

## CHAPTER-1

# INTRODUCTION

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem :**

Panchayat as a grassroot political institution has been in existence in India since time immemorial in one form or the other. However, women never occupied any important position in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and their participation was almost non-existent due to the predominance of certain social evils like the rigid patriarchal system, *purdah* system, illiteracy, superstition and traditional beliefs. Women had an important role in household work, and economy of the family was mainly in the hands of men. Politics as well as the decision making process was considered an exclusively male domain.

During the Freedom Movement Mahatma Gandhi provided the concept of swaraj wherein he declared – ‘as long as women of India do not take part in public life there can be no salvation for the country. I would have no use for that kind of swaraj to which such women have not made their full contribution.’ He also said that the governance of a village should be conducted by the Panchayat of five persons, annually elected by the adult villagers, male and female, possessing minimum prescribed qualifications. But, Gandhiji’s idea of ‘*Gram Swaraj*’ was not accepted by the constitution-makers. However, the constitution makers inserted into the constitution of India, promulgated in 1950 an article (Article 40) in the Directive Principles

of State Policy providing for setting up of village Panchayats and endowed them with such powers and authority as may be necessary for them to function as units of self government. In pursuance of this directive, village Panchayats were set up in almost all the states. But emphasis was not given on the empowerment of women through ensuring their participation in Panchayats. So participation of women in Panchayats was either microscopic or non-existent.

In 1957, a committee headed by Balwant Rai Mehta was set up by the Central Government to examine and report on the community development project and National Extension Service. Along with other recommendations like three tier Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), the Mehta Committee recommended co-option of two women each in all three tiers of Panchayats, who could look after the welfare of women and children. Thus it provided for a role of women in Panchayats. But some of the states still did not provide for co-option for women and some other states accepted the recommendation in principle but did not implement it. On the other hand the co-opted women had marginal power and role to participate in the decision making process. Thus the Mehta Committee recommendations failed to empower women practically.

In 1974, the Committee on the status of women in India recommended the establishment of statutory women's Panchayat, at the village level to ensure greater participation of women in the political process. The recommendation was only implemented by the states of Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. The other states did not pay any attention to the recommendations. The Ashok Mehta Committee (1977) also recommended

co-option in Zila Parishad for those women who secured maximum number of votes though not elected. All these recommendations were in vain because these were not implemented properly.

Till 1970's there was no demand by any women organizations to reserve seats for women in the decision making political organizations. There was resistance to and outright rejection of reservation policy for women. Stands began to change substantially after the publication of Committee on the Status of Women Report in 1974 and in the face of plethora of pathetic political experience. Since 1970's support to positive measure for women began gaining ground strongly for local government. Shedding off their initial inertia some women's organizations became vocal in demanding inclusion of women's issues like dowry, rape, violence against women into political agenda and urged protected representation in political institutions and employment. Majority of women organizations began to push for reservation in PRIs. They explained their stand by the logic that reservation would help in breaking the barrier of fear and resistance that have prevented rural women from entering into formal political institutions (Mandal 2003:58). The National Perspective Plan (NPP) for women (1988) for the first time gave some valuable recommendations regarding the reservation of seats for women in the PRIs. The final report of NPP recommended for women: (i) thirty percent reservation of total seats in local governments-both Panchayats and municipalities-with higher representation of Dalit, Tribal and weaker sections of the society "wherever possible", (ii) thirty percent reservation of executive heads in all Panchayati Raj bodies and a 'certain percentage of chief executive', (iii) reservation of certain percentage of constituencies in lower Panchayati Raj

tiers as exclusively women's constituencies, and (iv) reservation of fifty percent of all grassroots functionaries.

The 73<sup>rd</sup> constitution Amendment Act which was passed by Parliament on December 22, 1992, proved to be a revolutionary step in the field of democratic decentralization of power and a landmark in the history of Panchayati Raj in general and the political empowerment of women in particular. All of the three tiers of Panchayati Raj institutions received constitutional recognition and thus it added a new dimension to the concept of Panchayati Raj by providing enough scope for direct elections. It became compulsory for the states to set up PRIs and to provide them 29 subjects as mentioned in the XIth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. This Act provided that not less than one-third of seats would be reserved for women including those belonging to Scheduled Caste (S.C) and Scheduled Tribe (S.T) and these might be allotted by rotation to different constituencies of PRIs in proportion to the total population of the area. Of these, not less than one-third would be reserved for SC, ST and women. This would be done on a rotation basis among different Panchayats at each level. Thus, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment Act marked a watershed in the representation of women in the grassroot politics through the PRIs in the country.

In Assam, the Assam Panchayat Act, 1959 provided for co-option of one woman in each tier if no woman member was elected. Later it was amended and increased the number of co-opted women to two. The Assam Panchayat Act 1972 made provision of reservation of two seats for women in Gaon Panchayats and one seat in Mahkuma Parishad. The Assam Panchayat Act 1986 made provision for 30 percent reservation of seats of Gaon

Panchayats for women. The act also facilitated co-option of one woman member each in Anchalik Panchayat and Mahkuma Parishad, if no women member was elected. As per the provisions of the 73<sup>rd</sup> constitution Amendment Act (1992) the Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 was enacted. This Act made radical changes in both structural and functional aspects of grassroot politics in the state and included all the basic features of the new dispensation being brought about by the 73<sup>rd</sup> CA Act 1992. In 2001, the first election of PRIs under the Assam Panchayat Act 1994 was held, wherein 7851(33.45 percent) women got elected as members of Gaon Panchayats, 746(34.73 percent) to Anchalik Panchayats and 117(30 percent) to Zila Parishad. Thus the Panchayat election held in 2001 provided great opportunity to a large number of women to participate in PRIs (Das 2009: 30). This first experiment of women representation in the PRIs in the state of Assam had reflected their efficiency and accountability to the people as representatives and that women of Assam are fit for active participation in decentralized democracy.

Women empowerment is one of the major objectives of the third generation of Panchayats in India. As such the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment Act provided reservation of one third of the seats in the PRIs for women. The participation of women in PRIs is considered essential not only for ensuring their active political participation in the democratic process, but also for realizing the development goals of women. Participation of women in PRIs involves women as voters, members of political parties, candidates, elected members of the PRI's taking part in decision making, planning, implementation and evaluation and as members of *Mahila Samity* and their association with voluntary organizations. No doubt the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution

Amendment Act, with a view to involving women in decision making, provided psychological empowerment and a sense of political efficacy to those who had been left powerless to intense public decisions that affect them. But it also raised some issues which are related to tradition and socio-economic background of the society. In this regard it is important to study whether women have managed to overcome all the age-old traditional obstacles to actively participate in the PRIs. These obstacles rose mainly from the perception of society with regard to public life of women, capabilities of women in decision making, socio-economic disabilities of women like illiteracy, poverty, ignorance, in assertiveness etc., insecurity in the political activities, capacity to stand against social impediments like the division of castes, class, patriarchal attitude, ethnic, religious separation etc. To study all these issues crucial to the empowerment of women, we propose to explore the social, economic, and political background of the women representatives of the PRIs, their role in the decision making, planning, implementation and evaluation process, the perception of the society in general and the male representatives of PRIs in particular with regards to women representatives. In a rural society like ours, women are considered basically as house wives and doing unpaid household activities are considered as their primary duty. Under the circumstances it would be pertinent to closely look into the reality of the emerging trend of political representation of women in the specific context of our selected universe. Democracy in comprehensive sense and grassroots democracy in specific cannot be successful without proper and adequate representation of women and their effective role as development participants and decision makers. Therefore it is necessary to examine the

role of women in grassroots governance in the context of peripheral. Indian states of Assam in the light of the concept of democratic decentralization. Hence, it is justified to undertake a study on women representation in an intensive manner. An empirical study on the women representatives would give us a scientific knowledge on the empowerment of women through Panchayati Raj. Observing all these points we have taken up an empirical study on women representatives of Panchayats elected in 2001 with special reference to Panchayats under Nalbari district. No specific study has so far been conducted till date in this empirical setting pertaining to women empowerment following the new dispensation (73rd CA Act). The first group of women representatives since the new dispensation should provide us with new insights into the nature of women leadership at the grass- root level.

## **1.2 Theoretical Framework :**

Good research is based on theories. It is important to note that a given fact might have as many interpretations as there are interpreters. In such a situation the researcher would have to design his research to determine which of the possible explanations is pertinent for him. In this process, theory assists in giving meaning to the seemingly inconsistent and unrelated facts. Therefore, we are adopting a theoretical perspective for a logically consistent understanding of the empowerment of women through grassroot politics and the participation of women in the decision making process at the local level.

It is very difficult to analyze the socio-economic and political position of women on the basis of any specific sociological theory. Women have

been regarded as subordinate but nobody has provided a general theory to account for the subordination of women. It is also not possible to count women as a class. The existing position of women also does not support women as an elite class. Therefore an attempt has been made to analyze the participation of women in the grassroots politics and the emergence of women leadership on the basis of two theoretical frameworks - (a) Minority or marginal group approach, b) Gender justice through grassroots politics (c) empowerment of women through democratic decentralization.

### **1.2 (a) Minority or Marginal Group Approach :**

Women have been regarded as minority group or marginal group in the society because the subordinate socio-political status accorded to women is a feature of a minority or marginal group. However, some scholars tried to establish women as a class, but while others like Frank Parkin dismisses the idea that women are a class. According to him family and not the individual is the basic unit of analysis in the class system. He argued that the social and economic rewards of women are largely determined by their marital and family relationship and, in particular, by the status of the male bread earner. Parkin states that if the wives and the daughters of unskilled labourers have some things in common with the wives and daughters of wealthy landowners, there can be no doubt that differences in their overall situation are far more striking and significant. In other words, the inequalities of sexual status are insignificant compared to the inequalities of class status (Haralambos 1980: 389). However, some feminist writers do not agree with Parkin. But on the basis of Parkin's view a new approach - the minority group approach or

marginal group approach - has been developed by Helen Mayer Hacker. She adopts Louis Wirth's definition of a minority group which reads 'a minority group is any group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment and who therefore regard themselves as object of collective discrimination. By comparing the situation of American blacks and women, Hacker indicated some of the advantages of classifying women as a minority group. Firstly both groups have "high social visibility", Blacks in terms of their styles of dress, women in terms of their sexual characteristics and feminine clothes. Secondly, both groups have similar 'ascribed attributes' which are assigned to them by the majority group member. Blacks have been characterized as emotional, 'primitive and child like', women as irresponsible, inconsistent and emotionally unstable. Both groups, to some degree, have been or are regarded as having low intelligence. Compared to whites, Blacks have been labeled 'inferior', compared to men, women have been labeled as 'weaker'. Thirdly, the status of both Black and women is rationalized in similar ways by the majority group. Their position is seen as a reflection of their ascribed characteristics. Blacks are all right in their place and contended with their lot. The same applies to women. Their place is in the home and they find happiness and fulfillment in their roles as wives and mothers. Fourthly, both groups adopt accommodating behavior in adapting to their situation. Both are deferential and flattering to the majority group. Blacks have various strategies for outwitting whites, women use so-called 'feminine wiles' for getting their own way. Finally, both groups suffer from similar discriminatory practices. Their education is limited to fit them

for their ascribed status. Barriers are erected to prevent them from entering the political arena (Haralambos 1980:389-390). Hacker's comparison of Blacks and women indicates the explanatory value of classifying women as a minority group. The interrelationship of high social visibility, ascribed characteristics, rationalization of status, accommodative behavior and discrimination adds to an understanding of many aspects of the position of women in society. Yet despite valuable insights, minority group theory provides only partial explanations. In particular, it does not offer an adequate explanation for the relative powerlessness of women's position in society and politics. But there is no doubt that women are the marginal group in society as well as in polity. Hence they need a special as well as equal treatment for their upliftment and empowerment in democracy. The central focus and principles of democracy is equal treatment to all. Hence we assume women empowerment in society and polity is only possible through Democratic Decentralization of power.

### **1.2(b) Gender Justice through Grassroots Politics :**

Gender justice, simply put refers to equality between the sexes. Gender justice is a correlation of social, economic, political, environmental, cultural and educational factors; these pre conditions need to be satisfied for achieving gender justice. Gender justice entails ending the inequalities between women and men that are produced and reproduced in the family, the community, the market and the state. It also requires that mainstream institutions – from justice to economic policy making – are accountable for tackling the injustice and discrimination that keep too many women poor and excluded. Globally,

gender justice as a cause has gained in strength over the years, as it has been realized that no state can truly progress if half of its population is held back.

The struggle for equal rights, freedom and justice has been made by human rights activists, feminist, NGOs and through government support. Even though considerable progress has been made in this regard, women are still lagging behind. With globalization, there are other complex issues that women face today along with the elementary issues that have always plagued women. Consumerism and cultural heterogeneity has brought in its fold more objectification of women. Apart from these issues, there are still many cultures in the world where the condition of women is still deplorable, they still have no control or right over themselves or their bodies or their children. Gender justice refers to harmonizing of rights and needs of women into mainstream society. Justice in this sense means more balanced behavior and end to violence and equal distribution of social necessities.

It is hard to dispute that women and men are equally entitled to just treatment and that, when someone suffers injustice because of their sex, they are a victim of gender injustice. But the exact definition of gender injustice and the scope of gender injustice are contentious matters. Some forms of gender injustice are easy to identify. In many countries some kinds of violence against women are particularly high, often women receives lower pay than men for the same work , in some countries women still do not have legal rights equal to those that men held and women do not get space in the political institutions equally with men. Thus women face more injustice than men in our social-economic and political set up.

Gender justice depends on women's ability to participate in and

influence decision making, whether in the household, the community or at national, regional and global levels. CEDAW stipulates that women should be represented in political and public life on equal terms with men. The presence of women in leadership increases the probability that their experiences are represented in decision making and encourages girls to aspire to such roles.

The importance of women's representation in politics for gender justice is well recognized. In 1995, the Beijing Platform for Action called for a gender balance in governmental bodies, while CEDAW mandates the use of temporary special measures including quotas, to increase the voice of women in political decision making ([www.un.org/women\\_watch/daw/cedaw/text/ecoconvention.htm](http://www.un.org/women_watch/daw/cedaw/text/ecoconvention.htm)). To date, globally women only make up 18.6 percent of parliamentarians. However, 29 countries have now reached or exceeded the 30 percent mark (Inter Parliamentary Union (2010) Women in national Parliament, Comparative Data by Country). The impressive strides of some of the world's poorest countries – including those emerging from conflict – in increasing the number of women in parliaments show that progress has more to do with political will than level of development, of these 29 countries at least 24 have used quota. Globally, women occupy 16 percent of ministerial posts. Of this post, 35 percent are in social sector, considered to 19 percent in finance and trade roles (UNIFEM). In India we find that about 6 percent women are representing in the Union Parliament and State Legislatures, which is very low in comparison to some third world countries.

Local government provides opportunity for women to participate in decision making at community levels, and can build valuable skills for more

senior office. India has had remarkable success in increasing women's representation in its 265,000 *panchayat* village councils which administer public services and resolve disputes on matters ranging from marriage to property. Since the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment Act of 1992 reserved at least one – third of seats for women, more than a million women have been elected into *panchayats*. Already this quota has increased to 50 percent. This has been undoubtedly a step towards ensuring gender justice to Indian women, when men have traditionally been monopolizing the position of power even at the grassroots level. We have throughout the thesis exclusively reviewed the theory of gender justice and have made our independent critical judgments on the basis of our empirical findings regarding representations and women political empowerment at the grassroots level. It is important to state that through women have got political power and right to representation to the *panchayats* by the new dispensation of 1992, they will have to face gender injustice and male dominance still prevails at the decision making process.

### **1.2(c) Women Empowerment through Democratic Decentralization:**

Decentralization is a process whereby the Government divests itself completely of certain duties and responsibilities and devolves them on to some other authority (Mehta 1957). Decentralization is a centrifugal movement which aims to entrust local organs created in local areas with powers, local in character, the presumptions being that people belonging to the locality can know best and appreciate their own problems and needs and can solve them best. It signified a marked devolution of powers from the higher to the lower

levels in a way that the units of local government exercise their authority with the participation of the people of that area with occasional control and supervision of the state and Central governments.

Democratic decentralization as a political concept aims at widening the area of people's participation, authority and autonomy through dispersion or devolution of powers to people's representative organizations from the top levels to the lowest levels in all the triple dimensions of political decision making, financial control and administrative management with least interference and control from higher levels (Narain1963:15). As a political structure democracy signifies a system in which every citizen takes part in the day to day affairs of the state. The life blood of democracy is people's participation. Thus democratic decentralization aims at the largest possible participation of the people in carrying out the affairs of government in the sphere of policy making as well as execution by associating the people with locally constituted administrative units.

In India Panchayati Raj has been identified as democratic decentralization meaning democracy at the grass-root level. Power and functions of the development administration of the rural areas have been provided to the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) by the Constitution. Though the participation of women in the decision making process at the central and the state level political set up is very insignificant, in that of the PRIs they have received a considerably major share, at least thirty three percent in all of the three tiers of PRIs. The reservation of thirty three percent of the seats of members including that of chairperson in the PRIs for women has provided a greater opportunity for political as well as social empowerment of women

of India. About five million women have got an opportunity to participate in the electoral process of PRIs in the reserved quota for women. Political empowerment takes place only for to the women who win, while social empowerment happens not only to all the women who contest but also to all those who find that people of their own gender can be candidates. Moreover, in the *Gram Sabha* the women of a village are enabled to directly interact with women of their own kind who hold constitutional power and authority.

Participation of women in decentralized grass-root institutions like PRIs has been dealt with at two levels- (i) the representation of women in the PRIs either as members or as functionaries, and (ii) the substance of effectiveness of such representation. With the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment Act women participation in the PRIs has increased manifold. At least thirty three percent women have entered the PRIs as members or as functionaries. It is a desirable subject of study whether the new women leaders of PRIs have effectively performed their leadership duties in the new dispensation. Leadership does not mean merely the holding of any position or power. It also means the role and performance of the concerned persons as per needs of the society or community. Thus the empowerment of women through decentralized grass-root institutions actually depends on the participation of women in the PRIs in an efficient manner, i.e. by performing their duties, role and responsibilities effectively. Some study has shown that women participation in PRIs is not up to the mark. Mere reservations will not empower the women unless women are given commensurate powers effectively. A study in the state of Karnataka has shown that many women elected to the local bodies / Panchayats are surrogates for husband and father who could not contest because of

reservation. Some were put in place by the wealthy and powerful, for their malleability- a kind of puppet to tame the vested interests while appearing to be elected representatives (Ambedkar&Nagendra 2008:228-229).

Women political empowerment through the democratic decentralization has exploded several myths after the 73<sup>rd</sup> CA Act, like the belief that they are passive and disinterested in political institutions, only the well to do, upper strata women will come through reservation, only the relatives of powerful politician will entry Panchayats through political connectivity to keep the seats for them (Mathew 2003: 16). Today the buzzword is that women can do it. It is now widely recognized that decentralization of power to the local bodies and women's proactive participation on a large scale in the management of the local affairs in the villages has enhanced their status and rights. Here, it must be mentioned that basically we mean by the term "democratic decentralization" in dual sense such as economic or financial decentralization and political decentralization or democratization of political power to women through grassroots governance. In this context the study on the empowerment of women through the theoretical perspective of democratic decentralization would be very relevant meaningful, authentic and justified.

### **1.3 Review of Literature :**

Empowerment of women in general is a broad area and there are avalanche of literature and empirical research at the international and national level which shed light on the different aspects of empowerment of women. Different branch of social sciences like Anthropology, Sociology, Economics, Political science have attempted to empirically measure various aspects of

women's empowerment. The most cutting edge empirical research makes efforts to measure empowerment at multiple levels. Anthropological and qualitative studies are particularly adopted at blending individual or household situation with institutional structures and normative conditions at the middle level (Kabeer 1997; Mayoux 2001; Hashemi, Schuler, and Riley 1996). Quantitative studies that have attempted multi level analysis of empowerment have used both aggregations of individual and household data and direct measures of community level characteristics (Kritz, Makinwa-Adebusoye, and Gurak, 2000; Mason and Smith 2000 Jejeebhoy and Sathar 2001). Generally these studies find that both individual and community level effects are important in determining empowerment or related outcomes. Many studies have identified education, work participation, exposure to mass media and household standard of living as determinants or factors or sources for empowerment. Education enhances a women's position through decision-making autonomy, control over resources, knowledge, exposure to the modern world and husband-wife closeness (Jejeebhoy 1996 and Kishore et.al 2004). Female work participation in non-agricultural sector and level of wage are also considered as determinants of empowerment (Srinivasan 1990 and Kulkarni et.al 1990).

There is plenty of literature on the empowerment of women through participation in grassroot politics at the international level. In this respect scholars from Britain, West Europe and America have provided us valuable works with findings of experiments and observations. Some of these works have given us valuable insights into the problems of participations and role performed by women in the politics of state and local governments and into

the concept and strategy of women empowerment in various parts of the world (Rogers, 1983; Janet. ed. 1984; Elizabeth 1985; Freeda 1987; Peggy 1989; Hall 1992; Jeffrey 1993; Burns & Verba 1994; Nelson & Choudhury. ed. 1997).

In India there is a large number of research work and governmental and non-governmental publications on Panchayati Raj in general and empowerment of women through participation in PRIs in particular. It would be important to review some such works and publications as are relevant to our research work. It is observed that there are numerous studies on PRIs in India covering a variety of problems and topics on their historical development at, micro, macro, and regional level as well as almost on all general aspects of Panchayats (Mehta 1962; Inamdar 1970; Bhargava 1977; Kaushik 1995; Bandopadhyay 1997; Dhamal, 1998). There are also some in-depth studies conducted on new Panchayati Raj (panchayats after 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment Act). These studies are mainly concerned with the structural and functional aspects of PRIs, and additionally they also deal with socio-economic and political background of the representatives of PRIs established under the new Panchayati Raj Act (Mukherjee et. al. 1995, Mishra et. al. 1996, Palanithurai et. al. 1997, Biju 1998, Ambedkarv2002, Sharma 2002, Palanithurai 2003, Das 2009, Bandyopadhyay & Mukherjee 2004).

In India different attempts have been made by different scholars to study different aspects of the empowerment of Indian women through grass-root politics. Some studies have also empirically dealt with the socio-economic and political background of women leaders and their role in PRIs (Hazel 1980 and 1983, Monikyamba 1981, Kaushik 1993, Mukherjee 1994,

Kanta Prasad 1994, Mahipal 1994, Adiseashiah 1994, Bhargawa and Subha 1994, Narayanan 1994, Palanithurai 1994, Seetharam 1994, Rao 1994, Vandana 1999, Rukmani 2000, Kapur 2001, Mehta 2002, Mathew 2003, Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2003, Mandal 2003, Kumar&Varghese 2005, Biju 2006, Dwivedi 2008, Soni 2008).

Hazel D'Lima (1980 and 1983) studied women in local government in Maharashtra. In his study of women in Zila Parishad it is observed that the women of upper castes, i.e. those belonging to the families of big landlords or politically influential families try to dominate the positions reserved for women in the Zila Parishad or Panchayat Samities. In his study he also points out that the presence of women in the Panchayati Raj structure is an indication of the collaboration that is desired of them in rural development of the country. Women's presence on Panchayat bodies offers them an opportunity to make their voices heard and, thus, brings to the fore the rich content of feminine thought and action in the development of a people.

Monikyamba(1981) has emphasized that participation of women in the socio-economic and political institutions in the real sense is absolutely essential for a society to progress. Their participation in the political institutions is all the more important because, these institutions are the real centers of decision making and without their considerable representation in these institutions, women would become only beneficiaries of development but not contributors.

Susheela Kaushik(1993), in her study on women's role and participation in Panchayati Raj, has arrived at the following findings :

I. The participation of women is low in terms of number and quality. A majority (little more than 50 percent) is over the age of 50. Most of them

belong to the affluent land owning, high caste families and are related to politically active sections of the societies;

II. Political awareness as well as participation in and knowledge of wider issues are below the mark. The co-option of women is more a tokenism than real representation; and

III. The continuation of nomination- co-option or even reservation- is a reflection of the continuing inability of women to get elected through the normal process.

Thus Kaushik has felt that mere representation of women in the committees at the lower level is not enough. If the representation has to be meaningful enough to bring about the development of women and children, a more effective way would be to guarantee women's emergence as the *sarpanch* (head) of villages. Occupation of such positions are necessary if women have to be represented at the higher level bodies like Zila Parishad, where the composition is on the basis of offices held at lower levels. It is commonly known that there are very few instances of women occupying the position of the head of Panchayat.

Mukherjee(1994) has revealed that it is of immense importance that women may actively participate in the Panchayati Raj Institutions, which are at present monopolized by men. Mahipal(1994) has opined that participation of women in PRIs has been considered as the most effective instrument for removing their inequality with men, their invisibility and powerlessness. Women are far below their counterparts because they have not been involved as participators and decision makers in growth and development.

Adiseshiah(1994) has said, the two major obstacles in making the reservation a reality and to enable women to play their rightful role in the national development at every level including the decentralized Panchayat level are: (1) the illiteracy of women and (2) the discrimination, exploitation and oppression that they face in society, both rural and urban.

Bhargawa and Subha (1994) has emphasized that the local government should become a model in their incorporation of women's concern and local issues. Narayanan (1994) has attempted to set out the vital role that can be endeavoured towards a just and equitable social order.

Palanithurai (1994) has revealed that villages will be developed only by the villagers active participation and not by the participation of outside agencies. The village women know their problems, priorities, solutions and strategies but they do not know where from the resources are to be mobilized and how to initiate. They need a little orientation to make their participation more effective. Rao (1994) has pointed out that Indian women today are not what they were ten years back with the fast changing socio-economic scenario being witnessed today, coupled with the political empowerment, by the turn of the century, they are not going to be what they are today.

Rukmani (2000) has revealed that collective reflection and decision making are the two major ways of women becoming empowered. This can be measured by using a number of parameters such as: (1) the kind of positive self image and self confidence built in women; (2) the level of ability for critical thinking; (3) the nature of cohesion among women groups; (4) the amount of decision making and actions fostered in women; (5) the degree of equal participation ensured; (6) the number of active women groups being

encouraged; and (7) the extent of economic independence provided.

George Mathew (2003) has analyzed the women participation in Panchayats and Municipalities in the aftermath of the 73<sup>rd</sup> CA Act of 1992. He has compared the position of the women in Panchayats before and after the 1992 and shown that after the 73<sup>rd</sup> CA Act, different myths have been exploded, like the belief that women are passive and disinterested in political institutions, only the well to do, upper strata women will come through reservation, only the kin of powerful politicians will enter Panchayats through political connection. He also finds out some problems that have been faced by women representatives of PRIs: (i) almost all of them are first times in politics, (ii) a sizeable number of them are illiterate, (iii) they are not fully aware of the development issues or the governmental programmes, (iv) many are socialized in patriarchal values, (v) male kin take charge of the panchayats, (vi) increasing incidence of violence against elected women, (vii) more roles, more responsibilities, additional burdens, (viii) derogatory references to their lack of capacity, (ix) negative attitude of government officials at all levels, (x) character assassination, (xi) increasing number of no-confidence motion against women Panchayat heads.

In West Bengal there is a lot of empirical research on the participation of women in the PRIs, which are thematically relevant to our present research work. Institute for Socio-Economic Development, Bhubneswar(2000) conducted a study on the political empowerment of women through Panchayats in West Bengal. The study shows that the younger generation (18-30 with 52percent) followed by the middle age group (31-50 years with 46 percent) have greater presence in the PRIs. Married women have come

forward in the state to participate in the grassroots democracy, as most respondents are married. More educated women have come forward to join PRIs. Only slightly more than one-fourth of the respondents depend on agriculture. In respect of political awareness and performance in Panchayats, the study observes that almost one-fourth of the respondents have prior experience in politics through their involvement in movements such as farmers' movement and women's movement in the state. Almost three-fourth of the respondents had no prior knowledge on PRIs, which shows that most of them are new entrants into the system. The respondents have greater involvement in the grassroot democracy through communication in such meetings. Opinions of almost two-third of the respondents are taken seriously in the meetings whereas opinions of those that mostly belong to the lower positions are not taken seriously. More than three-fifth of the respondents got cooperation from bureaucrats in their functioning. Most of the respondents know about powers and functions of *Gram Sansad* and attend their meetings regularly, which indicate their greater involvement in the grassroot democracy. Joshi-Adhikari Institute of Social Studies did an empirical study in three districts of West Bengal in 1998. The study was carried out in the Panchayat Samitis. The purpose of the study was to assess the impact of women empowerment. The findings demonstrate that women are playing their assigned roles properly. The study shows that the level of participation of women respondents in the panchayats' activities is very high. The same has been the case with regard to the women involvement in major programmes of the panchayats such as Development of Women's and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA). The research has convincingly brought to light the fact

that empowerment has actualised the mobilizing potential of women Panchayat functionaries. The village women now come to the Panchayat offices and place their problems before the women functionaries. They find themselves comfortable in interacting with them. The field study observes a positive change of attitude in respect of women's role in society. There is no longer any strong objection to their coming out of the domestic boundaries and also taking part in politics.

Amal Mandal (2003) made an empirical study in West Bengal on the participation of women in Panchayati Raj institutions. The study has brought forth few exclusive and absorbing features. Women members are found to be not just dummy or docile, their participation both at the formal Panchayat process and at the informal levels, is no less exalting. G.S. Mehta (2002) and Bhola Nath Ghosh (2008) also made empirical study on the participation of women in PRIs in Uttar Pradesh and Tripura respectively. Mehta has examined various issues related to the implementation pattern of reservation policy and its awareness among rural women, nature of socio-economic status of elected women, extent of participation of women pradhans and members in different activities of Block and Village Panchayats at different stages of the implementation of development programmes and welfare activities, and the extent of improvements that have occurred in their socio-economic status and empowerment after being elected as the representatives of PRIs. Ghosh's work has dealt with the role of women members of Gram Panchayats in Tripura since 1993. He has analyzed their socio-economic and political background as well as their level of awareness about socio-political situation and their exposure to outside world. He has also analyzed the difficulties

faced by the women representatives in playing dual roles – the management of household as well as social affairs.

We can mention here the names of a few books which are thematically relevant to our present research work, which have been written on women in local government and politics, like Nivedita Menon (1999), Sangeeta Purushothanam(1998), Ranjana Kumari(1992), Sumana Pandey(1990), J.K.Baral(1990), etc. They deal with only a few particular regions of India.

In the specific context of Assam, there are some studies on the Panchayati Raj and its Institutions in general which mainly deal with the structural and functional aspects. Most of these studies were conducted before the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment Act (Saikia 1977, Rao & Hazarika 1983, Nath 1991, Jana Sangjog 1993) etc.

There are no specific and full length studies on the empowerment of women through participation in PRIs in Assam. As far as our concern we can mention here two research articles by J.K.Das, published in Indian Journal of Political Science in 1997 and in the Grass-Root Governance Journal in 2008. The major (Das, 1997, 2008) findings of the first paper are as follows:

1) The Panchayats were not yet functioning up to the popular expectation owing to lack of govt. initiatives and lack of necessary resources.

2) Most of the women candidates could not fight the elections on their own capabilities.

3) The elections of the women candidates had merely the sheer patronage of the dominant political and social groups

4) Women representations under scrutiny seem to be just one of tokenism.

5) Most of the women representatives lacked leadership qualities and they were yet to be emancipated from the traditional patriarchal dominance and subordination as some data reveal.

6) The women representatives lacked in gender sensitiveness.

7) Most of them were barely literate or illiterate, and qualified women were not interested in participating in the PRI politics.

8) Some of them failed to show up for Panchayat meetings and affixed their thumb impression on the decisions taken in their absence. They have a minority voice in the decision-making.

Thus this paper provides us with some empirical results on the women representatives of Assam specially the partial and proxy role of women in the decision making process and its implementation. The paper shows that the representatives of PRIs were inactive and mostly dependent on the male counterpart for performing their role as representatives. In the second paper (Das 2008) he observed that the newly emerging women leaders were certainly adaptive to the existing political environment as leaders and fit for the leadership position in our patriarchal social and political structure. Thus he has disproved findings of the previous study and reached at a new conclusion. He concluded that women are gradually moving ahead for more and more effective and meaningful leadership and additionally, it also reflects the increasing trend of gender sensitiveness of women folks in the rural social set up and we assume, this will help in the successful working of the participatory democracy. But these studies are also not full-length. We feel, in-depth and full length study on women's political empowerment, especially

in the aftermath of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment Act, can give us a comprehensive understanding of women leadership and their political participation, and can help us in reaching broader generalization in this regard.

Thus the literature reviewed reveals that there are only a few intensive, full-length empirical studies so far conducted on women leadership at the grassroots level politics in the country in general and Assam in particular, especially in the aftermath of the 73<sup>rd</sup> CA Act, which has, in reality, given a new dimension in the grassroots political movement. The elections held after the new dispensation have given a new lease of life to women leadership and boosted women's participation in the decentralized governance. This has invited our attention to give specific focus on the nature of women representation in our study area. Therefore, we propose to make an empirical study in this area and to fill the vacuum in our knowledge. It will be our sincere endeavor to overcome the theoretico-methodological limitation of the earlier relevant literatures, and it is hoped that our proposed research will enable us to obtain firsthand knowledge of rural women leadership in the specific context of our selected study area. We shall also keep in mind the limitations and strength of the earlier studies conducted in different parts of India and do our best to make our study meaningful and refreshing, interesting and relevant.

#### **1.4. Objectives of the Study :**

The proposed study has been carried out with the following objectives in view:

- i) To examine the recommendations of different committees, laws and

constitutional amendments since the time of independence with regard to participation of women in PRIs, the history of PRIs in India and Assam with reference to women representation, and the role of the Assam State government in activating the PRIs.

ii) To examine the social background and characteristics of women representatives and to scrutinize whether the socio-economic determinants could bear some impact on the emerging women leadership particularly in the aftermath of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment Act.

iii) To examine the role-performance of the women representatives and the constraints of political participation in the PRIs.

iv) To examine the perception of the male members, and the civil society on the role performance of the women representatives of PRIs.

### **1.5 Variables :**

In order to understand the socio-economic background of the women representatives of PRIs and their participation in the political and decision making process as leaders, we propose to look into the following independent and dependent variables: (1) Age, (2) Marital status, (3) Family structure, (4) Religion, (5) Caste and Community, (6) Educational background, (7) Number of children, (8) Medium of Children instruction, (9) Profession, (10) profession of family/husband, (11) Income level of family/husband, (12) Land holding pattern, (13) Land holding pattern of family/husband, (14) Ownership of industries/business establishment etc., (15) Causes for joining Panchayats, (16) Joining from reserved or unreserved category (17) Previous experience

as a representative, (18) Experience of the family members/husband, (19) Participation in election campaign, (20) Knowledge of the panchayats act, rules etc., (21) Decision taking ability at home, (22) Participation level in the meetings of PRIs and ability to air their opinion, (23) Participation in the rural development activities, (24) Party affiliation, (25) Link with other Non Governmental organization, (26) Association of husband or other male members of the family in the working of PRIs, (27) Interference of husband or other family members and some other relevant political variables.

### **1.6 Hypotheses :**

After a thorough discussion with the women representatives and observing the actual working of the present PRIs, we have arrived at the following tentative hypothesis on the basis of objectives we have taken up:

i) Most of the women representatives of the PRIs are elected from the reserved seats provided for by the new dispensation, and the Panchayats are fairly represented by women.

ii) Most of the women representatives have limited knowledge about the new dispensation of 1992 and the Assam Panchayats Act 1994.

iii) The women representatives of PRIs have partially participated in the decision making process, and in the, planning and implementation of the developmental activities of PRIs.

iv) The women representatives of PRIs mainly belong to the lower and middle caste groups, having primary and secondary level educational attainment and hailing from active political background.

v) Women representatives of PRIs contest in Panchayat elections largely on the wishes of the male, relatives, neighborhood and the party to which they belong and they largely lack in gender sensitiveness.

vi) Women still do not evince political consciousness and largely fail to assert their socio-economic and political rights.

Besides the proposed hypothesis to be tested in the proposed research, additional inferences will be drawn during the course of our empirical investigation and analysis.

### **1.7 Methodology :**

The method of the study of the research work is empirical and analytical. The study is mainly based on various primary and secondary sources such as published and unpublished records, books, journals, newspapers, field work, survey reports, official statistics etc. Comprehensive interview schedule has been used to collect necessary primary data from the women representatives and other representatives of PRIs about the participation and performance of women leaders in PRIs. Interview method has also been used to collect data from the panchayat officials, male and female villagers and knowledgeable persons about the panchayats and the women representatives.

For the secondary sources of data we have visited different libraries and research institutes like- National Institute of Rural Development (NIRD) Hyderabad, Gauhati University Library, Guwahati, Omio Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development, Guwahati, Assam Administrative Staff

College Library, Guwahati, Barbhag College Library, Barbhag, District Library in Nalbari and Guwahati, Deputy Commissioner's Office, Nalbari, Panchayats Offices situated in different parts of Nalbari district etc.

The present research work is an attempt to understand the socio economic and political background of the women representatives, the nature and extent of women's participation and role performance in the decision making process of Panchayats and the hurdles that have been faced by women representatives to play effective role in PRIs operating in Assam with special reference to Nalbari District. Thus the universe of the study is the whole area of Nalbari district. As per the 2001 census Nalbari district contains 466 villages covered by 109 Gaon panchayats, 7 Anchalik panchayats, 1 Zila parishad (Nalbari Zila parishad), 11 Revenue circles and 12 C.D. Blocks. It also includes 6 LAC. 4 Lok Sabha constituencies sharing them with the newly formed Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC and the constituent BTAD), which contains 46 GPs with 506 presidents and members. Therefore, at present Nalbari district contains a total of 63 GP with 693 representatives including the presidents. The women representatives of Gaon Panchayats and Anchalik Panchayats with women presidents of Gaon Panchayats have been the unit and object of analysis of our study. For this purpose we personally met 150 women representatives following a random sampling method, out of which 120 are members of Gaon Panchayats, 16 are presidents of Gaon Panchayats, and 14 are members of Anchalik Panchayats. We visited 45 Gaon Panchayats, and 6 Anchalik Panchayats scattered over different parts of Nalbari district to interview the women representatives. We used one structured interview schedule to collect

necessary data from them. At the time of analysis of data we advertently accommodated president of GP as one separate Panchayats tier. By isolating their responses from those of other women members and treating them as one discrete group, we intended to decipher the distinctiveness of their participation and problem, if any, even though, by no stretch of imagination, President could be considered as a separate tier from the administrative standpoint. In doing so, responses of 16 women presidents of GP were excluded from their respective Panchayat representatives.

The information furnished by the respondents and collected from various other sources was transferred from the notes, diaries and the interview schedules on to the data sheets prior to its analysis. The huge quantity of data on various aspects have been analyzed and arranged in tables with percentage for final inferences. The Data has been coded and analyses manually.

## **1.8 Some Conceptual Clarification :**

There are some concepts, which have been frequently used for understanding of the empirical materials on the women representatives of Panchayats. The following concepts as technical terms and tools for precision and abstraction have been repeatedly used.

### **1.8.1 Empowerment :**

Empowerment is a multidimensional social process that helps people to gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power (that is the capacity to implement) in people; for use in their own lives, their

communities and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important (Soni 2008:205). Empowerment is an important element of development, being the process by which people take control and action in order to overcome obstacles. Empowerment especially means the collective action by the oppressed and deprived to overcome the obstacles of structural inequality which have previously put them in a disadvantaged position. Broadly, empowerment means individual and marginal groups acquiring the power to think and act freely, exercise choice, and to fulfill their hopes and aspiration as full and equal members of society. Thus by empowerment we can mean increasing both the capacity of individuals or groups to make purposeful choices and their capacity to transform these choices into desired actions and outcomes (Narayan 2005:40).

Empowerment is a process by which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. Power arises from possessing a complex combination of personal and physical resources that is being bestowed or being acquired in the process of empowerment. Empowerment means challenging their disempowerment, having more control over their lives, being able to influence others, and bring about change. It is new central in political and social policy, educational, cultural, sexual, personal and managerial discourses (Kumar & Varghese 2005:62).

Two major aspects of the empowerment popularly used in political discourses are political and economic empowerment. The term 'political' refers to the views of Catlin and Lasswell who put it that 'shaping and sharing the power is political'. In other words, anything- action, idea, and incident that relates to 'power' can be termed as 'political'. Thus the political

empowerment of marginal group and women denotes their role in political sphere, i.e., political participation, political behavior and actions related to influencing the decision making process and participating in the process of governance. Political participation has been considered as any voluntary action employing legitimate methods to influence the choice of public policies and administration of public affairs or the choice of political leaders at any level - local or national. Economic empowerment denotes the role of marginal groups and women in the economic activities of the society and family. Economic empowerment is closely related with the political empowerment because the economically empowered or independent women can easily participate in the decision making process at home and in society. Their opinions are judged as valued opinion. Thus statutory political and economic empowerment may enable a marginal group or a minority community to make their voices heard in the political apparatuses especially in democracy. Hence, we have frequently used this term throughout the thesis from this broader perspective.

### **1.8.2 Empowerment of Women :**

The term empowerment of women has been used at different times under different circumstances to mean different things. It has different connotations, i.e., for some time it implies imparting of skills to enable a women to be economically independent, in other cases it has been taken to mean assertion of her human rights, in yet another situation it has implied political participation for political empowerment. Women empowerment is a process by which women gain greater share of control over resources-

material, human and intellectual like money and access to money- and control over decision making at home, in community, society and nation and to gain 'power'. The term women empowerment has come to be associated with women's struggle for justice and equality (Batliwala Srilatha 1994). Empowering women actually means to strengthen them to confront family, community, caste, religion and traditional forces, patriarchal forces and biases working within government departments. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNDFW) includes the following factors in its definition of women's empowerment :

a) Acquiring knowledge and understanding of gender relations and the ways in which these relations may be changed.

b) Developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one's ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one's life.

Four components of women's empowerment are identified:

i) Acquiring knowledge and an understanding of gender/power relations and ways in which these relations may be changed;

ii) Developing a sense of self worth, a belief in one's ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one's life;

iii) Gaining the ability to generate choices and thereby acquiring leverage and bargaining power; and

iv) Developing the ability to organize and /or influence the direction of

social change to create more just social and economic orders nationally and internationally (www.unifem.org).

The main goals of women's empowerment are :

- To challenge patriarchal ideology (male domination and women's subordination);
- To transform the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination and social inequality; and
- To enable poor women to gain access to, and control of, both material and informational resources (ibid).

### **1.8.3 Women Empowerment through Democratic Decentralization :**

Democratic decentralization as a political concept is widening the area of people's participation, authority and autonomy through dispersion or devolution of powers to people's representative organizations from the top levels to the lowest levels in all the triple dimensions of political decision making, financial control and administrative management with least interference and control from higher levels (Narain 1963:15). Thus democratic decentralization is a process through which people can participate in the decision making process right from the grass-roots level. In India, Panchayati Raj has been identified as democratic decentralization. After a great deal of experimentation since independence, as per to the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment Act of 1992, the PRIs have got the status of the third stratum of the Indian governance. It has provided a greater share in the decision making process of PRIs to the marginal groups like women, Scheduled castes, and

Scheduled Tribes. Women have got at-least one-third of seats of members and chairpersons in all of the tiers of PRIs. On the other hand, *Gram Sabha* has also provided opportunity to the general women to participate in the public affairs at the grass-root level. The *Gram Sabha* has been incorporated by all the States in their amended laws on Panchayats although there are variations in respect of number of meetings to be held, the issues to be discussed in the meetings and the like. The *Gram Sabha* is constituted with the all people or the all voters of the village panchayat area. Thus, women also can participate in the meetings of the *Gram Sabha* equally with the male. However, from different studies it becomes clear that the participation of women in the meetings of the *Gram Sabha* is still not up to the mark. Different factors like the patriarchal attitude, purdah system, over burden of the household work, lake of socio-political consciousness and irregularity of the meetings of the *Gram Sabha* etc. have kept the women away from participation in the meetings of the *Gram Sabha*. In Assam, the Assam Panchayat Act 1994 has incorporated the provision of the *Gram Sabha* and made provision to convene meetings of *Gram Sabha* four times in a year. All the voters of the area of the Gram Panchayat are the members of the *Gram Sabha*. From our observation we have found that the participation of women in the meetings of *Gram Sabha* is very low. In fact, we have made an attempt in the present research to scrutinize as to how far the women representatives of PRIs and the common women of rural areas have availed the opportunity to empower themselves from the new democratic and decentralized institutions. Thus democratic decentralization has been playing a role as an instrument of women empowerment.

#### **1.8.4 Local Self Government :**

Local self government is that part of the state government in federal countries that deal mainly with local affairs, administered by authorities that are subordinate to the State Government. It is an institution constitutionally created as an organ of decentralized governance or self- governance by the people at the grass- root level, and in fact, an extension of federal management of power in modern democratic systems. It widens the dimension and legitimacy of political power by enabling local milieu to participate in the decision making process in a non-political manner. The local authorities may be elected independently of the state authority by citizens or they may consist of partly elected and partially nominated members. Normally, the State Government has no jurisdiction within the local area in respect of matters administered by the local authority. Thus, the local authority derives its power from a portion of the same electorate from which the state authority derives its power. But the local authorities are the creation of the State legislature. Local government includes both urban and rural local government. The rural local government includes the Panchayati Raj Institutions like Gaon Panchayat, Anchalik panchayat and Zila Parishad. In fact, it is the basic organ of our present investigation where women have participated freely to share their constitutionally bigoted power at the grassroots politics under Nalbari district of Assam.

#### **1.8.5 Panchayati Raj And Panchayati Raj Institutions :**

Panchayats are an ancient form of local government based on the idea that when five (panch) elders come together, God will be present. The word

Panchayat possibly indicates that the number of those who originally constituted the council was five; but there is no evidence that this number was adhered to with regularity. The term has almost completely lost its numerical connotation and means only an association of people for doing administrative or judicial work. Traditionally, Panchayati Raj has been looked at as an institutional means for providing services and facilities. But in the new context it is meant for not only services and facilities but also growth with equity (Palanithurai 2003:17).

The word Panchayati Raj, instead of 'democratic decentralization' was used broadly for the first time by the first Prime Minister of India Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru. Panchayati Raj has been identified as democratic decentralization, meaning democracy at the grass-root level, the roots being autonomous village Panchayats. It has also been described as functional democracy, grass-root democracy, a system which builds from below the democratic structure of the state. The concept of Panchayati Raj involves the existence of democratically constituted, elected authorities at various levels, 'each closer to the ultimate sovereign, the people', with fixed allocations of power, duties, responsibilities, to each such authorities, all working democratically, the autonomy of the authorities being subjected to supervision, guidance and (the minimum) control by higher authorities.

Panchayati Raj institution means the institutions of panchayats like-Gaon Panchayat, Anchalik Panchayat and Zila Parishad, through which the objectives of Panchayati Raj – the strengthening the grass-root democracy and the rural development have been achieved. Hence, in the thesis, we have exclusively used this term to mean the statutorily decentralized political agency

of local self-government operating in the Indian state of Assam.

### **1.8.6 Politics and Political Participation :**

‘Politics refers to the functioning of a whole array of public institutions and forces which are involved in moulding the lives of people by way of decisions and policies that impinge upon their relations with one another’ (Kaushik, 1996:19). ‘Politics’ is often defined in a very narrow term as the electoral participation in democracy. The varied activities that are performed by a person in an elected position or as part of the voter’s duty are defined as political participation. This is because such participation is expected to be the springboard of decision making in the public sphere that, in turn, is denoted as power. Traditionally, political participation is limited to participation in formal political structures the Legislatures, Executive in a democratic set up. It has now been widened by political theorists to include movements, protests and struggles as legitimate expressions of political behavior. Feminist scholars have challenged the dominant hypothesis that ‘politics’ is confined to the public sphere. They maintain that traditional politics legitimizes women’s exclusion or absence from power spheres and also devalues women’s concerns. The new political science have legitimized women’s political involvement and active participation in the decision making process as representation and voters and we have used this term in the thesis in these sense.

The concept of politics has, by and large, been defined either in terms of ‘process’ or in terms of the ‘space’ or ‘place’ where it happens, i.e. in terms of the ‘arena’ or the institutional forms like parliament, assemblies or

PRIs, etc. However, both the terms are overlapping in certain occasions. Thus, for instance, those who subscribe to the 'arena' concept may regard it as a process but confine this process of politics to certain kinds of institutions and organizations. Broadly defining, politics refers to a whole gamut of structures and forces that affect people's lives by way of decisions and policies. It involves not merely the availability of opportunities, rights, liberties and justice to both individuals and groups, but also the extent to which they are availed of and exercised.

### **1.8.7 Leader :**

'Leader' literally means a person who leads or has the capacity to lead. He/she can understand the complexities of the social structures, which are the bases of politics, education, economy and social status. Leader has been understood in two different senses: (a) 'to excel, to be in advance, to be prominent,' and (b) 'to guide others, to be head of organization, to hold command.' In the first sense, it is identified with individual pre-eminence and in the later sense; it is identified with organizational talent. The leader exercises the power of a society, of a group, the government or an institution for a common cause. Power also indicates authority. The leader is one who has power and authority (Majumdar 1967). In any group, these powers have to be activated for the accomplishment of certain ends. The leadership act represents a choice of these instruments of power. The leader cannot and will not always rely on these instruments of power. 'He should affect the behavior of the followers in a situation' (Terry 1972). He/she has to energize and influence the people, in a common effort, to achieve the purpose of an

enterprise.

Leadership is the activity of influencing people to co-operate towards some goal which they come to find desirable (Ordway 1996:20). The leader must be capable of stimulating and vitalizing others. Consequently satisfaction and sense of fulfillment are secured by the followers of the true leader. The leader can arouse popular enthusiasm and local initiative in public service. Selznik advocates three main premises of leadership (Selznik Philip 1957 : 22-24).

1. Leadership is a kind of work done to meet the needs of a social situation.

2. Leadership is not equivalent to office-holding or high prestige or authority or decision making.

3. Leadership is dispensable.

Thus the concept of leadership is not concerned only with the power position or authority or decision making capability which one acquired in a democratic or other ways. It is concerned with the role performance according to the need of the society or community. The women who have been occupying positions in the decision making body, i.e. Parliament, State Legislature, PRIs and other decision making organizations and performing their roles for the society or community are women leaders. Thus in the present study, the women representatives (members and presidents) who have occupied positions in the decision making body namely, the PRIs and performed their role in meeting the needs of the society and the community have been considered as leaders. This study is limited to understanding the background

and role performance of the representatives of PRIs as the grass root organization. The new dispensation after 1992 have provided a vital chance to women to come to the leadership position by availing the constitutionally recognized seats reservation for them. However, other factors like previous participation in socio-political activities, previous representative experiences, involvement in socio political movements, socialization, and chance factor etc., also have contributed to their leadership positions. After involvement with the decision making process of PRIs, they are expected to play certain roles, which are different from those of common women.

### **1.9 Scheme of Chapters :**

The present study is divided into the following chapters:

#### **Chapter- I : Introduction :**

Statement of the problem, theoretical approach, review of literature, objectives of the study, variables, hypothesis, methodology, significance of the study, scheme of chapter, interdisciplinary relevance, contribution to knowledge and limitations.

#### **Chapter- II : Profile of Nalbari district and women participation in politics :**

History of Nalbari district, physical structure, climate, district administration, economy and infrastructure, education politics, participation of women in politics- India, Assam and Nalbari district in specific.

**Chapter- III : Growth and Development of the PRIs in India and the Statutory Provisions with Special Reference to Women Representation :**

History of panchayati raj in India and Assam with a review of the recommendations and suggestions made by different committees and commissions, and provisions of different acts on the participation of women in PRIs.

**Chapter- IV : Socio-Economic and Political Background of Women Representatives of PRIs :**

Analysis of different variables related to socio-economic and political background of the women representatives like- age, religion, caste and community, education, occupation, land holding pattern, income, political party affiliation, link with other organizations, previous experience in politics, experience of election campaign and other related variables.

**Chapter- V : Political participation and Role Performance :**

Analysis of primary data with regard to the nature, degree and extent of the participation of women representatives in the working of PRIs like- participation in the meetings of PRIs, participation in the decision making process, their ability to raise opinion in meetings, male interference faced by them, their dependence level on male members/husband and other related variables.

**Chapter - VI : Perception of The male representatives and the Civil Society on The Role performance of the Women Representatives:**

**Chapter- VII : Summary and Conclusion.**

**1.10 Significance of the Study :**

The proposed study would be a sincere attempt to understand the participation of women in different aspects of PRIs like decision making and implementation, planning and developmental activities, which have been emphasized by the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment Act. We can highlight the significance of the study as following:

i. It would be essentially an empirical research based on intensive field work, with vigorous analysis in terms of established theory on women empowerment, and

ii. It would provide us with valuable knowledge on the socio-economic and political background of the women representatives, their status and role in PRIs and of course, the process of empowerment of women through participation in PRIs. It would be helpful for scholars of different disciplines like Political Science, Political Sociology, Sociology, Social Anthropology and academician to conduct further studies on these issues in other empirical settings. It may also be of great help for the policy makers, administrators, and even for the N.G.Os, practically those, which are working for the empowerment of women, offering them significant appropriate measures to enlighten the women representatives and aspirant women leaders for participating in the PRIs as actively as their male counterparts.

### **1.11 Inter Disciplinary Relevance :**

The present study is on the empowerment of women through participation in grassroot politics, i.e. PRIs, in a developing society like India with reference to Assam. The study on women empowerment, especially their participation and role performance in decision making and implementation, planning and developmental activities, with their social, Economic and political background at the grassroot level, has a great sociological relevance. In a broader perspective, it is the study of women of a rural society where the traditional socio-economic and political elements still have strong presence. We can relate it also to Social Anthropology. It has great relevance to political Science because it would provide us with firsthand knowledge on the role of women in politics, especially in grassroot politics in a changing society. Thus, the present study has tried to fill the gap of our understanding of society-panchayat linkage pertaining to women which is directly relevant to Political Science, Political Sociology, Social Anthropology, Cultural Anthropology and History etc. Hence, the study is essentially interdisciplinary.

### **1.12 Limitations of the Study :**

The present research work is almost entirely based on responses of the sampled respondents. Interview schedule is the primary used tool to collecting the primary data. It has to be made clear that interview does not always help in exploring the complex interplay of various factors as attention is frequently restricted to questions and answers only. At the same time responses of respondents are not always revealing or reliable all the time. It may also be that responses are instantly given without any serious thinking. Sometime

some wrong information is given because of cultural stigma, hesitancy, or perception gap between the respondents and the investigator. The PRIs are formed on the basis of party politics and women representatives have been elected by and for the political parties, and so their responses, accordingly, may have political colour. Further, the results of this study may not be similar, with results of study conducting in other empirical settings. But we have no way other than to accept the information given by them. Moreover, it is not possible to prove the authenticity of these data. Again to study the socio-economic background of women representatives of PRIs and their participation in the grass root politics by a male investigator is brought with certain limitations. Because, the women representatives are sometime shy of to sharing information with a male investigator due to their natural and traditional instincts against the male. However, in spite of limitations, we have tried our best to present an objective account of empowerment of women through grass-root politics. Notwithstanding the limitations stated above, it is hoped that our study will throw ample light on the empowerment of women participating in grass-root politics. Though the work is empirical, it is at the same time an intensive analytical work where we have freely used relevant secondary data and resources and where we have developed independent critical judgment and rigorous argumentation in the context of established theories with an effort to make the study convincing and refreshing.

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