9. ROLE OF PANCHAYATS IN WEST BENGAL

Panchayat can be called as a watchdog of the village and pivotal agency for unleashing comprehensive rural development. As a result, success in the realm of land reforms can be appreciated from the success in the working of panchayat. The pattern of implementation of land reform measures can be visualized mainly form two contents viz., the progress in the recording of the names of the Bargadars, a programme known as ‘Operation Barga’ and secondly, from the total quantum of vested land distributed to the marginal and landless farmers.

It may be agreed with little doubt that the Government of West Bengal in the recent past has accomplished a relatively praiseworthy task in the agrarian front by revitalizing the age old panchayats and thereby making it the chief agency in the overall task of rural development. If the electoral success of the ruling force in West Bengal is takes into consideration, then it can be safely argued that panchayat in West Bengal has succeeded, to an extent, in delivering the desired goods to the people dwelling in the rural countryside.

The Britishers destroyed the traditional village artisan and cottage industry in order to further their own interest and made land a salable commodity by introducing the *Permanent Settlement Act* of 1793. As a result, the process of pauperization of the peasantry started for the first time in India and the country took the path of capitalistic
development and brought in drastic transformation in the entire socio-economic and political fabric in the then India. For this reason, Karl Marx categorized the British rule as “the only genuine social revolution in the Indian soil”.

The Britishers apart from furthering their economic interest also tried to build a solid social base in the form of zamindars to act as a feedback to carry on the rule of tyranny and oppression over the large army of peasant folk. As a result, the newly-created zamindars, the product of Permanent Settlement Act, were made the overall masters over the village communities. Armed with the power of hereditary ownership rights over land, after the enactment of the Permanent Settlement Act, the entire socio-economic fabric of the then Bengal Presidency got completely transformed, in tune with capitalist trends. Against the dual onslaught of the British masters and native zamindars, the peasantry of Bengal began to unite and consolidate themselves and soon began to burst out into a series of revolts, which were both anti-British (anti-imperialist) and anti-zamindar (anti-feudal) in character. The Wahabi, Farazi, Kol, Bhil, Fakir, Sanyasi uprisings etc. are the few examples of peasants’ insurrections having both the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal temper. These recurrent movements helped to the formation of consciousness and assertiveness among the peasants in Bengal.

In the third decade of 20th century the ‘Bangiya Pradeshi Krishak Sabha’ (BPKS) was formed and under its leadership the peasants fought unitedly, to the true heritage of anti-feudal and anti-imperialist character, cutting across political affiliation, values, beliefs, and religions with the ultimate aim of ending the long-drawn anti-people British rule in India & thereby eradicating the evils of zamindary system.

Thus from the historic past the peasantry of Bengal was somewhat united and consolidated and succeeded to an extent to resist the severest form of onslaught over them which succeeded in creating a revolutionary potential within themselves. It may be described as that the panchayat in West Bengal is the index of strength of the rebelling peasantry.

It is not merely that the political will of the present ruling front in West Bengal is enough to create this pro-poor panchayat system as the effective pillar of democracy and a meaningful means of decentralized planning system on the basis of popular
participation. Rather, it is due to the consciousness and assertiveness of peasantry that the panchayats are acting according to the wishes of the rural have-nots.

The long legacy and heritage of peasant resistance and recurrent popular upsurge “from below” have made the sub-alterns of Bengal, a more formidable and potential class of oppressed than it is found in other states. Moreover, for sufficient consolidation of the small peasantry and due to the sustained peasant movement for enforcing different land laws in independent India, the skewed pattern of landholding system was effectively curtailed thereby paving way for creating an egalitarian socio-economic fabric in West Bengal. In other words, panchayats in West Bengal has been fairly successful in playing a pivotal role in importing the overall task of rural development, with land reforms as a major component.

In the next section, I give a brief description of the organisation and functioning of the panchayat system in West Bengal:

**9A. Organisational Structure of Panchayats**

The panchayat system as a form of local self-government has been embodied as an ‘aspiration’ in the 1950 Constitution. In practice it was devolved to the states for implementation [Datta and Datta 1995]. Almost no action was taken on this matter by any State till the late seventies and early eighties when opposition parties were elected to power in some states, notably West Bengal and Karnataka. After a decade of political violence and upheavals, the Left Front (LF), a combine of leftist parties led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (known as the CPI(M)) came to power in 1977 on the promise of vigorous agrarian and political reform.

Its agrarian reform programme involved forceful implementation of existing tenancy laws that gave security of tenure and a legally stipulated minimum crop-share to tenants and distributing landholdings above the legally permitted limits from landowners to small and marginal farmers as well as the landless rural poor. In terms of its achievement on both these counts it is by far the leading state in the country [Gazdar and Sengupta 1995, p 136].

Its political reform programme consisted of empowering the *three-tiered Panchayat* system with a *gram panchayat (village council)* for a cluster of villages at the
bottom, a *Panchayat Samity* covering the area of a block, and a *Zilla Parishad* for the district. Table-1 gives an idea about the various *Panchayat* units and their area of operation. The lowest level of electoral unit in the *Panchayat* system in West Bengal is the *Gram Panchayat* or village council which covers around 10-12 villages totaling around 10,000 residents. In the 1998 elections, there was 3,226 Gram Panchayats or village councils in West Bengal with 49,199 members. An electorate composed of around 700 voters elects each member. This village council is headed by a ‘*Pradhan*’ (chief) and an ‘*Upa Pradhan*’ (deputy chief) elected from amongst themselves by the gram panchayat members. At the ground level, the village council is a very powerful and influential body, wielding effective control over substantial resources and political power.

Above the village council, there is the *Panchayat Samity* (PS) at the block level. Each *Panchayat Samity* covers, on an average, about 115 villages and a rural population of about 1,50,000. In 1998, there were 329 *Panchayat Samities* in West Bengal with a total of 8515 members, all elected by the people. An elected sabhapati or (president) heads the PS. The Block Development Officer (BDO) is an executive officer to the *Panchayat Samity*. This provides a direct linkage of the *Panchayats* with the administration. It also allows a popularly elected body to exercise some control over the administration. At the highest level, there is a *Zilla Parishad* (ZP), one for each district. In 1998, there were 16 ZPs with 873 elected members. The head of the ZP, the sabhadhipati, enjoys the rank of a minister of the State Government.

The Panchayats have become the ubiquitous political institution in rural West Bengal through which all kinds of developmental programmes are now being executed in the state (*Ref : G.K. Lieten, Development, Devolution and Democracy, Sage Publications*).

It would be relevant here to mention that the *district planning committee* (the first of its kind in West Bengal) of Medinipur visualized the whole process of development by putting the poor peasants at the centre of all kinds of planning process. The *DPC* published a small monograph entitled “Village based district planning process : an outline of methodology” in September, 1985, that described and analyzed in detail how relevant socio-economic information on every village could be collected by the panchayat workers for using them in this micro-level planning process. Among many pro-poor
planning elements, the document gave much importance to the (i) identification of the nature and amount of agricultural land as well as their improvement through ecologically sustainable use and (ii) exploration of the possibilities of developing industries in terms of local demand, raw material and/or skill. To quote from the monograph: *Apart from human beings, the most important wealth of the village is its land. It is used for locating residence, for cultivation, for planting trees, for forests, for ponds, and other water bodies, for roads, for schools, markets etc.* ... Again it is crucially necessary to know whether, why and how much of cultivable land of your village has either been kept fallow or have not been properly cultivated. What type of families owned these lands? (*Ref: District Planning Committee-1985*).

### Structures and Plans of the Panchayats

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*Source: Panchayat and Rural Dev. Board, Govt. of W.B*

### 9B. Functions of the Panchayats

The West Bengal Government has given top priority to land reform in their policies of rural development. The land reform programme has three phases: (a) enrolment of the names of share croppers (b) redistribution of ceiling-surplus vested land among the landless peasants (c) Arrangements of institutional credit for poor and marginal farmers under these programmes.

All these have been taken into consideration with the main task of eradicating the feudal system. The law for the enrolment of the names of share croppers was in existence for quite a long period of time. When the Left Front Govt. came in to the power in 1977, the newly elected panchayat members were also engaged in the enrolment programme.
Some share-croppers were also elected in the Panchayats. The new Panchayat was composed of the former oppressed classes like bargadars, small peasants etc. New programmes were undertaken in order to speed up and complete the enrolment of sharecroppers. It was known as ‘Operation Barga’.

Panchayats thus became associated with the process of land redistribution. A Permanent Committee was formed to look into the process of enrolment at Zila parishad level and Panchayat Samity level. This permanent committee issued the probable list of Pattadars. The joint patta system has been implemented successfully in West Bengal with the help of Government and Panchayat.

A very unique and large-scale experiment in economic and political decentralisation was introduced in the late seventies in the Indian state of West Bengal. The provision and maintenance of all local public goods and implementation of most local public projects were handed over to formally elected village councils (Gram Panchayats). Previously, these functions were discharged by bureaucrats working under state and central governments, a system that received widespread criticism as inefficient, corrupt and inequitable. The historical roots of this system go back to the colonial period.

While education, health and poverty alleviation programmes take up a fair share of the budgets of the central and the state governments, a rather small fraction of the benefits trickles down to the intended beneficiaries because of corruption at various levels of the government. It is common to observe the serious problem of absenteeism of salaried teachers in rural public schools and of doctors in rural public health clinics [Bardhan 1996, pp 141].

The experience of West Bengal under the Panchayat system stands in sharp contrast with the other states in India and together with land reform it has been credited for playing an important role in the impressive economic turnaround of the state since the mid 1980s [Rawal and Madhura Swaminathan 1998].

It is the first and only major state which has had timely panchayat elections on a party basis regularly every five years since 1978, a year after the Left Front government was elected to power in the state. The Left Front government in West Bengal has not postponed or rescheduled Panchayat elections even when electoral compulsions dictated otherwise unlike other states, like Kerala and Karnataka [Mathew 2001].
Numerous studies have showed that for anti-poverty and employment generation programmes that are funded by the federal government and therefore provides a basis for inter-state comparison, West Bengal stood out in terms of reaching target groups and being relatively free of corruption [Gazdar and Sengupta 1997].

In West Bengal a particular component of a set of recently introduced reforms of the Panchayat system that is aimed precisely at addressing this concern– the introduction of mandatory village constituency (Gram Sansad) meetings. These are public meetings held twice every year at the lowest possible level of the Panchayat system participated by elected members of the village council and their constituents. The goal of the meeting is for villagers to: (i) discuss local needs, suggest new programmes and allocate existing funds among competing needs; (ii) discuss selection of beneficiaries of anti-poverty programmes and logistical issues concerning sanctioned schemes (e.g., location of an irrigation project); and (iii) monitor and review the performance of elected representatives regarding the implementation of public projects and use of public funds. They also have access to the accounts of expenditure and are able to question elected officials for the use of public funds and implementation of public projects. Except for some anecdotal accounts, little is known about who participates in these meetings, what issues are discussed, and whether women and members of backward castes actively participate in the proceedings.

References:
2. ibid.