

CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the problem

A lack of satisfaction stems from non-correspondence between popular aspirations and actions of representatives who are guided more by party-decisions rather than people's wishes. Such situations have led to the demand of popular participation in the decision making and gained a popular acceptance. In this context 'participatory democracy' has emerged in an attempt to recapture people's power to determine their own fate and to correct the inadequacies of representative democracy. From this point view, participation is democracy.

The idea of participatory democracy has been encouraged in India by guaranteeing a constitutional status (73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992) to the local level institutions including Gram Sabha. One of the most important provisions of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment is setting up of Gram Sabha in the lower tier of Panchayats, known as Gram Panchayat with the adult citizens of concerned areas to ensure direct participation of ordinary rural people in local governance. Gram Sabha acts as a helping hand of Gram Panchayat to finalise the various welfare projects and programmes. It also acts as a 'watch dog' over the activities of Gram Panchayat and keeps necessary control over it. So, to sustain vibrancy in itself Gram Sabha needs direct participation of people in the decision-making process.

West Bengal is one of the pioneer states in India to experiment the panchayats as governing bodies at the village level since independence and particularly after 1977. West Bengal has tried invariably to extend the process of democratic decentralisation beyond the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA). So, it has taken a step forward by making the provision for Gram Sansad apart from Gram Sabha. Gram Sabha is constituted at Gram Panchayat level and Gram Sansad at each electoral constituency or 'booth' level with all voters of the concerned constituency. By introducing Gram Sansad, it is assumed that, unlike a huge Gram Sabha with a large size population, this relatively smaller unit will enhance the prospect of people's participation and create a truly decentralised local governing body. In fact, Gram Sansad is the lowest unit of the entire system of rural local self-government in West Bengal. It is the 'real soul' of village democracy. It is a system where all the villagers themselves are expected to engage in a process of direct interaction, dialogue and decision making to govern collectively their own local affairs. So, Gram Sansad is the centre of democratic power in the village and is the centre of developmental activity. It not only strengthens the process of

participatory governance but also facilitates empowerment of ordinary rural people and brings the elements of transparency, accountability and social control over panchayats. It is a platform based entirely on people's voice. It has the potential to change the noise of the people into the voice of the people.

However, without active and popular participation, Gram Sansads will not be able to play its real role as designed by the policy makers in the state of West Bengal. So, the potentiality of Gram Sansad is conditioned by its length of uses in the given rural environment. Therefore, the inclusive and participatory grassroots governance is still remaining a distance dream for the ordinary villagers. At the same time, the usefulness of this unique structure of Gram Sansad as an effective instrument to ensure decentralized decision making and participatory local government has been questioned. It has been argued that common people are not interested in the meetings/deliberations of Gram Sansads. Majority does not attend or participate in deliberations. Often people participate in meetings only to satisfy local leaders and to increase numbers. They do not raise issues. The Sansads are actually guided and controlled by a small group of local leaders or a local oligarchy.

In this context, it is necessary to examine the actual functioning of Gram Sansads to capture the nature of participatory institutions of India's Panchayati Raj system. Whether the institutions and structures created to ensure decentralised decisions and participatory democracy, are gradually becoming only theoretical or procedural and instruments in the hands of local elites, is a matter that needs attention.

Therefore, to probe this point, the focus of present study is on nature of participation in Gram Sansads in West Bengal, in this case particularly, Paschim Medinipur district.

Review of literature

It has been observed that over the years, number of books and scholarly articles on Gram Panchayats in West Bengal has increased. An attempt is therefore made to review the available literatures on Gram Panchayats in India in general and in West Bengal in particular, under following classifications.

Literature review on local self-government and Gram Panchayats in general

Elinor Ostrom's book, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*¹ analyses the governance of natural resources used by many individuals in common is an issue of increasing concern to policy analysts. Both state control and

1. Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of institutions for Collective Action*. London: Cambridge University Press.

privatization of resources have been advocated, but neither the state nor the market has been uniformly successful in solving common pool resource problems. Elinor Ostrom uses institutional analysis to examine different ways of governing the commons. She gathered information through field studies and then analysed this material. She studied how people in small communities around the world managed common resources. Her theory showed that when natural resources are pooled and have shared ownership, the rules for managing those resources evolves over time in a way both economically and ecologically sustainable. Elinor therefore believed that common pooled ownership of natural resources is better than privatization and government involvement. A prerequisite however is being advocated that decision-making be transparent and democratic.

Nirmal Mukherjee's article, *The Third Spectrum*² discusses that the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act requires the states to constitute panchayats at village, intermediate and district levels and consequently there will be a three-tier government viz. the Union, the States and the Panchayats. He argues that these panchayats would prepare and implement the plans for economic development and social justice as entrusted to them including the subject matters listed in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution.

George Mathew in his book entitled, *Panchayati Raj: from Legislation to Movement*³ highlights the historical background of Panchayati Raj and the role of women and political parties in it. The book also emphasised the need of a strong people's movement in spite of constituting the legislation on Panchayati raj. George Mathew cited Kerela experiment of Panchayati raj in support of his perception. Mathew in his article entitled, *Transfer of Power to Local Bodies*⁴ discusses several reasons for unsatisfactory conditions prevailing regarding transfer of powers to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and made recommendations to fill up the gap between their finances and functions. He emphasises the need for financial autonomy of PRIs which can be achieved through the political will of the state governments.

Bidyut Mohanti's article, *Panchayati Raj, 73rd Constitutional and Women*⁵ states that it is necessary to create positive and healthy socio-economic and political conditions to enable women to participate actively and effectively in Panchayati Raj Institutions. According to

2. Mukherjee, N. (1993). The Third Spectrum. *Economic and Political Weekly*. vol. XXVII, No. 18. May 1993. pp. 859-62.

3. Mathew, G. (1994). *Panchayati Raj: From Legislation to Movement*. New Delhi: Concept Publication.

4. Mathew, G. (1996). Transfer of Power to the Local Bodies. *Kurukshetra*. vol. XLIV, No. 7. April 1996. pp 22-34.

5. Mohanti, B. (1995). Panchayati Raj, 73rd Constitutional and Women. *Economic and Political Weekly*. vol. XXX, No. 52. December 1995. pp. 46-50.

Mohanti, women's reservation in PRIs provided under 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act is leading to their empowerment in real sense.

George Mathew and Ramesh C. Nayak in their article, *Panchayats at Work: What It Means for the Oppressed?*⁶ examines four case studies from Madhya Pradesh, which indicate that even after fifty years of independence, the power structure at village remains oppressive, feudal and inhuman. The case studies of *Dalit* panchayat representatives of various villages in Madhya Pradesh show that a lady Sarpanch was stripped naked, another lady Sarpanch was gang-raped and a Sarpanch was beaten up by the higher caste people, but the state government remained silent on those incidents.

Mahi Pal in his article, *Panchayats in Election Manifestos*⁷ analyses the election manifestos of almost all the national and regional parties during Eleventh Lok Sabha elections and argues that in spite of the promises in their election manifestos to make the PRIs strong and viable people's bodies, no other political party than the left parties, is serious about decentralisation of the powers to Panchayati raj in real sense.

V. Sudhakar's book, *New Panchayati Raj System: Local Self-government and Community Development*⁸ covers extensive details about every aspect of the Panchayati Raj System in India, including its contribution in community development, management of services, people and finance in local self-government. The changing managerial and leadership roles in the present scenario are also presented in a nurturing manner.

Jean Draeze & Amartya Sen in their book, *India, Development and Participation*⁹ explores the role of public action in eliminating deprivation and expanding human freedoms in India. The analysis is based on a broad and integrated view of development, which focuses on well-being and freedom rather than the standard indicators of economic growth. The authors place human agency at the middle, and stress the complementary roles of different institutions (economic, social, and political) in enhancing effective freedoms. They also attempt to present how participation ensures human freedom and efficiency in governance.

6. Mathew, G. & Nayak, R. C. (1996). Panchayats at Work: What It Means for the Oppressed? in *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. XXXI, No. 27. July 1996. pp. 65-71.

7. Pal, M. (1998). Panchayats in Elections Manifestos. *Economic and Political Weekly*. vol. XXXIII, No. 12. March 1998. pp. 63-632.

8 Sudhakar, V. (2002). *New Panchayati Raj System: Local Self-government and Community Development*. Jaipur: Mangal Deep Publication.

9. Draeze, J. & Sen, A. (2002). *India, Development and Participation*. UK: Oxford University Press.

R. P. Joshi & G. S. Narwani, in their book entitled, *Panchayat Raj in India: Emerging Trends Across the States*¹⁰ covers almost all the major issues of concern on Panchayati Raj and attempts to illustrate them with reference to experiments and experiences of various states in India, as well as of the Central Government. So far as the role of Gram Sabha in West Bengal is concerned in the context of people's participation the authors have superficially touched the matter.

Pranab Bardhan and Dilip Mookherjee's (ed.) book, *Decentralisation and Local Governance in Developing Countries*¹¹ showed that two-thirds of local government positions were secured by landless marginal and small landowners, compared with a demographic weight of 96 percent, implying that the poor constituted a majority but were nevertheless under represented. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act introduced 33 percent seat reservation for women and lower caste groups that encouraged and increased women's participation in village council meetings. Small and landless peasants were the majority attending the village meetings who were underrepresented while medium and large owners of land were less in number attending the village council meetings who were overrepresented.

D. Sunder Ram's edited book *Panchayati Raj Reforms in India: Power to the People at the Grassroots*¹² concerns with the various aspects of and issues on the existing Panchayati Raj Institutions as a self-sufficient Village Republic in India. The volume provides an overview of the changing role of the PRIs in India at the grassroots level, in the process of decentralisation and devolution of powers. It also examines the administrative and political lacunae in the functioning of the institution of self-government. This volume explores a real insight into the issues of major haunting dilemmas of the grassroots democratic institutions in contemporary India. However, the volume does not cover the intensive study on people's participation in Gram Sabha of a particular state.

M. Aslam's book *Panchayati Raj in India*¹³ is a modest attempt to have a look at Panchayati Raj System in retrospect and prospect. It is basically meant for those who attempt to materialise the concept of democratic decentralisation through Panchayati Raj in the country. The book briefly discusses the historical background, post-independence period leading to the

10. Joshi, R. P. & Narwani, G. S. (2002). *Panchayat Raj in India: Emerging Trends Across the States*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications.

11. Bardhan, P. & Mookherjee, D. (2007). (ed.). *Decentralisation and Local Governance in Developing Countries*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

12. Sunder R. D. (2007). (ed.). *Panchayati Raj Reforms in India: Power to the People at the Grassroots*. New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers & Distributors.

13. Aslam, M. (2010). *Panchayati Raj in India*. India: National Book Trust.

73rd Constitution Amendment Act 1992 and its main features and the post-amendment scenario. It also analyses the principles of local governance with reference to ‘empowerment of panchayats.’

Bishnu C. Barik & Umesh C. Sahoo’s (ed.) volume, *Panchayati Raj Institutions and Rural Development: Narratives on Inclusion of Excluded*¹⁴ discusses about the provisions of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act which provided space for the excluded sections of the society and encouraged them to participate in the affairs of Panchayati Raj Institutions. The volume reviews the micro-macro ground realities from an interdisciplinary approach. It also offers a comprehensive account of development dynamics, participatory governance and empowerment of excluded categories. However, the volume fails to highlight the extent and nature of participation of excluded sections of the society in the affairs of local self-government.

Literature review on Panchayati Raj Institutions in West Bengal

The study on Panchayat administration in West Bengal was made by Ashok Kumar Mukhopadhyay in his book, *Panchayat Administration in West Bengal*¹⁵. Mukhopadhyay here discussed the evolution, structure, composition, power, function, and staffing of Panchayat administration in West Bengal since 1950s to the present period. It is a pioneering work on Panchayat administration in the state. But the book does not discuss the operational part of Panchayati Raj Institutions. The participatory aspects of the Panchayati system have also been excluded in the discussion.

Prabhat Datta has made a comprehensive study on the post 1978 development of Panchayati Raj system in West Bengal. Datta has described the panchayats from 1978 to 1992 as ‘second generation panchayat’ and explained the manner in which Panchayat in West Bengal under Left Front regime is different from the earlier panchayats. According to him decentralised planning, direct election and land reforms are the main factors behind the success of Panchayat system in West Bengal. In his book *The Second-Generation Panchayats in India*¹⁶ Datta examines the twin roles of panchayat i.e. an instrument of rural development and as an institution of self-government. The study refers to the increasing dependence of the people on the panchayat and consequent decline of local initiative. The book also gives us a positive picture of the people’s response about the role of panchayat.

14. Barik, B. C. & Sahoo, U. C. (2012). (ed.). *Panchayati Raj Institutions and Rural Development: Narratives on Inclusion of Excluded*. New Delhi: Rawat Publication.

15. Mukhopadhyay, A. K. (1991). *Panchayat Administration in West Bengal*. Kolkata: World Press Private Ltd.

16. Datta, P. (1992). *The Second-Generation Panchayats in India*. Calcutta: Calcutta Book House.

G. K. Lieten's book, *Continuity and Change in Rural West Bengal*¹⁷ deals with a study of rural Bengal and the policies of the Communist government. He did fieldwork in a village called Ektagram in Birbhum district West Bengal in 1988. Many issues related to the structure and process of agrarian reforms which include the questions of poverty alleviation and rural development, the strategy of economic and political decentralisation adopted in the state by the Left Front Government and its institutionalisation of panchayat democracy at the sub-state level, the stanching of de-peasantization and the registration of bargardars (sharecroppers) to record their sharecropping rights, technological improvements including access to irrigation and better High-yielding variety, etc. have been discussed. He concludes that the Left Front Government (LFG) has dismantled the traditional forces in rural Bengal i.e., Landlords and moneylenders, by ushering in rural elections. The author has at the same time noticed that there was also continuity in the village power structure. Though the dominance of landlords and local zamindars has ended, the same upper caste educated men continue to rule the villages with the help of party. However, his work is based on experiences before the reservation policy was implemented in the panchayat system.

Neil Webster in his book entitled, *Panchayati Raj and the Decentralisation of Development Planning in West Bengal*¹⁸ views that despite the problems of fund allocation for beneficiaries and high degree of party control, the panchayats have brought about a significant change in the material life of the rural population. To him, the poor sections and schedule castes have significant formal participation in the panchayats of West Bengal. He observes that the Left Front's introduction of direct election to all the panchayats has demolished the dominance of vested interests in rural Bengal and the influence of caste. However, his work presents that there are some problems in popular participation in Gram Sabha meetings like low attendance of women in various meetings and dominance of affluent, educated and higher caste men in discussion of the meetings. Neil Webster conducted his study in Burdwan district in the late 80s and hence his work does not contain the post-1993 development.

Swapan Kumar Pramanik and Prabhat Datta in their book entitled, *Panchayat and People: The West Bengal Experience*¹⁹ have covered the social background of gram panchayat leaders in Midnipur district. They observe that there has been a concentration of poor peasant and low-income group people in the leadership structure while rich people like landlords in the

17. Lieten, G. K. (1992). *Continuity and Change in Rural West Bengal*. New Delhi: Sage Publication.

18. Webster, N. (1992). *Panchayati Raj and the Decentralisation of Development Planning in West Bengal*. Kolkata: K.P. Bagchi & Company.

19. Pramanik, S. K. & Datta, P. (1996). *Panchayats and People: The West Bengal Experience*. Kolkata: Sarat Book House.

panchayat are significantly absent. 46% of respondent cultivate their land themselves while several others are wage labourers. The authors argue that this pro-poor orientation has made panchayats of West Bengal as instruments of social change. The book also deals with the people's participation, but not in details. The study is limited to pre-73rd Amendment period and leaves scope for further research.

Harihar Bhattacharya's book *Micro Foundation of Bengal Communism*²⁰ is based on empirical study with theoretical orientation which presents that decentralisation and centralisation have been the two interlinked processes in West Bengal since 1997. He argues that the hierarchically organised and ultra-centralised communist party in West Bengal can never be a substitute for democracy. He further argues that West Bengal might be a highly mobilised regime but it is difficult to prove that it is highly democratic. Such mobilisation of pro-poor people cannot be a substitute for voluntary and spontaneous participation of the people. In the development that has taken place in West Bengal is itself not an argument for the case of democracy. The decentralisation since 1978 in West Bengal has not been translated into democracy at the grass root level. The decentralisation process has been operated mostly through centralised mechanism which has discarded a true democratic participation. The author observes that the party CPI(M) plays the leading role in the operational dynamics of panchayat.

Maitreesh Ghatak and Maitreya Ghatak in their article, *Recent Reforms in the Panchayat System in West Bengal*²¹ observe that despite its pioneering status in case of reforms in panchayat system, West Bengal lags behind several other states today in terms of devolution of power, finances and functions to the panchayats. They also view that people's participation in the process of planning at the panchayat level in West Bengal is less compared to Kerala. This is due to the principle of democratic centralism pursued by the Left Front Government in West Bengal which actually gives little scope for the elected representatives in general and people in particular to participate in the functioning of local self-government independently. It provides interesting theoretical insight that the government structure itself hinders participation at the grassroots level.

Moitree Bhattacharya's book entitled, *Panchayati Raj in West Bengal: Democratic Decentralisation or Democratic Centralism*²² shows that CPI (M) policies and principles bear maximum influence on the functioning of the Panchayati Raj system in West Bengal. The book

20. Bhattacharya, H. (1998). *Micro Foundation of Bengal Communism*. New Delhi: Ajanta Book International.

21. Ghatak, M. & Ghatak, M. (2002). Recent Reforms in the Panchayat System in West Bengal. *Economic and Political Weekly*. June 5, 2002. vol. 37, No.1.

22. Bhattacharya, M. (2002). *Panchayati Raj in West Bengal: Democratic Decentralisation or Democratic Centralism*. New Delhi: Manak Publication.

attempts to show the interface between two apparently contradictory processes of democratic decentralisation-the declared goal that panchayats seek to achieve and the democratic centralism-the basic philosophy of CPI(M). It deals with the participation of elected representatives and the ordinary rural people who constitute the electorate. The study also focuses on the extent of control exercised by political parties during decision making process of gram panchayat.

Stuart Corbridge, Glyn Williams, Manoj Srivastava, and Rene Veron's book entitled, *Seeing the State: Governance and Governmentality in India*²³ discusses the diverse forms of state instead of seeing and understanding the state as *discrete and singular entity*. The authors are very comfortable in referring Foucault's idea of *governmentality* or dispersed practices of government. To them, the state is a bundle of everyday institutions and forms of governance. We usually see the state from the eyes of others. The authors have discussed the perceptions of the people and how they view the state and the practices of government in the countryside. The book also elaborates James Scott's *Seeing Like a State* and Partha Chatterjee's *The Politics of Governed* to bring out the different forms of state from the eyes of poorer men and women including *adivasis* living in the countryside. The primary focus of the authors was on the 'developmental state'.

Glyn Williams, Manoj Srivastava, Rene Veron, and Stuart Corbridge's article, *Making Social Science Matter – I*²⁴ & *II*²⁵ describes that the state in its efforts to meet the needs of the poor has four major functions of governance - developmental, empowermental, protective and disciplinary. This paper, based on fieldwork across the rural areas in three states, probes the Employment Assurance Scheme to understand the state's performance on these parameters as well as aspects of participation, governance and political society. What is revealed is the complexity and divergence of state action - conflicts within and between different agencies of the state, as also the challenges posed to these agencies by civil and political society groups. The paper also describes the patterns of participation of the rural poor in state-sponsored schemes and the characteristics of political society in each of the blocks of Malda and Bhojpur districts studied.

23 Corbridge, S., Williams, G., Srivastava, M. & Veron, R. (2005). *Seeing the State: Governance and Governmentality in India*. UK: Cambridge University Press.

24. Williams, G., Srivastava, M., Veron, R. & Corbridge, S. (2003). Making Social Science Matter – I. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol - XXXVIII No. 24. June 14, 2003.

25. _____ (2003). Making Social Science Matter – II. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol - XXXVIII No. 25. June 21, 2003.

D. Bandyopadhyay in his article entitled, *The Caucus and Masses, West Bengal Panchayat*²⁶ strongly criticises the government's initiative on the proposed Gram Unnayan Samity (Village Development Committee). He argues that West Bengal Government has created numerous tiers of non-functional Panchayati Raj bodies without giving adequate resources, functions and functionaries to the panchayats. He views that the creation of Village Development Council (VDC) is a retrograde step in the Panchayati system. In the name of mass mobilisation, the ruling party seeks to formalise the illegitimate exercise of power by the local committees of the party. The author argues that gram panchayats in West Bengal have been made centres of handmade party caucuses through VDCs.

Prabhat Datta and Panchali Sen in their book entitled, *Women in Panchayats in West Bengal: An Exploratory Study*²⁷ observe that women members in the panchayat find it difficult to play effective roles as elected representatives. They argue that the political parties which nominated them to contest election have not taken sufficient care in helping them for playing effective role after they get elected. Women's political awareness and role perception are below the desired level.

Buddhadeb Ghosh and Girish Kumar discussed the role of politics behind the Panchayati Raj System in West Bengal in an evolutionary perspective in their book, *State Politics and Panchayat in India*²⁸. The authors clearly pointed out that in spite of success of Panchayat in West Bengal in the implementation of rural development programmes and land reforms programmes, the panchayat in West Bengal could not empower villagers rather it empowered the party i.e., CPI(M).

Amal Mandal's edited book, *Rural Development in West Bengal*²⁹ is a collection of revised versions of some papers presented in the UGC-sponsored National Conference held at Tufanganj Mahavidyalaya in September 2002 and the theme of the conference was *Transformation in Rural Society*. His book covers various topics such as devolution, people's participation, panchayat finance, panchayat leadership, primary education, rural health, tea plantation and social forestry but not a single issue bears a rigorous analysis.

26. Bandyopadhyay, D. (2003). The Caucus and Masses, West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment Act 2003) in *Economic and Political Weekly*. November 15, 2003, vol. 38, No. 46.

27. Datta, P. & Sen, P. (2003). *Women in Panchayats in West Bengal: An Exploratory Study*. Kolkata: Dasgupta & Co.

28. Ghosh, B. & Kumar, G. (2005). *State Politics and Panchayat in India*. New Delhi: Manohar Publication.

29. Mandal, A. (2005). (ed.). *Rural Development in West Bengal*. New Delhi: Northern Book Centre.

Prabhat Datta & Payel Sen's book entitled, *Good Governance and Development: Context and Concerns*³⁰ discusses rural governance and development in India in general and West Bengal in particular. In their book, they highlight multi-dimensional deep-rooted emerging challenges to the third-generation panchayats created through the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act, the role and relevance of civil society organisations in dealing with those challenges, Reservation of seats for women in all three tiers of PRIs. The volume also explores the process of democratic decentralisation in rural West Bengal. However, little attention has been paid to the people's participation at Gram Sansad and its functioning in Midnapore district.

Literature review on Gram Sabhas/Gram Sansads

Prabhat Dutta's book, *Panchayat, Rural Development and Local Autonomy: The West Bengal Experience*³¹ based on the field experience in Birbhum and Jalpaiguri, states that people have developed a dependency syndrome on panchayats which has both negative and positive implications. The positive implication is that panchayats have been able to win the heart of the people. The people have started accepting panchayats as their guide, friend and philosopher. But the growing dependency is a matter of concern because such dependency may damage the prospect of panchayat to emerge in future as a true self-governing institution. The book also highlights that more than one-third of the villagers are not aware of the existence of the Gram Sansad. However, Datta has not given adequate attention to find out the underlying causes behind the failure of Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad to emerge true participatory institutions at the grassroots in West Bengal.

Biswanath Chakraborty in his book, *People's Participation in West Bengal Panchayat System*³² assesses the nature of people's participation at gram panchayat level in West Bengal. The book is an outcome of an intensive analytical survey research conducted in the districts of Hoogly and Jalpaiguri of West Bengal. He explores the nature and extent of common villagers' participation in different activities of the Gram Panchayat during 1950-2007. He highlights the poor attendance of people's participation in Gram Sabha and gram sansad meetings and shows the problems of people's participation at the grassroots level. But his study does not cover the

30. Datta, P. & Sen, P. (2009). *Good Governance and Development: Context and Concerns*. Kolkata: Progressive Publishers.

31 Datta, P. (2001). *Panchayats, Rural Development and Local Autonomy: The West Bengal Experience*. Kolkata: Dasgupta & Company.

32. Chakraborty, B. (2008). *People's Participation in West Bengal Panchayat System*. Kolkata: Mitram Publication.

details of people's participation in decision making process at the grassroots level. Moreover, his book is more descriptive than analytical in nature.

Amal Mandal's book entitled *Grassroots Governance: Gram Sabha in West Bengal*³³ explains the significance of Gram Sabha as an exclusive and virtuous institution in terms of rural development and rural governance in West Bengal. He says that Gram Sabha may charts out the 'public sphere' where open discussion and collective decision-making may take place to ensure participatory and accountable governance at the grassroots level. He has conducted field study in five districts of West Bengal to observe the real scenario of grassroots governance at the village level. However, it is found that there is a scanty attention being paid to the people's participation of Gram Sansad in Midnapore district.

Document review of UN Report and Government Reports

*United Nation Human Development Report*³⁴ examines how and how much people participate in the events and processes that shape their lives. The democratic transition in many developing countries, the collapse of many socialist regimes, and the worldwide emergence of people's organizations are all part of a historic change, but not just isolated events. People's participation is becoming the central issue these days in case of good governance. The Report looks at three major means of peoples' participation such as people-friendly markets, decentralized governance and community organizations, especially non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The Report concludes with the five major recommendations of a people-centred world order such as (i) New concepts of human security; (ii) New strategies for sustainable human development; (iii) New partnerships between state and markets; (iv) New patterns of national and global governance; and (v) New forms of international cooperation. However, the report contains no detail study about people's participation in local self-governance especially in South Asia.

Nirmal Mukherjee and D. Bandyopadhyay prepared a report entitled, *New Horizons for West Bengal Panchayats: A Report for the Government of West Bengal*³⁵ for the government of West Bengal presents the success of West Bengal Panchayat is quite satisfactory, particularly in land reforms and generating awareness among the masses. However, the authors have stated that the initial enthusiasm of the people observed after 1978 has now largely faded

33. Mandal, A. (2012). *Grassroots governance: Gram Sabha in West Bengal*. New Delhi: Rawat Publication.

34. United Nations Human Development Report 1993, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr1993>.

35. *New Horizons for West Bengal Panchayats-A Report for the Government of West Bengal* by Nirmal Mukherji and D. Bandyopadhyay, Department of Panchayat, Government of West Bengal, 1993.

resulting in stagnancy of the panchayats. The survey was conducted in 1992 and therefore, in this study the post 73rd amendment scenario could not find place.

A publication entitled, *An Exploratory Study of a Gram Panchayat in West Bengal*³⁶ prepared by the State Institute of Panchayat and Lower Development which reveals that the gram panchayat has been able to improve relations among social classes and increased self-esteem of the poor. The study is based on Naita-Malpakharpur Gram Panchayat in Tarkeshwar block of Hoogly district. The study highlights that it is through the panchayat that a high degree of social and political awareness has been generated among the rural people. However, the panchayats in West Bengal have left their incomplete task of mobilising people and helping them to generate their own income and making social opportunities accessible to all sections of people especially the poor. The findings of the survey indicate that the majority of the electorates consider the role of gram panchayat very important for rural development.

*The Roadmap for the Panchayats in West Bengal*³⁷ is a vision document, which charts future path of decentralisation programme for the Panchayat bodies in West Bengal. It visions a proper people's Panchayat and sets out strategy to accomplish the vision. This strategy includes activities to be undertaken at the State Government level as well as at the PRI level, assignment of specific responsibilities at both the levels along with targeted timeframe to achieve the goal. It narrates the evolution of rural local governance in the State aiming the present journey towards self-governance. It also deals with strengthening democratic functioning of the Panchayats. It starts with the issues relating participation of the people at the village level along with organizing the poor for their participation in Panchayats. However, it fails to provide a comprehensive understanding about the people's participation in grassroots governance at gram level.

Research gap

The brief review of the existing literature on Panchayats in West Bengal reveals that the scope for the researchers to learn and explore knowledge through scientific investigation on this area is still relevant. It is also noticed that most of the studies have either dealt with organisational and functional aspects of PRIs and its role in development. Only few studies are available on the subject of democratic participation of the ordinary rural people in the decision-making process in Gram Sansads in Paschim Medinipur district. Even these few research works

36. *An Exploratory Study of a Gram Panchayat in West Bengal*, SIPRD, Kalyani, Nadia, West Bengal, 1999.

37. *Roadmap for the Panchayats in West Bengal*, Government of West Bengal, Panchayat and Rural Development Department Jessop Building, 63 Netaji Subhas Road, Kolkata, 2009.

are mainly concentrated on the role of elected representatives in decision-making process of Gram Panchayat. No extensive study has been conducted so far, on the issue of democratic participation of the ordinary rural people in decision-making in Gram Sansads in terms of planning, designing, monitoring and evaluating activities in Paschim Medinipur district. The present research attempts a comprehensive study of the nature of people's participation in Gram Sansads in Paschim Medinipur district.

Objectives of the Study

The chief objective of the study has been to investigate the basic issue: How far have the Gram Sansads been able to emerge at the local (village) level as an effective arrangement that ensure participatory government in villages? Or are the Sansads just another ornamental arrangement? The point is investigated in Paschim Medinipur district.

There are some specific objectives or sub-objectives which try to realise main objective:

1. To study how far the objectives of Gram Panchayats as laid down by the West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Acts 1994 and 2003, have been implemented and achieved in Paschim Medinipur; and to examine the powers and functions of Gram Sansad in Paschim Medinipur district.
2. To explore the nature of people's participation in Gram Sansads in Paschim Medinipur with regard to decision-making and deliberation.
3. To examine the roles of political parties in strengthening the process of people's participation in Gram Sansads in Paschim Medinipur district.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

The study focuses on the following research questions.

1. Are the Gram Sabhas/Gram Sansads decision-making bodies in Paschim Medinipur district?
2. Is Gram Sansad strong enough to raise the voice of the ordinary rural people in Paschim Medinipur district?
3. Do all the people fully participate in the process of governance and have access in developmental programmes at Gram Sansads in Paschim Medinipur district?
4. Whether Gram Panchayats are politically biased in Paschim Medinipur district?
5. How does Gram Sansad play its assigned role in practical political landscape in Paschim Medinipur district?

Apart from this, the work also intends to verify the following two hypotheses.

1. The institution of Gram Sansad automatically will encourage participation of ordinary rural people despite absence of a tradition of participation.
2. Lack of political awareness and rigid political party divisions are impediments on the way of participation of ordinary rural people in Gram Sansad in Paschim Medinipur district, in spite of availability of institutional for participation.

Participatory Democracy: Conceptual Framework

In these days, the need for people's participation in the decision-making process is being promulgated and supported by the theorists and decision-makers. Although the concept of participation is widely used and defined by different scholars differently based on the nature of context. Some definitions of participation are discussed below to identify the conceptual basis of the area of study.

Liberal thinkers like Jeremy Bentham and James Mill have dealt the concept of people's participation in liberal democracy as an individual rights to choose and replace periodically the legislative and executive wings of the representative government. To them, liberal democracy represents an amalgamation of free market economy with universal adult franchise. It features representative government by discussion, majority rule, recognition of minority rights and constitutional rights and the others. So, the framework of representative government consists of the 'constitutional provision whereby legislative and executive are periodically chosen, and also periodically replaceable, by the voters in general election.'³⁸

McGregor remarks that participation is one of the most misunderstood ideas that have ever emerged from the field of human relations. He further says that participation consists basically in creating opportunities under suitable conditions for people to influence decision affecting them. That influence can vary from a little to a lot ... participation is a special case of delegation in which the subordinate gains greater control, greater freedom of choice, with respect to his own responsibilities. The term participation is usually applied to the subordinate's greater influence over matters within the superior's responsibilities.³⁹

Etymologically, the term 'participation' is derived from the Latin word 'participare' which means 'taking part'. The Oxford dictionary meaning of participation is 'the act or an instance of participating, a taking part, a sharing, as in benefits or profits' 'receiving or having a part of something'. Encyclopaedia of Psychology describes participation as 'taking part of involvement in an activity' and 'greater involvement of persons in policy decision' which

38. Macpherson, C.B. (1977). *Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press. p.34.

39. McGregor. D. (1960). *The Human Side of Enterprise*. New York: McGraw Hill. pp. 124, 126 & 130.

affects them directly. As per Orient Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, participation means, to take part or have a share in an activity or event. Hence, it has a wider meaning and differs in its meaning according to the form or level of participation of clients or people in programmes.

According to Sawtell, participation is any or all of the processes by which employees other than managers contribute positively towards the reaching of managerial decisions which affect their work.⁴⁰

To Lammers, participation in decision making is the totality of such forms of upwards exertions of power by subordinates in organisations as are perceived to be legitimate by themselves and their superiors.⁴¹

According to UNDP, 'Participation means that people are closely involved in economic, social, cultural and political processes that affect their lives'.⁴² Therefore, participation is a process by which the people may influence the direction and execution of a development programme to enhance prosperity in terms of income, personal growth, self-reliance or other values that they cherish in a democratic society.

J. S. Mill says that what is more important to be protected in democracy is its contribution to human development. The model of democracy which J. S. Mill develops is a moral model. The moral objective of a democratic political system is conceived as a means to the improvement of mankind as Mill expressed in phrase the 'advancement of community... in intellect, in virtue, and in practical activity and efficiency.'⁴³ Mill's analysis of participation is participation as great as the general degree of improvement of the community which will allow the admission of all to a share in the sovereign power of the state.⁴⁴

The leading strand, including Blackstone, Montesquieu, and Madison, understands decentralised institutions as a mechanism to prevent direct popular rule, or at least to moderate its effects. The second leading strand, connected with Paine, Rousseau, and others, perceives decentralised power as a mechanism for bringing government closer to the people.⁴⁵

In the theories of J. S. Mill and Rousseau, participation has wider functions and is central to the establishment and maintenance of a democratic polity. Pateman calls it a

40. Sawtell, R. (1968). *Sharing Our Industrial Future?* London: The Industrial Society. p. 1.

41. Lammers, C. J. (1967). 'Power and Participation in the Decision-making in Formal Organisations'. In *American Journal of Sociology*. Vol. 73. No. 2. pp. 201-216.

42. UNDP, *Human Development Report 1993*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993, p.21.

43. Macpherson, C.B. (1977). *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*. London: Oxford University Press. p.47

44. Mill, J.S. (1910). *Utilitarianism - Liberty and Representative Government*. London & Toronto: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd. pp. 217-218.

45. Gerring, J. & Thacker, S. C. (2008). *A Centripetal Theory of Democratic Governance*. UK: Cambridge University Press.p.5-6.

participatory society. In fact, he refers Rousseau here as theorists of participatory democracy.⁴⁶ Rousseau's entire political theory focuses on the individual participation of each citizen in the political decision-making. The policy which is acceptable to all is the equal share of any benefits and burdens amongst the citizens. So, Rousseau's ideal system is designed to develop responsible, individual, social and political action through the effect of political process. The individual sense of freedom is increased through participation in decision making because it gives him a very real degree of control over the course of his life and the structure of his environment.⁴⁷

Both Rousseau and Mill believed on the need of citizen participation in political democracy. Rousseau sought to justify this assumption on the ground that participation performs a vital educational effect, teaching people to be informed, interested and involved citizens who have a sense of control over their own lives and concern for broader community. As these qualities develop throughout the population and they will in turn strengthen the democratic processes and institutions that promote citizen participation, in a continual cycle of self-enforcement.⁴⁸ Cole also argues that it is only by participation at the local level and in local associations that the individual can 'learn democracy'. 'Over the vast mechanism of modern politics, the individual has no control, not because the state is too big, but because he is given no chance of learning the basics of self-government within a smaller unit.'⁴⁹

The decade of 1960s had contributed to the process of re-emergence of the concept of participatory democracy in the following manner: - (a) The social and political turmoil like racism and poverty of that decade woke up many people for public issues and accordingly people demonstrated the power of collective action of the ordinary citizens which can influence the governmental policy programs. (b) The organised social movements of that decade like environmental protection campaigns were primarily grassroots efforts of the ordinary citizens, and in the process those social movements tuned into political action. (c) During 1960s, the young scholars rejected the elitist theory of democracy because of its conservative ideology and sought to re-conceptualise democracy in terms of wide spread citizen involvement with 'power to people.'⁵⁰ The effort for reconsideration of democracy during 1960s was nothing

46. *Ibid.* p. 20.

47. Olsen, M. E. (1982). *Participatory Pluralism: Political Participation and Influence in the United States and Sweden*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall. p. 22.

48. *Ibid.* p. 22.

49. Pateman, C. (1970). *Participation and Democratic Theory*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press. p.38.

50. Olsen, M. E. (1982). *Participatory Pluralism: Political Participation and Influence in the United States and Sweden*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall. p. 23.

more than a creation of true participatory democracy with full political involvement and equality among all citizens. Here participatory democracy seeks to maximise the opportunities of the ordinary citizens for their involvement in the process of collective decision making.

The idea of participatory government or participatory democracy was actually popularised by C. B. Macpherson. Macpherson in his '*Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*' identifies participation as the essence of democracy. It is actually some kind of direct democracy at the base level. All institutions should favour such participation in local decision-making.

David Held describes the concept of people's participation in his definition of democracy as 'a form of government in which, in contradiction to monarchies and aristocracies, the people rule. Democracy entails a political community in which there is some form of political equality among the people. In his *Models of Democracy*, Held refers to Jack Lively's list of ways to organize political equality in practice - (i) all should govern; (ii) all should be involved in crucial decision-making; (iii) rulers should be accountable to the ruled; (iv) rulers should be accountable to the representatives of the ruled; (v) rulers should be chosen by the ruled; (vi) rulers should be chosen by the representatives of the ruled and (vii) rulers should act in the interest of the ruled.⁵¹ Consequently, the concept of participation is articulated exclusively in relation to the ruled, ignoring the rulers. Held expresses the complexity of democracy in terms of determining whether democracy will mean some kind of popular power or an aid to decision-making.

The concept of participation is regarded a key feature of modern democracy that refers to the involvement of the citizenry within (institutionalised) politics. T. H. Marshall explains that the political citizen rights not only include the right to elect but also the right to stand for election. He said that by the political element of citizenship, he meant the right to participate in the exercise of political power, as a member of a body invested with political power or as an elector of such a body. These forms of political participation are not whole, but structured through institutional, legal and cultural logics.⁵²

The whole idea of participatory democracy, in fact, challenges the traditional idea of representative government as a reliable form of democracy. Pateman claims that under participatory democracy, participation is so important that a system of representation is only somewhat regretfully accepted as necessary modification of or supplement to direct

51 Held, D. (1996). *Models of Democracy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. p. 1.

52. Marshall, T.H. (1992). Citizenship and Social Class. In: T.H. Marshall; T. Bottomore (eds.). *Citizenship and Social Class*. London: Pluto Press. pp. 10-11.

participation by the people. A modern viable theory of democracy retains the notion of participation at its heart.⁵³ Pateman further argues that the existence of representative institutions at national level is not sufficient for democracy.

To Terrence E Cook and Patrick M. Morgan Participatory democracy connotes two broad features in pattern of decision making: (1) decentralisation or dispersion of authoritative decision making and also implementation, whereby the authority to make certain decision is to be displaced downward from remote points near the top administrative hierarchies or outward from central geographical location, thus bringing authority closer to the people affected by it and (2) direct involvement of amateurs in the making of decision, so that they move beyond participation the form of merely influencing officials to actually being authoritative decision makers. In other words, participatory democracy connotes decentralization of power for direct involvement of common people in authoritative decision- making.⁵⁴

A successful democracy depends upon maximum decentralisation of power to the local units of government. Accordingly, local government ensures more real and better participation of the people in the government. The term ‘decentralisation’ which Mohit Bhattacharya defines as institutionalisation of local government for unburdening the Central government, facilitating local decision-making for local problem-solving and encouraging popular participation as a democracy-enriching device.⁵⁵ He further argues that decentralisation involves measures to decongest a congested centre.⁵⁶

David Osborne and Ted Gaebler argue that ‘national, state, and local government should be innovative, market oriented, decentralized, and focused on offering their “customers” the highest quality services.’⁵⁷ They advocate that the governments should “steer rather than row” and further, governments should encourage local groups to solve their own problems more efficiently or effectively.

Rondinelli defines decentralization as the transfer of authority, responsibility, and resources through deconcentration, delegation, or devolution from the center to lower levels of

53. Pateman, C. (1970). *Participation and Democratic Theory*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press. p.111.

54. Cook, T. E. & Patrick, M. M. (1971). *Participatory Democracy*. San Francisco: Canfield Press. p.4.

55. Bhattacharya, M. (2000). *Development Administration: Search for Alternatives*. New Delhi: Jawahar Publishers & Distributors. p.41.

56. Bhattacharya, M. (2015). Decentralisation and Local Governance. In Anil Kumar Jana’s (eds.), *Decentralising Rural Governance and Development: Perspectives, Ideas, and Experiences*. New Delhi: Rawat Publication. p.53.

57. Osborne, D. & Ted, G. (1992). *Reinventing Government*. Boston: Addison-Wesley.

administration.⁵⁸ Decentralization now includes not only the transfer of power, authority, and responsibility within government but also the sharing of authority and resources for shaping public policy within society.

In recent years, local self-governance has emerged as the new mantra of the forces of globalisation and liberalisation. There are two different views on local governance: one understands it as a ground for transforming an unequal local society into a democratic community; while the other treats it as an agency or a channel to implement centrally formulated policies and programmes. The former suggests the ideas of Gandhi, trying to reinvent the vision of gram swaraj or village-level self-rule or villagers' self-determination in the course of people's struggle for freedom.

The later refers to the Maoist approach focuses on mechanisms of governance and stresses implementation of policies involving local institutions, local groups and local people in general. Mao Zedong's approach is knotted to the politics of transformation whereas the Gandhian approach is rooted in a framework of self-management. Though neither of these perspectives has been institutionalised in their own countries, they remain as reference points for any discourse on grass-roots democracy. Taking the concrete experience of local governance processes in the contemporary world, we can notice a tension between two kinds of practices in local governance, local governance as self-management and local governance as an instrumentality of the centre.

Grassroots democracy is all about people or community driven contribution in elections, governance and decision making. In other words, grassroots democracy can be seen predominantly as political process where the decision-making authority is shifted to the lowest level of organization. Grassroots democracy also refers to a political structure in which democracy is not simply narrowed to the national and states levels but is also extended to local levels in a true manner. It is therefore a way of people's participation, which is not distant and irregular, and is not inadequate to electing representative for a rather distant government but is based on their participation in the regular public affairs of their own local area. Hence, grassroots democracy is basically decentralised democracy in which the administration of public affairs does not begin and end at the top but operates through an inclusive system of people's participation in the decision-making at the grassroots level. In brief, 'grassroots

58. Rondinelli, D. A. "Government Decentralization in Comparative Perspective: Theory and Practice in Developing Countries," *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 47 (1981): 133–45; Dennis A. Rondinelli, John R. Nellis, and G. Shabbir Cheema, "Decentralization in Developing Countries: A Review of Recent Experience," Working Paper 581, World Bank Staff, 1983.

democracy is not just a window-dressing, but an effort at sowing the democratic seed deep into the soil of a country.’⁵⁹

Study area and Research methods

The study focuses on the Gram Sansads of the Paschim Medinipur district which is situated in the south-west corner of West Bengal and is adjacent to the State of Odisha in its south-west. Paschim Medinipur district was created in 2002 by bifurcating the erstwhile Midnapore district. Later, in 2017 a new Jhargram district has been created out of the western part of Paschim Medinipur district. The present work which was started before 2017, however, includes one block from the newly created Jhargram district.

As per the Government of West Bengal report 2011, Paschim Medinipur district consists of 4 Subdivisions, 29 Blocks, 29 Panchayat Samitis, 290 Gram Panchayats and 3086 Gram Sansads. But at present the district has only 3 Subdivisions. The present study being theoretical and empirical in nature has followed the review of literatures and survey methods. So, keeping in mind a fair representation of people, the field study has been conducted in 20 Gram Sansads on the basis of following criteria -

- (i) advanced Gram Sansads and backward Gram Sansads based on poverty and human development;
- (ii) Gram Sansads dominated by general caste, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and Women;
- (iii) one party dominated Gram Sansads by Ruling party or Opposition, Gram Sansads changing hands (competitive), and Gram Sansads with no clear domination (fragmented);
- (iv) Gram Sansads which achieved targets and failed to achieve targets.

In addition, 400 hundred villager respondents, 40 elected panchayat members, 20 party leaders from different political parties and 5 government officials including Block Development Officer (BDO) have been interviewed during the field visit.

Chapters

The present study has been divided into seven chapters which are as follows: -

59. Iqbal, N. (1963). Democratic Decentralisation: The Idea, The Image and The Reality. *Indian Journal of Public Administration*. January-March, 1963. Vol. IX. No.1. pp.9-10.

Chapter I: Introduction: This chapter consists of the context of the study, review of literature, definition, nature and scope of the proposed research problem, research questions, methodological premises, theoretical framework of the study etc.

Chapter II: Towards Participatory Governance in India: The Evolution of Panchayati Raj Institutions outlines the evolution of Gram Panchayats and their practices towards participatory governance in the Indian villages.

Chapter III: Gram Panchayats in West Bengal: Historical Evolution and People's Participation provides a detail about the experiments and experiences of rural local government in West Bengal.

Chapter IV: Rural Local Self-Government in Paschim Medinipur district during Left Front Government: Structure, Functions and People's participation seeks to find out policies, institutional structures, strategies and process of people's participation in PRIs under Left Front government.

Chapter V: Nature and Extent of People's Participation in the Gram Sansad in Paschim Medinipur district contains data collection from the field and their analyses.

Chapter VI: Power to the Gram Sansad: Awareness of Elected Panchayat Members, Local Leaders and Government Officials explores whether the Gram Sansad as a participatory institution at the grassroots level in Paschim Medinipur district or not.

Chapter VII: Conclusion consists of major findings, field observations and some recommendations for the development of Gram Sansad as a participatory democratic grassroots institution and self-governing institutions in Paschim Medinipur district in particular and in West Bengal in general.

Rationale of the Study

Gandhiji says, "True democracy could not be worked by some persons sitting at the top. It had to be worked from the below by the people of every village" (Joshi & Narwani, 2002). The greater power of Gram Sabha means the better it is for the people. However, the public functionaries are not yet ready mentally to acknowledge Gram Sabha/Gram Sansad as the representative body of villagers to supervise and monitor its working. Once place at least, let there be direct government or a direct democracy. Democracy at the top could not work successfully unless its foundation is not deeply rooted below. So, I have selected people's participation in Gram Sansads in Paschim Medinipur district as my research problem to examine the nature of true participatory democracy at the grassroots level. Another important

reason is accessibility of the respondents with researcher in the said district which helps researcher to investigate the problem in a scientific and more rational manner.

The district remains as a model of local governance and most of the time the district is used to have a first-hand experience in the field of local governance especially at the villages. Majority people of this district are not satisfied with the kind of grassroots governance operated at the village level. What they want is their direct involvement in all the affairs of Gram Panchayat which is legitimised. But they are kept out of the local affairs conducted by local bodies. It is in this context that I have decided to conduct a research work on issue of people's participation at grassroots governance in Paschim Medinipur district.