Chapter-2

Review of Literature
Chapter-2
Review of Literature

Part-A
Panchayati Raj System – A Brief Description

"Independence must begin at the bottom. Thus every village will be republic or panchayat having full powers. It follows therefore, that every village has to be self-sustained and capable of managing its affairs even to the extent of defending its affairs, even to the extent of defending itself against the whole world". -- Gandhiji

Section - I
Panchayat System in India: A Genesis

Democratic decentralization is a popular and important concept in the area of political discourse. It enables the local people in a democratic set up to manage their own affairs by means of their positive and active participation. Panchayat system is a powerful weapon to extend democracy at the grass root levels. Democratic decentralization aims at making democracy real by bringing millions of people into the functioning of the representative government at the lowest level. In this respect, M.K. Gandhi rightly said that “the greater the power of the Panchayats the better for the people”2. Gandhiji wished to revive these institutions with democratic bases of their own and invest them with adequate powers so that the villagers could have a real sense of Swaraj or self-rule. Gandhi’s idea of village Swaraj was that the village would be a complete republic. The panchayat system was for him the instrument, which would create the basis for the governance of the country. Pandit Jawahararl Nehru felt that “the progress of our country is bound up with the progress in our villages. If our villages make progress, India will become a strong nation and nobody will be able to stop its onward march”3. The panchayats as politico-judicial institutions also used to interpret different social laws and customs and award suitable punishments to the social offenders. As Sir Henry Maine testifies, “the council of village elders does not command anything, it merely declares what has always been."4 Prof. N.C. Ranga remarks, “I wish to remind the House of the necessity for providing as many political institutions as possible in order to enable our villagers to gain as much experience in democratic institutions as possible in order to be able to discharge their responsibilities through adult suffrage in the new democracy that

---

2 Harijan, 21st December, 1947, Kurukshetra, February 1949 P. 47.
3 Public Speech of Jawahararl Nehru in Rajastan, 2nd October, 1959, Kurukshetra 1949 P. 47.
we are going to establish. Without this foundation stone of village panchayats in our country, how would it be possible for our masses to play their rightful part in our democracy?5

Panchayati Raj Institution in India in general and the Gram Panchayat system in West Bengal in particular have an ancient root if we go through some sections of the ancient Indian literature or tradition. For example, we have got two terms ‘Sabha’ and ‘Samiti’ from Rigveda. The sabha was used for the game of dice. It is clear that the people who constituted the sabha could transact at the hall or even non-political business. Generally, Brahmnas and the Rich Patrons represented this Sabha but the ‘Samiti’ on the other hand was an Assembly of the Vedic Tribe. It was a more comprehensive conference including not only all the common people but also Brahmnas and Rich Patrons. It appears that the samiti was an August Assembly of a larger group of the people for the discharge of tribal or political business. However, this Samiti was presided over by the king. It was a more popular political body than the sabha. But both the sabha and samiti exercised considerable authority and must have acted as healthy checks on the power of the king. Great importance was attached, not only to establish a relation between the king and the Assembly, but also a spirit of harmony among the members of the Assembly6.

We also find administrative framework in Rigveda to rule over the Kingdom. A term ‘vis’ led a vital part in the political organization in the Vedic age. In a political sense the members of a tribal units were the ‘bisah’ constituting the tribal Kingdom. Below ‘vis’ the ‘Grama’ or the village was the basic administrative unit. Reference is also sometime made to ‘Jana’, another unit whose precise nature is not known. The Grama was practically self contained and had for the purpose of defense, a fortified enclosed (Pura) on an eminence. The Grama was probably made up of little knots of houses of the several branches of one family (Kula). With the heads of the family (Kulapa), a Gramani or Vrajapati was formed. The Gramani exercised both civil and military functions. The son of Gramani succeeded his father when his father died. This post of Gramani had a special position in King’s assembly as one of the ex-officio member of the assembly. The king, very often, discussed about the village administration with the Gramani because Gramani had a duty to defend or protect his village or a cluster of the villages from external attacks. He had also collected revenues, a part of which submitted to the king. Before imposing any type of tax on the villagers the Gramani had to discuss with the samiti or village council, because he was an ex-officio chairperson of

6 Majumdar R.C et al (eds) : (1996); The History and Culture of the Indian People : The Vedic Age, Bharatiya Vidyabhavan Series; Vol-I, Mumbai pp 355-359.
the Samiti. From this account we have come to know that the post of Gramani was like a parent in the Ancient Indian Society. To the king that is the Central Government and to the villagers Gramani was an eminent personality.

In Kautilya’s Arthasastra we find the word ‘Gramika’ which means a kind of village headman. It is stated that a Gramika may banish a person who is found to be guilty. He can also require a tenant to accompany him when he goes on some village work. It shows that Gramika had some executive power and occupied a position of some status in the village. There is another concept viz. Gramakuta means head of the village. He is obviously a state servant and may be looked upon as identical to the Gramika. The will of the village is to be expressed through either Gramika or Gramakuta. They are regarded as guardians and trustees of the villagers. They are to help in settling boundary dispute between two neighbouring farmers and are to be present when any sale of a field or a tank takes place. It may be assumed that the Gramika would like to consult with the village elders on matters affecting the village. The elders may be supposed to meet together in connection with their duties. But whether they formed a village panchayat or a village assembly is more than what one can say on the evidence of this text. With the centralized administration visualized in Arthasastra the village assembly or panchayat, even if it be assumed to exist, can hardly be expected to play any significant role. In the period of Mauriyas power in the rural area was centred in the hands of Samahart (i.e District Magistrate) with an army of subordinates under him spread over the entire countryside which left little scope for any initiative for general people at the village level.

In the period of Guptas we have got two concepts, one was ‘adhishthanadhikarana’ that is Municipal Board and other was ‘mahattams’ i.e the Rural Board. The Municipal Board was said to consist principally of four members viz the Guild President, the Chief Merchant, the chief Artisan and the Chief Scribe. The village elders on the other hand headed the Rural Board. These records pointed out to the association of the popular representative with the district as well as town and village administration. In this association of popular element with local government we may recognize one of the boldest administrative experiment of the imperial Guptas. We have no detailed knowledge of working of local administration in other provinces of the Gupta Emperors.

---

7 Ibid 359-362
9 Majumdar R.C et al (eds) : (1997); The History and Culture of the Indian People : The Classical Age, Bharatiya Vidyabhavan Series; Vol-III, Mumbai pp 341-348
From the studies on Chola Inscriptions we come across the presence of excellent village government. Village in the Chola empire was administered by a rural institution known as village assembly (i.e. Gram Samiti). The village assembly was of three types viz. the ‘ur’, the ‘Sabha’ and the ‘nagaram’. The ‘ur’ was the common type which included all classes of people who held the land in the village. The ‘Sabha’ was an exclusively Brahmin assembly of villages given as gifts to Brahmin where all land belong to them. The ‘nagaram’ was quite another type pertaining to localities where traders and merchants were in a dominant position. The most striking feature of Chola period was the unusual vigour and efficiency that characterized in functioning of the autonomous village assemblies. From the Chola inscriptions of the 10th and 11th centuries we find that the village in Chola empire had a headman, variously called ‘mutuda’, ‘kilan’, ‘gramabhojaka’ who was its leader and mediator with the Royal Government. In this period, a highly developed committee system (like present PRIs) was evolved for the administration of local affairs. The village assembly regulated irrigation rights, administered charitable endowments, maintained tanks and roads and managed the affairs of temples, etc. It also made rules for regulating its own procedure. In Chola period, the village assembly enjoyed high autonomy and the Royal Officials played the role of spectators and advisors in this regard. Justice in Chola period was administered by regularly constituted Royal Courts in addition to village courts and caste panchayats.10

During the period of Delhi sultanate, the village was the basic unit of administration. It was permitted to maintain its tradition of self-government. The government, in permitting a village to enjoy the privilege of managing its own affairs, entrusted it with the responsibility of maintaining peace in the area under its jurisdiction. The village dealt with the administration through its headman and maintained an account, called ‘patwari’, to keep its record of cultivation, produce, assessment and payment of state dues. The state, while welcoming and encouraging the cooperation of the headman, used periodical inspection in defining its relation with the villagers because the headman and influential sections of the village often tried to make the weaker peasants pay their shares e.g. Alauddin Khalzi gave strict order that the village should never be assessed as a whole, and that the strong should not be allowed to shift their burden on the weak. The headmen, some of whom were beneficiaries, were given a small percentage on the revenue which they had helped in realizing. The revenue administration had a large percentage of Hindu personnel, particularly in the local subdivision, because they possessed the necessary experience and knowledge of rural conditions. From this account we are not in a position to delineate any representative or

10 Sastri, Nilakanta K.A (1999); A History of South India (From prehistoric time to the fall of Vijayanagar), OXFORD, 4th edition, pp 149-150.
democratic functioning of the village administration during the Delhi Sultanate. It might be a break from the ancient Indian tradition of governing the villages\textsuperscript{11}.

Let us investigate whether Mughal Rulers had any tradition of panchayat system. Irfan Habib while studying the agrarian system of Mughal India found two documents of 1599, which suggested that there was a tradition of the panchayat of the village known as ‘Panch’, a collective body of five persons. The composition of panchayat was not confined to a single family or caste. However, one may assume that despite heterogeneity, hereditary succession had much to do with one’s obtaining the status of Panch. This Panch had to some extent some authority over the villagers. They could sell village land, which happened to be wasteland but it never took an individual right of possessing of land or other property. Thus, there existed individual peasant right over the arable land side by side with community right over the wasteland. Another important feature of the panchayat in Mughal India was an element of consultation and public deliberation, which made its members witnesses to transactions. However, there was no document discovered which could suggest a sense of equality and the existence of democratic method within this panchayat system. When the village headman called upon the villagers (Gramikas) for consultation only the notable respondents were present not the ordinary peasants, labourers and women: they did not count. Therefore, in Mughal India, there was no democratic set up in governing villages. It was noted by Irfan Habib that the so-called self-sufficient village community provided the umbrella for the exploitation of the lower peasantry and the non-peasant rural population by the village oligarchs. These village oligarchs sent a part of the surplus revenue in the form of tax to the Mughal ruling class. Therefore, villages in Mughal India were exploited by these elements\textsuperscript{12}.

The people of the rural areas during the period of Mughals had their own courts. Every village had its panchayat, which decided civil and criminal cases. The people elected the members of the panchayat and the judges were those persons who had rendered some conspicuous service to their caste or the entire village community. The decisions of the panchayat were almost variably unanimous and the punishments inflicted were fines, public degradation or ex-communica\textsuperscript{t}. The prestige enjoyed by the panchayat was great and their authority was moral rather than political or administrative. The fear of public opinion was one of the most potent factors responsible for the prevention of crimes and hardly did any case go out the boundaries of the village. Early British Administrators in India appreciated

\textsuperscript{11} Majumdar R.C et al (eds): (1990); The History and Culture of the Indian People: The Delhi Sultanate, Bharatiya Vidyabhaban Series; Vol-VI, Bombay, pp 453-454
\textsuperscript{12} Habib, Irfan (1999); The Agrarian system of Mughal India, Oxford University press, pp: 144-146.
this Mughal tradition of the panchayats or rural courts and it was continued in the British colonial rule for about 190 years.\(^{13}\)

It is argued that local self-government in India, in a sense of a representative organization responsible to a body of electors, enjoying wide powers of administration and taxation and as a vital link in the chain of organization that make up the government of the country is a British creation. It was matured in the period of Lord Mayo and Lord Ripon in the year 1870. Lord Mayo’s famous resolution advocated a measure of decentralization from the Centre to Provinces, emphasized the desirability of associating Indians in administration and indicated the municipal government as the most promising field for the purpose. Lord Ripon, who succeeded Lord Mayo as the Governor General of India resolved in 1882 to make local government self-governing. He is rightly credited with the enunciation of new philosophy of local government; to him, local government was predominantly an instrument of political and popular education. He was regarded as the father of local self-government in India. The tradition left by Ripon had been continued also in the report of Royal Commission upon decentralization in 1909.

From this brief retrospection, we find perpetuation of the tradition of local self-government from ancient India down to post-independence period culminating in the 73\(^{rd}\) and 74\(^{th}\) Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 and Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Area Act (PESA), 1996. It is thus clear that Indian past history also emphasized the role of the panchayat on several important issues relating to the needs and aspirations of the common people, although the framework of the panchayat system in the past was of different type.

**Section-II**

_Evolution and Development of Panchayati Raj in West Bengal_

We have found that the experiment in rural self-government in Bengal started since long past. But formal steps in this regard was first taken, during the British era, with the enactment of Bengal Village Chowkidari Act, 1870 in order to satisfy the popular demands of Panchayat system. This panchayat body consisted of not less than five members mostly appointed by the District Collectorate or any subordinate officers authorized by him. The main functions of that body were confined in levying and collection of Chowkidary tax and maintenance of law and order. Subsequently, because of absence of the real sense of local self-governance, this Act failed to create an authority in rural India in order to undertake the administration of essential civic services like rural roads, provision of safe drinking water,

\(^{13}\) Majumdar R.C et al (eds); (1994); The History and Culture of the Indian People: The Mughal Emperor, Bharatiya Vidyabhavan Series; Vol-VII, Bombay pp 549-550.
sanitation facilities, food and nutritional security, health and hygienic improvement, spread of elementary and informal education, solution of housing problems, social participation, etc on its own initiative.¹⁴

Later on, Lord Ripon, the then Viceroy of India, passed a Resolution on 18 May 1882, to provide sufficient momentum to this matter. Some of the important features¹⁵ of Ripon’s resolution are:

i) State control over local bodies should not be direct but it should be indirect.

ii) These bodies must be well equipped with adequate financial resources to carry out their functions.

iii) Local bodies should have mostly elected non-government members and non-government chairman.

iv) Local government personnel should operate under the administrative control of the local government.

This Act of 1882 ultimately led to the enactment of the Bengal Local Government Act, 1885. This act of 1885 provided for a three-tier structure for rural Bengal:

i) a district board at the top having jurisdiction over the entire district;

ii) a local board at the middle covering a subdivision; and

iii) the union committee with jurisdiction over a group of disjoint villages.

The Local Boards indirectly elected district Board members. The act of 1985 provided for Local Board to be constituted at sub-division level consisting of not less than six members, two-third of its members had to be nominated by the government. The elected elements, in fact, used to be chosen by the government, then those names had to be taken to people for their approval. The common people could not afford to reject the members having the blessing of government officials. Thus it was a quasi-democratic body. The union committees were also constituted by conducting an informal election i.e. by the process of electing members through nomination by the government officials. Therefore, this union committee could not provide a real democratic institution in villages during the time of British India.¹⁶

---

¹⁴ Roy, Dipen (2005); Finances and Accounting of Panchayati Raj Institutions in West Bengal, Abhijeet Publication, Delhi, P-15.

¹⁵ Maheswari, S (1996); Local Government in India, Orient Longman, New Delhi, p-18

Now the officials who were the members of both District and Local Board exercised the real authority. Actually the district was made the unit of local self-government and consequently, the Local Board had to act as the mere agency of the District Board with no autonomy of its own. The Local Board was soon found redundant and in 1936 those were abolished.

Chowkidari panchayats as well as union committees co-existed for a long time. The establishment of union committees under the Act of 1985 was extremely unsatisfactory. The villages were thus in practice denied any kind of self-government and, as a result, some of the basic needs of the people like sanitation, roads or drinking water remained unattended.

In 1919, the Bengal village Self-Government Act was passed on the basis of the report of the Royal Commission on Decentralization (1909) and the report of the District Administrative Committee (1913). This Act was practically the first attempt to introduce self-governing institutions for the rural people of the province. The Act of 1919 had provided for the creation of union committees consisting of a group of villages. Each union committee was to have an elected body known as the Union Board. The electorate was to consist of all adult males having residence within the union and paying local rates and cesses. Thus, it was a restricted electorate.\(^\text{17}\)

This union board performed a variety of functions like sanitation, conservancy, water supply, maintenance of roads or drains, control on construction of building, promotion of cottage industry, establishment of primary schools or libraries etc. Unlike the union committees steps were taken to constitute the union boards quickly and to hold election to them. A new class of officers, known as Circle Officers was appointed by the government to supervise the functioning of a group of boards and to act as a link between the government and the self-governing institutions. Therefore, from 1919 onwards, undivided Bengal had two sets of rural local government institutions – District Board at the uppermost (district) level and Union Board at the lowest (village) level covering a cluster of 8 to 10 villages. Each tier had a distinct corporate status and a separate statute delineating its powers, functions and obligations but there was no organic linkage between the two institutions.

It must be noted that social and economic power in the villages was concentrated in the hands of a small group consisting of the landed gentry, zamindars and the moneylenders. Union or District Boards used to be dominated by these groups, which had vested interest in the status quo. Official control had stifled the autonomous growth of these bodies. All these

\(^{17}\text{Ibid pp 306-307.}\)
bodies suffered from acute shortage of funds. Throughout British rule the principle of 'local taxation for local purposes' had been pursued. The government had disowned any responsibility of providing funds for local purposes, which, in its perception, included not only sanitation, roads, water supply or schools, but also the rural watchmen. In fact, the Act had provided that payment of salaries and equipment for the chowkidars and dafadars be made the first charge on the income of the union boards.\footnote{Status of Panchayati Raj in the States and Union Territories of India, 2000, Institute of Social Science, Concept Publishing Company, P-308.}

Independence of 1947 brought about social and political changes. The need for development at grass root level became urgent. Democratic decentralization took new meaning in the changed socio-political environment and thus it was wrong to deny people their right to participate in the planning and execution of local development. In reality non-participation of local people was dampening the tempo of development administration and on this ground the central council for local self-government suggested the devolution of as much role as possible to the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) in the planning and execution of economic development.

To this development were immediately added the recommendation of Balwantary Mehta Committee, which stated. "Community development can be real only when community understands its problems, realizes its responsibilities and maintains constant vigilance on local administration:"\footnote{Bhattacharya, Mohit (1965); Rural Local Self Government in Metropolitan Calcutta, Asia Publishing House, Calcutta, P-43.} When the National Development Council recommended the states to establish Panchayati Raj Institutions, West Bengal Government took the decision to introduce Panchayati Raj bodies constituted after the ideals of democratic decentralization. It introduced, in 1956 West Bengal Panchayat Act, providing for the Gram Panchayat at village level and Anchal Panchayat at former Union Board level.

In post independence period Panchayati Raj experiment of West Bengal started from below. Thus, subsequently the need for providing an integrated structure of Panchayati Raj covering upper tiers also seemed obvious. In 1963 Zilla Parishad Act was passed providing for formation of Zilla Parishad at district level.

Therefore, two separate Acts (viz. Panchayat Act, 1956 and Zilla Parishad Act, 1963) led to a four-tier structure of Panchayati Raj system in West Bengal consisting of:

"i) Gram Panchayat at village level,

ii) Anchal Panchayat for group of villages,
iii) Anchalik Parishad at block level, and
iv) Zilla Parishad at district level.

Though Gram Panchayat and Anchal Panchayat were started in 1958-59, full-fledged four-tier Panchayati Raj system was launched on 2nd October, 1964 on the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi who championed the idea of Panchayati Raj as “institution of real swaraj (self-rule) in Rural India”.²⁰

From 1964 to 1972, because of political instability, Indo-Pak war, excessive government control over the panchayats, etc, no concrete step was taken in this matter. In 1973, the West Bengal Panchayat Act was passed in which Anchalik Parishad at block level of previous system was abolished. Consequently this new Act provided for the formation of three-tier Panchayati Raj system in West Bengal instead of the previous four-tier one, viz.

1. Gram Panchayat at village level.
2. Panchayat Samiti at block level, and
3. Zilla Parishad at district level.

However, until 1978 nothing was done in this matter. Meanwhile the Government of India in the meantime set up the Asoka Mehta Committee (1978) to review the working of panchayats and to make recommendations for strengthening the existing system. The Committee found Panchayats as most appropriate instruments of rural development and recommended introduction of two-tier Panchayats, favoured open participation by political parties in Panchayat elections, direct involvement of elected bodies in development programmes and constitutional provision for further decentralization of power.²¹

The Panchayat system as a form of local self-government started its functioning in 1978 after the Left Front came to power led by the CPI(M) in 1977. Its political reforms programme consists of empowering the three-tier panchayat system with a Gram Panchayat (village council) for a cluster of villages at the bottom, a Panchayat Samiti covering the area of a block at the middle and a Zilla Parishad for the district at the top.

The first panchayat election was held under the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973 in June 1978 and since then, Panchayat general elections have been held in 1983, 1988, 1993, 1998 and 2003 strictly observing the five-year period. A three-tier panchayat system was set

²⁰ Roy, Dipen (2005); Finance and Accounting of Panchayati Raj Institutions in West Bengal, Abhijeet Publisher, Delhi, P-20.
up with elections contested on party lines and with direct elections through universal adult franchise for majority of seats in each tier.\textsuperscript{22}

In 1988, a major amendment was made in the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973 to mark the grant of limited autonomy to Darjeeling hill areas with the formation of Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) in the hill areas and Siliguri Mahakuma Parishad (SMP) with all the persons and authority of the Zilla Parishad (ZP) for Siliguri Sub-Divison.

The three-tier structure of Panchayati Raj Institution (PRIs) in West Bengal can be depicted in Figure-2A below:

\textit{Figure-2A}

\textit{Three-tier Structure of Panchayati Raj Institutions in West Bengal}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Institution Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DISTRICT</td>
<td>ZILLA PARISHAD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BLOCK</td>
<td>PANCHAYAT SAMITI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PANCHAYAT SAMITI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VILLAGE</td>
<td>GRAM PANCHAYATS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>GRAM PANCHAYATS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: There are around 20 Panchayat Samiti under a Zilla Parishad and 9 to 10 Gram Panchayats under a Panchayat Samiti.

The exact position of PR bodies and the total number of seats in different tiers 1978 to 2003 indicated in Table-2.1 and Table-2.2.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid; P-8.
Table-2.1

Total Number of Panchayati Raj (PR) Bodies in West Bengal: 1978 to 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Zilla Parishad</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Panchayat Samiti</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Gram Panchayat</td>
<td>3243</td>
<td>3305</td>
<td>3229</td>
<td>3223</td>
<td>3300</td>
<td>3354**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Different issues of Annual Administrative Reports, Department of Panchayat & Rural Development, Government of West Bengal.

*with Siliguri Mahakuma Parishad.

** There were 2258 Gram Panchayats up to 31.3.2002. During 2002-03, 4 (four) Gram Panchayats have been abolished due to inclusion of two Gram Panchayats in Municipalities and following erosion of 2 (two) Gram Panchayats by the river Ganges/Padma. Panshkura-II Gram Panchayat under Panshkura-I Block of Purba Medinipur district and Dalkhola-II Gram Panchayat under Karandighi Block of Uttar Dinajpur have been merged with Municipalities. Again, Kankribandha Jhowbana Gram Panchayat of Kalichak-II Block of Malda district and Charkuthibari Gram Panchayat under block Bhagwangola-II of Murshidabad district have been fully eroded into the river Ganges/Padma.

Table-2.2

Total Number of Seats – 1978 to 2003 in Each Tier

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Zilla Parishad</td>
<td>648</td>
<td>678</td>
<td>658</td>
<td>656</td>
<td>716</td>
<td>720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Panchayat Samiti</td>
<td>8467</td>
<td>8664</td>
<td>9128</td>
<td>9455</td>
<td>8520</td>
<td>8564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Gram Panchayat</td>
<td>46845</td>
<td>46153</td>
<td>52520</td>
<td>61011</td>
<td>49224</td>
<td>51142</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Different issues of Annual Administrative Reports, Department of Panchayat & Rural Development, Government of West Bengal.

A major change has taken place in the arena of Panchayati Raj by making the panchayat system constitutional through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992. This Act has come into force since April 20, 1993. It defines Panchayats to mean institutions of self-government to which State legislatures are required, by law, to endow "powers and authority as are necessary to enable them to function as (such)". However, it also goes on to say that "such law may contain provisions for the devolution of powers and responsibilities upon panchayat at the appropriate level" with respect to.

“(a) the preparation of plans for economic development and social justice;
(b) the implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice as may be entrusted to them including those in relation to the matters listed in the Eleventh Schedule.\[23\]

It has brought about significant changes regarding the composition, powers and functions of Panchayati Raj (PR) bodies throughout the country. The major changes\[24\] by the Act of 1992 are:

i) Constitutional recognition of panchayat system;

ii) To make Gram Sabha more meaningful and effective as an arm of direct democracy at the Gram Panchayat level;

iii) Reservation of seats for the schedule castes (SCs) and the Schedule Tribes (STs), in each tier according to their ratio in total population;

iv) Reservation of one-third of total seats or 33.33 % seats for women;

v) Additional responsibilities to the panchayat bodies which they did not enjoy earlier;

vi) Empowerment of panchayat bodies to arrange their own resources;

vii) To convene the meeting of the Gram Sabha as constitutional obligation once in six months where reports about new planning and the audit will have to be submitted;

viii) To make arrangement for appointment of finance commission to review the fiscal condition of panchayat bodies;

ix) To make the Gram Sabha a permanent organ of the Gram Panchayat for ensuring active participation of the people;

x) One-third of the total seats reserve for SCs and STs are to be reserved for women of those Castes and Tribes.

The corresponding State Act was passed in West Bengal in the year 1994. This Act envisaged a three-tier structure following the parent Act. The State Act of West Bengal was subsequently amended in the year 2003.

**Section – III
Structure and Institutions**

Through prolonged historical vicissitudes Panchayati Raj Institution has become a part and parcel of village life and has assumed the place of village Government. Owing to this fact, West Bengal, the pioneering state in India, has developed a three-tier structure of Panchayati Raj. A brief descriptions of the constitution and functions of these institutions are as follows:

---

\[23\] Annual Administrative Report (2001-2002); Department of Panchayat and Rural Development, Government of West Bengal, P-8.

(A) Gram Panchayat at the Village Level

Gram Panchayat is the lowest level Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI). It is simply a council of elected village representatives. The number of members of a Gram Panchayat can be five at minimum and thirty at maximum, directly elected by the people. According to 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, seats are to be reserved for women and for Schedule Castes (SCs) and Schedule Tribes (STs) in every Gram Panchayat.

An elector can be a member of a Gram Panchayat if he or she 25

a) is not either a member of Panchayat Samiti or a Zilla Parishad or a Municipality;

b) is not an employee of State or Central Government;

c) is not a discharged employee of a cooperative or an institution run by the Government;

d) is not a bankrupt or an insane;

e) is not convicted in prison for more than six months; and

f) did pay taxes or tariffs or fees due to a panchayat body.

The normal tenure of a Gram Panchayat is five years. The 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 has prescribed that in case of any abnormal or special situation the State Government can extend the tenure of a Gram Panchayat up to a maximum of six months. Any member of a Gram Panchayat can tender his or her resignation in writing to the Block Development Officer (BDO) before the expiry of working period. The sub-divisional officer can terminate the membership of a Gram Panchayat member for a number of reasons, such as

i) Absence from meeting of Gram Panchayat for three consecutive periods;

ii) Conviction for an offence involving moral turpitude;

iii) Conviction for a term of more than six months for committing a criminal offence;

iv) Defaulter of taxes, tariffs etc;

v) Declared as bankrupt;

vi) Medically proved as insane.

In the first meeting of every Gram Panchayat called by the BDO the elected village representatives elect one amongst themselves as 'Pradhan' and another as 'Upa-Pradhan'. Their normal tenure is five years but they can continue to act till the next election even after the expiry of their normal tenure.

The meeting of Gram Panchayat is to be held at least once in a month. One-third of the total number of members, subject to a minimum of three, is required to remain present to hold the meeting. Pradhan usually presides over the meeting and Upa-Pradhan does this job.

in the absence of Pradhan. President is empowered to tender one ‘casting vote’ when vote cast for and against on any proposal is equal. But this ‘casting vote’ is not allowed in case of termination of the ‘Pradhan’ or the Upa-Pradhan from their posts. Pradhan has the power to direct the administration of the Gram Panchayat. He also looks after the economic matters. He/She is also responsible to keep the records, documents and seal of the Gram Panchayat. He or she supervises and controls the activities of the staff and officials under his/her jurisdiction.26

There is a secretary in every Gram Panchayat. The State Government appoints him. His duty lies with the Gram Panchayat through the Pradhan. Apart from the secretary, there are other staffs, such as, Chowkidar, Dafadar, etc, now re-designated Gram Panchayat Karmees, under a Gram Panchayat. The staff is now treated as ‘Group-D’ employees of the state government. They perform their duties under the Gram Panchayat. The post of a Job Assistant has been arranged for every Gram Panchayat to manage its excessive burden of work. One post of Sahayak has also been created recently and the recruitment of the same is going on. The State Government is considering creation of a few more posts in the Gram Panchayat. The ‘organizational structure’ 27 of Gram Panchayat can be shown in Figure-2B.

Figure-2B
Structure of Gram Panchayat

GRAMPANCHAYAT

Pradhan

Upa Pradhan

Functional Groups of Members

Executive Assistant

Sahayak Secretary Job Assistant G.P. Karmee

26 The West Bengal Panchayat Act 1973 (Amended in 1992), Law Department, Government of West Bengal.
Gram Sabha

Under the new Panchayati Raj system in West Bengal the concept of Gram Sabha has been incorporated. Gram Sabha has become too much popular among the villagers. It is a body consisting of all persons registered as voters in the Panchayat at the village level and may exercise power entrusted to it by the State Legislature. This institution has been revived through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 to ensure people's participation through a permanent institution at the grass root levels in Rural India. The meeting of the Gram Sabha is to be held twice in a year at the specific place, date and time as decided by the Gram Panchayat. Pradhan usually presides over the meeting and Upa-Pradhan does the job in the absence of Pradhan. As a general body, the Gram Sabha discusses the annual statement of accounts, looks into the audit report of the Gram Panchayat, examines the administrative report of the preceding year and takes decisions in regard to the implementation of projects and programmes for the ensuring year. The majority of the members present in the meeting must support decisions. Implementation of programmes is done by the Pradhan with the cooperation of the members of the Gram Panchayat and officials working under the Gram Panchayat. It also provides deliberation recommendation and suggestion regarding the efficiency and effectiveness of the Gram Panchayat. 28

Gram Sansad

To make Gram Sabha more meaningful as the arm of democratic decentralization, it has been split up into Gram Sansads. Gram Sansad is the grass root representative body of the electorate belonging to a booth. Efforts have now been taken to make these Gram Sansads more effective and active instruments for the redressal of people's needs and demands at the grass root levels. Though Gram Panchayat considers all the accepted proposals of the Gram Sabha with due importance, still the latter's importance cannot be denied as a real regulatory mechanism in the hands of the rural people over the panchayat body. A Gram Sansad shall guide and advise the Gram Panchayat in regard to scheme for economic development and social justice undertaken or proposed to be undertaken in its area.

Gram Sansad has been given the following powers and responsibilities: 29

---

28 The West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act 1994, Law Department, Government of West Bengal & Bhattacharya, Niladri; Rural Local Government in India in the book Politics India edited by Rakhahari Chatterjee, p 166-167
i) To identify or lay down principles for identification of the schemes which are required to be taken on priority basis for economic development of villages;

ii) To identify or lay down principles for identification of the beneficiaries for various Poverty Alleviation Programmes (PAPs);

iii) To constitute one or more beneficiary committees comprising not more than nine persons who are not members of Gram Panchayat, for ensuring active participation of the people in implementation, maintenance and equitable distribution of benefits of one or more schemes in its area;

iv) To mobilize mass participation for community welfare programme and programme for adult education for family welfare and child welfare;

v) To promote solidarity and harmony among all section of the people irrespective of religion, faith, caste, creed and race;

vi) To record its objections to any action of the Pradhan or any other members of the Gram Panchayat for failure to implement any development scheme properly or without active participation of the people of that area.

The Gram Panchayat is required to consider every resolution adopted at the meeting of the Gram Sansad. The decisions and actions taken will be reported to its next meeting. The Gram Panchayat, on considering and reviewing the resolution of the Gram Sansad, is required to place before the Gram Sabha the resolution of the Gram Sansad and the views of the Gram Panchayat together with its report on the action taken and proposed to be taken on them for deliberation and recommendation of the Gram Sabha. It is also provided in the Amended Act that the proceedings of the meeting of the Gram Sabha will be recorded and read out before the meeting is conducted.

It is clearly laid down in the legislation that the inability on the part of the Gram Panchayat to hold the meeting of the Gram Sansad empowers the State Government either to remove the Pradhan (chief) or Upa-Pradhan (Vice chief), if they are found guilty or to dissolve the Gram Panchayat if the latter is responsible for it. It shows the seriousness of the Government and the political will. It ensures mass mobilization, people’s participation and transparency of panchayat activities.

The West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 2003 has made it obligatory for a Gram Panchayat to act upon any recommendations of a Gram Sansad relating to prioritization of any list of beneficiaries or scheme or program so far as it relates to the area of the Gram Sansad. However, if Gram Panchayat decides in a meeting that such recommendations are not acceptable or implementable under the existing provisions of the Act, Rules or Orders, such decision of the Gram Panchayat shall be placed in the next meeting of the Gram Sansad.
G.K. Lieten observes, “in the Gram (Sansad) Sabha meeting although the lecture (boktrita) culture is not altogether absent, participation takes place. Around one-fourth of the male stated that they take active part and occasionally speaker at the meeting" and thus the Gram Sansad meetings have given the panchayat great opportunity for mobilizing the rural masses.

Keeping in view the task of development through constructive work a second thought was given to further decentralized the PRI structure and to enhance participation of the people the State Act was further amended in 2003 so as to include Gram Unnayan Samiti.

**Powers and functions of Gram Panchayat**

The powers and functions of Gram Panchayat are extensive and are clearly mentioned in the Panchayat Act of West Bengal. These functions shall be to provide some basic needs required for better livelihood status of the villagers within the areas under its jurisdiction.

These are:

- a) Sanitation, conservancy and drainage, etc.
- b) Curative and preventive measures of contagious diseases, such as, malaria, small pox, cholera etc.
- c) Supply of safe drinking water and the cleaning and disinfecting the sources of supply and storage of water.
- d) The maintenance, repairs and construction of village roads and protection thereof.
- e) The protection and repair of building and other property vested in it.
- f) The management and care of public ponds, schools, common grazing grounds, burning ghats and burial grounds;
- g) The imposition, assessment and collection of taxes, cesses, fees and tolls leviable under the Panchayat Act;
- h) The formation, direction and administration of Naya Panchayat established under this Act;
- i) the control and administration of the Gram Panchayat Fund established under this Act;
- j) the arrangement of primary, technical, vocational, adult and non-formal education for the rural people;
- k) the establishment of rural dispensary, health centre, maternity home and child welfare centre;
- l) the arrangement of rural electrification including distribution of electricity;
- m) the performance of such functions as may be transferred to it under section 31 of the Cattle Trespass Act, 1871;
- n) the promotion of small scale industries, fishery, dairy and poultry farming etc.;

---

o) the introduction of Poverty Alleviation Programmes;
p) the promotion and welfare for socially and economically backward peoples, specially for SCs and STs;
q) a Gram Panchayat shall also perform such other functions related to various needs and necessities of rural masses.

Financial Resources of Gram Panchayat

For every Gram Panchayat there shall be constituted a Gram Panchayat Fund bearing the name of Gram Panchayat and all revenues and grants received by the panchayat shall be credited to the account. The chief sources of finance of a Gram Panchayat are:

i) Financial assistance and grants provided to them by the Central or State Government(s);
ii) Financial assistance and grants given by the Zilla Parishad, the Panchayat Samiti or any Local Authority;
iii) Loans, if any, granted by the Central Government or the State Government;
iv) Revenue earned in the form of taxes, cesses, tolls and fees imposed by the panchayat;
v) All receipts in respect of any schools, hospitals, dispensaries, buildings, institutions or works vested in it, construction by or placed under the control and management of the Gram Panchayat;
vi) All sums received as gifts or contributions and income from any trust or endowment made in favour of the Gram Panchayat;
vii) All other sums received by or on behalf of the Gram Panchayat.

The fund of the Gram Panchayat shall be deposited in a Savings Bank Account of a nationalized bank or post office. The Savings Bank Account shall be opened in the name of the Gram Panchayat. The Pradhan, or in his or her absence the Upa-Pradhan shall become the custodian of the fund. He/She shall be held responsible for proper utilization and satisfactory accounting thereof.

Section 34(1) of the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973 states that the Pradhan shall

(a) be responsible for maintenance of records of the Gram Panchayat, and
(b) have general responsibility for the financial and executive administration.

The secretary of the Gram Panchayat shall be responsible for writing of Cash Book and proper maintenance of accounts and vouchers.

(B) Panchayat Samiti at the Block Level

Panchayat Samiti is the intermediate level Panchayati Raj Institution. The villagers elect its direct members from their respective Panchayat Samiti constituencies. Pradhan of

different Gram Panchayats and Members of Legislative Assembly are ex-officio members of the Panchayat Samiti.

Members of the Panchayat Samiti elect, through secret ballot, one as Sabhapati and another as Saha-Sabhapati from among themselves, in the first valid meeting of the samiti after election. Their normal tenure is for five years. But they may be removed before the expiry of their terms if such situation arises. Since the volume of work at panchayat samiti is very high, the post of Karmadhakshyas has been created.

According to the West Bengal Panchayat Act, a meeting of the samiti is to be held at an interval of three months. The Sabhapati or in his or her absence Saha-Sabhapati presides over the meeting. The quorum of the meeting requires the presence of one-fourth of total members. The Sabhapati may put his/her ‘casting vote’ in case of a tie.

Sabhapati is entrusted with overall executive and financial control over the activities of panchayat samiti. He/She has to preserve all documents, files, papers and records of the samiti and to perform any special duty assigned to him by either State Government or by any special proposal of the samiti. The works and functions of the Panchayat Samiti have subdivided into different specialized groups viz. Finance, Agriculture, Public Works, etc.

Decision regarding different works and projects are taken in a meeting of the Panchayat Samiti, obviously supported by the majority of the members present. The decisions taken in the said meeting is executed by the BDO who is the ex-officio Executive officer of the Panchayat Samiti. 33

There are posts of Extension Officers at block level. They are members of respective Sthayee Samitis. They attend meeting of respective Sthayee Samitis and give technical advice, if necessary and exercise supervision over the activities.

Powers & Functions of Panchayat Samiti 34

According to section 109 of the Panchayat Act, 1973

1) Panchayat Samiti shall –

   a) Undertake schemes or adopt measures, including the giving of financial assistance relating to development of agriculture, animal husbandry, cottage industries, cooperatives, rural water supply, irrigation, public health, sanitation, rural credit, primary and adult education, social welfare etc.

---

33 The West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 2003, Law Department, Government of West Bengal.
34 The West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973 (Amended in 2003), Law Department, Government of West Bengal.
b) Undertake execution of any scheme or management of any institution entrusted to it by the State Government or any other authority;

c) Adopt measures for the relief of the distress people;

d) Coordinate and integrate the development plans and projects taken by different Gram Panchayats within the block;

e) Examine and approve the budgets of Gram Panchayats

2) Panchayat Samiti may undertake or execute any scheme if it extends to more than one Gram Panchayat.

3) Panchayat Samiti shall perform some other duties assigned to it by the State Government regarding the supervision and maintenance of any road, bridge, canal, pond, drainage system or any other property within the block.

Panchayat Samiti Fund

Panchayat Samiti has its fund allotted to it by the Central or State Government for the development work within its area. It is also empowered to levy certain taxes and received some share of the land revenue and grants from the State Government.

The chief sources of revenue are:

a) a prescribed percentage of land revenue collected within the block area;

b) financial assistance and grants provided by the Zilla Parishad or any local authority;

c) loans if any, granted by the Central or State Government; and

d) all receipts on account of tax, tolls cess, surcharge, rent, rates and fees levied by it;

The Balwantray Mehta Study Team recommended that “all Central and State funds spent in a block area should invariably be assigned to the Panchayat Samiti to be spent by it, directly or indirectly, except to an institution, assistance to which is either beyond the Panchayat Samiti’s functions or its financial resources.”35

Under the West Bengal Panchayat Act 1973 every Panchayat Samiti has to prepare its own budget for the next financial year and to place it before the Zilla Parishad for approval.

According to Sec. 118 (1) of the Act, the Sabhapati shall have the general responsibility for financial and executive administration. He shall be responsible for maintenance of the records of the Panchayat Samiti.

Zilla Parishad is the highest level Panchayati Raj Institution. Its members are of two types viz. direct members and ex-officio members. The villagers directly elect direct members from different Zilla Parishad constituencies through secret ballot. Sabhapatis of different Panchayat Samitis, MLAs and MPs elected from constituencies falling under the jurisdiction of Zilla Parishad are ex-officio members of the Zilla Parishad.

The District Magistrate of the District is the Executive Officer of the Zilla Parishad. There is an Additional Executive Officer in the rank of Additional District Magistrate who is placed exclusively in the Zilla Parishad. One senior member of the State Civil Service functions as the Secretary of the Zilla Parishad. A Deputy Secretary assists the Secretary. There is an Accounts Wing in the Zilla Parishad with an Accounts Officer. There are two Executive Engineers and a number of Assistant Engineers and Sub-Assistant Engineers in the Zilla Parishad. There is a complement of junior level officers to support the Zilla Parishad.

The organizational structure of Zilla Parishad can be shown in Figure-2C.
In the first meeting of the Zilla Parishad the members elect one as Sabhadhipati and another as Saha-Sabhadhipati. No member of Central or State Legislatures can either be Sabhadhipati or Saha-Sabhadhipati. The tenure of every member of Zilla Parishad is five years except the ex-officio members. The provision of having ex-officio members in all the three-tiers helps to establish an organic link among the different tiers of Panchayat system as well as with the representative institutions at the state and all India levels.36

Powers and Functions of Zilla Parishad37

It is very difficult to mention a comprehensive list of the functions of Zilla Parishad. Because, it leaves out none of the activities of a civilized society except defense and police. In short the functions of Zilla Parishad include:

i) All civic activities beyond the capacity of Panchayat Samiti;

ii) All reconstruction works and rural development programmes which require a considerable amount of fund, and exceeding the capacity of Panchayat Samiti;

iii) Reconstruction works falling under the jurisdiction of more than one Panchayat Samitis;

iv) Supervision and coordination of the activities of the panchayat samitis and Gram Panchayats;

v) Receiving the funds from the State Government and distributing the share of the Panchayat Samitis amongst them;

vi) Formulation of district development plan and making advice to the State Government regarding developments of its areas.

Special group of activities of both Zilla Parishads and Panchayat Samitis are put under the supervision and control of a group of members called Sthayee Samitis standing committees as prescribed by the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973. Each Sthayee Samiti has a balanced mix of elected representatives and appointed officials concerned with the related programmes as members with one elected representative as the Chairperson called Karmadhyaksha and one appointed officials as the Secretary of the Sthayee Samiti. Under the latest amendment, all Panchayat Samitis and Zilla parishads have 10 (ten) Sthayee Samitis with distinctly separate areas of functions. The Karmadhyakshas are responsible for formulation and implementation of schemes and programmes entrusted upon the Sthayee Samitis and has been vested with the necessary powers. Such Karmadhyakshas are directly elected members of the Zilla Parishad or the Panchayat Samiti as the case may be. One of the Officers appointed by the State Government in the Sthayee Samiti is selected by the Sthayee Samiti to

36 Annual Administrative Report (2001-2002); Department of Panchayat and Rural Development, Government of West Bengal, P-12.
37 The West BengaPanchayat Act, 1973 (Amended in 2003), Law Department, Government of West Bengal.
act as the Secretary. In the event of vacancy, the Secretary of Zilla Parishad or the Panchayat Samiti discharges this function.

The different 'Sthayee Samitis'³⁸ are:

(i) Artha, Sanshtha, Unnayan-O-Parikalpana Sthayee Samiti (Finance, Establishment, Development & Planning Standing Committee)
(ii) Jana Swasthya-O-Paribesh Sthayee Samiti (Public Health & Environment Standing Committee)
(iii) Purta Karya-O-Samabaya Sthayee Samiti (Public Works & Transport Standing Committee)
(iv) Krishi Sech-O-Samabaya Sthayee Samiti (Agriculture, Irrigation & Cooperation Standing Committee)
(v) Siksha, Sanskriti, Tathya-O-Krira Sthayee Samiti (Education, Culture, Information and Sports Standing Committee)
(vi) Sishu-O-Nari Unnyan, Janakalyan-O-Tran Sthayee Samiti (Women & Child Development, Social Welfare & Relief Standing Committee)
(vii) Bon-O-Bhumi Sanskar Sthayee Samiti (Forest & Land Reforms Standing Committee)
(viii) Matsya-O-Prani Sampad Bikash Sthayee Samiti (Pisciculture & Animal Resource Development Standing Committee)
(ix) Khadya-O-Sarabaraha Sthayee Samiti (Food & Supplies Standing Committee)
(x) Kshudra Silpa, Bidyut-O-Achiracharit Sakti Sthayee Samiti (Small Industries, Power & Non-Conventional Energy Standing Committee)

**Zilla Parishad Fund³⁹**

There is a fund in Zilla Parishad where income from different sources are deposited. Sources of fund of Zilla Parishad include --

- a) contributions and grants made by the Central Government or State Government,
- b) loans, if any, granted by the Central or State Government,
- c) proceeds on account of tolls, road tax, fees, cesses and rates levied by the Zilla Parishad,
- d) proceeds from schools, hospitals, institutions properties (leased out), endowment gifts etc.

According to section 165(1) of West Bengal Panchayat Act 1973, Sabhadhipati shall have general responsibility for the financial and executive administration of the Zilla Parishad. He shall be responsible for the maintenance records of Zilla Parishad. However, Office Superintendent cum Accountant and Head Assistant do the record keeping functions.

All the subsystems are organically related with one another under the overall leadership of the Zilla Parishad. The Pradhans of the Gram Panchayats are ex-officio members of the immediate superior body i.e. the Panchayat Samiti and the Sabhapatis of the

---

³⁸ Annual Administrative Report (2001-2002); Department of Panchayat and Rural Development, Government of West Bengal.
³⁹ The West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973 (Amended in 2003), Law Department, Government of West Bengal.
Panchayat Samities are ex-officio members of the Zilla Parishad. The law also empowers the bodies of the higher tier to supervise the functions of the lower ones. The position has been further elaborated in the Figure-2D.

**Figure-2D**

*Organic Relation of All the Subsystems of PRI*

---

**Organizational Linkage**

The organizational linkage of PRI can be conceived at three levels. At the first, PRI has the upward linkage with the institutions at the block and district level and downward linkage with the Gram Sabha, Gram Sansad and Gram Unnayan Samiti. At the second level, PRI has linkage with the line Ministries and Line Departments. At the third level, linkage is built between Panchayat, Corporate Sector and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). In brief the institutional linkage of PRI with the Government Organizations, Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organizations can evince the progress of development and constructive work through building partnership and synergy. These three level of linkages are shown in Figure 2E, 2E(1) and 2E(2) respectively to the following page.
Figure 2E : First level linkage

Figure 2E(1) : Second level linkage

Figure 2E(2) : Third level linkage
**District Council**

The West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 1994 introduced an important body called District Council for panchayats in each district to examine the accounts/budget of any panchayat body within the district, the annual reports of such body and such other books of accounts/documents of such panchayats. The Council consists of Adhyaksha (or chairperson) who will be the leader of the opposition in Zilla Parishad, Upadhyaksha (Vice Chairperson) to be elected by the members of the Zilla Parishad from among its members. Besides, the Council will have nine other members five of whom will be elected by the members of the Zilla Parishad from among themselves. The other four members shall be officials, three of whom will be nominated by the State Government, the fourth member being the Additional Executive Officer of the Zilla Parishad is the ex-officio member-secretary of the Council. Even though the Council has not yet made its mark as an effective body, the importance of this institution cannot be underestimated.

**Gram Unnayan Samiti**

The provision of Gram Unnayan Samiti has been introduced very recently by the West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 2003. A Gram Sansad may constitute a Gram Unnayan Samiti having jurisdiction over its area. Gram Unnayan Samiti shall be responsible for ensuring active participation of people in implementation and equitable distribution of benefits of rural development programmes within its jurisdiction. It shall be accountable for its functions and decisions to the Gram Sansad. Gram Unnayan Samiti may also constitute such number of functional committees as may be required. The manner of constitution of Gram Unnayan Samiti along with its functional committees and the conduct of its function and responsibility shall be prescribed in the Rules framed by the State Government.

**Zilla Sansad**

The West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 2003 has made the provision of Zilla Sansad in the State Act. Every Zilla Parishad shall have a Zilla Sansad consisting of Pradhans of all Gram Panchayats, Sabhapatis, Sahakari Sabhapatis and Karmadhyakshas of all Panchayat Samitis and all members of Zilla Parishad. An half-yearly and an annual meeting of Zilla Sansad shall be held every year. The Zilla Sansad shall guide and advise the Zilla Parishad for all matters relating to development including preparation of annual plan and budget, implementation of development programmes, schemes or projects and for undertaking such activities for economic development and ensuring social justice as are undertaken by Zilla Parishad.

35
Block Sansad

The concept of Block Sansad has been introduced at the block level by the West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 2003. Every panchayat samiti shall have a Block Sansad consisting of all members of Gram Panchayats pertaining to the Block and all members of that Panchayat Samiti and hold a half-yearly and an annual meeting every year. The Block Sansad shall guide and advise the Panchayat Samiti for all matters relating to development including preparation of annual plan and budget, implementation of development programmes, schemes or projects and for undertaking such activities for economic development and ensuring social justice as are undertaken by Panchayat Samiti.

Institutional Issues

It is proposed to take the institutional issues of Panchayati Raj so as to include the ‘Principles of Subsidiary’ (that is any task that can be done at the lower level should not move to a higher level) through effective devolution of 3Fs (i.e. Functions, Functionaries and Finances); reservation of seats for the women, SCs and STs; Extension of Panchayati Raj in Scheduled Areas (PESA); PR in Union Territories and PR Jurisprudence; PR planning, Implementation and Rural Business Hubs; Annual Reports on State of panchayats including devolution index; Election and Audit of PRIs and Information Technology (IT) enabled E-governance and capacity building and training of PRIs.

For this purpose the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India organized Seven Round Table Conferences of Ministers-In-Charge of Panchayati Raj during July – December, 2004 in seven places in India in which all the state governments and union territories actively participated. A Compendium Resolution of the Seven Round Tables of Ministers-In-Charge of Panchayati Raj has been compiled by PRIA, New Delhi. Some of the important resolutions of the first Round Table conference held in Kolkata, 24-25 July, 2004 called for Effective Devolution of 3Fs and empowering of Gram Sabha. They stressed that a strong system of Gram Sabha is indispensable foundation of good governance through Panchayati Raj. The second Round Table Conference held in Mysore, 28-29 August, 2004 gave emphasis on planning, Implementation and Parallel Bodies. In the preparation of district plan it was resolved that priority should be given, first, to plans for the provisions of basic minimum needs; second to provision of services; third, to facilitating rural business Hubs; and fourth, to general economic development. Further resolved that entrusted schemes should be implemented by PRIs not by line departments, and Parallel Bodies should be established only where indispensable and invariably in consultation with and with the collaboration of the PRI at an appropriate level. The third Round Table Conference held in Raipur, 23-24
September, 2004 demonstrated the need for the acceptance of the provisions of PESA 1996, reservation for women, SCs and STs. The fourth Round Table Conference held in Chandigarh 07-08 October, 2004 made a proposal relating to the implementation of the provisions of the Constitutions relating to panchayat and Nagar Palikas in Union Territories. It also gave emphasis on the establishment of a body of jurisprudence relating to Panchayati Raj. The fifth Round Table Conference held in Srinagar, 28-29th October, 2004 informed about the preparation of Annual Administrative Reports on the State of the Panchayats, including preparation of a Devolution Index on the basis of self assessment subject to reassessment by the Planning Commission in India. Resolutions of sixth Round Table Conference held in Guwahati, 27-28 November, 2004 called for the matters relating to panchayat elections and audit of PRIs. Resolutions of the seventh Round Table Conference held in Jaipur, 17-19th December, 2004 called for the recognition of Information Technology (IT) enabled E-governance and capacity building and training of PRIs.40

Section-IV
General Observations

The object of the Panchayat Raj system in West Bengal is to create a broad base for democracy in the country by transferring powers from the Centre and the State through Districts and Blocks to the villagers and also to enable the village people to participate in democracy in a more effective way and thus providing training for future leadership development in the country. Just after assumption of power by the Left Front Government in 1977 the main emphasis was laid, through panchayat, on economic and political justice at the grassroot level so as to create an environment of social justice. Accordingly, the Left Front Government in West Bengal formulated a rural development policy for the welfare of the villagers. This policy is guided by the philosophy of what may be called redistribution with growth to ensure growth with minimal inequality and maximum social justice.

The policy has some broad objectives—Firstly, it aims at involving the people not only in the process of implementation of development programmes but also in the process of preparation and monitoring of development plans by building up decentralization structure at the grass root levels.

Secondly, it seeks to bring about changes in the composition of class forces in favour of the poor and working people by involving them in an organized manner in the process of development.

40 Summary Resolutions of Seven Round Tables, Round Table Conference of Minister in-charge of Panchayati Raj organised by Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, July to December, 2004 compiled by PRIA, New Delhi.
Thirdly, it attempts to raise class-consciousness of people through a radical change in political process and also in development. The positive pay-off of the equity or distributive mode evidently points at social change.  

Two important objectives have characterized the rural development process in West Bengal:

i) To sensitize the bureaucracy as far as possible towards social justice and equity.

ii) To achieve horizontal mobilization of the masses.

The three-tier Panchayati Raj system constitutes the foundation on which the entire edifice of rural development in West Bengal stands. The Gram Panchayats which function at the grass root level and are in direct touch with the people, carry out the responsibility of implementing various development programmes, projects and schemes at the village level in terms of identification of beneficiaries, location of project sites, etc. They are informally, though significantly, associated with peasant organizations. The Panchayat Samitis and Zilla Parishads are responsible for the adoption and implementation of schemes and measures for the development of agriculture, cottage industry, water supply, irrigation, execution of any function assigned by the State Government and coordination and implementation of development plans, schemes, projects and programmes relating to development policy of the State Government at the block and district levels respectively and through various Standing Committees.

The core of rural development policy is land reforms. The experience of West Bengal under the panchayat system stands in sharp contrast with that of other states and together with land reforms, it has been credited for playing an important role in the impressive economic turnaround of the state since the mid-1980s. The Government lays stress on two aspects of land reforms viz, recording of names of sharecroppers and redistribution of ceiling surplus lands among the landless. Moreover, it is the policy of government to extend institutional credit cover to the land reforms beneficiaries.

The panchayat and peasant organizations play the most effective roles in implementing these programmes in West Bengal. In fact, West Bengal as Baruah (1990) argues, “provides one of the rare instances of land reforms programmes initiated by radical rural political mobilization with significant participation by the agrarian undercast”.

---

41 Mishra S.K. (1991); An Alternative Approach to Development: Land Reforms and Panchayats; Department of Information and Cultural Affairs, Government of West Bengal, P-9.
42 Rawal V. and Madhura Swaminathan (1998); Changing Trajectories: Agricultural Growth in West Bengal, Economic and Political Weekly, October 3.
43 Baruah S. (1990); The end of the Road in Land Reforms: Limits to Redistribution in West Bengal, Development and change, vol. 21, p-122.
programme of recording of names of sharecroppers is popularly known as the ‘Operation Barga’. The Gram Panchayats are supposed to play the most crucial role in the Operation Barga programme.

The Operation Barga programme was implemented through two innovative strategies:

1. There were legal changes supportive of a sharecropper’s claim. The eviction of sharecroppers for the ostensible purpose of self-cultivation was made more difficult by defining self-cultivation more rigorously to mean participation by the land owners and the person’s family as manual labour related to cultivation.

2. The Left-Front utilized the mobilization of the rural poor in this task. The strategy was to rely on group action on the part of the beneficiaries to enable them to overcome the fear psychosis by creating a mutual support system. This was done through what is popularly known as ‘Evening Camps’ organized by the CPI(M)’s peasant wing, Krishak Sabha.

Land redistribution has affected more than 21% of the rural families and 8% of the total cultivated area in the State. According to the NSS data (48th round) 70% of the agricultural land in West Bengal is in the hands of small and marginal farmers.

In order to make land reforms measures effective it is essential to support these measures with the provisions of non-land inputs, such as irrigation, agricultural implements, manure and fertilizers and infrastructure facilities particularly credit and marketing. Otherwise the beneficiaries would be left to the mercy of the market. In the provision of all these non-land inputs there is again the question of choice of technology. In West Bengal this has been done keeping in view the interest of the poor farmers. The working farmers are endowed with labour power and there is in rural areas often a relative abundance of local resources. The socially appropriate choice of technology regarding the non-land inputs in this alternative approach should therefore be one which should be modern and at the same time make efficient and improved use of labour and local resources. Accordingly, the State Government planned to extend minor irrigation facilities, which have been decentralized through Panchayats. Actually, it has created among the farmers and cultivators a sense of self-confidence and dignity.

There are several plans and programmes, which are basically meant for the economic development of rural masses. The poverty alleviation programmes are implemented now through the panchayats and the success or failure of these programmes in achieving the desired target depends on how successfully these programmes are implemented at the grass root levels. Gram panchayats are now playing an important role in the planning and execution of these poverty alleviation programmes. Through successful operation of these programmes
like JRY, EAS, IRDP, TRYSEM, MWS etc., the rural poor have the largest opportunity to be benefited. In order to make more qualitative improvement in the programme, attention should be given in few projects in any particular year with more emphasis on long-term assets durability.

Literacy programmes have given the Left-Front Government in West Bengal, a great opportunity to mobilize the poor, and raise their political consciousness. Local educated youths are motivated to take part in rural literacy campaign. The objective of literacy programme implemented through the panchayat is to popularize a slogan, “Education brings about consciousness, consciousness bring about revolution and revolution brings about complete emancipation of the rural masses.” Thus literacy can play a very important role in raising the political consciousness of the people.  

The most significant feature of the Left-Front mass mobilization strategy is the horizontal mobilization of the masses by politicized agencies. The panchayats and mass peasant organization are utilized for political mobilization of the masses. The congress party, which the Left-Front had defeated in 1977, mobilized the masses vertically. The landlords, rich and middle peasants, moneylenders and dealers in food grains had acted as instrument of mobilization. Heavy reliance on them led to dependence on a selected number of individuals for distributing favours to the masses on behalf of the party. The strategy thus, overruled the role of the local institution and thus the general people became alienated. One need not necessarily have to be Marxist to realize the antagonistic interest of the rural gentry on the one hand and the rural poor—the small and marginal farmers, landless tenant, agricultural labourers and village craftsmen on the other.

The above analysis has repeatedly stressed that the Left-Front Government has broken new grounds in mobilizing the rural poor through panchayat and peasant organizations for the implementation of rural development programmes. One may argue that politicization of development through mass mobilization, unless carefully monitored has the possibility of the means (political mobilization of the masses) overshadowing the ends (rural development). The Left Front seems to have taken care of this negative aspect of politicization of development. West Bengal has come to occupy the first position in India in terms of growth of food grains production through its adoption of ‘operation barga’. Number of poor as well as the extent of poverty or poverty gap has been reduced to a minimum. Radical mobilization

has resulted in reduction of the influence of the rural rich in spheres of rural life. It has helped in removing a sense of alienation from the minds of the villagers.\footnote{Ibid pp 52-53.}

The institutional development of panchayats in terms of the creation of new bodies such as the Gram Sabha and the Gram Sansad is developing among the poor a sense of participation in matters pertaining to their day-to-day life apart from enhancing the transparency in the functioning of the panchayat. The Left-Front, despite its skills of popular mobilization as Dreze and Sen feel, has not been able to achieve a real transformation in the fields of education and health which have a significant bearing on the living condition of the rural poor. Panchayat cannot be blamed for the poor achievement on the health and education fronts. In fact, the functional domain of panchayat does not extend to these areas.\footnote{Dreze J. and Sen A.K. (1995); India : Economic Development Social opportunity, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, pp 56-57.}

It is worthwhile to mention that the Left-Front Government has taken some initiative to expand the scope and power of the village constituency meetings in terms of greater participation of women and socially backward classes. It is also observed that the agricultural growth, the breaking down of the power of the landlord moneylender class, and empowerment of panchayat have all contributed to the creation of new rural middle class that is impatient with the pace of progress and is prone to anti-incumbent voting. For the purpose of development planning, different sectors have been identified viz. education, health, women’s developments, agriculture, irrigation, animal husbandry, fishery, cottage and small-scale industry trade and infrastructure. The village constituency meetings would be organized after adequate campaign, ensuring large-scale participation of all categories of electorates particularly women and those belonging to the lower caste (SCs and STs) to achieve the desirable result in terms of the parameters mentioned above.

From the foregoing we find that none of the study on Gram Panchayat make any reference to the involvement of grass root institutions like PRIs in rural development particularly in alleviating rural poverty. Herein lies the importance of our research in exploring a correlation between PRIs and rural development. Studies made on the subject so far have only made some passing remarks neglecting thereby the active presence of the PRIs in rural development. How does a gram panchayat play its part in identifying lakhs of acres of land to be vested by the Government and redistribute the same among the rural landless agricultural labourers through a package of land reforms which was undertaken by firstly the United Front Government in 1967 and then followed by the Left Front Government since 1977. We are to show also an intimate relation between the successful programme of land reforms under the guidance of PRIs and rural development. In the following part of this chapter we have a close look at the launching of land reforms as a movement in the state of West Bengal since 1967.
Part – B

Land Reforms

"Land will be owned by the state. I presume the reins of the government will be in the hands of those who have faith in this ideal. A majority of Zaminders will give up their land willingly, those who do not do so will have to do so under legislation."

— Gandhiji


Land reforms programme has many connotations. It is a process by which rights of ownership and/or use of land are redistributed amongst the landless and the near landless classes who are actually the tillers of land. In a wider sense, it is regarded as an integrated programme, which aims to eliminate the obstacles to economic and social development by a rational and equitable restructuring of land tenure system including the pattern of landholdings and ownership. This programme helps to provide the beneficiaries a sense of participation in rural development by providing security of tenure and regulation of rent, etc.

In an agrarian society, land is considered as the main form of wealth and a major source of social, economic and political power. The successful implementation of land reforms programme results in redistribution of not only land to the tillers but also endowment of social status, prestige and power to them. A.K. Bagchi remarks, “Land reform that disallows ownership of land by anybody who does not cultivate it (except for a group who are disabled by old age, physical infirmity or extreme youth) and puts a ceiling on the amount of land a person can own or operate, and that seeks to increase the bargaining power of all landless workers in the countryside by giving them homestead land, can lead to higher rates of agricultural and economic growth.”

In a rural society land is a symbol of dignity and social status. Therefore as soon as a person is given a piece of land he not only moves higher in the socio-economic echelon but also acquires a feeling and empowerment and articulation. He gradually takes part in local decision-making process. Therefore in the context of development, land reforms programme has more than a mere economic rationale.

Panchayat and Land Reforms in West Bengal

Reform of land relations was one of the earliest and most consistent aspects of the state government policy for the first two decades after the Left Front government came to power in West Bengal in 1977. After a decade of political violence and upheavals the Left Front, a combine of leftist parties led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) called CPI (M), came to power on the promise of vigorous agrarian and political reforms.

48 Bagchi, Amiya Kumar (2002); Agrarian Transformation and Human Development: Instrumental and consecutive links, in agrarian studies edited by V.K. Ramechandra and Madhura Swaminathan, Tulika Publisher, New Delhi p-155.
Its agrarian reforms programme involves forceful implementation of existing tenancy laws that give security of tenure and a legally stipulated minimum cropshare to tenants and distributing land holdings above the permissible limits from big land owners to small and marginal farmers as well as the landless rural poor. In terms of its achievements in agrarian structure, there is a progressive change during the regime of Left Front government. Its political reforms programme aims at the empowerment of the three-tier Panchayat system in West Bengal. Actually, it reflects part of a more general vision of the ruling party and governing coalition in the state, that changes in property relations are essential for social and economic changes in progressive directions, for greater empowerment of poor and marginal peasants and landless agricultural labourers, and indeed for meaningful democracy at the grass root levels. In addition, therefore, there is a strong association between the process of decentralization and the handing of greater power to the panchayats. West Bengal is a pioneering state in this matter where the Left Front government organizes effective functioning of Panchayats and regular elections to the panchayats every five years are going on.

These involve a system of democratic environment at which all agencies are ready to strengthen local self-government. In West Bengal, land reforms programme has become successful mainly on two grounds:

i) the process of registration of tenants, and

ii) the identification of ceiling surplus and ‘benami’ land for redistribution among the target groups.

The Panchayats have assisted in better identification of beneficiaries and have contributed to the efficiency of the subsequent support programme to the beneficiaries in term of credit and minikits. Not only, that they have also coordinated programmes such as IRDP, JRY, EAS, and helped to augment rural incomes. Similarly, the land reforms, in turn, have enabled the panchayat to have a more democratic character. The economic and social composition of the elected panchayat members clearly indicates the growing significance of small and marginal peasants along with landless agricultural workers.

West Bengal inherited very complex production relations, which were widely recognized to be the hindrance to development of agricultural output until the end of the 1970s. These relations were historically the result of the ‘Permanent settlement’ system adopted by the British in Bengal. This permanent settlement system was able to create prominently a class of parasitic, non-cultivating landlords who expropriated rent from the actual tillers. Specifically, the system was significantly associated with a strong prevalence of
sub-infeudation, with many layers of intermediaries between the actual cultivator and the 'landlord' all of whom had some claims upon the produce of the land.

Thus, the system of sharecropping or 'bargadari' was evolved under which the 'bargadar' (i.e. sharecropper) cultivated the lands of absentee landlords and got a share of the crop as income, leading to a situation of threat of eviction and other extra economic pressure. With the simple passage of time, there was a shift of direct power from 'Zamindar' to 'Jotedars' who were the local controller of the labour of the peasantry.\(^{50}\)

This system continued even after independence, when the period of permanent settlement was over. The actual cultivators failed to make themselves viable for sharecropping due to their serious indebtedness and impoverishment. The consequence was a large and growing class of poor landless labourers.

Both production and distribution were adversely affected by the existing state of land relations. The land tenure system served as a constraint to agricultural production. It also affected incomes and access to productive employment for the landless agricultural labourers. This system, thus, created unequal access to social and political power as well. Until the mid-1960s very little has done in terms of land reforms in the state. The small measures, which were undertaken related mostly to the abolition of intermediary interest and a small quantum of vesting of surplus land above the permissible limits. There was a growing political awareness of the need to incorporate tenants' rights into land reforms. The regular eviction of bargadar and the threat of it seriously affected the prospect of capital investment and technological progress in cultivation on sharecropped or barga land.\(^{51}\)

In the post 1977 era when the Left Front government came to occupy power, there was a dramatic change in the scenario of land reforms programme in West Bengal. Land reforms should not be viewed as only the result of administrative authorization. Rather, they could be represented as the outcome of a long period of struggle by peasantry and social and political mobilization of landless agricultural labourers of the countryside. This created the political pressure for land reforms and that was one of the most important reasons for the electoral victory of the Left Front government in 1977. Thus, an important factor in the ability of the state government to implement such reforms relatively at a higher rate and with some degree of success was the fact that such reforms had become part of the dominant social conscientious of the time, notwithstanding opposition from landed elements.

\(^{50}\) West Bengal Human Development Report 2004, Development and Planning Department, Government of West Bengal, p-27.

\(^{51}\) Ibid, p-28.
These reforms took shape mainly in the form of redistribution of vested land and securing the tenancy right, which already existed in law, through a programme of universal registration of tenants called 'Operation Barga'. The West Bengal Landholding Revenue Act, 1979 and the Revenue Rules, 1980, introduced by the Left Front government, provided for key changes in the sharecropping system. These were in addition to two other means of land reforms that were undertaken in most other parts of India including West Bengal, namely, imposition of ceiling on large landholdings and the reduction of sub-infeudation through the abolition of intermediaries between the cultivator and the landlord. The radical reforms initiated by the Left Front government were supported by administrative measures as well as extension of supportive facilities. The later included the supply of institutional credit, supply of modern inputs like High Yielding Variety (HYV) seeds, chemical fertilizers and irrigation facilities to the beneficiaries of the programmes.  

According to government source, land reforms in West Bengal have very clear economic, social and political objectives. These are:

i) The most obvious aim is to weaken the domination of landlords in rural West Bengal, and therefore contribute to the redistribution of assets and wealth. This is why the focus is both on providing lands to the landless peasants as well as some security of tenure to sharecroppers.

ii) The second aim is to unleash productive forces, which were constrained by the prevailing pattern of land relations.

iii) The next purpose is to create a market in rural areas by increasing purchasing power among the peasantry, which, in turn, is expected to lead the development of rural industries, trade, commerce and other services.

iv) It is believed that such land reforms will provide the basic conditions for the expansion of literacy, education and public health.

v) Finally, the aim is to empower the weaker section of the society including Dalits and women, and shift the balance of class forces in the state in favour of working people generally.

---


We find that land reforms in West Bengal have received a decisive thrust through the newly introduced system ‘Operation Barga’ after the Left Front government came to power in 1977. A structured programme was formulated and taken up for implementation. The agrarian policy of the then new government has been categorized first as structural and secondly developmental. Structural reforms form part and parcel of land reforms programme whose main components are identification and vesting of ceiling surplus lands and distribution of such land to eligible persons. The emergence of left dominated panchayats after the panchayat election in 1978 added a new dimension to West Bengal’s land reforms. The major change in tenant relations involves the active recording or registration of sharecroppers who have cultivated the same piece of land for number of years. This registration with the Department of Land Revenue gives them permanent and inheritable rights to cultivate the land. The ‘Operation Barga’ principle in West Bengal is guided by permanent improvements on land as well as by more modern technology with a view to attaining a balanced and meaningful livelihood status among the poor and marginal households in the countryside. In addition, some recognized land title is taken as a precondition for access to formal agricultural credit and here certain category of rural people i.e. agricultural labourers, artisans, rural craftsmen, fishermen, etc. are benefited.

The Panchayat institutions came to associate themselves in implementing land reforms programme in a variety of ways:

1. These institutions started feeding the implementing agency i.e. the Revenue Officials with requisite information regarding the families who possess surplus land over and above the permissible limits. This helped them in detection of ceiling surplus land.

2. These institutions are closely associated with the distribution process through joint field inquiries, identification of prospective beneficiaries, etc.

3. The standing committee on Forest and Land Reforms of the Panchayat Samity as the Block Level Land Reforms Advisory Committee is empowered to advise the officers to sanction allotment and issue document of title. Though the panchayat system is statutorily linked to land reforms only through the Block Level and Reforms Advisory committee, its involvement in the land reform efforts is nearly total.

The registration under ‘Operation Barga’ working through the panchayat enabled the tenants to subsidized institutional credit and so many other facilities in the form of cheaper inputs like seeds, fertilizers, water supply, etc in the early 1980s. The point of departure from
earlier trends is that the legislation is sought to be implemented by the active participation of the bureaucracy, rural mass organizations and also the panchayats. The peasant organizations and local left front worker play a major role in campaigning for an implementation of the programme. In this arena, panchayats continue to play an active role in assisting the registration process after getting information from the government officials about the necessity to register the tenants through group meetings.

It is worthwhile to mention that the programme of ‘Operation Barga’ did not seek to give the ‘bargadar’ any benefit other than those already available in the existing law. The entire exercise of recording was also done within the four corners of the law. The cornerstone of the programme was “to develop group action among the potential beneficiaries to enable them to overcome the fear psychosis by a mutual support school”. 54

Registration of bargadars that is recording their names in the Revenue Record of rights forms an important component of the West Bengal land reforms package. Bargadars who constitute a sizable percentage of West Bengal rural population, are now conscious about the rights and privilege. Although operation barga has become much more popular in the state since 1977 its success differs in various districts in accordance with the power of the peasant organizations.

Documentation of the right of cultivation of the bargadars serves a three-fold objectives:

i) to strengthen their cultivating right in the eye of law;

ii) to help them in securing benefits under different developmental programmes; and

iii) to generate a sense of security of tenure i.e. social security in the minds of the tenants.

The programme of land reforms in West Bengal was taken up for implementation towards the end of 1978. With gradual mobilization of administrative resources and increasing participation of the panchayat and people’s group the rate of recording increased at an accelerated pace. However, the pace of the programme tapered off in the mid-1980s and since then the rate of additional registration has been negligible upto 2001. The progress of recording of bargadars from 1978 to 2001 is shown in Table 2.3 below:

54 Bandopadhyay, D (1980); Land Reforms in West Bengal, Government of West Bengal, Calcutta, p-21.
Table 2.3
Progress of Recording of Bargadars (1978 to 2001)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of bargadars recorded</td>
<td>53209</td>
<td>221121</td>
<td>230565</td>
<td>125855</td>
<td>80703</td>
<td>64739</td>
<td>40214</td>
<td>26051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of bargadars recorded</td>
<td>24147</td>
<td>17454</td>
<td>15654</td>
<td>10423</td>
<td>24634</td>
<td>11726</td>
<td>10012</td>
<td>8899</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of bargadars recorded</td>
<td>2434</td>
<td>3919</td>
<td>6850</td>
<td>7127</td>
<td>4130</td>
<td>3990</td>
<td>4902</td>
<td>3108</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The matter is also clarified in Figure 2F below:

Figure 2F
Progress of Recording of Bargadars (1978 to 2001)

There are several factors behind the evident tapering off of tenant registration. To start with, there is the obvious point that at least for a significant period of time, such registration involves a once-off activity, since bargadars once recorded, will benefit from the advantages of continued tenure and reduced possibility of eviction and therefore there is likely to be reduced mobility of land and consequently there would be fewer new contracts to record. Thus in 2003, according to state government estimates, 86% of bargadars in West Bengal had been recorded. If this estimate is correct, then obviously the rate of new registration would come down.
There is substantial variation across districts in terms of the total number of tenants officially recorded over this entire period. This is evident from Table-2.4, which shows the number of bargadars recorded in each district by 2000. The column giving this as a percentage of total number of cultivators is given for the purpose of comparison. However, it must be noted that this is not fully indicative, since cultivators can include a significant proportion of owner cultivators, and the data refers to individuals rather than cultivating households.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Number of bargadars recorded by 2000</th>
<th>Per cent of total cultivators in 2001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Darjeeling</td>
<td>12879</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jalpaiguri</td>
<td>61279</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koch Behar</td>
<td>84431</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinajpur</td>
<td>103717</td>
<td>22.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malda</td>
<td>81171</td>
<td>29.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murshidabad</td>
<td>84426</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birbhum</td>
<td>111654</td>
<td>43.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bardhaman</td>
<td>131691</td>
<td>38.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadia</td>
<td>64022</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North 24 Parganas</td>
<td>73946</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hooghly</td>
<td>112996</td>
<td>25.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bankura</td>
<td>111654</td>
<td>25.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purulia</td>
<td>9071</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medinipur</td>
<td>292112</td>
<td>27.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howrah</td>
<td>42717</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South 24 Parganas</td>
<td>112939</td>
<td>31.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>West Bengal (Total)</strong></td>
<td><strong>1682193</strong></td>
<td><strong>30.3</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Economic Review, Government of West Bengal and Census of India, 2001*

The extent of registration as a proportion of total cultivators appears to have been exceptionally large in Howrah, Birbhum and Burdwan districts and also in South 24 Parganas. The proportion of cultivators registered is very small in Purulia district (less than
3%) but this is likely to be more reflective of the different pattern of land relations prevailing in dominantly tribal areas, with a greater prevalence of owner-cultivators among the peasantry. Similarly, Darjeeling, with a greater prevalence of populations and tea estate, may have had less tenant-based cultivation which could account for the lower proportion of registration, although as mentioned earlier, the degree of political and Panchayat involvement in barga registration has also been significant in explaining such differences. It is seen from our Table-2.4 that in totality the number of bargadars recorded in West Bengal between late 1977 and 2001 amounted to nearly one-third of the total cultivators (30.3%) in the state. This is surely an impressive performance.

**Land Redistribution**

In contrast to the programme of tenancy reform the process of land redistribution started much earlier in West Bengal and has continued even the most recent years. The pattern of land redistribution has been weighted in favour of scheduled castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) among the beneficiaries—the relatively backward classes. They constitute more than half of the pattadars in the state. Table-2.5 provides official data on the extent of SCs and STs among the beneficiaries of land reforms. Obviously, most pattadars are landless before they receive some land, but approximately one-third of pattadars has small piece of land, typically less than half an acre.

**Table-2.5**

*Distribution of Land Reforms Beneficiaries*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Per cent of total</th>
<th>Scheduled Castes</th>
<th>Scheduled Tribes</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pattadars</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>43.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bargadars</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>58.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Clearly, the land reforms are effective in terms of redressing certain social inequalities of castes. They also benefit minority groups such as Muslim peasant households who are among the poorest in rural West Bengal. However they are much less effective in terms of reducing gender discrimination.

The issue of ownerships or titles to assets is one, which is very significant for women in any society, who have tended to be denied rights to land ownership or control over other important assets. Land redistribution is potentially a very important instrument for redressing this imbalance, through the issue of single pattas in the name of women, or even joint pattas.
for women and their spouses. The land reform programme in West Bengal has been lacking in this regard. Joint pattas only started from the mid-1990s; prior to that, when most of the land was redistributed, pattas were granted only to the head of the household, who was typically male. The incidence of joint pattas and single pattas to women remained very low, and joint pattas account for less than 10% of the total, while pattas in the name of the women as single holder account for less than 6% of the total. Let us see the distribution of joint pattas and single pattas to women across the district of West Bengal. It is shown in Table-2.6.

Table-2.6
Distribution of Joint Pattas and Single Pattas to Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Joint</th>
<th>% of total</th>
<th>Single (female)</th>
<th>% of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Darjeeling</td>
<td>1360</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>3037</td>
<td>6.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jalpaiguri</td>
<td>6087</td>
<td>7.09</td>
<td>4851</td>
<td>5.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koch Behar</td>
<td>8764</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>2264</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uttar Dinajpur</td>
<td>14316</td>
<td>10.53</td>
<td>1105</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dakshin Dinajpur</td>
<td>3453</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>1148</td>
<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malda</td>
<td>8499</td>
<td>6.81</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murshidabad</td>
<td>10185</td>
<td>7.96</td>
<td>7075</td>
<td>5.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birbhum</td>
<td>6941</td>
<td>5.95</td>
<td>4005</td>
<td>3.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bardhaman</td>
<td>14565</td>
<td>8.07</td>
<td>5968</td>
<td>3.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadia</td>
<td>2356</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>5234</td>
<td>7.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North 24 Parganas</td>
<td>3797</td>
<td>4.96</td>
<td>5960</td>
<td>7.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hooghly</td>
<td>9448</td>
<td>16.97</td>
<td>3819</td>
<td>6.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bankura</td>
<td>26855</td>
<td>19.21</td>
<td>6619</td>
<td>4.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purulia</td>
<td>4006</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>3514</td>
<td>3.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medinipur</td>
<td>63800</td>
<td>16.08</td>
<td>30210</td>
<td>7.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howrah</td>
<td>3669</td>
<td>14.39</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South 24 Parganas</td>
<td>1778</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>39548</td>
<td>48.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>West Bengal (Total)</strong></td>
<td><strong>209855</strong></td>
<td><strong>9.7</strong></td>
<td><strong>128593</strong></td>
<td><strong>5.94</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Chakraborti et al (2003); Beneficiaries of Land Reforms: The West Bengal Scenario, SIPRD, Kalyani.

From Table-2.6 we find that there has not been uniform pattern in the distribution of pattas across districts. In some districts such as Hooghly, Bankura, Midnapore and Howrah, joint pattas have been more prevalent, while South-24 Parganas shows an impressive extent of allocation of single pattas to women holders (48.93%). Once again it is clear that the district-wise variation would have been strongly influenced by the degree of gender awareness and concern of local panchayat and peasant organizations, as well as the local level bureaucracy.
In aggregate we see that joint Pattadars are approximately 10% while single pattas to women holders are nearly 6%. The programme of distribution and recording of bargadars, which constitute the case of West Bengal's land reforms package what is now a matter of concern, is the sustainability of these benefits.

**Effects of Land Reforms**

There are many effects of land reforms in West Bengal. These are either economic or social or political. These are:

i) The most important one is that the economic, social and political domination of landlords in rural West Bengal has declined, and the oppression by landed grounds is no longer prevalent in the state.

ii) The most significant effect of land reforms is found in the rapid development of productive force leading to a dramatic expansion of agricultural output and making West Bengal the most agriculturally dynamic state in India in the last two decades of the century. Such agricultural development leads to a systematic development of minor irrigation, leading further to efficient use of land and consequent increase in yields.

iii) The expected indirect effect of such rapid agricultural growth is found in the form of substantial growth of small scale unorganized sector manufacturing and service activities in rural areas of West Bengal over 1990s.

iv) The next important effect of land reforms can be seen in terms of improving the basic conditions for expansion of literacy, education and health.

v) In terms of social and political empowerment, the land reforms certainly help to improve the class position of the rural poor in general.

In a speech K.R. Narayanan, the former President of India, says “we must resolve to complete the unfinished task of land reforms that we have embarked upon years ago and empower the landless poor and small farmers who have not got any benefits from the Green Revolution. Much of the poverty and unrest in rural India—the class conflicts and economic violence—can be traced to gross injustice in the distribution of land and some kind of counter-revolution that is taking place holdings up the implementation of land reforms and snatching away of whatever benefits progressive legislations had bestowed upon the poor”.

---

The combined package of land reforms and institutional provision of inputs to the
tenant cultivators has ultimately led to a significant impact on the reduction of poverty from
the poor village society of West Bengal. Hence its success in reducing rural poverty and thus
raising the standard of living of the rural masses is largely, if not solely due to panchayats. It
is the credit of the West Bengal panchayat to implement such land reforms programmes with
a view to making breakthrough in development in agrarian society.

Mr. P.S. Appu while recommending the ‘Barga Operation’ type land reform adopted
by the Left Front Government in West Bengal in 1977, mentions “The emphasis should now
shift to the role of land reform in fostering agricultural growth and augmenting employment
opportunities. An improvement in the incomes of the rural poor is a matter of high priority
not just for altruistic reasons. Increasing incomes mean increased purchasing power. The
resulting spurt in the demand for goods of mass consumption will foster industrial growth.
And that could pave the way for the success of the new economic policy that depends on the
market as the engine of economic growth. We need certain minimal measures of land reform
to facilitate the growth of the Indian economy on the capitalist path of development that we
have now chosen”. 56 Dr. P.K. Agarwal reinforcing the view of the P.S. Appu mention
“According to protagonists of farmers, the fort built by liberalization and globalization is
made on sand. Unless purchasing power is given in the hands of the teeming millions
liberalization cannot sustain. Land reform provides on area in which no financial investment
is required. It certainly requires a government with strong political will which can with stand
initial upheavals or shocks before achieving the goal of egalitarian society through stable
instrumentality of land reforms”. 57

57 Agarwal P.K. (2000); Issues in Land Reforms, RGICS working papers series no. – 18, preface.
Part-C
People’s Participation

“A nation’s progress depends upon how its people think. It is thoughts, which are transformed into actions. India has to think as a nation of a billion people. Let the young minds blossom—full of thoughts, the thoughts of prosperity”.

A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, The Hon’ble President of India
In the book: India 2020, A vision of the new Millennium
Written by himself with Y.S. Rajan, Co-author,
Penguin books, New Delhi, 1998, p-305

Any administrative innovation to bring about deliberate change in Panchayati Raj Institutions for better results cannot be effective unless devolution of power from the centre to the states, states to districts and districts to Panchayat units is rationalized and exercised in the true sense. Any talk of power to the people becomes meaningless unless the people at the grass root level of the society exercise power and political awareness is channelized in the right direction. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act aims at reducing political and bureaucratic interference in rural development programmes. The people’s participation can be viewed as an important matter to achieve the success of rural development programme. It has been felt that adequate and effective participation of people in Rural Development Programme is possible only when they are actually involved in formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation stages of the programme at the local level. People’s participation is extended because only the people in the villages know their own problems and needs better than the Government Officials working at the block, district and state levels. However, lack of participation of people in the rural development programme is reported by many researchers in their studies and it is a matter of concern for rural development. People’s participation implies participation at all the stages of the programme viz. planning, formulation, implementation, decision-making, sharing of benefits of development, monitoring and evaluation. Bandopadhyay and Kamath (1984) in their studies define participation as “the direct involvement through representation of beneficiaries in decision-making, implementation of development programmes, monitoring and evaluation of the programme and sharing of the benefits of development”. 59

The main objectives of people’s participation are as follows:

i) Better planning and implementation of rural development programmes.

ii) Mobilization of local resources needed for rural development programmes.

iii) Empowering the poor people with provision of opportunities to play an effective role in rural development.

In the process of reorganization of the system of local government initiated by the Left Front Government from late 1977 onwards, West Bengal has created a history of participation of the common people through the process of decentralization. A system of democratic elections to local bodies at Anchal, Block and District level are subsequently being held every five years. Now fiscal resources of this state are handed over to the local bodies and the panchayats at various levels have been assigned a large and substantial range of responsibilities for the well being of the rural people. The composition of the panchayats has changed drastically and therefore, there has been substantial representation of the rural poor and of socially deprived groups as well as women in the elected bodies. As a result of that we notice a remarkable change in the power equation of the rural society and all these changes encourage the social and political empowerment of women and marginalized social groups.\(^61\)

Since decentralisation and people's participation in decision-making can cover a wide range of public activities, it is useful to divide the possibilities of decentralization into various categories.\(^62\)

i) Functional decentralization (in terms of administrative powers and responsibilities),

ii) Financial devolution of both resources and some powers of resource mobilization,

iii) Planning and developmental activities, and

iv) Other potential responsibilities, which can be placed upon local government bodies, such as mobilization for particular purpose.

All decisions should be taken at lower levels and then should be implemented at these lower levels. At each and every stage there should be active participation of the people and people's representatives of the lower level should involve themselves in decision-making.

In the first phase after 1978, the newly elected panchayats were increasingly involved in the execution of land reforms. Panchayats have taken the initiative in identifying excess land and 'Benami' land holdings and after then these are vested and distributed among those recipient who are either landless or marginal ones. The Panchayats are also involved in

---

\(^61\) West Bengal Human Development Report (2004), Development and Planning Department, Government of West Bengal, p-45.

\(^62\) Ibid p. 45-46.
arrangements for the provision of institutional credit for the beneficiaries of vested land and for bargadars. The positive effect of the involvement of the panchayats on the land reforms themselves has already been explained more elaborately in the previous section of this chapter.63

Through the panchayat election of 1978, a new leadership has been established in our local rural bodies, with not only particular party affiliation but also from less privileged socio-economic background. Village elite class, landlords and moneylenders have lost their dominance over the newly elected local bodies. This is elite decapture where the emerging people’s leadership has acted as a countervailing force against the vested interest and centrality of exploitation, corruption and bad governance. This has, therefore, enabled the people to develop its own agency and to free transition from patron-client relationship. The occupational composition of the members shows a very significant increase in the proportion of landless and poor peasants, who constitute 43% of the elected members. Table-2.7 substantiates this picture.

### Table 2.7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>1978-83</th>
<th>1983-88</th>
<th>1988-93</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Landless agricultural workers</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bargadars</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landless agri. Pop (1+2)</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>28.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultivators below 3 acres</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landless &amp; marginal peasants (1-3)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>30.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultivators 2-5 acres</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landless &amp; small peasants (1-4)</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>58.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultivators 5-8 acres</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultivators 8-10 acres</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>28.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultivators above 10 acres</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total owner cultivators (3 to 7)</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>51.7</td>
<td>58.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non agricultural workers</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctors</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopowners</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total non agricultural (8 to 14)</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.00</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.00</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.00</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table-2.7 presents the occupational distribution of panchayat members between 1978 and 1988. It is observed that the new panchayats of West Bengal represent a brake from the

---

past political patterns in India. The panchayats in West Bengal is now free from domination by landlords and rich peasants. By 1988, 58% of panchayat members are poor peasants or agricultural labourers. The landed gentry and moneylenders in sharp contrast to the earlier picture of panchayat dominate this—as 70% or more of them are estimated to be from such sections.

People actively participate in administrative as well as functional decentralization of the Panchayati Raj system. Panchayats are given a range of fairly serious responsibilities and tasks and the solution of the local problem comes out of people’s participation in the process. Panchayats participate in relief work and general people come forward and help the panchayats at the time of distress and natural calamities. Panchayats are also entrusted with the management of rural employment programme, like Food For Work (FFW), Jawahar Rojgar Yojana (JRY), Pradhan Mantri Sarak Rojgar Yoyana (PMSR), Training of Rural Youth for Self Employment (TRYSEM) as well as various other schemes and projects in the rural area. All other functions like rural reconstruction programme, rural water supply, rural housing scheme, distribution of mini-kits for agriculture, programme of reconstruction of school building, social overhead capital etc. are now performed by the panchayats with active participation of the general people. Power given to the local bureaucracy has been reduced and there has been an increasing relative importance given to the elected representative of the three-tier panchayat. Locally accountable people’s representatives are now performing their duties in the process of management of all rural developmental activities.64

Indeed one of the interesting features of the West Bengal’s experience is that the institutions of elected local governments have been used not simply to participate in but to actively further various initiatives and programmes of the state government. Without active participation of the general people, panchayats cannot perform their duties and responsibilities properly. Panchayat members are required to be concerned with the management of the following activities:65

i) Forestry management and land reclamation.
ii) Improvement in land use patterns and farming techniques.
iii) Public health, community disease prevention, public health campaigns.
iv) Rural diversification through fishing, poultry farming etc.

64 Pal, Mahi (2003); Gap Between Needs and Resources of Panchayats in India, Mittal Publication, New Delhi, pp 39-41.
65 Panchayat Parichalana Prasange Nirdeshika, 1994, West Bengal State Committee, CPI (M).
v) Universalization of primary and elementary education and thus encouraging literacy campaigns.

vi) Monitoring Poverty Alleviation Programmes (PAPs),

vii) Organising and repairing rural roads, the cleaning of water tanks and ponds.

viii) to encourage decentralized planning with a view to raise resources for development and improvement in community infrastructure.

ix) Motivating the rural poor towards development.

All these activities can be carried out only through the participation of local working people in the formal panchayat system. In addition, panchayats have to hold regular meetings, not only of their own membership but also of the Gram Sabhas and Gram Sansads for periodic ratification and support for their activities. The most recent version of the ruling party directives for panchayat members contains a more realistic listing of priorities in terms of activities, with health and sanitation, education, water resources management and women’s empowerment being at the top of the agenda. In some cases, the functions of the panchayats are restricted and therefore panchayat bodies do not have administrative or functional control over many of the social sector delivery institutions such as in health and education. Panchayats may only supervise and monitor the Shishu Shikha Kendras (SSKs) and Primary Health Centers (PHCs). There are the fields where some administrative rules continue to limit the capacity and accountability of panchayats to local communities.66

The structure of planning machinery, in which the common people’s participation is a must, can be presented in a tabular form (Table-2.8).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Planning Body</th>
<th>Plan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>State Government</td>
<td>State Planning Board</td>
<td>Annual and Five Year State Plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>Zilla Parishad</td>
<td>District Planning &amp; Coordination Committee (DPCC) and District Planning Committee (DPC)</td>
<td>Annual and Five Year District Plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block</td>
<td>Panchayat Samiti</td>
<td>Block Planning Committee (BPC)</td>
<td>Block Plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village</td>
<td>Gram Panchayat</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Basic Needs Statements</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table-2.8 Structure of Planning Machinery after 1985*


---

66 Panchayat Parichalana Prasange Nirdeshika, 2003, West Bengal State Committee, CPI (M)
A major objective of the decentralized planning process is to coordinate the departmental schemes implemented at the block and district levels and make them more responsive to local level problems. The autonomy of the local planning authorities has been primarily limited to choosing the location within the district, selection of beneficiaries, or a choice between various schemes sponsored by the departments. The basic idea behind Community Convergent Action (CCA) programme is to focus on the participation of local community in the process of planning, implementation action, and monitoring of services that have a bearing upon the well-being of the people, through the existing local government structures which would ensure people’s participation in these processes. Therefore, the programme has sought first of all to integrate the planning, delivery and monitoring of public services (especially in nutrition, education and sanitation) under the local panchayats and with active participation of the local community.67

In the process of development through people’s participation, it is desirable that the panchayat will encourage particular local initiatives for development. Some panchayats are innovatively using local resources and labour to initiate their own projects so that a situation of employment and income generation occurs. There are at least three aspects68 to a successful decentralized planning process:

a) Mobilization of the common people is crucial to a planning exercise. Mobilization is an integral part of a range of panchayat activities such as health and vaccination campaigns, ensuring school attendance and so on.

b) Organization or institution building should related to gram sansads and gram committees for their fruitful results. Community based institutions like cooperatives and women’s self-help groups are to be linked with the panchayat institution.

c) Planning is essential for sustainability of the projects. Resource generation for planned activities is impossible without planning.

Obviously, for each of these aspects there are some operational constraints. The first is financial - the most important one. The second is in the form of opposition of the bureaucracy to the process of decentralization. The next important point is that there must be support from all political parties, so that it does not appear as if the process is benefiting only one section of the society or just the ruling party. Therefore one is to conceive participation in its essential form. From our experiences we find that many a participation is only procedural

67 West Bengal Human Development Report 2004; Development and Planning Department, Government of West Bengal p. 55-56.
where people participate as spectators. To make participation substantive it requires informed participation; commitment to common cause and a countervailing spirit. 69

It is worthwhile to note that to make people’s participation more popular, social audit should be undertaken at the Gram Sabha and at the higher levels of PR system. This audit is an important complement to formal audit and for the sound and healthy development of Panchayati Raj. For this purpose, to provide institutional measures to fight against corruption and at the same time to prevent needless harassment the government should frame social audit policy. 70

*Figure-2G*  
*Expenditure Pattern of Panchayats, 1991-92*

![Expenditure Pattern of Panchayats, 1991-92](image)

*West Bengal Human Development Report-2004.*

Figure-2G above indicates that the dominant part of panchayat spending, nearly half (46.1%), has been directed towards agriculture and rural development through infrastructure provision. The second most important area of expenditure has been in social services (23.20%), that is, in areas of health and education, which have accounted for around a quarter of panchayat spending.

69 ibid – p58.

70 Roy, Dipen (2005); Finances and Accounting of Panchayati Raj Institutions in West Bengal, Avhijeet Publication, New Delhi, p-370.
Resource mobilization by panchayats is now an urgent issue. In terms of funds allocation between different districts we see a picture of regional inequalities. There are substantial inter district difference in per capita plan outlays without any logical basis. Table-2.9 shows such evidence of regional inequalities.

Table-2.9  
*Per Capita District Sector Plan Outlays, 1994 (in rupee terms)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Per capita district sector plan outlay, 1994</th>
<th>Human Development Index, 2001</th>
<th>Per capita DDP, 2000-01</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Darjeeling</td>
<td>321.38</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>18529.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jalpaiguri</td>
<td>255.1</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>16749.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooch Behar</td>
<td>324.72</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>13855.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinajpur</td>
<td>143.02</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>12473.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malda</td>
<td>197.88</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>14777.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murshidabad</td>
<td>147.51</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>13392.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birbhum</td>
<td>213.69</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>12791.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bardhaman</td>
<td>106.24</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>17537.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadia</td>
<td>55.43</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>16211.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North 24 Parganas</td>
<td>78.08</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>14768.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hooghly</td>
<td>113.42</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>16279.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bankura</td>
<td>187.64</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>15741.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purulia</td>
<td>213.82</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>13044.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medinipur</td>
<td>145.51</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>15526.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howrah</td>
<td>85.31</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>15591.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South 24 Parganas</td>
<td>170.2</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>13630.22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


From Table-2.9, it does appear that more backward districts have tended to receive larger per capita allocation, although the pattern is not uniform. To establish an equitable distribution of funds it is desirable that the poorer districts with low Human Development Index (HDI) should receive more than the average per capita district sector plan outlay but the picture is quite different. For example, Darjeeling has relatively high per capita income (Rs. 18530) and a high HDI (0.56) but it received the second highest plan outlay just after Cooch Behar in per capita terms in 1994 and onwards. At the other end of the spectrum Nadia received much less in per capita terms than most other districts, even though it is at least a middle income district and its HDI rank is also relatively low. Thus, we see such major anomalies in terms of distribution of funds in different districts.

The experience of West Bengal since 1977 has indicated that there has been a radical change in the political mobilization of the rural poor. The composition of the various tiers of decentralized government has shown a significant representation of occupational categories.
that are traditionally among the oppressed classes, such as agricultural labourers, marginal farmers, politically marginalized people, such as Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and women. Table-2.10 shows the occupational distribution of panchayat members elected in 1993 (percent of total members in 8 districts viz, Jalpaiguri, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur, Nadia, Howghly, Burdwan, South 24 Parganas and Birbhum)

Table-2.10

Occupational Distribution of Panchayat Members Elected in 1993
(% of total members in 8 districts)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Gram Panchayat (GP)</th>
<th>Panchayat Samiti (PS)</th>
<th>Zilla Parishad (ZP)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural Labour</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bargadar</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultivator</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Artisan</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fisheries</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal Husbandry</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shop Owners</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Business</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>32.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Services</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others/Social Service</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.00</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.00</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.00</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Charvak (2003), based on District Panchayat Profiles published by SIPRD.

It is evident from our Table-2.10 that panchayats in West Bengal have large representation from marginalized social groups which include agricultural labourers, bargadars, rural artisans and those engaged in fishing and livestock cultivation. At the Zilla Parishad level, not agricultural labourers or bargadars but teachers have the highest representation (32.5%) whereas in other two tiers i.e. at the level of Gram Panchayat and Panchayat Samity, marginalized social groups have the largest representation. Gram Panchayat representation from agricultural labourers, bargadars cultivators and rural artisans accounts for 43.3% (=13.5% + 3.3% + 23.9% + 2.6%) of the total. The corresponding figure for panchayat samity is 32.7% (= 7.7% + 2.8% + 20.1% + 2.1%). Thus, we see that the first two tiers i.e. Gram Panchayat and Panchayat Samity are dominated by the marginalized class and the third tier i.e. Zilla Parishad is dominated by service-holders who are to some extent politically and economically better-off.

Social composition of panchayat members elected in 1998 for 8 districts mentioned above is also presented in Table-2.11.
Table-2.11
Social Composition of Panchayat Members Elected in 1993
(% of total members in 8 districts)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gram Panchayats (GPs)</th>
<th>Panchayat Samitis (PSs)</th>
<th>Zilla Parishads (ZPs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SC women</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC men</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>24.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total SC</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>37.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ST women</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ST men</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total ST</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Women</td>
<td>35.5</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>36.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Charvak 2003, based on District Panchayat Profiles published by SIPRD.

From Table-2.11, we see that total representation including both men and women from SC categories accounts for 38.5% in case of Gram Panchayats (GPs), 39.8% and case of Panchayat Samities (PSs) and 37.8% in case of Zilla Parishads (ZPs). Again total representation from ST categories is 7.4% in case of GPs, 7.1% in case of PSs and 7.0% in case of ZPs. It is clear from the table that SCs and STs have higher representation in the first two tiers than the third one. As far as women representation from backward group is concerned we see that SC women representation is 14.4% for GPs, 14.5% for PSs and 13.3% for ZPs. The corresponding figures for ST women representation are 3.0%, 3.2 and 3.2 respectively. In general it certainly appears that the electoral process has provided sufficient representation at the local level government from politically marginalized social groups.

For promoting people’s participation in the activities of the Gram Panchayats, the Government of West Bengal amended the West Bengal Panchayat Act in 1994 to incorporate the concept of Gram Sansad in each Gram Panchayat. The Gram Sansad is to aid and advise the Gram Panchayat and ensure popular participation. It is the forum for people’s direct interaction with their Gram Panchayat. Consultation with the Gram Sansad for selection of schemes and beneficiaries is mandatory. Gram Sansad meetings are being held more or less regularly with increasing participation. The beneficiary committees are being set-up for ensuring active participation of the people in implementation, maintenance and equitable sharing of the benefits on the schemes. The detailed provision regarding the functioning and responsibilities of the Gram Sansad is narrated in section 16A of the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973. It is relevant here to quote from the Act.

“16A: (1) Every constituency of a Gram Panchayat under clause (a) of sub-section (3) of section 4 shall have a Gram Sansad consisting of persons whose names are included in the electoral roll of the West Bengal
Legislative Assembly for the time being in force pertaining to the area comprised in such constituency of the Gram Panchayat.

(2) Every Gram Panchayat shall hold within the local limits of the Gram an annual and a half-yearly meeting for each Gram Sansad at such place, on such date and at such hour as may be fixed by the Gram Panchayat:

Provided that the annual meeting of the Gram Sansad shall be held ordinarily in the month of May and the half-yearly meeting of the Gram Sansad shall be held ordinarily in the month of November every year:

Provided further that a Gram Panchayat may, in addition to the annual and the half-yearly meeting, hold extraordinary meeting of a Gram Sansad at any time if the situation so warrants or if the State Government, by order, so directs and for the purpose of holding such extraordinary meeting, provisions of this section shall apply.

(1) The Gram Panchayat shall, at least seven days before the date of holding the meetings referred to in sub-section (2), give public notice of such meetings by beat of drums as widely as possible, announcing the agenda, place, date and hour of the meeting. A notice of such meeting shall also be hung up in the office of the Gram Panchayat.

(2) Every meeting of the Gram Sabha shall be presided over by the Pradhan and, in his absence, by the Upa-Pradhan and in the absence of both, the member or one of the members, as the case may be, elected from the constituency comprising the Gram Sabha or, in the absence of such member or members, any other member of the Gram Panchayat shall preside over the meeting:

Provided that when two members are elected from the constituency, the member senior in age shall have priority in presiding over the meeting

Provided further that every member elected from the constituency shall attend each meeting of the Gram Sansad.

(4A) One-tenth of the total number of members shall form a quorum for a meeting of a Gram Sansad:

Provided that if there is no quorum available in such meeting, the meeting shall be adjourned to be held at the same place and hour on the seventh day after the date of such meeting in the manner as may be prescribed.

(3) The attendance of the members of the Gram Sabha in the annual and the half-yearly meeting and the proceedings of such meetings shall be recorded by such officer or employee of the Gram Panchayat, or, in the absence of the officers and employees of the Gram Panchayat, by such member of the Gram Panchayat as may be authorized by the presiding member in this behalf. Such proceedings shall be read out before the meeting is concluded and the presiding member shall then sign it.
(d) A Gram Sansad shall guide and advise the Gram Panchayat in regard to the schemes for economic development and social justice undertaken or proposed to be undertaken in its area and may, without prejudice to the generality of such guidance and advice, -

(a) identify, or lay down principles for identification of, the schemes which are required to be taken on priority basis for economic development of the village,

(b) identify, or lay down principles for identification of, the beneficiaries for various poverty alleviation programmes,

(c) constitute a Gram Unnayan Samiti with such number of functional committees as may be required, in such manner as may be prescribed, having jurisdiction over the area of the Gram Sansad for ensuring active participation of the people in implementation, maintenance and equitable distribution of benefits with respect to such subjects, as may be prescribed:

Provided that the Gram Unnayan Samity shall be accountable for its functions and decisions, to the Gram Sansad and the Gram Sansad shall exercise its power and authority in this behalf in such manner, as may be prescribed;

(d) Mobilize mass participation for community welfare programmes and programmes for adult education, family welfare and child welfare.

(e) Promote solidarity and harmony among all sections of the people irrespective of religion, faith, caste, creed or race,

(f) Record its objection to any action of the Pradhan or any other member of the Gram Panchayat for failure to implement any development scheme properly or without active participation of the people of that area”.

There is another people's forum known as Gram Sabha. The area of a Gram Panchayat is coterminous with the Gram Sabha. The meeting is held once in a year (in the month of December). The provisions regarding the functioning and responsibilities of the Gram Sabha is laid down in Section. 16B of the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973. It is relevant here to quote from the Act.

“16B. (1) Every Gram shall have a Gram Sabha consisting of persons registered in the electoral roll pertaining to the area of the Gram.

(2) Every Gram Panchayat shall hold within the local limits of the Gram an annual meeting, ordinarily in the month of December every year, of the Gram Sabha after completion of the half-yearly meeting of the Gram Sansads.

(3) One-twentieth of the total number of members shall form a quorum for a meeting of a Gram Sabha

71 The West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973 (Amended in 1994 & 2003), Law Department; Govt. of West Bengal, 2004. PP-25-27
Provided that no quorum shall be necessary for an adjourned meeting which shall be held at the same time and place after seven days.

(4) The Gram Panchayat shall, at least seven days before the date of holding the meeting referred to in sub-section (2), give public notice of such meetings by beat of drums as widely as possible, announcing the agenda, place, date and hour of the meeting. A notice of such meeting shall also be hung up in the office of the Gram Panchayat. Similar publicity shall also be given in the case of an adjourned meeting.

(5) A meeting of the Gram Sabha shall be presided over by the Pradhan of the concerned Gram Panchayat or, in his absence, by the Upa-Pradhan.

(6) All questions coming before a Gram Sabha shall be discussed and points raised there shall be referred to the Gram Panchayat for its consideration.

(7) The Gram Sabha shall deliberate upon, recommend for, and adopt resolution on, any matter referred to in sub-section (6) of section 16A and section 17A:

Provided that constitution of a Beneficiary Committee by a Gram Sansad under clause (c) of sub-section (6) of section 16A, shall not be questioned in any meeting of the Gram Sabha.

(8) The Gram Panchayat shall, on considering and collating the resolutions of the Gram Sansads, place before the Gram Sabha the resolutions of the Gram Sansads and the views of the Gram Panchayat together with its report on the actions taken and proposed to be taken on them for deliberation and recommendation by the Gram Sabha.

(9) The proceedings of the meetings of the Gram Sabha shall be recorded by such officer or employee of the Gram Panchayat or, in the absence of officers and employees of the Gram Panchayat, by such member of the Gram Panchayat as may be authorized by the presiding member in this behalf. Such proceedings shall be read out before the meeting is concluded and the presiding member shall then sign the proceedings.\(^\text{72}\)

The progress of the attendance in both the meeting of Gram Sansad and Gram Sabha in the districts of West Bengal over time is presented in Table-2.12.

From Table-2.12 we observe that the average attendance in Gram Sansad and Gram Sabha meetings in the districts of West Bengal is very poor. Time series data available shows a declining trend in the attendance of both Gram Sansad and Gram Sabha meetings. In West Bengal, we see that the average attendance in Gram Sansad meetings declined from 18% in 1996 to 12% in 2002. Again the average attendance in Gram Sabha meetings declined from 30% in 1996 to 5% in 2000.

Table-2.12
Average Attendance in Gram Sansad and Gram Sabha Meeting in Districts of W.B. (figures in%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>GRAM SANSAD</th>
<th></th>
<th>GRAM SABHA</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cooch Behar</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jalpaiguri</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darjeeling :</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i) Hill Area</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii) Siliguri M.P.</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uttar Dinajpur</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(North)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dakshin Dinajpur</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(South)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malda</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murshidabad</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadia</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North 24 parganas</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South 24 parganas</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howrah</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hooghly</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midnapore</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(undivided)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bankura</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purulia</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birbhum</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Bengal</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: This table is constructed from the Notes on Agenda Division Level Review Meetings Panchayat & Rural Development Department Government of West Bengal. (NA - Not available)

The trend of attendance in Gram Sansad and Gram Sabha meetings can be presented in Figure 2H below:

Figure-2H

Trend of Attendance in Gram Sansad and Gram Sabha Meeting in West Bengal

![Graph showing declining trend in attendance](image)

The figure above shows a declining trend in both the Gram Sansad and Gram Sabha meetings over time.
If we compare the average attendance at Gram Sansad meetings as a percentage of all voters and that of as a percentage of Bargadars & Pattadars, we find that the former is considerably low and declining but the later one is significantly high. This indicates that the participation in the panchayat system has got a fruitful result for politically marginalized groups (Table 2.13).

### Table 2.13

**Attendance at Gram Sansad Meetings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Per cent of all voters</th>
<th>Per cent of bargadars and pattadars</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Darjeeling</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>70.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jalpaiguri</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>65.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooch Behar</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>73.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uttar Dinajpur</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>50.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dakshin Dinajpur</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>65.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malda</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>85.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murshidabad</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birbhum</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>46.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bardhaman</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>74.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadia</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>41.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North 24 Parganas</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>55.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hooghly</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>49.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bankura</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>63.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purulia</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>41.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medinipur</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>72.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howrah</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>52.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South 24 Parganas</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>65.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total West Bengal</strong></td>
<td><strong>13.1</strong></td>
<td><strong>63.4</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Column 2 from SIPRD, Government of West Bengal referring to November 2000; Column 3 from study conducted by Chakraborti et al (2003)*

The study conducted by SIPRD, Government of West Bengal, relating to the attendance at Gram Sansad meetings shows that the average attendance at such meetings amounts to slightly more than 13% of the electorate, with some variations across districts. Purulia District shows the lowest rate of attendance at only 7% of all voters and Jalpaiguri the highest at 26%. But more significantly, it is clear that there is very high attendance at such meetings on the part of bargadars and pattadars, who are among the poorest sections of the rural society and who account for nearly half the rural work force over all of West Bengal.

For the state as a whole, the average attendance by bargadars and pattadars at the gram sansad’s meetings is 63.4%, which is significantly high. We have only one district Murshidabad whose average attendance is only 25.3%. But all other districts except Murshidabad have good average attendance by bargadars and pattadars at these meetings. High level of attendance suggests that those politically marginalized groups see themselves as
gaining not only from the land reforms, but also for the process of decentralization and feel that involvement and participation in those meetings and in the activities of the panchayats is urgent. Recently, in some districts where decentralized planning has been taken up rigorously, attendance at gram sansad and gram sabha has picked up. Thus, time has come to place more importance on decentralized planning for ensuring maximum attendance and participation of the common people in the panchayat activities. We are hopeful to say that the state government is currently considering some new initiative to strengthen further the system of decentralization, and make it more flexible and responsive to people’s need. People’s participation has to be understood in a new way. They will play the role of decision makers and the representatives have to participate in the efforts of the people and the communities themselves. The effects of new initiatives in decentralization are yet to be established so that benefits can be trickled down from the upper elite class to the politically and economically marginal groups. We thus see that people’s participation in the formal Panchayati Raj system has increased to a large extent. ‘Operation Barga’ in West Bengal has led to a balanced and meaningful livelihood status among the poor and marginal households. Local level democracy has deepened with gradual mobilization of administrative resources and increasing participation of the panchayat in overall activities in rural areas.

Functional decentralization and enhanced people’s participation are the results of increasing awareness of the village people towards the panchayat. Positive correlation between tenancy reform and enhanced participation is established in our analysis. With the establishment of people’s forum like Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad, delivery of essential services through the panchayat has become much more regular and smooth.

In our study we are going to take up some concrete cases from different villages in the districts of Burdwan and Paschim Midnapore to testify more strongly people’s participation in rural development through implementation of land reforms programme and its related development schemes or projects funded by Central Government or the State Government from time to time. We have a desire to notice the actual changes occurring at the village level and the role of PRIs in the process.
Part-D
Rural Development

"A semi-starved nation can have neither religion, nor art, nor organization, whatever can be useful to the starving millions is beautiful to my mind. Let us give today first the vital things of life and all other graces and ornaments of life will follow. My ambition is to wipe every tear from every eye."

Mahatma Gandhi


Conceptual Framework

Rural development is an elastic concept and everyone interprets it in his own way, but the broad consensus is that more emphasis should be given to those rural development activities, which takes place in the rural areas. These include agricultural growth, the setting up of an economic and social infrastructure, fair wages as also housing and shelter for landless, village planning, public health, education and functional literacy, communication etc. Thus, it focuses attention on two aspects: (i) economic development with a close interaction between different sections and sectors, and (ii) economic growth specifically directed to the rural poor. In this multi-dimensional effort involving development and deployment of resources--land, water and human, the objective is to raise the standard of living and the quality of life of the rural poor. Rural development, thus, encompasses both the spatial and functional integration of all relevant programmes bearing on increased agricultural production and also the reduction of unemployment, underemployment and provisions of gainful employment among the rural people. The concept of rural development includes ‘village improvement’ rural upliftment, rural reconstruction and community development etc. Community development is defined as “a process designed to create conditions of economic and social progress for the whole community with its active participation and the fullest possible reliance upon the community’s initiative”.73 It is also defined as “the process by which the efforts of the people themselves are united with those of governmental authorities to improve the economic, social and cultural conditions of communities, to integrate those communities with the life of the nation and to enable them to contribute fully to national progress”.74

For the development of the rural population government from time to time has made several approaches. They are as follows:

The Multi Purpose Approach

Rural development approach in India began with the ‘Multi-Purpose Approach’. The community development programme, started in 1952 aimed at developing to the fullest extent the material and human resources of an area through the cooperative efforts of the people and the active help of the state. The rationale behind the approach was that all the aspects of rural life are inextricably interlinked with each other. Thus, agricultural development is not possible without the spread of education and improved standards of health of the rural people. Other crucial factors for rural development include roads, irrigation, electricity, communication and rural industry. Main aim of this approach is to raise the standard of living, thus promoting social welfare, social justice, a cooperative way of life, and community cohesion and also building up the democratic organizations and institutions of the people.

The Minimum Package Approach

This is a limited purpose approach, which takes up a particular area at a time and tackles it in depth. This approach was used for higher agricultural production and marketable surplus. A package programme was launched as the Intensive Agricultural District Programme (IADP) in the year 1960-61. IADP advocated a selected area approach to agricultural development and the achievements of intensity of cropping. The programme was further separated for commodity-wise production programmes such as for cotton, Jute and sugarcane. This approach actually helped the richer farmers in the rural areas, so its utility was limited and the Green Revolution failed to bring any greenery to the rural poor who continued to remain pale.

Target Group Approach

In this approach a particular group is taken up for in depth studies and plan priorities are accordingly modified, recognising that the small and marginal farmers and landless agricultural labourer’s problems are different from those of the bigger ones. For instance, the Antyodaya Scheme is a Target Group Approach, which produces a client-oriented design and the ultimate goal is to transfer all the responsibilities of planning and development to the clientele themselves.

Area Development Approach

Under this approach emphasis is laid on the development of the underdeveloped regions. It presumes that the growth centers have an even geographical spread effect and that the benefits of development percolate to the lower levels over a period of time. Under this
approach a pinpointed area is taken for development. A backward area is identified for concentrated efforts, such as DPAP, TDP, CAD, Hill Area Development etc., which comes under this approach.

The major weaknesses of all these approaches are:

i) They are mainly concerned with agricultural development and focus is on individual cultivators.

ii) They are concerned with the rural poor but their implementation fails to eradicate poverty and identification of the rural poor is a great problem.

iii) Some of the programmes like IRDP, CAD, CDP etc. are the creation of foreign experts and agencies. Their lack of understanding of our society leads to programme failures.

iv) Too much bureaucratic control over allocations of fund delays the development process and it invites corruptions.

What we need today is to involve more people in the decision making process at the grass root levels like PRIs and gram sabhas. They would act as checks to the corruption and facilitators of the various developmental programmes.

**PRIs and Rural Development: Interlinkages**

At present Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Rural Development are complementary to each other after the passing of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992. The decision-making powers of PRIs became extensive inclusion of farming, land reform, ecological restoration, rural industries, poverty alleviation, women empowerment, etc. PRIs are entrusted to construct plans for rural development through implementing different schemes or projects funded by the Central Government as well as the State Governments. They take decision on 29 subjects, which are concerned with the day-to-day life of the rural people. Their role in the field of implementation is much more pronounced. Major works of rural development being undertaken by the PRIs are agriculture, land reforms, minor irrigation, water management, social forestry, small scale industries like food processing industries, development of handloom industries, drinking water and sanitation, rural housing, roads or waterway communications, rural electrification, adult or non-formal education etc. In West Bengal PRIs are seriously involved in these activities concerning rural development as a whole. Prof. A.K. Sen in his book ‘India: Economic Development and social opportunity’ sees development in terms of the expansion of the real freedoms that the citizens
enjoy to pursue the objectives they have reason to value, and in this sense the expansion of
human capability can be broadly seen as the central feature of the process of development.
Capability refers to the alternative combinations of functioning from which a person can
choose. A person becomes poverty-stricken when he lacks real opportunity. It may be due to
low incomes, meager possession and other aspects of economic poverty. Development in this
sense extends the scope of choices. The basic objective of development is the expansion of
human capabilities. For development, as Prof. Sen argues, one needs to develop education
and health. “The remarkable neglect of elementary education in India is all the more striking
given the widespread recognition in the contemporary world, of the importance of basic
education for economic development”. To Prof. Sen education and health can be seen to be
valuable to the freedom of a person in at least five distinct ways:

a) Intrinsic importance meaning that education and health can provide some valuable
achievement to the person concerned;

b) Instrumental personal roles i.e. for getting a job and for making use of economic
opportunities.

c) Instrumental social roles i.e. greater literacy and basic education can facilitate public
discussion of social needs and encourage informed collective demands;

d) Instrumental process role means that education can reduce the incidence of child
labour; and

e) Empowerment and distributive roles i.e. greater literacy and educational achievement
of backward groups can increase their ability to resist oppression, to organized
politically to have a fair deal.

Other concept of development is to facilitate access to productive resources—ranging
from land and water to infrastructure. It requires permanent adaptation to changing
circumstances of power, economics and culture. Without the participation of the rural poor in
the implementation of programmes, and without the establishment of effective organization
of the rural poor, it is unlikely that much progress will be made in increasing the access of the
poor to productive resources.76

Thus, a key requirement for any escape from rural poverty and hunger is access to
productive resources for the rural poor; land and financial resources are of foremost

76 Puthenkalam John Joseph (2004); Empowerment: Sustainable Human Development Strategy for Poverty
Alleviation, Rawat Publication, New Delhi, pp 330-331.
importance but technology, seeds and fertilizer, livestock and fisheries, irrigation, marketing opportunities are also essential. Puthenkalam (2004) argues that, for various reasons, the experience of agrarian reforms during the last thirty years has been less positive than had been hoped. The vested interests of politicians, bureaucrats and local elites have militated against implementation of agrarian reform policies. Any agrarian reform needs to be accompanied by access to technology, credit and infrastructure. Other crucial question is the enhancement of women’s access to land. As a result of legal impediments of separation from their husband, many women have been losing whatever access to land they have. In his comparative analysis of land reforms programme in India and Pakistan, P.C. Joshi (2006) observes that the programme of land reforms served primarily the interest of the superior tenants and under-proprietors rather than the interest of the rural poor. Considered from the standpoint of the rural poor, land policies in both the countries has by and large, ended in a fiasco.77 Success of land reforms programme can be seen in its West Bengal chapter since 1967 being undertaken from time to time by the United Front and subsequent Left Front Government. In West Bengal, “The core of rural development policy is land reforms. The Government lays emphasis on two aspects of land reforms, namely, recording of names of sharecroppers and redistribution of ceiling surplus lands among the landless. Added to it is the policy of the Government to extend institutional credit cover to the land reforms beneficiaries”.78 Baruah argues (1990) that West Bengal provides one of the rare instances of land reforms programme initiated by radical rural political mobilization with significant participation by the agrarian undercaste.79

With the success in implementation of land reforms programme, panchayats in West Bengal have played remarkable role in implementing some centrally sponsored schemes like NREP, RLEGP, EAS, IRDP, JRY, SGSY, PMGSY, IAY etc. The list of targets in these programmes is prepared by the PRIs. In this regard the ground work is done by the various peasant organizations and branch committees of the party at the village level.80

Westergaad’s study (1986) suggests that the NREP has had considerable success in providing employment for the rural poor. Chaudhuri’s (1980) and Kohli’s (1989) studies of the Food for Work Programme accord the programme some success. Dreze (1990) also found that IRDP overwhelmingly benefited the landless labourers. Swaminathan has also noticed

80 Ibid p-42.
similar success while comparing the state’s performance in implementing IRDP in West Bengal and the southern state of Tamil Nadu. Webster found that the benefits under the employment generation programme and IRDP had gone to the poor and improved their living conditions.\textsuperscript{81}

For Puthenkalam another important variable of development is access to water whether to drink, to irrigate the land, to supply energy to industries, or to allow for fishing. Now Civil Society Organizations (CSO) and Governments throughout the world have began accumulating experiences in providing sustainable and equitable access to water for local communities. Another important variable is rural credit system without which rural development could not be successful. Most commercial banks do not provide loans to the rural poor fearing of loss or non-recovery of the same. Herein lies the importance of rural cooperative banks. Only by cooperative movements rural credit system can be strengthen on the basis of which rural development stands. The Gramin Bank of Bangladesh and NABARD in India are engaged in providing rural credit as part of rural development.

Rural development, as we understand today, under capitalism mostly takes place in laying better roads and other forms of communications, rural electrification etc. This type of development under the process of globalization is mainly intended to extend market links between the village and the town. These links are combined in such a way that the village is made to depend on the town so that agricultural products are marketed at prices determined by the market forces. Similarly, manufactured goods and farm inputs are also supplied at the market prices, which are mostly monopoly prices. In both the ways peasantry is exploited and made to pay for the development of capitalism. Rural handicrafts and traditional household industries are ruined due to competition from large-scale machine industries. Any planning for rural development has to take note of this negative impact of capitalist development in rural India. “Therefore, rural development in the sense of improved living standards and providing rural people a varied and richer life is not possible under capitalist development. It is possible only when capitalism is negated by another system, diametrically opposite to and different from capitalism.”\textsuperscript{82}

A more positive approach in defining rural development is found in Professor Amitav Lahiri’s article in Kurukshetra in January 1995. To him the rural development should have certain objectives like the improvement of human resources through inputs of education, health care, sanitation and hygiene, ensured supply of potable water and other facilities;

\textsuperscript{81} Neil Webster (1992), Panchayati Raj and Decentralised Planning in West Bengal, Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi.
development of infrastructure through roads, means of transport and communication, power etc. agricultural development like land reforms, water management, crop rotation, better seeds, organic pesticides and manure; forest development; development of dairy and poultry farming; agro-based industries and food products and also improvements in marketing. All these issues of rural development are analysed in this thesis in greater detail in different chapters and sections. But our studies on those issues are based on field works in different villages of Burdwan and Paschim Midnapore districts in the state of West Bengal. We think that data on those villages will highlight more strongly the issues of rural development and also its various shortcomings.

First five year plan involved the rural population in the process of planning their own welfare measures. The Community development (CD) programme was also launched in the year 1952 for the all-round development of the rural areas, where nearly 70% of the population lived. It was stated to exterminate the three ills of poverty, disease and illiteracy. For this purpose 600 community blocks were created to be headed by a Block Development Officer (BDO) in each block. Over the years the CD block has emerged as a permanent unit of rural planning and rural development. Its main agenda were—improvement of agriculture, communication, education, health and sanitation, housing, self-help groups by training in rural arts, crafts and industries to local people. The Central Government supported the programme substantially by providing funds. Though this community development programme has made some contribution to rural development; it has not succeeded in bringing about an all-round improvement in rural areas and in eliminating rural poverty and unemployment, of which the State of West Bengal is one of the exceptions in India. During 9th five year plan the emphasis shifted from individual development to group development. For this purpose some new schemes were introduced like TRYSEM, SITRA, DWCRA, SHGs under SGSY etc.

Professor Carl Taylor once remarked, that the whole concept and plan of community development—extension programme is that local self-help village groups will mobilize their natural and human resources for local improvement of all kinds and all technical agencies of government will aid them in this undertaking.83 It implies, according to him,

i) initiative of people in both formulating and executing the programmes,

83 Quoted in A.R. Dasai (edited), Rural Sociology in India, Popular Prakashan Bombay 2006, p-615.
therefore, the schemes, of generating and organizing a large number of voluntary associations almost of primary group nature and also a wide variety of local institutions,

iii) reliance upon group works techniques,

iv) active participation of people in all the stages of implementation, resulting in local leadership,

v) governmental administrative machinery, which act as assisting body.

A.R. Desai argues that the philosophy underlying in this movement of community development in the context of the Indian agrarian society, therefore, implicitly accepts the following major sociological assumptions:

a) The individuals, sections, groups and strata forming the village community have a large number of common interest, sufficiently strong to bind them together;

b) The interest of the various groups and classes within the village are both sufficiently alike and common to create general enthusiasm as well as a feeling of development for all;

c) The interest of the different sections of the community are not irreconcilably conflicting;

d) The state is a super-class, impartial, non-partition association and that the major policies of the government are of such a nature that they do not further sharpen the inequalities between the existing social groups;

e) People’s initiatives and enthusiasm and active participation are possibly in the extant village communities because they have common interest.84

The major criticisms offered by scholars and evaluating committees boils down to the following major points:

1. Its bureaucratic nature;
2. Absence of elective principle at any level in the machinery;
3. Decisions taken at the top and communicated below, almost like executive fiats;

84 Ibid, p-615
4. Considerable confusion in the overall administration of the country, expressed in the relationship between the project administration and other government departments;

5. Considerable confusion and conflict with regard to powers and duties, and relative position and seniority within the staff of different departments as a result of their being interlocked with the project administration.

6. Duplications of work for a section of the administrative personnel and resultant overworking and the problem of divided loyalty towards functions;

7. Absence of social service mentality and

8. Lack of social works skills among the staff.  

Panchayati Raj Institution i.e. the decentralization of government was an institutional means introduced in 1978 with which to implement much of the agrarian strategy. Several observers have argued that democratic decentralization together with the programme of structural reforms has been effective in politically and economically empowering the poor and the more marginal sections of the agrarian social formation. In order to implement developmental programme, it has required a strong state to implement the tenancy reforms of 'Operation Barga' to redistribute land over the land ceiling, to secure access to formal credit for some of those who traditionally could only turn to private moneylender, and to bring about a very successful development process with a strong pro-poor dimensions. Furthermore, the CPI (M) has also successfully pushed the local panchayat into playing a vital role in local conflict resolution and in establishing a rule of law at the local level that has clearly benefited the poor and marginal groups.

87 Ibid, p-330.