CHAPTER – 1
CHAPTER - ONE

INTRODUCTION: NATURE, SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

The present study is on and about two apparently incompatible approaches to rural development in post independence India in light of the experiments made with either in different parts of the country and at different points of time. Taking the Panchayati Raj Institutions in West Bengal in operation since 1978 into consideration and comparing the visions and missions of the West Bengal experiences with what Gandhi would have considered the ideal form of the Panchayats in a pre-dominantly rural, agrarian and poverty-stricken society like ours we propose to underline certain areas of convergence as well as contrast. For more than three decades Marxists have been in control of what the media cynically described as the ‘red’ panchayats. But this has not acted as a prelude to a seesaw class battle in rural West Bengal. Rather a process of democratic ‘deepening’ has been unleashed during this period with competitive political mobilisation in a multi party framework at the grass roots level. Wiping out tears from the eyes of the poorest of the poor would be the avowed goal of rural development in India, according to Gandhi. The Marxists would hardly differ. While for Gandhi, realisation of this goal is to be made possible by non-violent means, eschewing class struggle in any form, for the latter, radical restructuring of land relations with or without violent conflict alone is the suitable means to pursue the long term goal of eradication of poverty for India’s teeming millions. So much is obvious.

Gandhi has argued that in the acute class-divided society overall human development can not be achieved. Because in the class-divided society no class can enjoy the fruits of development properly.

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Gandhi, thus, has recommended a classless but non-violent society. In this non-violent society, people can appropriately use natural resources. In such society, having been non-violent, people need not be afraid of one another.

Gandhi has said that for overall growth and all-round development of India, there is hardly any need to import the socialist idea from any foreign country. He has strongly contended that in traditional India, idea of socialism has been embodied in various rituals and customs.

"Real socialism has been handed down to us by our ancestors who taught: ‘All land belongs to Gopal’ ... Gopal literally means the state, i.e., the People. That the land today does not belong to the people is too true. But the fault is not in the teaching. It is in us who have not lived up to it"4

Gandhi has said, “My idea of Village Swaraj is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbours of its vital wants and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is a necessity. Thus every village’s first concern will be to grow its own food crops and cotton for its own cloth. It should have a reserve for its cattle, recreation and play grounds for its adults and children ... Non-violence with its techniques of satyagraha and non-cooperation will be the sanction of village community."5

For the realisation of his ideal village and overall growth and all-round development of India, Gandhi has laid emphasis upon democracy. Because Gandhi has strongly believed that under proper democracy, the weakest have the same opportunity as the strongest. This can never happen except through non-violence.6

Gandhi has favoured the Panchayati Raj Institution very much for realisation of his dream. In his reared ideal, a Panchayat would consist of five members, possessing certain stipulated qualifications. These members would be elected for one
year. Such Panchayats would be entrusted with certain legal, judicial and administrative responsibilities.

"The Government of the village will be conducted by the Panchayat of five persons ... possessing minimum prescribed qualifications. This will have all the authority and jurisdiction required. Since there will be no system of punishment in the accepted sense, this Panchayat will be the legislature, judiciary and executive combined to operate for its year of office".  

From above discussion, it may be easily inferred that for proper development of India Gandhi has attached importance to rural development, as his firm conviction was that India lives in her villages. And he strongly believed that for rural development Panchayati Raj Institution, which is an ancient institution too, should be allowed to play its natural role as the vanguard of development.

Since 1977, the Left Front Government has been in power in West Bengal. This Left Front is not a communist form of Government. It is basically an alliance of various democratic and progressive forces. All of these do not practise Marxism.  

Thus it is quite natural that after attaining power in 1977, the Left Front Government under the leadership of the C.P.I. (M) has not been in a position to follow the Marxist theory of social change which propagates that bloodshed might be necessary if the situation so demands. In such condition Left Front of West Bengal provides an alternative approach to rural development. Though it is quite difficult for the Government of West Bengal to follow this approach in present constitutional framework wherein every provincial government is bound to implement the plans and programmes within bounds of the class state in India.

Just after independence, the C.P.I. did not take serious interest in parliamentary activities, claiming the independence of India as fake. They waged
militant mass movements for rehabilitation of the displaced persons from East Pakistan and trams, buses and trains were destroyed during these movements in West Bengal during 1948-1951.

By September, 1959, the C.P.I, in West Bengal formed a committee, named Price Increase and Famine Resistance Committee with a view to waging struggle against food crisis. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s the Marxists fought political battles against the Congress-led state government in West Bengal while taking part also in elections to the State Assembly and the Union Parliament and building up a strong parliamentary opposition against the Congress both at the centre and in the state of West Bengal.

The undivided C.P.I, split in 1964 leading to the emergence of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) which would henceforth become the dominant Marxist group in the state, combining electoral mobilization with the extra parliamentary forms of struggles encompassing a whole range of social groups like the peasants, workers, students, youths, women and those working in the unorganized sectors, in addition to the million of refugees hailing from erstwhile East Pakistan, described by some as Bengal's 'Surrogate Proletariat'.

In the Assembly Election, held in 1967, the Congress emerged as the largest majority party winning 127 out of 280 assembly seats. But it declined to form Government. Consequently, a United Front Government (UFG) was formed with the help of both People's United Left Front (PULF) and United Left Front (ULF) which were two Leftist Political Coalitions fighting the Congress and also each other. This Government gave some relief to the people from price escalation during its brief tenure, before it was pulled down through political mechanisms, resorted to by the Congress Government at the centre.
In 1969, United Front emerged as a winning front after the mid-term election. This second United Front put emphasis on land reforms as one of the most important of its 22 programmes of action declared in its election manifesto. They chose land reform programme as the first important policy to be implemented as through it they would be able to expand their popularity and support base in the rural areas. For implementation of land reform programmes, the Marxists refused to depend upon the bureaucrats as according to them, bureaucrats have close nexus with the rural gentry for their socio-economic background which usually forbids them from implementation of such measures. So, they have relied mainly upon the mass organisations. These mass organisations are generally infused with Marxist ideologies.

But after attaining power in West Bengal, the Left Front Government, led by the C.P.I. (M.) has changed its approach towards development. Now they are not very eager to accomplish social revolution through class-struggle. They are not willing to follow the principle of class-struggle, though many of the leaders till now strongly believe that social change would be possible in the present situation. But in reality, they neither preach class-struggle nor oppose the capitalist mode of production in West Bengal. The Political agenda of the present Left Front regime is described by some scholars like Atul Kohli as one of reform communism.

Buddhadev Bhattacharyya, Chief Minister of the Seventh Left Front Government has said again and again while negotiating the stalemate at Singur over acquisition of land for Tata Motors that at present big industry ought to be set up with the help of big bourgeoisie wherein hundred unemployed youths would be employed as the Government is not in a position to set up big industries with its own resources.
due to paucity of fund. He has said time and again that socialism is nothing but a remote dream at the era of globalisation.

Main objectives of the alternative approach to rural development, propagated by the Left Front are mainly three. Firstly, they try to involve poor people in the process of development through the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The principle, upon which the Panchayati Raj Institutions is based, is democratic decentralisation. Secondly, through the alternative approach to rural development correlation of class forces would be changed in favour of the poor so that they may actively participate in the process of their own development. Andthirdly, awareness is to be generated amongst the people about the present socio-economic and political conditions of the country so that they realize the political compulsions for bringing about a qualitative transformation of society through revolutionary initiative and action.\textsuperscript{10}

Two main pillars of this alternative approach to rural development, propagated by the Left Front, are setting of Panchayati Raj Institutions and implementation of land reform programmes.\textsuperscript{11}

With the help of establishment of Panchayati Raj Institutions, the rural people would be involved with the democratic decentralisation process. For through the setting up of the Panchayati Raj Institution local rural people would have been empowered to take decision for their own. Secondly through the implementation of reservation policy for deprived sections of society, e.g., women, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the Panchayati Raj Institutions, so-called exploited class has become conscious about their gloomy socio-economic situation and various privileges meant for them.\textsuperscript{12}

Second important pillar of the alternative approach to rural development is the implementation of land reform programmes. Under this programme, the names of the
sharecroppers have been registered to protect their interest from the onslaught of the land-lords whose landed property beyond stipulated ceiling has been confiscated for distribution amongst the landless cultivators who mainly plough that land as hired labour. Through the implementation of that programme two goals are supposed to be achieved. Firstly, poverty eradication programme has been implemented as the poor people have become owner of small plots of agricultural land which motivate the poor to produce more and more. Secondly, through this programme poor people have been socio-economically empowered. The outcome of such policy measures is that the poor people now become vocal in the meetings of various platforms as for example the Gram Sabha or the Gram Sansad about their grievances regarding various issues.

Now the rural people have become more vocal regarding various socio-economic problems, which have been reflected through the transaction of various agenda of the meetings of Gram Sabha, Gram Sansad and Gram Unnayan Samiti. They also utilise the elections to the Panchayati Raj Institutions, Bidhan Sabha and Lok Sabha to express their anguish against various dominant political parties. And the resentment expressed by them also favours various political parties including the Left Front to capture power. This has been clear through the result of the elections to the Panchayati Raj Institutions, held recently wherein the opposition could recover some of its lost grounds from the Left Front.

Not only that the Left Front has left no stone unturned to empower rural poor people properly so that the domination of the landed people of the rural area, which was predominant in the past, would be diminished. For this purpose Left Front depends heavily on various mass organisations to make the rural people aware about their power and privileges.
From the above theoretical discussion and the analysis of present rural system, it may be inferred that there are some resemblances between the approaches to development propagated by Gandhi and the Indian Marxists. So much so that one may be tempted to conclude that the Indian Marxists have imbibed the Gandhian principle of development.

Both of them are very eager to empower women in the rural area. Both of them are very much interested to implement the concept of rural legislature wherein the rural people would get a chance to chalk out their future planning. Like this, there are many other similarities between these two apparently different approaches.

But it would be wrong to come to the conclusion that no fundamental ideological differences exist between Gandhi’s ideas and Indian Marxism, in their application vis-à-vis, the institutionalized practices of the Panchayats in the context of post 1978 rural West Bengal.

It will not be out of place to mention in this connection that while framing the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Bill, which was placed before the Parliament for rejuvenation of the Panchayati Raj System and paying homage to Gandhi, policy makers of the country looked upon the West Bengal experiences since 1978 as the model worth emulating.

Under such condition, whether any type of metamorphosis has characterised Indian Marxism in recent years is a question which has inspired me to take up the present study.

**METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this work is to compare and contrast the Gandhian perspective on rural development with that of the Marxists in West Bengal on the basis of a historical analysis of Panchayati Raj experiments in West Bengal during the pre and post 1978 period and see how the perception about the nature and role of the
Panchayats has evolved from a Gandhian to a Marxist innovation in contemporary West Bengal. Literature survey method is adhered to for conducting the present study. This has been supplemented by reports of some leading Daily Newspapers in Bengali and English on the performance of the Left Front Government in West Bengal. We have collected data relating to performance of the Left Front Government from both official and non-official sources.

We have adopted the method of thematic analysis of texts. The texts which are very close to the questions raised in this study are examined. For instance, the writings of Gandhi on Panchayats and rural development have been selectively culled out by us from the corpus of his writings and put to critical interrogation. Similarly writings of EMS Namboodiripad, Binoy Krishna Choudhuri and Suryakanta Mishra which have theoretical imports bearing on the functioning of Panchayats as a major agency of rural change are put under scanner. Our study of these two sets of texts is supplemented by a review of theoretical interventions made by scholars adhering to a Gandhian or a Marxist standpoint in their reflections on Panchayats in West Bengal at work since 1978. The textual analysis has been followed up by our intense probe into official and non-official accounts of the functioning of Panchayats in different parts of West Bengal. These are available in Government reports, documents and surveys and micro levels field studies conducted by a whole range of institutions and individuals churning out considerable amount of primary data that we could have access to. As a researcher, I could personally get in touch with Panchayat functionaries and Government officials in two highly eventful districts of Birbhum and Burdwan and generated much information through the participatory rural appraisal mode. Informal interaction with common people in the villages has been most rewarding.
CHAPTERISATION

The proposed study is to be divided into the following chapters:

i) Introduction: Nature, Objectives and Methodology;

ii) Evolution of the concept of rural development in colonial and post-independence India with special reference to the vision of Gandhi,

iii) Panchayati Raj as an instrument of change and development in rural India: Gandhi and the Indian Marxists,

iv) Panchayati Raj in West Bengal since 1978: An evaluative account of its performance under Marxist control,

v) From opposition to convergence: Gandhian Vision in the Marxist programme of rural development,

vi) Conclusion: Development Impasse or Silent Revolution?

In the first chapter nature, objectives and methodology of the study have been discussed. In this chapter some features of the approach to rural development, propounded by Gandhi and the Indian Marxists have been analysed. In this regard, the militant attitude of Indian Marxism at the initial stage has been discussed.

In the second chapter, the notion of development, preached by various scholars has been elaborated. Along with this the evolution of the Panchayati Raj Institution during the pre-independence era has been discussed.

In 1870, the Village Choukidari Act was passed so that police system would be strengthened in the rural area to check the revolutionary activities of nationalists. After this another attempt was made by Lord Rippon to develop public spirit amongst the rural people so that they would properly execute the political power. After this, the year 1885 was very remarkable in the history of the evolution of the Panchayati Raj Institutions in India. In this year the Bengal Local Boards Act was passed which
empowered Government to form a district board in each Bengal district. With the help of this enactment, certain responsibilities, like handling village sanitations, repairs of roads had been entrusted to it. Though in this act provisions were made so that general people would get a chance to participate, but the real picture was not changed much. And it was found that government officials mainly controlled the total system.

With a view to checking the tendency of centralisation, initiated by Lord Curzon, Lord Morley formed a commission, named Royal Commission of Decentralisation, under the Chairmanship of Hobhouse. In accordance with the recommendation of Royal commission of Decentralisation, the Bengal Administrative Committee was formed. This committee recommended that as both the Choukidari panchayats and Union panchayats performed more or less same type of functions, such administrative authority should be established upon which functions of both the institutions should be entrusted. Following this recommendations, the Bengal Village Self-Government Act – 1919 was passed.

But Gandhi has opined that an ideal village would be governed by the Panchayat. This Panchayat would be formed by five persons, who would be annually elected and who would possess minimum qualifications. This type of Panchayat should perform legislative, judicial and executive functions. Naturally Gandhi was very much distressed when he came to know that the Panchayati Raj Institutions were not given any substantial power.

After independence according to Art 40, it has been said that the state government has been empowered to create the local authorities for village administration. So panchayats have become the creation of the provincial legislature though Panchayats are self-governing units.
In chapter three the concept of ideal village cherished by Gandhi has been discussed. Gandhi has been in favour of such a village which would be self-sufficient. And in his ideal village, Gandhi has put emphasis upon democracy. As according to him only under democratic set up the weakest would get the same opportunity like the strongest. And this type of democratic set-up can be achieved through non-violence.

This ideal village would be regulated by the Panchayat. This panchayat would be constituted by five persons who would be elected for one year and who would possess certain stipulated qualifications. Not only that, Gandhi has said that workers of the Panchayat would lead their life in such a way that they would be emulated by other people.

In this same chapter Marxian notion of ideal village and the Panchayat have been discussed. The Indian Marxists have considered that district should be regarded as the unit of the Panchayati Raj Institutions for mainly two reasons. Firstly, district has played the pivotal role historically. Secondly the staff, required for execution of various adopted plans for the district, would be available at district level.

The Indian Marxists have said that in the Panchayati Raj Institutions, the people would get a chance to be involved in the planning process.

Not only that the Indian Marxists have wanted to make Panchayati Raj Institutions economically self-dependent. They have wanted it so that the Panchayati Raj Institutions would not become victims of other forces or agencies controlling them from above.

The ideal village, reared by the Indian Marxists, would be controlled by the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The members of this institution would be democratically elected for five years.

With a view to setting the rural people free from exploitation, the Indian Marxists have put emphasis upon the land reform programme. As being the owner of
the small plot of agricultural land, they may exert pressure upon the decision making process of the Panchayati Raj Institutions. In effect, the Panchayati Raj Institutions would no longer remain the sole safe-guard to the interest of the rich.

The performance of the Panchayati Raj Institutions under the Left Front regime, controlled by the Indian Marxists, has been assessed in chapter four. The Left Front has performed well basically in the field of land reforms and various other poverty eradication programmes. Not only that, through the Panchayati Raj Institutions, the poor people would become politically conscious and ensure that the landed gentry would not be in a position to control the Panchayati Raj Institutions for safeguarding their interest.

In the fifth chapter the convergence between the Gandhian approach to rural development and that of the Indian Marxists has been discussed. Here we have discussed that both Gandhi and the Indian Marxists have provided us with alternative approach to rural development. Not only that both of them are very eager to empower women politically and socio-economically. Both of them have tried to motivate the rural people to actively participate in the policy making process. Keeping this object in mind the concepts of Gram Sabha, Gram Sansad and Gram Unnayan Samiti have been realised. Through these institutions the rural people would get a chance to mould the future planning in their favour.

In the last chapter, we have tried to examine whether such kind of convergence would help the Left Front in achieving their noble goal of wiping out tears from the eyes of the poorest of the poor.
References:


11. Ibid.