

CHAPTER 7

PANCHAYAT ACTIVITIES IN THE SELECTED - A COMPARATIVE STUDY

In this chapter, an attempt is made to make a comparative study on leadership pattern at the Panchayat level and critically examine the activities of the Panchayat. In West Bengal, there are 15 Zilla Parishads, 324 Panchayat Samities and 3,242 Gram Panchayats. The number of Panchayat samities and Gram Panchayats in the different districts of West Bengal is given in the following table :

Table 6.1

Particulars of Panchayats in West Bengal

District	No. of Zilla Parishads	No. of Panchayat Samities	No. of Gram Panchayats
Darjeeling	1	10	76
Cooch-Bihar	1	11	128
Jalpaiguri	1	13	122
West Dinajpur	1	16	157
Maldah	1	15	144
Bankura	1	22	190
Burdwan	1	23	224
Birbhum	1	19	169
Hooghly	1	17	201
Midnapur	1	52	515
Purulia	1	20	169
Harwah	1	14	165
24 Pargana	1	50	549
Nadia	1	16	182
Murshidabad	1	26	252
Total	15	324	3,242

A study was made of selected 100 gram panchayats (selected at random) on some specific points particularly related to the leadership pattern, their socio-economic backgrounds attitude of the villagers towards panchayati raj and lastly on the activities of the panchayat.

Socio-economic Background of the Members

The study was conducted on 1,466 members covering 100 gram panchayats of West Bengal selected at random. The age background of the members has been given in the following table :

Table 6.2

Age background of the members

<u>Age-groups</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
20-24	62	4
25-29	251	17
30-34	271	18
35-39	292	20
40-44	212	15
45-49	164	11
50-54	98	7
55-59	61	4
60-	56	4
Total	1,466	100

It clearly indicates that the members represented the younger age-group. The same trend was also noted in the context of Kaggari Panchayat earlier. This, however, was not the case in the context of earlier panchayats where mostly aged persons represented not only the traditional panchayats but also the first statutory panchayats.

The educational background of the members in the 100 selected gram panchayats has been given in table 6.3.

Table 6.3

Educational background of the Members

<u>Educational Standard</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
No education	10	1
Only read & write	57	4
Below primary	49	3
Primary	214	14
Middle	499	37
High/Higher Secondary	436	30
Graduate	161	11
Postgraduate	30	2
Technical	10	1
Total	1,466	100

One thing is very conspicuous from the above table: there are only a few persons who do not have any formal education. Persons having higher secondary or above qualifications constitute nearly half of the total members. It is also been noted in the context of Kaggari Gram Panchayat which has been studied in detail. In village India, mostly the very low castes, tribals and landless population form the bulk of the non-educated population and the relatively higher castes and landowners constitute the majority of the educated persons. This suggests doubt about the proportionate representation of very poor families. So an examination of the occupational pattern of the members may be made here.

The occupational background of the studied members is given below in the following table :

Table 6.4

Occupational Background of the Members

<u>Category</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage of the total</u>
Owner cultivator	743	50.7
Teacher	206	14.0
Unemployed	110	7.5
Landless agricultural labourer	70	4.8
Share-croppers	26	1.8
Artisans & Craftman	23	1.6
Shopowner	20	1.4
Craftman & Artisan Labour	19	1.3
Doctor	16	1.1
Tailor	8	0.06
Students	8	0.06
Big land owners & others	217	14.8
Total	1,466	

It is quite obvious that the owner cultivator form the majority of the members. The teachers also have a major share. If we consider the class background, considering the income, the teachers certainly do not belong to the landless category as a class even though many of them might be landless. However, the emergence of this educated class as rural elite is very interesting and significant. A large number of unemployed persons are also there as the members of the group. In the Kargari gram panchayat, it has been noted that a number of educated persons were given nominations particularly by the leftist parties. It is obvious that many of them did not really belong to the marginal farmer or landless class. It has been held that if properly trained, as ~~factors~~ future members/leaders of the different left parties, they can play a very crucial role in the rural society. The representation of landless and share-croppers, however, is not proportionate to the size of their population. Now land ownership pattern of the members according to different class categories is given below :

Table 6.5
Land Holding Pattern of the Panchayat Members

<u>Class Category</u>		
Marginal farmers	(below 2 acres)	42.9%
Small farmers	(2 acres - 5 acres)	28.2%
Middle farmers	(5 acres - 8 acres)	13.0%
Big farmers	(8 acres -10 acres)	8.1%
Very big farmers	(10 + acres)	7.8%

It is obvious that the marginal and small farmers form the bulk of the land owning members. The big and very big farmers constitute about 16 per cent of the total land owning members. This is not unexpected as the different left parties have more number of followers in the different panchayats and ideologically they are more committed towards the rural poor. But some times, these facts and figures are misleading. Anyone who has some knowledge about the Indian village knows that to avoid the different land reform programmes. Lands are often distributed among the family members. Each unit often does not form an economic unit, and thus an individual, considering the land holding pattern, might be a marginal farmer but he really belongs to the big farmer or very big farmer category, because lands owned by the members of his family are really controlled by the eldest male member of the family. However,

without considering this limitation, it can be said that more than 71 per cent of the total landowner members belong to marginal or small farmers category and thus represent the village poor.

Different Activities

Fund was given including under food for work programme to each gram panchayat for doing different activities within the gram panchayat. In 1978-79 financial year Rs. 25,000/- were allotted to each gram panchayat for different development purposes under food for work programme. The different activities in the studied 100 gram panchayats are given below in the following table :

Table 6.6
Activities of the Gram Panchayats

Type of work	No.	Expenditure (per thousand)	Expenditure (per unit)
1	2	3	4
Road	852	2,644	2,766(per km)
Small bridges	52	87	1,673
Tubewells including resinking	675	356	528
Well	171	85	497
Reclamation of tank	15	65	433
Drain construction	46	42	913
Canal for irrigation	33	142	4,303
Minor irrigation (cross bond)	18	43	2,390
School building Construction	25	45	1,800
Others	55	178	3,237
	<u>1,942</u>	<u>3,687</u>	<u>18,540</u>

The table reveals that construction of road was the major important activity taken up by the gram panchayats. There is no doubt that this programme would improve the communication system in the village which is largely neglected in the rural areas. Construction of tubewells or wells received major emphasis which no doubt is of vital importance in the village and would offer better drinking water facilities. Apart from these activities, the other works done included reclamation of tank, construction of canal for irrigation, construction of school building etc. All these, no doubt, are of vital importance and helped in improving the socio-economic conditions or standard of living of the villagers. However, a few points may be raised here in this connection. The functions of the gram panchayats are supposed to be

- i) Preservation and development of local resources;
- ii) initiate plans for proper utilisation of local resources for the betterment of the local population.

Gram Panchayats are supposed to initiate local level development plans with the help of outside experts if required. Thus plans and programmes which were so long made at the top and later on implemented often without getting the real or optimum benefit for not considering the local needs and resources, would be changed as they will be initiated from below, at the local level by the village panchayats. But the different activities done by the studied gram panchayats reveal a somewhat different picture. Though most of the programmes initiated or implemented by the studied gram panchayat were very important, they show little sign of local level development planning. The programmes for improvement or proper utilization of local resources for development of local economy undoubtedly received less importance. Thus many of these programmes are not economic programmes which, in future, can stabilize or improve the local economy. It is true that gram panchayats have tremendous potential for local/regional development but the planning should be made accordingly and panchayats should not be considered as another governmental programmes. Quite often the panchayats are so busy to implement the 'assigned' duties that they find little time to plan or implement their 'own' programmes. This unfortunately is curbing the real strength and potential of the panchayats.

Attitude towards Panchayats

In spite of the fact that the panchayats have not always been following the ascribed role, they have initiated a number of programmes in the rural areas. In order

to understand the attitude of the villagers towards the panchayats particularly with reference to the development works villagers representing the agricultural labourers, marginal farmers, small and middle farmer, grocer-shopowner, craftsmen and artisans and teachers were interviewed and for each group, 100 persons covering the studied gram panchayats were interviewed. They were asked whether the panchayat has initiated any development programme and whether there exists any functional difference between the earlier panchayat and the present panchayat. The opinions of the different groups are discussed below in the following table :

Table 6.7

Opinion about the Panchayat

Category (N=100 for each category)	Opinion about implementation of development works (in percentage)			Any difference in the functioning of the present and the earlier panchayat (in percentage)		
	Yes	No	No ideas	Yes	No	No ideas
Agricultural labourer	91	1	8	82	10	8
Marginal farmer	89	4	7	82	11	7
Small/middle farmers	87	2	11	79	10	11
Grocery shopowners	90	3	7	79	15	6
Craftsman & artisan	77	7	16	68	17	15
Teacher	89	1	10	86	4	10
Average Total	87	3	10	79	11	10
Total	523	18	59	476	67	57

It is clear from the above table that the poorer section in the village society particularly the agricultural labourers, marginal farmers and small shopowners are aware of the different developmental activities. It obviously indicates that the different development activities done by the panchayat have benefited these categories of villagers. The different categories have noted difference in the present and the past panchayat which also speaks positively about the activities of the present panchayat. This may also be due to one basic difference between the present and the past panchayat - the different development activities to be initiated by the panchayat are supposed to be discussed at the village level consulting all the villagers. The priorities, plans, and programmes are fixed accordingly and as such the villagers are aware of the development activities done. This may be reflected from the following table which would

indicate that in most cases decisions were taken after discussions at the village level. In a number of cases, however, decisions were taken only at the level of gram panchayat.

Table 6.8

Decision taken at Which Level

Decision taken after discussion with the villagers	- 70%
Decision taken at the panchayat level and communicated	- 66%
Decision taken at the panchayat level	- 24%

Even though most of the decisions were taken after consultation with the villagers, all the persons interviewed do not necessarily have clear idea as to on whose initiative the different development works are being done. In order to know this, it was asked to them whether they are aware, who is initiating these activities. The result of this questionnaire is given below in the following table :

Table 6.9

Who is initiating the Development Works

<u>At who's initiative the work is being done</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
1	2
Village panchayat	50.6%
Panchayat Samiti Zilla parishad or Government	12.9%
Panchayat Leader or Local Leader	12.8%
Not aware	23.7%

The above table No. 6.9 shows that though 50 per cent of the villagers are aware that the development activities were conducted at the initiative of the Gram Panchayat. Many of them do not have clear idea. A number of them have associated it with governmental activities or with any local leaders. Besides, nearly of the total respondents have no idea, even though 87 per cent of them have said that some development activities have been done in the recent past. This, no doubt, reflects lack of awareness on the part of a sizeable percentage of respondents about the activities of the Panchayat. The respondents were also asked to express their opinion, if any, about the Panchayat and its activities. Majority of them did not express any opinion, a few said how the activities can be improved and about 3.5 per cent respondents were critical about its activities for a number of reasons, the details of which is given in the following table :

Table 6.10

Points of Criticism

<u>Reasons</u>	<u>No.</u>
No definite plan	7
No economic improvement	4
Only persons have been employed	3
Villagers not consulted	3
Political consideration received more priority	2
Villagers unable to know the budget and see the accounts	2

Implementation of Governmental Plans through Panchayats of West Bengal

A number of governmental departments have implemented their plans through the panchayats. Particularly after the flood of 1978, village relief, welfare and reclamation and development activities were carried out very efficiently by the panchayat. Some of the activities and departments for which the activities were conducted by the panchayats at three levels in West Bengal are discussed below. This would give some idea about the resources that are going to the villages in West Bengal and responsibilities and duties that are carried out by the panchayats at different levels.

Gram Panchayats

Programme : Food for work
 Source : Relief and Social Welfare Department, Government of West Bengal.

The different development activities include construction of roads, canals for irrigation, tank reclamation, soil conservation, repair of school building, government offices, community centre, panchayat office etc. The purpose of this type of work is two fold, (a) to increase employment opportunities for the unskilled labourers and at the same time, (b) to initiate some permanent development activities in the region. The plans and programmes for each gram panchayat are to be made by gram panchayat and the works are done under their direct supervision and with the technical assistance, if

required, from the B.D.O. office labourers are employed directly by the panchayat and these works was not done through contractors.

The allotment under this programme for the state of West Bengal is given below :

<u>1978-79</u>		<u>1979-80</u>	
Cash (in lakhs)	Kind-Wheet (in Metric Tonnes)	Cash (in lakhs)	Kind-Wheet (in Metric Tonnes)
275.385	49,0072	394.843	30,388

In 1979-80 as a drought relief, some special allotment was made, for the whole of West Bengal and the total allocation amounted to Rs.760.24 lakhs. Thus one could easily appreciate the flow of money to the villagers in the recent past and the consequent effect on village economy.

Under village reconstruction programme of the relief and social welfare department, funds were provided to the gram panchayat, the details of which for the whole state of West Bengal are as follows :

<u>Village Reconstruction and Resource Reclamation</u>		<u>Housing subsidy</u>	
Cash (in lakh)	Wheet(Metric tonnes)	Cash(in lakh)	Wheet(Metric Tonnes)
500.80	25,247	2,351.16	18,750

From the panchayat and community development department, Government of West Bengal, funds were given to the different gram panchayats for construction of office building of the panchayats. The details of it for the whole state of West Bengal are as follows :

<u>1978-79</u>		<u>1979-80</u>	
No. of Gram Panchayat	Amount (in lakh)	No. of Gram Panchayat	Amount (in lakh)
128	8.825	209	29.14

To extend health facilities, Homeopathic treatment centres 84 in 1978-79 and 106 in 1979-80 were established through out West Bengal with the help of the Gram Panchayats. Under this programme, for each centre, Rs. 4,800/- are given to meet the expenses for one Doctor and one Compounder who are paid at the rate of Rs.250/- and Rs.150/- per month respectively.

Again under village activity programme, money is given to the Gram Panchayats from the Development and Planning Department. In 1978-79 financial year Rs. 25,000/- and 25,500 Kg. of wheat were allotted to each of the 3,242 Gram Panchayats of West Bengal.

Panchayat Samiti

Source : Community Development of Panchayat Department Government of West Bengal.

Programme : House construction for the landless labourers.

This programme of house construction was undertaken by the panchayat samiti only for the landless agricultural labourers, craftsmen of fishermen to whom lands were allotted. Generally Rs. 1,000/- were sanctioned for each house in the plains and Rs. 1,500/- for each house in the hilly region of Darjeeling or in the Doars region of Jalpaiguri. The labour is supplied by the person for whom the house is constructed and the programme is conducted under the supervision of the Panchayat Samiti. The expenditure for West Bengal in 1978-79 was Rs. 179.951 lakhs and Rs. 200.34 lakhs in 1979-80 financial year.

Source : Development and Planning Department,
Government of West Bengal.

Programme : Comprehensive village Development Programme.

This programme was initiated only in those blocks where Small Farmers Development Agency (SFDA), Drought Prone Area Programme (DPAP), Comprehensive Area Development Project (CAEP) or other such agencies were working for the welfare and development of the region particularly the landless, marginal and small farmers or village artisans. Special facilities are extended to improve production. For each block, Rs. 4-5 lakhs of Rupees were given under this scheme.

Source : Health and Family Welfare Department.

Programme : Supply of drinking water in the villages.

To supply drinking water in the villages, funds were given to the panchayat samiti, particularly in 1979-80 in the context of drought. During that financial year, Rs. 134,844 lakhs were given to the different panchayat samities of West Bengal and 950 tubewells and 873 wells were dug.

Zilla Parishad

Source : Panchayat Department, Government of West Bengal.

Programme : Roads, bridge repair, and construction.

In this programme Rs. 450.00 lakhs were given in 1978-79 after flood and in 1979-80 to the different Zilla Parishads of West Bengal.

Source : Panchayat Department.

Programme : Construction of Panchayat buildings.

In 1979-80 an amount of Rs. 18 lakhs were given under this programme to construct 11 office buildings at the Zilla Parishad Level and 4 at the Panchayat Samiti level in West Bengal.

Source : Relief and Welfare Department,
Government of West Bengal.

Programme : Special Food Programme.

Under this programme, an amount of Rs. 421.89 lakhs were given to the different Zilla Parishads of West Bengal to give special food to the children below 6 or to the expectant mothers. Milk and other foods were supplied

Source : Education Department,
Government of West Bengal.

Programme : Construction of Primary School Building.

Funds are given to the different Zilla Parishad for construction of school buildings. Particularly after the flood of 1978, special sanctions were made from the funds of the State Government, Central Government, UNICEF and CARE. An amount of Rs. 27.50 lakhs were given to construct or repair 250 school buildings in 9 districts of West Bengal, namely, Bankura, Burdwan, Birbhum, Howrah, Houghly, Midnapur, 24 parganas and Murshidabad.

Source : Development and Planning Department.

Programme : Development of North Bengal.

Under this programme Rs. 109.728 lakhs and Rs. 155 lakhs were given in 1978-79 and 1979-80 respectively to the five districts of West Bengal, namely Darjeeling, Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Malda and West Dinajpur.

So it is quite obvious that besides a large amount of money that was allotted to tackle flood and drought situations in West Bengal (in 1978 and 1979 respectively), funds were given to the different levels of panchayat for various welfare and development measures of the different departments of the government. The following table indicates the investment in the different districts of West Bengal. There is no doubt that due to may of these assigned duties, the panchayats find it difficult to complete the programmes efficiently or fail to evolve their own development programmes for the respective regions. In a number of interviews, a number of panchayat leaders admitted that they are so much preoccupied with different programmes that often it becomes impossible to work efficiently.

It has been observed that the newly elected panchayats have had exposure to various field problems in tackling which they have shown their initiative, innovative power and qualities of leadership. In dealing with the abnormal situation created by the devastating flood in 10 districts the panchayats have had direct education in terms of organizational ability and management. In the working of the panchayat samitis and zilla parishads the eight functional sthayeree samitis have already established themselves as important decision-making bodies regarding various aspects of rural development. The panchayat samitis and zilla parishads have been playing important roles in matters of supervision and co-ordination of panchayat activities. It is noteworthy that the practice of going to the people already prevails at the gram panchayat level.

There is no doubt that active involvement of panchayati raj institutions in the planning process would provide a better element of people's participation in the effective implementation of the plan. Again, a good understanding between the panchayati raj institution and the official machinery engaged in rural development work can accelerate the socio-economic change in rural India. Panchayats are becoming a central organisation in the socio-economic life of rural people, It plays a very significant role, In the context of development, some of the findings of the present study are very interesting.

1. Many of the panchayat members are not trained in rural development activities. Naturally there is scope for development.
2. Meaningful interactions among planners, policy makers, administrators, a social scientists and panchayat leaders involved in rural development should be initiated.
3. Persons involved in the rural development programmes should have knowledge about the socio-economic cleavages of the concerned society.
4. Some of the problems faced by the panchayat officials can be removed.
5. Necessary structural and institutional changes should be brought about to have desired effect of panchayati raj.

Some of the important items which need adequate attention are follows :-

1. Communication
2. Education
3. Supply of agricultural inputs
4. Water supply particularly drinking water
5. Irrigation
6. Political and public pressure
7. Lack of funds/resources

A number of measures can be suggested in view of these problems.

1. Improvement of physical infra-structure and financial power.
2. Training of members
3. Co-ordination of work
4. Delegation of power

Table 6.11Expenditure of the Panchayat in West Bengal

(Expenditure in Lakhs)

Districts	General Fund 1978-79	Special fund under flood and drought relief		
		1979-80	1978-79	1979-80
1	2	3	4	5
Darjeeling	53.316	69.381	-	17.360
Cooch Behar	101.377	61.492	-	8.090
Jalpaiguri	98.209	115.944	4.900	6.950
W. Dinajpur	88.750	193.418	-	11.870
Malda	80.421	132.619	74.62	20.680
Bankura	104.582	171.018	165.78	208.516
Burdwan	179.977	119.838	527.45	38.160
Birbhum	98.288	175.867	368.02	23.449
Hooghly	188.555	117.524	562.15	27.360
Medinipur	223.290	487.230	792.19	106.977
Purulia	86.129	164.999	9.00	305.585
Howrah	68.416	99.415	556.95	11.830
24-Parganas	189.296	269.741	547.14	37.990
Nadia	105.141	96.816	589.707	9.100
Murshidabad	95.417	155.398	394.797	14.650
Total	1,691.164	2,586.098	4,592.704	848.597