Chapter-8
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Observations

The PRIs have been established in West Bengal as units of self-governance. We have seen that they have been empowered to perform various duties and responsibilities for the betterment of the rural people. Panchayat is a powerful institution through which economic and political powers in the rural areas are decentralized. Inclusion of the rural poor in the decision-making process helps to improve their livelihood status and a sense of participation in overall economic and social activities. The influence of factors such as caste, class, community, religion cannot be wholly denied as these do have a role to play in determining the final well-being of the rural people. On the basis of the primary as well as secondary data, we can make some observations and findings on role of the panchayat in overall development of the rural society.

Due to introduction of new technology in agriculture and land reforms programme undertaken in the state since 1967, rate of rural poverty has been drastically reduced in our study villages. Studies on rural poverty in villages since 1977 to 2006, has revealed that in early eighties the people had to face the curse of poverty due to non-availability of rural employment throughout the year. They were unable to manage even two-squares meals a day. As the cultivators had to depend on seasonal rainfall for cultivation the agricultural labourers, poor and marginal farmers did not get jobs on the field. Even when they got jobs they had to work in the field of rich and middle peasantry at a low wage rate. As a result the poverty-stricken people never got out of the cycle of poverty. In 1981 rate of poverty in the study villages was nearly 60%. But in early 1990’s when system of irrigation in the area had been improved by the installation of river pumps, tube-wells and mini electric-shallows, the scope of jobs for the poor agricultural labourers has been enhanced. This has drastically reduced the number of persons living below the poverty line. In 1991 & 2001 the rates of rural poverty were 45% & 30% respectively. In 2006 the rate of rural poverty came down to 23%. This is a fall out of using new technology in agriculture, minor irrigation facilities and also the adoption of several centrally sponsored schemes/programmes of rural development.

In implementing centrally sponsored Poverty Alleviation Programmes (PAPs), the panchayat plays a formidable role. Our findings suggest that gram panchayats could play
an effective role in PAPs through the process of planning, execution, monitoring and evaluation. At the same time the PR leaders could provide help to the PRI in identifying the beneficiaries, in selection of priority areas and also in monitoring the works of the panchayats. Sometimes it is reported that PRRs and Government Officials behave negatively with the general masses. Their attitude towards the rural people is not favourable for smooth functioning of the panchayat. Inadequacy of fund is reported to be another constraint in the implementation of plans and programmes. To combat the situation there is a need to enhance the quantum of aid under various programmes, thereby enabling the beneficiaries to generate enough income to rise above the poverty line. Our analysis also reveals that there is some sort of inefficiencies at the administrative level either due to too much political interference or lack of coordination between government officials and panchayat members. Such administrative inefficiencies can be reduced by means of a better connection between panchayat members and government officials. Proper training to the government officials helps to reduce inefficiencies. In our analysis it is also observed that in some of the cases, non-poor are included wrongly in the BPL list and therefore, they are getting higher benefits than the poor. In West Bengal, PRI\'s have become synonymous with rural development. They have become perfect agencies of welfare state system. From the study it is noticed that only thing PRI\'s need is to reduce party control, which sometimes becomes unhealthy for democracy.

It is also found that rural poverty has been reduced by the introduction of SHGs, which has helped in reducing poverty amongst the weaker sections of the society particularly the women. The socio-economic programmes under the head of SHGs add fresh blood to each member and promote all-round development of the women, children, the households and the community as a whole. In our study villages it is observed that SHGs are moving towards fulfilling their needs and aspiration in a meaningful way. In 8 No. Saraboth Gram Panchayat area 53 self-help groups have been formed under the guidance of the gram panchayat out of which 33 (62.26%) have been formed exclusively by the women. Out of 53 self-help groups 23 belongs to SC, 14 belongs to ST, 2 belongs to OBC and the remaining 14 groups being run by general caste. Among them 52 SHGs are under the BPL category and only one is under the APL category. These self-help groups have engaged in different activities like cooking mid-day meals for the students of
SSKs and primary schools, poultry farming, cattle rearing (specially goat), minor irrigation by providing water to the cultivators on rental, bidi making, rearing of sapling in nursery etc. Till March 2005, 1,13,943 SHGs have been constituted in our state under Swarnajayanti Gram Sarojgar Yojana (SGSY) out of which 86,589 (i.e. 76%) have been formed exclusively by the women. Many of them are found capable of sharing important social responsibilities and to be a good vehicle for various social development programmes. Actually, creation of income and employment is the result of the formation of SHGs. It is observed that income of each member of different SHGs is ranging from Rs. 500 to Rs. 1500 per month. Moreover, a quality of leadership and banking practices among the women belonging to the group has developed. There are some problems also. Child rearing is a major problem for women engaged in SHGs. Then there is a problem of marketing of products of the SHGs. It is the duty of the state government to take some drastic measures so as to sell the product at a reasonable price and the local NGOs could help the panchayat and the government in this regard. Gram Panchayats in West Bengal have been found very active in implementing the scheme of SHG in rural areas. The government has to take initiative to form more SHGs in villages because this can help to alleviate rural poverty on a greater scale.

In spreading Universal Elementary Education (UEE) gram panchayat has also a great role to play. Due to paucity of fund and lopsided five years planning we could not achieve 100% literacy after more than sixty years of independence. The Directive Principles of the Indian Constitution, however, envisaged provision of free and compulsory education to all children upto the age of 14 years. The Constitution was amended in December 2002, (86th Amendment) to include free and compulsory education for all children in the age group of 6–14 years as a fundamental right. After passing this Amendment, the role of gram panchayat in this regard has become more important than earlier.

A study of literacy position in rural India from 1951–2001 shows that literacy rate in 1951 was 34.59% and in 2001 it is 59.21%. Therefore, till today more than 40% of the rural population in India are illiterate. Herein lies the importance of intervention by the gram panchayats. After realizing general problems and constraints faced by the formal primary schools and the West Bengal Primary Education Board, the Government of West Bengal has introduced an alternative system of school education known as Sishu Siksha
Karmasuchi (SSK) in 1997-98. Within a short span of time this alternative system has shown very encouraging results in terms of providing easy access to education, enrolment of children, regular attendance of teachers in schools and also in terms of the quality of teaching. All these are fall out of the initiative of the PRIs in spreading out of UEE in rural areas. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 has given a power to the state government by which it becomes possible to transfer education (primary and secondary, vocational, adult and non-formal education) to panchayats. Since then Sishu Siksha Karmasuchi has been adopted. It has become very popular and its demand among the villagers increases day after day, after launching the Total Literacy Campaign (TLC) in the state in early 1990s. This alternative system is found to be less costly, but in quality it is even comparable with the formal system. This programme is essentially a community-managed initiative with strong support of the panchayats. In 2003–2004, Paschim Midnapore had a total number of 2474 SSKs in which about 5672 sahayikas have been employed. In Burdwan district number of SSKs are 1083 in which 2680 sahayikas have been employed. As Burdwan is a more developed district than Paschim Midnapore, it has less number of SSKs in rural areas. Therefore, more SSKs are required in backward areas like Paschim Midnapore, to spread Universal Elementary Education to the illiterate villagers. Gram panchayats in those areas have to take strong measures to spread education. Mid-day meal scheme introduced in 1995 has enhanced the scope of primary education at the grass root levels. This scheme has attracted children of the poor families to be enrolled in primary schools. After the introduction of this mid-day meal programme for supplying nutritious food to the students of primary schools, average attendance has reached 80.18% (previously it was 72.81%). Therefore nearly 8% increase in student’s attendance is noticed in this study. In post mid-day meal period, the state of West Bengal may achieve cent percent literacy like Kerala if this mid-day meal scheme is sustained.

As a strong panchayat system exists in the state since 1977, it is expected that the panchayat should play an active role in improving the health status of the rural people due to the fact that health is an index of development. To assess the health status a survey was conducted in certain villages under the gram panchayats, which have been taken as the area of case studies. For this purpose 390 families were selected at random taking 180 families from villages in the district of Paschim Midnapore and 210 families from villages in the district of Burdwan. Collected data shows that out of 390 families only 202
families were under immunization during pregnancy period (i.e. 51.79% of the total sample families). Only 18.21% of sample families chose PHCs as a place for pregnant women to give birth to their babies. 38.97% families sent their pregnant women to government hospitals; 17.95% families sent their pregnant women to nursing homes and 24.87 percent families preferred their homes for delivery by trained nurses or local dhais (Ayya). Therefore, it is found that gram panchayats in our study area do not have strong presence in improving health status of the villages. Till today in most of the villages under study about 32.05% families go to quacks or RMPs for treatment of their day-to-day disease. Therefore, a positive intervention on the part of the gram panchayat in the area of health is called for if Government of West Bengal would like to have any breakthrough in improving general health of the people in West Bengal. The Government of West Bengal should enact law to empower PRIs in running PHC so that health administration comes under the purview of people’s control.

A related area of health is obviously water supply and sanitation where records from the districts in West Bengal are not noteworthy. From study we have seen that out of six districts in North Bengal, three districts Cooch Behar, Darjeeling and Malda have less than 50% coverage of drinking water supply. In these districts the success rate of different water supply and sanitation programmes launched by the state government and implemented by the gram panchayat is remarkably low (only 28.80%). The safe drinking water supply in the districts of South 24 Parganas and Purba Midnapore is not also upto the mark (41%). However, the districts of South Bengal have demonstrated a satisfactory result. Gram panchayats with their whole-hearted effort have taken up the rural sanitation schemes as part of their programme of rural development. At each panchayat in every block, several schemes are being undertaken to set up sanitary marts to produce low cost sanitary latrines so that poor villagers have access to hygienic sanitation. To make them popular at the grass root levels gram panchayats have also taken up several awareness programmes to let the people know the significance of these scientific sanitation relating to their every day health. So many marts have come out in the last few years but villagers are yet to receive these sanitary accessories. Instead they use the age-old practice of relieving in the open field, making several environmental hazards and inviting the danger of certain infectious diseases. The dominant political party with its organized cadres and elected members of the gram panchayat could not make a breakthrough in this area of
health. Though West Bengal occupies the second position among the Indian states in regard to the access to safe drinking water of households, average result at the village level is very poor. PRIs have to play more positive role in implementing the scheme of safe drinking water supply and sanitation. Most of the families in the villages under study are outside the purview of scientific sanitation. For a case study we have surveyed villages in the districts of Paschim Midnapore and Burdwan where we have found that 54.44% and 71.90% families respectively have their own sanitation. In regard to safe drinking water in those study villages we have found the nearly 96.67% of the total sample have access to safe drinking water. Our study shows that 63.84% families have come under the coverage of sanitation scheme. An increasing trend over the years have also been noticed in this study. PRIs have to take responsibilities to cover all the poor families with latrine facilities either through supplying sanitary materials at free of cost or providing financial assistance. To this end PRIs need to generate health consciousness among the rural population. It can make safe-drinking water and sanitation a big issue through democratic movement at the grass root levels. In this age of globalization, villagers must have also opportunities to enjoy the benefits of this new era. If 70% of the total population remains aloof from this new process India cannot be visualized as a developed nation.

With regard to the improvement of rural road connectivity, gram panchayat’s role has been also noteworthy. Rural road connectivity is one of the most important factors for opening up backward areas and constitutes a basic infrastructure for accelerating socio-economic development of the rural society. It can be viewed as the growth engine for economic development. To this end different centrally sponsored schemes viz. JRY, EAS, etc. were launched. Through these programmes rural roads were constructed. Basic objectives of roads construction are of two-fold–one is to create or assure employment to rural adults and the other is to create infrastructure for economic development. On 25th December, 2000 another programme namely Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY), a 100% centrally sponsored scheme, was launched. It was introduced as a part of poverty reduction strategy with the aim to provide connectivity to all unconnected habitations with all-weather roads. In West Bengal, the road network in the rural areas is developed and maintained by Public Works Department (PWD) of the Government of West Bengal. However, the Gram Panchayats do not take up construction of surface
roads. It mainly takes care of village roads mostly katcha or unsurfaced roads. Upto 31st March 2005, collected data shows that 54 roads in the districts of Burdwan were taken up for construction, total length of which were 399.27 Kms out of which 172.58 Km roads were found to be completed. In Paschim Midnapore 51 roads were taken up for construction, total length of which were 187.87 Km out of which 130.65 Km were found to be completed. Our data shows that there is a considerable variation in road density across the district. In most of the districts of North Bengal, road density is very low. Our data also shows that growth rate of road density in West Bengal is comparatively higher than that of India since 1994 to 2002. From the data it is also observed that the panchayat areas have a large chunk of unsurfaced roads as compared to surfaced roads. In the year 1996-97, the district of Burdwan had 13.09% surfaced roads and 71.94% unsurfaced roads at the level of gram panchayats. In 2000-2001, the unsurfaced roads in panchayat areas in the district came down to 68.76% though the rate of decrease in unsurfaced roads is not noteworthy. Gram panchayats have been engaged in undertaking various schemes to convert remaining unsurfaced roads into surfaced roads. Provision of rural network with all-weather roads throughout West Bengal requires huge resources for which Government of India must come forward. It can extend its Bharat Nirman Project to the rural areas also.

Gram Panchayats have played a formidable role in empowering the rural poor, particularly the weaker sections of the society. Gram panchayat itself symbolizes power at the grass root level. We have noticed that just by remaining present in the decision-making bodies at the institutional level like PRIs does not mean that the rural masses have become really powerful. Until and unless they participate actively in the decision-making process at the organizational level i.e. at the party level they cannot be said to be powerful in real term. Thus, panchayat representation is a necessary condition for the empowerment of the rural poor. It is not really a sufficient condition for the empowerment. Their roles should be recognized in the political party too. In West Bengal’s panchayat system, we find, all decisions are made primarily in internal party meetings. Hence, it desirable that poor should be involved in different party organizations like Local Committee, Gram Committee, etc. where decisions regarding allocations of development funds between different villages and different people are settled.
We have made a fieldwork at 8 No. Saraboth Gram Panchayat of Garbeta Block-II in the district of Paschim Midnapore in West Bengal from which we find that the earlier panchayat of 1978 was dominated by the general upper castes, rich and middle peasants. Lower caste representation i.e. representation by the ST families to the panchayat was only 28.00%, no representation of SC category was found here. In the last election of 2003, general caste representation has been reduced to 50% as compared to 72% in 1978. The present panchayat body is therefore, dominated by the middle peasants, poor and marginal peasants and landless agricultural labours (33%). It is clear that there has been a shift of power from upper general caste to lower castes and also from rich and middle peasants to middle and poor agricultural labourers. With the passage of time it is found that there is a radical change in the distribution of power in the panchayat institutions and thus it symbolizes political empowerment of the rural poor.

Side by side with the Gram Panchayat we have studied the composition of the Guide Committee where panchayat level decisions are taken. Here it is found that general caste representation is 56%. All members are male in this caste, which means that there is no female representation. The Scheduled Caste (SC) representation to the panchayat guide committee is 33% out of which 67% are male and 33% female. In case of Scheduled Tribe (ST), Guide Committee representation is only 11%. Thus it is observed that the committee is dominated by general caste. It is also observed that the male domination is significant in all the cases. It does not, therefore, signify empowerment of the female at the grass root levels. It should be noted that one of the decision-making bodies of the CPI (M)'s organization is Guide Committee, which is poorly represented by the landless agricultural labourers. It is a clear indication of their powerlessness at their grass root levels. Moreover, female representation is considerably low which does not signify any real breakthrough in empowering women section. Same picture comes out of the composition of the Krisak Sabha, DYFI, Mahila Samity and Gram Committee in 8 No. Saraboth gram panchayat area.

We have also gone through the composition of CPI (M)'s local committee to which 8 No. Saraboth Gram Panchayat belongs. From the survey it is found that out of the total 15 members of the local committee, 9 members i.e. 60% of the total still belongs to the general caste category. Only 3 members are from SC and 2 members are from ST. After passing of the 73rd Amendment in 1992, women began to take part in political-
institutional framework of power. But our study was not limited to political field only. Other indicators of empowerment such as social and economic empowerment have also been taken for analysis. These mean whether women have access to resources and economic opportunities and knowledge, and whether they take part in family decision-making. Our study shows that the economic status of women in comparison with their male counterpart is remarkably low. It is proved by negligible ownership of land holdings by women. We know that land symbolizes empowerment at the grass root levels from which women are a deprived lot. In order to make women more powerful they must have equal title to family land where we find male prerogative. Apart from equal land ownership PRIs can emphasize on enhancing the scope of SHGs as they can increase the scope of women's economic independence, which also leads to empowerment.

Like economic aspects prerequisites of women power we have also made an attempt to measure their social power. Considering several issues like domestic violence, female suicidal death or murder of brides due to dowry, position of widows in society and the role of female in several civil societies do it. It is found that women in the study villages are still backward in choosing their grooms. In spite of the existence of Article 498A, demands of dowry at the time of marriage and post marriage period, marriage at early age, particularly in lower caste families are still increasing which could not be stopped due to the passivity of the ruling party fearing of loss of vote at the time of election. Actually, left parties have no specific agenda for the liberation of women from different types of gender discrimination. This is a paradox of these secular parties, which we have noticed in our study villages. To demonstrate their secular credentials more strongly they must have specific programme for women liberation.

Conclusions

From the foregoing analysis we have noticed a paradigm shift in CPI (M)-led LFG's approach to rural development. Since 1978 panchayats in West Bengal have been made as agencies of rural development. As panchayat bodies are elected periodically and political parties take part in it, they have become an arena of political struggle at the grass root levels. They are the sources of new leaders to come out. Therefore, ruling political parties at the grass root levels have to take up the responsibility to implement various programmes of rural development for their survival at political institutions like PRIs. CPI (M)-led Left Front sustains its long tenure by strong emphasis on PRIs and rural
development. A party of strong rural support base, CPI (M) and its smaller allies has to take several concrete measures for alleviation of poverty, eradication of the curse of illiteracy, and land reforms in a big way. CPI (M)-led LPG has carried out its very specific agenda for land reforms by launching ‘operation barga’ with distribution of patta to the thousands of landless labourers. Since then, land reforms, PRIs and rural development become synonymous with each other. Resulting growth in productivity, increasing level of income, reduction in poverty and illiteracy are some of the indicators of success of the paradigm of rural development undertaken by the LFG. Pledges made by LFG in its different election manifesto have shown this strong leaning to rural development where PRIs have been focused as its sole agency. Therefore, rural development has become a success through agricultural development where land reforms play a greater role. It was an ideological position of the LFG that through land reforms agricultural development could be a reality. During thirty years of tenure of this left regime in West Bengal, land reforms policies have become a role model in other states of India too. Even non-left state governments in other parts of the country have shown their desire to adopt this policy in order to gain a quick success in agricultural development as well as in rural development.

However, a paradigm shift is going to be noticed in recent time in West Bengal in regard to development and rural development in particular. A debate is slowly cropping up in the midst of crises arising out of acquiring valuable agricultural land for the purpose of industrialization. It is seen that the CPI (M)-led LFG have eschewed its own ideological-political stand on rural development on which, it is claimed, the LFG stuck to for about thirty years. It has consolidated power for more than three decades based on its achievements in land reforms and decentralization of power through the PRIs. It has propagated several times in several places that both these measures were instrumental in increasing the economic, social and political positions of the rural poor in West Bengal. The rural poor have also reciprocated by voting in favour of the Left Front. Critics of LFG opine that the land acquisition process is a complete reversal of both land reforms and decentralization. If agricultural land is acquired for the purpose of industrialization, small and marginal farmers, majority of whom are agricultural labourers, are going to be losers because they have to depend on land for their survival. Therefore, a pertinent question may arise whether land reforms and rural development is going to take a
backseat in this new decade of industrial development. We must have industrialization in time with the ethos of globalization for a quick solution for the several problems of our economy and society. What would be the appropriate path in adopting new principle of industrialization? Acquiring land is a primary requirement for establishment of new industries. The rural poor coming from economically and socially backward scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and muslim communities having little formal education or technological knowledge would hardly find a place in these modern industrial institutions like motor car factories while they have to suffer the most if their valuable lands are officially acquired. Therefore, the government should do a cost-benefit analysis by acquiring land for this purpose. Representatives of the PRIs at its different levels must take part in decision of acquiring land as because PRIs always upheld the process of land reforms in rural West Bengal.

The question of women’s participation in politics through PRIs has been seriously taken up by LFG in West Bengal. The 73rd Amendment has paved the way for their participation in all panchayat institutions. LFG since 1992 has taken care in ensuring reservations of seats. West Bengal was the first state in the country to enact legislation for the reservation of one-third seats for women in PRIs in 1992 before the Constitution was amended in 1993. Our study shows that women face a lot of difficulties due to the patriarchal outlook of the society, inadequate education and negative attitude of their families. However, their participation in PRIs has exposed the potentiality of the women leaders. It is also found that the gains achieved by women through political participation are marginalized by certain incidence of or trends towards dowry, torture and violence against women. In spite of all these negative sides, women members play important roles in the implementation of all rural development programmes. They have shown their consciousness about their legal rights and encourage the fellow women to claim their rights also. We also notice an improvement in the social status of the elected women members, particularly from SC, ST and other backward categories. Not only women but also the poor villagers belonging to SC, ST i.e. dalit groups have also found empowerment and dignity in the rural society.

Inclusion of these age-old backward people of the villages in West Bengal is certainly an event to be reckoned with. Their inclusion in different levels of PRIs has improved their socio-economic status. Whether this inclusion is an authentic one is a big
issue to be debated by citing more case evidences from the villages in West Bengal. We have found in our study an upper caste and class biasness of distribution of resources at the levels of PRIs in which ruling party is found dominant. For these reasons poor backward people are found unable to assert newly found political position in PRIs. Therefore, mere inclusion in political process does not symbolize their political empowerment. What they need today is to increase their socio-economic empowerment to concretise their political empowerment. The poor people belonging to SC and ST categories, having no economic resources at their disposal are not in a position to enjoy fruits of political power.

It is also noticed in our study a conspicuous absence of the new agenda of environmental consciousness in PRI's programmes of rural development. In this age of global environmentalism no agency of rural development can overlook the importance of protecting environment. In our study villages several developmental programme are undertaken and implemented by the PRIs. Land reforms and subsequent agricultural development taking place in study villages had no focus on ‘sustainability’, which has become a global ideology of development. Issues which deserve special attention on the part of PRIs in order to achieve a ‘sustainable development’ for the generations to come are: (i) soil degeneration due to unlimited use of ‘package technology’ of green revolution; (ii) abuse of pesticides in cultivation and subsequent health hazards (iii) uncontrolled and unplanned extraction of ground water for the purpose of cultivation which will create crises in water table; (iv) import of high yielding varieties unsuitable to our soil that will lessen fertility of soil and consequent loss of bio-diversity process which has already been noticed. Every level of PRIs must take up these issues very seriously in order to sustain agricultural productivity upon which future generations also depend. They have to frame the policies of ‘sustainable agricultural development’ to percolate the fruits of development to the rural poor. Therefore, PRIs have to shoulder responsibility of restoring natural environment upon which rural development is based. Every PRI must have a unit to study environment and to prescribe for its restoration without which rural development cannot be sustained. This is not a political question it is a question of human survival. PRIs since inception have shown peoples-friendly approach. They must have eco-friendly approach too in order to ensure sustainability of rural development.