

Chapter-1

Introduction

a. General Outline:

Rural development has been engaging the attention of the Indian leadership even before Independence. The goals of development in general and rural development in particular have been enshrined in the constitution and Five Year Plans.¹ The constitution has laid down the goal in terms of building a socialist, secular and democratic society. In order to realise these goals it became necessary to devise institutional mechanisms, mobilise resources (both human & material) and transform existing institutional structures and value patterns with a view to build a new social and economic order based on the values of equality, freedom and justice. Thus it became necessary to simultaneously initiate two processes-one for reorienting and if necessary, even restructuring existing institutional structures and, secondly of building new institutional structures which could provide a base for the accomplishment of new goals.

The philosophy of development that emerged in India after Independence emphasised the involvement of the people into a structure that would enable them to actively participate in the process of decision making. The introduction of the Community Development Programme (CDP) in the first five year plan (1951) gave a new dimension as well as impetus to the participation of people in development process. But CDP failed to fulfill the expectations because of non-association of people and their representatives in the planing and execution of development schemes. Moreover, resources available for the programmes were too meager compared with the need and spread too thin for any significant achievement². The Balwantrai Mehta Committee, has therefore, strongly recommended the establishment of statutory elective local bodies and devolution to them of the necessary,

resources, power and authority to plan and implement the development programmes under a major institutional device which has come to be popularly, known as 'Panchayat Raj System' or 'democratic decentralisation'³. The committee also recommended three tier model of Panchayat Raj to same as instrument of development from below. The system is one of the important political innovations of the independent India. It was hoped to provide a bold and imaginative leadership for the all round development of the countryside. The system was conceived to and set up as an instrument of change and transformation.

b. Conceptual Distinction.

In the context of third world country like ours, 'economic development' essentially means rural development. The definition 'rural' is residuary because all over the world, what is defined is an urban area and whatever is not urban is known as rural. In India, a settlement is defined as urban if it fulfils either of the following conditions: (a) the place should enjoy a statutory label of local government administration corporation municipality, notified area etc. (b) the following three-item-test should be simultaneously satisfied:

- (i) a population of at least 5000;
- (ii) a density of at least 400 persons per square Kilometer;
- (iii) at least $\frac{3}{4}$ s of working males should be engaged in non-agricultural occupation.

Thus, places which do not satisfy the conditions either (a) or (b), fall into rural category⁴.

The term 'rural' essentially means an area, which is characterized by non-urban style of life, occupational structure, social organisation and settlement pattern. As Mishra and Sundaram put it "Rural is essentially agricultural, its settlement system consists of villages or homesteads; socially it connotes greater interdependence among people, more deeply rooted community life and a slow moving rhythm of life built around nature and natural phenomenon; and occupationally it is

highly dependent on crop farming, animal enterprises, tree crops and related activities'⁵.

The word 'development' carries a wide variety of meanings. In our context development means "an activity or a series of activities or a process which either improves the immediate living conditions-economic, social, political, cultural and environmental, or increase the potential for future living or both".⁶

Now the term "rural development" has also been viewed from different perspectives by various scholars, sociologists, social scientists and institutions, Copp⁷ has defined it a process through collective efforts, aimed at improving the well-being and self-realisation of people living outside the urbanised areas. He further contends that the ultimate target of rural development is people and not infrastructure and according to him one of the objectives of rural development should be to "widen people's ranges of choices". The efforts should be towards preservation and improvement of the rural environment and rural development planning may be conceived of identifying the complex of factors, which contributes to the creation change or development of a rural area or community.

A more comprehensive concept and method of rural development has been suggested by the World Bank. Rural development has been defined as a strategy to improve the economic and social life of a specific group of people i.e the rural poor including small and marginal farmers, tenants and the landless. The report of the Bank says, "A national programme of rural development should include a mix of activities including projects to raise agricultural output., create new employment, improve health and education, expand communication and improve housing.... The nature and content of any development programme or project will reflect the political, social and economic circumstances of the particular country or region...."⁸

In the same sequence of thinking, 'rural development' world essentially mean desired positive change in the rural areas--- both in a quantitative as well as a qualitative sense. Thus rural development is an area concept. It is a complete term which integrates a variety of human life and activities which can broadly be classified into the broad dimensions of social, economic, technological and natural. Rural development means desired changes in all these dimensions. But such changes should take place in mutually supporting relationships so as to generate organic and optimum development. Organic development is one, which maintains healthy relationships among the various components of a system.

c. Panchayats and Rural Development:

The role of panchayat Raj institution as instrument of rural reconstruction and development needs no emphasis. They have been recognised with under powers and financial resources not merely as institution of political participation but institution of social and economic development. It is a commonly held view that local development administration is married to such institution. It is not an end in itself:- it is a means of rural development⁹. Firstly it is a government by itself and secondly it is an agency of the state government. In West Bengal the Left Front government pushed up the process of decentralised planning responsibilities to the grass root level through the panchayat frame work. These institution have to discharge the responsibility of planning implementation and monitoring all rural development programme in the country side involving rural people in power structure in decision making process. In the integrated exercise of planning for social and economic development programme assume exceptional significance. These bodies have both co-operating and co-ordination roles. The present set up is a three tier representative structure of government where the administrator, elected leaders and local population participate in the development effort. In fact, the elected representatives play the key role

in power structure and decision making process. Leaders are regarded as facilitator of the process of development policies in bringing about peoples participation in the development programme. It is possible to achieve through the leader¹⁰. The administrators are expected to participate with missionary zeal in the life and development of the villages. These institutions are to be galvanized to become effective instruments of social and economic change.

d. Statement of the Problem:

Some agents are considered to be catalyst of development. The district, Cooch Behar of North Bengal is a poor and backward. Cooch Behar is a no industry district, its per capita income is lower than both state average; its rate of urbanisation is lower than both State and all India average; per capita road Kilometer infrastructure is one of the lowest in India, communication system is extremely primitive; railway lines have a poor mileage; it has a large scheduled caste population; the proportion of scheduled caste population is higher than the West Bengal State average; infant mortality rate is higher than state average. A high proportion of working population is engaged in agriculture and bulk of them are marginal farmers, small farmers, agricultural labourers. Irrigation facilities, electricity consumption are highly inadequate and much lower than the state average, cropping pattern discloses the increasing preponderance of food crops. So the district symbolises the poverty and backwardness of India in all its manifestations.

In the light of such various constraints to economic development our study has focussed the performances of Panchayat in respect to rural development with special reference to backward district, Cooch Behar. Moreover, in course of functioning of the panchayat raj system in the country for the past long years, doubts have been expressed on the effectiveness and efficacy of these institutions in the work of rural development. So our study seeks to reveal the actual picture of the region.

e. Approach and Objective of the Study:

Though several studies have been made about the panchayat raj institutions on different South Bengal districts in West Bengal, but no one has focussed attention on the role of these bodies as institution for promoting economic development of North Bengal districts particularly Cooch Behar in West Bengal. The present study regarding performance of panchayats in respect to rural development of a backward district Cooch Behar is in depth in nature covering all possible aspects. The present study will definitely add a new dimension to the existing field of knowledge. It would be useful for both academic and practical purposes.

The main objectives of the present study are:

- i) To present the over all picture of PR in West Bengal.
- ii) To study the operation of Panchayat Raj in Cooch Behar district focussing on two gram panchayats in particular.
- iii) To study caste, class and power structure of the panchayat members in the district.
- iv) To study panchayat resources and pattern of expenditure on development activities in the district of Cooch Behar.
- v) To assess the role of panchayats and poverty alleviation programmes on rural economy of Cooch Behar.

f. Review of Literature:

An attempt is made here to review studies and their findings, which have a close bearing on the present study.

Harichandran (1983)¹¹ made a study in the state of Tamilnadu which highlighted the relation between financial resources of panchayat and rural development. Rao (1980)¹² in his study of gram panchayat in Tumkur in the district of Karnataka State revealed that only upper economic classes among the dominant social groups captured the power in panchayat. Biju (1998)¹³ undertook a study in the state of Kerala who presented comprehensively an overall picture of P.R.I.

Ommen and Dutta (1993)¹⁴ conducted a study on P.R.I. on finance in the state of Himachalpradesh, Karnataka, U.P. Lieten and Srivastava (1999)¹⁵ undertook a study on the role of Panchayat on anti Poverty Programme, Power structure in the state of Uttarpradesh. B.S. Bargava (1979)¹⁶ in his study in the state of Karnataka highlighted the caste composition and financial relation with respect to rural development. In an interesting study in the state of Gujrat Chokshi (1971)¹⁷ found neither that the Panchayats were functioning satisfactorily nor that the resources were adequate for those bodies. There is one in-depth study by Muthayya (1972)¹⁸ on Panchayat taxes with particular reference to a few Panchayats in Andhrapradesh.

Shivaih et al (1976)¹⁹ made a comprehensive and objective analysis of the nature and working of P.R.I. which is an analytical survey not a comprehensive study. An attempt was made by Punekar and Golwalkar²⁰ to find out the impact of community development and Panchayati Raj Programme in the process of rural growth in the state of Maharastra. Pandya (1984)²¹ in his study analysed the role of leadership and development in Panchayati Raj in the Kheda district of Gujrat.

Darshankar (1979)²² made an authentic study on leadership in Panchayati Raj in the Beed district of Maharastra. Saha and Pandya (1989)²³ conducted an elaborate study, which highlighted the recent development of P.R. Rai et al (2001)²⁴ made an attempt to provide an overview of the past, present and future of Panchayat considering the areas like devolution of power and functions, participation of women and other marginalised sections in the state of M.P. Rajasthan, Gujrat, U.P., Kerala, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and Orissa. An indepth study was made by V.G. Nandedkar (1979)²⁵ who analysed the role of Zilia Parishad as local government and development body. In an interesting study Chaturvedi²⁶ observed that the resources of Panchayati Raj bodies were meager when compared to functions assigned to them.

The joint report by Mukherji & Bandyopadhyay²⁷ (1993) highlighted so many nobilities of Panchayat Raj in West Bengal. They pointed out that Panchayat System has brought about a churning of the submerged humanity in rural areas and created a high degree of social and political awareness among the villagers. Power structure of the panchayat members is heavily in favour of upper middle classes. In an interesting study of gram panchayat in Burdwan district of West Bengal G.K Lieten²⁸ (1992) pointed out that power structures are highly in favour of under privileged classes. Jalaluddin (1995)²⁹ conducted a study in the district of Birbhum on leadership style in Panchayati Raj and rural development. Bhattacharya (1986)³⁰ made a study in the district of Burdwan on participation under the Panchayat system in West Bengal. Roy Chowdhuri (1974)³¹ made an attempt to evaluate the role of Panchayati Raj bodies in production programme of a village in West Bengal. Jena³² (1999) enlightened in his study in the district of Midnapur on finances of Panchayat. Neil Webster³³ (1992) in his study on panchayati Raj in West Bengal focused some dissatisfactory performance of panchayats. There are two studies on Panchayati Raj in North Bengal. One study was undertaken by Mandal (1999)³⁴ in the district of Cooch Behar who focused light on only women in Panchayati Raj while Bose³⁵ (1977) in his study in the district of Jalpaiguri threw light on finances of Panchayat.

The literature available throws light on the working of P.R. in West Bengal on some selected aspect. Moreover only two individual studies are available in North Bengal. Out of them one takes care of the studies of women in Panchayat and second one deals with Panchayat finance. None has taken the enquiry of overall performance of Panchayat in respect to rural development in the district of Cooch Behar. This is a maiden attempt and this study may prove as the stepping stone in this direction.

g. Methodology:

Our methodology of the study is based on two types of data secondary & primary. The secondary data has been collected from books, journals, and official record from Zilla Parishad, Panchayat Samiti, gram panchayat, annual reports, State level reports, and census reports. In many cases different relevant information have been collected from the office of the panchayat, District Magistrate, lead bank cell, District Rural Development Agency. Frequent discussions have been made with the concerned Block Development officer and their officials, Sabhadhipati, Zilla Parisad for selecting sample panchayats.

For in-depth study on the subject and to receive primary level data, we have conducted a field survey or sample survey. For this purpose, we have adopted **fourth stage random sampling** where stage-I is the choice of blocks from the district, stage-II is the choice of two gram panchayats from the blocks, stage-III is the choice of villages from the panchayats and stage-IV is the choice of beneficiaries from the villages.

In the **first stage** 2 blocks of the district have been classified into two categories viz. developed and underdeveloped. Thereafter one block from each category has been selected randomly. Cooch Behar-II and Mathabhanga-II have been selected from developed and underdeveloped category of blocks respectively.

In the **Second Stage** two-gram panchayats – One developed gram panchayat from developed block and another underdeveloped gram panchayat from underdeveloped block have been selected randomly. Developed gram panchayat Khagrabari from developed block, Cooch Behar-II and underdeveloped gram panchayat Sikarpur from underdeveloped block, Mathabhanga-II have been selected for our purpose.

In the **Third Stage** four village – two from each gram panchayat have been selected randomly. The villages are Mahisbathan and Banchukamari from Khagrabari Gram Panchayat and Nalangabari and Mohanpur from Shikarpur Gram Panchayat.

In the **Fourth Stage** a list of beneficiaries has been prepared. A total of 100 beneficiaries (25 in each village) have been selected randomly. Finally, relevant information, primary data have been collected from the beneficiaries through questionnaires and personal interviews. The questionnaires prepared for survey has been given in appendix VI C.

Data gathered were tabulated and analysed through general statistical tools and interpreted accordingly.

h. Limitations of the Study:

The study is empirical & explanatory in nature. Data, collected through multiple channels and sources are mainly a combination of primary and secondary types. Inadequacy of data and lack of initiative from different government and panchayat offices in many cases have made the scope of investigation limited. To get relevant information from village respondents in many cases have put the matter in an ambiguous situation. Moreover, the apprehensive and evasive nature of the village people seemed to be a great difficulty in the way of primary data from field survey. The existence of widespread illiteracy and ignorance appeared to create problem in getting precise information. But most of the difficulties were overcome with the help of local people & students and frequent visits. The entire work has been motivated positivist and diagnostic in nature.

I. Schematic Arrangement:

The theme of the study is divided into seven chapters. **The first** is an introductory one. This chapter contains the specific objective of the

study, statement of the problem, review of literature. The methodology and limitation of the study are also discussed here.

The second chapter discusses Panchayat Raj in West Bengal. The main discussion centres around the historical overview of panchayat in the Pre & post independence period, Left Front government & Panchayat Raj, Power & functions of Panchayats and decentralised Planning approach of development

The third Chapter intends to focus the Position of PR in Cooch Behar District. Profile of the research area has been discussed in terms of location, boundary, administrative units, growth of population, urban-rural composition, scheduled caste and tribe population, occupational distribution, literacy level, cropping pattern, production of principal crops, fertiliser consumption, nature of irrigation. The Chapter also discusses panchayat election in the district along with party representation of the gram Panchayat members in the district.

The fourth chapter deals with caste, class and power structure of the panchayat members in respect to rural development in a backward region Cooch Behar. The chapter is divided into two sections. In section-I, the caste, class and power structure have been discussed in terms of the district as a whole and in section-II, it has been discussed with respect to the sample panchayats.

The fifth chapter focuses attention on financial resource of the panchayats in terms of tax revenue, non-tax revenue. Analysis of expenditure pattern on different development activities has also been made here.

The sixth chapter highlights the role of panchayats and poverty alleviation programme on the rural economy of Cooch Behar. For detailed study, the chapter has been divided in two sections – section I & II. In section-I, the progress on implementation of IRDP & its impact on the target group of people of the district have been discussed. In

section-II, similarly, the major rural development programme J.R.Y. has been discussed.

The chapter seven is concluding one that presents briefly the major findings of our study relevant to different chapters. In view of the findings, it also throws light on some recommendations to make PR institutions more effective bodies for promoting rural development and welfare.

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