

Chapter-1

1.1. Introduction

In India the review of rural and community development programmes reveal that in spite of the continued efforts made by the government for the upliftment of the countryside, not much headway could be made due to certain strategic deficiencies in implementation process.

The state of West Bengal is a model. Here, the government seems to have been making all out efforts to develop the Panchayat Raj Bodies as instruments of political education and mobilization of the masses and public participation.

That should not lead to any complacency either. The district of Cooch Behar in West Bengal suffers a lot over a period of time due to misbalance and lack of development.

Though conventional approaches failed, since governments cannot be done away with, there is need to redefine the role among the stakeholders, i.e., Community Based Organization (CBOs), people and government.

At present the government seems to have been showing their interest to take the cooperation from the successful civil society initiatives after realizing the need that it can better organize and demonstrate the poorest sections of the rural society into viable groups, at the grassroots.

In the district of Cooch Behar, a number of *Voluntary Organizations (VOS)* are actively taking part in the rural sanitation programme. *Society for Participatory Action and Reflection (SPAR), Sunderban Rural Development Trading Centre (SRDTC)* etc. are the NGOs engaged in rural development in this

district. There are also the organizations of the poor in the form of *Self-Help Groups (SHGs)* in the district.

All the above stated organizations can be taken and explained within the broad frame of *Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)*. The thrust of the study can be developed to understand whether these informal or formal community initiatives run with or without government help, and secondly, whether these organizations have been able to succeed in serving the most vulnerable sections of the society in the district of Cooch Behar.

1.2. Conceptual Framework

Governance and Development are the most dynamic words in the field of Public Administration as well as Development Administration. The essence of these words has always been broadened to keep pace with the changing needs and practical consideration of the people and society.

With regard to political economy approach one may find a definite correlation between governance and development. Better the governance, better the development is. Again, governance is meaningless if under it people attain less development.

Governance is associated with many core values, such as humane governance, democratic governance, effective or good governance, responsible governance, etc., In the beginning of the 20th century, while British Government proposed to offer effective or good Government to the Indians, the Indian leaders objected to it and demanded no good Government, but '*Responsible Government*'.

In fact, development, decentralization, responsibility, effectiveness, openness etc., are the pillars through which governance are run in the line of '*Democratia*' or '*power to the people*'. That is, there is a basic difference between good and responsible governance. In responsible governance, the authority is accountable to the people.

Governance may be explained at the macro or country level or at the region. At the micro or grassroots level local governance may be either rural or urban governance. Since nowhere micro level governance enjoy enough autonomy, its study has to find its scope on the macro status of governance of the country.

Governance is defined as the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources. One of the distinct aspects of governance is identified as the capacity of governments to design, formulate, and implement policies and discharge functions. (1)

However, governance is neither a mere function nor the sole domain of the government. There is much difference between government and governance. A government consists of a group of individuals who share 'a defined responsibility' under the legitimacy of the constitution in the sense of sanctified authority and right to exercise power on behalf of the others, maintain, protect and adapt the society by making and carrying out decisions that affect the lives of the citizens. But governance as it is explained 'Comprises mechanisms, processes and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise legal rights, meet their obligations, and mediate their differences'. (2)

It is true that government is the most powerful and coercive institution and continues to be the major element of any system of governance. But in the changing world, a number of key actors like private sectors as well as market or

business activity, Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), Peoples Organizations (POs), Voluntary Organizations (VOs), as a whole the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) play important role in managing public affairs through providing delivery of essential services, thereby helping the state, promote further development.

Therefore, shifting from its narrow view the concept of governance has been widened into its present broader view. ‘Governance is the sum of the many ways individuals and institutions, public and private, manage their common affairs. It is a continuing process through which conflicting or diverse interests may be accommodated and cooperative action may be taken. It includes formal institutions and regimes empowered to enforce compliance, as well as informal arrangements that people and institutions either have agreed to or perceive to be in their best interest. (3)

Under the above-stated broader ideological and political framework of governance, understanding of rural local governance at the district and its below level can be developed in terms of relationship between the functioning of the state, especially Panchayat Raj Institutions(i.e., PRIs) and the empowerment of the civil society, especially the Civil Society Organization,(i.e.. CSOs).

Since a politically conscious civil society is the key to a responsive state, this is precisely the reason why the inclusion of civil society is added to this study of governance. The responsibility of holding the state accountable rests not only with the formal institutions of governance, such as constitutions and legal institutions, it is a part of the social fabric, and it is the substance of civil society. (4)

Civil Society, according to Harry Blair, comprises the collective of those social organizations that enjoy autonomy from the state, and have as one important goal, among others to influence the state on behalf of their members. A

strong civil society directly supports democratic participation, assure the right and probity of the citizenry and contributes towards a deepening of policy accountability.

According to North-South Institute, “the definition of civil society depends on the vital question that can it be regarded as a mechanism to fight capitalism? Pluralist approaches would lead to counting and classifying organizations. Institutionalism approaches lead to examination of networks and relationships. Behavioral approaches would be questioning of intra-institutional dynamics.”

According to *Blaney and Pasha*, civil society must be understood from a variety of angles: both as structure (of organizations, social and political space and relationships) and as process (the ways in which the elements of the structure come into being). (5)

According to *Shethi*, civil societies are the locus of action by actors bent on change; whether these are foreign or domestic development groups, charities for relief, action groups devoted to consciousness – raising and mobilization of the oppressed, protest groups, political groups, pre-party political formations and support groups. (6)

While civil society is defined as a structure – the constituent parts of it are organized groups, civil society, by some others has been defined as a pattern of relationships with others. White argues, the use of civil societies “ implies a certain power relationship between state and society such that there are limitations on the state’s capacity to pervade and control society to insulate themselves from, and exert influence upon, the state.” (7)

Civil society enables environment. Blaney and Pasha argue that the starting point is “the stabilization of a system of rights, constituting human beings as individuals, both as citizens in relation to the state and legal persons in the economy and the sphere of free association.” (8)

The term ‘*Civil Society*’ is derived from the Latin word ‘Societas Civilis’.

According to *Antoney Black*, the concept of Civil Society was very much prevailed in pre-modern Europe. The term ‘*Societas Civilis*’ was derived from Cicero’s definition of the state (*Civitas*) as a partnership in law (*Societas*) with equality of legal status, but not of money and talent among its members. Civil Society simply meant a community, a collection of human beings united within a legitimate political order. (9)

The modern conception of the civil society is distinct from the earlier versions. The conception appeared systematically for the first time in the eighteenth century. In *Locke's conception*, civil society has two dimensions. It provides redress and security against anarchy and arbitrariness of the ‘state of nature’, and on the other, through the devolution of legislative powers gives the population security against the arbitrariness of the government.

Hegel's concept of civil society embraces the realm of economic interests, labor, private property and class distinctions. Civil society in Hegel’s terminology simply refers to the totality of the material conditions of life.

Marx and Engles, as opposed to their predecessors, gave an independent identity to civil society. They refused to concede the fundamental identity of the state and civil society. Marx demanded the abolition of the anti-thesis between political society (state) and civil society through the abolition of the both. This can

be achieved by the introduction of unrestricted means to the fullest extension of democracy, which he broadly equates with the transition to socialism.

Civil Society, according to *Gramsci*, takes on the notion of ‘terrain’, a place where the state, the people wage war against the hegemony of the market and the state.

Now, civil society represents a distinct sphere of human relations and activity; distinguished from the state— it is neither public nor private— but both at once.

In fact, decentralization is better helped at the grassroots by the spontaneous work or participation of the civil society in a multitude of activities. The different kinds of ‘Unions, Universities, Philanthropic foundations, Urban and Village level clubs, user groups, NGOs, neighbour hood associations influence public performance’. Among other things they can help hold local governments accountable. Such groups are known collectively as Civil Society. (10)

NGOs have the advantage of grass-root reach and they stimulate community participation. They are able to mobilize citizens for developmental efforts, which the state through its bureaucratic apparatus has not been able to do, and thereby serve as an efficient and flexible local delivery mechanism. NGO strengthen Civil Society for contributing to a differentiation in political participation; they perform effective advocacy and also lobbying function.

World Bank thinks that ‘it can also complement local administration in the search for more responsive and effective governance.’

It is believed that the government may and should encourage the participation of civil society. The involvement of civil society can reduce social tensions and bring social as well as political cohesion.

The active civil society can enrich a sound political environment by acting as watchdog of democracy.

To be clearly identified with the concept of civil society it is better to follow the report of the 'Human Development in South Asia 1999', especially its 'chapter - 7' on the 'Governance by civil society'. Here civil society includes '*all independent voluntary and private sector activities, which comprise: -*

(i) Individuals and households,

(ii) The media,

(iii) Business, and

(iv) Civil Society Organization (CSOs) which include all remaining groups. (II)

People-driven civil society organizations have been responsible for advancing political freedom, safeguarding basic rights and furthering social development at a much lower cost than governments. This is reflected in the activities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social movements, community-based people's organizations religious groups, peasant associations etc. like Civil Society Organizations.

In the age of globalization, though we cannot avoid pressure or domination, we have to think globally but act locally. The need of the hour is to build an environment friendly human economy. In fact, rural communities possess certain

features, which strongly qualify them as a major constituent of an alternative and sustainable economic order.

The term ‘Civil Society’ is defined as ‘the broad range of organized groupings which occupy the public space between the state and the individual citizen’.

In West Bengal, a list of relevant Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) were recommended by the Department For International Development (DFID). (12)

As it includes Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), International Non-Government Organization (INGOs), Community Based Organization (CBOs), research institutions, academics, media, trade unions, co-operatives, collectives, faith based organizations, women’s groups and advocacy groups. Phillipa Haden and Madhu Mishra consider the breadth of ‘civil society’ and claimed the definition as narrower referring mainly to NGOs and CBOs as the most commonly recognized organizational expressions of ‘civil society’ in the context of development.

However, a large number of NGOs receive funding from Governments Multi-Lateral Aid Agencies and Foundation, which may make them less independent in their programmes and operations. This may also make them susceptible to government and donor agencies. (13)

While multi-lateral agencies favoured withdrawal of the state to let the NGOs or free market a safe room to work, the search towards good governance in the Indian context could be thought within the system to be best suited to the needs and aspiration of the people concerned. Those voluntary organization or

non-government organizations are thus to be favoured by us if it is the result of the people-driven civil society initiative.

The search for a good governance could be developed if a dependable delivery system of services especially agricultural inputs, water supply for drinking or irrigation, medical facilities, infrastructure, education etc could be well provided to the rural poor.

Society, according to **Robert Dahl**—is basically a polyarchy where a large number of minority groups operate possessing a variety of political resources that are unevenly distributed among them and are, naturally used by them with different degrees of intensity and efficiency and hence there is no single elite as claimed by the elitists. In other words, Political power, is determined not by hierarchical, but by horizontal relationship. (14)

There can never exist a true democracy unless there is true participation of the disadvantaged section of the society, especially women, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes etc., both in governance and developmental programmes.

Empowerment could be a planning goal in the sense that the governmental support is extended to the voluntary sectors as well, both in the field of implementation as well as policy formulation.

More upon which the present study can be extended is to highlight those roles of the civil society initiatives or organizations, which can have at least a demonstration effect. Those organizations can alert the communities to the services to which they are entitled, and mobilize the rural people to demand their rights. These organizations can ensure that the delivery system operates efficiently. They can educate the community.

Since Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) act as an agent of change, it is hoped that a better Panchayat Raj Institutions and Civil Society Organizations (i.e., P.R.I. – CSO) partnership will promote human governance at the rural level. Since the positive role of Civil Society Organizations help to supplement the undoing or unfinished tasks of the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs), the suggestions or advices from the Civil Society Organizations can be invited or sought for. Civil Society Organizations are not the competitor, rather they are the friend, philosopher and guide of the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs), or it may be the vice versa.

While the state like ours today suffers from acute demand of localization or smaller states, the PRIs should attach themselves with the civil society organization in such a manner, from the very beginning, so that the demands of the people cannot linger or flare up or turn into tension or violence rather it is reduced to a peaceful solution.

It is because of the absence of a positive, conscious and patriotic civil society the state either willingly or unwillingly compelled itself to engage and negotiate with the parochial forces of the society.

However, the state has to bow to the genuine demands or forces and it is done because of a strong civil society initiatives or successful social movements. In fact, PRIs always have to be very cautious about the nerve of the society through close attachment with the CSOs. As people's participation in society grows, so does the number of these organizations and civic movements, which compels the government in articulating their demands to respond.

The state of West Bengal has a high credential with regard to the performance of Panchayat and rural development. In spite of the fact the state has

witnessed diverse pressures and it has been compelled to offer extra institutional arrangement (e.g. Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council at the hill area and very recently Uttar Banga Unnayan Parshad for the people of the six districts of North Bengal) in the northern part of the state of West Bengal.

However, a section of the Raj Bansi people in the banner of Kamtapur movement continue to raise their demand for a separate Kamtapur state within the Indian Union. In actual sense, Uttar Banga Unnayan Parshad is the result of a long-fought movement of several parties at the region who too wanted an immediate solution to the deprivation for the people in North Bengal.

Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the district of Cooch Behar has to act them within the ambience of such above-stated situation of political restiveness at the grassroots level and Cooch Behar happens to be the district under the Uttar Banga Unnayan Parsad or the tension affected area caused by the Kamtapur movement.

Moreover, there are acute problems for the district with regard to locational and other disadvantages. Poor communication and irrigation facilities, poverty, frequent soil erosion, flood etc. are the problems that keep the district as one of the backward district in West Bengal.

With this background, the responsibility of the Voluntary Organizations (VOs), People's Organizations (POs), NGOs and PRIs are much important which require a good coordination among them. More is needed to let the CSOs to allow such activities, which can help the process of governance and developmental work in the desired direction. Therefore, the relationship between PRIs and CSOs is a very close one. Any worthwhile Panchayat will certainly maintain link with Civil

Society Organizations to promote a humane, democratic, decentralized governance and development at the district of Cooch Behar.

Panchayat Raj Institutions are to transform themselves from being representative political institutions to being community institutions of direct democracy with support from the civil society organizations at the local level.

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