

## CHAPTER -III

### PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN DECENTRALISED GOVERNANCE: THE GRAM SABHA AND GRAM SANSAD EXPERIENCE IN WEST BENGAL

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#### 3.1 Introduction:

People's participation is one of the most important factors for success of decentralized governance. The aims of decentralized governance can't be fulfill without active participation of the stakeholders. Participation in the people's involvement in decision-making process about what to be done and by whom, their involvement in implementing the programme, sharing benefits and monitoring and evaluating the program (Cohen and Uphoff, 1977). Participation is a process through which stakeholder influence and share control over development initiatives, decision and resources that affect them (The World Bank, 1977). The core features of participation are; (i) it is a voluntary involvement of people; (ii) the people who participate influence and share control over development initiatives, decisions and resources; (iii) it is a process of involvement of people of different stages of the project or programme; and (iv) the ultimate aim is to improve the well-being of the people who participate. (Narayanasamy, 2009)

Participation has, for the last 20 years, been widely used in the discourses of development. For much of this period the concept has referred to participation in the social arena, in the community, in the development projects. This led to the rise of participatory development as a means of strengthening the relevance, quality and sustainability of the development projects. Of late, participation is viewed in the context of good governance which is generally understood as "both a broad reform strategy, and a particular set of initiatives to strengthen

the institutions of civil society with the objective of making government more accountable, more open and transparent and more democratic” (Dutta, 2005. p 14).

According to Jain, participation on rural development planning can be achieved through the following stages of programme planning and implementation.

- 1) Participation in decision-making;
- 2) Participation in implementation of development programmes and projects;
- 3) Participation in monitoring and evaluation of development programmes, and
- 4) Participation in sharing the benefits of development. (Jain, 2007)

### **3.2 Modes of Participation:**

Everybody is not agreed on what participation means. The fact is that participation has come to mean different things to different people. The real purpose of participation is to develop human capabilities for development decision making and action. Participation means a kind of local authority in which people discover the possibilities of exercising choice and, thereby, becoming capable of meaning their own development. (Mathur, 1986)

A Philippine study identifies six modes of participation. The first mode involved only the educated and moneyed people in the community without the participation of the ‘grassroots’ or the ‘beneficiaries’. The second mode is one in which the people or beneficiaries are asked to legitimate or ratify projects identified as formulation of the government. In the third mode of participation, the people are consulted about the project but they do not actually participate in the planning and management of the project. In the fourth mode, the people are consulted from the very start and they actively participate in the planning and management of the

projects. In the fifth mode, the people of the beneficiaries are represented in the highest policy making body of the agency. Finally, in the sixth mode, the representatives of the people control the highest policy making body of the agency. (Hollnsteiner, 1976)

Emrich classifies the meaning of participation through his six axioms. The axioms of participation are: a) first, participation must begin at the very lowest level. There must be real opportunities for participative decision-making for the poorest, and those decisions must relate to the aspirations of the poor more than to the wispy musings of those who will not identify with them. Second, participation must take place at all stages of the development process, from the earliest pre-planning exercises, to the development of plans the design of implementing mechanisms, and the actual implementation. Third, it must be recognized that a solitary vote is not participation. If people do not participate as members of relatively powerful groups, which serve their interests, than they participate only for the benefit of their masters. Fourthly, participation must have substance and usually political clubs and cooperatives do not have substance. 'Participative processes' must deal with the allocation and control of goods and services related to the production process. Fifth, participation must somehow deal with existing loyalties. If the result is merely to strengthen existing inter-class groupings it will just strengthen existing leadership. Sixth, it must be accepted that the development of effective participation will cause conflict in some form. (Emrich, 1979)

One of the most popular forms that have opened spaces for a wider deeper participation of citizens at the local level has been the decentralization process which has got unprecedented momentum in 1990s. Five million people in all but 12 of the 75 developing countries have implemented some form of decentralization with varying degree of financial and political

power. Parallel to these developments, enabling legal framework and institutional channels for citizen participation at the local level have been developed in many of these countries, as shown below:

### **3.3 Legal Enabling Environment for People's Participation**

Philippines: Local Government Code (1990)

India: 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments (1993-94)

Honduras: Municipal Law (1990)

Bolivia: Popular Participation Law (1992)

Namibia: local Authority Act. (1992)

Uganda: Local Government Act. (1997)

Tanzania: Local Authority Act. (1992)

### **3.4 Selected Example of Institutional channels for People's Participation**

Tanzania: Ward Development Committee

Zimbabwe: Village Development Committees

Uganda: Resistance Council and Committee

Nepal: Village Development Council

Colombia: Overseeing Committees

Bolivia: Village Committees

India: Gram Sabha and Ward Committees

**Source: Dutta, 2005. p 14.**

### **3.5 Participatory Democracy: The Working of Gram Sabha**

Gram Sabha is a village assembly of all adults, men and women, which would regulate and develop village life and function automatically. This was a structure based entirely on people's power (Lokshakti) expressing itself in the form of village power (Gramshakti). Thus the village would emerge as an organized unit to look after its internal administration, development, and agro-industrial economy. This was a model for democracy at the grassroots based on direct participation by the people. Democracy has been defined as 'a government where everybody has a say'. (Rao, 2007)

Gram Sabha did not figure prominently in the scheme of the Panchayati Raj introduced in the most states in early 1960s. It is found from the report of the Ashok Mehta that the sporadic efforts to receive the institution were not successful due to the lack of interest on the part of the office bearers and the apathy on the part of the public, the Gram Sabha has not been functioning satisfactorily. While the Constitution makes it mandatory to establish Gram Sabha at the village level, it does not stipulate any details regarding the structure, power and functions of this institution. In terms of article 243G these details are to be spelt out in the Panchayati Raj legislations passed in each state in compliance with the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment of the Constitution. Accordingly all the state governments have provided for the institution of Gram Sabha in their respective Panchayat legislations. But the jurisdiction of Gram Sabha in

state legislations is too big to facilitate effective participation of the people. In states like Kerala, West Bengal and Orissa the problem has been resolved by creating another body down the line at the electoral constituency level to ensure effective participation of the people. (Dutta, 1997)

### **3.6 The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment: Gram Sabha**

The necessary to give a particular shape to grassroots democracy became a reality with the introduction of 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment. It sought to integrate the democratic processes at all level by formalizing a mechanism where in people in all levels would have an opportunity to participate openly in matters which concern their welfare and development. The amendment thus ushered in an era of decentralized governance to harness local wisdom in a democratic way.

The most glaring omission in the state acts is one relating to the devolution of powers to the Panchayats and, equally important, to the powers and functions provide the Gram Sabha; whereas, Article 243A expected state legislatures to provide the Gram Sabha with such powers and perform such functions at the village level which will help in materializing the concept of democratic decentralization. In practice, the state legislatures have not given any thought to the vital aspect and a majority of them expect the Gram Sabha to discuss: a) Annual statement of accounts and audit report; b) administrative report of the preceding year; c) proposal of fresh taxation and enhancement of existing taxes; and d) selection of schemes and location. If we look more closely into the state acts, we find that the state acts have not been able to add anything new to the functions of the Gram Sabha. For example, if we look at the Andhra Pradesh Panchayat Raj Act, 1994, it becomes clear from the comparative analysis

of the past and present acts that, except for the selection of schemes or beneficiaries and location, all other matters to be considered by the Gram Sabha are the same as provided in the Andhra Pradesh Gram Panchayat Act, 1964.

Hardly any state acts empower the Gram Sabha to have control over the Gram Panchayat and to take final decision in matters of village development. The role of Gram Sabha is only advisory. The accountability of the Gram Panchayat to this body has also not been clearly spelt out in most of the state legislations. In most of the state the functional domain of the Gram Sabha is limited to discussions of annual statement of accounts, administration report and selections of beneficiaries for poverty alleviation programmes. Only in a few states like Haryana, Punjab and Tamil Nadu the Gram Sabha enjoy the powers to approve the budgets.

According to Aslam that Gram Sabha meetings are not take place regularly, women Panchayat members are not allowed to participate Gram Sabha is not vested with the necessary authority and power to take decisions and there is a lack of awareness among the people about the role of Gram Sabha. These problems are further compounded when Panchayat members are sharply divided in political liens and both ruling party and bureaucracy are constantly engage to have control over Panchayat affairs. The advisory rather than approving role assigned to Gram Sabha makes it further venerable to all the local pressures and polities. Gram Sabha has to be recognized as the heart and soul of Panchayati Raj Syatem. It has to develop as an institution where common people can get an opportunity to participate in the process of self-governance. It is therefore, essential to take necessary steps for creating conditions, which are conducive for the process of self-governance to flourish at the grassroots level. These stapes are- a) instead of an advisory body, the Gram

Sabha should be made an approving/sanctioning authority for taking up any development programme at the village level; b) the Gram Sabha should be allowed to function the way the parliament functions at the national level and state legislature at the state level. It should evolve its own procedure for conducting its business; c) a Gram Sabha for several villages is not a practical proposition. Every village has its own existence. Distance becomes a barrier for an aged person or women to participate in Gram Sabha meetings. There is thus a need to redefine Gram Sabha. In order to take grassroots democracy to the doorsteps of the people, every village irrespective of its size and population should have a Gram Sabha; d) it should be mandatory for every Gram Sabha to meet not less than four times a year. It will not be advisable to impose uniform dates for holding Gram Sabha meetings, because we live in a country, which is geographically diverse in nature. A particular date may suit one region but not another; e) in order to ensure participation of disadvantaged groups, the quorum for holding a Gram Sabha meeting necessarily should include 33 per cent participation/ presence of women, SC/ST; f) the role and responsibility of the Gram Sabha and its functional relationship with Gram Panchayat need to be clearly spelled out. (Aslam, 2007)

### **3.7 People's Participation in Decentralized Governance in West Bengal**

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 onward. 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 elections to local bodies at Anchal, Block and District level was instituted, and elections to these local bodies were held 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. The aim has been to provide a share of fiscal resources of the state to the local bodies, and the Panchayats (at various levels) have also been assigned a large and substantial range of responsibilities, that were earlier seen as under the purview of the district level bureaucracy. In addition, the composition of the Panchayats has reflected the caste, class, occupation and gender composition of local society, (even if not completely) more faithfully than Panchayats anywhere else in the country. There has been substantial representation of the rural poor and the socially deprived groups, as well as women, in the elected bodies. All this has helped to change the power equations in the rural society as well as encouraged the social and political empowerment of women and social groups that were earlier marginalized.

The role of land reform has already been noted; but Panchayats can also have a critical role to play in the process of development generally, as well as in transformation of human development indicators. This makes both the nature and the experience of this pattern of development and people's participation, an issue of particular interest with respect to its relationship with human development in the state. Since decentralized governance and people's participation in the decision making can cover a very wide range of public activities, it is useful to divide the possibilities of decentralization into various categories: functional decentralization (in terms of administrative powers and responsibilities); financial devolution of both resources and some powers of resource mobilization; and planning and developmental activities. In addition, there are other potential responsibilities which can be

placed upon local government bodies, such as mobilization for particular purposes. (West Bengal Human Development Report, 2004)

Unlike any other major states in India, elections to all three tiers of the Panchayat System have been held on a regular basis even since the Left Front Government assumed power and keenly contested by all political parties. Except 2008, in all the Panchayat elections, the CPI (M) led left front and its constituents have retained their overall hold over the Panchayat System at all the levels. (Table-3.1)

**Table- 3.1 Seats Shared by Left Front in General and CPI (M) in Particular vis-à-vis the Opposition Parties**

Year	Gram Panchayat				Panchayat Samiti				Zilla Parishad			
	Total Seats	LF	CPI (M)	Opposition	Total Seats	LF	CPI(M)	Opposition	Total Seats	LF	CPI (M)	Opposition
1978	46,845	70%	61%	30%	8,467	76%	67%	23%	648	90%	77%	10%
1983	46,153	61%	54%	39%	8,684	66%	60%	34%	678	75%	69%	25%
1988	52,520	72%	65%	28%	9,128	79%	72%	21%	558	90%	81%	10%
1993	61,010	64%	58%	36%	9,453	73%	67%	27%	656	87%	81%	13%
1998	49,199	56%	50%	44%	8,515	67%	61%	33%	716	88%	78%	12%
2003	49,140	66%	58%	34%	8,500	74%	67%	26%	713	87%	77%	13%
2008	41,504	52%	-	48%	8,800	55%	-	45%	748	68%	-	32%

Source: Data Compiled from Reports of the SIPRD and Election Commission.

The responsibilities of the village council have changed over time but typically include administration of public health, primary education, drainage and sanitation, provision of drinking water, maintenance of public utilities, agricultural extension, irrigation, poverty alleviation, land reform, electrification, and housing provision. Resources for various poverty alleviation programmes are now distributed through the Panchayats instead of the state level ministries. More than half of the development expenditure of the state is made through the Panchayats. (Gazdar and Sengupta, 1997) The village constituency meetings are being held in West Bengal only for the last couple of years. Since 1998 meetings have been regularly

held in practically all of the around forty-five thousand constituencies over the state. (Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002)

### **3.8 The West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act., 1994 : Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad**

The West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment ) Act, 1994, a Gram Sabha has been defined as ‘a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls pertaining to a Gram’ where a Gram is ‘any mouza or part of a mouza or a group of contiguous mouza or parts thereof as on how the state government may notify. A Gram Panchayat will have a jurisdiction over the territorial limits of such a Gram as notified by state government’. (The West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 1994)

Gram Sabha meeting shall be held once every year during the month of December. One-twentieth of the total members of the Gram Sabha shall form the quorum. The resolution of Gram Sansad and views of Gram Panchayts shall be placed before Gram Sabha for deliberation and recommendations. The questions and recommendations coming before Gram Sabha shall be recorded and referred to Gram Panchayat for its consideration. The annual budget before being finally formulated by Gram Panchayat must be approved by Gram Sabha. Other important issues like annual plan of Gram Panchayat and annual report of the activities of the Gram Panchayat shall also be discussed in the Gram Sabha. The Gram Sabha is the voice of the people and it raises their grievances and watches over the functioning of the Panchayat. The Gram Sabha can be an effective forum for mobilizing the masses in relating to community activities, by gathering the people under the umbrella and interacting the issues of mutual interest. In West Bengal, holding an annual meeting of Gram

Sabha in the month of December is compulsory. The Gram Sabha meetings were conducted regularly but the attendance of the people has not been satisfactory which clearly show from the table-3.2.

**Table: 3.2**  
**Year-wise data on meeting of Gram Sabha as up to 31.03.2004**

<b>Year</b>	<b>No. of Gram Sabha</b>	<b>Ave. no. of electors per Gram Sabha</b>	<b>Total no. of meeting held with quorum</b>	<b>Ave. no. of attendance in each meeting</b>	<b>No. of Gram Sabha meeting adjourned</b>	<b>No. of Gram Sabha which have not held any meeting</b>
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
1996, Dec.	3329	9988	2094(63)	2986(30)	-	1054
1997, Dec.	3329	10013	689(21)	2987(30)	-	644
1998, Dec.	3329	9706	2761(83)	2952(29)	115	568
1999, Dec.	3330	9985	2952(89)	526(5.5)	133	378(11)
2000, Dec.	3360	10015	3102(92)	522(5)	584	258(8)
2001, Dec.	3360	10093	2513(75)	-	962	847(25)
2002, Dec.	3358	8370	1932(58)	472(5)	629	1426(42)
2003, Dec.	3354	9664	3015(90)	637(7)	12	339(10)
2008, Dec.	3239	10,535	1694(52)	948(9)	-	1545(48)

Source: Annual Administrative report, DPRD, West Bengal 1997-98, 2003-04, 2008-09.

\*Figures in bracket indicate %.

The Gram Sabha meetings were held in the month of December, 2007 which is shown in the table- 3.3. It is clearly shown that the meetings of Gram Sabha held were 2342 out of 3242.

That means the percentage of Gram Sabha meetings is only 72.24 percent. In the districts like Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Nadia and Burdwan all Gram Sabha meeting were held. But the district likes Murshidabad only 11.42 percent meetings was held.

**Table- 3.3**  
**District wise data on Gram Sabha meeting on December, 2007**

<b>District</b>	<b>No. of Gram Panchayat</b>	<b>No. of Gram Sabha meetings were held</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Dakshin 24 Pargana	312	0	0.00
Murshidabad	254	29	11.42
Purba Medinipur	223	69	30.49
Bankura	190	110	57.89
Purulia	170	125	73.53
Hooghly	210	180	85.71
Malda	146	129	88.36
Purba Medinipur	290	270	93.10
Birbhum	167	160	95.81
Cooch Behar	128	124	93.88
Uttar 24 Pargana	200	196	98.00
Howrah	157	156	99.36
Derjeeling	22	22	100.00
Dakshin Dinajpur	65	65	100.00
Uttar Dinajpur	98	98	100.00
Jalpaiguri	146	146	100.00
Nadia	187	187	100.00
Burdwan	277	277	100.00
West Bengal	3242	2342	72.24

**Source: Panchayati Raj Samachar, August-September, 2008**

### **3.9 Working of Gram Sansad in West Bengal:**

The concept of Gram Sansad incorporated by the West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 1992, has been widely acclaimed by political observers as an epitome of participatory democracy. It consists of all registered electors of a constituency (single member or double member) within the area of a Gram Panchayat. Thus the meeting of a Gram Sansad implies a

meeting of all the electors of a constituency. In a sense, it is the large entry at the grassroots level below the Gram Panchayat.

Under the law, the Gram Panchayat is required to convene at least two meetings of every Gram Sansad in a year, annual meeting in the month of May and half-yearly meeting in the month of November. In addition to these two statutory meetings, a Gram Panchayat may hold extra-ordinary meeting of a Gram Sansad at any time if the situation so warrants or if the situation, so directs.

The main function of Gram Sansad is to guide and advise the Gram Panchayat in regard to the schemes for economic development and social justice, identification of beneficiaries for various poverty alleviation and food security programmes, constitution of one or more beneficiary committees for ensuring active participation of people in implementation, maintenance and equitable distribution of benefits of one or more schemes in its area. A Gram Sansad may raise objection of any action of pradhan or any other member of Gram Panchayat for failure to implement any development work properly. Further, it's mandatory for the Gram Panchayat to place in the meetings of Gram Sansad the budget and audit report of the accounts of the Gram Panchayat for deliberation, recommendation and suggestion of Gram Sansad.

The West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 2003 has made it obligatory for a Gram Panchayat to act upon any recommendation of a Gram Sansad relating to prioritization of any list of beneficiaries to scheme or programme so far as it relates to the area of Gram Sansad. However, the Gram Panchayat decides in a meeting that such recommendations are not acceptable or implementable under the existing provisions of the act, rules or orders, such

decision of the Gram Panchayat shall be placed in the next meeting of the Gram Sansad. The quorum of the Gram Sansad meeting is ten percent (10%) and the meeting should be adjourned in the absence of quorum. The adjourned meeting of Gram Sansad shall be held after seven days at the same venue and at the same time and attendance of at least five percent (5%) members will make quorum.

The goal of the meeting is for villagers to:

- 1) Discussed local needs, suggest new programmes and allocate existing funds among competing needs;
- 2) Discusses selection of beneficiaries of anti-poverty programmes and logistical issues concerning sanctioned schemes; and
- 3) Monitor and review the performance of elected representatives regarding the implementations of public projects and used of public funds;
- 4) The members of Gram Sansad also have access to the accounts of expenditure and are able to question elected officials for the use of public funds and implementation of public projects. (Ghatak and Ghatak 2002)

Till the early nineties, the Gram Panchayat or village councils had little formal accountability to the people whom they represented. The only effective control the electorate could exercise was through their votes in the next election. The situation was substantially changed with the introductions of the Gram Sabha (village council level annual meeting of the voters) and the Gram Sansad (constituency level six month meeting of the entire electorate of a constituency) in the early nineties, subsequent to the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment to the Constitution of the country in 1993. The Gram Sabha or village council, comprising 10,000-15,000 voters,

would have to meet once a year to review the proposed budget for the next year and the previous year's performance. The village council meetings cover a large number of voters and as a result they get limited opportunities to exercise effective control over their elected representatives as well as to provide inputs to the planning process. The village constituency meetings are held twice a year with about 700 voters in which the elected officials and villagers meet in a public place to discuss local needs, new programmes, and choose beneficiaries of existing programmes, and inspect the accounts of expenditure and budgets.

The village constituency meetings are thus an instrument of direct participation of the people in the planning process as well as monitoring elected representatives. Under the laws, the Gram Sansad are supposed to: i) guide and advice the Gram Panchayat in regard to scheme for economic development and social justice undertaking or proposed to be undertaken in its area, ii) identify or lay down principles for identification of the beneficiaries for various poverty alleviation programmes, iii) constitute beneficiary committees for ensuring active participation of the people in implementation, maintenance and equitable distribution of benefits of schemes in the area, iv) mobilize mass participation for community welfare, and programmes for adult education, family planning and child welfare; and v) records its objectives to any action of the village council chief or any member of the village council for future to implement development schemes properly or without active participation of the people of the area.

The village constituency meeting might at first glance appear to be a purely consultative and monitoring forum vis-à-vis the elected Panchayat representatives. However, they do enjoy a large status. The village council has to consider every resolution adopted at the village

constituency meeting and decision and action taken on them will have to be reported at the next such meeting. If a village council fails to consider the constituency level meeting resolution or fails to place the draft budget, statement of account and audit reports in such meeting, that would be considered a serious lapse and the auditors would declare all expenditures of the village council as illegal in their report. As a result of this clause people participating in these meetings in effect do participate in actual decision-making and are not just advisors and monitors to the actual decision-makings. The village constituency meetings are being held in West Bengal only for the last couple of years. Since, 1998 meetings have been regularly held in practically the entire around forty-five thousand constituencies over the state. (Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002. p 49)

The people's are directly participate in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the various schemes or projects through the Gram Sansad in West Bengal. The Left Front Government has made various acts for this purpose in the state legislature. The Gram Sansad meeting has conducted regularly but the participation of the people's has not satisfactory. The average attendance of the people has within the 10-13 per cent which is clearly showed in the table-3.4.

**Table: 3.4****Year-wise data on meeting of Gram Sansads as up to 31.03.2004**

Year	Total no. of GP	Total no. of GS	Ave. no. of electors per GS	Total no. of GS meetings held in May	Ave. no. of attendance in each meeting in May	Total no. of GS which did not held meeting	Total no. of GS meetings held in Nov./Dec.	Ave. no. of attendance in each meeting in Nov.	Total no. of GS meetings adjourned in Nov.	Total no. of GS which did not held meeting in Nov.
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
1996	3313	36125	808				32101(89)	145(18)		4024
1997	3313	36179	804	28412	121(15)		30816(88)	142(18)		5363
1998	3329	44506	741	10435(29)			44104(99)	122(16)	1175	403(1)
1999	3330	44634	746	43346(97)	90(12)	-	43872(98)	94(13)	2496	762(15)
2000	3360	45167	748	42910(95)	88(12)	2257	43246(96)	96(13)	4929	1921(4)
2001	3360	45167	750	43770(97)	86(12)	1397	42829(95)	79(11)	11056	2338(5)
2002	3358	45095	798	42340(94)	86(12)	2780	41625(92)	94(12)	9231	3470(8)
2003	3354	45154	752	4705(10.4)	89(12)	40392	41120(91.07)	88(11.7)	5335	4034(9)
2004	3354	45245	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2005	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2006	-	45168	752	40590(90)	84(11)	4564	43735(97)	64(8.5)	6645	1433(3)
2007	-	44122	771	43619(98)	84(11)	1513	41553(94)	64(8)	-	2569(6)
2008	3351	37067	938	-	-	-	22310(60)	142(15)	4305(12)	10452(28)

Source: Annual Administrative report, DPRD, West Bengal 1997-98, 2003-04, 2008-09.

\*Figures in bracket indicate %

### 3.10 Institutionalized of Village Assembly (Gram Unnayan Samiti)

The provision of the Gram Unnayan Samiti has been introduced by the West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 2003. The Gram Sansad shall constitute Gram Unnayan Samiti at an extraordinary meeting of the Gram Sansad and elect the members by simple majority determining by raising hands or by division. The tenure of Gram Unnayan Samiti shall be same as that of the Gram Panchayat. The Gram Sansad shall review the performance of the members of the Gram Unnayan Samiti every year in its annual meeting. A Gram Unnayan Samiti shall be consists of the following members-

- member or members of the Gram Panchayat elected from the particular Gram Sansad;

- b) one person or persons securing the second highest votes in the preceding Panchayat election;
- c) one member from a non-governmental organization-either registered or otherwise recognized by state government and other community based organization being member of the Gram Sansad and operating in the Gram Sansad area and membership remaining to three NGOs or CBOs;
- d) one members from a self-help groups(SHGs) functioning in the Gram Sansad area for at least six months having a bank account and all the members being voters of Gram Sansad and membership being restricted to three SHGs of which at least two shall be from women led SHGs.
- e) one serving or retired government employee in the area and being member of the Gram Sansad;
- f) one serving or retired teacher residing in the area and being member of the Gram Sansad;
- g) Ten other members or one percent of the total members of the Gram Sansad whichever is higher to be elected from the remaining members of the Gram Sansad. At least one third of the total members of the Gram Sansad shall be women. (Annual Administrative report, 2004-2005)

The Gram Panchayat member elected from the Gram Sansad shall be the Chairperson of the Gram Unnayan Samiti. In case of two-seated constituency the member senior in age shall be its chairperson. The Gram Unnayan Samiti in its first meeting shall select its secretary from amongst members. The Gram Unnayan Samiti shall assist Gram Sansad to prepare its perspective plan for five years and annual plan as a part of the same, which shall be the basis

of the Gram Panchayat plan and will also help its implementation. Gram Unnayan Samiti shall identified need of Gram Sansad area with active participation of people; receive and utilize fund for Gram Sansad; assist Gram Panchayat in assessment of tax and realization thereof; mobilize local resources for argumentation of Gram Panchayat and Gram Sansad fund; identify unutilized/ underutilized resources and suggest measures/ mobilized public opinion for utilization of resources; prioritize projects and schemes for implementation; promote livelihood opportunities for all members of Gram Panchayat and mobilized people for expansion of social opportunities. It shall be accountable for its functions and decision to the Gram Sansad. A write-up on the functioning of the Gram Unnayan Samiti has been published for wide circulation and is available in the department website. Till 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2005, 10,779 Gram Unnayan Samiti was formed out of 45,154 Gram Sansads of the state. (Annual Administrative Report, 2004-05. pp.8)

A gram Sansad may constitute a Gram Unnayan Samiti having jurisdiction over its area. Gram Unnayan Samiti shall be responsible for ensuring active participation of people in implementation and equitable distribution of benefits of rural development programmes within its jurisdiction. It shall be accountable for its functions and decisions to the Gram Sansad. Gram Unnayan Samiti may also constitute such number of functional committees as may be required. The manner of constitution of Gram Unnayan Samiti along with its functional committees and the conduct of its function and responsibilities shall be prescribed in the rules. Gram Unnayan Samiti was inserted in the act in 2003 and after the sixth Panchayat election in 2003; such Samiti was constructed at each Gram Sansad for more participation of people in theoretical governance. But after the completion of seven

Panchayat General Elections in 2008, when the process of forming Gram Unnayan Samiti in each of the district commenced, it was reported that for the constitution of Gram Unnayan Samiti the members of the Gram Sansad were being compelled to cast their votes openly on political line thereby exposing political preference of the citizen, which was not at all desirable and creation of such sharp division at the very initial stage of the process would frustrated the purpose of formation of the Gram Unnayan Samiti. With the objective of eliminating any scope for misinterpretation in the concept or in the process of formation of Gram Unnayan Samiti as well as to avoid any untoward incident at the time of such formation. It was desirable that those bodies should be formed on the basis of consensus of all the members of Gram Sansad. But it's very difficult to reach such consensus at an open meeting of a few hundred persons. In this regard the department of Panchayat, West Bengal issued an executive order that an all party meeting shall be held at block, sub-division, and district level to clarify the spirit, purpose, powers and functions of Gram Unnayan Samiti and to emphasis the formation of Gram Unnayan Samiti with consensus of opinion and for this purpose the members elected from a Gram Sansad and the opposition member who got second highest vote in the last Panchayat election shall discuss among themselves and prepare a list of persons in their constituency who can work for the development of their village without any self-interest or any separate agenda for their own.

Decentralized governance is a very labour-intensive process, both for the elected representatives and for the people themselves, who are thereby called upon to spend a lot of time and engage simply participating in decision-making. The framework for decentralization in the state called for meeting of the Gram Sansads and the Gram Sabhas at

list twice a year. But for most rural people, especially the rural poor, the ability to participate in such meeting is not only a function of the inclination to do so, but also the ability, given the pressures of time involved in wage labour or cultivation, as well as other necessary activities, including the large amount of unpaid labour that is still regularly performed in rural areas. Therefore, it would not be surprising to find that attendance of Gram Sabhas and Gram Sansads is sporadic and haphazard, even the local community is otherwise with the functioning and accountability of the Panchayats.

Average attendance at Gram Sansads and Gram Sabhas meeting has been relatively low and declining in recent years. Official data indicate that average attendance at Gram Sansad meetings decline from around 16 per cent in 1997 to around 12 per cent in 2001, which from Gram Sabha meetings, where attendance was 30 per cent in 1997, and the decline has been even sharper. There is also evidence of cases when the attendance at meetings falls below the quorum and these therefore have to be adjourned. In addition to the factors mentioned above, it is possible that low attendance reflects other tendencies which need to be addressed. One importance reason is the lack of effective functional and administrative power of the Panchayats is the tendency for the local political forces controlling the Panchayats to try and get their decision adopted at higher levels rather than mobilize local people.

A study conducted in 2000 by the State Institute of Panchayat and Rural Development (SIPRD) found similar levels of attendance at Gram Sansad meetings. The average attendance at such meetings amounts to slightly more than 13 per cent of the electorate, which is not so little considering the overall circumstances. This actually compares fairly well even with other countries where there is an emphasis on people's participation in local

government. There is some variation across districts, with Purulia showing (Table-3.5) the lowest rate of attendance at only 7 per cent of the electorate, and Jalpaiguri the highest at 26 per cent. But more significantly, it is clear that there is very high attendance at such meetings on the part of bargadars and pattaders, who are among the poorest section of the rural society, and who account for nearly half the rural workforce over all of West Bengal. In most districts, the rate of attendance of these groups combined is above two-thirds, which is extremely high in all cases (even Murshidabad, where the rate of attendance of bargadars and pattaders was the lowest at only 25 per cent) the attendance among these groups was several multiples of the general rates of attendance. These suggests that clearly these groups see themselves as gaining not only from the land reforms, but also from the process of decentralization, and feel that involvement and participation in these meetings and in the activities of the Panchayats is worthwhile. The changing of class forces in the West Bengal countryside is clearly indicated from such evidence. (West Bengal Human Development Report, 2004)

**Table: 3.5**  
**District-wise Attendance of Gram Sansad Meetings in West Bengal**

<b>District</b>	<b>Per cent of all voters</b>	<b>Per cent of Bargadars and Pattadars</b>
Darjeeling	13	70.5
Jalpaiguri	26	65.4
Koch Behar	25	73.2
Uttar Dinajpur	10	50.8
Dakshin Dinajpur	11	65.0
Malda	11	85.4
Murshidabad	12	25.3
Birbhum	16	46.4
Bardhaman	12	74.7
Nadia	15	41.0
North 24 Parganas	11	55.7
Hugli	11	49.6
Bankura	12	63.2
Purulia	7	41.8
Medinipur	14	72.4
Haora	8	52.8
South 24 Parganas	8	65.9
<b>West Bengal</b>	<b>13.1</b>	<b>63.4</b>

Source: West Bengal Human Development Report, 2004, p 68.

The state government is clearly considering in some new initiatives to strengthen further the system of decentralization, make it more flexible and responsive to the people's needs. The concern for some change stems from the perception that elected representatives at each level tend to believe that the decision-making authority should stop at their own level. But of course, the main aim of the decentralization process is that the ability to influence decisions should permeate down to the people who are affected by these decisions. This in turn means that people's participation has to be understood in a new way— it cannot be that the Panchayat Samiti or the Zilla Parishad decides what to do and then tells the people what they have to participate in. Rather, the representatives have to participate in the efforts of the people and the communities themselves.

Another important study conducted by Ghatak and Ghatak in 2002 on the 20 constituencies have an average of around 940 voters each. The average number of voter's par elected member of the village council from these constituencies is 628. The average attendance rates par village constituency was around 12 per cent, which is less than average for West Bengal as a whole (16 per cent). However, given that an attendance rate of 10 per cent voters is necessary for a quorum, it is not negligible. It is also to be noted that the voters from same village are often members of the same extended family or close-knit social network. A person attending the meetings (often the household) is likely to represent the views of more than one voter, and so in terms of effective popular participation, the attendance rate may appear lower it really is.

If we compare of the eligible voters to those attending the meetings a striking fact is that these meeting were overwhelmingly male dominate event in spite of official politics targeted towards empowering women, such as reserving one-third of the seats in the village councils. Not that women did not come at all, but their participation level was extremely low- while men constitute 54 per cent of the eligible voters in these constituencies, among those participation in the meetings, 91 per cent were men.

A distinct feature of the village constituency meetings is that those who participate were largely members of supporters of the same political party or the other. Those who do belong to any political party kept away from the meetings. Second, without any exception, in each of the 20 constituencies, a majority of the voters who were present belonged to the party of the elected member, which was the left front in 65 per cent of the constituencies. Indeed, the simple correlation coefficient between the party of the elected member and the percentage of

voters participating who belong to the same party is 0.95. Still, it would not be fair to conclude that there were no voices of opposition in these meetings. The average percentage of participants who did not belong to the party of the elected representative among all the twenty constituencies was approximately 20 per cent. (Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002)

In 2004, we conducted a study in Maynaguri block in the district of Jalpaiguri in West Bengal. In the Maynaguri block the total number of Panchayats is 16 and the total number of Gram Sansad is 202. The average number of voters per Gram Sansad is 784. In this block the numbers of Gram Sansad meetings held after adjournment. In November 2003 the total number of Gram Sansad meetings held 202. It was found the average number of attendance in each meeting was 177 and the percentage of present voters in comparison with total votes was 22.58% which is very high than average for West Bengal as a whole (16 per cent). The average number of women attendance in each meeting is 47 and the percentage of women present in comparison with total percentage voter is 26.55%. (Table- 3.6)

**Table- 3.6**  
**Report on Meeting of Gram Sansad in Mayanaguri Block**

Name of the Block	Total number of Gram Panchayets	Date of the Gram Sansad (G.S) meeting	Total number of Gram Sansad	Average number of voters per G.S.	Number of G.S. meeting held with quorum	Number of G.S. meeting held after adjournment	Total number of G.S. meeting held	Average number of attendance in each meeting	Average number of women attendance in each meeting
Mayanaguri	16	November 2003	202	784	199	3	202	177	47
Mayanaguri	16	August 2004	202	784	179	23	201	97	33

Source: Field Study

In August, 2004 the total number of Gram Sansad meeting held 202 but 23 Gram Sansad meetings held after adjournment and 179 Gram Sansad meetings held with quorum. The average number of attendance in each Gram Sansad meeting was 33. The percentage of women is comparison with total presence voter is 34.02 %.( Table -3.4)

The number of Gram Sansad in Khagrabari-I Gram Panchayat is 12 (Booth No – 19/165-176). The Gram Sansad meetings held in Khagrabari-I Gram Panchayat in between at 26-60-2004 to 27-7-2004. The number of total voters range between the Gram Sansad is 496-1051 and the numbers of total presence voters range between the Gram Sansad meetings is 52-143. The present voters range between the Gram Sansad meetings in 9.5 to 21.9 per cent. According to the report on meeting of Gram Sansad (May-July, 2004) in Khagrabari-I Gram Panchayat the range between the present male and female voters is respectively 34-88 and 18-61 (Table-3.7).

**Table- 3.7**  
**Attendance of Gram Sansad meeting at Khagrabari-I GP (May-July, 2004)**

Serial No.	Booth No.	Date of G.S Meeting	Total Voter	Present Voter	% of Present Voter	Female	% of Female Present Voter	Male	% of Male Present Voter
1	19/165	1.7.04	996	134	13.5	46	34.3	88	65.7
2	19/166	27.7.04	609	61	10	23	37.7	38	62.3
3	19/167	7.7.04	808	103	12.7	34	33	69	67
4	19/168	20.7.04	1051	113	10.8	50	44.2	63	55.8
5	19/169	26.6.04	870	115	13.2	45	39.1	70	60.9
6	19/170	28.6.04	943	106	11.2	43	40.6	63	59.4
7	19/171	24.7.04	611	76	12.4	18	23.7	58	76.3
8	19/172	27.7.04	506	59	11.7	22	37.3	34	57.6
9	19/173	28.6.04	652	143	21.9	61	42.7	82	57.3
10	19/174	22.7.04	496	62	12.5	26	41.9	36	58.1
11	19/175	1.7.04	558	53	9.5	16	30.2	37	69.8
12	19/176	7.7.04	993	135	13.6	49	36.3	86	63.7

Source: Field Study

The number of Gram Sansads in Madhabdanga-I Gram Panchayat is 10 (Booth No – 17/55-64). The meetings of Gram Sansads held from 1-07-2004 to 27-07-2004. The range of the voters in the Panchayat is 289 to 713. The total number of present voters range is 11.57 to 39.27 per cent. According to the report the lowest number of female participated in the Gram Sansad meeting is 3 while the highest number is 46. On the other hand, the range of male participated in Gram Sansad is 39 to 194 (Table 3.8).

**Table- 3.8**  
**Attendance of Gram Sansad Meeting at Madhadanga-I GP (May-July,2004)**

Serial No.	Booth No.	Date of G.S Meeting	Total Voter	Present Voter	% of Present Voter	Female	% of Female Present Voter	Male	% of Male Present Voter
1	17/55	27.7.04	505	65	12.87	13	20	52	80
2	17/56	27.7.04	458	53	11.57	14	26.42	39	73.58
3	17/57	1.7.04	401	103	25.69	11	10.68	92	89.32
4	17/58	27.7.04	316	65	20.57	10	15.38	55	84.62
5	17/59	27.7.04	608	154	25.33	29	18.83	125	81.17
6	17/60	11.7.04	400	93	23.25	5	5.38	88	94.62
7	17/61	27.7.04	289	70	24.22	3	4.29	67	95.71
8	17/62	22.7.04	713	280	39.27	46	16.43	194	69.29
9	17/63	27.7.04	438	83	18.95	11	13.25	72	86.75
10	17/64	27.7.04	301	74	24.58	26	35.14	48	64.86

Source: Field Study

The number of Gram Sansads in Maynaguri Gram Panchayat is 20 (Booth No – 17/17-36). In this Gram Panchayat, the Gram Sansads meetings held from 25-06-04 to 15-07-04. The range

of the present voters is 3 to 343. The percentage of total voters range is 0.47 to 37.45. The lowest number of female participated in the Gram Sansad is 1 and the highest number is 106 and the lowest number of male participated in the Gram Sansad is 3 and the highest is 237. (Sen, 2007)

### **3.11 Conclusion:**

We observed that the non-participation of people in the meetings of Gram Sansad because, people does not see any immediate benefits as they are not eligible for financial support under the various poverty alleviation programmes. Political minorities and those not directly associated with the political parties stay away as they feel their opinion would have little effect. They feel that the dominant party would do whatever they want to do anyway. Members of backward groups (SC/ST) felt that they did not have much voice in their own party where the leadership consists largely or members of higher castes. Women, too, felt that they are not encouraged to participate. This is consisted with the finding of earlier studies. (Webster, 1992)

We are agreed with Thorlind, the Swedish researcher, observed that the Gram Sansads are not working according to expectations, but he is still optimistic about the scenario. In the future, the Gram Sansads can be sculpted as an important institution for democratic accountability and people's participation. The need of the hour is to raise the consciousness of the oppressed people and to develop practical education and clear thinking among Panchayat members about democratic rules, regulations and processes.

### 3.12 References:-

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