

Chapter-II

Panchayat Raj in West Bengal

Introduction:

'Panchayat Raj system' or 'democratic decentralisation' is one of the important political innovations of Independent India and came into existence in 1959. They are the statutory elected local bodies with necessary resources, power and authority to plan and implement the development 'Programmes in rural areas. Previously, the development functions were discharged by bureaucrats working under state and central governments, a system that received widespread criticism as inefficient, corrupt and inequitable. There were much 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 the panchayat 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 state which has had timely Panchayat election on a party basis regularly every five years since 1978, a year after the Left Front government was elected to Power in the State with a massive and growing mandate. Under the era of three-tier the village panchayat is the lowest unit. The general body of the village panchayat is the 'Gram Sabha'. The entire electorate of panchayat circle constitutes the 'Gram Sabha'. The Panchayat Samiti is the second tier of the Panchayat Raj as the intermediate (Block level). At the top tier i.e. the district level is the Zilla Parishad which is primarily a coordinating body supervising the activities of panchayat and panchayat samities. The Left Front Government also has pushed up the process of decentralised planning responsibilities to the grass root level through the panchayat framework. These institutions are entrusted with the great task of fulfilling

the felt needs and aspirations of the rural people and development of the villages.

a. Historical Overview of Panchayat in the Pre-independence Period.

Village Panchayat have existed since time immemorial in India. If we go into the historical context of Panchayat Raj system, we will find that the system has been existing in India since the ancient Vedic Periods¹. In Vedic age, the village was looked after by a person who is known as 'Gramini'. The Mauryan and Gupta administration, used Panchayats to perform works relating to administrative, Social and economic development.

The British Government with a view to preserve and stabilise its political control, took various measures and recognised Village Panchayats. A special commission was appointed in 1909 on local self-government which suggested the need for revitalising village panchayats for handling local affairs². Subsequently a number of acts were like the Bengal passed village Self-government Act of 1919, Madras, Bombay and United provinces village Panchayats Act of 1926, Punjab village Panchayats Act of 1935 etc. to look after village affairs and certain matters relating to their development. But the Panchayats formed under these Acts were not democratic bodies as their members were mostly nominated by Government. The powers given to them were meager and their financial resources were also limited.

The Indian National Congress also took interest in the organisation of Panchayats to make them people's institutions. Mahatma Gandhi had pointed out that Independence must begin at the bottom. Every village should be a republic or panchayat having full powers. The greater the power of panchayats, the better for the people³.

b. Panchayat Raj in Independent India.

After Independence Article 40 of the Directive principles of State Policy of the constitution lays down that "that State shall take steps to



organise village Panchayats and endow them with such powers as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self Government⁴. The introduction of the community Development programme (CDP) in first Five-Year Plan gave a new dimension as well as impetus to the participation of people in development. But CDP failed to fulfil the expectations because of non-association of people and their representatives in the planning and execution of development schemes. Moreover resources available for the programme were too meager compared with the need and spread to think for any significant achievement. The experience gained from CDP made it clear that effective participation of the representatives of the people in development programmes was possible only if they were associated with policy making and planning at the local level with statutory power⁵.

The Balwantray Mehta Committee, had therefore, strongly recommended the establishment of statutory elected local bodies and devolution to them of the necessary resources, power and authority to plan and implement the development programmes under a system which has come to be popularly known as 'democratic decentralisation' or 'Panchayat Raj System'. This system is one of the important political innovations of Independent India and came into existence in 1959⁶. It was hoped that the system would work as infinitely large number of lamps shedding their light around as a means of height achieving comprehensive rural development and people's welfare⁷. The State of Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh became the pioneers. The other States followed and by the end of decade Panchayat Raj system had been established in different parts of the country⁸.

c. Panchayat Raj in West Bengal.

As with the majority of the States, West Bengal accepted the need for the form of Panchayati Raj following the principles and Philosophy presented in the Mehta Report. The structure of Panchayat Raj was not uniform in all States. They had involved their own pattern of democratic decentralisation. They had involved their own pattern of democratic

decentralisation. West Bengal adopted the three-tier Panchayati Raj System following the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973⁹. Prior to 1973, Old Panchayati Raj System existed in West Bengal. Accepting the Asoke Mehta Committee's recommendation of participating Political Parties directly in Panchayat Act of 1973, era of new Panchayati Raj started in West Bengal from the year 1978 when first Panchayat Election was held¹⁰. Under new era of three-tier structure, the village Panchayat is the lowest unit. The general body of the village Panchayat is the Gram Sabha. The entire electorate of Panchayat Circle constitutes the Gram Samsad¹¹. Every gram panchayat shall at its first meeting at which a quorum is present elect in the prescribed manner one of its members to be the pradhan and another member to be the 'Upa-Pradhan' of the Gram Panchayat¹². Pradhan is the Chairperson of the gram panchayat. As per Panchayat Election of 1988, there were 3304-gram panchayats in West Bengal¹³.

The Panchayat Samiti is the Second tier of the Panchayat Raj at the intermediate level (Block level). Every Panchayat Samiti shall at its first meeting at which a quorum is present, elect in the prescribed manner one of its members to be the 'Sabhapati' and another member to be the 'Sahakari Sabhapati' of Panchayat Samiti¹⁴. Sabhapati is the Executive Head of the Panchayat Samiti. The Panchayat Samiti is mainly composed of elected members in addition to all elected members there are a number of ex-officio members. All Pradhans of the gram Panchayats covered by the Panchayat Samiti/Block are entitled to attend along with MLA's and MP's from the constituency who are not ministers. As per Panchayat Election of 1998, there were 339 Panchayat Samities in West Bengal.¹⁵

At the topmost tier i.e. the district level is the Zilla Parishad which is primarily a coordinating body supervising the activities of Panchayats and Panchayat Samities. The Zilla Parishad is responsible for organising and administering the development of the district. Sabhadhipati is the executive Head of Zilla Parishad shall at its first meeting at which a quorum is

present, elect in the prescribed manner one of its members to be the Sabhadhipati and another member to be the 'Sahakari Sabhadhipati' of Zilla Parishad¹⁶. The Zilla Parishad is mainly composed of elected members. In addition to the elected members all Sabhapaties of Panchayat Samities are ex-officio members as are MLA's, MP's and members of the Rajya Sabha from the district. As per panchayat election of 1998 there were 16 Zilla Parishad in West Bengal¹⁷.

d. Left Front Government and Panchayati Raj in West Bengal.

The revitalisation and democratisation of the panchayat system were the first initiatives taken by the left front Government in West Bengal after it was voted in to office in 1977¹⁸. On coming to power the left front government embarked upon a programme of rural resurgence that had two legs, panchayats and land reform. The first and second united front government (UFG) could not strengthen panchayat system so much because of their short staying in power. But during 1969-70, a massive drive had been under taken by the united front government (UFG) to detect and vest lands that had been clandestinely retained by the landowners beyond their entitlement. Over million acres of good agricultural land had thereby been taken over¹⁹. This considerably weakened the hold of the big landlords who had traditionally led rural society because of their dominant economic and social position. Thus when the first panchayat election took place in West Bengal in the year 1978, the power structure in rural areas had altered substantially²⁰. As a result instead of empowering the already powerful, the panchayats in West Bengal placed power in the hands of new comers who could be relied upon to implement land reform measures faithfully.

Left Front government dominated by CPI (M), had been in office since 1977 with a massive and growing mandate. Since the Assembly election of 1977, the state of West Bengal has a stable government. In Assembly election of 1977 CPI (M) won 177 seats out of 294, followed by 174 in 1982 and 187 in 1987. In 1991 election CPI (M) won 182 seats

followed by 150 in 1996. In 2001 CPI (M) got 143 seats. The stable governance of left front headed by CPI (M) in comparison to other parties would be better understood from the Table 2.1

Table –2.1

West Bengal Assembly Elections: Position of Political Parties

Year	Party	1977	1982	1987	1991	1996	2001
	CPI(M)	177	174	187	182	150	143
	Forward Block	25	28	26	29	21	25
	RSP	20	19	18	18	18	17
	CPI	02	07	11	06	06	07
	United Congress	20	-	-	-	-	-
	CONG(I)	-	49	40	43	82	26
	TMC	-	-	-	-	-	60
	Muslim League	01	-	01	-	-	-
	SUCI	04	02	02	02	02	02
	Others	45	15	09	14	15	14
	Total	294	294	294	294	294	294

Source: I) Results of West Bengal Assembly Election, 1996 Ganashakti, P-124.

ii) Results of West Bengal Assembly Election, 2001, The Peoples Democracy, May, P-8.

Under such stability of governance the left front government headed by CPI (M) took keen interest on panchayat election regularly as a state policy to usher a new social order for the socio-economic transformation of the rural community of West Bengal. Since 1978 panchayat elections are being held regularly under left front regime. The last five panchayat election in West Bengal (1978-1998) gave the left front an overwhelming mandate in every tier i.e. gram panchayat, panchayat samiti and Zilla Parishad²². There had been marked the largest participation of rural electorate and political dominance of left front mainly CPI (M) party in rural areas. Table 2.2 will speak for the truth.

Table - 2.2
RESULTS OF LAST FIVE PANCHAYAT ELECTION OF
WEST BENGAL (1978-1998)

PARTY	YEAR	GRAM PANCHAYAT		PANCHAYAT SAMITI		ZILLA PARISHAD		TOTAL THREE TIRES	
		SEATS	%	SEATS	%	SEATS	%	SEATS	%
CPI(M)	1998	24,454	49.72	5,160	60.60	560	78.21	30,174	51.56
	1993	35,328	57.94	6,341	67.11	529	80.76	42,198	59.34
	1988	33,918	64.62	6,549	71.97	531	80.70	40,998	65.86
	1983	24,171	54.06	5,023	59.80	453	68.64	29,647	55.14
	1978	27,886	61.03	5,555	67.15	482	76.75	33,923	62.14
CPI	1998	660	1.34	111	1.30	17	2.38	788	1.35
	1993	806	1.32	95	1.01	6	0.92	907	1.28
	1988	896	1.71	114	1.25	7	1.06	1,017	1.63
	1983	701	1.57	94	1.12	1	0.15	796	1.48
	1978	816	1.79	131	1.58	5	0.80	952	1.74
RSP	1998	1,320	2.68	257	3.02	26	3.63	1,603	2.74
	1993	1,517	2.49	239	2.53	14	2.14	1,770	2.49
	1988	1,572	2.99	276	3.07	25	3.80	1,873	3.01
	1983	1,232	2.76	248	2.95	17	2.58	1,497	2.78
	1978	1,665	3.64	349	8.22	30	4.78	2,044	3.78
Forward Block	1998	959	1.95	160	1.88	24	3.35	1,143	1.96
	1993	1,252	2.05	169	1.79	17	2.60	1,438	2.02
	1988	1,405	2.68	222	2.88	23	3.50	1,650	2.65
	1983	1,080	2.42	192	2.29	25	3.79	1,297	2.41
	1978	1,444	3.17	320	3.87	43	6.85	1,811	3.32
Independent &	1998	195	0.40	24	0.28	5	0.70	224	0.38

Continued

Table – 2.2
RESULTS OF LAST FIVE PANCHAYAT ELECTION OF
WEST BENGAL (1978-1998)

PARTY	YEAR	GRAM PANCHAYAT		PANCHAYAT SAMITI		ZILLA PARISHAD		TOTAL THREE TIRES	
		SEATS	%	SEATS	%	SEATS	%	SEATS	%
other Supported by L.F	1993	329	0.54	29	0.31	6	0.92	364	0.51
	1988	168	0.32	9	0.10	4	0.61	181	0.29
	1983	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	1978	299	0.65	11	0.13	2	0.32	312	0.57
L.F Total	1998	27,588	56.09	5,712	67.08	632	88.27	33,932	58.08
	1993	39,232	64.35	6,873	72.75	572	87.33	46,667	65.67
	1988	37,959	72.32	7,170	78.79	590	89.67	45,719	73.45
	1983	27,360	61.20	5,567	66.27	499	75.61	33,426	62.17
	1978	32,114	70.28	6,366	76.95	562	89.49	39,042	71.51
Cong. (I)	1998	5,962	12.12	831	9.76	32	4.47	6,825	3.86
	1993	16,300	26.73	2,155	22.81	72	10.99	18,527	4.75
	1988	12,298	23.43	1,712	18.81	61	9.27	14,071	3.88
	1983	14,641	32.75	2,526	30.07	151	22.88	17,318	5.56
	1978	13,435	29.40	1,883	22.76	65	10.35	15,383	0.31
TMC	1998	9,773	19.87	1,439	16.90	38	5.31	11,250	19.26
	1993	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	1988	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	1983	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	1978	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
B.J.P	1998	3,830	7.78	328	3.85	1	0.14	4,159	7.12
	1993	2,372	3.89	121	1.28	-	-	2,493	3.51

Continued

Table – 2.2
RESULTS OF LAST FIVE PANCHAYAT ELECTION OF
WEST BENGAL (1978-1998)

PARTY	YEAR	GRAM PANCHAYAT		PANCHAYAT SAMITI		ZILLA PARISHAD		TOTAL THREE TIRES	
		SEATS	%	SEATS	%	SEATS	%	SEATS	%
	1988	36	0.07	3	0.03	-	-	39	0.06
	1983	34	0.08	2	0.02	-	-	36	0.07
	1978	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Independent & Other	1998	2,038	4.14	205	2.41	13	1.81	2,256	3.86
	1993	3,067	5.03	299	3.16	11	1.68	3,377	4.75
	1988	2,196	4.18	215	2.36	7	1.06	2,418	3.88
	1983	2,674	5.98	305	3.63	10	1.52	2,989	5.56
	1978	145	0.32	24	0.29	1	0.16	170	0.31
TOTAL	1998	49,191	100.00	8,515	100.00	716	100.00	58,422	100.00
	1993	60,971	100.00	9,448	100.00	655	100.00	71,074	100.00
	1988	52,489	100.00	9,100	100.00	658	100.00	62,247	100.00
	1983	44,709	100.00	8,400	100.00	660	100.00	53,769	100.00
	1978	45,694	100.00	8,273	100.00	628	100.00	54,595	100.00

Source: SHRENI DRISTI BHANGHITE PANCHAYAT- Suryakanta Misra,
2nd Edition-1999, National book agency (Calcutta).

e. Powers and Function of New Panchayat Raj Bodies in West Bengal.

The Panchayat Raj institutions are subject to the authority of the state government. They enjoy the delegated powers and function as are purely local in character. The West Bengal panchayat Act, 1973 provides for functions of panchayat, panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad both obligatory and discretionary in addition to the functions entrusted to them by the state government. Panchayat in all states have been provided with along list of functions and duties covering the entire field of civic administration and social and economic development in rural areas.

i. The Gram Panchayat:

In the case of gram panchayat, all its executive powers are vested on Pradhan and in his or her absence the Uppa-Pradhan. As per section 19 of the West Bengal panchayat Act 1973 the obligatory functions of the gram panchayat²³ are:

- 1) Sanitation, conservancy, drainage and prevention of public nuisances.
- 2) Curative and preventive measures in respect of malaria, small pox, cholera or any other epidemic.
- 3) Supply of drinking water and the cleansing and disinfecting the sources of supply and storage of water.
- 4) The maintenance, repair and construction of public streets and protection thereof.
- 5) The removal of encroachments of public streets or public places.
- 6) The protection and repair of buildings or other property vested in it.
- 7) The management and care of public tanks, common grazing grounds, burning ghats and public graveyards.
- 8) Organising voluntary labour for community works and works for the upliftment of its area.
- 9) The imposition, assessment and collection of taxes, rates of fees.

Section 21 of the Act provides discretionary functions of Panchayats²⁴.

They are:

- 1) The maintenance of lighting of public Streets.
- 2) Planning and maintaining trees on the sides of Public Streets.
- 3) The Sinking of Wells and excavation of ponds & tanks.
- 4) The introduction and promotion of Co-operative stores and other Co-operative enterprises.
- 5) The construction and regulation of markets, the holding and regulation of fairs, melas, hats and exhibition of local products of home industries.
- 6) Filling up of in sanitary depressions and reclaiming of unhealthy localities.
- 7) The promotion of cottage and village industries.
- 8) Promotion of dairy and poultry.
- 9) Promotion of fishery.
- 10) Poverty alleviation programme.
- 11) The construction and maintenance of sarais, dharmasalas, rest houses, cattlesheds.
- 12) The disposal of unclaimed cattle.
- 13) The establishment and maintenance of Libraries and reading rooms.
- 14) A cultural activity including sports and games.
- 15) Assisting in the prevention of burglary and dacoity.
- 16) Any other local works or service of public utility.

A gram Panchayat shall also perform other functions as the state government may assign to it.

ii. Panchayat Samiti:

In general terms the Panchayat Samiti has similar responsibilities to those held by the gram Panchayat. The difference being that the former's power is at higher level while the gram Panchayat handles the local administration at village level. The Panchayat samiti operates across the whole block. Outside the orbit of gram panchayat affairs, the

Panchayat Samiti is also required to monitor and supervise the work undertaken by the gram panchayats.

Section 109 of the West Bengal panchayat act 1973 mentions the following duty of the panchayat samity²⁵.

- 1) Undertake schemes or adopt measures including the giving of financial assistance relating to the development of agriculture, fisheries, live stock, khadi, cottage and small scale industries, Co-operative movement, rural credit, water supply, irrigation, public health and Sanitation including establishment of dispensaries and hospital, communication, Primary & secondary Education, Social forestry and farm forestry including fuel and fodder, rural electrification.
- 2) Manage and maintain any work of public utility.
- 3) Make grants-in-aid of any School, public institution or public welfare to organisation within the block.
- 4) Adopt measures for the relief of distress.
- 5) Co-ordinate and integrate the development plans & schemes prepared by gram panchayats in the block.
- 6) May take over the maintenance and control of any road bridge, tank, ghat, well, channel or drain belonging to private owners or any other authority.

A panchayat samiti shall also perform other functions as the state government may assign to it.

iii. Zilla Parishad:

The Zilla Parishad is the apex body of the three-tier Panchayat Raj. The Zilla Parishad is entrusted with the responsibility of overall development of the district. It organises and administers the development of the district. It has general powers of supervision of both panchayat samities and the gram panchayats. The Zilla Parishad acts as the interface between district's political institutions and the state government. The overall management of its affairs is the responsibility of the

'Sabhadhipati' (Chairperson) and the 'Sabhadhipati' (Vice-chairperson), District Magistrate (DM) is the executive officer of the Zilla Parishad. Section 153 of the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973 assigned to the Zilla Parishad the similar functions of Panchayat Samiti²⁶. The difference is that the former's powers are at higher level (District level). The Zilla Parishad has the authority to give grants to the Panchayat Samities or Gram Panchayats. It has the power to advise the state government on all matters relating to the development work among gram panchayat and panchayat samities.

f. The Decentralised Planning Approach:

Decentralised planning refers specially to the involvement of institutions below the State level necessitated both by the administrative developmental exigencies and the constitutional status of the local institutions. Under such planning there would be proper integration to lower level plans into those at higher level; Village to block to district to State. Such plans would be more sensitive to local needs and there would be people's participation in development programmes²⁷.

The Left front Government after 1985 has pushed up the process of decentralised planning responsibilities to the grass-root level through the panchayat framework. Panchayats now have come into the mainstream of planning and implementation of different rural development programmes. From 1978 until 1985, the work of the Panchayats remained primarily the local implementation of the State Policy and of programmes that came from the state or central governments²⁸.

Under the present structure of planning in West Bengal each Gram Panchayat is required to prepare a statement of the existing needs of the population of the area, a 'basic needs statement'.

These are passed to the block planning committee established by the Panchayat Samiti which has the responsibility to formulate a plan under

different development programmes for the command area of its block as a whole and the basic need identified by the gram panchayat.

These consolidated plans are then passed to the 'District Planning Committee' constituted by the 'Zilla Parishad'. Within the overall guidelines regarding priorities and the allocation of funds for each district indicated from the state level the District Planning Committee (DPC) is expected to formulate an overall 'annual District Plan' incorporating the plan proposals of the blocks & basic need proposal of the gram Panchayat. The 'Annual District Plan' is placed before a 'District Planning & Co-ordinating Committee for final approval. The Chairperson of D.P.C. is the Sabhadhipati, Zilla Parishad and Member Secretary is the District Magistrate. Other members are – Sabhapaties of all Panchayat Samities, one representative of each of the Statutory bodies in the district, District level officers of all departments in the district²⁹.

The implementation of development plans depends upon the Panchayat Samiti and Gram Panchayats under the guidance of Zilla Parishad. In Many cases, the implementation of the departmental schemes is the responsibility of the concerned departments, though there should be proper co-ordination between panchayat and other government officials. The District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) which is an important agency for the implementation of different rural development programmes in the district was even tied into the Panchayat framework. So Panchayats have been brought into the mainstream of planning and implementation of different rural development programmes in the district³⁰.

Summary:

The historical context of 'Panchayat Raj' system had been existing in India since the ancient Vedic age. The actual working of this system came into existence in 1959, after following the

recommendation of Balwantray Mehta Committee. Panchayat Raj institution are the statutory elected local bodies, with necessary resources, power and authority of plan and implement the development programmes in rural areas. The state of Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh became the Pioneers.

As the majority of the states, West Bengal also accepted the principles and philosophy of Panchayat Raj system of three tier following the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973. Prior to 1973, **old panchayati raj** system existed in West Bengal. The revitalisation and democratisation of the panchayat system were the first initiative taken by the Left Front Government in West Bengal after it was voted into office in 1977 with massive and growing mandate. Accepting the Asoke Meheta Committee's recommendation of participating political parties directly in panchayat election and subsequently by amending the West Bengal Panchayat Act of 1973, era of **New Panchayat Raj** started in West Bengal from the year 1978 when first panchayat election was held. It is the first Indian state which has had timely panchayat elections on a party basis regularly every five years since 1978.

Under new era of three-tier panchayat structure in West Bengal, the village panchayat is the lowest body. The general body of the village panchayat is the 'Gram Sabha'. The entire electorate of panchayat circle constitutes the gram sabha. The Pradhan is the chairperson of Gram Panchayat. Panchayats have been provided with a long list of functions and duties covering the entire field of civil administration and social & economic development in rural areas. The panchayat samiti is the second tier at the intermediate level (Block level). **Sabhapati** is the chairperson of Panchayat Samity. It has similar responsibilities to those held by the gram panchayat higher level (block level). Moreover it is also required to monitor and supervise the work undertaken by the Gram Panchayat. The Zilla Parishad is the **apex body** of three tiers Panchayat Raj. The Zilla Parishad is entrusted with the responsibility of

overall development of the district. It has general powers of supervision of both Panchayat Samities and the gram Panchayats. **Sabhadhipati** is the chairperson of Zilla Parishad.

Since the Assembly Election of 1977, the state of West Bengal has a **stable government** under Left Front dominated by CPI (M). In assembly election of 1977 CPI(M) won 177 seats out 294 followed by 174 in 1982 and 187 in 1987. In 1991, CPI (M) won 182 seats followed by 150 in 1996 and 143 in 2001 (Table 2.1). Under such stability of governance the Left Front government took interest on panchayat election regularly as a state policy to usher a new social order for the socio-economic transformation of the rural community of West Bengal. The last five panchayat elections (1978-96) gave the Left Front an overwhelming mandate in every tier i.e. Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samity and Zilla Parishad (Table2.2). There had been marked the largest participation of rural electorate and political dominance of Left Front mainly CPI (M) party in rural areas. They pushed up decentralised planning responsibilities to the grass root level through panchayat framework to fulfil the felt need, and aspirations of the rural people and development of the villages.

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