

CHAPTER II

PANCHAYATI RAJ IN WEST BENGAL

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2.1 An Outline of Panchayati Raj in West Bengal

A brief study of the Panchayati Raj in West Bengal may be attempted. The campus of the study covers Panchayati system in operation since 1958, the changes brought about by the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973 and the main directional thrusts offered by the Left-Front Government following the Panchayat election of 1978 after a lapse of about twenty years.

The setting up of Village Panchayat as a self-governing institution is one of the Directive Principles of the Constitution of India. Article 40 of the Constitution lays down that the State shall take steps to organise village Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government.

Steps were, however, taken to organise Village Panchayats throughout the country only after the recommendations of the Balwantray Mehta Committee for decentralisation of administrative system under the control of elected bodies were accepted by the Government of India.

The Balwantray Mehta Study Team was appointed in January, 1957 to study and report on the Community Development Projects and National Extension Service which were initiated during the First Five Year Plan (1951-1956) with a view to developing the rural areas intensively and associating the

village people through their leaders or representatives with the working of Projects in Blocks.

The Balwantray Mehta Team was of the opinion that the Community Development Programme and the National Extension Service failed to evoke enthusiasm and indicate any sign of durable strength or the leadership to provide the motive force for continuing the improvement of economic and social conditions in rural areas.¹ The authors of the report suggested :

"Development cannot progress without responsibility and power. Community development can be real only when the community understands its problems, realises its responsibilities, exercises the necessary powers through its chosen representatives and maintains a constant and intelligent vigilance on local administration. With this object we recommend an early establishment of statutory elective local bodies and devolution to them of the necessary resources, power, and authority."²

Keeping in view the broad suggestions of the Balwantray Mehta Committee the Panchayati Raj in West Bengal was set up through two distinct enactments - the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1957 and the West Bengal Zilla Parishads Act, 1963. The purpose of the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1957 was to build up a system of Village Panchayats with a view to enabling them to function as units of self-government and to vest them with powers and duties

1 R.V.Mathur, 'Evolution of Panchayati Raj in India,' Quarterly Journal of the Local Self-Government Institute, Bombay, January-March, 1967, P. 289.

2 Report of the Team to Study Community Project and National Extension Service, 1957 (Popularly known as Balwantray Mehta Committee Report), P.23.

necessary for the management of village affairs and to entrust them with the powers of taxation necessary for the purpose.

With the promise for democratic decentralisation the Acts, the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1957 and the West Bengal Zilla Parishads Act, 1963, established a four-tier Panchayat system in West Bengal and this structural composition was a deviation from the recommendation of the Balwantray Mehta Committee for a three-tier system. The four tiers were the Gram Panchayat at the village level, the Anchal Panchayat at a level between the block and the village, the Anchalik Parishad at the block level and the Zilla Parishad at the district level. The Anchal Panchayat was an innovation of the West Bengal Panchayat Act. The operational trends of this four-tier Panchayati Raj soon tilted the scale of importance in favour of the additional tier, Anchal Panchayat.

In West Bengal, the First Panchayat elections were held between 1958 and 1965 when 15 Zilla Parishads, 325 Anchalik Parishads, 2926 Anchal Panchayats and 19662 Gram Panchayats were constituted covering a population of 328.68 lakhs. Subsequent elections to be held after a four year cycle could not, however, be arranged for various reasons.

2.1.1 Gram Sabha

The Gram Sabha was the basic body on which the entire fabric of the Village Panchayat was built up. The Gram Sabha consisted of all persons whose names were included in the electoral roll of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly. It means

that the voters' list of a Gram Sabha was the same as that of the State Assembly for the area concerned. The Gram Sabha was only a deliberative body with powers to recommend in certain cases. But it had no executive functions.

Ordinarily the Gram Sabha had two sessions annually. At the Annual General Meeting the Gram Sabha considered the Budget for the following year and the report of the Gram Panchayat on the progress of work done during the previous year and on the work to be done in the following year, and issued such directions as appeared necessary. The Gram Sabha was to elect its executive body, the Gram Panchayat, for a period of four years.

2.1.2 Composition of Gram Panchayat

The Gram Panchayat was to consist of 9 to 15 members elected by the members of the Gram Sabha by means of secret ballot.

2.1.3 Functions of Gram Panchayat

The powers and duties of the Gram Panchayat under the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1957 may be classified into three categories -

1. Obligatory (Section 31 of the Act)
2. Delegated (Section 32 of the Act)
3. Discretionary (Section 33 of the Act).

The 'obligatory functions' were primarily of civic nature while the 'delegated' and 'discretionary' functions were mainly concerned with development and rural reconstruction.

The following were the obligatory functions :

- (a) Sanitary, conservancy and drainage ;
- (b) Anti-epidemic measures ;
- (c) Maintenance, repair and construction of public streets and protection thereof ;
- (d) Registration of births and deaths ;
- (e) Organising voluntary labour for community works and works for improvement of its area ;
- (f) Supply of drinking water ;
- (g) Supply of any local information to the higher authorities, when wanted ;
- (h) Vaccination and inoculation ;
- (i) Removal of encroachments on public streets or places ;
- (j) The management and care of public tanks, common grazing grounds, burning ghats and public graveyards of the people ;
- (k) Protection and repair of buildings or other property vested in it ;
- (l) Performance of such functions as may transferred to it under section 31 of the cattle-trespass Act, 1871.

The 'delegated' and 'discretionary' functions related to the agricultural and economic development of the area.

The agricultural functions were :-

- (a) Irrigation ;
- (b) Bringing waste land under cultivation ;
- (c) Cultivation of fallow lands ;

- (d) Co-operative land management ;
- (e) Assisting in the implementation of land reform measures ;
- (f) Grow more food campaign ;
- (g) Allotment of places for storing manures ;
- (h) Improved breeding of cattle and prevention of cattle diseases etc. ;
- (i) Construction and regulation of markets, fairs, melas and hats
- (j) Planting and maintaining trees.

The economic activities included -

- (a) Introduction and promotion of co-operative farming, co-operative stores and other such enterprises ;
- (b) Promotion and encouragement of cottage industries ;
- (c) Acting as a channel for government assistance to villagers ;
- (d) Assistance to agriculturists in regard to obtaining State loan, its distribution and repayment.

2.1.4 Financial Resources of Gram Panchayat

The West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1957 did not provide any independent source of revenue for the Gram Panchayat. According to section 55 (2)(d) of the Act, the Anchal Panchayat shall allot such sum to the Gram Panchayat under its jurisdiction taking into consideration -

- a) the amount available for distribution ;
- b) amount realised from each of the Gram Sabhas within its jurisdiction as tax, fee or rate and
- c) amounts required by the Gram Panchayats concerned

according to the budget framed by them for carrying on their duties and functions.

With exclusive dependence on the Anchal Panchayat for fund and no financial resources of its own the Gram Panchayat could hardly be expected to discharge even a fraction of the wide variety of functions it was required to perform under the Act. However, since 1976 the Anchal Panchayats had been discharging the functions of the Gram Panchayats and hence, for all practical purposes, the Gram Panchayat was reduced to a paper entity.

2.1.5 Anchal Panchayat

The Anchal Panchayat was the second executive tier. According to the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1957 the State Government was authorised to establish the Anchal Panchayat and fix by notification the number of contiguous Gram Sabhas to be included within each Anchal Panchayat.

2.1.6 Composition of Anchal Panchayat

Indirect election was introduced for the Anchal Panchayat. The Gram Panchayat members would elect one member for every two hundred and fifty members of the Gram Sabha and each Gram Sabha would have at least one member to the Anchal Panchayat. The Adhyakshas of all Gram Panchayats within the jurisdiction of the Anchal were ex-officio members.

The inclusion of the Adhyakshas of the Gram Panchayats as ex-officio members of the Anchal Panchayat claimed certain advantages. The Adhyakshas were expected to communicate the

problems and necessities of the Gram Panchayats to the Anchal Panchayat and influence in a very effective way the decision of the Anchal Panchayats in respect of allotment of funds for the Gram Panchayats and assessment and realisation of taxes.

2.1.7 Functions of Anchal Panchayat

The functions of the Anchal Panchayat were as follows :

- (1) Control and administration of the Anchal Panchayat Fund ;
- (2) Imposition, assessment and collection of the taxes, rates or fees leviable under the Act ;
- (3) Maintenance and control of dafedars and chowkidars ;
- (4) Constitution and administration of the Naya Panchayats established under the Act ; and
- (5) Performance of such functions as may be transferred to it under section 31 of the Cattle-trespass Act, 1971.

The Anchal Panchayat was also required to carry out such duties and functions as were assigned to it by the State Government.

To sum up the Anchal Panchayat had to perform three functions in the main - (1) rural finance ; (2) rural police and (3) rural justice.³

2.1.8 Financial Resources of Anchal Panchayat

The West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1957 authorised only the Anchal Panchayat to impose and collect taxes. An Anchal Panchayat shall impose annually,

³ Local Self-Government in West Bengal, Subrata Mukherjee, Published in July, 1974 by Dasgupta and Co., Pvt., Ltd., Calcutta - 12, P. 93.

1 (a) On lands and buildings within the local limits of its jurisdiction, a tax not exceeding two per cent of the annual value of such lands and buildings determined in the prescribed manner to be paid by the owners or occupiers thereof ;

(b) On professions, trades, callings and employments carried on or held within the local limits of the jurisdiction, a tax on the basis of the total annual income accrued from such professions, trades, callings and employments, subject to a maximum of two hundred and fifty rupees per annum in respect of any one person.

An Anchal Panchayat may levy the following :

- a) Fees on the registration of vehicles ;
- b) Fees on plaints, petitions and other processes ;
- c) Fees for providing sanitary arrangements at places of worships or pilgrimage ;
- d) Water rate, light rate and conservancy rate if such arrangements are provided.

In addition to the above sources of revenue each Anchal Panchayat also received an annual lump grant of Rs.1300.00 for allotment to the Gram Panchayats under it.

Of the tax-sources of revenue the property tax (1,a) and the profession tax (1,b) were to be levied compulsorily while the levy of all other fees and rates was optional. The resource base contemplated under the Act was too weak to enable the Anchal Panchayats to release adequate fund for the Gram Panchayats after meeting its own establishment charges towards rural police, rural justice etc. and other expenditures.

2.1.9 The West Bengal Zilla Parishads Act, 1963 and the Formation of Anchalik Parishads and Zilla Parishads

The setting up of the Anchalik Parishad, the block level organisation, and of the Zilla Parishad at the district level in pursuance of the West Bengal Zilla Parishads Act, 1963 practically marked the completion of the process of the Panchayati Raj in West Bengal.

2.1.10 Anchalik Parishad

Located at the block level the Anchalik Parishad was made the third executive tier of the West Bengal Panchayati Raj system.

The Anchalik Parishad was to be made up of the following categories of members :

- (1) Ex-Officio ;
- (2) Elected ;
- (3) Appointed ;
- (4) Co-opted ; and
- (5) Associate.

(1) The ex-officio members were (a) the Pradhans of the Anchal Panchayats ; (b) the members of the Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assembly from any constituency comprising the block ; and (c) the members of the Rajya Sabha and the State Legislative Council having a place of residence in the block.

- (2) One Adhyaksha from the territorial limits of each Anchali Panchayat elected by the Adhyakshas of that area from among themselves;
- (3) Four members to be appointed by the State Government - two women and two from the backward communities ;
- (4) Two members to be co-opted by the members of the Anchalik Parishad from the residents of the Block having experience or knowledge in social and rural development work ;
- (5) The Block Development Officer to serve as an associate member.

The Anchalik Parishad had a tenure of office for 4 years. A President and a Vice-President were to be elected by the members. The Associate member, Block Development Officer was, however, debarred from contesting the office of the President or of the Vice-President.

2.1.11 Powers and Functions of Anchalik Parishad

The Anchalik Parishad was entrusted with the following powers and functions :

- (a) Taking up schemes relating to the development of agriculture, irrigation, live-stock, cottage industries, co-operatives, rural credit, public health and sanitation, water supply, primary or adult education, communications, social welfare, setting up of dispensaries and hospitals and other objects of general utility ;

- (b) Undertaking schemes entrusted to it by the State Government or any other authority ;
- (c) Management, maintenance and control of public concerns vested in it ;
- (d) Extending financial assistance to public educational institutions or welfare organisations within the block ;
- (e) Making grants to the Zilla Parishad or Anchal Panchayats;
- (f) Adoption of measures for the relief of the distress ; and
- (g) Co-ordination and integration of the development plans and schemes prepared by Anchal Panchayats in the blocks, if and when necessary.

One of the significant provisions of the Zilla Parishads Act was the formation of Standing Committees based on specialised subjects. There were seven types of Standing Committees though other committees could also be formed with the approval of the State Government. The seven Standing committees were :

1. Finance and Establishment Committee ;
2. Public Health Committee ;
3. Public Works Committee ;
4. Agriculture and Irrigation Committee ;
5. Public and Social Welfare Committee ;
6. Industry and Co-operation Committee ; and
7. Primary Education Committee.

Rule 67 of the 'West Bengal Zilla Parishads Rules, 1964' provided that each Standing Committee would exercise the powers

and perform the functions of the Zilla Parishad and of the Anchalik Parishad in relation to the subjects assigned to it within the respective financial limits and would be responsible for the implementation of the works and schemes of the Zilla Parishad or the Anchalik Parishad coming under these subjects. The Standing Committees were required to act in close co-ordination with the Finance Standing Committee in respect of sanctioning administrative and financial approval and cost of a scheme. Of the Standing Committees, the Finance Standing Committee was the most powerful and it transacted all functions concerning the budget, taxation, grant of fund to the lower Panchayat bodies, maintenance of accounts of the Zilla Parishad or Anchalik Parishad, preparation of the Annual Administrative Report etc.

2.1.12 Sources of Revenue of Anchalik Parishad

The West Bengal Zilla Parishads Act, 1963 provided the following sources of revenue for the Anchalik Parishad :

(1) Grants and Contributions

Grants and contributions cover (a) contribution and grants made by the Central or State Government or the Zilla Parishad and (b) loans, if any, granted by the Government or raised by the Anchalik Parishad.

(2) Non-tax Revenue

All receipts accruing from tolls, rates and fees levied by the Anchalik Parishads. The Anchalik Parishads were authorised

to levy (i) fees on registration of vehicles ;

(ii) fees for providing sanitary arrangements at public places or fairs and melas ;

(iii) fees for licence for a hat or market ;

(iv) water and light rate if arrangements for supply of water (drinking and irrigation etc.) and street lighting were made;

and (v) tolls on persons, vehicles, or animals and in respect of any ferry.

(3) Other Sources

Income from public institutions like schools, dispensaries etc. under the Anchalik Parishad and gifts and contributions received from any trust or endowment made in favour of the Anchalik Parishad were included in this category.

(4) Taxes and Miscellaneous receipts

Taxes, if any, fines or penalties imposed and realised under section 86 of the West Bengal Zilla Parishads Act, 1963.

The Balventray Mehta Committee suggested that the block level organisation should be the pivot around which the entire system of the Panchayati Raj should revolve. Besides organising and co-ordinating the works of the block it should co-operate and supervise the works of the lower tiers. But the Anchalik Parishads as they were constituted in West Bengal played only a secondary role to the Zilla Parishads and could leave hardly any impact on the rural life. Finance was certainly one of the most inhibiting factors. The only source of revenue worth the name was grants and contributions from the State Government. The

scope of levying taxes and fees was limited since the other two tiers, the Anchal Panchayat and the Zilla Parishad, were also endowed with the power to impose and collect taxes and fees. That the Anchalik Parishad was never given a fair trial in the working of the Panchayati system was evident from the fact that it was virtually withdrawn from the structural set-up of the Panchayati system. During the period under study the Anchalik Parishad was non-existent.

2.1.13 Zilla Parishad

The West Bengal Zilla Parishads Act, 1963 provided under section 3(1) that there should be a Zilla Parishad for each district and it would bear the name of the district.

(1) Ex-Officio

The ex-officio members were (a) the Presidents of all the Anchalik Parishads within the district ; (b) the members of the Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assembly elected from any constituency within the district ; (c) the members of the Rajya Sabha and the State Legislative Council having residence in any place of the district; and (d) the President of the District School Board.

(2) Elected

From each subdivision of the district Gram Panchayat Adhyakshas would elect two Adhyakshas from among themselves.

(3) Appointed

The Municipal Chairman or the Mayor in the district and

two women having a place of residence in the district were to be appointed members of the Zilla Parishad by the State Government.

(4) Associate

The associate members were the Sub-divisional Magistrate of each Sub-division of the district and the Panchayat Officer.

A Chairman and a Vice-Chairman were to be elected by the members of the Zilla Parishad from among themselves. The Zilla Parishad had a term of office for 4 years.

2.1.14 Powers and Functions of Zilla Parishad

The functions of the Zilla Parishad embracing different aspects of welfare, public utility and development of the district were as follows :

- (a) Adopting schemes or measures relating to live-stock, co-operation, irrigation, water supply, public health and sanitation, establishment of dispensaries and hospitals, education, communications and other objects of general public utility;
- (b) Management of Public utility concerns ;
- (c) Making grant-in-aid or other contributions to public welfare institutions ;
- (d) Awarding scholarships or stipends for furtherance of technical education ;
- (e) Acquisition and maintenance of village hats and markets ;
- (f) Providing grants to the Anchalik Parishads ;
- (g) Co-ordination and integration of development plans prepared by the Anchalik Parishads ;
- (h) Considering and approving the budget estimates of the Anchalik Parishads ;

- (i) Taking up measures for the relief of the distress ; and
- (j) Executing schemes entrusted to it by the State Government.

The Zilla Parishad had also the power of supervision and guidance over the activities of the lower tiers of the Panchayat.

The powers and functions of the Zilla Parishad were to be exercised by the seven Standing Committee as provided for the Anchalik Parishad.

2.1.15 Sources of Revenue of Zilla Parishad

The sources of revenue as laid down in the West Bengal Zilla Parishads Act, 1963 were as follows :

(1) Taxes - All proceeds of road cess levied and realised in the district;

(2) Grants or Contributions

Grants and contributions from the Central or State Government including shares of land revenue ;

(3) Non-Tax Revenue

Receipts from tolls, rates and fees levied by the Zilla Parishad, fines and penalties imposed and realised ;

(4) Other Sources

(a) Incomes from remunerative schemes, trusts and endowments ;

(b) Loans from the State Government ; and

(c) Grants and contributions, if any, from the Anchalik Parishads.

Grants and contribution from the State Government constituted the bulk of the income of the Zilla Parishad.

2.1.16 Comments

The Panchayati system as introduced by the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1957 and the West Bengal Zilla Parishads Act, 1963 following the recommendations of the Balvantray Mehta Committee failed to bring about democratic decentralisation and make the rural people active participants in the process of decision making and execution of different schemes. So, after its first flush of momentum the Panchayati Raj lost its speed and was gradually tapering out. The expert opinions reflected the accusation that the Government proceeded with a hesitant, none-too-sure approach about the way the Panchayat should work and establish a chain of relation among the different tiers as also with government. The sorry performance of the Panchayat may largely be attributed to the fact that it was never given an honest trial with the desired amount of autonomy and authority.

The factors responsible for the unsatisfactory working of the Panchayat may broadly be classified as (a) organisational ; (b) financial ; and (c) administrative.

1. Organisational Factors

(a) The working of the different structures of the Panchayati Raj soon exhibited lack of co-ordination and harmony among themselves. The Administrative Report for 1967-68 observed - "There has been absolutely no co-ordination and mutual understanding amongst the different tiers. The Zilla Parishads are functioning more or less, as the District Boards. The Anchalik Parishads have very little defined functions, Anchal

Panchayats being successors to the Union Board have nothing more to do than their predecessor bodies used to. The only difference is that the Union Boards had some responsibility to execute development works in the villages. Gram Panchayats, which have the powers and responsibilities for development work in the villages, unfortunately exist only in name

The question should naturally arise whether there is any justification of these organisations in their present state. The sooner the confusion in respect of the powers, functions and the mode of work of the Panchayati Raj Organisation of this State is considered the better."

(b) The democratic structures as envisaged in the Acts for Panchayati Raj had little meaning in practice. The provision for direct election was made for constituting the Gram Panchayat only. But, for the other tiers the system of election was indirect. The Zilla Parishads and the Anchalik Parishads were dominated by the ex-officio members, particularly by the members of the legislature who enjoyed full voting rights including the right to be elected executives. The composition of the Zilla Parishads and the Anchalik Parishads was such that the elected members were very few in number and the army of the ex-officio, appointed and co-opted members bossed the show. Such a composition of the Panchayat institutions can be hardly expected to lend a truly representative character and make them a platform for meaningful popular participation.

(c) Till 1977 the Panchayats had the taste of popular election only for once. The Anchalik Parishads which happened to be the pivotal organisation of the Panchayati Raj at the block level in most of the Indian States were reduced to a non-entity and the administration of the Zilla Parishad was placed at the disposal of the administrators appointed by the State Government, superseding the Zilla Parishad bodies in 1967.

Under such circumstances, the programmes undertaken by the Zilla Parishads for rural development were considered "Government's programme" and not "People's programme". The atmosphere was certainly not conducive for the exhibition of any zeal and initiative by the Zilla Parishad and spontaneous response from the people for participation in the programmes.

(d) The only one popular election since 1958, the dominance of the non-elected members, and finally the supersession of the Zilla Parishad bodies may be said to have defeated the very purpose of throwing up local leadership and development of human resources by the Panchayati Raj institutions. "If the purpose of these Acts is to create genuine local leadership then the first and foremost requisite will be to trust and rely on local representatives. There is every possibility that they may commit mistakes - but it is highly desirable that people should be allowed to learn through the processes of trial and error rather than to remain under perpetual guardianship of seasoned bureaucracy."⁴

4 Local Self-Government in West Bengal, Op cit, P.110.

No doubt, during the nascent stages of the Panchayati Raj some sort of government control and supervision was essential but the general attitude should have been one of guidance and not of authoritative regulation. The members of the Legislature - State and Central - may be associate members and should not be given such rights and powers as may obstruct the growth of local leadership.

(2) Financial Factors

The popular criticism against the Panchayati Raj institutions was that the functions discharged by them were much more limited than the impressive lists would indicate. The range of activities of the Village Panchayats did not, in practice, extend beyond construction and repair of some village roads, culverts, wells for drinking water, provision of village lighting, construction of Panchayat offices etc. The most inhibiting factor for such limited operations was certainly finance.

Here, in West Bengal, the Panchayats grew sick because of want of necessary resources. The Gram Panchayats as the basic unit of the Panchayati system were not endowed with any independent source of revenue. Neither did they receive government grants straightway. The State Government awarded a lump grant of Rs. 1300.00 annually to each Anchal Panchayat for distribution to the Gram Panchayats under it. The Anchal Panchayats were expected to allot further grants from their own funds. On a perusal of the incomes of the Anchal Panchayats

such financial grants to the Gram Panchayats appeared almost impossible. The scope of taxation was also extremely limited considering the ability to pay taxes of the rural people. The Zilla Parishads were almost cent per cent dependent on government grants and contributions for execution of developmental and welfare schemes as well as for running their own establishments. But such grants were also not adequate and released in time and to the full. It was also a common complaint from the Zilla Parishads that the proceeds from road cess were not made available in full. The Panchayat bodies also did not exert themselves much for realisation of revenue from their tax sources. Since imposition of fees, rates, tolls etc. were made optional the Panchayat Bodies showed little interest in levying and realising them. Provision for institutional finances and government loans particularly to the Zilla Parishads was made in the Act but these sources were hardly squeezed. The State Government also did not assign developmental programmes with necessary money and material to the Panchayat bodies so that their resource base could be strengthened.

3) Administrative Factors

(a) The administrative set-up was also responsible for the failure of the Panchayati Raj to come closer to the heart of the people for whom it was intended. The Panchayats in West Bengal practically never turned out to be democratic bodies since the three tiers other than the Gram Panchayat were not

popularly elected. The entire administration of these tiers was fabricated and run by the bureaucrats who had very little touch with the people for whom they were working. The cultural gap between the bureaucrats and the rural masses turned the latter to mute receivers of blessings from above. The administrative system divorced from any psychological adjustment with the rural people frustrated the goals of the Panchayati Raj to a very considerable extent. The observations of Balvantray Mehta may be worth quoting in this connection. "The administrative system, more or less, is what was our legacy

If the government remains the same, irresponsible though responsible, and continues in the same old grooves, how will it be in consonance with the Panchayati Raj ? There has to be some consistency, some consonance between the Panchayati Raj below and the bureaucratic government above. These two things have to be inter-related. That we have not done. With regard to Panchayati Raj also, is it going to be the same ? The files and the papers and the delays and so on, or is it going to be the rule on the spot ? The personnel going round and meeting people, calling conferences, listening to grievances, giving the judgements and trying to meet the aspirations of the people, a thing like that was supposed to be the new order of the day, but that is not there."⁵

(b) A basic requirement for the success of the Panchayats was, as felt by many, the arrangement for extensive training of

5 Reflections from the Chair - Balvantray Mehta,
op cit, pp. 86-87.

the Panchayat members and officials. A thorough training was imperative to acquaint the Panchayat personnel with their powers, functions and responsibilities as also for change of outlook, sharing of experiences and creating participatory process of management. But there is much scope for doubt whether any training worth the name was at all arranged for the members and officials.

(c) Most of the staff of the Panchayats were from other departments on loan or on deputation. Some were from state cadre. The technical staff transferred to them were also not under their control. With almost no staff absolutely at their disposal how can we expect the Panchayats to work seriously and effectively ?

(d) Panchayati Raj institutions failed to evoke people's participation in their programmes because in most cases they played agency roles and were not associated in any real sense with the process of planning from below. The working Group on District Administration and Agricultural Administration for West Bengal appointed in 1966 by the State Government recommended that more and more development schemes at the district level should be entrusted to the Zilla Parishads with provision of adequate funds. It was also suggested that in the matter of drawing up 'District development plans' the Zilla Parishads and their affiliated units must have a leading role.⁶

6 Local Self-Government in West Bengal, Op cit, P. 108.

2.1.17 West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973

The operational trends of the Panchayati Raj and the governmental approach towards these local self-governing institutions brought out the truth that the ideal of democratic decentralisation and emergence of local leadership was difficult to realise unless the prevailing system of Panchayati Raj was overhauled. This awareness of the State Government led to the passage of the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973. Though the enactment was made by the erstwhile Congress Government it was put to effect by the Left Front Government soon after its assumption of power in 1977.

The West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973 may be considered a comprehensive enactment in the sense that it replaces the two earlier Acts - the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1957 and the West Bengal Zilla Parishads Act, 1963 and the entire system of Panchayati Raj covering the village level, the block level and the district level organisations has been woven into a single pattern. The Act also establishes a three-tier structure in conformity with the structural pattern of the other states of the country in place of the earlier four-tier Panchayati system.

A comparative study of the important provisions of the new Act and the earlier Acts may help us assess how far the Panchayati bodies have been sought to be made really democratic and financially equipped to meet the challenges of rural life.

(1) Structure

The following structural changes may be noted :

(a) The three-tiers under the present Act are the Gram Panchayat at the village level, the Panchayat Samiti at the block level and the Zilla Parishad at the district level;

(b) The entire provisions of the Act of 1957 regarding the Gram Sabha have been dropped and the new Act has named the area of the Gram Panchayat as 'Gram';

(c) The Anchal Panchayat introduced as an additional tier under the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1957 has been abolished;

(d) The Panchayat Samiti replaces the Anchalik Parishad as the block level organisation and it has come to be the second tier of the Panchayat System ;

(e) Standing Committees as under the West Bengal Zilla Parishads Act, 1963 have been retained for the Panchayati Samiti as well as for the Zilla Parishad but their numbers have been reduced and names changed.

(2) Composition, powers and functions of the tiers

(a) Gram Panchayat

Compared to the old structure of the Gram Panchayat there has been extension of its area, composition and functions in the new Act.

The Gram Panchayat is the executive body of the Gram. According to section 3(1) of the new Act "the Government may, by notification, declare for the purposes of this Act any mauza or part of a mauza or group of contiguous mauzas or parts thereof

to be a Gram." The members of the Gram Panchayat shall be elected by the persons enlisted as voters in the electoral rolls of the State Legislative Assembly for area comprising the Gram. The Gram has been divided into a number of multi-seated constituencies. No constituency can elect less than three and more than fourteen members to the Gram Panchayat. The number of the Gram Panchayats shall be between seven and twentyfive instead of between nine and fifteen under the old Act of 1957. At present, the Gram Panchayats cover an average population of 8000 each.

The members of the Gram Panchayat shall elect two of its members Pradhan and Upapradhan to conduct its business. Previously they were known as Adhyakshaya and Upadhyakshya.

Powers and Functions

The Gram Panchayat has been vested with more powers and functions under the new Act.

The Anchal Panchayat has been abolished and its powers of taxation, rural defence and rural justice have been entrusted to the Gram Panchayat.

The functions of the Gram Panchayat under the new Act are :

1. Civic functions ;
2. Development functions ;
3. Village defence (Services of the Chowkidars and Dafadars have been placed at the disposal of the Gram Panchayat after the abolition of the Anchal Panchayat);
4. Village Taxation ;
5. Constitution and administration of Naya Panchayats.

(b) Panchayat Samiti

According to section 94 of the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973, there shall be a Panchayat Samiti for each Block.

The provision for 'appointed' and 'co-opted' members under the West Bengal Zilla Parishads Act, 1963 has been dropped under the new Act. The Panchayat Samiti shall have three categories of members :

(a) Elected ; (b) Ex-officio ; and (c) Associate.

Under the old Act there was indirect election for the members of the Anchalik Parishad, the block level organisation. But the new Act provides for direct election of the members from each 'Gram'. Persons enrolled as voters in the Assembly voters' list for the concerned Gram are entitled to elect not more than three representatives from among themselves.

The Ex-officio members are (a) the Pradhans of the Gram Panchayats ; (b) the members of the Lok Sabha (the lower chamber of the Indian Parliament) and the State Assembly elected from any constituency under the Block (not being ministers) ; and (c) the members of the Rajya Sabha, (the upper chamber of the Indian Parliament) not being ministers, having a place of residence in the Block,

The Sub-divisional Magistrate shall be the 'Associate' member of the Panchayat Samiti.

The Panchayat Samiti shall be headed by 'Sabhapati' and 'Sahakari Sabhapati' to be elected by the members from among themselves. The 'Associate' member and the 'Ex-officio' members are, however, not eligible for contesting election.

The Block Development Officer shall act as the Executive Officer of the Panchayati Samiti.

Powers and Functions

The powers and functions entrusted to the Panchayat Samiti under the new Act are almost the same as those of the Anchalik Parishad under the West Bengal Zilla Parishads Act, 1963. The new Act retains the committee system through which the Panchayat Samiti and the Zilla Parishad shall function. At present, the Panchayat Samiti carries on its functions through eight Sthayee Samitis (Permanent Committees) as listed below :

- (1) Artha O Sanstha Sthayee Samiti ;
- (2) Jana Sasthya Sthayee Samiti ;
- (3) Purta Kerya Sthayee Samiti ;
- (4) Krishi Sech O Samabaya Sthayee Samiti ;
- (5) Siksha Sthayee Samiti ;
- (6) Khudra Silpa, Tran O Jana Kalyan Sthayee Samiti ;
- (7) Unnayan, Parikalpana O Bhumi Sangskar Sthayee Samiti ;
- (8) Matsya O Pasupalan Sthayee Samiti.

Each Sthayee Samiti is headed by an elected member called Karmadhyaksha and has a government official as its Secretary.

(c) Zilla Parishad

The Zilla Parishad located at the district level shall be the third and the highest tier of the Panchayati Raj.

It shall be made up of three types of members :

(a) Elected ; (b) Ex-officio ; and (c) Associate. The category of 'appointed members' as provided for in the earlier Act has

been withdrawn in the new Act. The composition of the Zilla Parishad appears to be more democratic now. Instead of the Adhyakshas of the Gram Panchayats (as provided under the West Bengal Zilla Parishads Act, 1963) ordinary members of the Gram are now eligible for electing two of their representatives from each Block in the Zilla Parishad from among the voters enlisted in the Assembly voters' list of the area.

The Ex-officio category of members includes (a) all the Sabhadhikaris of the Panchayat Samitis of the district; (b) the members of the Lok Sabha and the State Assembly (not being ministers) from any constituency within the district; and (c) members of the Rajya Sabha having a place of residence in the district.

The District Magistrate shall be the 'Associate' member. It is also a new provision.

The Zilla Parishad shall be headed by Sabhadhipati and Sahakari Sabhadhipati elected by the members from amongst themselves. Members of the Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha and State Assembly and also the 'Associate' member are not eligible for contesting the election.

Powers and Functions

The powers and functions of the Zilla Parishad under the new Act do not differ from those given to it under the old Act. The powers and functions have already been discussed and hence here, there is no repetition.

The Zilla Parishad has also the same eight Sthayee Samitis, as in the case of the Panchayat Samiti, to carry on its diversified functions.

Section 210 of the new Act empowers the State Government to appoint two members of the Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes and two women to be members of the Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad to represent their interests if such representation could not be secured through direct elections.

Finance

As regards financial provisions the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973 does not appear to be an improvement over the two earlier Acts. Only in case of the Gram Panchayat an addition to the tax-sources of revenue has been made by way of provision for levy of additional stamp duty on all transfers of immovable property and on all payments for admission to any entertainment.

The Gram Panchayat shall levy (a) an additional stamp duty at the rate of 2 per cent on all transfers of immovable property situated within the local limits of the Gram ; and (b) an additional stamp duty at the rate of 10 per cent on all payments for admission to any entertainment. It has already been noted that with the abolition of the Anchal Panchayat its power to impose, assess and collect taxes and fees has been transferred to the Gram Panchayat under the new Act.

No new source of revenue has, however, been suggested for the Panchayat Samiti and the Zilla Parishad. The Panchayat Samiti shall have all the sources of income of the Anchalik Parishad.

2.1.18 Comment on the New Act

1. The new Act envisages a more democratic composition of the Panchayat bodies and allows the elected representatives a major role in the process of decision - making. For all the tiers direct election has been introduced and the ex-officio members like the members of the Union Legislature and the State Assembly as well as the associate member have been debarred from contesting the election of the executives. There is, however, the apprehension among many that the members of the Union and the State Legislature with their varied experience and influence may dominate the Panchayat institutions and thus hinder the growth of local leadership. The observation of the Ashoke Mehta Committee about the association of the legislators with the Panchayat bodies may be worth quoting here -- "The lukewarm attitude of political elite at higher levels towards strengthening of the democratic process at the grass roots was generally the crux of the matter. Of particular significance in this connection is the relative cooling off of enthusiasm of MPs and MLAs in some states towards Panchayati Raj, because they would perceive a threat in emerging Panchayati Raj leadership to their position in their respective constituencies."⁷

The elimination of the Gram Sabha as provided under the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1957 may, however, restrict the scope of popular participation in matters relating to rural planning and development. The Gram Sabha was the general body where the villagers had the privilege of sharing the activities

7 Report of the committee on Panchayati Raj Institution, Government of India, Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation Department of Rural Development, P. 6.

of the Panchayat. The Gram Panchayat also owed certain statutory obligations to the Gram Sabha. In other States like Bihar, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka etc. the Gram Sabha sits twice in a year and the Gram Panchayat submits its report of works done and adopts plans for development for the next year in these sessions.⁸ The continuance of the Gram Sabha in some form or other may be considered for involvement of the rural people in the management of their village affairs.

2. The inclusion of the Block Development Officer and the District Magistrate as the executive officers of the Panchayat Samiti and the Zilla Parishad respectively may enrich these local self-governing bodies with the much-needed administrative experience. But these officials should only exercise advisory powers and render all possible assistance as and when required. They must not be given such power and authority as enable them to dominate over the elected representatives.

The observation of the 11-man 'Working Group'^{*} under the chairmanship of a Cabinet Minister appointed by the Government of West Bengal in 1966 about the role of the District Magistrate may be noted. The Group was of the opinion that the District Magistrate should neither be overburdened with additional functions concerning development nor he be dissociated completely from such functions of the Zilla Parishad. The Group recommended that the District Magistrate should be conversant with all

⁸ Pashim Banga Panchayat Act, 1973 | Dr. Asit Kumar
Pashim Banga Abashyakiya Niyamabali, 1974 | Basu, pp. (ii)
Pashim Banga Panchayat (Gathan) Bidhi, 1975 | (iii).

* The Working Group on District Administration and Agricultural Administration for West Bengal, 1966.

activities of the Zilla Parishad but Government funds should not be routed through him to avoid unnecessary delay.⁹

3. It has already been observed that the new Act does not constitute any improvement so far as the financial resources of the Panchayat bodies are concerned. With the existing resource base these bodies can hardly be expected to give a good account of themselves in performing the wide variety of functions entrusted to them. The Act is also silent as regards the assignment of the particular programmes by the State Government to these organisations and the transfer of the fund necessary for the purpose.

4. The new Act retains the checks and controls of the Government over the Panchayat bodies as provided under the earlier Acts. While the auditing of accounts by the State Government and taking up of necessary measures for correction of the faults made by these bodies are not to be disputed the primary object of the 'control and supervision' should be to guide and advise the local bodies. If the Panchayat bodies are superseded for one reason or the other in exercise of the power of control and supervision by the government particularly with the change of ministry the idea of strengthening democratic process at the grassroots would be nipped in bud. The danger is still there in the Act.

9 Local Self-Government in West Bengal, Op cit, P. 109.

2.1.19 The Left Front Government and the Panchayati Raj
in West Bengal

The Left Front Government came to power in West Bengal in 1977 and within a year decided to hold the Panchayat elections under the new Act. On the 4th June, 1978 direct elections were held for 3242 Gram Panchayats, 324 Panchayat Samitis and 15 Zilla Parishads. The most remarkable feature to note is that the elections were fought on the basis of political ideologies and party symbols.

The Panchayats constituted under the 1957 Act put up a very unsatisfactory performance and one of the significant causes for this is that the erstwhile State Government evinced little interest in executing programmes for rural development through the Panchayat members and providing them with necessary fund and material for meeting the requirements of rural life.¹⁰

The present Government wants that the Panchayat bodies should serve as the vanguard of rural development and turn themselves into effective channels of people's participation. This can be a reality only when the Government makes provision for adequate fund, allow these bodies considerable freedom in the sphere of decision - making and selecting the right type of developmental and welfare programmes and arrange for an administrative set-up capable of taking up the challenges of rural life.

10 Panchayat -Naba Parayyay O Nab Udyog, a Bengali Publication by the Department of Informations and Cultural Affairs, Government of West Bengal, P. 2.

2.1.20 Measures for mobilisation of additional resources

The Panchayat bodies have been empowered under the new Act to collect revenue from their own sources by way of levying taxes, rates, fees etc. within their respective jurisdictions. But incomes from these sources appear to be too meagre to finance the variety of welfare and developmental programmes. So, to strengthen the resource base of the Panchayat bodies the State Government contemplates to make more fund available to them.

The following measures have been taken for the purpose :

- (1) The Government have decided to provide a matching grant to each Gram Panchayat corresponding to the amount collected by it against taxes, fees and rates. But the amount of this matching grant shall not exceed Rs. 5,000.00 annually.
- (2) The Board of Revenue of the Government has also issued orders for transfer of control and management of (a) all Khas or Vested tanks (not leased out or settled) located within a Gram to the concerned Gram Panchayat ; and (b) all government hats, markets (excluding those under the control of the Department of Agriculture) and ferries to the Panchayat Samiti with power to levy rates thereon within its own jurisdiction.
- (3) The Zilla Parishads have been empowered to control and spend the West Doars Market Fund and the North Bengal Development Fund in the interest of local developments.
- (4) The expenditures for the programmes assigned to the Panchayat bodies by the Government must have to be borne by the assignee departments.

In addition to these measures for consolidating the resource base of the Panchayat certain other measures are also under consideration for augmenting revenue of these bodies.

(1) The Panchayat Samiti shall receive a certain share of the Land Revenue as grants-in-aid every year.

(2) The Zilla Parishad will be awarded the entire proceeds of the Road cess and the Public Works cess realised in the district.

(3) The Panchayat Samitis and the Zilla Parishads shall be given revenue augmentation grant of Rs. 3 lakhs and Rs. 1 lakh respectively per year.

(4) The Zilla Parishad shall get 5 per cent of the land revenue realised in the district.

(5) The Zilla Parishad shall also get 80 per cent of the proceeds from cess.

The Government also extends grants-in-aid to the Gram Panchayats and the Panchayat Samitis to meet the entire expenditure towards pay and allowances of the staff. The Zilla Parishads also get subventions from the Government to meet 80 per cent of the cost towards dearness allowances of its employees. From 1979-80 the Government have started releasing grants to all the three tiers towards travelling expenses and honorarium of the members. ¹¹

It is, however, too early to get a clear picture of the financial resources that the Panchayat institutions need for

11 Panchayat in West Bengal, a publication from the Panchayat Department, Government of West Bengal, P. 5.

implementation of the programmes of socio-economic development of the rural areas and the quantum of resources made available to them as also the impact of the working of the rejuvenated Panchayats on the village life.

2.1.21 The Panchayati Raj Institutions and the Developmental Programmes

Following the policy for decentralisation of power the Government assigned, at the first instance, the following programmes to the Gram Panchayats :

(1) Food For Work Programme ; (2) Rural Works Programme; and (3) Composite Scheme for Rural Reconstruction. The programmes were intended for providing employment to the flood-affected villagers (A disastrous flood broke out in some of the districts of West Bengal in 1978) and quick restoration of community assets destroyed during the flood. Necessary money and materials were made available to the Gram Panchayats for implementation of the programmes.

The Food for Work Programme covers minor irrigation projects construction of dams for preventing flood, making of drains and outlets for water, improvement of village roads, sinking and repair of wells and tube-wells, soil conservation, tree planting, building of schools and community centres etc. The Gram Panchayats must select the schemes after a careful consideration of the local needs and the quantum of available financial resources.

The schemes under the programme taken up for implementation cannot be left to the contractors for execution.

The Gram Panchayats will themselves execute the schemes under the guidance and supervision of the Panchayat Samitis and the Zilla Parishads. Unskilled workers of the locality should be employed and the daily wage for each such worker will be Re.1/- in cash and 2 kilograms of wheat. The Government will have the entire financial responsibility of the schemes.

The Rural Works Programme includes schemes like building of storing places for crops, making irrigation canals, digging tanks and ponds, construction of village roads, development of the community centres, building of dam, soil conservation, production of manures, planting of trees etc. Schemes other than these may also be taken up under the programme if local necessities demand.

For implementation of the schemes under the programme during 1978-79 each Gram Panchayat was assured of a financial grant of Rs. 25,000.00 from the State Government and 25,500 kilograms of wheat to be supplied by the Government of India.

The State Government have also arranged for technical guidance for preparation and execution of the schemes under the programme. (a) Schemes involving an estimated expenditure upto Rs. 5,000.00 may be formulated by the Gram Panchayats without approval from any technical expert ; (b) Schemes involving expenditure between Rs. 5,001.00 and Rs. 20,000.00 must have the approval of the Sub-assistant Engineer or any such technical expert of the Block prior to acceptance by the Gram Panchayats ; (c) Schemes costing more than Rs. 20,000.00 must be passed by the technical experts of the Zilla Parishad before approval of the Gram Panchayats.

Composite scheme for Rural Reconstruction comprises (a) reconstruction of the houses damaged during the flood of 1978 and (b) restoration of community assets like reclamation of land, removal of garbages, repair of the damaged roads, dams, ponds and construction of school building, dispensaries etc.

Under the Composites Scheme for Rural Reconstruction each Gram Panchayat will be awarded financial assistance to the tune of Rs. 100,000.00 — Rs. 50,000.00 for reconstruction of houses and Rs. 50,000.00 for restoration of community assets. This financial assistance will be supplemented by assistance in kind, e.g. supplying wheat for distribution among the workers as part of their wages.

Administration of the assigned programmes :

In formulation and execution of the different schemes under the programmes the Gram Panchayats will have a reasonable degree of administrative independence. They will have necessary guidance from the Panchayat Samitis and the Zilla Parishads in respect of preparation of the schemes but they will select the schemes independently. But certain basic considerations must be there : (a) The schemes adopted must be need-oriented. It means that only such schemes are to be undertaken as may satisfy the felt needs of the locality ; (b) Among the rival needs of the locality the emphasis must be on the immediate need and the project should be drawn up accordingly ; (c) The selected schemes must have to be employment-oriented ; (d) The emphasis should be on production-oriented schemes as far as practicable.

The Food for Work Programme, the Rural Works Programme and the Composite Scheme for Rural Reconstruction are the three important programmes assigned to the Gram Panchayat.

The State Government in later times have assigned many other programmes to the Panchayats for execution. A list of the programmes assigned by different departments during 1978-79 may be quoted.

Statement showing up-to-date programme devolution to Panchayat Institutions*

Name of the tier		Name of the scheme / programme assigned	Assignee Department	G.O. No. and Date
1.		2.	3.	4.
1. Gram Panchayat	(i)	Rural Works Programme	Development and Planning	7405/14M-36/78 dated 28.8.78
	(ii)	Food for Work Programme	Relief and Welfare Department.	9813 dated 19.10.78
	(iii)	Composite Scheme for Rural Reconstruction	-do-	8796/78-37/78 dated 23.10.78
	(iv)	Control and management of Khas and Vested tanks	Board of Revenue	2634 (15) CE (M) dated 7.3.79
2. Panchayat Samiti	(i)	Integrated Rural Development Programme	Development and Planning	9675/18-25/78 dated 25.11.78
	(ii)	Special Programme for construction of Primary School building ('B' & 'C' type)	Education (Primary)	33-Edn (P) dated 6.1.79
	(iii)	Construction of Primary School building under UNICEF'S help to flood-affected Districts ('B' & 'C' type)	-do-	683-Edn (P) dated 23.4.79

1.	2.	3.	4.
	(iv) Programme for distribution of nationalised text books	-do-	1166-Edn. dated 8.6.78
	(v) Control and Management of Khas or Vested Ferries	Revenue	2634 (15) CE (M) dated 7.3.79
	(vi) Functions of Land Reforms Advisory Committee at the Block Level	Board of Revenue	333GE dated 10.1.79
	(vii) Rural Housing Schemes for Landless Labourers	Panchayat and C.D., -CD Branch	615-RH dated 8.5.79
	(viii) Rural Water Supply	Health and Family Welfare	PA/2066-7066/3D-8/78 dated 31.5.79
	(ix) Scheme for unemployment assistance	Labour	Order under issue
3. Zilla Parishad	(i) Special Programme for Construction of Primary School building in flood affected districts ('A' type)	Education (Primary)	93-EPN(P) dated 6.1.79
	(ii) Construction of Primary School building with UNICEF'S money in flood affected districts ('A' type)	-do-	683-Edn (P) dated 23.4.79
	(iii) Construction of Primary School building in Flood-affected districts	Chief Minister's secretariat	2529-2538 PSCM dated 19.3.79
	(iv) Sinking of Tube-wells in flood-affected districts	Chief Minister's secretariat	2718-2730 PSCM dated 28.4.79
	(v) Construction of Block /Samiti Building	Panchayat and C.D., C.D. Branch	26470AZP dt.12.2.79
	(vi) Repair/Restoration of properties of Panchayati Institutions affected by	Panchayat and C.D. (Panchayat)	1550 AZP dt.12.2.79

1.	2.	3.	4.
(vii)	Expansion of the Blocks/Samiti building and Zilla Parishad Offices	Panchayat and C.D. (Panchayat)	
(viii)	Special Nutrition Programme	Relief and Welfare	4594-SW dt. 8.6.79
(ix)	Programme for development of North Bengal	Development and Planning	2981/15- 35/78 dt. 2.4.79
(x)	Pilot intensive Rural Employment Project in Jhargram Sub-division of Midnapore district	-do-	5665 dt. 24.6.78

* Quoted from 'Panchayat in West Bengal' PP.7,8, a publication of the Panchayat Department, Government of West Bengal.

2.1.22 Observations

These assigned programmes may kindle among the Panchayat members a new sense of responsible leadership and initiative and help the process of diversification of the rural economy so that the benefits accrue to the rural underprivileged.

Extension of grassroot democracy and involvement of the rural masses in the task of rural reconstruction through the working of the Panchayat Raj Institutions will remain a far cry if the enthusiastic rural leadership does not have the knowledge and experience of discharging the powers, functions and responsibilities and the large army of government officials employed for administering rural developmental programmes does not

have psychological adjustment with the elected representatives, reflecting a team spirit. The two prerequisites are, therefore, (a) imparting right type of training to the Panchayat members as well as the officials; and (b) making available the knowledge and experience of the experts in the field. If these conditions are satisfied an administrative set-up responsive to the needs of the rural population may be built up.

(a) It is reported that the State Government organised extensive training for the Panchayat members and the officials. "Training courses were organised throughout the State for the three-tier Panchayat bodies in a phased manner. Beginning with the trainers' training at Kalyani Orientation and Study Centre the training programmes were organised at the district, sub-divisional and block levels. About 19,000 Panchayat personnel and officials received the training in the State for which about Rs. 20 lakhs were spent under the plan-provision. Various seminars, symposia, workshops were organised highlighting the multi-disciplinary approach to rural development. The massive training programmes organised by the Department have helped the Panchayat personnel in matters of knowledge, skills, and motivations in working the Panchayat System." 11A

"The basic object of these training programmes is to develop the vast human resources that are available in the countryside through Panchayats and to harness it for all round growth of the rural sector." 12

11A Left Government completes three years— a publication from information and cultural affairs department, Govt. of West Bengal, P. 3.

12 Panchayat in West Bengal, a publication of the Panchayat Department, Government of West Bengal, P. 6.

(b) The State Government have also placed the services of such officials at the disposal of the Panchayat bodies as have rural backgrounds and enough experience of rural works.

Each Gram Panchayat shall have the services of one Gram Sevak who will assist the Panchayat members in preparing and executing different schemes and maintaining accounts. As a matter of policy it has been decided to recruit the Gram Panchayat secretaries from among the villagers satisfying conditions for eligibility.

The Block Development Officer will be the executive officer of the Panchayat Samiti and the Panchayat Extension Officer will serve as the secretary of the Panchayat Samiti. Such an arrangement may bring about co-ordination between the Panchayat Samiti and the Block Development Organisation.

The Zilla Parishad is responsible for formulation and implementation of schemes for the development of the district. It is, therefore, imperative that there should be harmony, co-ordination and understanding between the Zilla Parishad and other organs of the district administration. With this end in view the District Magistrate has been made the Executive Officer of the Zilla Parishad and a senior officer of the West Bengal Civil Service Cadre will assist him as the Secretary of the Zilla Parishad.

In addition to this, the services of the technical experts and other government employees of the departments like the Community Development, Development and Planning, Relief and Welfare etc. have been made available to the Panchayat bodies.

✓ The imagination and initiative of the elected representatives combined with the tact, knowledge, and experience of these officials may make the Panchayat machinery more effective and meaningful. ✓

2.1.23 Conclusion

It is to be admitted that the present State Government have allowed the Panchayat institutions more freedom and initiative in respect of planning for rural development and execution of the projects. Measures for strengthening the financial base and supplying the necessary inputs like administrative and technical guidance have also been taken. It is, however, too early to make any comment on the working of the Panchayat institutions under the new rural leadership. Exposure of these bodies to various fields of problems with the passage of time will put the rural leadership as well as the government policy towards the Panchayati Raj in West Bengal to the real test.

2.2 Panchayati Raj in Jalpaiguri

The Panchayati Raj of Jalpaiguri is about 18 years old. The first elections were held between 1958 and 1964 when one Zilla Parishad, thirteen Anchalik Parishads, ninetythree Anchal Panchayats and five hundred and seventyfive Gram Panchayats were constituted. The elections were held under the provisions of the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1957 and the West Bengal Zilla Parishads Act, 1963. Subsequent elections due to be held under a 4-year cycle could not, however, be held for various reasons.

In a harmonious and peaceful atmosphere but with unlimited enthusiasm rural voters participated in the elections. They welcomed the formation of the Panchayat institutions as the most trusted organisation for democracy and development. In fact, to them the Panchayat had the image of the rural government and as such a new sense of expectation was born among the rural masses. The Panchayat institutions were entrusted with the task of comprehensive rural development. (But the most inhibiting factor was finance.) Funds at their disposal appeared to be too limited for the wide variety of developmental activities they were expected to perform. So, the Panchayats could make only a limping start. Their efforts for realisation of taxes and fees were not very rewarding. Donations and voluntary contribution of physical labour also did not appear to be very encouraging. But subsequently during the emergency of 1975 collection of taxes and fees recorded an all time improvement and Jalpaiguri had the distinction of realising the highest amount of taxes and fees among the districts of West Bengal. During the first few years of the working of the Panchayats tax realisation hardly exceeded thirty per cent of total assessment. But in 1975-76 the revenue from tax-sources came to be Rs. 7,23,192.00.

This performance of the Panchayats in realising taxes received much appreciation from the State Government and this was reflected in extending incentive grant of about Rs. 1,80,000.00 to the Panchayat institutions of Jalpaiguri during the period under study. The State Government also released Rs. 1,20,900.00 as lump grant and additional lump grant for developmental works by the

Anchal Panchayats. During 1975-76 the State Government awarded a capital grant of Rs. 77,622.00 for construction of office buildings of the Anchal Panchayats. Fourteen Anchal Panchayat office buildings were built with the said grant supplemented by the Anchals' own funds. Proposals and estimates were also submitted to the government for construction of ten more Anchal Panchayat office buildings. The project called for an investment of Rs. 60,000.00 more.

Among the variety of welfare and developmental activities the Panchayats were expected to take up, the following deserve special mention :

Different agricultural developmental projects, supply of drinking water, maintenance and construction of village roads, repair and construction of culverts and sagoos, making drains for irrigating agricultural plots, holding agricultural exhibitions, development of schools, clubs and libraries, arrangement for games and recreations, development of cottage and small-scale industries, electrification of streets, building earthen dams and embankments for prevention of flood, setting up adult literacy centres, encouraging fisheries etc.

The achievement of the Panchayats of Jalpaiguri during their short span of life in providing the infrastructure and in the sphere of minor welfare and developmental activities may be taken note of. Till 1976, they sunk about 5,000 tube-wells and wells for providing drinking water to the people of different localities, launched more than 4,000 agricultural projects, held about 1,500 exhibitions and demonstrations for improvement of

agriculture, constructed 300 drains for irrigation of plots and built a good number of dams and embankments for prevention of flood. About 3,000 kms. of unmetalled village roads and more than 2,000 culverts and bridges were constructed and repaired. The Panchayats also extended financial assistance to about 600 schools and 200 clubs and libraries besides arrangement of rural games and sports and different recreational functions on 400 occasions.

Despite the works done by the Panchayats people do not appear to be very much enthusiastic about them and the wide gap between the performance of these institutions and popular expectations have lowered the image of Panchayati Raj before the rural masses. The members also seemed to have lost the zeal and initiative they displayed during the first few years of the Panchayati Raj. The slackness among the members and the indifference of the rural people about the Panchayats were, according to many, due to the fact that elections were not held for a long time.

The Rural Leadership Development Scheme which came into offing in 1975 was, however, a welcome move and was largely successful in eliciting a good response particularly from the younger section of the rural community. The scheme was intended for injecting dynamism and a sense of confidence into the rural life. An atmosphere for harmonious co-operation between the Panchayat institutions and the local clubs and organisations was created.

In 1976 the scheme was introduced in as many as 100 Anchals while it covered only 5 in 1975. 59 youth organisations

participated in the scheme in 1976. The scheme embraces tea plantation, family welfare, small savings, social service, welfare of the youths, games and sports and recreation, installation of Gobar Gas Plant (cow dung gas plant), public health and sanitation, production of chemical fertilizers etc.

Within a year of the launching of the scheme 1,25,000 trees were planted, many wells were reclaimed and repaired, 10 kuchha drains were made and about 1,000 holes were dug for chemical manures, 12 villages were earmarked for small saving operations, 15 Sanchayaika (Savings organisations) were opened and 8 Gobar Gas Plants were set up. About 5,000 couples were sterilized under the scheme.

It is to be noted that the State Government did not extend any financial grant for the scheme. The entire scheme was financed partly from the Anchal Fund and partly from voluntary contributions of the local people in cash or in kind.