Chapter 5:

ORGANISATION OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT-
PANCHAYAT SYSTEM
CHAPTER - V

ORGANISATION OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT – PANCHAYAT SYSTEM

5.1 Concept and Meaning of Panchayat System:

The word Panchayat has come from Hindi language meaning the 'Seat of five'. Since the period of pre-moghal era this concept was in effect in the rural India. In 1870, rural Bengal had witnessed a short spell of a type of Panchayats which were called the Chowkidari Panchayat became very unpopular shortly after its introduction and did not play an effective role. During the Post Independence Period the Panchayat system became a statutory system which was responsible for all round development of the rural people.

Since independence rural development has, for obvious reasons, been the centre pillar of national development. Where has been scarcity dearth of programmes and funds, the endeavour has not achieved its expected results.

The realization is that, unless people are involved at the local micro level, rural development efforts may not attain its goals.

Three tier Panchayati-Raj system has been the institutional intervention to associate rural people in democratic and development process at village level. Especially, after constitution of Panchayat by 73rd Amendment Act, provision for another forum either at the level of Gram Panchayat, the lower tier, or at each of its constituent ward or constituency has been enacted for associating villagers at the grass root micro level. Constitution and confinement of specific power and functions to Gram Sabha (village assembly) have offered rural population the scope and opportunity to govern themselves collectively according to their own perception and priority.

5.2 History of Panchayat System in West Bengal:

During the early years of the British rule, the traditional Local self - government institutions declined all over the country, especially with Permanent Settlement of the land tenure system with the Zamindars. The Bengal Chowkidari Act of 1870 established Chowkidari Panchayats for provision of rural police force, but these were also not representatives of local bodies.

In 1885 the Bengal Local self-government Act was passed. The act provided for two tier of local government. One at the district level and the other at the sub-divisional level. It also provided for union committees for groups of villages. The union committees
with fewer responsibilities and insignificant role outside the context of village politics. In 1914 the District Administrative Reforms Commission, appointed by the Government of Bengal pleaded for a unified system of rural local government and ensured the establishment of a network of unified rural local authorities, combining the functions of the Chowkidari Panchayat and the Union Committee. This led to the birth of the Union Board under the Bengal Village Self Government Act 1919.

The West Bengal Panchayat Bill was passed, in 1957 although it was introduced in 1956. The Union Boards gave place to two tier structure at the lowest level-Gram Panchayat and the Anchal Panchayat.

The next step in completing the structure of the first generation Panchayat system was taken during the Third five year plan period. In 1963 the West Bengal Zilla Parishad act was passed to provide for re-modelling of local government, with a view to bring in about democratic decentralization and people’s participation in planning and development. The two Acts provided for a four - tier structure consisting of (Zilla Parishad, Anchalik Parishad, Anchal Panchayat and Gram Panchayat) . The Zilla Parishad and Anchalik Parishads died prematurely. The other two bodies did not play an effective role as institutions of local government.

A consolidated piece of legislation called the West Bengal Panchayat Act was enacted in 1973. The Act provided for a three - tier Panchayat System-Gram Panchayat at the Village level for a group of villages, Panchayat Samiti at the block level and Zilla Parishad at the distinct level. Thus came the skeleton of the second generation Panchayat the flesh and blood to which was provided by Left front government in 1978.

5.3 History of Panchayati-Raj :

When the Britishers arrived on the political scene in India, the village community were governed by village Panchayats or gram Sabhas. Up to 18th century, the Panchayats discharged most of the functions affecting the life of the village community and were effective units of administration. Various factors like the centralization of administration during the British rule, new taxation, policies, the development of transport and communication, the growth of the transport, the spirit of individualism, etc, led to the decline of village Panchayats. After independence, the government decided to take measures to restore the Panchayats. In a continental-size country like ours, it is impossible to run the administration from one capital. Democracy can be meaningful only if the local people participate in the management of local affairs at micro level. Rural
economic planning cannot hope to attain ensuring results unless the local public are involved in the planning process. Realising the need to set up village Panchayats, the Article 40 of the Directive Principles of State Policy of the Constitution of India, states "The State shall take steps to organize village Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self government".

The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee recommended the setting up of an organically-linked three-tier structure at the district, block and village levels. It also proposed an official set up for each tier system with its functions and availability of resources. In this scheme the main unit of planning and executions of various developmental programmes was to be the block. The committee recommended that "As far as possible the block should be treated as administrative unit of development departments with one unified set up". In this set up the Block Development Officer is to be the captain of the team of the extension staff at the block level. For ensuring necessary co-ordination between the Panchayat Samitis, a Zilla Parishad should be constituted consisting of the president of these samitis, MLAs and MPs representing the areas and the district level officer. The collector will be its chairman and one of his officers will act as secretary. The task of the Zilla Parishad will be mainly to ensure co-ordination between Panchayat Samitis falling under its jurisdiction, while the functions of a Panchayat Samiti would include all types of development in all activities. It will also have powers to approve the budget of village Panchayats. The functions of the village Panchayats will be both municipal and developmental. Certain functions would be obligatory, while others might be with the consent of the Panchayat Samiti. Further, the village Panchayat will act as an agency of the Panchayat Samitis in executing any schemes of development or other activities. Thus the functions of village Panchayats covered activities relating to agricultural production, animal husbandry, co-operatives, minor irrigation projects, village industries, primary education, local communications, medical relief, health and sanitation which have been recognized as developmental functions and maintenance of the roads, street lights and sanitation, etc, have been included in the municipal functions.

Today almost the entire country is covered by the system of democratic decentralization known as the Panchayati Raj. A beginning in this direction was made in Rajasthan on Gandhi Jayanti day in 1959. At present Panchayat Raj in our country is a three-tier structure with village Panchayats at the village level, Panchayat Samiti at the block level, and Zilla Parishad at the district level. The state Governments of various
states are free to make some alterations in the organizational structure to meet their local needs.

5.4 Functions of Panchayat:

The Mukherjee & Bandopadhya (MB) Committee report has argued that Panchayats in West Bengal are yet to grow as institution of self government. The report said that Panchayats in West Bengal do not have adequate functional and financial autonomy. Secondly, at present Panchayats have the functions and the developmental department staffs. Self governing Panchayats with wider functions and almost the entire district bureaucracy to look after, will need strong administrative support. Thirdly, autonomy needs self reliance. But Panchayats performance in this regard is not promising. Fourthly, funds are developed for developmental purposes only and Panchayats get only a fraction of these funds directly. Fifthly, if self-government means measured autonomy for the Panchayats, to that extent the functions of the government must diminish.

5.4.1 Power, Functions and Duties:

The powers, functions and duties of each tier have been laid down in the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973. The duties of Panchayat bodies are broadly classified into obligatory, discretionary and assigned duties. Obligatory duties are those which panchayats are required to perform under the law, while discretionary duties may be attended to when the situation so needs. Assigned duties relate to programmes specifically authorize to Panchayats for monitoring and or implementing with full financial assistance. Large scale assignment of such programmes have made the panchayats, vital organs of the government deeply involved with Rural Development.

Gram panchayats have obligatory duties generally related to sanitation, conservancy, public health, water supply, rural roads and other local developmental works. Their discretionary duties include lighting, afforestation, marketing, storage of agricultural inputs and production etc. Gram panchayats have been given specific powers in epidemic control, removal of water pollution, maintenance of public path-ways, water-ways, etc. Gram panchayat also have the power to impose taxes on lands and buildings and trades, callings and employments apart from laving fees on registration of vehicles and for providing sanitary arrangements in melas, fairs, etc. Gram Panchayats also have powers to manage public properties, etc. allotted to it by the state Government or by the higher tiers of Panchayat bodies. In addition, as
already explained, Gram Panchayats can perform such other functions as are assigned to it by state Government. At present the major assigned programmes implemented through Gram-Panchayats are N.R.E.P and maintenance of spot sources of drinking water.

Panchayat Samitis have powers to undertake schemes related to development of agriculture, livestock, cottage-industries, co-operatives, rural credit, water supply, irrigation, public health and sanitation, Communication, primary and adult education, social welfare, etc. They are also authorized to adopt measures for relief of the distressed. They may make discretionary grants for Gram Panchayats or schools, Public institutions, etc. They may also manage any public property entrusted to them by the state Government or the Zilla Parishad. As a superior tier, Panchayat Samitis have the authority to exercise general power of supervision over Gram Panchayats, give directions and inspect schemes or programmes implemented by Gram Panchayats.

They have the authority to examine and sanction budget estimates of Gram Panchayats and to co-ordinate developmental works implemented by Gram Panchayats. Panchayat Samitis are also authorized to grant license for any rural market and to cancel license for certain offensive and dangerous trades. Apart from such license fees, Panchayat Samitis are authorized to levy tolls in respect of ferries, bridges and roads and fees for registration of vehicles and for sanitary arrangements at fairs, melas, etc. Subject to the approval of the state Government, Panchayat Samitis may borrow money from Financial Institutions. Like Gram Panchayats, Panchayat-Samitis may also implement programmes assigned to them by the state Government. At present the major assigned programmes implemented through panchayat samities are Rural Water Supply, Rural Housing, relief works, distribution of gratuitous relief, IRDP, TRYSEM, distribution of minikits, training of fish farmers, marketing outlets for cottage and small scale industry's products, old age pension, widow pension, Farmer's Pension etc.

Zilla parishads have, more or less, the same powers for execution of schemes as Panchayat Samitis. They are also authorized to adopt measures for relief of the distressed. They may make grants-in-aid to Panchayat Samitis, Gram Panchayats and Schools, Public Institutions, etc. They are authorized to manage or maintain any work of public utility under their control or imposed on them by the State Government. As the highest tier, Zilla Parishads exercise general powers of supervision over Panchayat
Sami ties and Gram Panchayats within the district. They may issue directions to Panchayat Samitis or Gram Panchayats and inspect any scheme implemented by them. They have the power to examine and sanction budget estimates of Panchayat Samitis and also have the power to co-ordinate developmental works of Panchayat Samitis within the district. Zilla Parishads also have the power to advise the State Government on all matters related to developmental works among Gram Panchayats and Panchayat Samitis. Like Panchayat Samities, Zilla Parishads may also levy toll on ferries, roads and bridges and fees for registration of boats and vehicles as also for providing sanitary arrangements at fairs and melas. Zilla Parishads have the power to grant license for any fair or mela and collect license fee. Zilla Parishads may also borrow money from the State Government or from Financial Institutions with previous sanction of the State Government. As in the other tiers, there are assigned programmes implemented through Zilla Parishads, the major ones being RLEGP and BIG, NREP schemes.

Zilla Parishads and Panchayat Samitis function through Sthayee Samitis (Standing committees) which have the powers to monitor and review the progress of developmental works within the relevant sectors. Departmental officers of the specific departments have been made members of these Sthayee Samitis. For co-ordination of functions between different Sthayee Samitis and for monitoring of activities of the lower tier of Panchayat bodies separate committees called Samanway Samities (Coordination Committees) have been set up in all Panchayat Samities and Zilla Parishads by an amendment of the statute a legislative enactment.

5.4.2 Panchayats and Land Reforms:

Panchayats in West Bengal have been deeply committed to Land Reforms from the outset. In fact, wide ranging Land Reforms measures over the period 1967-71 had swept the state ever before Panchayat reconstitution was even attempted. This has been held by many to be a precondition for successful decentralization through panchayats. From this, the Panchayats inherited a Pro-Poor attitude which was, in turn, a base for successful deployment of Panchayats in Anti-Poverty Programmes.

Many studies have pointed out the domination of the land-poor classes in West Bengal Panchayats. Panchayats have, from the outset taken keen interest in unearthing ‘benami’ or illegally held land. This enhanced both vesting of land to the state and its subsequent redistribution- in both of which West Bengal heads the list of the states of India. In a bold move, the state Government abolished the nominated Block Level
Land Reforms Advisory Committees and replaced them by Standing Committees. Since then, Panchayat members and Land Reforms administration have been working jointly in distributing vested lands and in recording of share-croppers or ‘bargadars’.

5.4.3 Panchayats versus poverty:

The Pro-poor attitude of the panchayats made them an ideal delivery system for the anti-poverty programmes. Involvement of the Panchayats and their present class background have ensured that the benefits flow only to the intended target groups. Quantity and quality-wise, the Programmes implemented through Panchayats have been reviewed by many official and non-official agencies and these have been highly acclaimed. With time, Panchayats have forged closer links with all target group oriented programmes and we face future challenges confidently.

The first major employment programme assigned to the Panchayats for implementation was the “Food For Work” programme launched in 1977. The Food For Work programme was largely assigned to Gram Panchayats but certain reconstructional works were entrusted to Panchayat Samiti in view of the technical difficulties involved.

‘Food For Work’ Started in 1977-78, continued till December 14, 1980 when it was converted into the National Rural Employment Programme (NREP) under instructions of the Government of India.

Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEG) was launched during 1983-84 as a supplement to NREP.

Work under Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) also started throughout the state in 1980-81 through the Panchayats. In this system, the DRDA serves only as the funding and monitoring agency. Another innovation is the induction of the Sabhadhipati of the Zilla Parishad as Chairman, DRDA. It has been seen that better selection of beneficiaries, selection of more appropriate down to earth schemes and better return on investments in the state under IRDP. The lion’s share of the credit, for this should go to the Panchayats.

5.4.4 Panchayats and Planning:

Under the West Bengal Panchayats Act, Panchayat Samities and Zilla Parishad have the authority to draw up development plans for their respective jurisdictions. To make the planning a little more broad-based, however, a Block Planning Committee has been set up with the sabhadhipati as Chairman and all block-level functionaries as members. The BPC draws up; the Block Plan and submits it to the district level.
Though there is a higher body—the District Planning and Co-ordination Council, chaired by the District magistrate, this body is a purely formal sanctioning authority and the DPC is the major planning body. At the State level, the State Planning Board examines and interacts with the district plans but in purely advisory capacity. Thus, the initiative rests with the organization planning machinery and the composition of the machinery, ensuring that there is no conflict between the DPC and Zilla Parishad.

Since Panchayat bodies are largely funded by the government through grants-in-aid, they are susceptible to audit control. The State Government has set up an elaborate audit system with the help of a new Audit and Accounts organization. Statutory annual audit as well as running audit is being done and financial discipline is ensured.

The state Government has the powers of inspection and officials at appropriate levels have been given such powers. There are also powers of suspension of resolutions and powers of removal of office-bearers or members as well as powers of suppression of Panchayat bodies. Such powers have, however, been used very sparingly as the State Government, on principle, nurtured the Panchayat bodies to build up a movement.

5.4.5 Retrospects and prospects:

The evolution of the Panchayat system has now continued for thirty years and can be considered to have attained maturity. The system built up in the state has been widely acclaimed as one, that has been given the most wide-ranging powers to the people’s representatives. It is not claimed that the system is infallible. Many faults have been detected and corrective measures have been applied. After six successive Panchayat general elections, the time has come to consolidate the gains and detect the faults of the system and, with an ability to do so, depends the future prosperity of the teeming millions.

5.5 STRUCTURE OF PANCHAYAT SYSTEM IN WEST BENGAL:

The present structure of Panchayati Raj in the state has three tiers which are organically linked—Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad. Each tier has its own set of functionaries and its own administrative structure which commensurate with its statutory responsibilities.
The Gram Panchayat is the lowest tier of Panchayati Raj—corresponding to a group of villages which constitute the Gram Sabha. On an average there are 12 villages in each Gram Panchayat and the maximum population is 15000. (5000 in hill areas). The number of members in each Gram Panchayat (G.P.) varies from 7 to 25 depending on the total number of voters. All the seats are directly filled up by election and there is a further provision for co-option of two women and two Scheduled Caste / Scheduled Tribe members if these categories are under-representation. Such Co-option is only possible according to the choice of the Gram Panchayat, to prevent arbitrary use of state power.

The Gram Panchayat is headed by a Pradhan assisted by an Upa-pradhan. All executive powers is vested on the Pradhan. For bank operations, however, joint signatures of any two of Pradhan, Upapradhan and another members (as per resolution of the Gram Panchayat) are required. This checks any possibility of fraudulent withdrawal of funds. By an amendment in 1985, it has been made mandatory for Gram Panchayats to convene two meetings of the Gram Sabha every year. This makes the Gram Panchayat directly accountable to the populace it serves. The Gram Panchayat is served by a full-time secretary who looks after the office work and multi-purpose job worker called the Job Assistance who is technically trained. In addition, there are Tax Collectors and Rural Police (Chowkidaris/Dafadars) who are part time employees.
THREE TIER ORGANIZATIONAL LINKAGE

SOURCE: DEPARTMENT OF PANCHAYATS AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT
GOVERNMENT OF WEST BENGAL. 2002-2003

Fig : 5.2
The Panchayat Samiti is the middle tier at block level. Panchayat Samiti members are directly elected from constituencies which are parts of the constituent Gram Panchayats, in addition to all Gram Panchayat Pradhan and MLAs/M.Ps., are ex-officio members. There is also a provision for co-option of two women and two Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe members in case of under representation of these categories.

The Panchayat Samiti is headed by a Sabhapati and Sahakari-Sabhapati, who are elected by the members. The concerned Block Development Officer is the Executive Officer of the Panchayat Samiti while Extension Officer for Panchayats is the Secretary. The Panchayat Samiti has only one clerk and a peon as its direct employee but the entire block staff of the C.D. (Community Development) set up has been placed at the disposal of the samiti. In addition, extension officers and staff of certain departments at the block are also available to the samiti. The Zilla Parishad is the topmost tier; Each Zilla Parishad has members directly elected from constituencies which number two per block. In addition all Panchayat samiti sabhapatris and MLAs/MPs are ex-officio members. There is also a provision for co-opting two women and two Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe members in case of under representation of these categories.

![Organizational Structure of the Zilla Parishad](image)

The Zilla Parishad is headed by the Sabhadhipati and Sahakari-Sabhadhipati, who are elected by the members. The District Magistrate serves as the Executive Officer of the
Zilla Parishad and one full-time Additional Executive Officer of the rank of Additional District Magistrate is at the disposal of the Zilla Parishad. A senior state civil service officer serves as the secretary. Technical officers of the rank of Executive Engineer and below have also been placed at the disposal of Zilla Parishads. In addition, each Zilla Parishad has its own clerical, technical and accounts set up.

Zilla Parishads and Panchayat Samitis act through functional standing committees headed by karmadhakshas. Each Standing Committee has a departmental officer as its secretary and has powers of implementing, reviewing and monitoring sectoral programmes. There are now nine standing committees (Sthayee Samitis) such as:

- Artha, Sanstha, Unnayan O Parikalpana Sthayee Samiti (Finance, Establishment, Development & Planning).
- Bon O Bhumisanskar Sthayee Samiti (Forest & Land reforms).
- Krishi, Sech O Samabay Sthayee Samiti. (Agriculture, Irrigation & Co-operation)
- Purta Karya Sthayee Samiti (Public works)
- Janaswasthya Sthayee Samiti (Public Health)
- Siksha Sthayee Samiti (Education)
- Khudra Shilpa, Tran O Janakalyan Sthayee Samiti (Cottage & Small Scale Industries, Relief and Social Welfare)
- Matsya O Pranisampad Bikash Sthayee Samiti (Fisheries and Animal Resource)
- Khadya O sarbaraha Sthayee Samiti (Food and Supplies).

All these committees function under Panchayat Samities and their functioning enhance the prospects of rural development.
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73

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