

CHAPTER-II

CHANGES IN THE STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONS OF PRIs IN WEST BENGAL SINCE INDEPENDENCE

2.1 A Profile of the State of West Bengal

When India became independent in 1947, 'Bengal' was partitioned between India and Pakistan. While Pakistan's share came to be called East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), India's share was called West Bengal. The State of West Bengal covers the bottleneck of India in the east stretching from the Himalayas in the north to the Bay of Bengal in the south. It is bounded on the north by Sikkim and Bhutan, on the east by Assam and Bangladesh, on the south by the Bay of Bengal and on the west by Orissa, Jharkhand, Bihar and Nepal. The total area of the State is 88752 sq. km. out of which the rural and urban areas are 85427.26 sq. km. and 3324.74 sq. km. respectively. In terms of area West Bengal's position is 12th in India.

As per the 2001 census, the total population of the State is 80176197 out of which the numbers of male and female are 41465985 and 38710212 respectively. The decadal growth rate of population is 17.77 (1991-2001) percent and the density of population (persons per sq. km.) is 903. Regarding total population, West Bengal is the 4th State in India, (excluding Union Territories). Sex ratio (females per 1000 males) is 934. Out of total population about 72 percent live in rural areas and the total number and percentage of the schedule caste population are about 1.90 crore and 23.02 percent respectively. Literacy rate of the State is 68.64 percent, for male it is 77.02 percent and for female it is 59.61 percent ¹.

Agriculture is the primary occupation in the State of West Bengal. The State's six agro-climatic zones offer an extensive and diversified variety of environmental conditions for the development of a variety of temperature, sub tropical and tropical produce to cater to market demands round the year. The importance of agriculture in the State's economy is reflected by its contribution of around 20 per cent to the total Net State Domestic Product. The employment support from the sector is 62.7 per cent of rural work force, and about 70 per cent dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. The

growth rate of this sector has plateaued over the years at 2 per cent in the 10th five year plan in the State. The State has also achieved significant growth in agriculture production over the past few years and is now among the country's top producers in a variety of agricultural produce. The State produces 7.35 per cent of total food grains in the country. Total cultivable land in the State is 56.07 lakh hectares which is about 64.57 per cent of the total geographical area of the State. In the 11th five year plan period, plans and programmes are being implemented for placing agriculture on a growth path beyond 4 per cent and to raise growth rate of agriculture and allied sector to around 5.5 per cent².

The index of industrial production (Base 1993-94 = 100) of West Bengal has been consistently rising from 154.8 in 2003-04 to 204.5 in 2008-09. Though the growth of the industrial sector started to slowdown in 2007-08, the overall growth during the year remained at 4 per cent. The industrial sector witnessed a sharp slowdown during 2008-09 as a consequence of successive shocks particularly in the global economic scenario. Thus at the close of the year 2008-09 the index of industrial production in West Bengal grew at 2 per cent³. Major industries in West Bengal include engineering, automobiles, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, aluminium, ceramics, jute, cotton textiles, tea, paper, leather, footwear, bicycle, dairy, poultry and timber-processing. Central Public Sector undertaking includes locomotive, cable, fertilizer, ship-building and ordnance. The State undertaking include tea, sugar, chemicals, photochemical, agro-textile, sugar beet, fruit and vegetable processing, electro medical and other allied industries (including mineral development). Coal and china clay are two important minerals being exploited.

The legislature is unicameral- the Legislative Assembly. The State is divided in 19 districts. The three-tier Panchayat system is with 3354 Gram Panchayat at base, 341 Panchayat Samitis at the Community block (intermediate) level and 18 Zilla (district) Parishads at the apex. The number of seats, in these three systems are 51201, 8576 and 724 respectively. West Bengal is the first State where 30 percent reservation of seats for women in the elected bodies was implemented. The Panchayat Acts as the agency for implementing development programmes (See Appendix).

2.2 Historical Perspective and Structural Frame of Panchayati Raj in West Bengal

Since the purpose of the study is to examine the patterns of finances of Panchayati Raj, it will be appropriate to know the origin and evolution of structural and functional

aspects of the PRIs in West Bengal to provide better understanding of the existing relations between the fund flow and the functions entrusted to those bodies. This will also further provide us an insight into its working and performance as institutions of self-governance.

2.2.1 Origin and Evolution

Statutorily constituted Panchayats were established in 1870 when the Bengal Village Chowkidari Act was passed. These Panchayats had no democratic character, being composed of persons nominated by the district collector or any subordinate officer chosen by him, with the sole purpose of levying and collecting Chowkidari (a tax paid to watch-men) for the maintenance of the village police.

On 18 May 1882, when Lord Ripon, the viceroy of India, had issued a resolution encouraging the setting up of local government, the impediments to true local government institutions within a colonial framework had been many. The bureaucracy had been apathetic towards sharing power, and the development of decentralised self-governing institutions through devolution of power had not found favour with the imperial rulers.

When a comprehensive scheme for setting up local government institutions was put forward through the Bengal Local Self-Government Act of 1885, it fell far short of the ideals set forth in the 1882 resolution. The Act had provided for a three-tier structure for rural Bengal. At the top, there was to be a district board having jurisdiction for the entire district, at the middle level, a local board covering a sub-division, and at the lowest level the union committee having jurisdiction over a union or a group of villages.

In 1919, the Bengal Village Self-Government Act was introduced. This Act represented the first experience with self-governing institutions for the rural people of the province. It was passed on the basis of the report of the Royal Commission of Decentralisation (1909) and the 1913 report of the District Administrative Committee.

The Act of 1919 had provided for the creation of unions consisting of a group of villages. Each union committee was to have an elected body known as the union board. The electorate was to consist of all adult males having residence within the union and paying local tax, i.e., union rates or cess. Thus it was a restricted electorate. Women were made eligible as voters only in 1950, after independence. Each union board had a

president and a vice-president elected by its members. The term of office of the members was four years.

The union boards were given a variety of functions. There were normal municipal functions, such as sanitation, conservancy, water supply, maintenance of roads or drains, or regulatory functions, such as control on constructing buildings. There were some development functions as well, such as for cottage industry, and establishment of primary schools or libraries. The boards could exercise control over the rural police. Subject to such control as was exercised by the government over the boards, specially regarding rules of operation, audit of accounts, power of annulling proceedings, and super session in case of default, the union boards had autonomy in their functioning. As regards finance, a union board could levy a rate on the owners or occupiers of buildings within the union.

Thus from 1919 onwards undivided Bengal had two sets of local government institutions – district boards at the uppermost level and union boards at the lowest. Each tier had a distinct corporate status and a separate statute delineating its powers, functions and obligations, but there was no organic linkage between the two institutions. The union boards continued to function for about four decades, and in the process created such lasting influence that even later developments introducing democratic decentralisation could not alter some of the traditions created by them.

2.2.2 Post-Independence Developments

The setting up of village Panchayats to replace the union boards was initiated in the early fifties. In 1954, the West Bengal Legislative Assembly had passed a non-official resolution asking the government to take steps for establishing village Panchayats and endowing them with judicial, administrative and other powers. A draft bill was introduced in the Assembly in 1956, which, after scrutiny by a select committee, was enacted in 1957 as the West Bengal Panchayat Act. West Bengal is one of the few States where the impact of the report of the Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1957) was negligible.

2.2.3 The Act of 1957

The Act of 1957 replaced the Village Self-Government Act of 1919 and restructured local self-government in villages by introducing two tiers – Gram

Panchayats and Anchal Panchayats in place of the union board. Besides, a new concept called the Gram Sabha was introduced.

The Balwantrai Mehta Committee report was made public soon after the Act of 1957 was passed. Despite enthusiastic acceptance of the recommendations of this report by a large number of States, West Bengal initially preferred to ignore them. There was no attempt to opt either for the all-India pattern of a three-tier Panchayat system or to integrate Panchayats with the Community Development Programmes (CDP). On the other hand, no serious endeavour was made to implement quickly the provisions of the 1957 Act. As a result, the progress in the conversion of union boards into Anchal Panchayats and Gram Panchayats was extremely slow. It was only after June 1964 that the entire rural area was covered by the Gram and Anchal Panchayats. Moreover, there was no linkage between the Panchayats in the village and the district boards. In other words, the old model of union boards and district boards was allowed to continue.

2.2.4 The Act of 1963

In 1963, the West Bengal Zilla Parishads Act was passed to provide for the remodelling of local government with a view to associating local authorities with development activities and bringing about democratic decentralisation and people's participation in planning and development. Under this Act, two corporate bodies were created – Anchalik Parishads at the block level and Zilla Parishads at the district level. There was no direct election to any of these bodies.

The 1957 Act providing for Gram and Anchal Panchayats and the 1963 Act providing for Anchalik and Zilla Parishads formed the basis of the Panchayati Raj structure of the State. It was a four-tier system instead of the three-tier system recommended by the Balwantrai Mehta Committee. Except for the Gram Panchayat, none of the other tiers had any directly elected members. The members of the Anchal Panchayat, Anchalik Parishad and Zilla Parishad were either ex-officio, nominated or co-opted, with some being elected indirectly. There was another class of members known as associate members who had no right to vote.

By June 1964, 19602 Gram and 2926 Anchal Panchayats covering almost the whole State were constituted. By August 1964, 325 Anchalik Parishads came into operation and on 2 October 1964 a Zilla Parishad each in all the fifteen districts of the

State was constituted, replacing the erstwhile district boards which had already enjoyed a long innings of almost eighty years.

2.2.5 Phase of Stagnation

West Bengal chose a bad time for introducing Panchayati Raj. It almost coincides with what had been termed as the "phase of stagnation" (1965-69) of the Panchayati Raj system by the Ashok Mehta Committee ⁴. The then Congress Government in the State went through a crisis of an unprecedented nature. There was acute shortage of food in 1965, while the maintenance of the public distribution system had become a major task for the administration, including the block administration. The year 1966 was marked by widespread strikes and *bondhs* to register popular protest against the failure of the government to solve the problem of food. Over and above this, the State unit of the Congress Party had split into two, with the dissidents forming a separate party. In such a situation, the government had little time to nurse the newly created Panchayat institutions.

In 1964, the State government did assign to the Zilla Parishads and Anchalik Parishads some funds and some assigned schemes for execution. The government also took the responsibility of bearing the establishment and other costs of the Panchayat institutions. Thus in 1965-66, half of the total income of Anchal Panchayats was in the form of State assistance. This funding was not at all adequate to enable the Panchayat institutions to undertake rural development work in an impressive manner. Schemes assigned by the government to the Panchayat bodies were of a minor nature. Nevertheless, assignment of schemes and transfer of State funds had at least indicated the goodwill of the State government towards these nascent institutions.

Meanwhile, in the general elections of March 1967, the Congress Party was defeated and a united front dominated by the Left parties came to power in West Bengal. After the fall of the first United Front Government, the State went through administration by a coalition ministry and also was under President's Rule for a brief period during which nothing tangible could be achieved. After the 1969 mid-term elections, the United Front again came to power.

The new ministry introduced a comprehensive Panchayat Bill in the Legislative Assembly. In March 1970, before this bill could be enacted, the United Front ministry

again went out of office. President's Rule was reimposed in the State. In March 1972, when a new Congress ministry was installed in the State following a brief spell under a coalition ministry and another under President's Rule, it promised a new Panchayat system for West Bengal. At last, the West Bengal Panchayat Act was passed towards the end of 1973, displacing both the earlier Acts. This Act of 1973, with a few amendments made subsequently, remained effective in the decades that followed. With this Act, the State's Panchayat system fell in line with the all-India pattern of a three-tier system.

2.2.6 The Act of 1973

Even though the 1973 Act was passed, the government took no steps to implement it. As a result, the entire Panchayati Raj system of the State was languishing. The Zilla Parishads and Anchalik Parishads remained superseded. After the first elections, no elections were held to the Anchal and Gram Panchayats. The period 'between' 1967-72 had been marked by political unrest and absence of stable governments. No purposive policy hence towards strengthening the Panchayat system could be introduced. There was a stable government 'between' 1972-77 but there was almost total neglect of the Panchayat system, even though it was during this period that the comprehensive Panchayat Act was passed.

By 1977, the Panchayat system of the State was in a moribund State. Without elections, Anchal and Gram Panchayats were like deadwood. The other two tiers remained superseded. Special purpose organisations had to be created for executing rural development programmes.

In June 1977, the Left Front led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) was voted into office. Immediately thereafter, the new government embarked upon a programme of rural development based on land reforms and decentralisation of power through Panchayats. After making some amendments to the 1973 Act, the government on 4 June 1978 announced elections to all the three tiers of Panchayati Raj bodies. Thus began a new chapter for Panchayati Raj institutions in the State. Literally from the ashes rose popular institutions which succeeded in a large measure in occupying the sub-state level administrative space which had been the exclusive domain of the bureaucracy. This was the moment when the Ashok Mehta Committee was undertaking its study. By the time the committee's report became public in August 1978, nearly 56,000 elected

representatives were in position to undertake the new responsibilities of democratic governance at the district, block and village levels.

2.2.7 State Legislation

The Act of 1973 followed the three-tier structure. The Gram Panchayats as the lowest tier, Panchayat Samiti at the taluk level and the Zilla Parishad at the district level. On an average, each Gram Panchayat covered a group of villages with a population of ten to twelve thousand people. Despite the one-village one-Panchayat pattern of other States, West Bengal has preferred to retain its lowest unit at the earlier Anchal and union level. Primarily because of the tradition and also because of the habitat pattern of Bengal's villages which make single village a non-viable unit for self-governance. The other two-tiers above the Gram Panchayat followed the pattern recommended by the Balwantrai Mehta Committee, i.e., the Panchayat Samiti at the block level and the Zilla Parishad at the district level.

Major amendments to the Act were made in 1992, 1994 and 1997. Even though the immediate purpose of the 1994 amendment was to bring the Act in conformity with the constitutional amendment and some provisions of the 1992 amendments were influenced by the anticipation of such constitutional amendment, all these three amendments of the State Act enacted before and after the introduction of new constitutional provisions had a larger agenda, namely reform of the institution. The major thrust of reform was directed at two fronts: one enhancement of the responsibility of the elected representatives in the management of Panchayats and the other to make the institution more accountable to the people. It would be appropriate to highlight some important provisions of these amendments:

1. It provides for a Gram Sansad for each electoral constituency. It is required to meet twice a year to guide and advice the Gram Panchayat with regard to the scheme of development and social justice undertaken or proposed to be undertaken in its area and in all matters pertaining to identification or laying down principles of identification of beneficiaries for various anti-poverty programmes.

2. The Gram Sabha is to meet once in a year. The Panchayat is required to place before the meeting the decisions of the Panchayats on proposals submitted at the Gram Sansad meetings.
3. The tenure of the three-tiers of the PRIs has been fixed at five years.
4. The amendment also establishes the State Election Commissioner and the State Finance Commissioner and the District Council. The district council is an interesting institutional innovation. The Act provides that there shall be a District Council for each district consisting of members elected by the members of Zilla Parishad from among the members, officials nominated by the State Government, the Additional Executive Officer of the Zilla Parishad. The district council examines and scrutinises the accounts of the Panchayats.

2.3 Some Concepts about the Panchayati Raj Institutions

Some concepts which are very important and which are closely related to the Panchayati Raj Institutions. Without the concepts of these terms we could not analysis the actual picture of the PRIs.

2.3.1 Gram

The State Government may, by notification, declare for the purpose of the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973 any mauza or part of a mauza or group of contiguous mauzas or parts thereof to be a Gram.

Provided that any group of mauzas or parts thereof, when they are not contiguous or have no common boundaries and are separated by an area to which this Act does not extend or in which the remaining sections of this Act referred to in sub-section (3) of section I have not come into force, may also be declared to be a Gram ⁵.

2.3.2 Gram Sansad

Every constituency of a Gram Panchayat under clause (a) of sub-section 3 of section 4 shall have a Gram Sansad consisting of persons whose names are included in the electoral roll of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly for the time being in force pertaining to the area comprised in such constituency of the Gram Panchayat ⁶.

Every Gram Panchayat shall hold within the local limits of the Gram an annual and a half-yearly meeting for each Gram Sansad at such place, on such date and at such hour as may be fixed by the Gram Panchayat.

The annual meeting of the Gram Sansad shall be held ordinarily in the month of May and the half-yearly meeting of the Gram Sansad shall be held ordinarily in the month of November every year.

A Gram Panchayat may, in addition to the annual and the half-yearly meeting, hold extraordinary meeting of a Gram Sansad at any time if the situation so warrants or if the State Government by order, so directs and for the purpose of holding such extraordinary meeting, provisions of 16A section shall apply.

One-tenth of the total number of members shall form a quorum for a meeting of a Gram Sansad. But no quorum shall be necessary for an adjourned meeting which shall be held at the same time and place after seven days.

A Gram Sansad shall guide and advise the Gram Panchayat in regard to the schemes for economic development and social justice undertaken or proposed to be undertaken in its area and may without prejudice to the generality of such guidance and advice:

- Identify, or lay down principles for identification of the schemes which are required to be taken on priority basis for economic development of the village.
- Identify, or lay down principles for identification of the beneficiaries for various poverty alleviation programmes.
- Constitute one and more beneficiary committees comprising not more than nine persons, who are not members of the Gram Panchayat, for ensuring active participation of the people in implementation, maintenance and equitable distribution of benefits of one or more schemes in its area.
- Mobilise mass participation for community welfare programmes and programmes for adult education, family welfare and child welfare.
- Promote solidarity and harmony among all sections of the people irrespective of religion, faith, caste, creed or race.
- Record its objection to any action of the Pradhan or any other member of the Gram Panchayat for failure to implement any development scheme properly or without active participation of the people of that area.

The meeting of the Gram Sansad and the Gram Sabha will be convened by the Pradhan and in his absence, by the Upa-Pradhan. All decisions of the Sansad will go to

the Gram Panchayat for its consideration and the Gram Panchayat shall place the same before the Gram Sabha together with their own views and a report on action taken or proposed to be taken by them on such resolutions. After deliberation, the Gram Sabha will adopt resolution which will prevail over the resolutions of the Sansads, provided that the constitution of beneficiary committees by the latter shall not be questioned in any meeting of the Gram Sabha.

2.3.3 Gram Sabha

Every Gram shall have a Gram Sabha consisting of persons registered in the electoral roll pertaining to the area of the Gram. Every Gram Panchayat shall hold within the local limits of the Gram an annual meeting, ordinarily in the month of December every year, of the Gram Sabha after completion of the half-yearly meeting of the Gram Sansads⁷.

One twentieth of the total number of members shall form a quorum for a meeting of a Gram Sabha, provided that no quorum shall be necessary for an adjourned meeting which shall be held at the same time and place after seven days.

The Gram Panchayat shall, on considering and collating the resolutions of the Gram Sansads, place before the Gram Sabha the resolutions of the Gram Sansads and the views of the Gram Panchayat together with its report on the actions taken and proposed to be taken on them for deliberation and recommendation by the Gram Sabha.

A meeting of the Gram Sabha shall be presided over by the Pradhan of the concerned Gram Panchayat or, in his absence, by the Upa-Pradhan. All questions coming before a Gram Sabha shall be discussed and points raised there shall be referred to the Gram Panchayat for its consideration.

2.3.4 Gram Panchayat

For every Gram the State Government shall constitute a Gram Panchayat bearing the name of the Gram⁸. The average population of Gram Panchayat varies between 8000-15000 which may comprise a group of villages or a village or part thereof depending on its population and area. The Gram Panchayat is a body corporate comprising members in the range of 5-30 who are directly elected by the registered voters. The Panchayat area is divided into a number of constituencies ranging from 3-14, each electing not more than three members. There is a member for every 500 voters. The

chairperson is known as Pradhan who is assisted by any Upa-Pradhan both of whom are elected from among the members themselves for its full term. They can be removed from the office if a resolution is passed by a majority of existing members of the Gram Panchayat at a meeting specially convened for the purpose. Every Gram Panchayat shall hold a meeting at least once in a month in the office of the Gram Panchayat. Such meeting shall be held on such date and at such hour as the Gram Panchayat may fix at the immediately preceding meeting.

2.3.5 Panchayat Samiti

This is intermediate tier corresponding to a Block. For every Block the State Government shall constitute a Panchayat Samiti bearing the name of the Block ⁹. The Panchayat Samiti shall consist of the following members, namely:

- Pradhans of the Gram Panchayats within the Block as ex-officio members.
- Directly elected members (not more than three) from each Gram Panchayat area in a Samiti to be determined by the number of voters in the following manner: up to 3000-1 member, 3001-6000-2 members, 6000 and above – 3 members.
- Member of the House of the people and the Legislative Assembly to the State elected thereto from a constituency comprising the Block or any part thereof, not being Ministers.
- Member of the Council of States, not being Ministers, registered as electors within the area of the Block.
- Members of the Zilla Parishad, not being Sabhadhipati or Sahakari Sabhadhipati, elected thereto from the constituency comprising any part of the Block.

The Sabhapati and Sahakari Sabhapati respectively, are elected members from among themselves. They can be removed from the office, if the resolution to that effect is passed by a majority of the existing members of the Panchayat Samiti at a meeting especially convened for the purpose.

2.3.6 Zilla Parishad

The Zilla Parishad is the district tier of the Panchayati Raj system. For every district (except the district of Darjeeling), the State Government shall constitute a Zilla Parishad bearing the name of the district ¹⁰. The Zilla Parishad shall consist of the following members, namely:

- Sabhapatis of the Panchayat Samitis within the district as ex-officio members.
- Such number of persons, not exceeding three, as may be prescribed on the basis of the number of voters in the area from each Block within the district.
- Member of the House of the people and the Legislative Assembly of the State elected thereto from a constituency comprising the district or any part thereof, not being Ministers.
- Members of the Council of States not being Ministers, registered as electors within the area of any Block within the district.

The Sabhadhipati (Chairman) and Sahakari Sabhadhipati (Vice-Chairman) are elected by directly elected members from amongst themselves and can be removed by a majority vote of members of meeting specially convened for the purpose. The members in the first and third category are not eligible to hold any office in the Zilla Parishad.

2.4 Powers, Duties and Functions of Panchayati Raj Institutions

The Panchayats in the State of West Bengal are required to perform the following functions:

1. Preparation of development plans at the village level.
2. Implementation of schemes for upliftment of those below poverty line.
3. Development of infrastructure facilities for overall economic development.
4. Implementation of programmes relating to literacy.
5. Implementation of health and family welfare programmes with special emphasis on rural sanitation.
6. Programmes ensuring social justice.

2.5 Powers and Duties of Gram Panchayat

The powers of Gram Panchayats are: control of building operations, improvement of sanitation, power over public streets, waterways and other matters, polluted water supply, to prevent growth of water-hyacinth or other weed which may pollute water, recovery of cost for work carried out by Gram Panchayat on failure of any person and power to hold, acquire and dispose of property.

A Gram Panchayat shall function as a unit of self-government and, in order to achieve economic development and secure social justice for all, shall, subject to such

conditions as may be prescribed or such directions as may be given by the State Government:

- Prepare a development plan for the five-year term of the office of the members and revise and update it as and when necessary with regard to the resources available.
- Prepare an annual plan for each year by the month of October of the preceding year for development of human resources, infrastructure and civic amenities in the area.
- Implement schemes for economic development and social justice as may be drawn up by, or entrusted upon it.

2.5.1 Obligatory Duties of Gram Panchayat

The obligatory duties of a Gram Panchayat shall be to provide within the area under its jurisdiction for:

- Sanitation, conservancy and drainage and the prevention of public nuisances.
- Curative and preventive measures in respect of malaria, small pox, cholera or any other epidemic.
- Supply of drinking water and the cleaning and disinfecting the sources of supply and storage of water.
- The maintenance, repair and construction of public streets and protection thereof.
- The removal of encroachments of public streets or public places.
- The protection and repair of buildings or other property vested in it.
- The management and care of public tanks, subject to the provisions of the Bengal Tanks Improvement Act, 1939, common grazing grounds, burning *ghats* and public graveyards.
- The supply of any local information which the District Magistrate, the Zilla Parishad, the Mahakuma Parishad, the Council, or the Panchayat Samiti within the local limits of whose jurisdiction of the Gram Panchayat is situate, may require.
- Organising voluntary labour for community works and works for the upliftment of its area.

- The control and administration of the Gram Panchayat Fund established under this Act.
- The imposition, assessment and collection of the taxes, rates or fees liveable under this Act.
- The maintenance and control of Dafadars, Chowkidars and Gram Panchayat Karmees within its jurisdiction and securing due performance by the Dafadars, Chowkidars and Gram Panchayat Karmees of the duties imposed on them under this Act.
- The constitution and administration of the Nyaya Panchayat established under this Act.
- The performance of such functions as may be transferred to it under Section 31 of the Cattle-trespass Act, 1871.

2.5.2 Other Duties of Gram Panchayat

A Gram Panchayat shall also perform such other functions as the State Government may assign to it in respect of:

- Primary, social, technical, vocational adult or non-formal education.
- Rural dispensaries, health centre and maternity and child welfare centre.
- Management of any public ferry under the Bengal Ferries Act, 1885.
- Irrigation, including minor irrigation, water management and watershed development.
- Agriculture, including agriculture extension and fuel and fodder.
- Care of the infirm and the destitute.
- Rehabilitation of displaced persons.
- Improved breeding of cattle, medical treatment of cattle and prevention of cattle disease.
- It's acting as a channel through which Government assistance should reach the villages.
- Bringing waste land under cultivation through land improvement and soil conservation.
- Promotion of village plantations, social forestry and farm forestry.

- Arranging for cultivation of land lying fallow.
- Arranging for co-operative management of land and other resources of the village.
- Assisting in the implementation of land reform measure in its area.
- Implementation of such schemes as may be formulated or performance of such acts as may be entrusted to the Gram Panchayat by the State Government.
- Field publicity on matters connected with development works and other welfare measures undertaken by the State Government.
- Minor forest produce.
- Rural housing programme.
- Rural electrification including distribution of electricity.
- Non-conventional energy sources.
- Women and child development.

2.5.3 Discretionary Duties of Gram Panchayat

Subject to such conditions as may be prescribed, a Gram Panchayat may, and shall if the State Government so directs, make provision for:

- The maintenance of lighting of public streets.
- Planting and maintaining trees on the sides of public streets or in other public places vested in it.
- The sinking of wells and excavation of ponds and tanks.
- The introduction and promotion of co-operative farming, co-operative stores, and other co-operative enterprises, trades and callings.
- The construction and regulation of markets, the holding and regulation of fairs, melas and hats and exhibitions of local produce and products of local handicrafts and home industries.
- The allotment of places for storing manure.
- Assisting and advising agriculturists in the matter of obtaining State loan and its distribution and repayment.
- Filling up of in sanitary depressions and reclaiming of unhealthy localities.

- The promotion and encouragement of cottage (*khadi*, village and small-scale including food processing) industries.
- Promotion of dairying and poultry.
- Promotion of fishery.
- Poverty alleviation programme.
- The destruction of rabbit or ownerless dogs.
- Regulating the production and disposal of foodstuffs and other commodities in the manner prescribed.
- The construction and maintenance of sarais, dharma Salas, rest houses, cattle sheds and cart stands.
- The disposal of unclaimed cattle.
- The disposal of unclaimed crops and carcasses.
- The establishment and maintenance of libraries and reading rooms.
- The organisation and maintenance of akharas, clubs and other places for recreation or games.
- Cultural activities including sports and games.
- Social welfare including welfare of the handicapped and mentally retarded.
- Welfare of socially and educationally backward classes of citizens and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes.
- Public distribution system.
- Maintenance of community assets.
- The maintenance of records relating to population census, crop census, cattle census and census of unemployed persons and of other statistics as may be prescribed.
- The performance in the manner prescribed of any of the functions of (the Zilla Parishad or the Mahakuma Parishad or the Council, as the case may be) with its previous approval, calculated to benefit the people living within the jurisdiction of the Gram Panchayat.
- Rendering assistance in extinguishing fire and protection life and property when fire occurs.

- Assisting in the prevention of burglary and dacoity.
- Any other local work or service of public utility which is likely to promote the health, comfort, convenience or material prosperity of the public, not otherwise provided for in this Act.

2.6 Powers and Duties of Panchayat Samiti

A Panchayat Samiti shall function as a unit of self-government and, in order to achieve economic development and secure social justice for all, shall prepare:

1. A development plan for the five-year term of the office of the member, and
2. An annual plan for each year by the month of January of the preceding year.

In furtherance of its objective of development of the community as a whole and socio-economic upliftment of the individual members of the community and, without prejudice to the generality of the above provisions, shall have power to:

- Undertake schemes or adopt measures, including the giving of financial assistance, relating to the development of agriculture, fisheries, live-stock, khadi, cottage and small-scale industries, co-operative movement, rural credit, water-supply, irrigation and minor irrigation including water management and watershed development, public health and sanitation including establishment and maintenance of dispensaries and hospitals, communication, primary and secondary education, adult and non-formal education, welfare of students, social forestry and farm forestry including fuel and fodder, rural electrification including distribution, non-conventional energy sources, women and child development, social welfare and other objects of general public utility.
- Undertake execution of any scheme, performance of any act, or management of any institution or organisation entrusted to it by the State Government or any other authority.
- Manage or maintain any work of public utility or any institution vested in it or under its control and management.
- Make grants in aid of any school, public institution or public welfare organisation within the Block.

- Make grants to the Zilla Parishad (or Mahakuma Parishad or Council) or Gram Panchayat.
- Contribute with the approval of the State Government such sum or sums as it may decide, towards the cost of water-supply or anti-epidemic measure undertaken by a municipality within the Block.
- Adopt measure for the relief of distress.
- Co-ordinate and integrate the development plans and schemes prepared by Gram Panchayats in the Blocks if and when necessary.

A Panchayat Samiti has to perform 18 functions like agriculture, animal husbandry, small industries, cooperation, water supply, irrigation, health, primary and secondary education, adult education and women and child development etc., include under 11th Schedule.

2.7 Powers, Functions and Duties of Zilla Parishad

A Zilla Parishad shall function as a unit of self-government and, in order to achieve economic development and secure social justice for all, shall prepare:

1. A development plan for the five-year term of the office of members, and
2. An annual plan for each year by the month of January of the preceding year.

In furtherance of its objective of development of the community as a whole and socio-economic upliftment of the individual members of the community and, without prejudice to the generality of the above provisions, shall have power to:

- Undertake schemes or adopt measures, including the giving of financial assistance, relating to the development of agriculture, fisheries, live-stock, *khadi*, cottage and small-scale industries, co-operative movement, rural credit, water-supply, irrigation and minor irrigation including water management and watershed development, public health and sanitation including establishment and maintenance of dispensaries and hospitals, communication, primary and secondary education, adult and non-formal education, physical education and games and sports, welfare of students, social forestry and firm forestry including fuel and fodder, rural electrification including distribution, non-conventional energy sources,

women and child development, social welfare and other objects of general public utility.

- Undertake execution of any scheme, performance of any act, or management of any institution or organisation entrusted to it by the State Government or any other authority.
- Manage or maintain any work of public utility or any institution vested in it or under its control and management.
- Make grants in aid of any school, public library, public institution or public welfare organisation within the district.
- Contribute such sums as may be agreed upon towards the cost of maintenance of any institution, situated outside the district, which are beneficial to, and habitually used by the inhabitants of the district.
- Establish scholarships or award stipends within the State for the furtherance of technical or other special forms of education.
- Acquire and maintain village hats and markets.
- Make grants to the Panchayat Samitis or Gram Panchayats.
- Contribute, with the approval of the State Government, such sum or sums as it may decide, towards the cost of water-supply or anti-epidemic measures undertaken by the commissioners of a municipality within the district.
- Adopt measures for the relief of distress.
- Co-ordinate and integrate the development plans and schemes prepared by Panchayat Samitis in the district.

A Zilla Parishad shall have the power to advice the State Government on all matters relating to the development work among Gram Panchayats and Panchayat Samitis.

2.8 Sthayee Samitis of the Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad

As the unique feature of the Panchayati Raj system, Sthayee Samitis are powerful organs of the Panchayat Raj system of the State. The Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad, each operates through the Sthayee Samitis constituted at that level and

exercises functional control over the developmental activity. A Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad shall have the following Sthayee Samitis, namely:

1. Finance, Establishment, Development and Planning (Artha, Sanstha, Unnayan O Parikalpana Sthayee Samiti),
2. Public Health and Environment (Janassasthya O Paribesh Sthayee Samiti),
3. Public Works and Transport (Purta Karya O Paribahan Sthayee Samiti),
4. Agriculture, Irrigation and Cooperation (Krishi, Sech O Samabaya Sthayee Samiti),
5. Education, Culture Information and Sports (Shiksa, Sanskriti, Tathya O Krira Sthayee Samiti),
6. Child and Women Development, Social Welfare and Relief (Sishu O Nari Unnayan, Janakalyan O Tran Sthayee Samiti),
7. Forest and Land Reforms (Bon O Bhumi Sanskar Sthayee Samiti),
8. Fisheries and Animal Resources (Matsya O Prani Sampad Bikash Sthayee Samiti),
9. Food and Supplies (Khadya O Sarbaraha Sthayee Samiti),
10. Small Scale Industries, Electricity and Non-Conventional Energy Sources (Khudra Shilpa, Bidyut O Achiracharit Shakti Sthayee Samiti)

Such other Sthayee Samiti or Samitis as the Panchayat Samiti may, subject to the approval of the State Government constitute. Each Sthayee Samiti, in addition to the elected members, has a number of Government and quasi Government officers as its members and is headed by a chairperson called Karmadhyakshas. The Sthayee Samiti draws up, implements or causes of implement, monitors and reviews implementation of sectoral programmes. Besides, a coordinator Panchayat Samiti or the Zilla Parishad coordinates the functions between a Sthayee Samiti and the Panchayat body.

2.9 Establishment of Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad

To implement the programmes of economic and social development, the required technical and administrative assistance is provided by the officers of the State Government belonging to different departments and functioning at the Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad levels.

The Gram Panchayat has the following category of staff of their own: Secretary, Job Assistant, Gram Panchayat Karmee and a Bill Collector are appointed on commission basis for the purpose of collecting taxes.

At the Panchayat Samiti level, the staffing pattern is as follows: Executive Officer [Block Development Officer (BDO) from the State Civil Service Cadre] being the ex-officio executive officer, Secretary [Extension Officer Panchayat (EOP)] posted as secretary dealing with administration and accounts matters, other supporting staff services of the officials of rural development and other departments posted at the block level are placed at the disposal of Panchayat Samiti.

At the Zilla Parishad level, the staffing pattern is as follows: (a) Executive Officer – District Magistrate (DM) being the ex-officio executive officer, (b) Additional Executive Officer – one IAS officer in the rank of Additional District Magistrate (ADM) posted as full time Additional Executive Officer, (c) Secretary – a senior state civil service officer looking after administration and accounts matters, (d) District Engineer with supporting staff dealing with preparation of plans, estimates and implementation of programmes, (e) Executive Engineer, Assistant Engineer and other staff of rural development department are placed under deputation to Zilla Parishad.

Sabhadhipati is the executive head of the Zilla Parishad, Sabhapati for the Panchayat Samiti and Pradhan at the Gram Panchayat level. Besides, the Collector is the executive officer of the Zilla Parishad, the Block Development Officer is the executive officer of the Panchayat Samiti and there is a Secretary at the Gram Panchayat level to look after the records and established work.

2.10 Functioning of Panchayats

The Amendment of 1992 strengthened the role of the Karmadhyakshas of the Sthayee Samitis of both Zilla Parishad and Panchayat Samitis. They were made responsible for 'financial and executive administration' of the programmes or schemes under the control of the Sthayee Samitis¹¹. Together with the responsibility they were given some administrative power. Since in the GP there was no Sthayee Samiti, provision was made to distribute the executive functions among the Pradhan, Upa-Pradhan and ward members of Gram Panchayat. The executive power and responsibility given to the Karmadhyakshas of the Zilla Parishad and Panchayat Samiti and provisions to delegate

executive functions to the ward members of the Gram Panchayat to assist the Pradhan had indicated a shift towards a cabinet-type of executive structure – the chairperson and his colleagues forming a team for all the three-tiers of Panchayat bodies.

Another interesting development was that the chairpersons and the vice-chairpersons of the Zilla Parishad and the Panchayat Samiti as well as the Karmadhyakshas of Zilla Parishad were made full time functionaries by the 1992 Amendment. In the 1997 Amendment, even offices of Pradhan and Upa-Pradhan of GP were made full time. A member shall not be eligible for election to any of these offices, unless he declares in writing that on being elected, he shall be a whole-time functionary of his office and that during the period he holds such office, he shall not hold any office of profit, unless he has obtained leave of absence from his place of employment.

The 1973 Act had provisions for representation of lower body in the higher body. Thus, the chairperson of Gram Panchayat was ex-officio member of Panchayat Samiti and the chairperson of the latter was an ex-officio member of the Zilla Parishad. In addition to such linkage, the 1992 amendment provided for representation of higher body also in the lower body. This amendment provides that a member elected to the Panchayat Samiti from the constituency comprising any part of the area of the Gram Panchayat shall be ex-officio member of the said Gram Panchayat provided he or she does not hold the office of either chairperson or vice-chairperson of the Samiti. Similar provision exists in respect of the member of Zilla Parishad. They are also ex-officio members of any Panchayat Samiti which falls, partly or fully within their constituencies, provided they do not hold offices of either chairperson or vice-chairperson of Zilla Parishad. Thus the West Bengal Act provides for both backward and forward linkage between the lower and higher tiers of the PRIs.

It is necessary to point out in this connection that clause 3 of Article 243C of the Constitution has clearly specified the categories of ex-officio members at the intermediate or district level Panchayats, other than the members elected from territorial constituencies. They are chairpersons of village and intermediate level Panchayats, Member of Parliaments (MPs) and Member of Legislative Assembly (MLAs). In view of this, the constitutional validity of the provision made in the West Bengal Act that a

member of the higher tier would be an ex-officio member of the lower tier appears to be doubtful.

2.11 Devolution

The Act of 1973 had earmarked a long list of functions of GPs which were divided into three categories: obligatory, discretionary and assigned. In the first category were the usual municipal functions such as sanitation or supply of drinking water. The other two categories of functions were mostly developmental in nature. There were some regulatory functions as well, like control over construction of buildings. Those listed for the Panchayat Samiti and the Zilla Parishads were basically developmental in nature and included planning. For all the three-tiers, there were provisions enabling the state government to assign its own schemes, programmes or works to the Panchayat for implementation or management.

After the first election, a new set of leaders took charge of the Panchayats. They neither had any experience in running local government institutions nor did they have a model before themselves, for they had inherited a lifeless system. It was a chance event that baptised them into the new task and gave them credibility in the eyes of the people. This was the devastating flood of 1978 that had brought misery to innumerable people. The state government took a bold step in entrusting to the new Panchayats not only the massive rescue and rehabilitation work, but also the work of reconstruction that was taken up the following year. The Panchayats plunged into the work and thereafter never looked back. Following this, there was hardly any scheme or programme of rural development with which Panchayats were not associated. The range of functions assigned by the state government to the Panchayats was many and varied. By way of illustration, mention may be made of the following:

1. Major employment generation programmes, for example, the Food for Work programme of the late seventies, nor were the National Rural Employment Programme (NREP) and Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP) of the eighties implemented by the Panchayats. The programmes of the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY) as also the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) were being implemented through them.

2. The Panchayats had the responsibility to implement the schemes of rural water supply, minor irrigation, social forestry, fisheries, agriculture and animal husbandry. They had the responsibility to undertake promotional measures in agriculture as also to identify the beneficiaries for the supply of minikits of quality seeds and fertilisers to farmers. The Panchayat Samiti supervised the functioning of the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) and various social security measures, such as pension for widows, farmers and so on.
3. In the field of education, the Panchayats utilised the funds made available to them through various schemes for construction or renovation of school buildings. They also had the responsibility of ensuring supply of state text books to the schools. By far the most spectacular achievement registered by the Panchayats in the field of education had been their leadership in literacy programme. In addition, they were also involved in rural electrification and rural housing programmes and the public distribution system.

Article 243G intended that functions relating to the 29 items of the 11th Schedule would be transferred to the Panchayats and they would have autonomy over the functions thus transferred. In other words, the constitution envisioned division of functions between the state government and the local governments in a manner somewhat similar to the division of powers between the central government and the state governments under the 7th Schedule. The state government has not attempted such transfer of power. As a result, the older method of having a set of state-local concurrent functions continues even after the 1994 – amendment, the primary objective of which was to bring the State's Panchayat Act in conformity with the Constitution. It is well known that such concurrent functions for a local body are meaningless, unless commensurate financial and administrative resources are provided for. Since such resources have not been made available, functions earmarked in the statute for different tiers of Panchayat hardly carry any sense. It is interesting to note that the makers of the State's Act are conscious of the fact that long lists of functions notwithstanding (GP alone has functions covering sixty four items), the Act, in rarity, has not transferred power and authority to the rural local bodies in the manner intended by the Constitution. Accordingly, it makes an additional provision which empowers the state government to 'transfer to a Panchayat such power, functions

and duties as are exercised, performed or discharged by the state government' in relation to matters listed under seventeen heads all of which are included in the 11th Schedule. However, no such transfer has yet taken place.

2.12 State Finance Commission

The first State Finance Commission was appointed by the West Bengal Government in 1994. The commission submitted its report in September, 1995. Its main recommendation was sharing 16 per cent of the net proceeds of all the taxes collected by the State in a year with the rural and the urban local bodies. The entitlement of each district and within a district of each local body – rural as well as urban – to such share of revenue of the State was worked out by the commission after taking into consideration such factors as population and backwardness¹². The fund was to go to each local body in untied form. This was an additionally over and above the revenue support now being given to the Panchayats for the payment of salaries to the staff. Thus, the commission envisaged a fiscal arrangement under which the Panchayats resources would consist of (a) revenue generated internally by utilising the fiscal powers given to them under the statute, (b) share of the revenue of the State as per recommendation of the commission, (c) grants of State Government for payment of salary of staff. Apart from these, Panchayats could receive schematic funds for works assigned to them. Of the total share of the State's revenue going to the Panchayats in a district, the proportional allocation between the three-tiers would, according to the commission, be as follows: Zilla Panchayat – 30 per cent, all Panchayat Samitis taken together – 20 per cent, all Gram Panchayats taken together – 50 per cent. The commission also suggested clear demarcation of functions between the State and the local bodies and for this purpose made a plea for dividing the development functions into State sector and district sector. The activities under the latter were to be transferred to the local bodies.

An Action Taken Report (ATR) on the recommendations of the commission was presented by the State Government to the legislative assembly in July, 1996. In this report, the government declared that most of the recommendations, including the recommendation on the sharing of the State's tax revenue with the local bodies, had been accepted in principle. Unfortunately, none of the recommendations of the commission has been implemented till now.

2.13 Planning and Implementation

The most important step towards devolution of power and resources to the Panchayat bodies was taken in 1985-86 when the Block Planning Committee (BPC) and the District Planning Committee (DPC) were constituted, headed by the Sabhapati and Sabhadhipati of the Panchayat Samiti and the Zilla Parishad respectively. The Gram Pradhans and Karmadhyakshas of Panchayat Samiti and the Block level official of different departments were made members of the block planning committees. Similarly, the Sabhapatis of the Panchayat Samitis, the Karmadhyakshas of the Zilla Parishads, the chairpersons of municipalities, and the district level officials were made members of the district planning committees. Budgetary provisions of the different departments for district level items were disaggregated and communicated to the District Planning Committees. Similar exercises were done for the blocks and municipalities. With these budgetary provisions, the district planning committees and the block planning committees were given the power to formulate their district level and block level plans.

Apart from this, untied fund under a new head in the State budget, that is, the district plan fund scheme fund, was placed at the disposal of the district planning committees to meet the critical gaps between the fund requirement and the fund available from the departmental allocations. Decentralisation of planning and involvement of Panchayats in the same were, no doubt, very significant steps. However, the scheme had two glaring defects. First, the departmental allocations and the schemes being centrally fixed, the Panchayats had no manoeuvrability in determining either inter-sectoral or even intra-sectoral priorities. In effect, their role in respect of the departmental schemes was limited to the choice of location or to the selection of beneficiaries only. Secondly, and more importantly, the quantum of united fund made available to the District Planning Committees was too small to facilitate local-level planning. What is more, from the beginning of the nineties, even this source of united fund began to be dried up. The Panchayats naturally lost interest and the experiment was practically abandoned before it could blossom into a model of decentralised planning.

2.14 Planning Process of Panchayati Raj Institutions in West Bengal

The planning process has been decentralised in West Bengal. The GP prepares plan for JRY and other schemes and submits in to the Panchayat Samiti and Zilla

Parishad for information. The GP is empowered to sanction any scheme costing upto Rs. 7500/-. Such schemes costing more than Rs. 7500/- but not more than Rs. 30000/- require technical vetting by the Panchayat Samiti.

The planning process starts from the village level. Every constituency of a Gram Panchayat shall have a Gram Sansad consisting of electoral roll of West Bengal Legislative Assembly. Every GP shall hold two half yearly meetings of Gram Sansad. The elected member from the concerned Sansad will preside over it. The Gram Sansad shall guide and advice the Gram Panchayats in regards to the schemes of economic development and social justice undertaken or proposed to be undertaken in its area. The Gram Sansad will identify schemes, prioritise them for the economic development of the village and will list the felt needs of the village too. They will also identify the beneficiaries and constitute beneficiary committees for ensuring active participation of the people in planning, implementation, maintenance and equitable distribution of benefits. Mobilise mass participation of community welfare programmes, adult education, family and child welfare, promote solidarity and harmony among all sections, records its objection to any action of Pradhan or any other member of Gram Panchayat on failure to implement development schemes properly or without active participation of the people. Debates are encouraged on felt-needs and prioritisation of schemes. A public meeting of Gram Sabhas is convened after half yearly meetings of Gram Sansad. In this Gram Sabha meeting Gram Panchayat shall consider and collate the resolutions of Gram Sansad and its proceedings to be recorded and GP will finalise its plan and annual Action Plan. In annual meetings of Gram Sansad, the Gram Panchayat will discuss the budget of Gram Panchayat and latest report of audit and accounts of Gram Panchayats. It is reported that the attendance in meeting are increasing day by day.

This is how the planning process is shaped with people's participation at grassroots level. The institutions of Gram Sansad ensure accountability and transparency of functioning of Panchayats and actually transforming Panchayat bodies as responsive and effective units of self-governance¹³. This way the annual plans by Gram Panchayats are prepared after assessing the local resources available and felt-needs and aspiration of the people. These plans are integrated at block level by the planning committees. Thus

the district planning committee there after integrates all block plans and municipal plans and sectoral plans and arrives at the district plan.

At the block level, a Block Planning Committee is constituted. The Sabhapati is the Chairman and the Block Development Officer is the member secretary. The Karmadhyakshas of Standing Committee of the Panchayat Samiti and Pradhans are its members. Within the overall guidelines regarding priorities and financial allocations for each block indicated by the District Planning Committee, the Block Planning Committee formulates a shelf of schemes within its area. The Block Planning Committee is empowered to approve block specific schemes with estimated cost of Rs. 50,000/-. The Block Planning Committee after formulating the annual plans and programmes of the block sends proposals to the District Planning Committee for incorporation in the district plan.

At the district level, a District Planning Committee (DPC) is constituted with Sabhadhipati as Chairman and District Magistrate as member secretary. The Karmadhyakshas of the Standing Committees of the Zilla Parishad, Sabhapatis of the Panchayat Samitis, Chairman of municipalities in the district, one representative each of the statutory bodies in the district and district level officers of development departments in the district are members of District Planning Committee. Within the overall guidelines of the priorities and the allocation of funds for each district indicated from the state level, the DPC formulates a shelf of schemes within the framework of an overall plan for the district as a whole, wherein the departmental schemes, the Panchayat schemes, etc., are indicated with a view to securing better balance. The DPC is empowered to approve schemes with estimated costs not exceeding Rs. 5, 00,000/-. Schemes of a higher value require the approval of State Planning Board. There is also a District Planning and Co-Ordination Council (DPCC) constituted for every district. A minister usually is the chairman and Sabhapati is the vice-chairman. All district plans and programmes formulated by the DPC are required to be placed before the DPCC for discussion and approval. It meets atleast twice every year. The planning process has undergone a change replacing it by newly constituted District Planning Committee under the 74th Constitutional Amendment from 1996. But the Zilla Parishad Chairman is the chairman

of the DPC. Further, he is also the Chairman of District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) in the district and collector is vice-chairman.

2.15 Decentralised Planning

As the PRIs stabilised and matured, their greater involvement in the planning process became an imperative necessity, if their capabilities were to be tapped for accelerating rural development. A number of reforms were introduced in the planning process from 1983 onwards to ensure the participation of the local bodies in the planning process. At the apex of the institutional structure were the State Planning Board (SPB) and the State Planning Department. Even though SPB was an advisory body for the formulation of the state plan, it played a leading role in guiding and coordinating the lower level planning machinery. At the district level there were two tiers: the District Planning and Coordination Committee (DPCC), more of a deliberative body, and the District Planning Committee (DPC) its executive arm. The DPCs were to prepare the plan, which would be approved by the DPCCs. The Block Planning Committee (BPC) was the planning agency at the block level ¹⁴.

The key institution in the decentralised planning structure, the DPC, was headed by the Chairperson of Zilla Parishad and the district collector was its member secretary. It had a mixed membership of non-officials and officials. It was the duty of the DPC to integrate the local plans prepared by block and municipalities within the overall guidelines indicated by the State Planning Board. The DPC was empowered to approve schemes up to Rs. 5 lakhs while schemes of higher values and inter-district schemes would require the approval of the State Planning Board.

The Block Planning Committee headed by the Sabhapati of the Panchayat Samiti, comprised Chairpersons of all the Standing Committees of the Samiti and also of Gram Panchayats as well as the block-level officers of various development departments. The Block Development Officer (BDO) was its member-secretary. This Committee prepared block level plans and approved block-level schemes that costing less than Rs. 50,000/-. Schemes involving more expenditure, and inter-block schemes, had to be submitted to the DPC for approval. A small planning committee at the block level was meant to prepare schemes and send them to the DPC for discussion and appropriate action, review and

coordinate plan schemes being implemented within the block. Table-2.1 gives a summary idea of the structure that was sought to be created.

Table-2.1: Structure of Planning Machinery after 1985

Level	Government	Planning Body	Plan
State	State Government	State Planning Board	Annual and Five Year State Plans
District	Zilla Parishad	District Planning & Coordination Committee (DPCC) and District Planning Committee (DPC)	Annual and Five Year District Plans
Block	Panchayat Samiti	Block Planning Committee (BPC)	Block Plans
Village	Gram Panchayat	No Specified Planning Committee	Basic Needs Statements

Source: Govt. of West Bengal, West Bengal Human Development Report (2004), p. 53.

In the mid-1980s, the major source of plan funds that was expected to be available for local level planning was from the centrally sponsored schemes such as IRDP, NREP/RLEGP, which were expected to be significantly higher than the past. An important innovation was the provision of introduction of some untied funds which the district authorities could utilise to meet the critical gaps between their fund requirements (according to the District Plan) and the available funds from diverse sources. For the first year, a sum of Rs. 20 crores was provided under this head for the whole state, which was to be distributed to the different districts according to a formula arrived at State Planning Board. The sharing was to be based on population, extent of under-development, incidence of poverty and a few similar criteria.

The State Planning Board also provided broad guidelines as to priorities to be borne in mind in the formulation of the local plans. The first priority was to be development of agriculture and allied activities which would generate the maximum employment and secure the rapid rate of growth. The focus of attention had to be on the marginal farmers and on the assignees of vested land. The provision of irrigation through appropriate technology to this group was to be the key link. The importance of scientific agronomy, in the selection of crops etc. so as to optimise the limited land and water resources, was also emphasised.

A major objective of the decentralised planning process was to coordinate the departmental schemes implemented at block and district level and make them more responsive to local level problems. The district sector schemes of the departments constituted the most predominant component of the local plans. Further, the proportion of district sector schemes in the State Plan has tended to rise over time.

This means that the main focus of the decentralised planning introduced in West Bengal from the state level, so far has been on integration or coordination of district-specific schemes of the departments at district and block level. The autonomy of the local planning authorities has been primarily limited to choosing the location within the district, selection of beneficiaries, or a choice between various schemes sponsored by the departments.

There are at least three aspects to a successful decentralised planning process:

1. Mobilisation of the common people. This is crucial to a planning exercise, and does not necessarily require plan funds as such. Mobilisation is an integral part of a range of Panchayat activities such as health and vaccination campaigns, ensuring school attendance, and so on.
2. Organisation or institution building. There is the issue of how to relate the three existing officially reorganised levels to the Gram Sansads and adhoc institutions like the Gram Committees, which may also need some form of official recognition. While Gram Sansads fulfil some crucial roles, they do not have any legal-institutional framework to support or govern their activities. In some areas, indeed, it may even be necessary to have sub-Sansads. In addition there is the question of relating and linking all these levels to other community-based institutions like co-operatives and women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs).
3. Planning. Here the issue of sustainability is crucial, and the initial enthusiasm has to be sustained over time, especially in a context of fiscal constraint in which the Panchayats cannot expect very much in the form of resources from the state government. The other problem is that of resources generation for planned activities.

Obviously, for each of these aspects there are also constraints. One explicit constraint is financial, but this is not the only one. There are also potential problems

stemming from the fact that there is a mindset, especially among the bureaucracy, which is actually opposed to decentralisation, so that there is a lack of the required inclination and incentive to implement. Similarly, there is a typical tendency for each tier to feel that the process of devolution should end at that tier, rather than extending further down the tiers and finally to the people themselves. Without full-scale commitment all down the line, the process can get thwarted.

2.16 Reservation

Anticipating constitutional amendment, the 1992 amendment of the State Act provided that not less than one-third seats of all the three-tiers would be reserved for women. Similarly, seats were reserved for SC/ST people in all the tiers, the number of such reserved seats being proportionate to the percentage of their population in the area. The Panchayat election of 1993 was held on the basis of these amendment provisions of the State Act. However, even though reservation was made in the seats of members, no reservation was made in the 1992 amendment in the offices of chairpersons as required under the constitution. The amendment made in the 1994 provided for reservation in the offices of both chairpersons and vice-chairpersons of all the tiers for women as well as for the SC/ST people. Accordingly, in the elections held in 1998, the offices of the chairpersons and vice-chairpersons of all the three-tiers were reserved for women (not less than one third of the total number of such offices) and SC/ST people (in proportion to their population) in addition to the reservation of seats of members of these bodies.

2.17 Performance of Panchayati Raj Institutions

The Panchayats have so far operated mainly in the field of development. Even there, they have functioned more as implementing agencies of the Union and State schemes than managing thing on their own. Even as implementers of such schemes, they have had to depend on departmental staff outside their control. On this front there is great deal of dissatisfaction. Many Panchayats in the States mediate the disputes and try to solve a variety of people's problems. The West Bengal can claim to have several achievements in the area of rural development for facilitating the growth of PRIs.

Firstly, PRIs are allowed to grow without interruption since 1978 by holding the elections at regular intervals of five years (i.e. 1978, 1983, 1988, 1993, 1998, 2003, and 2008). West Bengal was pioneer in introducing direct elections to all three tiers of PRIs

to make the elected representative directly responsible to the people. It is the first State to have introduced the concept of political Panchayats in the country.

Secondly, the Panchayats have been given substantial funds and powers to implement rural development schemes given by State of Central Government. The decentralisation policy pursued for three decades has enabled the Panchayats to emerge as institutions of importance and demonstrates to the people their usefulness. The front parties have swept the elections on all seven occasions and several studies conducted in the past have held the Panchayat bodies in West Bengal as dominated by land poor rather than landed rich. The pro-poor role of West Bengal Panchayats has also been appreciated in their achievement in the area of land reforms, rural development.

2.18 Summary

The Panchayats of West Bengal are today lively centres of activity. However, such decentralisation is in the nature of 'de-concentration' type under which Panchayats serve as the implementing agencies of the State Government. For over three decades, they have been functioning primarily as agencies to implement schemes handed down by the State Government. Being engrossed in basically routine works assigned by the State Government, the Panchayats have, by and large, failed to emerge as institutions of self-government. The character of these institutions did not change even after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. It is also noted that, Panchayats have not been given autonomy over any of the 11th Schedule functions. Nor, have they been provided with united funds to devise programmes reflecting the 'local will'. It is also seen that decentralised planning could not be institutionalised. With the drying up of the source of united funds under the district plan scheme head, the system of decentralised planning launched in 1985 died its natural death. Thus, West Bengal's Panchayats remain contended with being a part of the delivery system of the State Government. The possibility that they would emerge as institutions of 'self-government', thus facilitating genuine decentralisation of governance, still remains a distant dream.

Notes and References

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