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"An economics that inculcates mammon-worship, and enable the strong amass wealth at the expense of the weak, is a false and dismal science. It spells death. True economics, on the other hand, stands for social justice, it promotes the good of all equality including the weakest, and it is indispensable for decent life". -- Mahatma Gandhi

I

Introduction and Objectives

This Ph.D research work explores relationship between Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and rural development in West Bengal. PRIs act as an agency of rural development apart from playing its political role, which is spreading of democratic values at the grass root levels. As a system of local governance, gram panchayats, since their inception in post independent India’s rural political fabric, have taken up the issue of development though in a narrow scale. As the problem of poverty encompasses the rural Indian society as a whole, leaders of this newly emerged nation have put emphasis on rural development. They visualized that a new nation cannot flourish in the midst of millions of starving population. Herein lies the importance of PRIs in all-round development of the villages, of which the state of West Bengal may be a model in this regard.

Though Panchayati Raj system was introduced after the publication of the report of Balwant Rai Mehta Committee in 1957, most of the Indian states were found to be unable to implement the report which envisaged a new India likely to emerge on the threshold of democratically elected local government like gram panchayat system which happened to be a traditional institution in Indian subcontinent to govern rural people. But bigger states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab etc. could not implement the report due to the vested interest of the landed gentry indirectly ruling over the rural society even in post independent period. They were also unable to implement Land Reforms Act, which officially abolished Zamindari system in India. Therefore, thousands of acres of land remained at the hands of ex-Kings or Zamindars who by virtue of their political connections could escape from the Act. As land reforms could not be implemented in most of the states, rural development remained a far cry because distribution of land was one of the pre-conditions of rural development. Political leaders of different national parties could not make a breakthrough in redistribution of vested land among the poorer section of the society fearing a loss of vote banks. In most of the North Indian states rural development has been found to be a lopsided one and which has also upper caste biasness. Therefore, schemes or programmes sponsored by the Central
Government from time to time could not be implemented effectively due to an unholy nexus between the ex-Zamindars and dominant political party on the one hand and Civil Servants on the other. Till today we find the existence of certain undemocratic institution like ‘Sharunch’ or ‘Mukhiya’ who are seem to be distributing resources to the people at their wishes and also according to their political leaning to the upper caste dominated political party or newly emerged dalit based political parties. Whoever may be on the thrones of local governing institution are not elected democratically and even periodic election, an alma-mater of local governance could not be held due to opposition from the upper castes or dalits at different places or region of India. Even after passing of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in 1992, in which PRIs become more democratic and slated to make backward section of the population more empowered, PRIs could not be liberated from the yokes of bondage of the landed aristocracy. In order to implement 73rd Amendment, every Indian state has to launch a democratic movement at the grass root levels, which only can make rural development a success. Incidentally, this research work would show why should they imitate the model of PRIs and rural development developed in West Bengal.

Gram Panchayat system introduced in West Bengal in 1973 could not be a success due to same reasons as stated above. No democratic movement was launched during this time. A democratic institution minus people’s participation is a misnomer. If people at the grass root levels are not involved in decision-making process, no scheme or programme of rural development could be successful. Taking lesson from this shortcomings or lacuna of previous gram panchayat system, Left Front Government since 1977 has made a real breakthrough in establishing PRIs for rapid development of the rural society. It has made PRIs a perfect local democracy by involving millions of people within its fold. The Left Front Government has two fold objectives -- to make rural society as its strong support base and also to make rural development a grand success so that the people have strong attachment to the Left Front Government particularly with CPI (M). If we want to evaluate the role of PRIs in rural development we must have a close look at this political aspect too.

It is a necessity to evaluate the role of PRIs in empowering Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and other backward sections of the rural population like women, after passing of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. In this research work, an attempt will be made to examine what’s really going on in present-day rural West Bengal. Are SC, ST and rural women becoming powerful by participating in different layers of PRIs? Are the elected members of the PRIs truly enjoying decision-making power at the institutional level that is, PRI? Are not they submitting their wishes to the dominance of the ruling party? Is not the
ruling party taking all the decisions of the PRIs keeping itself behind the scene? These are some pertinent questions, which are likely to be answered in this research. By way of assumption, we may say that becoming elected members of PRIs does not automatically symbolize empowerment of the backward sections of the society stated above. Until and unless they take part in the real space of decision-making it is not possible to enjoy power at the institutional level. Therefore, we may say that political empowerment becomes incomplete if it has no relationship with the party organization in West Bengal where party is everything controlling over every segment of civil society and political society at the same time.

The term empowerment is a broad concept inclusive of social and economic empowerment. Women, by becoming members of PRIs cannot be truly empowered if they are found to unable to decide at their homes as well as in financial matters. This research work explores this area also. The issue of literacy among women is thus getting momentum at this turning of age – the age of liberalization and globalization. PRIs have to play an active part in this regard. We also want to evaluate PRI’s role in empowering rural women and other backward sections of the society as Left Front Government (LFG) has no clear cut agenda in regard to women liberation, PRIs also cannot avoid the core issue of development that is, the issue of alleviating poverty from the grass roots. As more than thirty to forty percent of the total Indian population are suffering from acute poverty and living a subsistence existence, a nation like India cannot be a super power in coming years as envisaged by our Government. Since independence leaders of our nation wanted to alleviate poverty by launching several programmes or schemes through periodic five years planning. For obvious reason after sixty years of independence India remains a country where most of the world’s poor live. Therefore, a radical party like CPI (M) in West Bengal, since it came into power, had to take positive steps in implementing several programmes of rural development at the grass root levels. For this purpose it has made PRIs as live political institutions to shoulder the responsibility of rural development as well as good governance. We would also like to show how much PRIs have become successful in shouldering these responsibilities for alleviating poverty by institutionalizing participatory democracy at the local level. Poverty, as a consequence, has been reduced drastically in villages in West Bengal, which can be an example for other states of India to follow.

PRIs in West Bengal also deal with the issue of maternity, infant mortality and general health care for its people. As the Central Government has launched several health related programmes, PRIs are entrusted to take responsibility of health care. In 73rd
Constitutional Amendment there is a provision of safe drinking water, sanitation facilities and health care services to be a compulsory duty of PRIs. As health builds up the nation, it becomes an index of development as argued by Prof. A.K. Sen, PRIs in West Bengal on the advice of the State and Central Governments and also of the World Health Organization (WHO), actively intervene in expanding the scope of water supply, sanitation and health among the rural masses.

Panchayat is a powerful institution through which basic elementary education is provided to the rural poor. Mid-day meal scheme introduced in West Bengal along with other states of India is stated to be reducing dropouts, improving retention and enrolment in schools. Rural infrastructure particularly rural road connectivity and rural electrification are grossly inadequate to meet the needs of the growing rural population. Panchayat is responsible for providing safe drinking water to all villagers. Recently Panchayat is in the forefront to implement family planning measures rigorously among the villagers. The efforts in these fields are also the subject of our evaluation. Gender imbalances may be reduced to a large extent through enhanced consciousness about the fact that both male child and female child, are the assets of the society. Hence, this is a time to evaluate performance of PRIs in reducing sex discrimination too. In West Bengal’s rural society panchayat is the only organ through which all basic necessities required for a healthy rural society that is, ‘Gram Swaraj’ can be fulfilled. Hence, rural development becomes unattainable without an effective role of the panchayat. Thus, our task is to find out whether and how far such targets of achieving elementary education, preventive and protective health care, empowerment of the rural poor, etc. have been achieved in practice. It is against this background that the study on “The role of Panchayats in overall development in Rural West Bengal” is taken for analysis. Our research will encompass both political and non-political issues and show their inter-relationships in the backdrop of developmental approach.

**Objectives**

This Ph.D research work has the following objectives:

1. To review the space of agrarian reforms in West Bengal through the panchayats since 1977.

2. To identify the extent of rural population below the poverty line and to review the effectiveness of the centrally sponsored poverty alleviation programmes implemented through the panchayats;
3. To identify the role of panchayats in popularizing informal education among the rural people;

4. To assess the role of panchayats in the development of literacy and education, health and hygiene, drinking water facilities and sanitation etc.

5. To identify the role of panchayats in the construction of social overhead capital like rural roads and rural electrification etc.

6. To know the process of empowerment of the rural poor and to evaluate the extent of decentralization of decision-making power of the poor especially the women through the panchayats;

7. To identify the extent of development gained through the panchayats by the socially backward classes;

8. To examine the relative position of West Bengal in terms of economic, social and rural indicators;

9. To assess the role of panchayats in mobilizing Self-Help Groups (SHGs) towards a better livelihood status through an enhancement of income and employment opportunities: their economic empowerment.

10. To look for and find out a causal relation between (a) political participation and rural development; (b) political, social and economic empowerment; (c) PRIs, rural development and political sustenance of the Left Front Government (LFG); (d) new ethos of rural development replacing ideology of the CPI(M)-led LFG.

II
Methodology

Ours is an empirical research based on case study method. 'A comprehensive study of a social unit be that unit a person, a group, a social institution, a district or a community – is called a case study'¹ Frederic Le Play (1806-1882) is reputed to have introduced the case study method into social science. The case study is not in itself a scientific method at all but merely a first step in scientific procedure. We know that individual cases become scientifically significant only when they are classified and tabulated in such form as to reveal uniformities, types and patterns of behaviour of a social unit. To collect data relevant to my research, I have followed this method.

¹ Young P.V, Scientific Social Survey and Research, Prentice Hall of India, 1982.
This method consists of two parts –

1) Library or archival research in which two techniques are followed:
   a) Analysis of historical records in which technique of central analysis is followed;
   b) Analysis of documents in which techniques of statistical compilation, references and abstract guides are used.

2) Field research in which three methods are followed:
   a) Participant observation-interaction recording technique is followed maintaining a field diary.
   b) Personal interview with a detailed schedule with open and close-ended questions are used.
   c) Personal interview for collecting households records

For the purpose of archival research I have visited two gram panchayats – one is in Paschim (west) Midnapore and other is in Burdwan to which our study villages belong. We have also visited Block Office, Zilla Parisad Office to collect relevant data from the original registers, printed audit reports, plan-documents, annual budget etc. I have also gone through Statistical Abstracts of the Government, District Census Handbooks, and District Gazetteer, Census Report of India, West Bengal Human Development Report, Annual Administrative Report of the government, etc.

In this Ph.D thesis, random sampling procedure is used in choosing the universe that is, villages to be studied. In a statistical enquiry, when only part of the population or only group of units is taken into consideration, it is called sampling. In statistical investigation it is used to select a part of an aggregate, which represents the whole universe. The first common method is lottery method. In this method the names of the villages are written on slips of paper and they are put into a box then the slips of paper are mixed thoroughly and some slips are picked up from the box randomly. These papers are taken for sampling. We have followed the lottery method in choosing our study villages from the district of Burdwan and Paschim Midnapore.
Variables

For the purpose of this research certain variables have been used. These are as follows:

The term panchayat is used in this work in a broad sense. It is defined as an institution of local governance and an agent of rural development. We have also defined rural development in broad sense encompassing the whole gamut of lives of people residing in villages. It includes certain socio-economic variables like poverty, income, landholding, employment, literacy, infrastructure, and empowerment. We have also used the term empowerment to define two things – one is participation in political decision-making process and other is socio-economic sphere. By political participation we have meant participation by the people particularly SC, ST and women in PRIs. PRIs is a place which has three layers in West Bengal that is, Zilla Parisad at the top, Panchayat Samity in the middle and Gram Panchayat at the bottom. We have also used the term LFG, an abbreviation of Left Front Government in West Bengal – a coalition government consisting of the CPI(M), CPI, Forward Bloc, Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), Samajbadi Party (SP), Marxist Forward Bloc. LFG is led by CPI(M) that is, the Communist Party of India (Marxist). The term land reforms is used several times in this research which means changes in ownership of land holding, limited land ceiling, redistribution of vested land among the landless agricultural labourers, rights of sharecroppers, ‘operation barga’ and giving ‘patta’ to the landless people. In a separate part of a chapter we have treated it in a greater details as a prerequisite of ensuring rural development.

We have also studied the problem of poverty. We have followed the definition of Prof. A.K. Sen who has defined poverty as hunger and lack of nutrition or required amount of calories for human beings. We have measured poverty in study villages following the latest measurement schedule published by the Government of India.

By literacy we have meant spreading of education that is, to make people read, write and calculate. We have also analysed elementary education that is, education at the primary level which is being imparted by two ways, formal and informal. Formal education means admitting students in the government-run primary schools and informal education means providing primary education through Sishu Siksha Kendras (SSKs), Integrated Child Development Schemes (ICDS), Adult Education, Sarba Siksha Avijan and other literacy drives.
Hypotheses

Hypotheses are primarily certain assumptions that are tested by an empirical study. They are some speculation about what ought to be found while investigating the research fields. To limit the scope of research or the field of investigation, it is important to formulate hypotheses. Our hypotheses of this Ph.D research are as under:

1. PRIs in West Bengal have played a commendable role in rural development;

2. After passing out of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, the backward section of the population like SC, ST and women have become really empowered by participating in multi-layered PRIs;

3. By rural development PRIs sustain its political future; and

4. Rural development becomes a new ethos of the LFG replacing any Marxist or Communist overtones of the government.