



PANCHAYATI RAJ AND THE DECENTRALIZATION OF DEVELOPMENT PLANNING IN WEST BENGAL

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ABSTRACT

India is one of the very few post-colonial countries having a continuous history of democratic rule. India, after independence, accepts liberal-democracy as its mode of governance and the Constitution of the country as usual guarantor of universal adult franchise so that its citizen can enjoy political rights, but it does not provide adequate scope for decentralization. The Constitution, however, has not totally remained silent on the issue, it has provided for an institution of grassroots governance in Art. 40. Yet, the placement of this provision of the panchayats in the Directive Principles the nonjusticiable part of the constitution, kept the case for grassroots democracy weak for a long time. It is only after the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution in 1992, that the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), the institution of self-management of the rural people and the Gram Sabha and the Gram Sansads, the platforms of the people representing direct democracy for enjoying economic decentralization, are made compulsory in India. It has been decided, of late, that all local developmental projects would emerge from the discussions held in these people's platform and the PRIs or the development departments would be entrusted with implementing those.

Keywords: *Panchayati Raj, Decentralization, Planning, West Bengal*



1. INTRODUCTION

In West Bengal, the CPI(M) immediately after coming to power in 1977 because of its leftist orientation became interested in experimentation with participatory democracy and resorted to a programme of radically reconstructing the moribund institutions of grassroots democracy in rural Bengal. The party initially thought only of political decentralization but once the poor have their political control firmly established over these institutions, they thought of expanding it into the economic sphere. Thus the idea of the party came to be in tune with that of the theorists like John Fredmann who tried to show that political empowerment has a direct linkage with economic empowerment.³¹ Thus the CPI(M) which has a stronghold over the PRs in the state enunciates three objectives for its rural development policy: to involve the entire people in the process of development by democratic decentralization of the power structure, to bring about a change in the correlation of class forces in favour of the poor and working people, and to raise class-consciousness through struggles over development.

India is the largest democracy in the world. In participatory democracy it is expected that people would be associated with its decision-making process as directly as possible, otherwise it would become a pseudo-democracy where the role of the people simply confined to selection of rulers at regular intervals. This is one of the reasons behind setting up of federal structures and creation of local self-governing institutions which, no doubt, provides adequate scope for its citizens to participate in the power process. However, the creation of political structures like the PRs and providing adequate scope to the people in political process at the local level is not enough, for the uncongenial and unequal economic condition may act as a hindrance to the free and fair participation of the common people in the decision-making authority. Political decentralization is meaningless without economic decentralization as economic power is the core of social power. In other words, economic decentralization is necessary for political decentralization, hence the issue of decentralized planning, the offshoot of economic decentralization is the theme of the present study.

Within a decade of Indian federal statehood, its citizens felt the need of creating PRs to provide an environment for enjoying political decentralization. However, economic power seemed to remain highly centralized; policy-makers did nothing in this regard and that turned to be the prime cause of



the failure of the PRis after the initial zeal for it was faded. Until the Janata Regime, the policy-makers were hesitant to decentralize economic power. Economic planning was then a centralized effort confined to the Planning Commission which was composed of eminent economists and politicians- the upper echelons of the society. As such, rural development whose main essence is the upliftment of the living condition of village India seems to have severely hampered because the economists and politicians, though they may be experts in their respective fields, lacked local knowledge pertaining to the needs and requirements. During the mid-eighties, the Central Government in order to rejuvenate rural India, found no other alternative but to accept, in principle, the idea that rural development programmes should be planned locally by the local people. The PRis being the storehouse of local knowledge were found to be the best suited institutions and vested with the power of planning in accordance with the local needs. Thus planning, so far centralized at the national headquarters became decentralized at the grassroots, e.g. decentralization of economic power became a reality. This marriage between rural development and the PR is ensured two things: first, in theory, political decentralization and economic decentralization came to be synthesized and second, in practice, the projects taken up for rural development claimed to have become more realistic, meaningful, and participatory.

1.1 Problem Statement

To evaluate people's participation in West Bengal, the present study attempts to make a critical assessment of economic decentralization pursued through the PRis in West Bengal during the last two decades. Technically, the process of economic decentralization has now been popularized as decentralized planning and, recently, it is attracting the attention of the scholars working in the field of local self-government, especially in the sphere of rural development both in India and other Third World countries. Since the Left Front Government came to power in the state in 1977, as stated before, a number of studies have been carried out on the performance of Panchayati Raj in West Bengal, mainly in the sphere of political decentralization. However, there seems to have a considerable research gap in evaluating the role of the PRis in the state from the perspective of its performance in decentralized planning. Most studies have just touched the issue and it seems very few systematic studies so far have been conducted from this angle. However, genuine decentralization involves conferring of the real power, both political and economic, on the local authorities and the process of conferring economic



power upon local bodies starts from decentralized planning. This provokes the researcher to undertake this sphere as his research enquiry. As the central concept of this study is decentralized planning, besides examining the above-mentioned issues empirically, the present study will also attempt to provide a conceptual analysis of decentralization in general and decentralized planning in particular; the experiences of decentralization in various Afro-Asian and Latin American countries; critical analysis of the genesis of decentralization in India since the pre-British days; the relation between decentralized planning and Panchayati Raj, a comparative experience of decentralization in different states in India; and a critical analysis of the growth of decentralization in West Bengal.

1.2 Rationale of the Study

It has been made amply clear in the chapter that decentralized planning and Panchayati Raj are closely interwoven and one cannot go without the other. The tighter is the bond between the grassroots planning and the local self-governing institutions, the greater is the prospect of the fruits of development of various people-oriented projects percolating at the grassroots. To establish the contention, an elaborate sketch is drawn of the central sponsored rural development programmes of post-independence India for tackling poverty which were not implemented through the PRIs and resulted in utter failure in the sense that the benefits have not reached the downtrodden. In contrast, the state of West Bengal has achieved commendable success in this regard, as it has sought to implement these programmes of development through the PRIs which were revived and reinvigorated since 1980s. A comparative study of the decentralized experiences in other states of India has been presented in the chapter by grouping the states into four categories. By way of discussion, the chapter has highlighted the issue of structural, functional and financial decentralization the three important facets of decentralized governance, and that of people's participation at the grassroots level in various states in India in order to come to a conclusion regarding the performance of decentralized planning in various states of India. It first discusses the topographical situation, demographic features and political scenario of the district of Burdwan. Then the research findings on the operation of decentralized planning in the district are presented in the chapter. Here the framework of decentralized planning presently followed in the district which has come out in course of enquiry, is given a proper place to arrive at a conclusion regarding the level of structural decentralization prevailing in the district, in particular, and West Bengal, in general. The scope and extent of people's participation in decentralized planning without



which a decentralized democratic structure becomes symbolic, is also discussed here empirically. This chapter also analyses the levels of functional and financial decentralization and tempts to point out how far benefits are percolating down to the downtrodden with the obvious purpose of assessing whether optimum benefits from available resources have been received in the district.

1.3 Geographical Location

Geography of West Bengal, a state in eastern India, is diverse, of high peaks of Himalaya in the northern extremes to where Himalayas are in the north and sea is at the south, with both plains and plateaus covering the remaining region. West Bengal is on the eastern bottleneck of India, stretching from the Himalayas in the north to the Bay of Bengal in the south. It lies between 85 degree 50 minutes and 89 degree 50 minutes east longitude, and 21 degrees 25 minutes and 27 degrees 13 minutes north latitude. The state has a total area of 88,752 square kilometres (34,267 sq mi). With Bangladesh, which lies on its eastern border, the state forms the ethno-linguistic region of Bengal. To its northeast lie the states of Assam and Sikkim and the country Bhutan, and to its southwest, the state of Orissa. To the west it borders the state of Jharkhand and Bihar, and to the northwest, Nepal. The capital of the state is Kolkata, the third-largest urban agglomeration and the seventh-largest city in India.

West Bengal is a state in the eastern region of India along the Bay of Bengal. With over 91 million inhabitants, it is the fourth-most populous state and the fourteenth-largest state by area in India. Covering an area of 88,752 km² (34,267 sq mi), it is also the seventh-most populous country subdivision of the world. Part of the Bengal region of the Indian subcontinent, it borders Bangladesh in the east, and Nepal and Bhutan in the north. It also borders the Indian states of Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar, Sikkim and Assam. The state capital is Kolkata, the third-largest metropolis, and seventh largest city by population in India. West Bengal includes the Darjeeling Himalayan hill region, the Ganges delta, the Rarh region and the coastal Sundarbans. The state's main ethnic group is the Bengalis, with the Bengali Hindus forming the demographic majority.



1.4 Scope of the Study

Decentralization symbolizes democratic process of power sharing in decision making and is based on the principle that most decisions are to be taken by the people who will be affected by them. Decentralization of power aims at involvement and commitment of the people in development, mobilization of support and utilization of resources in a better manner for national development, reduction in delay in decision making and implementation, greater equality in allocation of resources and investments as well as reduction in apathy of administration to client. It further provides a necessary precondition for socio-cultural and politico-economic development as greater equity is presumed more likely when representatives from various lifestyles take part in deciding development issues. Any form of community development in the absence of decentralized democracy appears to be ineffective. The concept of decentralization, thus, designed to stimulate development at the grassroots has many justifications for the Third World. However, the experiences of these countries show that decentralization cannot always be granted as a readymade solution to all the political, administrative and economic misfortunes of these countries. It is because, first, creation and promotion of decentralized institutions in these developing countries are dictated by a combination of administrative, political, legal, economic, social and cultural considerations. Second, what is more important, a well-designed policy of decentralization cannot be adequately implemented unless a number of preconditions are met. Broadly speaking, these preconditions include: genuine support and commitment of politicians at the centre and at the local levels; readiness on the part of the local community to participate; availability of financial and material resources at the grassroots level to carry out the devolved activities. The real test of decentralization is not the piecemeal division of the number of political institutions or agencies but the effective diffusion of power and responsibility, and the proper devolution of functions and finance among the different layers of administration. Genuine decentralization involves conferring of the real power, both political and economic, on the local authorities and the process of conferring economic power upon the local bodies starts from decentralized planning.



1.5 Limitations

- The study has undertaken the people's representatives of the panchayats but has not included the MLAs and MPs elected from the locality. This has been mainly due to their non-availability at the field owing to their engagements at the Parliament, Assembly, or otherwise.
- It would have been better if the spatial coverage of the study were wider. The researcher being beset with time-constraint because of his full-time teaching assignment at the undergraduate and part-time assignment at the postgraduate level has failed to approach all the 31 blocks of the district while collecting data.
- The representation of women should have been much wider in the sample. Female representation in the sample that has been studied is nearly 36 percent compared slightly higher than 47 percent of females in the district as per 1991 census.
- The researcher has chosen a few variables which are considered by him significant for the study. In judging what the significant variables are, the researcher might have been somewhat arbitrary. There might remain some other variables equally important to have been included in a study of this kind.
- Adoptability and appropriateness of measuring techniques might have certain limitations, but the appropriate confirmation or correctness remains a problem.

1.6 Hypothesis

- (i) analysis of decentralized planning dealing with the issue of associating people's participation in area planning with the obvious purpose of making plans a democratic exercise
- (ii) The concepts of local self-government, the institutional form of the political ideal of democratic decentralization, one of the prime preconditions for making decentralized planning successful and people's participation, the cardinal point of decentralized planning, have also been discussed with proper emphasis.



- (iii) The control of the Central Government over village affairs in ancient India was marginal and the village authorities enjoyed undisputed authority over local issues.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Prabhat Kumar Datta (2020) In India, the idea of decentralized planning gained momentum after the country became independent in 1947 but its rudimentary practice was not completely unknown before 1947. In post-independent India a number of government committees and commissions had recommended for introduction of decentralized planning at different points of time. The most remarkable event in this regard were twin Constitutional amendments which clarified the role of local bodies and institutionalized participation of the people which signalled what is often called a paradigmatic change. The amendments gave decentralized planning constitutional sanction and sanctity, and provided a model of planning for the whole country. In this paper, an attempt has been made to capture the different phases in the evolution of the decentralized planning processes in India as a backdrop and to assess and analyse the experiences of introduction of decentralized planning in one state of the Union of Indian states called West Bengal. It is one of the states where the exercise was done through active participation of people sought to be achieved through institutional structures created in the villages. This paper tries to make use of the available secondary data to arrive at some of the major conclusions and to justify the contentions made. Reference has also been made to some limited field work which was done through village survey. The authors have also highlighted some of the key emerging issues which call for further research. It also seeks to explore what could be the probable lessons the developing countries in general, and India, in particular.

Rajiv Sen (2013) After forty years of experiments in democratic decentralization, the constitutional directive was taken seriously and by 73rd (Amendment) Constitution Act of the Indian Constitution, the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) were accorded constitutional sanction. In order to ensure effective participation of the people in line with the requirements of local democracy as well as to revitalize and reorient the civil society, new institutions in the form of Gram Sabha were brought into being. The state of West Bengal pushed the idea of local democracy a step further by devising another institution below the Gram Sabha, namely, Gram Sansad to ensure more effective and more functional grassroots democracy.



Kunal Bandyopadhyay (2015) People's participation is usually seen as a vital aspect of democratic governance. Many experts claim that people's participation has a positive effect on the quality of local governance. This paper examines whether effective people's participation can bring about changes in the decentralized planning process in Gram Panchayats. The paper also focuses on the relationship between citizens and local government from a citizens' perspective. For the purpose of this study purposively two Gram Panchayats were selected from Birbhum district, West Bengal. The present study examined how far the steps followed during implementation of decentralized planning projects/process were successful in creating meaningful participation in decision making at the local level. Result shows that the role of citizens in the development projects is limited. Nevertheless, the study argues that citizen involvement has a number of positive effects on governance; not only do people consequently feel more responsible for public matters; it increases public engagement, encourages people to listen to a diversity of opinions, and contributes to a higher degree of legitimacy of decisions. One negative effect is that not all relevant groups and interests are represented. Patronage and clientelism is a cause of concern for certain areas. The article concludes that for a healthy democracy at the local level, aspects of democratic citizenship are more important than having a direct say in decision-making.

Rajni Kumari (2016) The present research work study about the need of decentralization planning in India. The review of literature clearly emphasis on the need for responsive administration to match the people's needs and aspiration at ground level. The present study examine the system of decentralized planning process at the block and grassroots levels. Even after 64 years of independence, India is still on building steps in decentralization planning. Decentralization is a way of involvement of every person to be a part of the system. Decentralization Planning provide a local platform for people to meet and discuss the local development problems, analyses the development and administrative actions of the elected representatives, thereby ensuring transparency and accountability.

Sujit Kumar Paul (2014) The term "decentralisation" has generally been used to refer to a variety of institutional reforms. It has sometimes been considered as a change in the organisational framework in which political, social and economic decisions are made and implemented. It is also understood as a mechanism to transfer responsibility and authority. In recent years, decentralisation has received singular attention all over the world. It has been considered as one of the most important elements in



development strategy. It is a global and regional phenomenon, and most countries have attempted to implement it as a tool for development, as a political philosophy, and as a mechanism for sharing responsibility at different levels. Since 1980s, developing countries have increasingly adopted decentralised form of governance. Decentralisation means the transfer of authority and responsibility from central to intermediate and local governments. Although the democratic decentralisation in terms of Panchayati Raj Institutions (village councils) was a post-Independence phenomenon, there has been a legacy and tradition of village panchayats since time immemorial in India. The 73rd and 74th Amendment Act, 1993 of the Constitution of India has made the Panchayat an institution of self-government. As per the constitution, Panchayats shall prepare plan for economic development and social justice at their level. The District Planning Committee shall integrate the plan so prepared with the plans prepared by the local bodies at district level. The success and failure of the Panchayats would depend on planning and implementation. It also depends on maximum people's participation at every stage of planning process, from proposal to implementation. People's participation in local-level development has been exercised through the formulation of the Panchayat-level development plan, project coordination at intermediate and district levels of the Panchayats.

ARITRA CHAKRABARTI (2015) Participatory communication is intended to promote sustainable and systematic use of communication in the development process to ensure people's participation at all level of development initiatives. Decentralized Planning means preparation and implementation of development plan by the people for their own welfare. Strengthening Rural Decentralization (SRD) with support from DFID had formally started in West Bengal in 2005. In the first phase of SRD programme, 52 Gram Panchayats were selected in Murshidabad district for implementation of the same. This study seeks to evaluate the output of SRD programmes qualitatively and quantitatively and understand the aspect of volunteerism in participatory approach to village planning. The plans prepared by the villagers were based on local needs.

Joe Varghese (2007) Public sector decentralization has been a priority of many countries during the last two decades and has been accepted by the groups and regimes from opposite ends of the political spectrum (Collins and Green, 1994). In health, decentralization is about improving responsiveness and incentive structure by transferring ownership, responsibility and accountability to States, districts, local communities or individuals (WHO, 2000, Vaughan et al., 1984). It can assume different forms



depending on the level, personnel, and the kind of power decentralized and can be administrative, fiscal or political. Its actual shape, however, depends on the government, political and administrative structures and objectives and Organization of the healthcare system (Mills et al., 1990). The significance of political decentralization is the transfer of planning and control of resources to the elected civil bodies. People are expected to be participants in, not simply the beneficiaries of, development programmes (Datta, 2000). Hence, it cannot be expected to be different from the centralized planning process unless there is an inherent mechanism for people's participation. To be both effective and long lasting, people's participation must not remain as a structure imposed from outside (Zakus and Lysac, 1998). It must be rooted in their expectations and supported by needed and usable information, material resources and significant stakeholder commitment. The real challenge is to achieve the optimum people's participation, which is determined by the complex political and social milieu, tradition and culture.

M.A. Oommen (2004) Despite over more than half a century of the Indian republic, governance in rural India has failed to improve the quality of life of the average villager. He/She continues to live as the victims of innumerable unfreedoms. That Kerala has out distanced the rest of India in terms of its social and human development attainments is now fairly well acknowledged in the development literature and among policy makers throughout the world. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment is a great initiative to establish 'institutions of local self-government' with the task to prepare and implement 'plans for economic development and social justice'. Responding to this amendment Kerala has launched in mid-1996 a unique decentralized planning experiment to enhance participatory democracy and quality of life of the local people. This paper is a critique of this experiment to draw lessons for the other Indian states (which still lag way behind Kerala) and for Kerala State itself to put decentralization and democratic practices on a sound and stable footing.

2.1 Research Gap

As the research has been done till now some other developments in Indian economy and polity have also forced a decision in favour of conferring of economic power to the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) by reforming the concept of centralized planning in the country. It may be recalled that the national objectives of planning in India are: increase in the rate of growth; reduction in poverty,



unemployment and inequalities; rapid industrialization of the economy and modernization of the society; improvement in the quality of life of the people, especially of the weaker sections; promoting active involvement of the people in the process of development; initiating changes in the attitudes and values of the people and the like. Macro-plans sought to achieve these objectives in India. Nevertheless, one cannot overlook the fact that some of these objectives would be better met through local level planning and the result would be delighting if the initiative comes from the local areas. Yet, for a very long time planners in India had lost sight of this perspective and continued to focus on the national and state level plans. With the realization that macroplans hardly could reach the benefits of development to the common man, the need for involving the people in the process of plan formulation and implementation was appreciated. The following passage accurately captures the mood of academics and policy makers: "Everything cannot be done by government alone. Energies of the people will have to be released, especially, in the rural areas so that they will participate in the development of their area. Therefore, public participation is an essential instrument and this would help in assessing the felt needs of the people, mobilizing local resources for plan implementation, carrying out people's sector, reducing resistance to plan implementation by mobilizing popular support and cooperation. Thus there must be people's participation in decision-making, in implementation, in the delivery of benefits and in the assessment or evaluation of the results.

3. OBJECTIVES

- 1.** To enquire into the framework of decentralized planning presently followed in the district of Burdwan in West Bengal,
- 2.** To enquire how far people's participation is ensured in decentralized planning
- 3.** To enquire how far the benefits of development are percolating down to the poorest of the poor through the decentralized planning process
- 4.** To enquire into the issue of functional and financial decentralization, the two other basic spheres of decentralized planning

5. To enquire into the perception of the people regarding local area development achieved through the working of panchayats which would provide some insight about the functioning of decentralized planning.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Regarding methodology, it can be stated that the study is descriptive-cum analytical in nature. The data has been collected from both primary and secondary sources. While examining the genesis of decentralized planning, the method of historical research is followed. Method of content analysis is also used here to make the study more meaningful. For narrating the decentralized experiences of different countries as well as different states in India, information is gathered primarily from secondary sources using both government documents and relevant published literature available in different libraries and from personal collection of the researcher. Besides, the researcher has made use of Internet facilities. The method of comparative review is used wherever possible to make the study stylish.

As the basic objective of the study is to assess the functioning of decentralized planning in the district of Burdwan, an empirical study is conducted. This exploratory study proceeds with certain hypothesis and is conducted over fifteen Panchayat Samities of the district. The information required for presenting the structural framework of decentralized planning in the district of Burdwan is gathered primarily from the interviews and discussions held with the responsible government officials as well as 18 people's representatives whose working knowledge can contribute. Analysing the information gathered from the interviews of the common people living in villages in different parts of the district and the views of the local panchayat leaders, the researcher has tried to conclude regarding people's participation in decentralized planning at Burdwan. Relating the common people's response with the statistics available with the local panchayat offices and the data presented in different government documents the researcher to finally come to a conclusion regarding functional and financial decentralization in the district. Based on findings of the above, the researcher has tried to conclude regarding decentralized planning in the district of Burdwan, in particular, and West Bengal, in general.



While conducting his empirical survey the researcher has made use of the techniques of preliminary survey and pre-testing, administered structured questionnaires for quantitative survey, resorted to the method of qualitative study by establishing personal relationship with the respondents and received assistance from the key informants. The technique of random sampling has been used to select the field and finally stratified random sampling has been adopted to draw sample from the field so that views from various cross-sections of the people can be received. The statistical computation of the data has been done with the help of computer.

5. EXPECTED OUTCOME

The study on the experiments of decentralised planning in West Bengal has definitely led to good experiences as well as lessons for India and developing nations. It is very difficult to implement decentralized participatory planning in village India in a state with highly politicized society without spontaneous and sustained bottom-up political initiative and support. And it is possible only when the ruling political party or coalition of parties realize that there is electoral dividend in this kind of programme. Political initiative and interest can hardly be isolated from political incentive. It was observed that proper planning could lead to better results. As planning is not simply socio-economic exercise, it has a technical dimension in the sense it calls for some knowledge about how to weave all the components identified through participation of the stakeholders in the form of a document. In most of our villages this expertise is not easily available. And that is why the Gram Panchayat Facilitating Team created under the DFID sponsored SRD programme and it was to ensure this that provision was made to enlist the support of the school teachers and serving and retired government employees. They have to be motivated for which some incentives need to be provided more particularly when consumerism has slowly crept into rural political life. The study finds that the villagers need to be sensitized about their roles and responsibilities. This is a very difficult task for which informal para meetings or meetings of a section of the villagers who might be considered useful, needs to be organized before the formal meetings are held. There are no established tested methods of doing it. Attempt has to be made to adopt innovative methodologies for this purpose in keeping with local situations.



A well-developed programme always requires meticulous planning and its implementation. As this kind of planning has to be inclusive, adequate care has to be taken to include the voices of the down and out and women. In the traditional village society their voices are not always given due importance and there is also a tendency on their part to shy away from this kind of programme. It has happened in West Bengal which has a long tradition of leftism and where caste system is relatively weak. Their physical presence in the meetings will not necessarily ensure this. They have to be motivated to raise their voices. Care has to be taken to make them understand how and why their voices are important in the processes of village development planning.

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