

## **CHAPTER-FOUR**

### **THE RAJ AND THE RURAL SOCIETY (A) CHOWKIDARI ACT, 1871 (B) LOCAL SELF GOVERNMENT, (C) FORMATION OF THE DISTRICT BOARD : EMERGING OF NEW SOCIAL ELITE IN RURAL SOCIETY**

The *Raj* and the rural society were interrelated with each other. In the pre-colonial and colonial period the village landlord/rich farmer, share-croppers of the frontier regions deeply influenced the rural society. The *jotdari-adhiari* system of North Bengal grew out of conditions wholly atypical of the older settled regions of Bengal. Large areas in these regions were uncultivated jungle and settled for reclamation with enterprising tenant-farmers called *jotdars*.<sup>1</sup> This type of process was introduced by the big *zamindars* prior to the Permanent Settlement and continued in the post-1793 period.<sup>2</sup>

In North Bengal the *jotdar-adhiar* pattern became the dominant feature of the agrarian structure in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In parts of Rangpur, Jalpaiguri and the Siliguri Sub-division of Darjeeling, the practice of leasing out tracts of waste land to men with capital to organize reclamation had already been restored to by the Coochbehar *Raj*.<sup>3</sup> In Malda and Dinajpur (later divided a part known as West Dinajpur) British government hold their sovereignty. The book '*Bengal politics Documents of the Raj*' refers the documents on Bengal politics generated by the British Bureaucracy in Bengal from 1936 to 1947. Actually British *Raj* closely involved about social, political, economic life of Bengal.<sup>4</sup> These documents dealt with a variety of events, subjects and issues that were perceived to be important by the Governor to appraise the Viceroy in provincial matters of other imperial concern.<sup>5</sup>

After the Grant of *Dewani* (1765) British rights of land and their interference gradually increased over the *raiyats* or peasants. The peasants were divided by the British in the following manners-<sup>6</sup> i) *Taluk* and *Jaagir* ii) *Debottar* and *Pirottar raiyat* iii) *Khas land raiyat* iv) *Pahi Kast* and v) *Khud Kast*. Lord Clive, Warren Hastings and Lord Cornwallis had close contact with the *Raja*, *zamindar*, *naib*, *mahajan* and *raiyats* etc. Several land settlement such as *Ekshala*>*PanchShala*>*DosShala* and later Permanent Settlement created an atmosphere of bineding with the *Raj* and the common people especially peasants and tenants. Setab Rai, Debi Singh, Reza Khan had done their work in favour of the British *Raj*. Apart from these *Rajas*, *zamindars*, *jotdars* and later intermediaries act as a significant role. After the passing of Bengal Patni Taluk Regulation of 1819, intermediaries got their law recognition.<sup>7</sup>

The first great area of revenue settlement was Bengal where hereditary *zamindars* acted as go-betweenes between government and cultivator.<sup>8</sup> These men were not land holders in the northern sense but hereditary tax-collectors, often on a large scale.<sup>9</sup> Experiments of Warren Hastings were not continuously successful. The question was subsequently settled by Lord Cornwallis with the introduction of the Permanent Settlement. Though the Permanent Settlement was a bridge among British *Raj*, *zamindar*, peasant and cultivators. But this system could not fulfil the hopes and aspirations of *raiyats* and tenants. It should be mentioned that by the hands of the Permanent Settlement *Raj* entered in to the rural life of the common people.

After the Permanent Settlement, *zamindars* possession actually changed. *Zamindars* established their rights over the land. But in the rural society, another important class flourished who were more powerful and rich than the *zamindars* and they were known as *jotdar*.<sup>10</sup> Hence, it was seen that in one side there were *zamindar-jotdar-mahajan* and on the contrary, there were tenants-*raiyats*-peasant and cultivators. Tebhaga movement,

Naxalbari movement and the introduction of *Panchayati Raj* entered a new colour in the life of cultivator, *jotdar* and rich peasants. Rural life swept in a new way.<sup>11</sup> Rural politics, economy and reform created new enthusiasm. Introduction of Chowkidari Act of 1871 helped the Chowkidars for the smooth run of village organizations. Local Self Government which was boosted by Lord Ripon and for this he had been rightly styled as the father of local self government in India. Lastly the formation of the District Board gave birth of new social rural elite in the rural society. These sections created lot of changes in the rural life of the common people of North Bengal. Let us now study the three stages which made radical changes of rural life.

### **(A) CHOWKIDARI ACT, 1871**

Chowkidari Act of 1871 was regarded by the administrative historians as the first step to relegate the administrative power to the Indians though in a very significant way. However, the subsequent administrative measures have encouraged and promoted the participation of the rural people into the administrative structure the ultimate motive behind this policy was not to accept the financial burden of rural administration. This motive of colonial imperial government reflected in the subsequent legislation and reforms. In spite of it, it was a historical fact that this reforms unconsciously led to the birth of elite class in the rural society.

During the time of colonial rule Lord Ripon raised the proposal of decentralized administration in 1882.<sup>12</sup> Though Bengal regional government gave similar type of idea before Ripon, Chowkidari Act was especially provided for the appointment, dismissal and maintenance of village Chowkidar.<sup>13</sup> By the provisions of the Act, the countryside was divided into 'unions' comprising about ten or twelve square miles each and they would embrace a number of villages within their fold.<sup>14</sup> Each of these unions would have a

committee known as Panchayat. The Panchayat was made responsible for maintaining unity and peace in the village under its jurisdictions and in this task the Panchayat would take the help of the Chowkidar or rural police.

Apart from this the Panchayat was empowered to collect revenues to raise fund for the Panchayat of the Chowkidars.<sup>15</sup> The Panchayat was neither a revival of the old system nor was it an elected body. Its members would have been appointed by the District Magistrate (D.M) who could dismiss them even without any proper intimation. Panchayats were not autonomous and this organization was not recognized by the constitution.<sup>16</sup> So it is worth mention here that in this time Panchayats were the part of autonomous administration and a preface of experiment.<sup>17</sup>

The Local Self Government Act was passed by the Bengal Legislative on the 6<sup>th</sup> April, 1885.<sup>18</sup> Lord Ripon implemented it. He regarded 'the reform and rejuvenation of local self government as the greatest achievement of his Viceroyalty'.<sup>19</sup> Ripon had declared: <sup>20</sup> It was not primarily with a view to improvement in administration that the measure was put forward and supported. It was chiefly desirable as a measure of political and popular education. His Excellency in council has himself no doubt that in course of time as local knowledge and local interest were brought to bear more freely on local administration improved efficiency will in fact follow.

The Act introduced a three-tier local administration, such as a District Board for the whole district, a local board for every Sub-division and a Union Committee for every union. Unlike the members of the Panchayat under the Chowkidari Panchayat Act of 1871, the members of the newly introduced Union Committee would be elected from among the people of the unions.<sup>21</sup> The Village Chowkidari Act of 1870 was implemented in 1871 to provide for the appointment, dismissal and maintenance of village Chowkidar. On the other hand, it was expedient to make provision for the appointment, dismissal and maintenance of

village Chowkidars in the provinces subject to the Lieutenant of Bengal.<sup>22</sup> It was enacted as follows-<sup>23</sup> The District Magistrate and *zamindar* played an important role in the construction of this Act. Appointment of Panchayats; delegation of powers by the D.M; power of define a village; power to appointment Panchayat on application of villagers, succession of member of Panchayat and their works, roll of Chowkidars, number of salaries of Chowkidars, salaries to be provided by assessment; D.M may revise assessment; rate quarterly in advance; constitution of Chowkidari fund; objections to levy how to be made; custody of property distrained; what property may be distrained for rates; distress would not be levied after a year; appointment and dismissal.

Chowkidars were controlled by the Panchayats. The power of Chowkidars, their duties, procedure of arrest by Chowkidars, fines and penalties to be credited to district Chowkidari fund; mode of paying Chowkidars; Panchayat to pay or remit quarterly amounts for payment of Chowkidars etc.<sup>24</sup> One thing must be noted that all Chowkidari Chakran lands before the passing of this Act assigned for the benefit of any village in which a Panchayat shall be appointed, transferred in manner and subject as here in after mentioned to the *zamindar* of the estate or tenure within which may be situated on such lands.<sup>25</sup> All lands so transferred shall be subjected to an assessment which shall be fixed at one-half of the annual value of such land. Such assessment when made by the Panchayat shall be submitted to the Collector of the district. Collector has the right to make transfer. Such order shall operate to transfer to such *zamindar*. The land therein mentioned was subject to the amount of assessment. The transfer has the effect of Estate, tenure as any land in the place in which such land may be situated.

Apart from these assessments there should be a permanent charge on lands. Every such assessment shall be deemed to be a demand to be realized in the manner here in after provided. Notice of arrear, mode of effect of sale, application of proceeds of sale right to

service from occupier of transferred land to cease, appointment, duties of commission and effect of their order, duty of *zamindar* to report crimes not affected and village watch where Panchayat not appointed nor affected.<sup>26</sup>

Actually Village Chowkidari Act of 1871 paved the footprints of village organization which later flourished as Panchayat. So it is clear that by the implementation of Chowkidari Act of 1871, rural people came under the Panchayat system. Gradually Panchayat became the back bone of rural administration. This rural administration became popular in North Bengal. Hence, implementation of Chowkidati Act was the first step to introduce rural administration among the common people of villages. In a word it can be said that rural people got administrative power. Actually by the introduction of Chowkidari Act of 1871, rural society of North Bengal gradually changed with the passing of time.

## **(B) LOCAL SELF GOVERNMENT**

The Gram-Panchayat, *zamindari kachari* and *paragana tahsil* made the hieararchic tiers of the pre-colonial structure of the local government.<sup>27</sup> While the Gram-Panchayat or village-council, which represented the village people, formed the basis of that government, the *pargana tahsil* represented the government interests. The *zamindar* served as the intermediate agency between the people and the government. At this formation and structure of local government was inconsistent with the purpose of the mercantile government of the English East India Company, this was erased under the initiative of Lord Cornwallis' plan of Permanent Settlement in 1793.<sup>28</sup>

The story of local government in British India reveals long drawn-out effort to retain what was good in existing institutions and to reinforce these whatever necessary by ideas which had been proved to be useful in England.<sup>29</sup> It was bestowed as a gift, first on the three presidency towns and later on the district towns, while the villages were allowed to

retain their ancient customs.<sup>30</sup> Though in these villages, where a large number of people live, that there had been the existence for centuries a kind of local self government on which all real advance must be based.

Local self government in its modern form had its beginning in the presidency towns before the acquisition of political power by the Company. By the forties of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was considered to be necessary to enlist the co-operation of the residents in the collection and administration of municipal funds.<sup>31</sup> The first major step was taken by Sir John Lawrence and in 1864 he initiated a new policy in regard to local self government.<sup>32</sup> This system imposed upon the Government of India a very heavy burden of local financial business, but it was not prepared to allow the local governments even a small measure of freedom in regard to spending on the ground that 'it would be opposed to the law of the land'.<sup>33</sup>

The Local Self Government Act (Act III, 1885) was passed by the Bengal Legislative Council on 6<sup>th</sup> of April, 1885.<sup>34</sup> The chief framer of this Act was Viceroy Lord Ripon. Ripon, as a liberal politician, believed that if local government was to have any vitality, it must evolve out of local needs and circumstances and it should be planned in detail by local administrators, and not to be imposed ready-made by the central government.<sup>35</sup>

After the initiation of Ripon's liberal policy of local self government, the constitutions of the three corporations of the presidency towns were revised; the proportion of elected members was increased.<sup>36</sup> In 1896 Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Sir Alexander Mackenzie delivered a speech in the Calcutta Corporation in reply to an address "which created a considerable sensation in the town".<sup>37</sup> A Bill was passed by the Bengal Legislative Council in 1899 aimed at remedying these defects and the remodeling municipal administration. The conditions of life in the towns, however, called for the early application of English methods of administration, and many attempts were made to transplant English

municipal life into India.<sup>38</sup> Municipalities, the District Board, Union Board and Panchayats belonged to the authority of local self government.<sup>39</sup>

The subject of local self government in India naturally divided itself into two main sections, rural and urban. In rural areas the administration of the villages with their indigenous local self government stands apart from that of the rural district while among the urban centres it is quite distinct from each other.<sup>40</sup> One thing was noticed that the rural community became progressively poorer.<sup>41</sup> *Imperial Gazetteer* gives us a picture about Indian village-<sup>42</sup> “The typical Indian village has its central residential site, with an open space for a pond or cattle stand. There stretched around this nucleus lie the village lands. It consisted of a cultivated area and (very often) grounds for grazing and wood cutting. The arable lands have their several boundary marks and their little Sub-divisions of earth rides made for retaining rain or irrigation water. The in-habitants of such a village pass their life in the midst of these simple surroundings welded together in a little community with its own organization and government, which differ in character in the various types of villages, its body of customary rules, and its little of functionaries, artisans and traders.”

But such description was not true of certain parts of India. In Bengal especially North Bengal the role of Panchayat was important in the acceleration of feudal administrative system.<sup>43</sup> The final word in the internal affairs of the village lay with village council or Panchayat, which settled matters by discussion carried on until general agreement was reached. The village Headman/*Sarpanch/Mukhiya*, the accountant, watchman, priest, school teacher, artisans, washerman were the chief functionaries. In Bengal where village headman did not exist and where the village watchman was a servant of the landlord or under the control of the regular police: this effort have made since 1870 to create a local village council to collect the pay of the village watchman and to control them as village servants.<sup>44</sup>

The scheme at first met with little success, as the council members objected to being responsible for the pay, and the regular police found that they could get no help from either council or watchman. Changes were made in the law to give the Magistrate and police more control, but with little improvement of the system, until finally in 1919 the Village Self Government Act gave the council a proper status and dignity and definitely placed the village watchman in a position subordinate to that authority.<sup>45</sup> Village defence parties have functioned in most provinces and proved especially useful in Bengal in combating and capturing robbers, even when armed with firearms.<sup>46</sup>

Ripon's liberalism was not confined to the narrow sector of local self government. He contemplated the possibility of introducing an elective element into the Imperial and Provincial Legislative Councils. The implementation of Ripon's policy led to considerable extension of the elective principle.<sup>47</sup> Municipal organization in the urban areas was a combination of some features of English local government and the Mughal *Kotwali* system: civic administration was linked up with police administration.<sup>48</sup> In rural areas the historical precedent for modern local bodies is to be found in the ancient Panchayats. Ripon recognized the fact that British rule had done a great deal to destroy the 'indigenous system', but he tried to revive and extend it. He treated the village system as the ancient foundation of the superstructure of 'modern local self government'.<sup>49</sup>

Ripon's resolution stressed two new features—representation and effectiveness. Rural areas were to be placed on a par with urban areas. Legislation seeking to implement Ripon's policy reflected provincial diversities. Later two-tier systems flourished—i) Local (Sub-divisional) Board and ii) District Board. But the local government was empowered to create Union Boards. They worked for people's interest.<sup>50</sup> Local Boards were to have elected Chairman; District Boards would have nominated or elected Chairman as the local government directed.<sup>51</sup> District Board can work freely.<sup>52</sup>

In all provinces the rural boards were generally speaking, subjected to greater official control from within than Ripon had intended. A Sub-division, not to speak of a district, was really too large to be managed by single representative body. The lowest unit of rural self government, the Union Board, languished for many reasons.<sup>53</sup> It was a weak product of a top-heavy system: ‘.....rural local government was imposed from above, and the village was the last place to feel its influence’<sup>54</sup>

The Decentralization Commission made some important recommendations which were reviewed by the Government of India in a resolution dated 28<sup>th</sup> April, 1915.<sup>55</sup> The Commission desired that municipal boards should ordinarily be constituted on the basis of a substantial elective majority and that nominated members should be limited to a number sufficient to provide for the due representation of minorities and official experience.<sup>56</sup>

In 1919 the Government of Bengal observed:<sup>57</sup> one of the most noticeable features of the reports for the year is the reiterated and general complaint of the inadequacy of municipal funds to maintain any high standard of administration, combined with a general disinclination of the part of municipal boards to raise funds for the purpose.....Many boards have only elementary ideas of the duties and responsibilities of municipal administration. The incidence of taxation is below R.I per head in more than  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the municipalities, and at this figure it is impossible to expect much in the way of civic amenities.

The peoples of North Bengal were also influenced by the local self government. In the case of Malda there were no Local Boards nor did unions under the District Board.<sup>58</sup> The Municipalities of Englishbazar, Old Malda and Nawabganj played an important role. The municipalities elected their own Chairman and Vice-Chairman.<sup>59</sup> Municipalities engaged in civil works, education, medical reliefs etc. In the case of West Dinajpur, there were two municipal towns in the district, both of which came into existence in 1951. The municipality of Balurghat was constituted by Notification No.-M.1M-40/50 (1) dated the 24<sup>th</sup> May, 1951

and on the other hand Raiganj municipality was constituted by Notification No.-M.1M-37/51 (1) dated 19<sup>th</sup> July, 1951.<sup>60</sup> West Dinajpur District Board was constituted in 29<sup>th</sup> July, 1947. In November, 1956 parts of the District of Purnia were merged with West Dinajpur. The District Board functions under the provisions of the Bengal Local Self Government Act of 1885. There was no Local Board in the district.

In West Dinajpur there were Union Boards in seven police stations (Kumarganj, Tapan, Itihar, Hili, Balurghat, Bansihari and Kushmandi) in the districts.<sup>61</sup> These Union Boards have been constituted and were functioning under the provisions of Bengal Village Self Government Act of 1919. Under this Act, the affairs of the Board are run by elected members who elect a President and a Vice-President. The Board has the right to levy taxes for-(a) paying salaries to the *Chowkidars* and *Dafadars* and (b) carrying out welfare activities like road building, digging of wells etc.<sup>62</sup> Circle officer was appointed to provide guidance to the Union Boards in the management of their affairs. It should be mentioned that in West Dinajpur there was no Union Court in the district. Gram and Anchal Panchayat have been set up in the four police stations (Gangarampur, Kaliaganj, Hemtabad and Raiganj) under the West Bengal Panchayat Act I of 1957.<sup>63</sup>

From the above review it will be seen that British administrators were successful in retaining and developing the indigenous local self government of the villages than in transplanting urban and rural organizations to their appropriate habitats in India. But Ripon's dream remained largely unfulfilled. Local Self Government did not become an active and stimulating educative agency.<sup>64</sup> In smaller towns and districts however, no great success was achieved in establishing a local self government at once competent and capable of a healthy natural development.<sup>65</sup>

### **(C) FORMATION OF THE DISTRICT BOARD: EMERGING OF NEW SOCIAL ELITE IN RURAL SOCIETY**

Formation of the District Board was an important part of the rural society. It played a significant role in the colonial and post-colonial period. The District Board was to consist of not less than nine members, though it was found to consist of usually 18-34 members according to the size and population of the district.<sup>66</sup> The main functions assigned to the District Boards were the maintenance and improvement of roads and other communications, education, especially in its primary stages-the upkeep of the medical institutions, sanitation, veterinary work, the construction and maintenance of rest houses, and the charge of ponds and ferries.<sup>67</sup> They could also reallocate their funds to the relief activities in times of famines and serious distress.<sup>68</sup> During this time rural uplift works forms an important phase of the activities of the ministry. An all round improvement of rural areas and an all round uplift of the rural population was the aim of their policy.<sup>69</sup> Some activities were provided under the following heads-improvement in the condition under which the rural population live, improvements in methods of agriculture, nutrition, facilities for physical recreation, facilities for mental recreation and improvement of cottage industries etc.<sup>70</sup>

It is true that Ripon's policy reflected provincial diversities. By the Act of 1885 (Bengal Local Self Government Act) it was decided to create three-tier systems.<sup>71</sup> Except Chowkidar Union, there were Local Board (District Level).<sup>72</sup> Local Board work for favour of District Board and District Board can work freely. The revenue of the District Boards would mainly come from a cess levied on land. Upto 1912, half of the total income from this sector was created by government as public work cess but in 1913 this was surrounded to District Boards.<sup>73</sup> A part of the revenue would also come from the receipts in connection with their educational and medical institutions, ponds and ferries.<sup>74</sup> The government was the important source which would grant funds for education, improvement of communication, veterinary

and other purposes.<sup>75</sup> Union Board's income consisted mainly of the receipts from ponds situated within their jurisdiction, grants from District Boards and fund raised by taxation on the residents.

In all provinces the Rural Boards were generally speaking, subject to greater official control from within than Ripon had intended. The universal practice was to place the District Magistrate at the head of the District Board as its Chairman.<sup>76</sup> After 1921 District Board can appoint highest rank officials.<sup>77</sup> But government control was still maintained. Without the prior approval of District Magistrate and Sub-divisional officer no one can be nominated as a member of Board. This system continued upto 1957.<sup>78</sup>

In Malda District Board was established in the year 1887 and consisted of thirteen members.<sup>79</sup> It is a continuation of the old ferry fund and education committee. The District Magistrate and Collector were an exofficio members and the remainder are nominated by the local government.<sup>80</sup> In West Dinajpur, District Board was established by Government Notification No. L S G 1386/47/1 B (1) dated 29<sup>th</sup> July, 1947.<sup>81</sup> In 1956 Purnia was merged with the District of West Dinajpur. The newly added areas were constituted into the Sub-division of Islampur.<sup>82</sup> The jurisdiction of the District Board, therefore, now extends over a much wider area. As Mayo wrote...it will enable the rulers of the country gradually to institute.....something in the shape of local self government, and will eventually tend to associate more and more natives of the country with ourselves in the conduct of public affairs.<sup>83</sup> It should be mentioned that the District Board functions under the provisions of the Bengal Local Self Government Act of 1885. Both in Malda and West Dinajpur there were no Local Board in the district.<sup>84</sup>

Another important thing was that the formation of the District Board gave birth to the emerging of new social elite in rural society. Power of Local Board, role of Local Board, importance of District Magistrate, Sub-divisional officer still remained. This system

of British government continued even after independence until the passing of West Bengal Panchayat Act I of 1957. This Act erased the previous Union Board and implemented Gram Panchayat in village level and Anchal Panchayat in Block level.<sup>85</sup>

The concept of Panchayats in post-colonial India as reflected in the constitution and in the reports of the committees and commissions and the experiences of their working, tend to suggest that there can be three perspectives on Panchayats-Panchayat as instruments of development, Panchayats as institutions of self government and Panchayats as both instrumentalist-institutionist perspectives.<sup>86</sup> In 1955 Balvantrai Mehta and Asok Mehta Committee gave a recommendation about the formation of Panchayat.<sup>87</sup> Balbant Ray Mehta committee puts emphasis on non-political Panchayats, putting rural development as the first and foremost agenda for the first generation non-political Panchayats. The participation of the people was considered necessary for better implementation of rural development programmes.<sup>88</sup> The first generation Panchayats in West Bengal came in late 1950s when the Panchayat began to decline throughout the country.<sup>89</sup> The political instability in the state and growing factionalism in the Congress in 1960s further complicated the situation.

The Panchayats were the moribound state. They used to make their presence felt only when relief material had reached them. As a result of which people began to look up to the block office as the problem solving organization. Actually first generation Panchayat failed to fulfil the aspirations of the rural society. The installation of the Left Front government in 1977 brought about a remarkable change in the attitude of the Government to Panchayats. The main slogan was- '*Bastoo ghoogooder bansa bhango*' (Destroy the centres of vested interests), '*Panchayate ghoogoor bansa bhangte habe*' (It is necessary to do away with the centres of vested interests in Panchayats) etc.<sup>90</sup> The Left Front government had initially three tasks on the rural front:<sup>91</sup> i) revitalization of Panchayats, ii) regeneration of stagnant rural economy and iii) changing the correlation of class forces in favour of the poor.

Left Front government spelt out its intention to make Panchayats political institutions and to make the people realize through the experience of their participation about the limitations inherent in the existing socio-economic structure and then to unleash the struggles for implementation of an alternative development strategy. This type of approach is difficult from the mainstream approach where the emphasis is on developing Panchayats as institutions of self government and instruments of rural development.

A look at the programmes of the Left Front constituents and the common programme of the Left Front would tend to show that one of the major objectives is to bring about a change in the correlation of class forces. Land reform constitutes the core and rural development policy of the government. Their main aim was <sup>92</sup> i) abolition of landlordism, ii) redistribution of land among the landless agricultural workers and poor peasants and iii) offering statutory protection to tenants against eviction. In the rural areas Panchayats are the helping hand of the government.

From the statement of the then State Minister Pradip Bhattacharya (Labour Department, West Bengal) it was known that in West Bengal there were 1 crore 37 lakh acres of cultivated land and on government possession there were 10 lakh 16 thousand acres of land.<sup>93</sup> After the passing of the Panchayat Act, Gram Panchayat was formed in village level and Anchal Panchayat in the block level. In 1963 *Paschimbanga Zila Parishad Act* was passed.<sup>94</sup> In this way Balbant Ray Mehata's proposed three-tier Panchayat system replaced by four-tier system in the platform of local self government.<sup>95</sup> Actually the Act of 1973 gave birth to three-tier Panchayat system. In this system Gram Panchayat by 10/15 villages, Panchayat Samiti in the Block Level and Zila Parishad in the District level was proposed to form.<sup>96</sup> But inspite of the passing of the Panchayat Act, it was not implemented during the regime of Siddhartha Sankar Roy, the Congerss Chief Minister of West Bengal. The three-tier Panchayat system was first applied in West Bengal in 1978. North Bengal also witnessed

the experience and enthusiasm of Panchayat election. Especially in Malda and West Dinajpur common people participated in their first Panchayat election. On that year three-tier elections was held in Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad level. West Bengal is the first State in India to hold Panchayat elections at regular intervals of five years since 1978.<sup>97</sup>

It should be noted that the second generation Panchayats born out of elections held in June, 1978 are marked by certain remarkable features.<sup>-98</sup> i) West Bengal is the first State in the country to go in for political Panchayats even before the Asok Mehta Committee had recommended it. ii) West Bengal is the first State in the country to represent a break from the past political patterns in India in terms of social background of rural leadership. A macro study and quite a few micro studies had shown that small and marginal farmers with land holdings below 5 acres had dominated the second generation Panchayats. iii) Panchayat becomes the platforms for fighting against the rural vested interests.

Then came the participation of the people in Panchayats in the implementation of rural development programmes. This was the core of land reforms. Stop eviction of peasants from land was the key to the success of land reform programme.<sup>99</sup> Land reforms programme has three aspects viz. registration of names of share-croppers, redistribution of ceiling surplus lands among the landless and extension of institutional credit over to the land reform beneficiaries. Moreover Panchayat wanted to stop the tug-of-war between *bargadar* and *raiyyat*.<sup>100</sup> Panchayat played an active role in Operation Barga Programme. It played the role of motivators in the evening camps by promising the prospective *bargadars* seeking their help and support.

The Panchayat actively participated in the land redistribution programme. At Zila Parishad and Panchayat Samiti levels there are standing committees to look after this work. The standing committees are there to look after the work. The standing committee at the samiti level clears the list of persons to whom the vested lands would be redistributed.

The successful implementation of land reform programmes along with the rise of Panchayat institutions has resulted in a remarkable change in the socio-economic scenario of the country side.<sup>101</sup>

Now we discuss about the role of women in Panchayat. In the rural society, women empowerment is essentially a socio-economic and political question. In 1952 the participation of women in Assembly and Parliamentary election was below 7%.<sup>102</sup> Panchayat participation was also inconsiderable and in 1964-65 female's participation in Gram Panchayat was ninety-seven and in Anchal Panchayat was twenty-seven.<sup>103</sup> When Panchayat Act was passed in 1973, out of 49,828 seats female's were elected only in 4,588 seats.<sup>104</sup> Later the role of women in Panchayat participation gradually increased with the passing of times.

Hence the Panchayat system gave birth to the emerging new social elite in the rural society. It is seen that in the villages those who are educated belong to privileged class. Again, those who get the opportunities about the study of higher education; it is a symptom of elite formation in the villages. So it can be said that in the Panchayat administrative system elite class people dominated.<sup>105</sup> It is true that due to land reform and Panchayat system, poor peasants and cultivators got land on the other hand due to the introduction of Panchayat system, rural people's participation in the local administration created an atmosphere of independence. As a result of which rural economy developed and social status of the elite in rural society gradually increased.

## **NOTES AND REFERENCES**

1. Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal Economy, Social Structure and Politics 1919-1947*, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p.11.
2. *Ibid.* p.12.

3. *Ibid.*
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