

## Summary of Findings and Concluding Observations

### I. Summary of Findings

The primary purpose of the present study has been to examine the role and functions of the Zilla Parishad and to what extent the Zilla Parishads in the districts of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar have become the real planner, energizer and coordinator towards making the district administration more responsible and responsive to the concept of decentralised democracy and participatory development. This is sought to be done by using the tools of survey analysis. It is argued that formal structure of an organization fails to provide an understanding of the factors that shape and influence the way the organisation grows and functions. In the context of reality of the dynamics of development, what is very important is not how a system has been ideally conceived, but how it actually works and what problems stand in the way of the realisation of the systemic goals it subscribes to.

This study is an attempt to examine the actual functioning of the Zilla Parisad in the two districts of North Bengal, viz., Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar. The study was carried out in the two districts covering a sample of 44 elected representatives of Zilla Parisads and 28 district level Government Officials who were attached to the functioning of the Zilla Parisads.

In order to understand the situational and contextual factors impinging upon the functioning of the organisation, an attempt has been made to trace the growth of the local self-government in the State of West Bengal right up to the present structural-functional manifestations. Such an analysis of historical and environmental contexts has helped in providing important clues in understanding the present working of the organisation with its functional and dysfunctional characteristics.

From the survey of the historical perspective, it is clear that the State of West Bengal has had a chequered history of local government. It was also found that the local institutions were not provided with the necessary care and nourishment required for the new-born organisations, speaking in terms of financial and administrative patronage, consequently the institutions were allowed to languish in

certain congenital constraints.

After independence, when it was found that the fruits of development were not reaching the poorest of the poor, the lacuna was identified as lack of truly representative rural institutions. To rectify this short-commings, the Balwantrai Mehta Committee suggested the establishment of Panchayat bodies to be based on adult suffrage. This was done in the late 1950s all over the country. But it was found that with the exception of some states, the local institutions failed to deliver the required results and became moribund and non-functional. Lack of political will was evident in making these organisations truly people-oriented. The State of West Bengal was no exception to this.

In West Bengal, a new Panchayat Act was passed in 1973 which was designed to revive and invigorate the moribund Panchayati Raj system in the State introduced through the Acts of 1957 and 1963. The Act of 1973 was a historical necessity and proposed a change in the structure, composition and functions of the Panchayati Raj bodies. But for certain obvious political reasons, the Panchayat Act of 1973 was put to cold storage leaving the Panchayati Raj Institutions in the state to where they were there under the Acts of 1957 and 1963.

Against this backdrop, the new Panchayati Raj system was re-introduced in 1978 with a definite change in the powers and functions. The main planks of policy in the field of Panchayats have been broadly three fold : first, acceleration of organisational development, second, development of human resources, and third, effective implementation of various developmental programmes by the Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Re-vitalisation of Panchayati Raj in West Bengal came about in three phases of its development. The initial years of its operation were one of consolidation in the field of administration, finance, devolution of programmes, monitoring and evaluation of Panchayati Raj Institutions' activities. The second term of office had been the years of taking off for the new era of democracy and development. The third phase was one of further consolidation of democratic and developmental values and nourishment of new found local and youthful leadership in the Panchayati Raj Institutions, especially in the Zilla Parisads.

Keeping this change in view, the administrative infrastructure of the Panchayati Raj Institutions was given a new orientation with substantial financial powers. The Zilla Parisad had been strengthened to discharge vast areas of

developmental functions which were assigned to it. The eight Sthayee Samitis were incorporated for carrying out diversified developmental functions. In these Sthayee Samitis, the district level officers of the technical departments were attached to the Sthayee Samitis. This helped identification of personnel belonging to the development departments with the operation of Panchayati Raj at the district level and helped in achieving coordination between government officials and elected representatives of Zilla Parisads.

The post of a full time Additional Executive Officer for each Zilla Parisad, of the rank of the Additional District Magistrate, was created for effective management of Zilla Parisad and to ensure the desired coordination in matter of planning and development by the Zilla Parisad.

The most important and fundamental change that has been introduced to invigorate the Panchayati Raj structure at the State level, was the amalgamation of the Department of Community Development with the Department of Panchayats. Thus, a unified department has come in to existence, with command and control. This has, to a large extent, removed the administrative rivalry between two groups of officials and helped in implementing rural development programmes in a faster and more coordinated manner.

With the emergence of decentralised, district level planning from 1985-86, the Panchayati Raj bodies have assumed greater responsibilities in planning and implementation of development programmes for rural Bengal. Moreover, with a view to involving people at the grass-roots level in the planning process, and to secure better coordination of plan efforts by different departments at the area level, a District Level Coordination Committee and District Coordination Council were set up at the district level and similar planning organisation was set up at the block level, known as the Block Planning Committee. The essential idea behind this kind of development was to decentralise the formulation and implementation of developmental programmes to the extent possible and also to resolve pressing local problems as per the perception of the common people. This development has produced the desired results.

In West Bengal, Panchayats were first entrusted with Governmental works in the event of massive flood in 1978. In dealing with the abnormal situation, the Panchayats have had an exposure to various field problems in tackling which they had shown their initiative, innovative power and qualities of leadership. Thus the Panchayats had first-hand work education in terms of organisational ability and management qualities.

The most important programmes devolved upon Zilla Parishad along with various other developmental programmes, were National Rural Employment and Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme. These programmes made the Panchayati Raj Institutions an effective delivery-system for anti-poverty programmes. The involvement of Panchayat bodies ensured the flow of benefits to the intended target groups.

The first major employment programme assigned to the Panchayats was Food for Work which was converted to National Rural Employment Programme under the instruction of Government of India. From December 15, 1980, the National Employment Programme was launched in the State as in the rest of the country. From the outset, NREP was entrusted to the Panchayats for implementation and the Zilla Parishad emerged as the nodal unit of the entire exercise, in place of District Rural Development Agency as in the other states.

Several innovative measures were noticed in the operation of programmes in connection with NREP. From the very beginning, the total NREP allocation of each district was distributed among all Gram Panchayats. This completely ruled out the possibilities of any discrimination against individual Gram Panchayats on political or other extraneous considerations. Later, seeing that this posed difficulties in the way of implementation of bigger or technically complex projects,

the State government reserved 20% of district allocation for big NREP projects to be implemented by Zilla Parisads alone.

In Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri Zilla Parisads, programmes like construction of bunds, channels and field channels, village roads and bridges and culverts were formulated and implemented. Programmes of social forestry, drinking water supply and construction and repair of primary school buildings were undertaken. In Cooch Behar Zilla Parisad, during the period 1987-89, 7.92 crores of rupees were spent and employment was generated to the tune of 54.05 lakhs mandays, while this figure in Jalpaiguri Zilla Parisad was more than 8 crores and 61.40 mandays.

Another important programme implemented by the Panchayati Raj Institutions was the Rural Landless Employment Programme and was launched during 1983-84 as a supplement to NREP. The RLEP was entrusted to Zilla Parisad for implementation. In Cooch Behar Zilla Parisad, schemes like soil conservation, small irrigation, construction of roads, rural housing for rural poor, social forestry and others were implemented during 1987-89. Jalpaiguri Zilla Parisad also implemented same nature of programmes during the same period as in Cooch Behar.

Besides these two very important programmes, both the Zilla Parisads viz., Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri, undertook

various other schemes like North Bengal Development Programme, Rural Water Supply scheme, Integrated Rural Development Programme and District Plan Fund Scheme. Under NBDP, the Zilla Parisads undertook construction and repair of roads and bridges, construction and repair of culverts, construction of embankments, excavation of tanks, sanitation, drainage, soil conservation, and other infrastructural facilities.

The manner in which the environmental factors bear upon the organisation through individuals performing defined functions has been subjected to different kinds of analysis. The individuals who join an organisation have their life histories, goals and aspirations which very much influence the functioning of an organisation. Keeping this in mind, analysis was made of the social background of two sets of functionaries, officials and elected representatives. It was found that elected members and officials came from diverse social origins. For instance, the fathers of government officials were largely engaged in white collar jobs and professions, whereas, the fathers of the elected representatives were mainly agriculturists and businessmen.

Besides family background, differences between the two groups of respondents were noticed in respect of their personal attributes like age, education and rural versus urban

exposure. The officials were, by and large, younger than the elected members. However, the caste composition of the two groups was almost the same. The majority of the respondents belonging to the higher castes. The officials had spent a longer part in urban areas as compared to the elected members who had lived largely in the countryside. The officials were by and large more formally educated than the elected members.

Panchayati Raj which was conceived as the main politico-administrative framework at the local level for decision-making and implementation of various developmental plans and programmes suited to the needs and resources has been developed as an autonomous system in West Bengal. The Zilla Parisads have been entrusted, as a nodal unit of Panchayati Raj system, to represent an organic complex to sustain and support a people oriented development administration under popular leadership. To get at this dimension, and in order to find out how the Panchayati Raj Institutions in general and zilla parisad in particular work and what are the dysfunctions that cause a deviation from the blueprint designed for the institutions, an attempt has been made to analyse the following roles of the Zilla Parisad, viz., development, cooperation, coordination, supervision and control and leadership. Besides these key roles, attempts were made to analyse different organisational aspects of

Zilla Parisad including the performance of Panchayati Raj in general and Zilla Parisad in particular in the districts of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri.

The following are the findings in relation to the different roles of Zilla Parisad.

(1) Under the present system of Panchayati Raj administration, the Zilla Parisad has emerged as the main vehicle of development administration and established its credentials and credibility as the undisputed leader in the whole gamut of Panchayati Raj system. The development arms of Zilla Parisad are the two organically linked structures, namely, Gram Panchayat and Panchayat Samiti. It is through these bodies that the development programmes were implemented with Zilla Parisad acting as the friend, philosopher and guide at the helm. Moreover, the development programmes were implemented equitably throughout the district. The respondents from Jalpaiguri Zilla Parisad pointed out that the Zilla Parisad was ~~not~~ successful in implementing small industries programmes. 94.5% per cent of the elected members and 85.7% per cent of the officials expressed satisfaction over the performance of the Zilla Parisad. On the other hand, the respondents from Cooch Behar Zilla Parisad indicated that programmes relating to communication were most successfully ~~were~~ implemented. The programmes were only in the form of

road construction, and construction of bridges and culverts. As a result of the development programmes, the quality of life in the rural areas of both the districts showed a definite uprising. All the respondents in both the categories in the districts of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri were in complete agreement that successful implementation of development programmes by the Zilla Parisads produced 'qualitative and quantitative change in the rural areas of the districts.

(2) The mechanism of coordination assumed a critical importance in view of the vast magnitude of development functions performed by the Zilla Parisad. Success of the development programmes depend on the quality of coordination produced among different development departments and the Zilla Parisad. It was found in implementing programmes, coordination between Zilla Parisad and district level departments was being achieved smoothly. A large number of respondents (59.1% per cent) in the category of elected representatives from both the districts pointed out that the present system of coordination between Zilla Parisad and district level departments worked smoothly. This view was overwhelmingly corroborated by the officials of the district development departments. In this category a substantial number of respondents (64.3% per cent) had highlighted the positive aspect of the mechanism of coordination. It is also

important to note that no less than 40.90 per cent of the elected representatives expressed unfavourable opinion in respect of smooth functioning of the mechanism of coordination between Zilla Parishad and development departments. This view was substantiated by a good number of officials.

Statistically they constituted 35.71 per cent. Respondents in this category attributed such state of affairs to certain important factors. To the elected members, the lack of coordination was the product of the hang-over of the previous system in which the officials worked in an environment where popular participation in development administration was totally lacking. This generated among the officials an attitude of 'empire-building'. The transfer of power and decision-making authority to the people's representatives in the field of rural development has understandably disturbed the earlier balance between the two sets of functionaries. The officials also explained in their own way the reasons that led to some what unhappy situations that produced lack of coordination. On the question of coordination, it transpired, that two sets of functionaries located in an institutional setting implying mutuality and reciprocity of relationship was put to critical test in the functioning of Zilla Parishad and other development departments. In this field, however, a process of trial and error, a process of adjustment, has started and there is an increasing appreciation of the view points of elected members and government

officials. An awareness has dawned that power has necessarily to be with the people and their elected leaders and the bureaucracy must consciously and whole-heartedly provide the needful support and assistance in the process of decision-making and also in the process of implementation of development programmes decided upon.

In facilitating the process of coordination, the role of the Sthayee Samitis (Permanent Committees) at the Zilla Parisad was commendable. These committees were the real workshops where effective coordination was struck producing a healthy interaction between the two sets of functionaries. It produced team work, participation, cooperation and unity of efforts. In expressing their orientation, both the categories of respondents indicated that through the mechanism of permanent committees at the Zilla Parisad level, a good deal of agreement in the role-expectations of the two sets of functionaries were produced and cooperative work culture was inculcated. It guaranteed a realisation to the effect that elected representatives and bureaucracy are enjoined not to generate dysfunctionalities in the administrative environment, but to produce congenial atmosphere in the whole administrative system.

(3) In the field of supervision and control, it was revealed that Zilla Parisad enjoyed unquestionable powers to supervise

plans and programmes formulated by the lower tiers. It was also found that the lower tiers accepted the decisions of the Zilla Parisad on technical matters as the Zilla Parisad has the technical expertise which no other tiers have got. The Zilla Parisad has also the supervising capacity on the Panchayat-run schemes. In respect of the departmental schemes, it is the responsibility of the respective departments to supervise the schemes sponsored by the respective departments. But Zilla Parisad being the leader of the entire gamut of district administration, retains the power to supervise the developmental programmes of the district.

But the process of supervision and control was not without any difficulties. It was noticed that Zilla Parisad experienced a good deal of difficulties to supervise the plans and programmes operating under the realm of Panchayat Samitis and Gram Panchayats, the reason being that the supervisory staff belong to the respective departments and they were very loyal to their parent departments. Moreover, the technical staff at the Panchayat Samiti level, most of the time, attached importance to the departmental programmes which generally do operate simultaneously with the Panchayat-run schemes and elected representatives found it very difficult to effect supervision through them. This situation sometimes produced unhealthy relation between the elected

members and the government officials at the district level in a vicarious way as the technical officers at the district level tend to protect their junior officers at the lower levels.

(4) Leadership in the context of development administration, under Panchayati Raj, has assumed tremendous significance in enhancing the quality and competence of the organisation. Zilla Parisad being the apex tier of the Panchayati Raj system has been entrusted with the vast areas of development programmes in the district. Under the new Panchayati Raj set-up in West Bengal, the Zilla Parisad has become the main catalyst in determining the effectiveness to bring about progressive socio-economic and political goals with the needed leadership quality and competence.

Zilla Parisad, being the top tier of the system, has the statutory obligation to lead the lower tiers. But mere statutory obligation does not automatically confer on the Zilla Parisad the quality of being leader in the entire structure of development administration under Panchayati Raj. It was the intention of the present Government in power in West Bengal to make the Zilla Parisad the most important tier from the administrative point of view to create representative institution which would supply local initiative, supervision

and care. In our study, it was revealed that the Zilla Parisads have become the nodal unit through which multidimensional developmental programmes were implemented successfully. Leadership of the Zilla Parisad has emerged as the single most important variable to determine the success of the organisation committed to the concept of rural development administration. The acceptance of the Zilla Parisad by the lower tiers in the Panchayati Raj system as the undisputed leader, was facilitated by the fact that Zilla Parisad had more powers, resources and machinery and above all, the Government wanted Zilla Parisad to assume leadership in the Panchayati Raj administration. Zilla Parisad asserted its leadership quality through certain statutory powers. Moreover, all government funds were channeled through Zilla Parisad which further allotted the grants to the Panchayat Samiti and the Gram Panchayats. Zilla Parisad was made the implementing agency for the schemes like NREP and RLSP and District Plan Schemes.

The quality of leadership the Zilla Parisad produced, was relatively young, dynamic, responsible and responsive to the new kind of situation the entire administration was made to work in. With the new found leadership, the organisation of Zilla Parisad has emerged as a sort of autonomous administrative system for initiating planning, organising and executing developmental programmes in response to the local needs and

resource. The leadership was also successful in mobilising both human and material resources to implement successfully the various developmental programmes meant for the upliftment of the rural people in the districts.

## II. Concluding Observations

The findings reported above lead us to the following concluding observations which have futuristic implications.

The new Panchayat structure that emerged in West Bengal has opened up a new vista of possibilities in the state. From the beginning, the Panchayat organisations, particularly the Zilla Parishad, were entrusted with the task of implementation of major rural development programmes. Involvement of Panchayat organisations in these programmes resulted in better planning, quicker and better implementation, greater participation and certainly much better public awareness.

As a result of the developmental thrust, the Panchayati Raj Institutions, particularly the Zilla Parishad, have been suitably strengthened and empowered with necessary instruments and given adequate administrative support. But the fact remains that these bodies derived their powers from the grass-roots level support.

With the emergence of decentralised planning from 1985-86, the Zilla Parishad has assumed greater responsibilities in planning and implementation of development programmes for the rural West Bengal. In this field, the Panchayat organisations in West Bengal have become the pathfinder for effective and radical decentralisation measure for the service of the rural people in the State.

But this experiment in democratic decentralisation has not been free from certain problems which have arisen in the working of the Zilla Parishad. We conclude with the identification of these areas where the attention is to be focused for plugging the loopholes.

1. The transfer of power and decision-making authority to the elected representatives in the field of rural development has, to a large extent, disturbed the balance between the elected members and the government officials. The government officials sometimes questioned the authority of the elected members on the ground of their aggrandising the new-found political power. Government officials, too, on many occasions, behaved in a over-bureaucratic manner. This situation produced an acrimonious relationship between the two sets of functionaries and more often than not hampered the process of development in the districts. To overcome this situation,

emphasis should be given to orientation training for both the categories of functionaries to build an awareness that they are the co-partners in the task of nation-building and not the contenders in the process. This working atmosphere has yet to be developed to a considerable extent in the district administration to take up the new challenge of rural development. Nevertheless, a process of accommodation and adjustment has started with an increasing appreciation of view points of the elected members and the government officials to achieve the common goal of nation-building.

2. The Panchayati Raj bodies do not yet have the full contingent of management and technical staff of their own. The assigned staff have diverse loyalties. They have to serve both the Panchayats and also their departmental masters. The present Panchayat administration is faced with this problem of duality of control. The officials are supposed to work under the command of the elected members and at the same time carry out the instructions from their departmental heads. This duality of control exposes them to situation of role-confusion and conflict, since both the categories display diverse orientations and follow diverse interests and goals. This problem is further compounded during the period of implementation of Panchayat-run schemes and departmental schemes. This situation blurred responsibility to a large extent and

frustrated any effective chain of command in programme implementation.

3. The machinery for monitoring of programme, implementation and evaluation has still to take a concrete shape. There is no serious feed-back of information on all important items of development from the field. In fact, there is hardly any information system. The Panchayats in general and zilla Parisad in particular are caught between various currents and cross currents of developmental schemes and programmes and coordinated working is not always being achieved in all cases.

4. With the volume of work of the Panchayati Raj Institutions increasing enormously, corresponding increase in the staff pattern has not been effected. As a natural corollary, various official work gets hampered and could not be done in due time. Panchayat Institutions in general and zilla Parisad in particular has to send a number of reports and returns in due time and this work is hampered for lack of manpower at all levels of Panchayat administration in the district.

5. Inter-departmental links between the departments assigning programmes to Panchayat bodies are not clearly worked out. There is no agency at the State level to coordinate, oversee and advise the Panchayat bodies in regard to the totality of the programmes undertaken and to suggest the appropriate lines

of development which might be taken by the Panchayati Raj Institutions by their own choice. Moreover, the technical competence of the Panchayat bodies to independently implement schemes is strictly limited due to paucity of technical staff. In this context, setting up of a Rural Development Board and Rural Engineering cell at the State level is necessary to help Zilla Parisad and other lower tiers to fulfil their proper role in the perspective of the totality of the rural development scenario. Without such an organisational mechanism, there is a possibility that resources would not be utilised to the fullest extent for the benefit of the rural people in the State.

6. Zilla Parisad being the leader, the energizer and the planner of the Panchayat administration at the district, it is necessary that the entire staff engaged in development work at the district level and lower levels be placed under the elected representative bodies. This means that all the staff working for the decentralised administration at the district level and those subordinate to them in the respective departments be working for the Zilla Parisad.

7. The Panchayati Raj Institutions which have carved out a niche in the context of development administration in the State, have drawn attention from the scholars from India and

abroad. To help the future researcher in this field, a full fledged information system or a State level resource centre be created exclusively on the Panchayati Raj administration and it may be developed in to a centre for rural studies.

8. Another suggestion that is worth making at this point relates to the role of information, education and communication (IEC) in facilitating rural development under the auspices and leadership of the zilla parishad in West Bengal, and, for that matter, in the entire Panchayati Raj system in India. Even admitting that communication, whether in the traditional forms, or inter-personal forms, or even through the electronic media like Radio, Television, Video or Message Transfer, can at best play an indirect and supportive role as admitted by the professionals in the field of development communication, the importance and significance of such communication in creating awareness among the small and marginal farmers, educating them about the latest technologies in the process of rural development, and acting on their feedback to improve future policies, cannot be gainsaid. The experiments successfully conducted by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and the researches presently being undertaken in utilising traditional folk media and other indigenous forms for such communication purposes would go to show the vast potential of development communication in this area. Such

communication, in the context of the Zilla Parishad, can take place both at the vertical and the horizontal levels, and would go a long way in improving the effectiveness of the organisational structure of the Zilla Parishad in performing its leadership, coordination and supervisory role as outlined earlier. This would need a complete restructuring and revamping the entire machinery and organisation of human resource development that is presently in a very deplorable state.