CHAPTER III.

Rural Areas in West Bengal - a brief survey.

Institutions are the reflections of the ideas of the people, and they are just the means to an end. To understand these institutions one is required to know the rural communities who run them. An attempt has been made here to describe the broad aspect of the rural life in West Bengal.

There is no universally accepted definition of a rural or urban area - a village or a town. Rural communities are distinguished from urban ones mainly on the basis of density and homogeneity of population and technological element in culture. In West Bengal communities containing population less than 5,000 and a density of less than one thousand per square mile are regarded as rural. By towns are meant all the places recognised and declared by the Government of West Bengal to be municipalities, notified areas, town committees, etc. Since 1951 Census the following tests have been applied in West Bengal for determining the urban characteristics:

(a) a population not less than 5,000, and

(b) a density of not less than 1,000 person to the square mile, and

(c) some importance as a centre of trade or distribution or administration, and
(d) at least three quarters of its adult male population
employed in pursuits other than agriculture. *2

On the other hand, the term village has different meaning in
different areas. Sometimes it means a residential village, a mulla,
a collection of hamlets, or a survey mauza. Since 1921 Census the term
village generally means in Bengal a survey mauza. But all mauzas are
not necessarily villages because some of the mauzas happen to be towns
or parts of towns. Again, what is regarded as a village for adminis-
trative purposes is not the same in all States or in different parts of
the same State in India. "In some parts of the country, a village is
a settled area with defined boundaries for which land records have
been prepared. In some others it is a cluster of houses, or two or more
closely adjoining clusters of houses, whose inhabitants are regarded
by themselves as well as by others as a distinct social unit with its
identity marked by a distinct local name, whether it constitutes a
revenue village or not." *3 In the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1957
"village" means "an area defined, surveyed and recorded as a distinct
and separate village in the revenue records of the district in which
it is situated." *4

But there are some urban fringe areas or 'Burban', *5 areas where
the density of population is more than one thousand per sq. mile and
the inhabitants are mostly non-agriculturists. Most of the areas of
Jadavpur - Behala Block and some areas of the Barrackpore, Baruipur,
Saiarpur, Barasat-1, Blocks of the District of 24 Parganas and of Bally - Jagacha of the District of Howrah are instances in point. These semi-urban areas have come into existence due to the influx of refugees into West Bengal after independence in 1947. Besides, a number of semi-urban areas have come into existence due to the natural increase of population in these areas, migration from remote villages to these areas and flourishing of trade and commerce therein, e.g., Diamond Harbour, Nangi, Jeka Anchals of 24 Parganas, Islampur, Kaliaganj Anchals of West Dinajpur, Seithia Anchal of Birbhum, etc. All these areas exhibit definite urban characteristics but still they have not been recognised as 'towns' by the Government of West Bengal.

More than 75 per cent of Indian population constitute the villagers. 17.98 per cent of India's population live in urban areas. Today India is what she is because of our neglect of villages. So long as these areas are neglected and left in an unenviable condition, there can be no hope for our nation because the very foundation of the Indian Republic will remain rotten. That is why Gandhi fought for "village republic". "The village is the unitary organism of the body politic and its state of health will affect the whole nation. It is the training ground for future statesmen. It is the hand which feeds the nation economically." If the village is to make its valuable contribution to the rebuilding of Indian nation, it must be restored to its pristine functions and glory. It must remain an integral part of our social, economic and political life.
The outstanding characteristics that differentiate rural communities from urban areas are occupational patterns, modes of life, habits and attitude of the people, size, geographical location, etc. In the rural areas in West Bengal the principal occupation is cultivation. Here the village is a distinct organic entity as a territorial, social, economic and ritual unit. The inhabitants of a village maintain their corporate identity, and we find in them a sentiment of attachment towards their own village. "The village acts as a unit." in several matters. The population in the villages comprises a number of groups belonging to different Hindu Castes and other religious groups and in some cases to tribes. Generally heterogenous groups live in a village. But they are settled in separate areas of the same village. No group is self-sufficient. Rather they are mutually dependent and require the services of other occupational castes who hold the monopoly of certain trades and services. Intergroup relationships in the villages were governed till a few years ago by the well established social usages and ethics, and breaches of these norms were severely dealt with by the village leaders who had the "final authority of social ostracism through which it can effectively enforce its sanctions." For several decades the village community as a well-knit social organization has been slowly but steadily declining in West Bengal. It is not generally a corporate body as conceived by Sir Henry Maine. Nor is it a "little Republic" having nearly everything the villagers
want. Today village is but "a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow mindedness and communalism." Social intercourse between the upper castes and the lower castes or between the Hindus and the Muslims is not maintained, though there is a general personal relationship among the different groups. Money and education are the determining factors of social status of an individual. The lower castes or the Muslims having money and education and superiority on other accounts are treated with respect by the higher caste Hindus but at a distance. Hence the conscious efforts on the part of the lower castes receiving education to give up their traditional occupation and to move up the social ladder.

In his "Village India" Marriott treats the 'little Community' as an element in the development of Indian civilization. Government and culture have grown upward from thousand of villages, and the Government and the reflective thought of India have influenced the development of all these villages. This historical interaction is regarded by Marriott as a relation of little community and great community. Indian government is in part a growth upward from the institution of the local community. On the other hand, features of the villages that appear at first as local developments - elements of kinship structure, village loyalty, and typical modes of conflict - turn out to be "reflexes of general state policy." And caste relationships too are in part reflexes of institutions of the wider community. "The villages which are the little communities of
India today may be conceived as relative structural nexuses, as systems within great systems, and as foci of individual identification within a greater field. They cannot be conceived as things in themselves in their organization of marriage and kinship, residence patterns, modes of conflict, or caste organization. Nor are they likely to have been conceivable as isolates since Indian civilization began. The traditional social structure of the greater community of India similarly cannot be understood as apart from its continuing existence in relation to hundred of thousands of little Communities. Both little Communities and greater Communities are mutually necessary conditions of each other's existence in their present forms.  

West Bengal is essentially a State of villages. Out of the total population of 44,440,095 only 10,928,399 or 24.59 per cent live in urban areas and remaining 33,511,696 or 75.41 per cent live in the rural areas. In a country the rate of urbanization bears a positive correlation with the level of industrialization. But compared to other States in India the rate of urbanization in West Bengal is slow. The most urbanized State appears to be Maharashtra where nearly one-third of its population is urban. It is followed by Tamil Nadu (30.3 per cent), Gujarat (28.1 per cent), West Bengal (24.6 per cent), Mysore (24.3 per cent) and Punjab (23.3 per cent).  

Compared to other States in India, West Bengal has some special problems. The rate of growth of population during the 10-year period from 1961 to 1971 is 27.24 per cent, and this rate is much higher than
the All India average of 24.26 per cent. The population density in West Bengal stands at 507 per km² which is the sixth highest in India. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes constitute about 26 per cent of the State's population. 17

About 70 per cent of the population in West Bengal are below the poverty line 18 against the all India average of 40. Moreover, there is a chronic unemployment and under-employment problem.

Land utilization in West Bengal is second highest in India. There is limited scope of extensive cultivation although there are possibilities of intensive cultivation which calls for massive investment in rural electrification, irrigation and other agricultural inputs. Only about 10 per cent of the villages in West Bengal have been electrified against the national average which exceed 19 per cent. 19

In West Bengal the "village life for most part is undisturbed by city influences and retains its stability and self-sufficiency as much as modern economic influences will allow." 20 The society is based on commodity production. The upper class of the people have their land cultivated on the share system with the cultivators. The cultivators are paid charges for cultivation if one wants the entire produce. The traditional economic structure divided the traditional peasantry into a small section of rich farmers and a large majority of landless labourers. 21 After the abolition of the Zamindari system and the passing of the Land Acquisition Act the lands are being gradually distributed to
the landless peasants. This will lead to a great change in the basic character of the rural economy, and thereby a change in the pattern of the functioning of the rural institution.

The level of education is much below the expectation after twenty-five years of independence. Only 33.05 per cent of the population of this State is literate. In order of rank, literacy rate the position of West Bengal is twelfth. It is a bit higher than the all India standard 29.35 per cent.

In West Bengal free Primary Education Act was passed long before independence. After independence a large number of free Primary Schools have been established in the rural areas by the State Government though the number is insufficient in comparison with the growing strength of the school-going children. At present education up to Class VIII is free for girls throughout West Bengal. Efforts are also being made by the Government for adult education.

In spite of all the above measures, it is a matter of regret that there is a dearth of consciousness among the villagers to send their wards to schools. Of course, most of the children in the rural areas have to help their parents in agricultural work since their childhood, and even the school-going children have to bring food for their parents to the paddy field. The illiterate parents alone are not to be held responsible for this state of affairs. The Government, the political parties and the social leaders have never taken any bold step to bring
The leadership pattern is also changing in the villages, and the old leadership has been losing its position and influence. Zamindars were the formal and informal leaders in the villages. But with the abolition of the Zamindary system, the traditional leaders belonging to the higher ranks in the social hierarchy were overthrown and thereby a vacuum seems to have been created in the village authority structure.

Now the new leadership pattern is being created by the process of social change and it is difficult to identify the key men in the villages. In the villages visited by the present author, it has been rare to find a village-wide leader. The complete absence of women leadership has been noticed, and the old Union Board Presidents enjoyed more prestige than do the present Pradhans or Adhyakshyas. The villagers are rather reluctant to delegate leadership function to any individual. Here leadership is diffused, and sometimes faction-wise. In some villages, of course, a single man may be identified who can claim the loyalty of all sections of the population, and that is due to his selfless philanthropic service and his education, wealth and position in the society. But at the Block level the leadership is absolutely diffused, and there is not a single leader who can claim the loyalty of all the people. At the Block level, the B.D.O., the Extension Officers, the members of the Anchalik Parishad, and the teachers are the formal leaders. On the other hand, the traditional authority structure symbolises the informal leadership, e.g., Casta-groups, political parties. 

The children back to school.
This traditional authority pattern is authoritarian based mainly on wealth, age, heredity, and it is temporary.

In a class-ridden village where the gap between have-s and the have-nots is very wide it is very difficult to find a leader who is accepted by all. Persons of means of each caste or group is looked to for leadership. The persons having education or wealth or both are still considered leader in the villages.

Caste and age are also other factors for determining the leadership pattern. Most of the people in the Districts of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri belong to the scheduled castes community, and therefore, most of the leaders of the Gram and the Anchal Panchayats come from this group. But the other castes are gradually increasing their power and position due to the gradual diminishing trend of the caste feeling.

The leadership of the rural panchayats is still in the hands of the elders. These elderly persons are conservative in their outlook. This helps perpetuate the tradition. Therefore, to break the inertia and bring new ideas in the village institutions, leadership from the younger generation is urgently necessary.

Panchayati Raj Institutions have formally brought the different castes or social groups in the rural areas in West Bengal at the same platform. But the social, cultural and economic inequality among the villagers has created unequal opportunity for the people. Moreover, to
run the Panchayats is required the understanding of the rules and regulations framed by the Government. That involves some amount of training and education on the part of the Panchayat office-bearers. Again, the poor villagers hard pressed with time to earn their bread find very little time to devote to the Panchayat activities. As a result, the authority in the rural areas has concentrated in the hands of the educationally and economically advanced few.

In conclusion, it may be observed that with the introduction of adult suffrage and Panchayati Raj institutions the traditional authority and influence in the rural areas in West Bengal is gradually declining and political influence becoming predominant. The sanctions behind the caste have disappeared and the influence of religion in day to day activities seems to be disappearing. Decentralised democratic institutions are linked in a chain with the State. So the ruling party in the state is also the dominant organization of village politics. Decentralised institutions are not only bound with the State Government in the statutory sense, the office-bearers of these institutions are also politically organised in a centralized party set-up. Presumably the inevitable result of secularism in politics is the dominance of politics which, with its elaborate organizational set up, overcasts society and gradually erodes the frontier between society and the State. This is the general trend in the rural areas in West Bengal. To this political tie may be added a number of social and economic ties and these together
have made the villages a part of what Mc Kim Marriot calls the 'great society'.

In short, the pursuit of individual interest has become predominant in the villages. There are now few common purposes which inspire all sections of a village equally. Apart from this, the growth of glaring inequality in wealth and thereby opportunity, migration from rural to urban areas, particularly the flight of the educated young men to towns and the increase of the number of absentee landlords are the general trends of the villages in West Bengal. The village community is also losing its hold over its members. Due to the establishment of the Community Development Block, and the Panchayati Raj Institution, the growth of the activities of the political parties, extension of the medium of mass communication, the whole rural society in West Bengal seems to be in transition, and the occupational pattern, modes of life, habits and attitudes of the inhabitants and the traditional authority pattern seem to have been put to acid test with vigorous reaction without substantial signs of a new way of life stepping into its place.
REFERENCES:

2. Ibid, PP. 82-83.
3. Ibid, PP. 104-105.
4. Section 2(r), The West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1957.
5. C.J. Galpin introduced the term "Rurban". Rurbanization is a type of composite urban settlements which are inter-dependent and connected with each other. These settlements are characterised by a blending of rural and urban life.
11. C. T. Metcalfe - Minute of The Board of Revenue, November 17, 1830.


18. The Planning Commission has adopted this norm: "When we talk about the elimination of poverty as a goal of development, what we have in mind is not the relative concept but a definition of what could reasonably be considered as an absolute level of poverty. This poverty line has to be defined in terms of a minimum level of consumption. Available estimates show that at 1960-61 prices, private consumption of Rs. 20/- per capita per mensem would be needed to assure a reasonable minimum level. In present day prices, these figures will have to be multiplied by a factor of about 1.88." (Quoted by Dr. K.N. Raj, "Poverty and Planning," Yojana, August 15, 1972).


