CHAPTER 4

PANCHAYATI RAJ PRACTICE IN WEST BENGAL

INTRODUCTION

... West Bengal's wholehearted implementation of panchayati raj in 1978 ... set it apart from other states in India and made it an international leader in the decentralization of political representation."¹

West Bengal epitomizes the few Indian states where the lowest tier of local government, the gram panchayat, is the chosen political and legal instrument for the implementation of State policy with regard to important issues like land reforms, distribution of surplus land, rights of the sharecroppers, tenancy rights, distribution of state subsidies and loans.² As a political institution, the gram panchayat is the lowest tier in the hierarchy of representative democracy and political wisdom entails that influence in this tier is vital in the scheme of political power. In case of West Bengal post 1977, politics from above (the Left Front government) favored the decentralization process through the panchayati raj system while politics from below (the political organization of the CPI [M] and its allies in the Left Front) took advantage of this new political resource and harnessed it for its own purpose leading to the creation of 'red panchayats'.³ The preference of the CPI (M) and Left Front alliance for panchayati raj as the instrument of both implementation and legitimization of state policies at the grass-root level led to it being adopted as the main focus of the Left Front government. But there is no escaping the truth that this was a politically motivated step of the ruling coalition and the dominant party.⁴ The CPI (M) and the other Left Front allies knew that their success or for that matter mere survival as an administration depended on dislodging the powerful landlord-moneylender class but without taking recourse to radical methods to avoid questions on their legitimacy as a democratic government.⁵ The fittest way of displacing the traditional rural elite comprising the landlords and moneylenders was by penetrating the local political set-up with the help of institutionalized local bodies. The coalition partners were aware that without the institutional power of the State it would be difficult to break the stranglehold of the traditional land-owning elites and implement
the agrarian program that would sustain their political support base. Without state power the Left Front coalition would be immobilized while confronting the vested interests, the rich and powerful in the rural society as well as a bureaucracy apathetic to land reforms and distribution of surplus lands who sometimes, allegedly, acted in collusion with the vested interests. There was another danger. The demand of the left ideology for modification of existing relations between the forces of production through peasant activism in rural localities held the potential of insurrectionary violence, damaging to image of the CPI (M) and the Front. Panchayats, in the words of Mitra and Singh (1999), in this context was the supreme strategy to promote, on the one hand, the political goals of the CPI (M) and its allies and on the other, empower the poor in the most effectual way. As Ghatak and Ghatak (2002) observed the panchayati raj system provided the ruling Left Front with an opportunity to ensure the coexistence of its electoral compulsions with its ideological commitment to egalitarian reforms. This explains the expediency and political will of the Left Front government in enforcing panchayati raj immediately (in 1978) after capturing power (in 1977).

It is equally pertinent to add here that, at a time when many other states failed to show any initiative for implementing democratic decentralization, the Left Front, in the words of G. K. Lieten (1996) focused on the reconstitution of the political power structure through the revival of the panchayat bodies elected along party lines. Since 1978 elections to all the three tiers of the panchayati raj, have been held regularly in the state. It has consolidated the rural support base of the CPI (M) and its allies in the Left Front. In all the six elections held during the sample period of this study - 1978 to 2003, (in 1978, 1983, 1988, 1993, 1998 and 2003) the CPI (M) led Left Front retained its overall hold over panchayat institutions at all levels. The Front’s share of Gram Panchayat seats have ranged between 60 - 70% and it has obtained a much higher share of seats at the upper levels. This was the reason behind its overwhelming control of the panchayat system during the sample period. Over three million families have benefited by land reforms carried out by the elected panchayats during 1978 - 2003 and they constituted the dominant support base of the CPI (M) and the Front in West Bengal. The CPI (M) and the Front, to its credit, held regular elections to the decentralized bodies which helped it to maintain a stable and orderly regime for a period unsurpassed in Indian political history.
Whatever the political mileage gained by the CPI (M) and the Front from the panchayati raj, it cannot be denied that theirs was a significant achievement. In the words of Dr. Surjya Kant Mishra, Minister for Health, Panchayats and Rural Development of the West Bengal government during 1997-2001, “The most significant achievement of the Panchayat system has been that it has entrenched grass-root level democracy.” The reforms initiated by the Panchayati Raj Institutions led to an impressive spurt in agricultural productivity, the highest in the country. Between 1980-81 and 1990-91, the average annual increase in food production in the state was 7.1% as against the national increase of 3.15%. Several studies have attributed a significant share of the gains in agricultural growth to the institutional reforms carried out by the Left Front especially the evolution of Panchayati Raj Institutions.

The panchayat bodies have gradually with the support of the LF government taken over the planning, administration and implementation of developmental activities. The panchayat bodies have implemented various rural development programs aimed at generating gainful employment for the rural poor and creating durable assets for common benefit. The panchayat system has ensured equitable distribution of land and other productive assets in rural areas. In West Bengal about 60% of the total land is owned by small and marginal farmers as against the national figure of 28.8%. With time Panchayati Raj Institutions have molded themselves into a powerful force. It has empowered the grassroots to decide their political and social destiny.

There are shortcomings of the PRI system in West Bengal and much scope for improvement especially when compared with the system in certain states where it was initiated much later (e.g. Kerala). The Panchayati Raj Institutions in the state have been plagued with allegations of increasing corruption and nepotism by ruling party members. A new elite group, who commanded respect and privilege by the virtue of being elected panchayat members, became almost equivalent to the powerful and influential land-owning rural elite of the earlier days. This was particularly dampening to the participatory ethos of the panchayat system.

But despite these even staunch critics of the Left Front admit that the process of decentralization of administrative and economic power initiated by them has generated widespread interest and admiration. More importantly independent observers and experts in the field of Panchayat studies, like Lieten, Westerguard and Kohli have reiterated the claim made by CPI (M) and its Left Front allies that
panchayats in West Bengal have largely been responsive to the needs of the common people.

In the ultimate analysis, the administrative principles adopted and the development strategies pursued through the three-tier panchayat system has catered to the needs of the grass-root people and provided an inclusive approach to development that prioritizes poverty alleviation and ascertains social equality and justice.\textsuperscript{25}

**A BRIEF HISTORY OF DECENTRALIZATION IN WEST BENGAL**

Administrative decentralization in Bengal dates back to the colonial period. Lord Mayo’s resolution of 1870 known as the Village Chaukidari Act\textsuperscript{26} and his scheme of financial decentralization was a rudimentary step towards the introduction of so-called village autonomy. The Act (1870) showed complete compliance with the policy of the imperialist British government by restricting the rights of the villagers in selecting the panchayat members. (The process of selection of panchayat members rather than election through regular voting in constituting rural government machineries was the age-old practice.) Section 3 of the Chaukidari Act\textsuperscript{27} allowed the adult male taxpaying residents of a village to participate in the selection of panchayat members. It was only after the formation of the Union Board by the enactment of the Bengal Village Self Government Act, 1919\textsuperscript{28} that elections became a part of the local government machinery in rural Bengal. The Act introduced voting right for rural folks with certain qualifications. Women and non-taxpayers were debarred from exercising this right. The introduction of the Village Self Government Act, however, failed to change the predicament of the rural local government units. They continued to suffer from low resource capability, excessive bureaucratic intervention and interference and above all, control by vested interests particularly the landed gentry.

West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1957\textsuperscript{29} replaced the Act of 1919 a decade after independence following the constitutional directive to promote local self-governments. The Act provided for a Gram Panchayat in every village, which would function as the executive of the Gram Sabha. The Gram Sabha consisted of all people whose names were included in the electoral roll of the village. The West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1957 (Sec 11) specified that the State government after constituting the Gram Sabha will make arrangements for elections of the Gram Panchayat members. It stated that the members of a gram sabha shall elect from amongst themselves 9 to 15 members to the Gram Panchayat. The Act of 1957 was
implemented just before the publication of the Balvantray Mehta Committee's report, which was a major influence in shaping the panchayati raj legislation elsewhere in the country. As a result the Community Development Project (CDP) was not integrated into the panchayati raj system in state of West Bengal. This created problems in the proper execution of CDP and hindered meaningful involvement of the panchayats in development activities.\textsuperscript{30} In an effort to integrate the panchayat institutions with the CDP framework, the West Bengal Zilla Parishad Act of 1963 was enacted.\textsuperscript{31} This Act decreed that Zilla Parishads, replacing District Boards, and Anchalik Parishads would be set up. These two new bodies along with Gram Panchayats and Anchal Panchayats formed under the 1957 Act constituted the basis of a four-tier local government. However, elections to these panchayat bodies could not be held for a decade due to economic crisis and political instability in the State.

In 1973 the West Bengal Panchayat Act was passed annulling all previous laws. The four-tier structure was replaced by the all-India pattern of three-tier panchayat system comprising the Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and the Zilla Parishad. The Gram Panchayats under the new Act consisted of a group of villages with a population of 10 -12 thousand. Following the Balvantray Mehta Committee's recommendations, Panchayat Samitis were coterminous with blocks and Zilla Parishads were coterminous with districts. The Act provided for the direct election of members to all the three tiers for a five-year term. The Pradhans of Gram Panchayats would be ex-officio members of the Panchayat Samitis and the Sabhapatis of Panchayat Samitis would be ex-officio members of Zilla Parishads.

As a framework for decentralized governance, the 1973 Act was a great improvement on the previous legislation in ensuring organic linkage between various tiers and providing greater clarity regarding the functions of the various tiers.\textsuperscript{32} Gram Panchayats were assigned mostly civic functions. The functions of higher tiers were related to developmental activities. But for all its positive aspects the then Congress government in power failed to implement it. Democratic elections to these newly instituted local bodies were held in West Bengal only after the Left Front government assumed power.

THE DAWN OF DECENTRALIZATION

In 1978, democratic elections were held simultaneously to all the tiers of the rural local bodies. The event heralded a new era for the Panchayati Raj system in the
Effective reorganization of local governance system in rural Bengal has been the most important institutional change brought about by the Left Front government. Through the process of administrative and political decentralization, West Bengal set an example of participation of the grass-root people. More importantly the powers and responsibilities of local bodies thus constituted were enhanced and consolidated. The successive Left Front governments have provided a share of the fiscal resources of the State to the local bodies at various levels and substantial amount of responsibilities, which were once the prerogative of the district bureaucracy, are now vested with these local bodies.

The directly elected panchayat institutions are the foundation on which stands the entire edifice of rural development in West Bengal. The Gram Panchayats, which function at the grass-root level and are in direct touch with the people, carry the responsibility of implementing various development programs, projects and schemes at the village level in terms of identification of beneficiaries, location of project sites etc. The Panchayat Samitis and Zilla Parishads are responsible for the adoption, coordination and implementation of development plans, schemes, projects and programs of the State government at the block and district level respectively. They are also responsible for execution of any function assigned by the State government in their designated area.

The composition of the panchayats in West Bengal reflect the class, caste, occupation and gender composition of the immediate rural society. There has been substantial representation of the rural poor and the socially deprived groups such as the Schedule Class and the Schedule tribes as well as women in the elected local bodies especially after the reservation of seats for these marginal sections. This has changed power equations in the rural society and encouraged political, social and economic empowerment of these erstwhile marginalized groups. The panchayat election of 1978 gave birth to a new leadership at the helm of rural local bodies from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds. The erstwhile village elite including landowners and moneylenders lost their dominance over the newly elected bodies. The occupational composition of the panchayat members showed a significant presence of marginal or small farmers and the landless agricultural workers. On the basis of this new development it was appropriately observed by Kohli (1989) that the newly elected panchayats of West Bengal represented a break from the past political patterns in India. The panchayats in any part of India have seldom been so free of...
domination by landlords and rich peasants before the panchayat elections in West Bengal."

Prabhat Datta (2001) pointed out Panchayat elections in West Bengal fulfilled three basic objectives of rural development. In the first place, it involved the people not only in the process of implementation of development programs but also in the process of planning and monitoring developmental plans. The active participation of the people in the formation of decentralized structures at the grass-root level has been feasible because of the panchayat elections. Secondly, panchayat elections brought about a change in the correlation of the class forces in favor of the poor and marginalized sections of the rural society by involving them in an organized manner in the process of development. Thirdly the panchayat elections raised the political consciousness of the people through radicalization of the political process and politicization of the development process. The two most important achievements of panchayat elections in West Bengal have been curbing the power of the bureaucracy within the framework of Indian Constitution and horizontal mobilization of the rural grassroots.

THE WORKING OF THE POLITICAL PANCHAYATS IN WEST BENGAL

West Bengal can claim distinction for facilitating uninterrupted growth of its panchayat institutions since 1978. The period 1977-78 witnessed three major incidents that contributed to the stability and maturing of Panchayati Raj Institutions in the State. Firstly, in 1977 for the first time in post-independence era a non-Congress government, a coalition government led by the Janata Party came to power in New Delhi. Secondly, this new government at the Center constituted a Committee headed by Asoka Mehta to review and evaluate the working of the panchayat institutions in the country. Among the several recommendations of the Committee were constitutional recognition for the panchayat bodies and involvement of political parties in Panchayati Raj Institutions. The report of this Committee submitted in 1978 generated substantial enthusiasm for reviving moribund panchayat institutions and gave birth to Second Generation panchayats. The third incident, which contributed to the genesis of the present panchayati raj system in West Bengal, was the victory of the Left Front coalition in the Assembly elections of 1977.
In its election manifesto prior to the Assembly elections in 1977, the Left Front promised to hold elections to the panchayat institutions if voted to power. It was further asserted that all development activities of the government in the rural areas of the State would be handed over to the elected panchayats. The first panchayat election was held in West Bengal in 1978 almost immediately after the CPI (M) led Left Front captured state power. It was the first time in the history of panchayat elections in India that political parties of varied standpoint actively participated in the election process. There was a keen contest for the local bodies which was in direct contrast to the mainstream perspective held at that time. The idea of political party-based panchayats was in tune with the leftist approach to decentralization. As the legendary CPI (M) leader E. M. S. Namboodiripad (1962) observed, “Non-partisanship disarms the poor in their fight against local gentry who are interested in transforming the panchayats into their instruments.” The participation of political parties in the panchayat elections and thereafter in the working of the Panchayati Raj Institutions generated great enthusiasm amongst the masses. The political parties, mainly the CPI (M) and its Left Front allies took upon themselves the task of mobilization of the rural masses. Sengupta (1978) observed, “Never in the history of India’s politics did a political party penetrate so deeply and methodologically the ancient villages.”

People’s participation in the decision-making process of local governments covered a wide range of public activities. The grassroots through their representatives in the local governments were designated to participate in three broad categories of functions - administrative responsibilities, resource mobilization and planning and development activities. In West Bengal the Left Front government enforced both functional decentralization involving delegation of administrative powers and authority and financial decentralization involving devolution of resources. From the early years political panchayats were given a range of fairly serious responsibilities and tasks. The organization of relief and reconstruction after the severe floods of 1978 is a case in point. The involvement of the newly elected panchayat bodies in the relief work substantially reduced the distress migration from affected areas. Panchayats were entrusted with the management of rural employment programs as well as various other schemes and projects in the rural areas. During the 1980s the West Bengal government entrusted the panchayat institutions with the implementation of as many as 27 rural development programs some of which were of national importance. The list included some programs of major developmental significance such as Rural
Reconstruction Program, Rural Water Supply Program and Rural Housing Scheme etc.

The local institutions not only participated in the initiatives taken by the State government but actively promoted its various enterprises. The most important function designated to the newly instituted political panchayats was the execution of Land Reforms policy. The Front always maintained that land reform was inseparable from democratic decentralization and the two together were the pillars of rural development in the State.

Post-independence the bureaucracy was assigned with the task of implementation of land reforms and ensuring equitable land distribution. But the bureaucracy colluded with the landed gentry to stifle the land reforms program. The successful implementation of land reforms called for limiting the powers of the bureaucracy and empowering the peasantry. Organized mass movements for altering the land-ownership pattern and unearthing ceiling-surplus lands preceded the launching of Panchayati Raj Institutions in West Bengal. But it was only after the formation of elected panchayat bodies that the policy of Land Reforms could be realized. Panchayat bodies were entrusted with the responsibility of implementation of land reforms particularly with respect to distribution of ceiling-surplus land among the landless and ensuring security of tenure of sharecroppers. The panchayats were also responsible for keeping record of the land reforms beneficiaries for institutional credit cover and other supporting inputs extended by the State government.

The policy of democratic decentralization would have been devoid of real substance if the power base of the traditional rural elite was not weakened and the local government was not sufficiently politicized. The West Bengal panchayat system implemented land reforms to the extent where panchayat institutions were liberated from the clutches of the traditional rural elite. The first political panchayats in West Bengal overwhelmingly consisted of the poor and marginalized who emerged as the prime beneficiaries of the land reforms program. Prabhat Datta (2006) commented “West Bengal provides one of the rare instances of land reforms program initiated by radical political mobilization with significant participation of the agrarian underclass.” The panchayat system thus contributed to the empowerment of the “submerged humanity.”

The Left Front government has been successful in implementing decentralization of power but the mobilization of the grassroots has been partial.
Panchayat leaders at all levels over the years have emerged as key players in their respective localities. Elections to Panchayati Raj Institutions in West Bengal threw up a new rural leadership. Panchayat elections at regular intervals paved the way for the emergence of thousands of leaders from the downtrodden sections. Many of them have shown considerable promise in state politics. The land-owning gentry were rendered powerless, an achievement that remained unmatched in the country for many years. The Left Front government was instrumental in carving out a pattern of political organization in rural West Bengal that involved penetration of the countryside without depending on the dominant rich landlords.

Another valuable contribution of the political panchayats was the strengthening of egalitarian principles. There has been increasing representation of the economically poor and weaker sections of the rural society like the schedule caste and the schedule tribes in West Bengal panchayat institutions especially at the gram panchayat level ever since 1978. The composition of the various tiers of the decentralized government units have shown a significant presence of the traditionally oppressed occupational categories such as marginal farmers, agricultural labourers. Social groups that were earlier politically marginalized such as the schedule class and schedule tribes and women also asserted their presence with seat reservation for them in all the three tiers of the panchayat. This brought about a change in the hitherto prevailing relation between the class forces in the countryside. The social and occupational backgrounds of the panchayat members in West Bengal allayed the fear that local level governance in rural India will be dominated by rural elites and reinforce power equations that are skewed against the poor and marginalized.

The status of the panchayat representatives vis-à-vis the bureaucracy in the political panchayats of West Bengal is worth reckoning. The importance given by the Left governments to the directly elected panchayat representatives who are accountable to the people over the local bureaucracy marked the Panchayati Raj in West Bengal. The Panchayati Raj Institutions were not subservient to the bureaucracy rather it was the other way round. The civil servants and district officials are firmly tied to the panchayat framework. The power balance in rural localities shifted away from bureaucratic domination towards greater importance to locally responsible people's representatives. There are of course functional linkages between the bureaucracy and panchayats at various levels but while panchayats are the decision-making bodies, the bureaucratic office-holders are mere executors of those decisions.

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Political commitment of the Left Front to democratic decentralization has made panchayats in West Bengal exemplary self-governing institutions where government officials work under the leadership of elected panchayat members. Bureaucracy occupies itself with developmental governance leaving administrative governance to the elected Panchayati Raj Institutions.  

In order to ensure improved horizontal mobilization and more direct interface between the people and the panchayat members and transparency in the working of the panchayat bodies, the Left Front government decided to form more participative grass-root institutions. In 1992, an amendment to the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973 was enacted providing for a new tier called the Gram Sansad to be constituted at each electoral constituency. The amendment specified that gram sansads would hold mandatory meetings twice a year at the elementary level of the panchayat system. The meetings were to be attended by the elected members of the gram panchayats as well as by all voters in the panchayat elections. The Gram Sansad meetings were intended to 1) deliberate on the local needs, allocate funds among competing needs and suggest new programs; 2) decide on the beneficiaries of the poverty alleviation programs; and 3) monitor and review the performances of the elected panchayat representatives with regard to the implementation of public projects and the use of public funds. The Gram Sansads provided the grassroots with the opportunity of practicing participatory democracy.

The Left Front government has been reasonably successful in affecting political mobilization of different sections of the rural population and inducing institutional changes like asset distribution through the political panchayats. The elected panchayat members who were usually members of political parties and had political goals carried out the task of mass mobilization but the effort of political penetration of the rural grassroots comprising sharecroppers, landless laborers, small and marginal farmers and other disadvantaged groups served to empower them in some way. The participation of all sections allowed for the implementation of a number of far reaching social programs that was considered infeasible in other states. Echeverri Gent observed “The institutionalization of the panchayati raj allowed the subaltern groups to utilize the political and economic resources and reduce social inequalities.”
DEVOLUTION OF FINANCIAL POWERS

West Bengal was the first State in the country to make a serious effort at devolving funds from the State level to the lower tiers of administration. The provision of allocating fund from the 1985-86 Planned Expenditure to the district bodies directly was the first such measure by any State government. The West Bengal government claimed to spend almost half of its annual budget through the Panchayats. The money allocated created rural employment and financed local development. Over the decade of 1990, the resources received by the panchayats showed considerable increase. In constant price terms, there was a five-fold increase in the total funds received by the panchayats and a seven-fold increase in Plan funds allocation between 1993-94 and 2000-01.

Despite these figures the fact remains that scarcity of resources both in terms of State government funding and autonomous resource collection remained an area of concern for the local government institutions in rural West Bengal. The actual financial devolution, contrary to the claims made by the Left Front, was relatively constrained during 1978-2003 partly because of the State government’s own fiscal crisis which reduced the availability of untied funds to the panchayats. The District Plan Funds that was supposed to be the basis of financial autonomy of the local planning authorities proved to be too meager to make any significant impact. There have also been substantial differences between allocation made and actual amounts released to the panchayat bodies by the State government.

But other sources of funds for the panchayat bodies such as the various Central government schemes provided some autonomy regarding spending decisions to the local bodies. The resource mobilization capacity of the panchayats through taxation or uses of local resources were not upgraded to the point where the panchayats could initiate resource generation and mobilization.

The West Bengal Human Development Report (2004) observed that the dominant part of panchayat expenditure during 1978 to 2003 was directed towards agriculture and development of rural infrastructure. Social service sector mainly health and education formed another important part of panchayat expenditure though panchayat institutions did not have the administrative or functional control over the majority of the social sector institutions. For instance, government educational institutions including primary schools in the rural interiors were under the direct
control of State government departments at that time. Thus the prevailing administrative framework needed to be altered to strengthen the decentralized set-up.

Despite several limitations it remains a fact that the panchayat bodies in West Bengal provided the grassroots with opportunities of direct control over local administrative institutions and power over machineries of local public utility. In fact administrative and financial devolution of powers and responsibilities and active participation of the grassroots has played a significant role in human development in the state. This reinforces the close association between the principles of decentralization and development.

PANCHAYATS AND DECENTRALIZED PLANNING IN WEST BENGAL

Jyoti Basu, the longest serving Chief Minister of West Bengal and the celebrated CPI (M) leader observed, “Decentralization of planning through involvement of the people in the formulation and implementation of the planned schemes constituted a basic component of our (the left’s) strategy of common welfare.” As the Panchayati Raj Institutions in West Bengal stabilized and matured, their involvement in the planning process became imperative in order to fully utilize their capabilities for rural development. A number of reforms were introduced in the planning process from 1983 onwards to ensure the participation of the local bodies. The State Planning Board (SPB), an advisory body for the formulation of the state’s plan played a leading role in guiding and coordinating the lower level planning machineries: the District Planning Committee (DPC) at the district level and the Block Planning Committee (BPC) at the block level.

In the mid-1980s the major source of plan funds that was available for local schemes was from the centrally sponsored schemes such as IRDP, NREP, and JRY. An important innovation in West Bengal was the introduction of the concept of untied funds that the district authorities could utilize to meet the gap between funds required and funds available for planned expenditure. District panchayats prepared and implemented local-level plans. The scope of decentralized planning improved substantially over time with attempts at planning and resource mapping at the Zilla Parishad, Panchayat Samiti and Gram Panchayat level.
A major objective of the decentralized planning process was to coordinate and integrate the various departmental schemes at the district and block levels and make them more responsive to the local level requirements. In West Bengal initially the district-specific schemes of the various departments of the government constituted the dominant local-level plans. The autonomy of the local planning authorities was primarily limited to choosing the location of projects, selection of beneficiaries and between various schemes sponsored by the departments. However, with the progress in decentralized planning, local bodies acquired the authority to ensure schemes that catered to particular local needs. More recent efforts at local-level planning were oriented towards active involvement of the panchayat members in the planning, implementation and monitoring services that would have a bearing upon the well being of the local people. There is no doubt that the Panchayati Raj Institutions have helped institutionalize people's participation in the planning, implementation and monitoring processes of development.

The limits to implementing decentralized planning were many besides the obvious financial restraints. One severe problem faced by the process was the mindset of the bureaucracy that could not tolerate the reality of actual planning activities slipping out of its hands. Therefore there was lack of inclination and inducement on their part to implement decentralized planning. On another plane, if there was a tendency of the upper tiers of the panchayat system to feel that the process of devolution should end there rather than extending to the lower tiers especially the gram panchayats and finally to the people themselves then the process of devolution of powers would be incomplete. Without full-scale commitment down the line the decentralization process will be stagnated. There was also the need for the decentralization process to get active support from all political parties. The political polarization in West Bengal made coordination between supporters of rival political organizations improbable at most occasions and offset the development process in some cases. The coordination between the political parties would have helped realize the full potentialities of the political panchayats and prevented the Panchayati Raj Institutions from being the stooges of the party system.

CONCLUSION

The political and economic decentralization process introduced in West Bengal in 1978 was a unique experimentation. The provision and maintenance of
local public utility services and implementation of most local public projects were handed over to politically elected panchayats. The previous system where bureaucrats working under the central and state governments discharged these functions was inefficient, corrupt and inequitable. As Dreze and Sen (1995) pointed out, "Excessive centralization and non-participatory nature of management of local public services perpetrated by successive governments post independence in India led to their poor functioning." The experience of West Bengal villages under the elected Panchayati Raj Institutions stood in sharp contrast to that of other states of India where panchayati raj did not take off. Together with land reforms the panchayats have been credited for playing an important role in the economic turnaround of the State since 1980s. More than half of the development expenditure in the state is made through the panchayats.

However despite its pioneering status West Bengal lags behind several states today in terms of devolution of powers, finances and functions of the panchayats. The extent of people's participation in the planning process is significantly less compared to that of say Kerala where villages are directly empowered to prepare detailed development plans. As the West Bengal Human Development Report (1994) noted "decentralized governance is a very labour-intensive process, both for the elected representatives and for the people who must spend time and energy for participating in the decision-making process." The framework for decentralization in West Bengal calls for meetings of the Gram Sansads twice a year but for most members, employed in the agricultural activities, even this is time-consuming. So attendance at these meetings is sporadic and haphazard. The local political forces controlling the panchayats take advantage of this situation. They take effective decisions at the higher level instead of mobilizing the grassroots or involving them in decisions.

The primary concern of the supporters of the decentralized set-up has been the various emerging centers of informal power such as the ruling political party members, panchayat functionaries over a long period who have either become politically powerful because of repeated terms in office or economically powerful as the first beneficiaries of Land Reforms policy. Elected representatives at various tiers tend to ensure that their decision-making is ultimate. But the main objective of the decentralization process is to ascertain that decision-making permeate down to the grassroots. This means people participation should not be confined to the concept
where the Panchayat Samitis or Zilla Parishads decides the planning and then asks the people to participate in the execution process.

The Left Front government recognized the need for reforms that will bring the panchayat system in West Bengal closer to the ideal of participatory governance, something that goes beyond the mere right to vote elected representatives. It introduced certain new initiatives to make the Panchayati Raj Institutions in the State more responsive to the needs of the people. The West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 2003 made provision for Gram Unnayan Samitis to be created by the Gram Sansads.94 These are representative Committees to execute decisions and monitor the activities of the Panchayats. The Gram Unnayan Samitis were intended to function like watchdog bodies. The effort was to make the entire process more transparent and the panchayat bodies' non-partisan as also to involve as many people from the local community as possible. In addition to this, the Amendment Act willed to create Block Sansads and Zilla Sansads where there would be adequate representation of the lower tiers. The Amendment also stipulated the constitution of functional sub-Committees at the Gram Panchayat level. These developments are aimed to improve village-level planning and reiterate the emphasis on empowerment of the grassroots through decentralized governance.

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