

Chapter - VII

Summary & Conclusion

On the recommendations of Balwantrao Mehta Committee 'Panchayat Raj System' or 'democratic decentralisation' is one of the important political innovations of Independent India. Many experiments of PR are going in most of the states of India since last four decades. Academicians, politicians and administrators have with great interest debated the role of PR in rural India. They are now the statutory elected local bodies with necessary resources, power and authority to plan and implement the development programmes in the countryside. Contribution to growth and welfare is the core strategy of Panchayat Raj. Previously bureaucrats discharged the development programmes, a system that received widespread criticism as inefficient, corrupt and inequitable. There were many evidences that the poor functioning of local public services in India relates to the centralised and non-participatory nature of their management. Moreover, there was little scope for citizens to voice their demands in the formal institutional structures.

The experience of West Bengal under three-tier Panchayati Raj system stands in sharp contrast with that of other states in India and together with land reform it has been credited for playing an important role in the impressive economic turnaround of the state. It is the first and only major Indian state which has had timely panchayat election as a party basis regularly every five years since 1978, a year after with Left front government was elected to Power in the state with a massive and growing mandate. LF government, by amending the West Bengal panchayat Act of 1973 has revitalised the panchayat system and made this sector effective bodies participating in rural development process. Many observers feel that they have brought about a churning of the submerged humanity in

rural areas and created a high degree of political awareness among all sections. The concerned effort at the political level acts effectively to change rural power structure in favour of marginalised or suppressed groups. Under strong political stability and long continuity of governance of LF as the state level, the Panchayat Raj system has been working as a state policy to usher a new social order for the socio-economic transformation of the rural community of West Bengal.

Keeping in view the wider aims of Panchayat Raj programme under LFG in West Bengal, the present study was undertaken to evaluate the performance of panchayats in respect to rural development in a backward district Cooch Behar with the following objectives -

- (a) To present the overall picture of PR in the district.
- (b) To study caste, class and power structure.
- (c) To study the panchayat resources and pattern of expenditure on development activities.
- (d) To assess the role of panchayats and poverty alleviation programmes on the rural economy of Cooch Behar.

The study has been done with respect to two sample panchayats of the district. In the foregoing chapters, discussions were carried out at length. An attempt is made in this chapter to bring together all major findings and suggestions for future prospect.

Some agents are considered to be catalyst of development. North Bengal especially Cooch Behar district of North Bengal is a poor and backward area. Cooch Behar is a no-industry district; its rate of urbanisation is lower than both state and all India average; Communicative system is extremely primitive; it has a large scheduled caste population; the proportion of scheduled caste population is higher than the West Bengal state average, agriculture of this region is very primitive and handicapped by preponderance of food crops, low irrigation facilities, low

fertiliser consumption and consequently it may be treated as a very poor and backward rural area of West Bengal. The district symbolises the poverty of India - Poverty in all its manifestations.

In Cooch Behar, local government institutions had been functioning in a fairly organised way under the political stability of LF to transform the rural community of the district. As an authority of the state government, they are now entrusted with civic, social and economic functions. LF mainly CPI (M) has one of its strongest bases both in terms of popular support and in terms of organisational maturity which has been reflected in last five panchayat election (1978-1998). In 1978 panchayat elections LF got 75.43 percent seats in gram panchayat, 88.88 percent seats in panchayat Samity and 100 seats in Zilla Parishad. In subsequent panchayat elections same picture was reflected.

CPI (M) has also proved its strongest political control in the selected gram panchayats viz. Khagrabari and Sikarpur over last panchayat elections. Both the gram panchayats are absolutely dominated by the CPI (M) panchayat members. LF's agrarian policy gave larger security to the sharecroppers, agricultural labourers and marginal farmers of the villages. Downtrodden villagers have the strong belief that party CPI (M) is pro-people party.

Regarding caste, class and power structure of the panchayat members, both from the macro & micro level studies, it has become quite evident that there is remarkable representation of weaker sections in the district of Cooch Behar. Their direct involvement in different rural development programmes restricted the old power relations in the villages with tremendous politicisation.

Regarding caste of the panchayat members in the district it has been observed that 54.76 percent gram panchayat members belong to scheduled caste and 44.76 percent belong to general caste. Scheduled

caste women representation accounted to 20.28 percent which is much higher than general caste women representation (15.01 %).

Similar result has been obtained at micro level with reference to two samples GPs of the district. On an average 46 percent gram panchayat members in Khagrabari GP are scheduled caste whereas in Sikarpur it accounted to 85.16 percent. Caste system in the villages of the district has lost significantly the stigmatic and discriminatory meaning.

Class character of the panchayat representatives in terms of landholding, occupation and educational status also provides alarming results. Regarding landholding it has been observed that 11.70 percent are landless family, 4.2 percent are patta holders and 54.95 percent are marginal farmers who have a land upto 2.49 acres. In terms of occupational pattern, marginal farmers, agricultural labourers & bargadars combinely accounted to 64.39 percent in the district. Educational status also shows that 60.72 percent have an educational qualification upto lower & upper primary level. Thus rural power structure in the district is heavily in favour of weaker sections who have low educational status and who emerge from locally lower caste.

Class character of the panchayat members in terms of sample GPs also confirms the same result. On an average 58.04 percent panchayat members in Khagrabari GP belong to landless families, 26.6 percent have the land holding upto 2.49 acres (marginal farmers). On the other hand in Sikarpur GP on an average 66.46 percent members have the landholding upto 4.49 acres (marginal and small farmers).

The representation of elected members in Khagrabari GP mostly have come from occupational background of marginal & small peasants (22.70 percent), housewives (20.75 percent), teachers (14.81 percent), small shop owner & small business (10.69 percent), unemployed (10.20 percent), other services (9.71 percent), agricultural labourers (7.43

percent). Most of the elected housewives have come from the families of marginal and landless farmers. On the other hand in Sikarpur GP, the elected panchayat members, mostly have come from the occupational categories of marginal & small peasants (54.12 percent), medium & big peasants (21.11 percent), teacher (7.06 percent), unemployed (6.46 percent) & housewives (35.41 percent).

In Khagrabari GP, local leaders who are in power structure have comparatively better educational qualifications than that of Sikarpur GP. 26.64 percent members are secondary, 25.78 percent are graduate, 21.51 percent are lower primary, 18.98 percent are upper primary & 8.80 percent higher secondary. In Sikarpur, 61.60 percent members are upper primary, 18.66 percent are lower primary, 17.58 percent are secondary and 7.08 percent are graduates.

Performance of Panchayats in poverty alleviation programme on rural economy of Cooch Behar is not at all encouraging. Field survey results to evaluate the impact of IRD programme on the target group of people in the sample GPs show that 60 panchayat beneficiaries crossed the poverty line; 19 percent misutilised their assets; 12 percent perished their assets and 9 percent disposed their assets. Highest number of families crossed the poverty line belong to the annual income group of Rs. 3501-4800 (28 percent). Schemes which helped most of the families to cross the poverty line were tertiary (42 percent) & primary (18 percent). Remarkable percentages of misutilisation were obtained in the annual group of Rs. 0-2265 & Rs. 2265-3500. Misutilisation was considerable in Bamboo craft (77.77 percent), milch cow (66.66 percent), Chiramuri (43.75 percent). Regarding repayment of Bank loan survey result showed quite a disappointing picture. Only 30 percent beneficiaries were found non-defaulters whereas 70 percent were found defaults. Among the reasons of non-repayment Bank loan, urgent family need topped the list (34.30

percent), asset perished & disposed (30 percent), inadequate income generation (20 percent), old due paid and delay in income generation (15.70 percent).

As regard to impact of credit on earnings summery result showed that 60 percent beneficiaries utilised credit in enhancing their incomes more or less judiciously. 40 percent borrowers failed to use it effectively. Desired result under the scheme could not be achieved for some important limitations. The limitations are: wrong and slow identification of beneficiaries, misutilisation of income generating assets lack of infrastructure facilities, low recovery of Bank loan, low per family investment, lack of guidance, supervision and follow up action, lack of marketing facilities & acute shortage of DRDA staff at block and village level.

Field survey result to evaluate the performance of JRY programme in the sample GPs show in Khagrabari GP, JRY worker got employment only 8 days in a year and income was estimated Rs. 448 per year. On the other hand in Sikarpur G.P. a JRY worker got employment only 6 days in a year and income was estimated only Rs. 336 per year.

As regards Pattern of expenditure under JRY in both the GPs it has been observed that by and large, panchayats have given priority to construction works for infrastructure development of the villages rather than to development oriented works related to asset creation of permanent nature in the villages. However considering the poor performance of the programme in the study area, it can hardly be denied the need to develop rural infrastructure and the important beneficial role-played by the village panchayats to the people living in such villages.

Field survey result also to evaluate the impact of JRY on perception of Gram Sabha meeting and village development shows that 85

per cent respondents (villagers) are of the opinion that the meetings are vague and final decision making process is found to be unilateral and centralised around the pradhan or a small coterie. In the meetings of Gram Sabha they pass resolutions imposing their own decisions upon the common citizens of the villages. Only 15 per cent respondents pointed out that development works are done in the villages as per decisions of gram sabha meetings. As per citizens participation is concerned, on an average 30 to 35 per cent of the electorate normally take active part in the meetings. The citizens who do not get any benefits under poverty alleviation programme show any interest in attending the meetings.

Regarding the impact of existing devolution on development, on an average 57 per cent respondents are of the opinion that devolution has a marginally positive impact on the village development; 30 per cent are of the opinion that devolution has not at all any impact on village development and 13 per cent respondents believe that impact is quite substantial. In order to find out principal reasons for the poor performance of panchayats, on an average 56 per cent respondents identified village level corruption; 5 per cent identified block level corruption and 39 per cent pointed out shortage of funds. Majority respondents are also with the opinion that allocation and expenditure are not transparent and villagers are by and large not involved in the implementation of the programme.

As regards to panchayat resources it has been observed that finances of panchayat exclusively depends on grants-in-aid. Own resources generated by gram panchayats are meagre and it constitutes 4 percent and 6 percent in Sikirpur & Khagrabari gram panchayat respectively. On the contrary, grants-in-aid constitute on and above 94 percent of the total resources. Own resources, which include tax revenue and non-tax revenue, constitute a significant source of income to gram

panchayat. Among the tax revenue, house tax is an important source of revenue but there is a poor drive on the part of the panchayat to effectively mobilise the resources from this source. Operational mobilisation as well as effectiveness of this source of revenue has been remaining poor. Non tax revenue is also the significant factor in the generation of income to G.P. It is evident from the study that percentage of revenue to total revenue earned during the years is more than 70 percent in Sikarpur G.P.

It has been also observed that expenditure during the period i.e. from 1990-91 to 1999-2000 increased considerably on development activities but no balanced approach is followed in respect of expenditure. Education and health, which are the most important parameter of human development, received the least attention in respect of expenditure over the years. On an average, 5.96 percent and 7.30 percent of the total own resources are spent on education in Khagrabari and Sikarpur G.P. respectively. Expenditure under health is decreased from 18.73 percent in the year 1990-91 to 2.57 percent in the year 1999-2000 in Khagrabari G.P. The same picture is noticed in Sikarpur G.P. in this respect. It is, no doubt, a hindrance to rural development. The proportion of expenditure on miscellaneous item has been larger than the development activities found in Sikarpur G.P during the years.

For the successful functioning of the panchayat system for the development of a backward district Cooch Behar the following suggestion are to be followed:

i) **Tax Revenue:**

- i) Regarding the levy of house tax the rates should be revised at least once in five years.

- ii) Campaign and awareness programme should be introduced among the villagers regarding the collection of tax.
- iii) Before allowing any grant or issuing any certificate to the people of the area under G.P. tax clearance from them should be enforced.
- iv) Agricultural income tax should be incorporated and it should be transferred to the hands of Panchayats.
- v) A system of strict and regular supervision over tax collection should exist.
- vi) Proper autonomy should be given to the panchayats to collect tax.
- vii) Incentives should be given to the Panchayats for better tax efforts.

ii) Non tax revenue:

- i) The rate of levy of fees should be increased to not less than one hundred percent once in five years.
- ii) All leviable items should be assessed and fees to be collected.

iii) Expenditure:

- i) A balanced approach on expenditure policy is necessary for development works.
- ii) Among development expenditures, education, health and welfare should be given priority. Their shares of total expenditure should be 60 percent; 10 percent and 5 percent respectively.

iv) Devolution of Power and Decentralised Planning:

- i) Development planning of the villages and selection of beneficiaries should be free from politicisation. Both the things are to be done in the meetings of Gram Sabha fairly with significant participation of the villagers.
- ii) The village constituency meetings must be organised mandatory twice in a year after adequate campaign, ensuring

large scale participation of all categories of voters, particularly women and those belonging to backward classes.

- iii) An Outline of Development Plan (O.D.P.) on the villages should be prepared by task force in the village constituency meeting. This will be followed by development seminars at the gram panchayat levels with village council members, resource persons, govt. officials working at the village and the block level, and representatives all political parties. Thereafter O.D.P. will be integrated with the block and district level planning for implementation.
- iv) Elected panchayat members officially must be liable to produce accounts for the use of public funds and implementation of the public projects before the villagers in the Gram Sabha meeting.
- v) Guidance, supervision and follow-up action are needed at different levels.
- vi) Women candidates, thanks to reservation, have started taking part in public affairs as a proxy for their male family members. In most of the cases, they are not exerting themselves in decision making properly. So there should be training for the women panchayats by the expert personnel.
- vii) Timely, more funds for J.R.Y. programme should be provided by the governments to ensure employment of the 100 days in a year to needy persons. Moreover, panchayats should give priority to "development oriented works" related to asset creation of permanent nature in the villages.
- viii) Adequate staffs at D.R.D.A. and block level are needed for the proper implementation of rural development programmes in the villages.