

Chapter-II

Evolution of Local Self-Government in India and in West Bengal:

A) Evolution of Local Self-Government in India

Before going to discuss about the historical development of local self-government in India, it is necessary to define the concept of "Local Self-Government". In Encyclopedia Britannica, "Local Government means authority to determine and execute measures within an area inside and smaller than the whole state. Local means a restricted area. The variant, Local Self Government is important for it emphasizes upon the freedom of the locality to decide and act. Local Self Government has been traditionally used of Local Government in Great Britain"¹. The United Nations Division of Public Administration defines Local Government as, "a political sub division of a nation (or, in a federal system, a state) which is constituted by law and has sub-national control of local affairs including the power to impose taxes or to extract labour for prescribed purposes. The Governing Body of such an entity is selected or otherwise locally selected....."²

According to M.A. Muttalib and Mohd. Akbar Ali khan, "Local Government is an ancient institution with a new concept. In political terms, it is concerned with the governance of a specific local area, constituting a political subdivision of a nation, state or other major political unit."³

As a representing body, the local government representing a particular set of local views, conditions, needs and problems, depending on the characteristics of population and economic elements. According to M. Venkatarangaiya and M. Pattabhiram, "the term Local Self-Government is ordinarily understood the administration of a locality -- a village, a town, a city or any other area smaller than the state - by a body representing the local inhabitants, possessing a fairly large amount of autonomy, raising at least a part of its revenue through local taxation and spending its income on services which are regarded as local and

Epic Era:

We find two parts of administration i.e., 'Pur' and 'Janpad' or city and village in the study of Ramayana. Villages were 'Janpad' and the village people were called 'Janpada'. Gram is village, mahagram is big village, and the 'Ghosh' is group of village. There were local bodies like 'Shreni' and 'Nigam', but there was no description about their constitution in Ramayana. The welfare of the people has been described as the main object of the local bodies.⁶

The existence of Self-Government of a village is found in the 'Shanti Parva' of Mahabharata and Manu Smriti, we find the concept of Gram Panchayat in the 'Sabha Parva' of Mahabharata. Manu Smriti emphasized on the organized system of the local self-government and also focused on the importance of devolution of the function of the state. In the 'Manu' we find the village as a smallest unit of governance. Units of 10, 100, and 1000 Village groups were also a part of the system of self government.⁷

The nature of the local self-government of the Vedic era was 'Caste Panchayat'. According to the versions of 'Sabha Parva' of Mahabharata, it is not clear whether the Gram Panchayats were elected by the people or nominated by the Kings. But there is no doubt that the members of local body were come from higher caste and old-age group and they were educated and knowledgeable persons.

Ancient Period:

Kautilya's Arthashastra gives us detailed information about the village administration, i.e., Local Self-Government of Ancient India. Kautilya in his Arthashastra advised the king to constitute units of villages having 100-500 families. There would be centres of 10 villages, 200 villages, 400 villages and 800 villages. These centres were known as "Sangrahan", "Karvatik", "Dronamukh", and "Sthaneeya" respectively.⁸

According to kautilya's Arthasastra we also describe that the 'Samahartr' that is head quarters of the state capital is divided into four divisions, each in charge of an officer called 'Sthanika'. Under the Sthanika there are to be junior officers called 'Gopas' each in charge of five or ten villages. The Gopa is to maintain a record of all agricultural and other holdings in the villages, in his charge and take a census of every house hold, noting down the number of inhabitants with full details about the profession, property possessed, the income, the expenditure and the revenue received from each house hold.⁹

The village was normally carried under the supervision and direction of the village head man. The Arthasastra attested to his important part in the administration. He was called 'Gramika' in northern India. There was only one head for each village. The post of headman was hereditary. Government having the right to nominate another scion of the family if the succession of the son was not approved. By caste, the head man was usually a non-Brahmana. He was the leader of the village militia and belonged to the Kshatria Caste. But some time Vaisyas too aspired for and obtained the office. The village headman was the most influential person in the village. The Sukranitis observation that he was like the father and mother to the villagers is substantially true. Defence of the village was the most important duty of village headman. The collection of the government revenue was also vital duty of the headman. The village office had to keep records of the rights and transfers of village lands. Jatakas informs us that the village head man is guided in the administration by the opinion of village public, which made itself felt through the village elders, who formed a kind of informal council since very early times.¹⁰

Great men of the village being so large a body could obviously have carried on the administration only through an executive committee or council, which was known as Village Panchayat in later times. During the Gupta period the village council has evolved a regular body at least in some parts of India. They were known as 'Panchamandalis' in central India and 'Gram Janapada' in Bihar. A large number of the sealings of the different village councils (Janapadas) have been

discovered in Nalanda, which doubtless sealed the letters sent by them true to the administration of the Nalanda University.¹¹

The village administration assumed new dimension in the Gupta period. Village affairs were managed by the village head man with the assistance of elders, mahattara, who were some times associated with the government of the Visaya (greater than village). The Gupta inscriptions refer to the participation of leading local elements in the administration of the village or small town called 'Vithis'. No land transaction could be effected without their consent.¹²

In the history of Satbahan Kingdom in the 1st century B.C., we find the existence of local bodies. The governance of the village was also developed by the Chola rulers. Chola dynasty's inscriptions helped us to present a more detailed picture of the constitutions and functions of the village assemblies and executive committee in Tamil country. The primary assembly of the villages was known as 'Ur' in the case of ordinary villages and 'Sabha' in the case of 'Agrahāra' villages, mostly tenanted by learned Brahamanas.¹³

From the above discussion it is clear that we find the existence of local government during the Ancient period. The local bodies performed various function independently. The village community in Ancient India had a tradition of autonomy in terms of organization, functions and finances. The powers, authority and responsibility had evolved over a period of time and had the sanction of society; it did not develop nor was handed over to the community by a fiat of a ruler. The village Committee was not organized on the basis of any set of rules laid down by the authorities and required to be followed; here was, therefore, no uniform pattern of organization.

Every village community had the freedom to develop and set up its own institution of governance. The powers of governance were derived by the tacit consent of the community, some times expressly given to a group of persons constituting a committee or a group of committees, for doing specific or general

purpose duties. The village community assembled periodically to deliberate and decide issues. The village headman known by various names in different regions was entrusted with the responsibility of day to day management in some areas. Any misuse or abuse of power was questioned in the meeting of the village assembly.¹⁴

In North eastern India, there were 'Small Republics' which were quite independent in the internal matters. The village panchayats were vested sufficient administrative powers without any interference from king. But at that time upper caste holders like Brahmana, Kshatriya dominated the local bodies. Age old and learned persons had greater opportunity to rule the village community.

Medieval Period:

During the sultanate period, it was believed that without the devolution of power, it was not possible to rule the whole kingdom. So the whole kingdom was divided into provinces called 'Vilayat', 'Amir', 'Vali', was principal ruler i.e., head of the province. For the governance of the rural area there were three types of officials. i.e., 'Mukkadam' for administration, 'Patwari' for collection of revenues and 'Choudhurie' for the settlement of disputes with the help of Panch. A village of the smallest unit, its affairs were looked after by the 'Lambardar', 'Patwari', and 'Chowkidar'. Villages had sufficient autonomy in respect of local governance. Actually the panchayats played dominant role in the village governance in the medieval period. Marathas also constituted local self-government institutions in rural and urban areas during the rule of the Peshwar in the Maharashtra area.¹⁵

British Period:

For the attainment of British imperial interest local self-government was introduced in India. According to S.R.Maheshwari, "A beginning of local government may be said to have been made in 1687 when, for the first time, a local governing body - a municipal corporation was set up for city of Madras."¹⁶

The subsequent history can be detailed as follows:

1687-1881:

In 1687, the Madras City Corporation was established to look after the public affairs. The duties and functions of the corporation was not only the collection of taxes; the corporation also dealt with the civil and criminal matters. In 1726, Bombay and Calcutta Municipal bodies were established. According to Sir Charles Metcalfe, the Governor General of India (1835-36), the Indian Village communities are 'Little Republics.'¹⁷ In the history of local government in India, the year 1870 was landmark, because in this time Lord Mayo passed a resolution suggesting further devolution of power. The 1880 Famine Commission urged for the vital role of local bodies for relief works.

1882-1919:

During the tenure of Lord Ripon as a viceroy in India, the Local Self-Government Resolution 1882 was accepted. He regarded local self-government as "an instrument of political and mass education"¹⁸ In his tenure local boards were established in the rural areas. Districts and Tehsils were formed. The Local Boards were authorized to perform some function and collect revenues. During 1883-85, the Local Self-Government Acts were passed in many provinces.

The Royal Commission (1909) reported that the local bodies were not functioning effectively due to paucity of funds and caste and religious disputes. The commission also recommended that attempt should be taken for the constitution and development of village panchayat. In 1918, Montegu Chelmsford Report suggested that the Local Boards would be made representative bodies.¹⁹

1920-1937:

In 1930, Simon Commission evaluated the implementation of local self-government. The Commission reported that they did not find any progress in rural areas except Uttar Pradesh, Bengal and Madras. The local bodies did not show any good performance during the period between 1919-1930. Hence, it was recommended by the Simon Commission for more control of the state over the

local bodies. During the period between 1920-37, the Local Boards were elected bodies, chairmen were non-official persons and the administrative and financial powers of the local bodies were increased.²⁰

1937-1947:

The Provincial Governments were empowered and got provincial autonomy under the Government of India Act, 1935. It had become the duty of Provincial Government to democratize the local self-government institution, including the village panchayats. Thus, the local bodies were organized properly during the British period, though the popular government vacated the office during the period of 2nd world war, 1939. But the status of the local government institution remained unchanged till august 1947.²¹

So, from the ancient period, the existence of local self-government in India was found more or less; it had got good shape after the independence of India.

Post-Independence Period:

The establishment of village panchayat was an ideological part of the, Indian National Movement. Gandhiji had given the idea of 'Gram Swarajya': The Government of the village will be conducted by the panchayat of five persons annually elected by the adult villagers, males and females possessing minimum prescribe qualifications. These will have all the authority and jurisdictions required. Since there will be no system of punishment in the accepted scene, the Panchayat will be legislature, judiciary and executive combined to operate for its year of office. Any village can become such Republic today Here there is perfect democracy based on individual freedom. The individual is the architect of his own government.²²

It is sad that the first draft constitution did not have any reference or article on the villages or village panchayats. There was an acrimonious debate on this subject in the Constituent Assembly. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar who represented the dalits strongly argued against the empowerment of Village Panchayats, as,

according to him the landed gentry of upper castes would invariably dominate them and these institutions would be utilized for perpetuating the exploitation of the lower caste people and the poor.²³ He also condemned the village as a "sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism." So, Dr. Ambedkar argued that caste ridden villages in India had little prospects of success as institutions of self-government. Incidentally Dr. Ambedkar position was very close to that held by Nehru who wrote to Gandhi, thus, a village, normally speaking, is backward intellectually and culturally, and no progress can be made from a backward environment, narrow-minded people are much more likely to be untruthful and violent.²⁴

However, several members expressed strong resentment against the uncharitable observation made by Ambedkar. H.V. Kamath criticized the attitude of Ambedkar as a typical of the "Urban high - brow". Mr. Kamath supported the inclusion of village panchayats. He opined, "it is due to Mahatma Gandhi, it is due to you (i.e. Dr Rajendra Prasad) sir, and it is due to Sardar Patel and Pandit Nehru and Netaji Bose, that we have come to love our village folk....." God save us" Mahatma Gandhi taught us in almost the last mantra that he gave in the last days of his life to strive for Panchayati Raj. If Ambedkar cannot see his way to accept this. I don't see what remedy or panacea he has got for uplifting our villages.....²⁵

It is an irony of history that Ambedkar, who was one of the principal architects of the liberal democratic frame work of Indian constitution, found himself in the company of those who did not find any incompatibility between the bureaucratic district administration and democratic governance. Such was the complexity of the historical legacy left by the imperial rulers.....²⁶

The view that was adopted was that even though it may not be possible to provide for the reestablishment of 'Village Republics' immediately as these were known in the earlier part of history, it should be our ultimate objective. Mr. Ananthasayanam Ayyanger said, "But where these Republics? They have to be

brought into existence.....therefore, I would advise that in the directives, a clause must be added, which would insist upon the various Governments that may come into existence in future, to establish village panchayats, give them political autonomy and economic independence, in their own affairs.”²⁷

Ultimately the arguments for inclusion of village panchayats were prevailed and it took place in the chapter of Directive principles of state policy, Art. 40 of part IV of Indian constitution. The Article reads as under: “the state should take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such power and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self government”. So, the Art. 40 of the Indian constitution directs the state to take steps to organize village panchayats which may enable to work as units of self government.

The fundamental belief that village panchayats could play an important role in the social transformation and implementation of development programmes could not be disregarded easily. But the pertinent question still remains unanswered. The question is that why did panchayat system come under the part IV of Indian constitution? This part IV was not enforceable legally. Why were they not given the constitutional status and recognition they deserved? The answer is simple that the urban and rural elites and their representatives in politics (from the time of National freedom movement onwards), had a disdain for panchayats and this has ever since remained intact. Whatever genuine attempts were made for the devolution of power, these interests saw to it that the attempts did not succeed. This is a story of panchayat institution since independence.²⁸

Another point of view about the incorporation of panchayat system in part IV is that after the line of criticism was successfully established, it was written a letter to Sir B.N. Rao, the constitutional adviser, for re-examination and re-drafting the whole constitution regarding the incorporation of panchayat system. It was pointed out by Sir B.N. Rao, it was then too late in the process of constitution making to re-draft the whole constitution having the panchayats as its basis. It was then, thought better to incorporate panchayats in the Directive Principles of State

Policy, and retain framework of parliamentary government based on direct popular election both at the centre and in the states of the Indian Union.²⁹

The Community Development Programme:

Panchayati Raj in India today owes its origin to the Community Development (CD) Programme which was introduced in October 1952. It had established the decentralization of rural administration in the sense that responsibility and power for executing programmes of economic development and social welfare delegated to officials in newly created administrative units of Development Blocks. The programmes of Block development were to be translated into action under the leadership of the Block Development Officer; this required the co-operation and association of the local people with the block staff but there was no transfer of power and responsibility to the people.³⁰

“The Planning Commission in the first five year plan, described community development as the method through which the five year plan seeks to initiate a process of transformation of the social and economic life of the villages.”³¹ “Implementation of Community Development Programme on a national scale requires: adoption of consistent policies, specific administrative arrangements, recruitment and training of personnel, mobilization of local and national resources and organization or research experimentation and evaluation A programme of community development is most successful when it becomes an integral part of, or is closely related to, the existing administrative organization at the local, intermediate and national level.”³² So, development depends upon the responsibility and power. Community development will become real when the community realizes its problems and responsibilities, exercises the necessary powers through its chosen representatives and maintains a constant and intelligent vigilance on local administration. Various complaints were raised against CD regarding the wastage of funds, corruption, malpractices and favoritism.

The findings of the Balwant Rai Mehta team led to the following conclusion: "Admittedly One of the least successful aspects of community development and National Extension Service Work is its attempt to evoke popular initiative few of local bodies at a level higher than the village panchayat have shown any enthusiasm or interest in this work; and even the panchayats have not come into the field to any appreciable extent So long as we do not discover or create a representative and democratic institution which will supply 'the local interest, supervision and care necessary to ensure that expenditure of money upon local objects conforms with the needs and wishes of the locality', invest it with adequate power and assign to it appropriate finances, we will never be able to evoke local interest and excite, local initiatives in the field of development."³³

Balwant Rai Mehta Committee:

The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee comes to know that Community Development Programmes were the programmes of government and not the programmes of the village people. The village self-sufficiency only could be attained through the partnership of village people. In considering this idea the Mehta Committee suggested that the villagers should be given power to decide about their own problems and implement the soluble programmes accordingly. Bidyut Mohanty while explaining the recommendation of the Mehta Committee observes: In 1959, the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee suggested that an agency should be set up at the village level which would not only represent the interest of village community but also take up the development programmes of the government at its level. The Gram-Panchayat which was to constitute this agency was therefore, perceived as an implementing agency of the government in a specific, viz. developmental sphere.³⁴

The major objectives of the Panchayati Raj, which was established according to the recommendations of Balwant Rai Mehta Committee, were: 1) to represent the felt needs of the village community; 2) to give power to the non-officials for the development of the village communities; 3) to give power of implementation or execution of programs to the people.

The main recommendations of Balwant Rai Mehta Committee were as follows:

1. Development block covering about 100 villages and having population of 100 thousands should coincide with taluk / tehsil / sub-district unit.
2. There should be three – tier - Zilla Parisad at the district level instead of district board, Panchayat Samiti at the block level and Gram-Panchayat at the village level.
3. Panchayat should work under supervision of Panchayat Samiti
4. Composition of Panchayati Raj bodies should be representative of all section of the people by and large.
5. Effective training arrangement would be made for people's representative of three tiers.
6. People's representative would plan the community development and allied programmes.

Thus, the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee legislatively made the villagers active partners in the task of village development. The responsibility of the execution of development programmes was left to the elected members of the Panchayati Raj. Panchayat Raj was firstly established in Rajasthan on the birth day of Gandhiji i.e., 2nd October, 1959. Then it was established in Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu in 1959. And in Assam, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh and other states, it was established in 1960-61. Different states followed different system of Panchayati Raj. While Jammu and Kashmir followed 1 tier, Haryana chose a 2 tiers and Rajasthan and Andhrapradesh 3 tiers system.

The Panchayati Raj could not come out as successful story. Though, theoretically, the decisions had taken by the non-officials at the three-tier of Panchayati Raj; but the officials became the major decision makers in practice. Due to illiteracy, uneducated and inefficiency the non-officials could not wield their power. There was also lack of coordination between the three-tier systems.

Therefore, the failure of this system have evolved a new pattern on the recommendation of Ashok Mehta Committee.³⁵

Ashok Mehta Committee:

The Ashok Mehta Committee was appointed by the Government of India in 1977, in order to study the role and powers of the Panchayati Raj institution and give some remedial suggestions. The basic recommendation of the Committee are as follows:

1. More genuine and effective devolution of powers to Panchayat Raj institution should take place.
2. Primary unit in the Panchayati Raj system should be the Zilla Parishad and not the Panchayat Samiti because Zilla Parishad had better leadership and resources.
3. Mondal Panchayat with proper powers and resources and covering smaller area than development block and larger area than village should replace the Panchayat.
4. To ensure co-ordination among the rural and urban bodies the municipal bodies should also representatives in the Zilla Parishad and the Mondal Panchayat.
5. Political parties should take part in the election of panchayat raj.
6. A Panchayati Raj Finance Commission should be set up.
7. The Zilla Parishad should prepare the district plan which should be implemented through the Mondal Panchayat.

Andhrapradesh and Karnataka state accepted this suggestion and implemented by creating Mondal Panchayats. The West Bengal Government also took initiative in 1978 to revitalize the panchayat in accordance with the Ashok Mehta Committee's recommendations. But the recommendations of Ashok Mehta Committee were not accepted by the Central Government due to the change of ruling party; though few states accepted the recommendation.³⁶

After Ashok Mehta Committee various team and committees were formed which can be mentioned as follows:

C.H.Hanumanth Rao Team (1982):

The planning commission emphasized upon effective mass participation through the Panchayati Raj institution in the field of rural development. The planning commission experts, under the leadership of Dr. C.H. Hanumanth Rao, were deputed to study as to how to prepare plans at the district level. It was suggested that decentralization of planning should take place. Local people should be associated from the plan formulation stage.

G. V. K. Rao Committee (1985):

In 1985, the Central Government also appointed G. V. K. Rao Committee to advise on poverty alleviation programmes and organization of the Panchayati Raj institution. The committee suggested that regular election should be held for Panchayati Raj institution and plans should be formulated at the district level.

Laxmi Mal Singhvi Committee (1986):

This Committee was formed by the Government of India to make suggestions for revival of Panchayati Raj. It advocated that Panchayati Raj should primarily be viewed as the Local Self-Government system and should be strengthened accordingly. The Committee suggested that Panchayati Raj should be constitutionally recognized on the basis of this suggestion 64th constitutional amendment bill was introduced.

P. K. Thungan Committee (1989):

This Committee recommended for regular elections and according constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj institutions. And, also suggested that Zilla Parishad should play the role of agency of planning and development.

In 1989, 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill i.e., 'Panchayat Bill' was introduced in Loksabha and was passed in this house; but the Bill was not

accepted by the upper house (Rajya Sabha). As a result of the recommendations of various committees the Central Government decided to give constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj institutions and passed 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act., 1993. 73rd amendment of the constitution of India had escalated a landmark development in the history of local self-government in India.

73rd Constitution Amendment Act:

In 1993, 73rd Constitution Amendment Act was passed. A new part IX with heading 'Panchayat' was added to the constitution. Art 243, a new schedule XI, containing 29 powers to be transferred to panchayats, was added. Unlike the Balwant Rai Mehta pattern, the present pattern of Panchayati Raj differs in respect of political institution. According to Balwant Rai's recommendation, elections to panchayat raj bodies were held on individual basis. The candidates contesting for election were not nominated by political parties. The 73rd Amendment Act allows political parties to enter into the election fray. Besides, the present Panchayat Raj is not an implementing body to the development programme. It is a decision making body and rules over the governance of the village. One very prominent aspect of the present panchayat is that it empowers the women and weaker sections of village in the wielding of power.

So, the present Panchayati Raj is constituted under the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act in India. Naturally, it is central Act, which is adopted by the states and the union. The basic features of the 73rd Amendment Act are as follows:

1. Panchayat will be considered as political institution in a truly decentralized structure.
2. The 'Gram-Sabha' shall be recognized as the life - line of the Panchayat Raj. The voters of the village of clusters of villages will constitute its membership.
3. There will be direct election in all the three-tire of Panchayati Raj.
4. For the empowerment of women, the Act has made provision for reservation of seats; $\frac{1}{3}$ of the total seats shall be reserved for women. In case of SC/ST $\frac{1}{3}$ seats reservation for women will be followed.

5. The tenure of each Panchayati Raj Institution will be five years.
6. The election of Panchayati Raj Institution will be conducted regularly.
7. There will be separate Election Commission and Finance Commission for Panchayat Raj institution in every state.

Though most of the State Governments have amended their Panchayat Acts following the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act, during 1993 and 1994; yet things have mostly remained on paper. The panchayati Raj institutions are still playing the role as agency for development rather than institutions of self-government.³⁷ In the era of Globalization when the 'participatory democracy' has become a slogan of liberal democracy in India, where quasi-federation, politics of coalition and centralized party structure prevail, in this environment we have to see how far Gandhian concept of 'Gram Swaraj' will come into existence.

B) Evolution of Panchayat System in West Bengal

Previously, it has been defined about the origin of local self government in India. In that discussion we have found that the local government is not new in India; it has been traced from Vedic period in various names. Here, we would like to discuss about the evolution of Panchayat system in West Bengal from the colonial period in India.

Colonial Period:

The British had become interested to establish the local self-government after Sepoy Mutiny.³⁸ After 1857, it was found consequent rise of mass awareness against alien domination and rise of resentment against British rule. In this situation British understood the need for Indianisation of Administration. The public opinion was in favour of decentralized administration and self-governance.

A question may be raised as to why the British rulers at all interested in establishing these local government institutions. For a reasonable answer, we need to understand the complexities of the British rule in India. The timing of the introduction of these institutions also requires to be noted. Attempts to introduce local government institutions started soon after the annexation of India by the British crown. It was a time when the trauma of the uprising of 1857 was still fresh in the minds of the colonial rulers. It was also the time when the business of governance passed almost in its entirety to the provincial governments. As the arm of the government stretched to remotest parts of the countryside, the local communities lost what ever power they had in managing their own affairs, if not on democratic basis, at least on the basis of some caste or communal norms.³⁹

It was at this historical juncture that the British rulers invented a form of 'modern' local government for the country. There were several compulsions for this. The first and foremost was a fuller political and economic integration. Second, it was necessary to build a reliable information system extending right up to the villages, because even after 1857, there were sporadic peasants movements in different parts of India. The Chowkidari Panchayats, and later the Union Committees and Union Boards, made it possible for the state to penetrate deep into the country side and simultaneously put in place reliable information system. It is interesting to note that one of the obligatory functions of Union Board was to keep the district magistrate informed about the law and order situation of the villages. Similarly, the Dafadars had to report to the Officer-in-Charge of local police station on a regular basis. All these could be ensured without putting any additional burden on the state exchequer.⁴⁰

The local government institutions in the villages also helped the imperial government to recruit a new group of collaborators in the countryside apart from the erstwhile permanently settled zamindars. They came from the ranks of big intermediaries and the traders cum merchants cum money lenders whose economic power had been increasing overtime and now increased further because of commercialization of agricultures. These groups come to enjoy

additional power and prestige by virtue of their position as elected representatives in different tiers of the newly introduced rural local government structure. By becoming a part of the imperial system of the governance to which the local government institutions were integrated, their distance from people was now complete. It is an irony that technically they were representatives of the citizens. In reality they were new patrons in a crystallized network of patron-client relationship of which the imperialist rulers were the highest patron. They not emerged as powerful but also as legitimate mediators of both public and private affairs of people in the countryside.⁴¹

As a result, there were several Acts, like Indian Council Act of 1861, 1892 and 1909. Each act was in favour of Indian control over administration. But the primary motive of the British Raj was to save the imperial interests. Prior to this, the Charter Act, 1793, introduced the municipal administration in the towns of Bombay, Madras and Calcutta.

However, the British recognition of Lord Mayo's resolution 1870, made avenue for the rural decentralized governance for the first time. It proclaimed the need for local interest, local supervision and local care in order to bring about success in management of fund devoted to education, sanitation, medical relief and public works. The effects of the Mayo's resolution could be defined into two ways: 1) Devolution of power from Central Government to Provincial Governments; 2) enactment of local self-government for rural areas of the Bengal, Punjab, Bombay and North-West Frontier Province.⁴²

The first Panchayat introduced in colonial Bengal through the Village Chowkidari Act, 1870, which is called Chowkidari Panchayats. These Panchayats were strictly concerned with village watch and ward problems.⁴³ Later on, the Chowkidari Panchayat was supplemented with District Road Cess Committees. These committees were engaged with the fixation of the rates of road cess and maintenance of roads in the District. A district committee headed by collector was composed with 2/3 members nominated by the government from the tax payers

and 1/3 members were the government official. In the colonial history for the first time the non-officials were engaged with the public works.⁴⁴

In the history of local self-government in India, the year 1885 was most remarkable; because, in this year, the self-government act was passed to implement self-governance in rural area. The act was passed according to Lord Ripon's Resolution of 1882. On May 18, 1882, Lord Ripon's resolution on local self-government was adopted, which emphasized four fundamental principles, viz., a) elected non-official majority, b) non-official chairman; c) government's control over local bodies to be exercised from without rather than from within and d) elastic and sufficient financial resources for the local bodies. Thus the resolution of the liberal viceroy heralded the dawn of a new era in the history of Indian Administration.⁴⁵

Lord Ripon conceived local self-governing institution in terms of instrument not only for effecting improvement in administration, but also for political education of the people. As a follower of the philosophy of J.S. Mill and Hume he proposed to establish a large network of rural local boards in India.⁴⁶

The Local Self Government Act of 1885 introduced two-tier system of local self-government viz., District Board at the district level and Local Board or Sub-District Board at tehsil or taluk level. It had also provided for Union Committees for group of villages. Because of its wide jurisdiction the district tier failed to live up to the expectations. The Local Boards at the sub-divisional level had no autonomy, and were abolished shortly. In this regard, Neil Webster described that the local boards had no fixed roles as such and they rapidly became redundant because of their total reliance upon very limited grants and subsidies. The Union Committees had little role outside context of village politics. For their part, the District Boards increasingly lost their responsibilities to functionally specific boards such as the District School Board.⁴⁷

Though the Bengal Self-Government Act, 1885, established local self-government in Bengal, but it could not attain real devolution of power. Despite provision of elective principles and non-official chairmanship, under the Act of 1885, the Bengal Administration Report of 1891-92 showed that elected members were minority in both the tiers, out of 790 members in the District Board covering 38 districts of Bengal, 138 were ex-officio members, 313 nominated by British Government and 309 were elected by local boards, i.e., indirectly elected. In the Local Boards out of 1248 members, 40 were ex-officio members, 730 nominated by the British Government and only 469 were elected. The elected members were the representative of zamindar, government servants and lawyer. Poor masses did not represent in the local boards.⁴⁸

The claim for effective decentralization was intensified in Bengal after the Bengal partition, 1905. As a result, the Royal Commission was formed in 1907, under the chairmanship of Hobhouse. The Commission submitted its report in 1909 for the effective devolution of power. The report did not come into existence, much of its provision remained on paper.⁴⁹

For restructuring the local self-government the District Administrative Reforms Commission in Bengal has been appointed in 1914. The Commission recommended that rural local governments must be unified by combining the Union Committees and Chowkidari Panchayats. As a result under the proposed scheme of diarchy the Montagu Chelmsford Reform 1919 indicated that panchayats should come under the purview of provincial government. So, another attempt was made for the devolution of power under the colonial government in India.

Like other province in Bengal, we found Bengal Village Self-Government Act, 1919, which provided for two tier structure: Union Boards at the lower level and District Board at the higher level. Each Union Board was comprised with 9 members - three nominated and six elected. Each Union covered on average 8 to 10 villages with total population 10,000.⁵⁰ On the other hand, $\frac{2}{3}$ members of the

District Boards indirectly elected by members of the Union Boards under it and 1/3 members were nominated by the governments, and the District Magistrate was given free hand in the appointment of nominated members. In appointing the Dafadars and Chowkidars who played vital role in rural law order and administration, the wishes of elected members of the Union Boards were ignored. These Defadars and Chowkidars were responsible to Police Thana (station) in the Union Board area and not the Union Board directly.⁵¹

The weakness of Rural Local Government, under the act of 1919, is found in West Bengal Human Development Report-2004. However, the main colonial legacies with respect to local government in rural Bengal were low resources capability of local government, the relative weakness of lower level tiers of local government emphasis on mainly municipal function, excessive bureaucratic or official control and above all, controlled by vested interests, particularly the landed gentry.⁵²

As a result of all these factors, apprehension arose about real intention of the British government. What followed as the anti-Union Board agitation, 1921, people refused to pay taxes, Union Boards refused to work. The stalemate continued, more or less, till 1930s. After this the 2nd world war, Quit India Movement and pre-independence agitations left no space for creation or consolidation of local self-governments in Bengal as well as other parts of India.⁵³

Post- Independence Period:

The Constituent Assembly included the provision of Panchayati Raj in the chapter of Directive Principles of State Policy, Art 40 of part IV of Indian Constitution. The Draft Constitution did not have any reference or article on the villages or village panchayats. There was an acrimonious debate on this subject in the Constituent Assembly. Art 40 of part IV was the out come of this debate. The urban and rural elites did not like to give constitutional status and recognition to the panchayat system. Due to the inclusion of panchayats in part IV of the Indian constitution, it was not compulsion upon the union and the states government to

implement it. In spite, some states tried to implement panchayat system. Experimentally West Bengal Government implemented panchayat system in the Block area of Baruipur, Mahammad Bazar, Santhia, Shaktigarh, Guskura, Jhargram and Fulia. There was no legal institution of experimental panchayat system. So, this type of panchayat worked under the previous Union Board.⁵⁴

According to the recommendation of Balwant Rai Mehta Committee, three - tier panchayat system was implemented in all about Indian states. But the situation in West Bengal was different. The Union Board which was established in Bengal and functioning as rural self-government was hard to avoid it. For these reason four- tier panchayat system was established in rural West Bengal. The West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1957⁵⁵ introduced two-tier panchayat system: in the village level--Gram panchayat and in the old Union Board level--Anchal Panchayat. On the other hand, the West Bengal Zilla Parishad Act, 1963⁵⁶, introduced Anchalik Parishad at the Block level and Zilla Parishad at the district level in 1964.

Zilla Parishad:

The Zilla Parishad was entrusted with wide ranging powers and functions relating to public works, sanitation, education, social welfare and public health etc. Unlike the District Board Zilla Parishad was expected to play a meaningful role in rural planning. The Zilla Parishad was comprised with the following members: i) the president of all Anchalik Parishad of the districts; ii) two Adhyakshas from each sub-division of the district elected by the Adhyakshas from amongst themselves; iii) all the members of the parliament and the state legislature; iv) one municipal chairman or mayor to be nominated by the state government; v) the president of the District School Board and vi) two women to be nominated by the state government. The Act of 1963 scrupulously avoided the direct elective principle at the district level. Every Zilla Parishad has one executive officer and one secretary, both normally belonging to the West Bengal Civil Service. The District Magistrate was however, yet to have any organic or integral linkage with the Zilla Parishad.

Anchalik Parishad:

Like the Zilla Parishad the Anchalik Parishad was entrusted with powers and functions. Anchalik Parishad was composed with the following members: i) the Pradhan of all the Anchal Panchayat's of Block; ii) One Gram Panchayat Adhyaksha to be elected by the Adhyakshas from amongst themselves from the territorial limits of each Anchal Panchayat of the Block; iii) all members of the parliament and the state legislature (excepting the minister of the Block); iv) two women and two persons from Block Ward Committees to be nominated by the state government and v) two social workers to be co-opted by the other members. Besides the Block Development officer was included in the Anchalik Parishad as an associate member.

The structure and composition of the Anchalik Parishad ensured that it was a loose and disjointed combination of different types of members. The combination of indirect election, lateral co-option and nomination could hardly be a substitute for direct elective principles.

The Block Development Officer was the ex-officio chief executive officer of the Anchalik Parishad. The Parishad was empowered to take a resolution seeking the removal of the Block Development Officer and it was made obligatory for the state government to abide by the recommendation. Under the Act of 1963, bureaucratic machinery was controlled by the Panchayati Raj at the Block level.

Anchal Panchayat:

The West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1957 provided for one Anchal Panchayat for a cluster of villages. The Anchal Panchayats were given very little substantive powers. They had no developmental role. An Anchal Panchayat was meant to control the Dafadars and Chowkidars of the area. In functional terms, the Anchal Panchayats were not in a better position than Union Boards.

Regarding the composition of Anchal Panchayat the principle of direct election was not followed. However, unlike the Zilla Parishads and the Anchalik Parishads; the Anchal Panchayats did not have provisions for nomination of members or co-option of officials. There were only two types of members in an Anchal Panchayat: i) the Adhyakshas of all the Gram Panchayats concerned; and ii) some members elected by the Gram Panchayat members. In other words, the Anchal Panchayats were formed on the basis of vertical integration and indirect election. At the first meeting of after the election, one Pradhan and one Upa-Pradhan were elected by the members of the Anchal Panchayat among themselves.

Gram Panchayat:

The first step towards constituting the Panchayati Raj structure was the constitution of Gram Sabha. The Act of 1957 empowered the state government to constitute the Gram Sabha (at the village level), consisting of all persons whose names are included in the electoral role of the Legislative Assembly. In theory, Gram Sabha was designed as the meeting of all adult members of the village. Gram Sabha was expected to consist of all voters of the village. It was further stipulated that the members of the Gram Sabha would elect the members of the Gram Panchayat from amongst themselves. Thus, the principle of direct election was introduced at this level. At the first meeting of the Gram Panchayat its members were to elect one Adhyaksha and one Upadhyaksha from among themselves.

In consistence with the expected democratic vigour of the Gram Panchayats, they were entrusted to perform the function relating with public health, sanitation, supply of drinking water and maintenance of public road etc. They were expected to perform both civic and developmental functions, while they had a limited role in rural policing also. The Adhyaksha and Upadhyaksha were expected to play leading role in these fields.

Evaluation:

The Act of 1957 and 1963 conjointly designed an elaborate Panchayati Raj network which failed to give a fair and practical trial. It was with a certain amount of fanfare that this system was introduced in a newly born post-colonial society; but lack of organized support from below and political ambivalence at the top soon brought an early death to an infant system the late sixties were politically turbulent times for the entire nation also for the state in particular, and this climate was not exactly conducive for promotion of self-government at the grassroots level.⁵⁷

In 1981, Uday Bhadhuri, the Assistant Director of Panchayat in west Bengal wrote of the early implementation of Panchayati Raj in the state; this was undoubtedly an important step towards democratic decentralization; its socio-economic significance is indisputable. But in the economic base on which the gradual evolution lay, there was very little place for the poor. The rural and panchayat leadership was on that emerged out of the green revolution in the farms of big land holders (Jotedars). The Zilla Parishads and Anchalik Parishads met their inglorious death as soon as they were born. The reason behind this fact was that the unorganized landholder (Jotedar) class could not be a match for the neo-bourgeoisie a product of the industrial cities. Beginning right from the national movement up to 2nd decade after Independence the national leadership was mainly in the urban areas. Therefore, though the rural institutions got the theoretical recognition; in practice it was beyond the notice of national leadership.⁵⁸

While the Zilla Parishad and Anchalik Parishad died a premature death, the Gram Panchayats and Anchal Panchayats did continue to function at the local level. Their role as institutions of local government was extremely minor- some involvements in the disbursement of relief collection of Chowkidar tax and the payment of Chowkidars and Dafadars. From the out set they could never be described as institution for popular participation. Although given a four year period of office new election was never held and the members remained in office without any proper attempt at recourse to local opinion. Besides, the failure was aggravated by the continuing existence of massive rural poverty. The local

government remained undemocratic institution in the hands of dominant village elite.

However, it is fruitful to mention that in some ways, the panchayati raj experiments of this phase were to have lasting impact on the subsequent exercises. Despite their avoidance of the direct elective principle at all the tiers (except the lowest), the Acts of 1957 and 1963 succeeded in introducing popular representatives at different levels of rural self-government. Besides, the newly introduced panchayat raj was conceived as an indigenous experiment and the vernacularisation of the associated nomenclature was definitely a popular gesture. The Indianised panchayati Raj was, to the extent, less elitist than the network established in the colonial era.⁵⁹

Panchayati Raj at Present:

For restructuring the panchayat system in West Bengal, in 1973, the West Bengal Panchayat Act was passed, annulling the previous laws. The four tier structure was replaced by the emerging all India three-tier panchayat system: Gram Panchayat at the lowest level; Panchayat Samiti at the Block level and the Zilla Parishad at the top level. The new Gram Panchayats were similar to the Anchal Panchayat of 1957 Act and consisted of group of villages with a population 10 to 12 thousand. Following the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee Report's recommendation Panchayat Samiti was coterminous with Blocks; and Zilla Parishads were the coterminous with district. The Act provided for the direct election of members of all three tiers and for the tenure of four years (increased from 1982- 5years term)

However, although the Act was passed in 1973, it failed to be implemented because of political instability in the state at the time and Indira Gandhi's subsequent declaration of a state emergency in India in 1975.⁶⁰ So, the national political scenario was not conducive for effective decentralization of powers. Growing centralization of powers was the most dominant phenomena in national politics. Added to it was the infighting and internal bickering within the Congress in

the state. Rampant factionalism had further damaged the party organization. The Congress party in the state did not have effective, efficient and acceptable leadership. The central leadership started intervening in many issues and the factional leadership began to depend on them for strengthening their respective position.⁶¹ In this situation, it was not possible for the state government to implement new panchayat system. The new panchayat system was revitalized only after the Left Front Government came to power in 1977. The first general panchayat election under the new Act took place in 1978 and new elected local bodies were installed with great enthusiasm.

Zilla Parishad:

At the top level of three tiers Panchayat Raj was the Zilla Parishad (Mahakuma Parishad at sub-divisional level for Siliguri after the constitution of Darjeeling Hill council in 1988) under the chairmanship of Sabhadhipati and in his absence a Sahakari Sabhadhipati. The parishad was composed with the following members: i) two members elected on the basis of adult franchise for each constituency within the territorial limit of Zilla Parishad; ii) all MPs and MLAs(except minister) of the territorial area were the ex-officio members; iii) Sabhapatis of Panchayat Samitis were the ex-officio members; iv) reservation of seats for women and SC/ST would be done according to recent amendment. The District Magistrate was the executive officer of Zilla Parishad. The functions of Zilla Parishad included providing financial assistance regarding agriculture, industries, livestock, irrigation water supply, communication, establishment of schools, hospital etc. According to 1973 Act, there were various standing committees to perform the functions. At the district level, there was District Planning and Co-ordination Committee (DPCC) and District Planning Committee (DPC) for the decentralized planning.

Panchayat Samiti:

At the Block level there was Panchayat Samiti under the chairmanship of Sabhapati and in his absence Saha-Sabhapati. It was comprised with the

following members: i) three members elected from each village on the basis of adult franchise; ii) Pradhans of Gram panchayats were the ex-officio member; iii) all MPs and MLAs(except minister) of the territorial area were the ex-officio members; iv) reservation of seats for women and SC/ST would be done as per recent amendment act. The BDO was the ex-officio executive officer of Panchayat Samiti. The functions of Panchayat Samiti were related to agriculture, taxation, small industries social service, relief of distress anti-epidemic measures and supervision and co-ordination of works made by Gram Panchayats within its area. At the Block level for the implementation of decentralized planning it was found Block Planning Committee (BPC).

Gram Panchayat:

At the lowest level of three - tier panchayat system was Gram Panchayat. The total elected members would vary between 5 and 30 depending on the number of voters in the area. Reservation of seats for women and SC/ST would be done as per recent amendment act. The members elected a Pradhan and Upa-Pradhan from among themselves. The Pradhan exercised administrative powers. There would be a secretary and Job-assistant to transact day to day business of Gram Panchayat. The Gram Panchayats would provide sanitary, medical and drinking water, maintenance of public road, tanks, grounds, street lighting and minor irrigation etc. The Gram Panchayats would monitor and oversee almost all the important aspects of village life.

However, election of these bodies was not held until the Left Front Government came into power in West Bengal in 1977. In June 1978, elections were held simultaneously for all the tiers of the rural local bodies had been held at the regular five years interval as stipulated by law, with most recent elections taking place in May, 2008.

Amendment of West Bengal Panchayat Act:

There were several times amendment of West Bengal Panchayat Act had taken place till 1994. These amendments had changed the character of West

Bengal Panchayati Raj institutions further. In 1982, amendment was made to increase the tenure of three-tier panchayat 4 yrs to 5 yrs. In 1992 amendment, it was provided that not less than $\frac{1}{3}$ of the seats shall form quorum at each tier. It also made such provision that at least $\frac{1}{3}$ of the seats in each tier of panchayats should be reserved for women. The reserved seats should be rotated in every election. In 1994 Amendment Act, it was included that only for ordinary member's reservation would be effective also for the seats of chairpersons. Reservation of seats for SC/ST according to their proportion to total population was also provided. Secondly, two popular bodies 'Gram Sabha' and 'Gram Sansad' were set in operation with changed connotation.

Gram Sansad and Gram Sabha:

The Gram Sabha has been incorporated by all the states in their amended laws on panchayats, although there are variations in respect of numbers of meeting to be held, the issues to be discussed in the meeting and the like. West Bengal has however taken step forward by making provision for Gram Sansad apart from Gram Sabha. All the voters of each of the electoral constituencies of a gram panchayat constitute a 'Gram Sansad'; all the voters of a Gram Panchayat area constitute a 'Gram Sabha'.

The meeting of the Gram Sansad will be held twice in a year. The half yearly meeting to be held on November for consideration the budget for the coming year and written opinion is taken regarding this budget and the last audit report comes into consideration. The annual meeting of the Sansad to be held ordinarily in May for the consideration of revised budget of previous year, the accounts of the last six months, the activities undertaken during the last year and proposed to be undertaken in the coming year. The meeting of the Gram Sansad will be convened by Pradhan, in his absence, by the Upa-pradhan.

The Gram Sabha meets ordinarily in December every year after the completion of half-yearly meetings of the Sansad in November. The Agenda items of the Sansad are included in the Gram Sabha meeting. It is the duty of the Gram

Panchayat to place before the meeting of the Sabha the budget of Gram Panchayat. The Panchayat has also to place before the meeting of the Sabha the decisions of the Gram Sansad along with the observation of the Gram Panchayat. The opinions of the Sabha have to be recorded in the resolution book. The meeting of the Gram Sabha is convened by Pradhan, in his absence, by the Upa-Pradhan.

The Gram Sabha is really cornerstone of the entire scheme of democratic decentralization. It is a direct democracy at grass roots level. The Gram Sabha has been regarded as the 'Soul' of Panchayati Raj. Reports available from various states indicate that success with regard to the holding of Gram Sabha meetings is mixed. West Bengal has better record. In 1995, Gram Sansads in West Bengal held 63 percent of the statutory meetings. The figure rose to 88% in 1998.⁶² But D.Bandyopadhyay tried to show the lack of attendance in his writing.⁶³ According to him Gram Sansad in West Bengal are notorious for lack of attendance by members. Figures made available by Government for Gram Sansad meetings held in May and November 2002 show the average of 12% and 11% respectively with the high of 19% and low of 6% (November 2002). The percentage of adjourned meetings was abnormally high. It was 25% in May and 18% in November 2002(PanchayatiRaj Samachar no.-2, November 2002 and no 1 and 2 January-February, 2003 Institute of Social Science).

Thirdly, independent State Election Commission would be established to conduct the panchayat elections. Fourthly, State Finance Commission would be constituted for every five years to review the financial position of panchayat. Fifthly, provisions for creating a district council were made in every district under the chairmanship of the leader of recognized political party which is in opposition in Zilla Parishad. Sixthly, the total member of Gram Panchayat was increased from a maximum of 25 to 30.

Village Development Committee (Gram Unnayan Samiti)

In 14 July, 2003, West Bengal Government passed the West Bengal Panchayat (amendment) Act for the establishment of Village Development Committee. The Act is that it tries to establish through law organic linkages among the various tiers of panchayat. It creates a Block Sansad and Zilla Sansad where the representation of lower tier is adequately provided. The object VDC is to ensure active participation of the people in implementation, maintenance and equitable distribution benefits.

The Village Development Committee to be constituted through a process among three options: i) it could be constituted by a general election by all the members of the Gram Sansad, ii) it could be elected only by the members of Gram Sansad present in a particular meeting ; iii) VDC member could be nominated by the government or any other authority. The government is not interested in the first option is very clear. If it were so, it could have clearly stated it in law. D. Bandyopadhyay criticized that in the name of participation; firstly, it is to create a front organization under the law in the shape of the Village Development Committee to legalize the illegitimate exercise of power by the party local committee. Secondly, it is to appease the lower rank and file who have lost elections by making them members of the VDC either through manipulative limited election or by nomination.⁶⁴

Evaluation:

The Panchayat Raj institution in West Bengal have been functioning from the very long time. At present, we can not think about the rural life of Bengal without the existence of Panchayat Raj institution. These institutions are known as an instrument for socio-economic development of rural people. It is no doubt that the rural people have gained benefits from panchayat. But how far Panchayat Raj institutions have been succeeded and failed it has become a question of debate. Some one praised the role of West Bengal panchayats and some one put it opposite view.

Reorganization of the system of local government was one of the most important of the institutional changes brought about by the Left Front Government from late 1977 onwards. In the process West Bengal has created a history of participation of the common people through the process of decentralization, which is unique in India. A system of democratic election in local bodies like Gram panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad was in 1978. They have subsequently been held every five years making West Bengal the only state in India to have had regular elections to local bodies every five years for the past 30 years.

In the first phase after 1978, newly elected panchayats were increasingly involved with the execution of Land Reforms. Panchayats took the initiative in exposing benami lands holdings, ensured the identification of excess land and the declaration of vested land and were also given charge of ensuring the legal rights of recipients of vested land and Bargadars (share croppers) over land.⁶⁵

G.K.Lieten in his study had come into conclusion that the role of panchayat Raj in West Bengal in the field of rural development cannot be ignored. From his field work conducted in a village of Birbhum, he concluded that the Left Front broke the traditional strangle hold of land lord, money lenders and morois with ushering in regular election. Now the people do not throng the money lender's house for meeting their needs. Although they do not get jobs and loans, or any other help from panchayats, but these bodies have increased their sense of security.⁶⁶

Besides, G.K Lieten emphasized upon the rural development in West Bengal in respect of the following heads:

1. The push forces, pushing people out of the rural habitat have become feeble, and out migration from villages have virtually stopped.
2. Employment opportunities appear to have grown considerably, leading to decrease in the percentage of rural non-workers between 1981 and 1991,

unlike in the rest of India where the percentage of non-workers has increased.

3. Agrarian production between the mid 1970s and the early 1990s has virtually doubled. Out put figures suggest that in recent years West Bengal has come to occupy the first position among all the states in terms of growth of food grains produced and per capita increase in food grain consumption.⁶⁷

Neil Webster has shown in his discussion that the success of the new Gram Panchayats to be presented as the attitudes of the substantial majority of house holder interviewed in the two Gram panchayats are quite explicit in their recognition of the new institution success in implementing development works and the general improvements, material and political, that have brought to the villages. Besides, he described that the implementing panchayat raj was a bold and innovative strategy by the Left Front in West Bengal. The experience of Burdwan districts demonstrates that it can bring some degree of economic improvement to the poorer sections of rural social formation.⁶⁸

In assessing the Left Front Government in West Bengal Atul Kohli described that "landless labourer, share croppers, and small land owners constitute the majority of rural population in West Bengal. These are also the groups that have become the CPI (M)'s main supporters, enabling the CPI (M) to win three consecutive state elections. As one would expect in the case of a leftist party, larger land owners, business man and industrialist tend to oppose the CPI (M). It is important to note, however, that the CPI (M) has gone out of its way to make itself acceptable to such groups.⁶⁹ From this discussion, it is clear that West Bengal Left Front Government has played vital role for the welfare of the poorer sections of the society. It has become possible through Panchayat Raj instrument in rural Bengal.

On the other hand, Ross Mallick in his book 'Development Policy of a Communist Government: West Bengal 1977', discussed that the Left Front failed

as a force for revolutionary change and its reformism was less impressive than that of capitalist parties in other states.⁷⁰ Panchayats have merely consolidated the interest and control of dominant landed elite at the expenses of the lower classes, making rural change for their own benefit.⁷¹

D. Bandyopadhyay criticized the panchayat system in West Bengal. He described that the Left Front forgets that legislation is no substitute for action. In Kerala, the great success in planning did not require only change of the local law. It only required political will, faith in the genius of the masses and sustained effort by the leadership on the ground. In a report Nirmal Mukherjee and D. Bandyopadhyay mentioned that West Bengal's success in the realm of panchayats is quite tangible, specially, in land reforms, generating awareness among the masses and also in rural development programmes. At the same they mentioned that the initial enthusiasm of the people after 1978 have now largely faded away resulting a stagnancy of the panchayats.⁷²

Harihar Bhattacharya criticized the West Bengal Panchayati Raj in a way that the so-called process of decentralization in West Bengal since 1978 has not been translated into democracy at the grassroots. The process of decentralization has witnessed a process of centralization which remains strong challenge to democracy in rural West Bengal. The real reason explaining why democracy, institutionally, has failed in rural West Bengal's paradigmatic. It is the party's version of Marxism which is the guiding spirit behind it panchayat discourses and which believes only in 'Guided Democracy', and sees panchayats as feature of 'bourgeoisie democracy. But H.Bhattacherya believed that the West Bengal Panchayats are full of radical potentialities. They have been able to attract considerable popular attention. Villagers now accept them as part of their life.⁷³

In going to evaluate the success of West Bengal Left Front Government, Krishna Chakraborty and Swapan Bhattacharya mentioned that the achievement of Left Front Government led Panchayat system does not succeed to replace the old and traditional rural elites by enlightened leadership from the hitherto

unprivileged, inarticulate masses. Village elites and faction leaders still retain the power. The Panchayat system only allows transfer of power from leaders of one faction to another. The vested interest groups have not suffered much due to the introduction of Panchayat Raj based on adult franchise. They only mentioned it as 'structural change' in the villages.⁷⁴

G. K. Lieten from his study defined that the survey on the composition of the panchayats' in terms of caste and class in any case confirms that a new type of leadership has come to dominate the stage at the lower levels in the system of political devolution. Poor peasants, labour in agriculture, lower caste holder come into the forefront. They also take part in the panchayat system.⁷⁵ This is an achievement of West Bengal Panchayat Raj. Atul Kohli also discussed in his book 'The State and Poverty in India' that small farmers, share-croppers and agricultural labourers constituted about a half of the new panchayat leaders.⁷⁶ But Ross Mallick believed another opposite view. Mallick observed that the old pro-congress elite was now replaced by a new elite class, which was less wealthy than the old set, but better placed than the majority of the rural population.⁷⁷

Despite the arguments made by some scholars against and for, it can not be denied that Panchayat Raj institutions have become familiar with rural people. At present, the West Bengal Panchayat Raj is running under the light of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. The new amendment has established participatory democracy and empowered women. Participatory democracy has been established in panchayat system through Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad to be compared with the citizens' forum of direct democracy, which existed in the Greek City states.

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