;

*“Provided also that not less than one-third of the total number of seats, including the seats reserved for Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, in a Gram Panchayat shall be reserved for women, and the constituencies for the seats so reserved for women shall be determined by rotation, in such manner as may be prescribed” (WBPA 1973)*

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<sup>10</sup> For a in depth discussion of the status of women in India see Sen & Drèze (2002)

Section 9 states the same but with the focus on the Pradhan quota, which works in the same manner.

The use of a quota is controversial, even in the modern, westernized areas of the world. To get a position due e.g. to gender instead of competence is, for many, wrong since it gives an advantage to a group at the cost of another. On the other hand, it may be the only way to break unhealthy power structures and old habits. The 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment was added 16 years ago, not an especially long time for changes to occur. An interesting question is whether West Bengal is ready for this kind of change. As I will discuss more in detail later, the attitudes and beliefs that are historically rooted in India, e.g. the different roles given to men and women, may be hard to reshape. The question then is how far these changes, if there are any, in attitude have come. Is India, and the state of West Bengal in particular, ready for local women leaders and are the West Bengal women ready to become leaders? Does the fact that they know have the opportunity to lead empower them?

## 2.5 Chapter summary

To recap this chapter we can conclude that the PRI in West Bengal has great ambitions and grand goals but so far it has not fully been able to live up to its own agenda. The institution itself struggles with poor autonomy and unclear directives. We have village people not really being the active participants that the state wants them to be, this a result of them being poorly educated or just feeling powerless and not seeing the meaning of attending. We have opposition party members in the GP who should be able to participate in the decision-making under the rule of freedom and respect, but this is also not always the case. We have GP employees, politically hand-picked and almost certainly more educated than the office bearers, having an important role in the GP office but with loyalty to higher instances. We have a ruling party having a strong grip over the state and its GPs. In all this, if the rotation system has reached the GP in question, we have a female Pradhan supposed to lead the GP, be the boss to the employees and the final outpost when it comes to making decisions. A position granted due to a reservation bill.

In the next chapter I will discuss leadership, power and empowerment. To study whether these women have become empowered or not one needs to understand and define what empowerment is. How do you measure it? The theory argues that defining

empowerment is hard, to measure it even harder. This since empowerment is argued to be a *process*, not something static and therefore easy to pinpoint and measure. I argue that one way of measuring empowerment is to look at the variables power and leadership. A woman Pradhan cannot be empowered without being: 1) accepted as leader and 2) aware of her obligations and rights as just leader i.e. to wield the power given to her.

### 3 Theory

Knowing the structure, function and problems of the PRI and its administration will only get us so far. To really be able to understand the female Pradhans situation and whether they become more empowered by being put in power, we need to look deeper. We need to understand what it means to become empowered and how we are to measure it. Furthermore, we need a greater understanding of what leadership and power really is. We cannot get around the fact that a leader needs followers hence the question, who will follow these women?

In the following chapter I will first discuss the literature around the theory of empowerment. This to try finding indicators that will help us detect whether the women interviewed are empowered or not. The same goes for leadership and power. I will attempt to some degree to capture the history, mentality and beliefs, deeply rooted in Indian (rural) society, of gender, leadership, power and leader-follower relations. These are all areas that must be included and discussed if we are to understand the problematic situation a woman faces entering a position as the Pradhan of a GP. After all, she is not there primarily because the GP elected her as their first choice. Without the reservation bill it is unlikely that she would have the position today. In a sense, she is there due to the law. Does this fact clash with history?

#### 3.1 Empowerment

The Millennium Development Goal agenda states that gender equality and the empowerment of women must be promoted. As I mentioned in the introduction, by empowering women, we

do not just gain social justice and greater equality, we also gain in the fields of poverty and economic development. There is no doubt about the necessity of strengthening women, to empower them. The problem lies in how to do it and how to measure the result. How do we as scientists decide whether women have been empowered or not? Or as in my case, how can I decide whether the women leaders are empowered by their new position and power? What are the indicators? To start with, we need to define the word empower.

### 3.1.1 Definition

One might argue that in the political arena, being empowered simple means being included i.e. to participate in the decision-making. However, there is a need to differ between being able to participate and participating (or having power and wielding it). Bennet (2002) discusses this and creates a framework where *empowerment* and social *inclusion* are related but separate concepts. She defines empowerment as:

*“the enhancement of assets and capabilities of diverse individuals and groups to engage, influence and hold accountable the institutions which affect them”*

Social inclusion is defined as:

*“the removal of institutional barriers and the enhancement of incentives to increase the access of diverse individuals and groups to assets and development opportunities”*

(Bennet 2002:13)

While empowerment focuses on the individual or group, hence the micro level, social inclusion is about changing institutions at the system level.

Bennett sees three elements that are important and affect the framework of empowerment and social inclusion. They are *people, their assets and capabilities, and the institutions and organizations*. The empowerment process then works “from below” i.e. the poor themselves exercise it. Social inclusion, in contrast, requires systematic change, which may be initiated “from above”. To sustain empowerment over time there is a need for systematic change or some kind of regulation from the state. In our example we can translate

this as the need for governmental interference to remove some institutional or social barriers, such as implementing a quota system to ease women's entry into GPs and to enhance and sustain the empowerment of women. Bennett's definition of empowerment emphasizes the importance of seeing it as a process, not something static, hence the difficulty of measuring it (Bennet 2002:6pp).

Furthermore, according to Malhotra, Schuler and Boender (2002), the literature on women's empowerment uses some key words to define empowerment: options, choice, control, and power. Some of the definitions of empowerment often cited are:

*“altering relations of power...which constrain women's options and autonomy and adversely affect health and well being.”*

*“how much influence people have over external actions that matter to their welfare”.*

*“a process whereby women become able to organize themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination”*

*“The expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them” (Malhotra et al 2002:5pp)*

The last definition is useful since it in two ways distinguishes itself from other various closely related concepts. First it has an element of process, also important in Bennett's empowerment and social inclusion definitions. There is a movement from not being able to make strategic life decisions to an expansion in being able to do just that. There is also the phrase “making strategic life choices” i.e. there is some degree of individual responsibility. You must make the choices yourself. To connect it to Bennets framework with “bottom-up” and “top-down”, if there is a social inclusion without women taking advantage of this, there is no empowerment. The women are themselves important factors. For example, there are many examples in literature of women given, for example, greater access to resources but it does not lead to greater control. There are examples of women getting increased decision-making power but without exercising it, or women being leaders without promoting women's interests (Malhotra et al 2002:6). Kabeer (1999) adds a similar view when she talks about the relationship between empowerment and power, the root concept, which may mean *the ability*

*to make choices*. To be disempowered then implies to be denied choice. Again, we can see the importance of defining empowerment as a process since there is no empowerment if it does not start with some kind of barrier to choice i.e. disempowerment. There are for example powerful individuals who have positions where they make choices but they are not empowered since they have not been disempowered in the first place (Kabeer 1999:1-3).

Datta (2003) adds a definition of political empowerment as the: “*acquisition of the capacity as well as the adoption of needed strategy by women in order to exercise their powers more effectively and professionally, for their own development in particular and of the society in general*” (Datta et al 2003:3). Women need the capacity, e.g. in the form of top-down structural changes and fiscal autonomy but perhaps mostly through better education and strategy, which can only be planned if they are politically aware, to empower themselves.

### 3.1.2 Measurement

As we can see, defining empowerment is in itself hard. Add to this the common understanding in the literature that empowerment is a process, hence the difficulties when trying to measure it. What is one to look for when doing a qualitative study? To answer this we add another important factor explaining empowerment. *Agency*.

Malhotra (2002) finds that there is a great consensus in the literature on what are to be used as indicators of being empowered, divided into resources and agency (Malhotra et al 2002). Resources are nowadays often seen as enabling factors or critical inputs needed to promote an empowerment process, such as education, employment or material necessities. Agency on the other hand is, for many scientists involved in this area, the basis for understanding empowerment. It is “*the essence of empowerment*” (Malhotra 2002:9). Kabeer defines it in short as “*the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them*” (Kabeer 1999:3). Malhotra (2002) defines it as “*the ability to formulate strategic choices, and to control resources decisions that affect important life outcomes*”. Feminists often call it the “power within”. Agency puts even more responsibility on the individual and it points to the importance of “bottom-up” empowerment.

Add a third component, achievements, and we get a three-part definition, which helps us understand the meaning of empowerment:

## Resources – Agency - Achievements (Kabeer 1999:3)

The additional component, achievements, are easiest seen “*as outcomes of empowerment, not as empowerment per se, just as resources may be more usefully construed as enabling factors or catalysts for empowerment*” (Malhotra et al 2002:9). To connect this to the reservation bill and the use of quotas we can create a similar model:

**Resources/enabling factors** (Reservation bill/Education) – **(Women’s) Agency** (ability to assert oneself, make decisions independently) – **Achievements** (increased participation/self-confidence)

So, the reservation bill is in itself not empowerment, it is merely removing barriers, in the Indian case guaranteeing women a place within the political sphere, creating the opportunity for women to be involved in the decision-making. It is up to the individual whether women get empowered by this. Whether education, a subject so important that it has a separate chapter, is a determinant, i.e. an enabling factor, or an indicator of empowerment, i.e. something that indicates empowerment, may be debated. In this paper I will hold education as one of the most important determinants of empowerment. Without being educated, which we will see both in the literature and from my field study, a woman in West Bengal will have a hard time empowering herself, both due to the lack of awareness that comes with illiteracy but also from lack of respect from villagers wanting an educated leader. Remember how Bennet defined empowerment: *the enhancement of assets and capabilities of diverse individuals and groups to engage, influence and hold accountable the institutions which affect them*. This means that to be able to become empowered, some structural changes are not enough; there is a need for change on the micro-level as well. First and foremost, everyone must have what Friedman calls “Life space”, i.e. the capability to earn a secure livelihood. After that, empowerment of “the mind” may occur, for example through increased consciousness of one’s situation, political awareness, organizing the poor etc. Here education must be mentioned as important. Without education there cannot be any empowerment or achievement. As will be discussed in the next chapter, social norms work as a negative determinant of empowerment in the sense that, being a female leader and having power is uncommon in India, and they must therefore work their way through hundreds of years of women’s subordination and exclusion. This is, just as education, such an important factor that I have chosen give it a separate section in this paper.

There is, in conclusion, some responsibility of both the government and the people at grass roots level. Changing the “rules of the game” or removing institutional barriers is only one step in the empowerment process. There must be movement at the bottom as well to create the possibility for women to empower *themselves*. In the end, it is up to the individual to take advantage of the opportunities given. To be able to do this education plays an important role. To have agency, women Pradhans must know what to pursue, why they should pursue it and also have the capabilities to pursue it. Also, the old power structures and old beliefs that women should not be leading, which we will see very much exist, should be weakened thus paving the way for women as accepted leaders.

### 3.1.3 Finding empowerment in the field

How do you measure agency? How do you find it when doing a qualitative study? To find the determinants is possible, just as it is possible to find the factors that hinder empowerment. In this study we conclude that the reservation bill is an enabling factor, education is a determinant and the social norms and history are a hindrance to empowerment. Is it then possible to measure the agency, the empowerment process at an individual level? I have argued that the most important aspect of empowerment, agency is to be seen as something reflected in the ability to assert oneself, make decisions independently and take firm control of a situation. This I have tried to measure through observations and interviews. By studying the Pradhan herself and the people around her, it will be possible to some extent to see whether she is in power or not, in the sense of using her agency. Is the Pradhan the boss in the GP office or the village leader i.e. does she have followers? Is she asserting herself, pursuing goals and talking decisions? If yes, can we say that she has agency and that she has empowered herself? I would argue yes, but to what degree is more uncertain.

By studying people’s perception of the use of quota as a tool I will hopefully get a fuller view of how well this kind of social inclusion works and whether it is accepted in the Indian context. However, women being empowered in one place or area may not mean that the same given situation creates empowered women at another, since the attributes and behaviour vary (Malhotra et al 2002). The political context in which the women interviewed by me are situated in can be described as an historical exclusion from decision-making.



Therefore, in the next chapter, I will explain the historical position of the leader in India. From being informal to now being formal.

### 3.2 Leadership and power

Throughout history power has been seen in different shapes. We have of course the power of force, threat or manipulation, a strong army for example has given men the power to shape their own and other's futures throughout history. There are also the personal characteristics such as education, charisma, wealth, knowledge or even gender that an individual can use to convince people to support his or her cause. Ruud, in his book "Poetics of Village Politics", give us a very interesting picture of how leaders emerge in rural West Bengal. His study covers two villages during periods both pre-CPI(M) and post-CPI(M). He draws the conclusion that to be influential in a village you cannot just base your dominant position on enforcing power (which was tried) or authority, i.e. through landholdings or legitimacy, alone. To truly be able to possess and use one's power one must look deeper, at the "*individuals positioning in a broader social context, arising from within social relationships, where norms, interpretations... are constitutive concepts*" (Ruud 2003:67). Does this mean that women, with less informal networks and relationships due to being new to this experience, who are given leader positions in this society will have difficulties being accepted as leaders? They cannot base their leadership or gather followers based on individual relationships of power since they have none. They can base it on the formal power of the GP and the role of the Pradhan, but is this enough to be accepted as true leaders?

The history of West Bengal leadership after independence can briefly be described as oppression through land ownership. In the 1960s, massive poverty and great economic inequalities caused a deep cleavage in the rural society that led to hostilities of the lower classes, e.g. untied peasants, towards their superiors, the landowners (Kohli 1990:377pp). This was noted in the urban areas where political leaders, mainly communists, saw a chance to attract voters or followers. The reason why communistic ideas fell on good soil was, according to Ruud, the fact that the labourers were there for the taking. West Bengal's agriculture at the time was to a large extent based upon sharecroppers doing the labour with absentee landlords. With poor control over the peasants there was room for massive mobilization. CPI(M) created a picture of themselves as the party "for the poor", which

attracted many followers. That power mobilizes followers is a fact. Ruud states that different elements of power attract different groups of followers (Ruud 2003). CPI(M) attracted all the oppressed and poor labourers who for so long had lived and worked under the rich man.

What defines a leader? Is it possession of power? What is power then? There is, as always, a range of different definitions, more or less open for interpretations. E.g. Beethan defines power as:

*“ability to produce the intended effects upon the world around them, to realize their purposes within it”*

(Ruud 2003:47)

Weber describes power as:

*“the chance of a man or a number of men to realize their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action”*

(Ruud 2003:47)

Weber’s definition is interesting since it takes for granted that power is something exclusive for a man (or a group of men). What power is then, simply put, is the ability to push through your will, even against resistance. To do this you need some leverage against said resistance. You need something that the opposition does not have, which will give you more followers and hence a stronger power position. From this it follows that to be empowered as a woman leader, one must go from not having any power to getting in and wielding it. To wield it you need to be aware of what you have. If you wield it you will attract followers. Do the women in West Bengal know what has been given to them? Are they aware and are they attracting followers? If they are, can that be seen as an indicator of being empowered? That is, if villagers, historically used to male leaders, follow and accept the women leader, can we say that she in some degree is empowered? In some sense, she has used her agency to be what the reservation bill wants her to be. Or is the ability to have power a determinant? I stated before that history and social norms have denied Indian women the opportunity to wield power, and have worked as a negative determinant of empowerment. We need to separate between having power and wielding it. If you wield it we can talk about agency and political empowerment of rural women. But since power is so tightly tied to the social norms and history, where the ability to wield power is closely connected to one’s informal and individual

relationships, we can also interpret it as a determinant of empowerment. These old beliefs must however be destroyed before they work as a determinant in a way that it helps women become empowered.

Is it possible then? Or is the rural mind completely unwilling to change and adapt to women leaders? The way in which people look at caste, especially the progressions of “untouchables” (lowest caste, unclean for the higher caste to touch), which is described in Ruud (2003), shows us that people can change and adapt<sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, Vernooy (2006) shows us that gender relations change if there is an economic incentive<sup>12</sup>. He also points to the fact that younger women are more confident due to higher education, have an increased awareness of the outside world, greater mobility and a higher exposure to modern ideas (Vernooy 2006) than what was the case just a few generations ago. Maybe they can turn the tide and make place for themselves now given the chance through the reservation bill.

The leader-follower dichotomy is particular interesting in West Bengal since it has so many layers. We have the Panchayat receiving funds from the State Government hence bound to abide by its rule. At the same time the Panchayat is the voice of the people. It is for them, after all, that they are there. Add to this the pressure from the party in majority. The West Bengal example is also here special since the CPI(M) agenda does not always go hand in hand with the State Governments. The Panchayat is not only responsible to the State Government but must also accommodate the policies of the ruling party in running, for example, the GP. And these are just the outside powers working in an intricate web of responsibilities and accountabilities. Inside the GP the Pradhan not only needs the villagers behind her but also the confidence from the employees, given their so important function in the everyday duties of the GP. Do they follow her? Do they follow a woman there on quota, not, as history tells us was the case, due to some material or personal power?

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<sup>11</sup> One example and rural study is untouchables at first not being allowed into the house for dinner during work. They ate outside the house and cleaned after themselves with cow dung. After some time they were allowed to eat with the rest of the crew.

<sup>12</sup> Men do change the working pattern if they see a profit in this. In Vernooys’ example men accepted selling vegetables in the market since it made economical sense.

### 3.3 Education – an indicator of empowerment or a determinant?

*“There can be no sustainable development if women remain ignorant, disenfranchised and discriminated against” (Dauda 2007:461)*

The hiding and sub-ordination of women in India is not only due to religious or historical norms and views. It is also linked to the fact that people in general and women in particular have very poor elemental education in India. Education, hand in hand with good health, is crucial to have to be able to empower one self. Without being able to read or write or have the possibility of filling your stomach daily greatly decreases your opportunities and will to participate e.g. engage in a village decision-making, obtain a loan or a job, compete for secure employment or to take part in political activity. Sen argues that *“literacy is an essential tool of self-defence in a society where social interactions include the written media”* (Sen 2002:143). Many governmental reports points to illiteracy as a block to participating and therefore empowerment (Ghosh et al 2007)

Comparing India’s illiteracy rates with for example China, which started its journey towards becoming a developed nation around the same time as India, makes it clear that India has done something fundamentally wrong when handling basic education. China has had a development in this sector far better than India. Table 2 below illustrates this clearly:

*Table 2: Literacy Rates in India and China*

<b>Adults (age 15+)</b>	<b>1981-2</b>		<b>1990-1</b>	
	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>
<b>India</b>	26	55	34	62
<b>China</b>	51	79	68	87
<b>Adolescents (age 15-19)</b>				
<b>India</b>	43	66	55	75
<b>China</b>	85	96	92	97

*Source: India Development and Participation 2002*

Looking at a period of 10 years after the reform of 1979 the differences are quite staggering. In 1991 only 34 per cent of the female adult population in India could read or write, an increase of 8 per cent during the 10 years. The fact is that China had better literacy rates in the

early 80s than India had in the early 90s, for both men and women. However, what is even more worrisome is that the adolescents, the future of the country, in India are so much worse off than in China. In 1990-91 45 per cent of the girls between 15-19 were illiterate compared to 8 per cent in China. The fact that India had not reached China's level of literacy of 1980 ten years later is even clearer looking at the young ones. This is of course something that affects a country's future prospects when thriving towards economic growth. The gender gap shown in the table, which is existing in both countries, is far worse in India which further points to the fact that the female population, which in a country this vast is quite substantial, is not seen as something that important for the country's future, at least not by the policymakers. This is also noted by Lieten (1992) who finds in his paper "Continuity and Change in rural West Bengal" that many political leaders and candidates indeed do not seem to be aware of the necessity to induct women into all spheres of public life as one of the means to eliminate the gender discrimination. The one exception that stands out in India is the state of Kerala, which shows literacy rates at the same level and even above that of China. Comparing India with the rest of the world may not be as necessary as comparing India with itself since the size of the country and of the states creates great differences within the country. Kerala truly is standing out in many aspects. The reason for its literacy rates being that high, at the same level as modern societies, is due to 100 years of public action in the spreading of elementary education, both from state and general public (Sen 2002). What is encouraging is that this means that any other state could do the same.

That education is the basis for the full promotion and improvement of the status of women has just recently been recognized as a fundamental tool of any development plan (Dauda 2007). Sen and Drèze (2002) talk about the thresholds illiteracy and poor education create. Being educated and literate is important for many reasons:

- 1) *Intrinsic importance*: Being educated is important in it self due to its power to help a person fulfil aspirations and dreams.
- 2) *Instrumental personal roles*: Being educated helps you to make use of economic opportunities i.e. education is not only important in it self but in the end, it helps you do things other than just being educated.
- 3) *Instrumental social roles*: Better-educated people lead to greater public discussions of e.g. social needs. It also makes it possible for people to hold politicians accountable and address social issues.

- 4) *Instrumental process roles*: Schooling, besides educating children, reduces child labour, particularly prevalent in India. Going to school also means meeting new and different people, broadening the horizons for the pupils.
- 5) *Empowerment and distributive roles*: Greater literacy and educational achievements, especially among disadvantaged groups can enhance their ability to resist oppression, get organized and in the end, maybe, create a better life for themselves (Sen et al (2002:41pp)).

In addition, educating a mother helps the child; educating teachers helps the young ones, educating the masses helps the nation. Educating the women will help them empower themselves in, for example, the political sphere. Education, which we will see, is the backbone of any society.

### 3.4 Chapter summary

In the theory chapter we have discussed the concepts of power, empowerment and how you measure empowerment. The biggest problem by far is how to separate the process of empowerment, i.e. what are the indicators that tell us that someone is empowered, from variables that enable empowerment i.e. what are the determinants. We can also conclude that finding empowerment in the field is difficult due to the problems arising when defining empowerment. I said that in my case the reservation bill itself was a clear determinant for empowerment, not empowerment in itself. The same goes for the important factor education that is a crucial determinant for empowerment. I spent some time talking about the leadership and having followers as an important determinant of being empowered. However, the most important factor of empowerment, and also the most difficult to measure, is the agency of the women in question. Becoming empowered ultimately depend on each Pradhans individual preferences and abilities.

## 4 Earlier findings

Many studies have been done on the subject local democracy, grass roots participation and the effects on various factors. About women's participation and empowerment the results vary from women indeed participating more but also a unanimous opinion that they would not have gotten into these institutes without statutory representation. Here are some of the earlier findings on the subject:

Kirsten Westergard (1986) found that the reservation of SC/ST/women was of no consequence. The women would still just stand at the entrance door during meetings and do nothing to participate in the discussion.

M. Ghatak (2002) concluded in "Recent Reforms in the Panchayat system in West Bengal: Towards greater participatory governance" that Gram Sansad meetings i.e. village constituency meetings, were overwhelmingly a male dominant event.

Neil Webster (1992) found that women are marginalized. While the benefits are reaching the poor, they are not reaching women in general and poor women in particular.

Raghabendra Chattopadhyay and Esther Duflo (2004) in their paper state that the identity of the leader, for example being a woman, influences the decisions taken. For example women leaders decisions better reflect women's preferences. This is encouraging due to the fact that it is not only women leaders that need to be empowered but also all women.

Kumar (2006) in his book "Local democracy in India: Interpreting decentralization", finds that many respondents from a West Bengal village, both men and women, had serious reservations on the sitting Pradhans' worthiness as leader. Furthermore, he finds that many villagers found having a woman as Pradhan an absurd proposition and if it were up to them women would never be allowed to become Pradhans (2006:160 and 233).

K.K Singh, S. Ali (2001) in "Role of Panchayat Raj Institutions for rural development" finds that representatives that work as a shadow of male representatives mostly come from higher income groups. However there is emerging a new, younger and educated leadership (2001:141)

The Development Policy Review "India Inclusive Growth and Service Delivery: Building on India's Success" (2006) from the World Bank states that many expected the reservation bill to be of no importance at all since men still would dominate the discussions.

However, the study found that in West Bengal, there has been an increased women participation in Gram Sabha meetings in the GPs where the Pradhan is female. This indicates that even though it may be hard for women to lead, to be Pradhans, the very presence of them in these positions increases women's involvement and contributes to more inclusive politics (2006:78pp).

## 5 Hypotheses and framework of the study

Based on the literature and theories discussed in part I, I have outlined the following hypotheses:

### *Hypothesis one:*

Given the social and cultural norms in India on gender issues, and the high degree of female illiteracy, as evidenced in the current literature, it is expected that the quota system may give power only formally

### *Hypothesis two:*

The implementation of a quota in a region and culture such as the Indian is like planting in bad soil. The policy makers implement schemes/programmes before the village people and GP office are ready for them. The reservation bill may therefore be premature and the villagers will not accept women as leaders.

When answering these hypotheses I have created a framework based on the discussion and results in part I and on common answers from various respondents during my field study. This framework will guide us through the discussion and results from my study in part II. The framework consist of six areas: *use of quota, political awareness, leadership, education, politics* and, as a conclusion, *empowerment*.

The awareness among the villagers of the use of a quota system was to me important since it is hard to discuss something that people are not familiar with. Also the level of awareness will tell us something about the empowerment process of rural women. As I have discussed earlier, empowerment is both about resources but in the end about being able to



make choices. This implies being aware of one's situation and rights. Not knowing about such a vital change and reform as the reservation bill tells us that the empowerment process probably will not survive. The result varied between villages. I could also see a weak connection between the level of awareness and the level of education further pointing to the importance of education for the empowerment process.

I wanted to know whether people saw the use of a quota as something good or something that did not belong in their GP. The use of this kind of tool to increase the participation of the few in various areas, not necessarily in politics, is controversial even in our part of the world. When it is about increasing women participation in India, famous for its male dominating climate, must it be met with scepticism? This is also one of my hypotheses: is the reservation bill accepted as a tool for women's empowerment? If not, the empowerment process will not occur since empowerment through increased political participation implies having the possibility of wielding the power and attracting followers. If the tool is accepted it is unlikely that empowerment will occur.

Are the Pradhan leaders? If they are then does that mean that they are empowered and how do we know whether they are leading or not? Can we see a pattern of different groups of people coming to the GP for help due to there being a woman leading? What kind of people do women Pradhan attract that men Pradhans do not? Communication between women seems to be very different from the way women and men communicate. Women as Pradhans has, based on my field work, the effect that more women go to the GP for help.

Education was something that many respondents mentioned as important. Women Pradhans are indeed accepted as long as they are educated enough. The poor literate rates and the burden of not being educated was discussed in part I. Its relevance is in any case unquestionable, hence its place as one of my themes.

Politics is here as a theme since it will help the reader understand the difficulty discussing politics and the Gram Panchayat system in general and the party, CPI(M), in particular. This did indeed affect the data collected, not that many were keen on discussing the political situation. Also CPI(M) has such a strong grip on the political life and decision-making that they inhibit the autonomy of the GP, hence affecting, probably hindering, the empowerment process of female Pradhans and women in general. Why? Because I, in this study, assume that empowerment through increased access to political resources and power, includes the ability to lead. CPI(M) seems to, in some cases, be a hindrance to this.

To answer the question whether the Pradhans have been empowered, in the sense that they are asserting themselves and are in control of their new position, i.e. having agency, I

used interviews and observations. Since the measurement of agency is difficult the answer to the question whether someone is empowered, at least in this paper, is to be considered as a discussion, not a final conclusion or answer. Furthermore, increased participation for women was often the reason given when respondents were asked about why they thought the quota was good. It also made women more independent and active in the community life outside the household. This can be seen as, to connect to earlier theory, the achievements of empowerment. We have concluded that the reservation bill itself is a resource for empowerment but not empowerment itself, just as education. This section however, wants to look at the agency aspect of empowerment.

My study will now try to confirm my hypotheses with the help of the framework outlined above in part II.

## PART II

### 6 The survey

During our first field day, which we used to some extent as a sample survey field day, testing the questions, I realized that creating useful semi-structured interview questions was harder than first expected. Many of them were either too difficult to translate and be made understandable for the villagers or they were just too sensitive for them to answer. The elections were to be held in the near future, which, everybody told me, was making everyone tense and even more unwilling to answer questionnaires, especially from an unknown stranger. I will therefore start the field study part with some discussion surrounding the difficulties working in the field and also what effect the use of a translator had on the material. Is my data useful at all? Some of the problems and limitations with this particular method have already been discussed in the methodology chapter. However, some specific “in the field” problems are in place. Part II will then continue with a review of the respondents, some background of the area and of course my findings that will be discussed with the help of a framework of themes. Finally, in the last part of this chapter, I will draw my final conclusions and reconnect to my outlined hypotheses earlier.

#### 6.1 Limitations and problems

In addition to my limitations discussed in part I, I found the following areas to be important when analysing the data collected.

- Interviewing with a translator and
- Observations as a data-gathering tool

Interviewing with the help of a translator has many flaws when it comes to qualitative research. First, we have the issue of trust. Since I myself do not speak a word of Bengali, the language spoken in this area, I had to trust that my translator was telling me exactly what was told to him. I had to assume that he did translate at his best and that he did not try to give me answers he thought I needed. Since he was aware of my thesis and what kind of data I was looking for this may be the case. Furthermore, the data collected and the discussion around it that will follow further down will to some extent be based around citations; these are translations from Bengali to English. This means that they are not true quotes in the sense that they are written down just as they were told. They are written down just as they were translated to me and should be treated as such. Some of my respondents did know some English, which means “safe” answers, but the majority did not speak English. The amount of data missed or misinterpreted due to problems in communication is hard to appreciate but there are of course some.

When it came to the interviews with the Pradhans I found that observations worked well as a source of data gathering. As I described in the theory chapter, by observing openly and to some extent actively, I could gather additional data but it also created some difficulties, mostly due to respondents not wanting to be watched. I needed the observations as an extra tool to be able to measure the process of empowerment i.e. by observing whether the Pradhan was wielding her power. This was done mainly through questions, but since the answers, due to various circumstances, could not always be trusted and with the probability that she just told us what we wanted to hear, the information given by just observing got just as important. Much of my data regarding the Pradhan’s role in the GP office, whether she was confident, taking decisions, having control over the situation etc, was gathered just through observations where I focused on her relations towards the others in the room, the attitude from staff towards her and whether villagers approached her or someone else. For instance, a Pradhan acting very shy or having someone else answer for her is obviously not wielding her power but when asked if she felt in power during the interview the answer would probably be yes since that is to be expected of her.

## 6.2 A review of the field objects

The answers given by the Pradhan herself, the employers regarding the Pradhan, by the villagers and my observations allowed me to get a somewhat good picture of her persona and role at the office.

In total I interviewed five female Pradhans and between 10-15 villagers in each GP. Furthermore, in each office I tried to talk to one employee, possible in four of the five GP. Sometimes we spoke to the Upa-Pradhan. Table below gives an overall picture of the respondents.

Table 3: Field data review

	<b>Pranganj</b>	<b>Tardaha</b>	<b>Khayada-1</b>	<b>Narayanpur</b>	<b>Bhavanpur</b>	<i>Chitto Mandall</i>	<i>Lila Mandall</i>
<b>Pradhans</b>	1	1	1	1	1	<i>1 (male)</i>	<i>0</i>
<b>Employees, other office bearers</b>	Upa-Pradhan	Secretary	Assistant	Secretary. Upa-pradhan**	Secretary*		<i>Upa-Pradhan, Secretary</i>
<b>Opposition</b>	None	None	None	None	None	<i>None</i>	<i>None</i>
<b>Villagers</b>	8	13	4	9	10+1	<i>0</i>	<i>0</i>
<b>Total respondents</b>	10	15	6	12	12	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>
<b>Aware of reservation bill</b>	10/10 (8/8)	2/13 (0/13)	6/6 (4/4)	12/12 (9/9)	5/12 (3/11)***	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>

\* Here the interviews were done between the Pradhan and the employee simultaneously.

\*\* Here between upa-pradhan, secretary and Pradhan (and some more)

In addition there were on many occasions more people around sometimes saying something but those I have no information on. Every member agreed on the Pradhans answers.

Numbers in brackets are villagers only

\*\*\* Includes one woman who did not understand our question therefore not included as interviewed but included as one unaware.

Source: Field study

In addition to my five GPs each with a female Pradhan, I came across a couple of GPs that either did not have a female Pradhan, the female Pradhan was not at work that particular day or the female Pradhan was unavailable due to attending a meeting. However, some of these “wrong turns” ended up in us having short interviews with sometimes the male Pradhan, the secretary or the Upa-Pradhan who gave us their opinion of the reservation bill and when possible their view of the female Pradhan at their GP. Two of these are included in the table.

My intention in every GP was to get an interview with the female Pradhan. If that was possible I went on interviewing employees and villagers. A short presentation of the respondents follows.

**Tardaha Gram Panchayat** elected **Chitali Naskar**, 29 years, as Pradhan. She belonged to the SC caste, was Hindu and, since she was married not head of the household. The overall impression I got from her was that she was responsive, verbal and very keen on discussing her role as Pradhan. She was elected to this position through the reservation bill due to her being both woman and SC. She had no previous experience of this kind of work but she was well educated; she had attained a master degree, and was well spoken.

**Nayaranpur Gram Panchayat**, belonging to the same block as Tardaha GP, elected **Husneara Begum**, 32 years old, as Pradhan. She was married, Muslim, and educated till class VIII. My impression of her was; a confident woman with a healthy relationship to her male companions i.e. there was a give and take atmosphere in the office. The most interesting thing here was that the seat for Pradhan was not reserved. Anyone could get it which meant that the committee choosing her obviously did not care about her being a woman. The most eligible got the seat.

The third GP in this block was **Pranganj Gram Panchayat**. The Pradhan here was named **Rekha Rani Naskar**, 43 years old, and Hindu of SC caste with a higher secondary degree. Married with a husband doing service. Since she got some experience from Party work (CPI(M)) and social work, she was elected for this seat when it became reserved for women. As with Naskar she was fairly well educated which was reflected through her behaviour and willingness to discuss the reservation bill and the empowerment of women.

**Bhavanpur Gram Panchayat**, belonging to another block, elected **Rasia Bibi** as Pradhan. She was married and had attained a class VIII education. Unlike the three Pradhans discussed above, this one was shy and relied on her male secretary to speak for her. For the first time I witnessed for myself what I had read so much about, a woman Pradhan not taking advantage of her position of power. This became obvious when I started the interview. The man, who did not leave her side, even though I asked him to do just that, answered all questions.

**Khayada-1 Gram Panchayat**, yet another block, was interesting due to the powerhouse of a Pradhan residing there. **Dolly Naskar**, Hindu, 40 years of age and with a class VIII standard education ran her office as any other man i.e. loudly and with a lot of authority. However, she had some previous experience from research and looking for data. Since she never really understood why, she unwillingly agreed to be interviewed.

### 6.3 The district

All the GPs in my study were located within the district of South 24 Parganas. The table below explains the district and block composition of each GP with some interesting statistics;

Table 4: Village belonging on Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad level

<b>District (Zilla Parishad)</b>	<i>South 24 Parganas</i>		
<b>Block (Panchayat Samiti)</b>	<i>Bhangore-I</i>	<i>Bhangore-II</i>	<i>Sonarpur</i>
<b>Village (Gram Panchayat)</b>	<i>Narayanpur Tardaha Pranganj</i>	<i>Bhagawanpur (Bhavanpur)</i>	<i>Kheyadah-I</i>

Source: Field study

Table 5: Statistics over the five Gram Panchayats

	<i>Area</i>	<i>No. of HH</i>	<i>Popn</i>	<i>Popn M</i>	<i>Popn F</i>	<i>SC M</i>	<i>SC F</i>	<i>ST M</i>	<i>ST F</i>	<i>Literate M</i>	<i>Literate F</i>
<i>Tardaha</i>	3052.32	4229	20794	10513	10281	6488	6278	1297	1274	6000 (29%)	3813 (18%)
<i>Narayanpur</i>	1581.86	4379	24177	12618	11559	2608	2318	32	43	7457 (31%)	5149 (21%)
<i>Pranganj</i>	1106	4162	22975	11711	11264	1460	1375	6	7	7250 (32%)	5454 (24%)
<i>Bhagawanpur</i>	1520.75	4146	25861	13454	12407	701	671	0	0	7826 (30%)	6153 (24%)
<i>Kheyadah-I</i>	2179.14	3339	16145	8324	7821	6437	6119	909	858	5383 (33%)	3568 (22%)

Source: Information on West Bengal Panchayats, Government of West Bengal, state Institute of Panchayats and rural development West Bengal, P.O-Kalyani, District - Nadia Publication (first) 2007)

The district is included in the Presidency Division of the State of West Bengal and is located in the southeast corner of the State. Due to its nearness to Kolkata it is one of the most populous districts with a territory that covers an area of 10121.00 sq km. That it lies so close to Kolkata should be kept in mind when analysing and drawing conclusions from my data.

Obviously you would get different material if you went out to the most remote areas of India. It is located in the Gangetic delta with the characteristics of the deltaic land, locally known as the land of “Bhati”; because the rivers are flowing southward and falling in the Bay of Bengal. The district is bounded in the north by North 24 Parganas district, in the east by Bangladesh, in the south by the Bay of Bengal and in the west by the river Hugli (Ganges) (Bhattacharya 2007:15pp).

According to the 2001 census, the district has a total population of 6 906 689 of which 5 820 469 reside in the rural areas. Women constitute 48.5% of the rural population and SCs and STs 35.03 per cent and 7.92 per cent respectively. Rural literacy rate of the district comes to 56.61 per cent of which 47.05 per cent for women, and 56.77 per cent and 34.85 per cent are SC and ST respectively. Main, marginal and non-worker categories constitute 23.66 per cent, 8.91 per cent and 67.42 per cent respectively.

The district has 312 GP and 29 PS spread over 29 C.D. Blocks. Of the total of 4324 Gram Sansads, Gram Unnayan Samitis have been constituted up to 31<sup>st</sup> march, 2006 in 1136 sansad areas. CPI(M) is the largest party having majority in all tiers of PRIs. AS far as GPs are concerned, AITC has emerged as the largest opposition after 6<sup>th</sup> Panchayat elections (Primary census abstract 2001) In the election results of Panchayats in West Bengal it is an established fact that the Left Front with CPI(M) as its pivotal force has been dominating the three tiers of PRIs since 1978, already discussed earlier in chapter two. Some election statistics at Zilla Parishad and Gram Panchayat level for the district in question:

### *South 24 Parganas*

#### *Zilla Parishad seats*

*Table 6: Election statistics*

Year	BJP	CPI	CPI(M)	AIFB	RSP	INC	AITC	Indep. Including unreg. Party	Total
1978	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1983	-	-	40	-	3	13	-	4	60
1988	-	-	46	-	3	7	-	4	60
1993	-	-	36	-	3	13	-	6	58
1998	-	-	48	-	6	-	8	5	67
2003	-	-	57	-	4	-	3	2	66

*Source: West Bengal state election Commission 2003*



## Gram Panchayat seats

Table 7 Election statistics

Year	BJP	CPI	CPI(M)	AIFB	RSP	INC	AITC	Ind. Incl. unreg. Party	Total
1978	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1983	-	12	2291	5	217	1670	-	423	4618
1988	-	26	3077	7	260	1607	-	480	5457
1993	227	16	2777	20	320	2062	-	567	5989
1998	146	11	2299	15	233	311	1474	390	4879
2003	75	14	2652	10	275	371	1130	371	4898

Source: West Bengal state election Commission 2003

The massive CPI(M) dominance was confirmed by my field study. In my study all GPs had CPI(M) in majority. No opposition members were interviewed due to not being present. Since the elections were to be held soon after my arrival no one was really interested in talking politics and the few villagers I met who did not support CPI(M) had mostly negative things to say about the office bearers.

## 7 Findings

In this section the data collected will be presented, discussed and compared. The answers given by the respondents will be discussed and compared to each other but also further analyzed with help from my theory framework given in part I. The different areas or themes given above are used as a framework.

### 7.1 Political Awareness

The awareness of the use of the reservation bill varied between GPs. All Pradhans knew that they were there due to a quota, it was the same for the office employees. Among the villagers however, the degree of awareness varied greatly. This is interesting since it tells us something

about how aware people are of the political surroundings. If villagers are uninterested in women getting a position as leader of their GP, then how can they become empowered?

In Pranganj, Narayanpur and Kheyadah-1 GP all of the respondents knew about the reservation bill and that their Pradhan was elected due to it being implemented. In Tardaha GP none of the 13 respondents knew about it and in Bhavanpur GP only three of 11 respondents were aware. My sample of respondents is of course too small to be able to draw any statistical conclusions but the fact that the differences between villages are this clear, from none being aware to all being so, tells us that some GP and villagers are much more up to date and interested in everyday political life.

The reservation bill is a controversial topic in India. Many want it to be passed on a national level. How come some GP villagers do not know about it at all? All five GPs have low rates of literacy so a relationship between education and awareness cannot be made from this sample, even though this could be a possibility. However, the clear difference in awareness between the villages could perhaps be explained by the differences in modernity and economy. Narayanpur GP was much more modern than for example Tardaha GP in the matter of quality of roads and houses, access to electricity and water and so on. Maybe this had the effect of a population more up to date with state politics. The fact that no one was aware in two of five GPs is in any case disturbing since this institution is there for the sake of the poor people living there. Not knowing that their Pradhan, their leader, has gained her position due to a rather new and controversial bill might tell us something about the interest from the villagers in the GP office itself. We have seen in the earlier discussion in part I that the level of interest and participation in the GP are not as expected in many areas. People mistrust and do not feel that they are a part of this institution, to some extent due to a too dominating party. This could also be an explanation; people have more vital issues, such as finding food, water or a job, to worry about. What do they care about women's empowerment? Quite a lot I found out later.

Kumar (2006) found that the villagers in his West Bengal village indeed were politically aware since they refused to accept the current female Pradhan. She had the position, according to respondents, due to being the wife of a party member (2006:160). This shows awareness of the current political situation and this was something I found as well. Even if you dislike having a female Pradhan there due to a quota, or any other reason, you at least have an opinion. Something that is necessary if the PRI is to live on and prosper.

When it came to the Pradhan's awareness of their position and obligations, a prerequisite to be considered empowered (or in the process of being empowered), the result

varied as well. The most obvious example of a woman going through an empowerment process was Chitali Naskar, Pradhan in Tardaha GP. Both being of low caste and a woman, to get a master's degree, and with that an awareness and curiosity of both her role as Pradhan but also her role as woman, and also getting the position as Pradhan must be considered as a process of empowerment. On the other hand we had Rasia Bibi in Bhavanpur GP, who, even though she also had attained some educational training, was acting as someone not really knowing what she was doing there, which made it easy for the male secretary to take control. The former Pradhan showed agency, the latter did not.

## 7.2 Use of quota

Did the Pradhans, employees and villagers see the reservation bill as a good or bad way of increasing women's participation? Due to the fact that positions are given based on gender, not primarily on competence, its unlikely that it will get looked upon without some sort of response.

The overall response was that the reservation bill and the use of a quota was a good, even necessary, way to increase women's participation. Some voices from the field:

*"This is a good and concrete step towards development taken by the central government"*

Secretary, Khayada-1 GP

*"Why 30%? I want the quota to be raised to 50 per cent"*

Chitali Naskar, Pradhan Tardaha GP

*"The quota is a good thing since it increases the opportunity for women to participate"*

Secretary, Tardaha GP

For many, using a quota seems to be the only effective way to increase women's participation. Obviously the female Pradhans would prefer being elected as equal contenders but most of them were aware of the current situation and have accepted the use of a quota.

The Pradhan in Tardaha GP was the one who really spoke her mind about the issue. If a quota is the only really effective way why then set the limit to one third of the seats? In short, her point was that if it were possible she would prefer to be elected as any other man i.e. without the use of a quota, but this is not how it works here, she said. *“If there were no quota, no women would get into the GP. Men as before would then dominate it”*. Therefore, it is preferable to the alternative that is no women at all in the GP, and therefore it should be 50 per cent, not 33 per cent. This particular Pradhan showed us that education had created a Pradhan, who was both a woman and of low caste, strong, aware of her role as leader and with strong opinions about not only the reservation bill but other matters as well. For example, she saw a problem in young people leaving the GP or village to get an education but not returning, hence draining the village of skilled people.

The two secretaries quoted above both praised the use of the quota. The fact that all secretaries and Upa-Pradhans interviewed were not only men but also positive to the reservation bill tells us something about the acceptance this tool has got, even among the male population. Kumar found for example in his study of a West Bengal village that few educated male respondents understood the hard and tortuous path of political empowerment of women (2006:233). That result stands in sharp contrast to my own where a clear majority, both men and women, both understood the need for and the easing of this process.

*“The President is a woman, why shouldn't the Pradhans be able to be that too?”*

Woman, Nayaranpur GP

This woman very aggressively explained that of course the quota is good followed by a remark that our president is a woman. Of course my point was not that women could not be Pradhans but the fact that they needed a quota system to become that. The answer still tells us something. This might be the common response from people, that women cannot be Pradhans. Kumar for example found this in his study. Due to the fact that women, historically not at all involved in the political life and decision-making outside the household, would enter this area before dominated by men, and doing it on behalf of the men, made even me believe that the quota would not be accepted (Kumar 2006:160pp); not by villagers, employees or politicians. This assumption was wrong. In fact, very few individuals, in total one woman and one man in Bhavanpur GP, gave me a negative response when asked about the quota. This is out of around 70 respondents in total.

*“Male Pradhans get things done more effectively. They always manage to arrange all the meetings necessary.”*

Woman, Bhavanpur GP

This woman was not against the quota as a tool but did not like the current female Pradhan in her GP. She would rather see a man in that position. Another male respondent had a similar view, the quota was not bad but he had better experiences from men having the Pradhan position and thought that this particular Pradhan did not have what it took to lead the GP. The fact that the Pradhan in question, seated in Bhavanpur GP office, was very shy and let her secretary do all the talking explains why some people did not approve of her. However, most of the respondents, not just these two but also others from other GPs, explained that it was not a gender issue but the quality of the work. In addition, since everybody has more experience of men leading the GPs, having women in these positions is a new and, for some, uncomfortable experience. Mukhopadhyay finds that the male members of the rural society are used to seeing women beside the cooking fire. Now when they are seeing them in the panchayat office, discussing public works, health, literacy and such things, they are visibly annoyed (Mukhopadhyay 1996). This was however not what I found. If the women then have an inadequate education or do not really have leadership qualities, then of course many want to see things go back to as it was before. However, as I said, a clear majority thought that the quota was good just because it helped women participate and become independent. To conclude, the most common responses from the villagers to whether the quota was a useful tool were;

- Effective way to increase women’s participation
- Concrete way
- The right way to go
- The only way (no other choice)
- Women become independent, more active in the GP
- Women do not hesitate to approach a female Pradhan

This tool seems indeed to be, based on these results, a very effective and for many the only way to break the male dominance in the area in question. Many respondents talked about the importance of increasing women’s participation i.e. the most important thing is not whether the GP office is run in the most effective or better way but that the women are included. That most people have more experience of male leaders is, as I have discussed earlier, only natural

since the women for a long time have been excluded from this kind of activity. Another important finding that will be discussed in detail later is the fact that women no longer hesitate to approach the GP office.

### 7.3 Education

*“Though I have eyes, I cannot see. I am at the mercy of every deceitful gomastha, and of every tyrannical zamindar...*

*The days in which our fathers lived were days of piety and virtue. That was the Satya-Yuga. There was no cheating, no oppression in those days. Writing and reading, therefore, were not essentially necessary. But in our days, man has become very deceitful – they fear neither gods nor men. It is necessary to read and write, that we may not be cheated and oppressed” (Lal Behari Day 1909:60)*

Lieten found that the success of mass education was something as important, perhaps even more so, as economic change due to its power to free the illiterate from ignorance and demographic constraints (Lieten 1992:63). This is even truer for women who in general have poorer skills in reading and writing, as discussed earlier. The fact that the level of education mattered did get apparent when interviewing villagers about their attitudes toward the female Pradhan in their specific GP. Most were satisfied with the work the women did, but in Bhavanpur GP some villagers were unhappy with what the Pradhan had done to their village. Of course not being satisfied with politicians can be for many different reasons. Religion, caste, nepotism or political affiliations can be something to hold against a particular leader. What became apparent as the cause of the unhappiness of the Pradhans in the GPs I visited, but most obvious in Bhavanpur GP, was the level of education of the Pradhan.

*“That women have positions as Pradhans now is all good, but they must also be educated to get the respect needed”*

Man, Bhavanpur GP

*“If they work hard they get my support but she is not up to the task”*

Man, Bhavanpur GP

*“She is not educated enough”*

Man Nayaranpur GP

*“Male or female doesn’t matter as long as they have enough education to do their job.  
Our Pradhan is very capable and she therefore has my support”*

Secretary, Tardaha GP

This was an opinion shared by many. That it was most obvious in this particular GP depended probably on the Pradhan being not only less educated than the others but also weaker in general. As mentioned she did not speak for herself and acted in general as a “rubber stamp”<sup>13</sup>, which may explain the somewhat negative responses toward her. Education indeed seems to increase the respect the Pradhans get from the villagers. That India in general and certain states in Particular have extremely poor statistics when it comes to literacy means that there is a weak base on which the GPs are built. To make them and the people working there what they are supposed to be, education must be prioritised. The constitution states that the GPs shall be able to function as a unit of self-government i.e. they should be autonomous. Having educated villagers who participate and who know what they are entitled to most certainly would increase the level of self-government. Having an educated Pradhan being more aware of her responsibilities as leader would improve the GP autonomy even further.

#### 7.4 Leadership or who will follow the female Pradhans?

So far we can conclude that the quota system is welcomed by most even though many did not know about its existence. We can also conclude that education plays an important role, to increase the number of competent Pradhans, which in turn raises the respect for them from villagers, and that the increased participation has indeed made women more self-confident and independent. However, the most important result, both according to theory and the

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<sup>13</sup> Officially the leader but in reality there is another person, often the husband or some other male relative, running the show

villagers interviewed, was the casual relationship between women Pradhans and women villagers going to the GP for help. In general, with few exceptions, all women thought it was easier to approach a female Pradhan than male.

*“She helps pregnant women”*

Village women, Tardaha GP

*“Why it is mostly women that approach me for help? Probably due to them also being women. It eases the communication”*

Pradhan, Tardaha GP

*“It’s easier to approach the GP office now”*

Village women, Nayaranpur GP

*“It’s a relief to go to the GP now when there is a woman as Pradhan. Our (women) problems are not always that easy to explain to men”*

Village woman, Bhavanpur GP

The village women were indeed visible in all the five GP offices I visited. And with them came the children. That the focus then became health related is maybe not that surprising since that, here, is a woman’s area. That health was becoming more important is a promising result.

So, we can conclude that woman Pradhans attract women followers. Perhaps not very shocking but nonetheless an important finding since the reservation bill not only seems to give women more room in the GP office but also empowers and increases confidence in the village women. As I mentioned earlier, the men as well were aware of the difficulties for women participating and supported the female Pradhans. Did the employees have the same positive view?

*“The Pradhan being female does not affect my work, I just follow the rules and do my job”*

Secretary, Chitto Mandal GP



The employees in general were very positive towards the use of the quota and stood behind the Pradhans. The response given above, that gender is unimportant, was common. Most saw no problem working under a woman as long as she was eligible. Again, these answers given from various people within the GP office must be interpreted carefully since CPI(M) was in the majority in every GP.

## 7.5 The political situation

Talking politics in this area was sensitive on some occasions. The election was coming up and some questions were not appropriate at the time. What was obvious was the total dominance of CPI(M) and this made it hard to get an opinion from different party members in the GP offices. There was no one to be found much less interviewed. In the village some people not being CPI(M) supporters told us their point of view.

Kumar states that if the Pradhan of the gram Panchayat is a party member, he, or she, enjoys the privilege of leadership. Otherwise, the real power is held by the leader of the local committee of the party (Kumar 2006:115). Some Pradhans, for example the one in Khayada-1, were party members, which some villagers saw as a problem.

*“I’m a simple man, therefore not interested in answering questions about such areas. That will get me into trouble”*

Village man, Tardaha GP

*“If you approach her (the Pradhan) and ask for help she will ask you which party you belong to. If it is not CPI(M) then you have to wait to get help. If you do belong to CPI(M) then there is no problem”*

Village man, Khayada-1 GP

*“The Pradhan does not take any decisions by herself, everything is done through committees or by the majority Party (CPI(M))”*

Village man, Pranganj GP

My reason for showing the political situation is to further clarify what kind of environment the Pradhan works in. A party as dominant as CPI(M) has both its ups and downs, which has been discussed in detail in part I. As we can see from the citations above, the fact that the female Pradhan is party controlled makes it difficult for the villagers to accept her as their leader, which must be seen as a hindrance to empowerment. On the other hand, the Pradhan in this particular GP was a very dominant and strong woman who ran her office with confidence and with absolute control of her situation and position.

## 7.6 Empowerment

The Pradhan in Nayaranpur GP was elected without the use of the quota. This alone is to me a sign of change that indeed is positive when we talk about empowerment of women. Here gender apparently was not an issue during the elections, the woman in question was elected due to being the most suited for the job. Is a quota then necessary to break the male dominance in decision-making areas? The answer, which we stated earlier, is yes. That it is necessary is still a valid conclusion but here we can see that the dominance has already been broken at some places, this without the help of a reservation bill. However this particular GP must be seen as an exception since both others and I have concluded that women do not enter this arena without help.

*“In the 80s everything was handled by men, no women were included”*

Upa-Pradhan, Pranganj GP

*“Our sisters, mothers and daughters get a chance due to this quota to participate and make a difference”*

Man, Bhavanpur GP

It became clear quite fast that almost every single respondent, both within the GPs offices and outside in the village, thought this way of increasing women participation through the reservation bill was good because it **helped women** become independent and active in the decision-making outside the household i.e. what mattered was that women were in focus, not the GP in general. This is important since it tells us that the various employees, politicians

and villagers are aware of the women situation. They may not know the implications of including women, such as improved economic development or better child health, but they are aware of that they should be included just because it makes sense. Women have not been allowed in the decision-making but this is about to change and people find this very positive.

Were the Pradhans interviewed empowered women? Did they work with awareness and confidence and did they feel respected as political leaders by fellow co-workers, politicians and villagers? Did the villagers follow them as leaders? The answers to these are both yes and no. All Pradhans felt that they had support from employees, villagers and politicians. These answers may or may not be true, some probably felt forced to answer in a positive way. However, since the villagers had no reason not to speak their mind and that they overall were confident in their Pradhans, the answer is yes, the Pradhans were, in general, accepted as leaders.

*“She works a bit slowly and is very quiet”*

Village man about the Pradhan, Bhavanpur GP

*“She is effective, actively engaged in projects and really gives everything for her work”*

Secretary about the Pradhan, Khayada-1 GP

The attitudes toward the Pradhans, negative or positive, are almost never based on gender but on education, as discussed before, and charisma, shown above. One Pradhan was, for example, powerful and loud whilst another was quiet and shy. This means that women, as individuals, have different opportunities to use their agency. Some are just not up to the task of empowering themselves in this particular arena, due to various circumstances, even though various pre-requisites for empowerment are in place. However, I did, in my way of measuring empowerment, see empowerment, or agency, very clearly in two Pradhans whilst I only found one Pradhan who, as discussed in the literature, acted as a “rubber-stamp” letting a male do the decision-making for her. This is to me encouraging results indicating that the reservation bill has paved the way for something good.

## 8 Conclusion

My two hypotheses were whether the quota system gave power only formally to women and that the reservation bill is premature since the villagers will not accept women as leaders. This in turn would make it hard for women to empower themselves through the reservation bill. I can with some certainty conclude, even though the study is minor, that women do not only have formal power, since one of the main results of the study is that female Pradhans attract women followers, hence giving them more than formal power. I can also conclude that the reservation bill is in no way premature. Even though the study is small I can with great certainty conclude that the inhabitants of this area of West Bengal very much welcome the reservation bill and its effects on women's participation.

To capture and study the empowerment process and measure agency is indeed hard and all variables should be considered carefully. In my case, I wanted to measure the level of power-wielding i.e. where the Pradhans were aware of their position and could wield the power coming with the position (which in theory was called agency). If so, did they get followers? If we can answer yes, we can say that this particular woman has empowered herself. I also studied the determinants for empowerment, finding that education is an extremely important factor affecting the possibility for empowerment while the social norms and Indian history may work negatively in the sense that people do not accept women leaders. I find the role of the CPI(M) in this area as strong with the consequences that women, even though having a powerful position, must bend under the weight of the party. This, however, is a problem that not only women face, but men as well. This was outlined in my two hypotheses, which I in part II have tried to discuss and answer.

There is no doubt that the new female Pradhans attract followers. Woman after woman told me of the relief they now feel when going to the GP office since they know can speak to a woman, who is more responsive to women needs. We can therefore conclude that the reservation bill has increased women's participation in the Gram Panchayats, a result confirmed by the World Bank. This is an encouraging result and if this continues it will hopefully break the dominant position that men have in the political area. That the Pradhans are not accepted as leaders since the quota system is not accepted, as one of my hypothesis stated, is not true. The quota as a tool to increase women's participation was not only accepted in the areas visited by me, but often seen as a necessity. This implies a change in the view people have of women as leaders and as participatory citizens in the Gram Panchayats.

Have the Pradhans gotten empowered then? The answer is both yes and no. I have given examples of Pradhans who were well educated, shy, loud, some interested in answering questions, but also some uninterested in discussing the matter at hand. Some of them were aware of their role and ran their office with confidence whilst others were more uncertain of their role and their being there. All of them had been given the opportunity to strengthen their own and other women's positions. Some had the agency to do that, some did not. It all came down to the individual. However, one important and encouraging conclusion is that **there are** women leaders in West Bengal who know what to pursue, why they should do it and have the individual qualities needed to do it. Inspiring results indeed.

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