

Preface and Acknowledgement

For more than a decade, rural development has been the focal point of our national plans. In the context of the changing new objectives and changed scenario in the field of planning gave birth to a new dynamics of development and outlined a phenomenal increase in the spatial scatter of rural development. The new philosophy of development with increasing rural orientation has already enlarged the action-points beyond the existing machinery of development administration. This challenge of development has initiated a search for a new structure for rural development administration and an institution which would be able to propel the spirit of development and transmit the impulses to the vast number of rural people to make the programmes meaningful. West Bengal has found such an institution in the revitalised Panchayati Raj in the late seventies. Democratic decentralisation through Panchayati Raj as a means

to usher in new social order for socio-economic transformation of rural community of West Bengal has been accepted as a state policy and now represent an organic complex to sustain and support a people oriented administration under popularly elected leadership. The new institutions have raised new hopes for the rural West Bengal which have been brought into existence by the first ever direct Panchayat elections in June, 1978 on party basis in the State.

Democratic decentralisation in politics and administration is now a reality with new model Panchayats, and has opened up a new horizon of possibilities in the State with its myriad socio-political problems.

Under the new structure of Panchayati Raj in West Bengal, Zilla Parisad has been accorded a prime place and made the nodal unit for planning and implementation of various development programmes meant for the vast multitude of rural people in the State. Zilla Parisad with its leadership attributes has emerged as a real planner, energizer and coordinator of the whole gamut of development at the district level. As a natural corollary, the entire district administration has acquired a new meaning and purpose under the leadership of Zilla Parisad. The Zilla Parisad, in the new setup, has emerged as the nodal agency for the programmes like NREP, RLEGP, DISTRICT PLAN SCHEMES and various other development programmes.

North Bengal as a cluster of districts is not well placed in terms of development as compared to the southern part of West Bengal. But after the introduction of the new Panchayati Raj experiment, the hitherto backward districts have taken strides in the path of development so far as rural development is concerned. In the districts like Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri, rural development under the leadership of Zilla Parisad is clearly felt. The Zilla Parisads in the districts have already brought an unmistakable transformation of rural society and contributed to the awakening of consciousness among the less privileged sections regarding their ability and capacity to rebuild their future and to bring the fruits of development within their easy reach. One of the remarkable features of the new development in the districts of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri is that most of the development programmes are now implemented in an well coordinated manner with great measure of success. This was made possible because people have already developed a culture of participation in the process of development and have begun to identify themselves with the Panchayat institutions. This intimate involvement of rural masses in the entire exercise of rural development and spontaneous growth of leadership of the Zilla Parisad has made the district administration more responsible and responsive to the needs of the rural people and have become the main feature of the new Panchayati Raj experiment in West Bengal.

This changed scenario, which has generated a new concept of rural development, necessitates the study of rural development under the leadership of Zilla Parishad in the two districts of North Bengal. This dissertation, accordingly, is an attempt to study the structure and functions of Zilla Parishad and an effort has been made to show how far the new leadership that has emerged at the Zilla Parishad level has been successful in bringing about a qualitative and quantitative change in the district development administration.

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Parthasarathi Das.
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