

Development, social transformation of Medinipur through Panchayati Raj

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Abstract

As far as Panchayati raj institutions are concerned, they play a significant role in the development of primary education, health, agricultural developments, women and child development, women participation in local government, etc. The Panchayati raj institutions are important systems that play a vital role in rural development and management of all spheres. Panchayati raj institutions are the backbone of village/rural development, which inculcate the sense of rural development and rural management for sustainable development. The various programmes for rural development such as basic primary education, health centres, cottage industries, agriculture development, agriculture marketing, transportations, and other village developments run under the panchayat raj system/ village developments authority. Panchayati raj institutions also work for rural development and protect the environment. Panchayati raj institutions play a vital role in the development of primary education is an important tool that cultivates the sense of responsibility and cares among students and people towards rural development, how to develop the rural area and how to sustain the rural growth? The sustainable development of rural can be done only in a healthy environment and through quality education. Without quality education and a healthy environment, sustainable development is impossible.

Keywords: Social transformation; tribe; political orientation; interaction pattern

Introduction:

People's Participation as understood today in the context of democratic local government is different from its meaning in the 1970s, when the concept meant only involving citizens as users of state-delivered beneficiary programmes (Patnaik, 2005). There is a significant shift in the discourse of people's participation in the recent past. It is now an integral part of all development initiatives of both national governments and international development agencies. Since 1990s, several countries have witnessed transformations of administrative and planning systems in favour of more people-centric policies. The immense importance of participatory development in this era has moved this development paradigm from margin to mainstream (Williams, 2004) and served important economic, institutional and legitimating functions for a mainstream vision of development (Rahnema, 1997). During the 1990s, many countries, including the Philippines, India, Bolivia, Tanzania, and Uganda, amended their legislation, enabling them to create new spaces for people's participation. A process of participatory development planning was designed according to people's needs. It is now widely acknowledged that wider public participation improves the government's ability to discern public interest and makes public officials more accountable (Patnaik, 2005).

India has adopted decentralized and participatory governance system since the inception of the five-year plans. The government practices the effort to promote decentralized governance through promoting and strengthening the Panchayati Raj system. The need for the Panchayati Raj system of participatory governance is traced as far back as to the recommendations of the Balwantrai Mehta committee in 1957. The committee recommended a three-tier Panchayat

system at district, block and village levels. The National Development Council approved the recommendations of the Mehta Committee in January 1958 and suggested that each state should implement this as best suited to its own particular conditions. Although this recommendation is considered as the stepping stone of the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) in India, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, in 1992, is said to have formalized such an institution by giving PRI the constitutional provision to constitute a three-tier panchayat system in each state. West Bengal adopted three-tier Panchayat system in 1973, even before the passage of 73rd Constitutional Amendment. Unlike most other states in India, West Bengal stands apart in the context of Panchayati Raj in more than one sense. Apart from regular Panchayat elections in the state, several other steps, like three-tier structure, representation of women and backward section in local governance, initiative for participatory planning etc. have been taken up to strengthen participation in rural government.

Given this backdrop, this paper is an attempt to assess the existing participatory practices in rural West Bengal and draws implications there-from. Accordingly, the paper is divided into five sections. Section 2 gives a brief historical account of the decentralization process in West Bengal. Section 3 discusses the role of the 'invited space' in the functioning of the PRI in West Bengal to strengthen participation. Section 4 delineates the methodology of the present study. Section 5 assesses the existing scenario concerning participatory practices in West Bengal, confining the analysis to Gram Panchayats (GP) only, the lower rung of the PRI. Section 6 attempts to draw implications of the findings and concludes the study.

IMPLICATIONS OF TRIBAL SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION:

As it is, social transformation among the tribals follows a more or less directed course. It is doubtful whether economic prosperity could be a leveller. Moreover, the type of economic prosperity we are used to and how it is to be achieved disturb the co-operative base of the tribal social system. At Kamalalota village the Santals worked in the agricultural fields of Buddhadeb Singh, the Bhumij Ex-M.L.A., on payment while the Santals employed the Lodhas for the same purpose. Paid labour as controlled at different levels. A preliminary survey conducted in a Kora village near Midnapore town revealed that the limited few who could manage to get a permanent worker's job in the adjacent Tata Metallic Works had a greater share of agricultural land and had a more easy access with the panchayat leaders. By selling off a portion of agricultural land they could acquire the minimum necessary skill by gaining political access to make an entry into the field of industrial labour. Those who were landless or had very small agricultural holdings could not reach that level. That was the case with Binu Mundi, a landless agricultural labour, who could not improve his lot even though he managed to get a job of an earthfiller at the Tata Metallic Works. The job was a purely temporary one meant for a very limited time period and he was also in no position to stake a claim for a higher-grade job for which he did not qualify. His accessibility partly conditioned his capability to resource base and power base. The story of Binu Mundi could be the story of many others like him. Their story has not yet ended. It must be admitted that turning forest-dwellers and agricultural settlers into wage earners and industrial labourers may not always go to the advantage of the group as a whole, more so, when it involves the question of political manipulation. A change of this nature is a lopsided one, which weakens the bonds that hold the society together. The process of weakening is rather faster than the rate of increase in the economic options to a less differentiated tribal community.

The tribals have also entered the field of power relations in a significant way and have even formulated an 'ideology of power' often supported by the traditional kinship relations. In a

situation of changing power relations social transformations are bound to be unequal. In the history of India as a nation such a situation was prevalent immediately after the transfer of power from the British Government to the independent India. As Bose (1967) observes, “Under these circumstances, not only were the social transformations unequal, but eventually they led to significant inequalities and tensions in the political field when power came to Indian people either through British Constitutional reforms, or as a result of massive political action undertaken by the people of India in general.” In other words, social transformation among the tribes follows the same trend as was evident during India’s long struggle to attain a national status.

The observation is no less valid even today. In the context of Midnapore and adjoining areas belonging to the neighbouring states, which cannot possibly be separately treated, the whole process of social transformation deserves to be seen from this angle. As has been demonstrated by history time and again, increased contact, the influence of the general process of modernisation directed through a process of politicisation cannot always stop ‘communal sub-nationalism from making headway. On a number of occasions, social transformation proves to be counterproductive to those who try to see it primarily as a means of social control and consolidation of political authority. One needs to keep in mind the recent rise of an extremist Naxalite organization in the name of ‘Ganayuddha’ in West Midnapore in this context. All will agree that it is not just one of those freak occurrences.

Panchayats as instruments of social and economic progress:

The National Panchayati Raj Day is celebrated every year on April 24. The Panchayati Raj Institutions play a major role in people's socio and economic development at the grassroots level. Several awards are given to panchayats in different States on this occasion to encourage a spirit of competition among them.

India has had a long tradition of panchayats in one form or another. In the olden days, the village inhabitants used to meet together under the leadership of village elders to discuss and resolve village problems. This system displayed the spirit of participatory democracy. Mahatma Gandhi advocated for ‘Gram Swaraj’ and argued for the handing over certain powers to the villagers.

Gram Panchayats

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment passed by the Parliament in 1993 was a pioneering step in decentralising political power in India. It required the Indian States to enact laws for the creation of the Panchayat Raj institutions. As a result, Gram Panchayats (GPs) get constituted after conducting elections more or less on a regular basis in the States. However, one or two instances can be found where elections have been delayed.

The 2.5 lakh Gram Panchayats in the country have been entrusted to provide basic services in the villages and plan for local economic development. The decision-making process of the panchayats is such that the Gram Sabha (GS) discusses the development work plans of the GP called Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) and the elected representatives execute the plans. Formulation of GPDP improves efficiency of public services.

Since all eligible village voters can participate in the Gram Sabha, it is a channel to include the less privileged section of society and ensure their participation in the village level governance wherein they can advocate their developmental aspirations. This bottom-up approach is meant to reflect felt need of various stakeholders. GS is a vital as a decision-making body at the bottom. This process reflects the practice of direct democracy at the village level while the governance system at the state and union level is indirect or representative. The relationship between the

elected representatives of the panchayat and gram sabha is visualised to be similar to that of the cabinet and assembly.

It is observed that attendance in GS is not high in most of the GPs except on special occasions like Gandhi Jayanti when the authorities undertake special drive for attendance. This is one way of slowly generating larger public interest on self-governance.

Admittedly, local level governance is still in the evolution process in India. We need to encourage the process to play a more effective role. Already visible signs of change can be seen in most of the villages in terms of village roads, water supply, sanitation, storm water drainage, and street-lighting. While connectivity of one village with another is beyond the jurisdiction of a GP, construction and maintenance of roads within the village is the responsibility of the GP. One can now walk without touching mud at least in some parts within a village and GPs are under pressure to construct roads in the left-out parts. This is exactly as it should be in a functional democracy.

The composition of elected representatives like Sarpanch and ward members of the GPs involves various social groups. The government has provision for capacity building of the representatives to facilitate the effective functioning of the GPs. Training usually takes place at the State Rural Development Institutes or district or block level local body offices on their roles and responsibilities, budget preparation, project execution, and accounting.

Village development:

The overall impact of the FFC grant was a mixed one in the above study. Many areas needed further attention for enhancing efficiency and effective delivery of services. Overall, close to 80% of the FFC grants from 2015-16 to 2018-19 were utilized in the selected GPs. Road construction and drinking water were top two priority activities.

Most of the GPs are found reluctant to raise own source of revenue (OSR) in the selected sample. However, some GPs can generate OSR in the form of tax or non-tax revenue by renting shops, house tax, and clean water fees. GPs in Assam, Kerala, and West Bengal have more varied sources of own revenue. But, the unwillingness by local bodies to collect potential tax revenue in most of the GPs needs a change in the mind set and some amount of persuasion.

While convergence of various development programmes has been a priority for the government, it is mostly conspicuous by its absence in the programmes undertaken by the GPs. While roads in two different patches are being constructed utilising two different funding sources (e.g., FFC and MPLAD), it is difficult to find one large activity with funding from multiple sources. Different guidelines by different departments were cited as a major constraint for lack of convergence of activities. Separate accountability to different departments is also a problem and provision of accountability to a consortium of funding agencies can overcome this.

The line departments cannot carry out all village level development programmes in the absence of local level initiative and participation. The local people must have a sense of belonging in the schemes. Involvement of GPs in a coordinating role in various projects of line departments would be a way forward for convergence.

Some GPs do not have their building and they share space with schools, anganwadicentre and other places. There are also GPs which have own building but without basic facilities like toilets, drinking water, and electricity connection. Several GPs are having internet connections through broadband and some under e-mitra scheme, but they are not functioning in many cases. For data entry purposes, panchayat official need to visit Block Development offices.

Solid waste management and waste disposal, as well as overall cleanliness, still need considerable improvements. It is heartening that there is greater thrust on providing an effective and sustainable solid and liquid waste management system in the recently launched Swacch Bharat (Grameen) Phase-II. Likewise, it is also gratifying that the integrated portal for planning, monitoring, accounting and auditing function of the Panchayat called e-Gramswaraj, which is being launched today, includes a user-friendly mobile app that readily provides all information on income and expenditure of GPs. It is suggested that Ministry of Panchayati Raj could design a system of comparative ranking of different GPs in a State. This could help build a competitive ecosystem at the grassroot level.

GPs are third tier in the democratic participation process by the citizens. The system should be strengthened for active participation by the rural community in Gram Sabha so that people can directly take part in the decision-making process and governance of the village

As we celebrate the National Gram Panchayat Day, we may remember that the success of democracy at the top requires that it is built from the bottom. GPs are increasingly going beyond their traditional civic functions and taking up more and more developmental responsibilities. No doubt, more challenges lie ahead for the little republics but they are now poised to overcome such challenges.

Panchayati Raj Institutions and Women Empowerment in West Bengal:

West Bengal has been selected to study the empowerment of women representatives in panchayats because it is at the forefront of the successful implementation of Panchayati Raj Institutions. It has implemented Panchayati Raj Institutions by holding elections to all the 3 tiers consistently from 1978 in every five years. The panchayat (at various levels) have also been assigned a large and substantial range of responsibilities that were earlier seen as under the purview of the district level bureaucracy. The West Bengal government took steps for one-third of seats for women participation in the panchayat bodies before the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act 1993 was passed. The West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act 1992 provided one third of the total seats in panchayat bodies for women. Prabhat Datta says that West Bengal is unique in the implementation of Panchayati Raj Institutions for three reasons. First, it was the first state in the country to go in for one third reservation of seats for women. Secondly, the objective conditions for effective and real participation were created through land reforms as a result of which, unlike the other parts of the country, West Bengal had created history by making it possible on the part of the small marginal and landless farmers to get elected to the panchayat bodies. Panchayats in West Bengal are free from the clutches of the landed gentry and from upper-caste dominance ensuring free and fare participation of the deprived people such as scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and women at large way. Thirdly, West Bengal was the first state in the country to bring in through elections more women than that were stipulated in the legislation. In 1993 elections, about 35 percent of women were elected in Gram Panchayats (Dutta P. , 1995, p. 74). West Bengal is also unique in holding panchayat elections on a party basis for India's first time in 1978. There was considerable opposition to the involvement of political parties in local elections but the Communist Party of India- Marxist (CPI-M) and its allies preferred the official recognition of parties in the panchayats elections. They believed that the direct involvement of political parties in the Panchayat Institutions would make its leadership more disciplined and responsible in managing these institutions of rural democracy and could put

an end to the landed gentry and upper caste domination in Panchayati Raj Institutions (Mathew, 1995, p. 18).

Role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Development of Primary Education:

Panchayatiraj institutions are the backbone of village/rural development, which inculcate the sense of care of rural development and rural management for sustainable development. The various types of programmes for rural development such as basic primary education, health centres, cottage industries, agriculture development, agriculture marketing, transportations, and other village developments work under panchayatiraj system / village developments authority. Panchayatiraj institutions also work for the rural development and protection of the environment. Panchayatiraj institutions play a vital role in the development of villages especially primary education. Education is an important tool that cultivates the sense of responsibility among the people towards rural development, how to develop the village and its surroundings and how to sustain the village development?

Panchayati Raj Institutions are the main body of village local government that play a significant role in the development of the village, especially primary education, health, agricultural developments, women and child development, women participation in local government, etc. The Panchayatiraj institutions are important system which play a vital role in rural development and management of all spheres etc. Panchayatiraj institutions are the backbone of village/rural development which inculcate the sense of care of rural development and rural management for sustainable development. The various types of programmes for rural development such as basic primary education, health centres, cottage industries, agriculture development, agriculture marketing, transportations, and other village developments run under panchayatiraj system/ village developments authority. Panchayatiraj institutions also work for the rural development and protect the environment. Panchayatiraj institutions play a vital role in the development of primary education. Education is an important tool that cultivates the sense of responsibility and care among students and people towards rural development, how to develop the rural area, and how to sustain the rural development? The sustainable development of rural can be done only through healthy environment and quality education. Without quality education and healthy environment the sustainable development village/rural area is impossible. The Gram Panchayat/Gram Shabha totally controls the primary education. The members of Gramsabha play an active role in the activation and implementation of primary education. They play a very vital role in the development in primary education at village level. The Panchayatiraj Institutions play a very important role in enhancing primary education in eradicating illiteracy and fulfilling Universalization of Primary Education (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan-SSA). It is fact that Panchayatiraj Institutions play a very vital role in the enhancement of primary education.

Conclusions:

In the Midnapore district, Tamluk I and II, Ramanagr I and II, Sutahata I, Mohanpur and Egra are renowned for betel-vine farming. Government Si, Agricultural Universities, and Cooperatives all have important roles to play in improving this kind of farming, according to Prof. Gajendranath Si. I.R.D.P. of Midnapore has already recognised this and has lately extended loans to betel-vine growers since it needs a significant initial financial commitment. D.R.D.A, Nationalised Banks, and cooperatives may all provide loans to farmers who meet their criteria.. Either via the Panchayats or through the Industrial Officers at the Panchayat Samiti Level, direct government loans and subsidies may be given to the farmers. Panchayats may aid financial

institutions by choosing loan recipients and assisting farmers with loan repayment. Cooperatives are "Growers Organizations" that provide raw materials at affordable prices, remove marketing problems, ensure transportation facilities, pack and bleach. Cooperatives are "Growers Organizations". The government and agricultural universities may arrange for an agricultural 'package of practices' research and training, as well as popularising agriculture and its applications across the Midnapore district in general, to be created.

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