

Grassroots Democracy: A Study of the Panchayat System in West Bengal¹

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1. Introduction

In this paper we study some institutional features of a very unique and large scale experiment in economic and political decentralization introduced recently in the Indian state of West Bengal. The provision and maintenance of all local public goods, and implementation of most local public projects were handed over to formally elected Village Councils (Gram Panchayats). Previously, these functions were discharged by bureaucrats working under state and central governments, a system that received widespread criticism as inefficient, corrupt and inequitable. The historical roots of this system go back to the colonial period. As Dreze and Sen (1995) point out, while hierarchical centralization may have been necessary for a handful of foreigners to administer a large and potentially rebellious population, there was no good reason for it to have been consistently perpetuated by the successive governments of independent India.² There is much evidence that the poor functioning of local public services in India relates to the centralized and non-participatory nature of their management.

¹ The authors would like to thank Pranab Bardhan, D. Bandyopadhyay, Asim Dasgupta, and Archon Fung for helpful discussions, and Lipi Ghatak for her help in conducting the field survey. However, only they remain responsible for the views expressed in the paper as well as any errors and shortcomings.

Moreover, there is little scope for citizens to voice their demands and criticisms in the formal institutional structures.³ While education, health and poverty alleviation programs take up a fair share of the budgets of the central and the state governments, a very small fraction of the benefits trickle down to the intended beneficiaries because of corruption at various levels of the government . It is common to observe the serious problem of absenteeism of salaried teachers in rural public schools and of doctors in rural public health clinics (Bardhan, 1996, pp. 141).⁴

The experience of West Bengal under the Panchayat system stands in sharp contrast with the other states in India and it has been credited for playing an important role in the impressive economic turnaround of the state since the mid 1980s.⁵ A comprehensive comparative assessment of the Panchayat system is beyond the scope of this paper. We focus instead on a crucial and innovative feature of the Panchayat system - the Village Constituency (Gram Sansad) meetings. These are public meetings held twice every year in villages where elected members of the Village Council have to face the voters and answer their questions regarding the implementation of public projects and use of public funds. In this paper we study the process of participation and deliberation in these meetings covering twenty villages from various parts of West Bengal.

² See *India : Economic Development and Social Opportunity* by Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen, Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 106.

³ See Dreze and Sen, 1995 pp. 105-107.

⁴ A well known phenomenon is that of ghost schools – those for which government funds have been spent but which were never built or sit vacant – the teacher's never show up for work. An army-administered 1998 survey in the Punjab province of Pakistan, which is similar to some of the Northern states in India, estimated around 4000 ghost schools (*The Boston Globe*, October 30, 1999).

⁵ See H. Gazdar and S. Sengupta (1997) : “Agrarian Politics and Rural Development in West Bengal” in J. Dreze and A. Sen (ed.s), *Indian Development : Selected Regional Perspectives*. New Delhi and New York,

2. An Outline of the Panchayat System in West Bengal

The Panchayat system as a form of local self government has been formally in existence in most of the major states of India since the early fifties.. However, nowhere were they allowed to become effective instrument of local self government. The Panchayats did not have any resource at all. They would become slightly active when a natural disaster took place and some relief materials reached their hands for distribution. Elections were not held and the members remained in power without any mandate from the people.⁶

After a decade of political violence and upheavals, the Left Front (LF), a combine of leftist parties led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (known as the CPI-M) came to power in 1977 on the promise of vigorous agrarian and political reform. Its agrarian reform program involved forceful implementation of existing tenancy laws that gave security of tenure and a legally stipulated minimum crop-share to tenants, and distributing landholdings above the legally permitted limits from landowners to small and marginal farmers as well as the landless rural poor. In terms of its achievement on both these counts it is by far the leading state in the country.⁷ Its political reform program consisted of empowering the three tiered Panchayat system with a Gram Panchayat (Village Council) for a cluster of villages at the bottom, a Panchayat Samity covering the area of a block, and a Zila Parishad for the district. Table 2.1 gives an idea about the various Panchayat Units and their area of operation and Table 2.2 shows the number of voters *per seat* for the various levels.

The lowest level electoral unit in the Panchayat system is the Village Council which covers around 10-12 villages totalling around 10,000 residents. It has 15-20 seats of representatives elected every five years. In the 1998 elections, there were 3,226 GPs in West Bengal with 49199 members. Each member is elected by an electorate composed of around 700 members. This GP council is headed by a *Pradhan* (Chief) and an *Upa Pradhan*

⁶ The West Bengal Panchayati Raj Act 1994 by Chandan Datta and Prabhat Datta in STATE PANCHYAT ACTS : A CRITICAL REVIEW, VANI, 1995, pp. 175.

(Deputy Chief) elected from amongst themselves by the GP members. At the ground level, the GP is a very powerful and influential body, wielding effective control over substantial resources and political power.

Above the Village Council, there is the Panchayat Samity (PS) at the Block level. Each PS covers , on an average, about 115 villages and a rural population of about 165736, of whom 101387 are eligible voters. In 1998, there were 329 PSs in West Bengal with a total of 8515 members, all elected by the people. The PS is headed by an elected *Sabhapati* or President. The once all powerful bureaucrat at this level, the Block Development Officer, is now an executive officer to the Panchayat Samity. This provides a direct linkage of the Panchaysts with the administration. It also allows a popularly elected body to exercise control over the administration.

At the highest level, there is a Zila Parishad (ZP), one for each district. In 1993, there were 16 ZPs with 873 elected members. The head of the ZP, the *Sabhadhipati*, enjoys the rank of a Minister of the state government.

The first Panchayat elections were held in 1978.⁸ The then LF Chairman Pramod Dasgupta, the ideologue of the C.P.I.(M) characterised the elections as a struggle for establishing the rights of the poor peasants, agricultural labourers, village craftsmen etc., against the vested interests and exploiting classes in the village and for curbing the power of the village bureaucracy.⁹ Years later, recalling the situation, it was observed by two senior administrators who were familiar with the Panchayat system in the state intimately:

The Panchayats made their appearance at a time of expectation and hope. In 1977 a Left Front led by the CPI (M) had won power at the state level. There was enthusiasm about its policies and programmes, which were generally seen, as pro-people. This was especially the case in the countryside where land reform had much promise for large sections of the under-privileged. The circumstances were thus favourable for the newly arrived Panchayats. Yet it was left to a chance event to give them credibility in the eyes of the people. The devastating floods of 1978 tested the Panchayats as nothing else could have, and they came through with flying colours. Several Panchayat members lost their lives in rescue operations. Success in handling

⁸ An observer commented: "For the first time in this republic's history, there was a keen political contest for the roots of power. It was an open, democratic and peaceful contest in which the major organised political parties tested their strength in the villages on the crucible of the ballot box."Bhowani Sengupta, CPI-M: Promises, Prospects, Problems, Delhi, 1979, p118.

the situation created by floods gave the Panchayat members the confidence they needed to begin doing what they were meant to do in normal times.¹⁰

An important point to be noted here is that the success of the agrarian reform and the political reform were mutually self-reinforcing phenomena in West Bengal. The Mukarji-Bandyopadhyay report points out how the stranglehold of the landowners had already received a jolt through massive drives in 1967-70 under the two United Front Governments for detection and taking over lands that had been clandestinely retained by landowners, violating the land ceiling laws. Over a million acres of good agricultural land was taken over during 1967-70. This considerably weakened the hold of the big landlords who had traditionally led the rural society. Thus, when the first Panchayat elections took place in 1978, the power structure in the rural areas had already altered considerably. “As a result, instead of empowering the already powerful, Panchayats in West Bengal placed power in the hands of newcomers who could be relied upon to implement land reform measures faithfully. In this way, land reforms and the Panchayats supported each other.”¹¹ Without agrarian reforms it is very likely that the Panchayat system would be dominated by the rural landowning elite in spite of the elections.

In turn, the Panchayats played an active role in the enforcement of the agrarian reform program of the LF administration. This involved identifying the beneficiaries, supporting them against possible threats by the landlords, and helping the land bureaucracy register the leases of sharecroppers so as to enable them to take advantage of the tenancy laws.¹²

Unlike any other major state in India regular elections to all three tiers of the Panchayat system has been held on a regular basis ever since the LF assumed power and keenly contested by all political parties. In all the last five elections, the CPI (M) led Left Front and its constituents have retained their overall hold over the Panchayat system at all levels with a share of Village Council seats ranging between 60-70% (see Table 2.3) Still, there is considerable competition among members of the LF at the village level and also, there are many Village Councils which are dominated by Opposition parties. Also, the pattern of the

¹⁰ Nirmal Mukarji and D. Bandyopadhyay, New Horizons For West Bengal Panchayats, A Report For the Government of West Bengal, 1993, p 3

¹¹ Ibid

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relative proportion of Village Council seats going to the LF and the Opposition suggest the presence of electoral cycles indicating some degree of anti-incumbency voting.

From the middle of the 1980s West Bengal achieved an impressive breakthrough in agricultural productivity which placed it as one of the fastest growing states in India. Contemporary observers have found that "... the visible signs of destitution are disappearing from West Bengal's rural areas"¹³ earning the administration praise from many, sometimes unexpected, quarters.¹⁴ Empirical studies have attributed a significant share of the gains in agricultural growth to a combination of these institutional reforms carried out by the LF.¹⁵

The responsibilities of the Village Council have changed over time but typically include administration of public health, primary education, drainage and sanitation, provision of drinking water, maintenance of public utilities, agricultural extension, irrigation, poverty alleviation, land reform, electrification, and housing provision. Resources for various poverty alleviation programmes are now distributed through the Panchayats instead of the state-level ministries. More than half of the development expenditure of the state is made through the Panchayats. The road infrastructure in the rural areas has vastly improved. While charges of leakage and partisan use of resources meant for poverty alleviation programmes are not unheard of, the situation is much better than many other states of India.¹⁶

Another distinguishing feature of West Bengal Panchayats is that many people from the lower and middle rungs of the rural society, poor peasants, sharecroppers, agricultural labourers and school teachers for the first time came to hold seats of power and resource distribution in the rural areas. Sample surveys conducted after the 1978 elections suggested that 75% of the elected representatives of Village Councils came from households owning less than two acres of land.¹⁷

¹³ D. Bandyopadhyay (1997) "Not a Gramscian Pantomime" *Economic and Political Weekly of India*, March 22.

¹⁴ See *The Economist* (July 31, 1993) for an article on the Left Front's successful rural reforms in West Bengal entitled "Left Gets it Right".

¹⁵ See "Empowerment and Efficiency : The Economics of Agrarian Reform" by A.V. Banerjee, P.J. Gertler and M. Ghatak, Working Paper, University of Chicago.

¹⁶ For example, Gazdar and Sengupta (1997) cite various comparative assessments of the implementation of anti-poverty programs of various states that found that the most beneficiaries in West Bengal were from the target groups whereas in other states they were often well off relatives of the panchayat officials.

The 73rd amendment to the Indian constitution in 1992 required that socially and economically weaker sections like Scheduled Castes(SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) should have representation in all levels of the Panchayat in proportion to their presence in the district population.¹⁸ This amendment also reserved one-third of the seats at all levels of the Panchayats for women. So far, the Panchayats even in West Bengal were a male-bastion, women constituting hardly two percent of the members. In the last two elections, a large number of women as well as members of SC and ST have started taking part in public affairs (see Table 2.4).. While there are instances of women candidates contesting as a proxy for their male family members, or not asserting themselves in Panchayats still dominated by men, there are many instances of women taking an increasingly assertive role, an issue which we will address in the next section.

Most interesting from the point of view this conference is the establishment of two types of directly deliberative bodies in 1993. The Village Constituencies, composed of about 700 voters, shall have to meet twice a year under the new rules under which the elected officials will face the voters in a public meeting to review the past and proposed programs, inspect the accounts of expenditure, and suggest new programs and choose beneficiaries of existing programs. The Village Constituency meetings are thus an instrument of *direct participation* of the people for exercising control over elected representatives. They do not have any statutory power or control over the Village Councils but are supposed to act as a grassroots level check on the elected representatives. But, under the rules, the Village Councils have to consider their resolutions. The Village Council, comprising 10000-15000 voters, would also have to meet once a year to review the proposed budget for the next year and the previous year's performance. This is a large body where little effective deliberation is possible. Hence we focus instead on the Village Constituency meetings.

¹⁸ These groups, usually referred to as the 'untouchables', were historically excluded from most occupations other than low-skilled jobs as a consequence of the rigid caste system in India. They consist of roughly 25% of the Indian population and are among the most backward groups.

3. Grassroots Democracy in Action: The Village Constituency Meetings in West Bengal

The Village Constituency meetings are being held in West Bengal only for the last couple of years. Initially, the meetings were not taken seriously, and many constituencies did not hold a meeting as late as May 1998. Table 3.3 gives a picture for all the village constituencies of West Bengal for the May 1998 meetings, just a year before our observations, took place.

In May 1998, there were a total of 36175 village constituencies for the entire state. Overall, Village Constituency meetings were held in less than one-third of the constituencies. Three districts did not provide any information and, in at least three other districts, less than 10 per cent village constituencies held their meetings. On the other hand, there are six districts where from around half to all the meetings was held in May 1998. The data on the rate of attendance of eligible voters in these meetings are not available for this year.

The next round of Village Constituency meetings in West Bengal were held on the basis of number of constituencies which existed after the 1998 Village Council elections (Table 3.4). There were now 44506 constituencies and meetings were held in practically all of them. This is a significant achievement, if one goes by the number of meetings. The average attendance rate in these meetings in the state was around 16 per cent, which appears low.

However, given that an attendance rate of 10 per cent voters is necessary for a quorum, it is not negligible.

3.1 The Design of the Study

The Village Constituency meetings take place twice a year, in May and November. Our aim was to attend and observe the functioning of a cross section of these meetings in May 1999. The meetings last for only two to three hours. Hence the observer, ideally, needed to be one who was familiar with the local situation and personally knew the people assembled. An NGO that had village based workers in several districts of West Bengal assisted us select 20 villages from under its area of operation.¹⁹ The interviewers selected observations personally belonged to the village constituencies where the observations were made. The 20 observation points were thus selected purposively.

All the meetings covered took place between 15-30 May, as announced by the government. The normal practice is for the Village Council (Gram Panchayat) to announce the meeting dates of a particular constituency seven days in advance. In almost all the areas covered by us, the concerned Village Council under which the constituency falls, prepared a leaflet announcing the dates on which the meetings would take place in that constituency. A common practice is for the local representatives of the Village Council to have their employees announce the day and time of the meeting using a public address system or by the beating of a drum to attract the attention of the people. Also, the political parties have their own channels of mobilisation, which are used to mobilise their own members and supporters to attend. The village level workers knew beforehand when the meeting was going to take place in his/her area. They attended the meetings and noted down the details of the deliberations. After the meetings were over, they spoke to a few men and women who had attended the meeting and a few others who did not attend the meetings to get some idea about why they attended or did not attend.. This part of the paper is based on these observations as recorded by the observers who were present in the meetings.

3.2. A Profile of the Districts and the Village Councils Covered by the Study

¹⁹ The NGO is The Tagore Society, a very old and distinguished NGO working in areas of primary health and

The observations were carried out in 20 Village Constituency meetings located under Village Councils in five blocks of three districts of West Bengal (see Table 3. 1). Two of the districts are located in southern parts of West Bengal – North 24 Parganas and South 24 Parganas. Sixteen of the twenty observations are from these two districts. The specific areas in these two districts, which were covered, are on the fringes of the dense forest areas of the Sundarbans, near the Bay of Bengal. The area is extremely backward in terms of all standard economic indicators. The other four Village Constituencies were observed in Tapan Block of Dakshin Dinajpur district in northern parts of West Bengal. This is also one of the least developed areas of West Bengal.

The 20 Village Constituencies are under 14 Village Councils. The 14 Village Councils taken together have 203 elected representatives or members. The smallest two have 11 members each while the largest one has 21 (see Table 3.2.) About 35% of the members of these Village Councils are women which is slightly higher than the percentage of seats reserved for women. Except in two Village Councils, Deulbari and Satjelia, both located in the South 24 Pargana district, the Left Front has an absolute majority in all the others.

In the zone covered in the North and South 24 Parganas district, the CPI (M) and its partner in the Left Front, RSP, are traditionally dominant.²⁰ The Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI), a left leaning party which is opposed to the Left Front, has a strong influence in some specific pockets. In recent times, the Trinamool Congress (TMC), a breakaway group from the traditional centrist opposition to the Left Front, the Congress, and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the conservative party that now heads the central government in India, has started making inroads. It is also to be noted that the Left Front is not a monolithic combine at the grassroots in this part and there is strong rivalry between its two partners, CPI (M) and the RSP, though, on the whole, they work together. In the area covered in the northern district of Dakshin Dinajpur, the CPI (M) and the RSP are traditionally dominant. The opposition party BJP has started making inroads in the area in recent times.

²⁰ These are, respectively, The Communist Party of India (Marxist) and The Revolutionary Socialist Party. The former is the dominant partner of the coalition of the left wing parties that constitute the Left Front that have been in power at the state level for more than two decades.

Of the 20 Village Constituencies whose meetings were observed all are not equal in size in terms of number of voters. The larger ones have more than one elected member of the Village Council. 12 of the 20 constituencies are single-member ones, six have two members each and two have three members each. The 20 constituencies, in all, have 30 members. All the members of the Village Council are required to attend their Village Constituency Meetings.

Table 3.5 gives a brief profile of the elected representatives of the constituencies observed. There are 30 representatives elected from these constituencies. They are locally known as "members" (members of Village Councils). ²¹ Of the 30 Village Council members elected from the Village Constituencies covered by our study, about a quarter are women all of whom listed their occupation as being housewives.²² The average representative is male, forty years old and agriculture is his main source of income. Also, a large majority of the members belong to parties that constitute the Left Front (RSP, CPI(M) and the CPI) with about 30% of the members belonging to opposition parties (BJP, TMC, SUCI).

3.3. Participation Rates in the Meetings and the Profile of the Participants

The 20 constituencies have an average of around 940 voters each. The average number of voters per elected member of the Village Council from these constituencies is 628. In Table 3.6 we show the attendance rates per Village Constituency. The average was 11.7% which is less than that of West Bengal as a whole. But the constituency-wise situation is quite uneven, with less than 10 per cent attendance in half the constituencies. ²³ On the other hand, in six of the 20 constituencies, the attendance level was 15 per cent or more.

²¹ Most of the 20 constituencies (12) are single-member ones. Among the remaining eight, two (Pakhiralaya and Manmathnagar) have three members each. The other six have two each.

²² Although one-third of the seats in the Village Council are reserved for women, here we are looking at the profiles of the members of a sample of Village Constituencies and not that of the Village Councils of which they are a member as a whole.

²³ Though the necessary quorum is 10 per cent, the meeting was adjourned in only one constituency, Eganpur, where only nine out of 623 voters turned up. In some of the other constituencies, it was agreed after some discussion that the meetings would be held anyway as there was no guarantee that there would be a better

Next we compare the composition of the eligible voters to those attending the meetings (see Table 3.7). A striking fact is that these meeting were an overwhelmingly a male-dominated event in spite of official policies targeted towards empowering women, such as reserving one-third of the seats in the village councils. Not that women did not come at all, but their participation level was extremely low - while men constitute 54% of the eligible voters in these constituencies, among those participating in the meetings, 91% were men. Among the socially and economically weaker groups, the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) constitute the largest category. "Others" include the relatively higher caste groups. Muslims, another economically backward group, have a low presence in these constituencies.

Taking all the 20 constituencies together, the "Other" category, representing those who are not SCs and STs and are relatively better-off than them, is the only social category whose participation level was higher than their share among eligible voters.

Table 3.9 provides the occupational background of the voters who attended the meetings. The largest single category is agricultural labourers (43 per cent) followed by farmers with less than two acres of land (41 per cent). Those with more land or had non-farming sources of income, who are also likely to belong to the "Other" category, constituted about 16 per cent of those present.

A distinct feature of the Village Constituency meetings is that those who participated were largely members or supporters of some political party or the other (Table 3.9). Those who do belong to any political party kept away from the meetings. Second, without any exception, in each of the 20 constituencies, a majority of the voters who were present belonged to the party of the elected member, which was the Left Front in 65% of the constituencies. Indeed, the simple correlation coefficient between the party of the elected member and the percentage of voters participating who belong to the same party is 0.95. Still, it would not be fair to conclude that there were no voices of opposition in these

turnout if the meetings were held again. A couple of low-turnout meetings were "repeat" meetings.. They had been convened earlier but had to be adjourned for lack of a quorum. This time they were being held as "adjourned" meetings. Under the existing norms, an adjourned meeting can be held without a quorum.

meetings. The average percentage of participants who did not belong to the party of the elected representative among all the twenty constituencies was approximately 20%.

Low participation, thus, seems to be a feature of the majority of the constituencies. Also, there is some evidence that participation rates are particularly low for the relatively affluent, people belonging to opposition parties, women and minority groups. Our observers spoke the day after the meetings to a cross section of men and women who did not attend the meeting to find out the reasons of their absence. The typical responses from non-participants are listed below:

1. Relatively affluent individuals do not attend these meetings because they do not see any immediate benefits as they are not eligible for financial support under the various poverty alleviation programmes. Among the poor, some such as wage labourers some cannot attend as they have to go out for work. Among them those who expect to get work or other benefits of poverty alleviation programmes attend. Some members of this group alleged that the benefits do not reach the poorest.
2. Political minorities and those not directly associated with political parties stay away as they feel their opinion would have little effect. They feel that the dominant party would do whatever they want to do anyway.
3. Members of backward groups (SC/ST) felt that they did not have much voice in their own party where the leadership consists largely of members of higher castes.
4. Women felt that they are not encouraged to participate. Another common response was that household work made it difficult for them to attend these meetings.

3.4. The Deliberations

Under the existing rules, each Village Constituency meeting should be conducted by the Chief or the Deputy Chief of the Village Council of which the concerned Village Constituency is a part. In case neither is present, the local representative should preside. If there are more than one member, then the senior most official gets the privilege. The locally elected representative or member/s must be present, whether or not the Chief or the Deputy Chief of the Village Council is present.

The significance of the presence of the Chief or the Deputy Chief of the Village Council is that much of the deliberations would be in the form of review of the functioning of the Village Council as well as input for future plans and programmes. Apart from voting in the elections which are held once every five years, the Village Constituency meetings are the only forum in which the people can meet face to face with their elected representatives, provide their input into the decision making process, and voice their criticisms. Among the 20 constituencies observed, the presence or absence of these important functionaries can be seen from Table 3.11. In a majority of the meetings at least one of these influential functionaries were present.

3.4.1. The Voice of the People

Despite the low level of attendance in general, the deliberations were quite lively in some of the meetings. In fact, because of the partisan nature of the gatherings, discussions often led to heated arguments between rival political camps. This was noticed in several meetings where representatives belonging to one constituent party of the Left Front had to face questions from another constituent of the same Left Front because of the ground level rivalry between the two parties (e.g., Sadhupur, Pakhiralaya). A summary of the discussions in the various meetings is annexed to this paper. In most of the meetings, the Village Council functionaries who were present gave an account of the work done in the last six months, i.e., since the November 1998 meeting. In several meetings, though not in all, the accounts for the previous year and budgets for the next year for the entire Village Council area were placed. An analysis of the village-wise deliberations suggest three broad themes :

I . Review of the Village Council Programs and the Performance of the Elected Officials.

II. Raising Demand For New Programmes.

III. People's Participation in Selection of Beneficiaries and Locations for Schemes.

We discuss each of these below.

I Criticism by participants of past performance was a prominent feature of practically all the meetings. These related to :

1. The poor performance and failure to implement programmes promised earlier drew severe criticism. Such criticisms were heard in more than half the villages. The members and other Village Council functionaries were asked to explain their poor performance. These ranged from failure to complete a road or drainage scheme, building of a culvert, installation of a tube well, reexcavation of silted canals, raising the river embankment for protection of fields from saline water, digging of a pond, to the inability to provide loans or houses for people who were selected for such programs in the past.
2. Not giving priority to the felt need of a constituency was another area of criticism.. It could be repairing a road, digging of a pond or installation of a hand pump. In some cases (Madhavpur village) even the locally elected representative agreed with the voters and requested the Village Council Chief who was present to change the priority of some programmes so that building of a culvert , considered urgent by the villagers , could be taken up before other programmes. In at least two villages, landless wage labourers stood up and demanded to know why schemes like road-building, pond digging which were meant to provide some employment to them were always taken up just before the monsoon rains when they would get work in agricultural fields anyway. They demanded that such activities should be taken up earlier, during the lean season when they do not have any work in the fields.
3. The inadequate provision of money or non-release of money for schemes sanctioned earlier were criticised in several villages. The choice of specific locations within a constituency for road building or digging of ponds became controversial issues. Whether the work should be undertaken in one or another part of the village sometimes divided the voters or became a point of criticism against the Village Council functionaries. For example, in East Nimpur village, members of Scheduled Tribes who have their own hamlet within the village stood up and demanded to know why their locality was being neglected in road repair schemes. In Madhavpur, there was a long and heated discussion about the choice of a pond which should be re-excavated. Some argued for a private individual's

pond because the individual was ready to allow the people to use the water for bathing. But others insisted on a pond on public land. In a similar debate in Kantamari village, the Village Council Chief proposed that a private individual's pond be selected for re-excavation . In return for letting the people use the pond for bathing, the individual should be allowed to use some water for irrigating his agricultural land. Water for irrigation being a scarce resource, many people objected to the proposal of the Village Council Chief and it was finally agreed that the individual may be allowed to use the pond for growing fish.

4. The poor quality of the projects undertaken by the Village Council also drew severe criticism in several villages. In Sitalia(2), the villagers compared the poor development activities in their own village with development work in two neighbouring village. In Kalidaspur, people grilled the Village Council representatives about the poor quality of road repair work and the work for repairing the protective embankment on the river.
5. Another issue around which there was heated discussion in some villages was the charge of corruption in programme implementation. In Sadhupur, the local Panchayat had leased out part of a canal to a private individual. There was commotion in the meeting and people wanted to know about the nature of the deal and what would be done with the money. In Sonagan, people wanted know about how much money has actually been spent on a drainage scheme in their village. In Dayapur there were charges of corruption in a road building project. It was pointed out that the labourers who worked on this poverty alleviation project were paid less money at a lesser rate than the official one. In another village, Nimgachhi, there were angry comments and questions from the assembly of voters who charged that the cost shown for a road project in their village was inflated. That belonging to the same party does not necessarily mean that people would come and endorse whatever their party leaders said was evident in South Harishpur . There one wage labourer, belonging to the same Left Front Party that controls the Village Council, stood up and said that a sum of Rs.14000/- was sanctioned for building his house. The accounts showed that the money had been

paid but he has actually been paid Rs.4000/- . He demanded to know what has actually happened to the money. The Chair and the local member hurriedly stood up and promised an enquiry within seven days.

6. Changes in the priority list of 'beneficiaries' or individuals who would be supported under various types of poverty alleviation or welfare programmes was another controversial issue in many villages. In Sitalia (1), the Village Constituency meeting held last year in November had prepared a list of people who should get housing support for a central government sponsored scheme for the poor. Those present vehemently protested and ultimately the local representative and others who were present from the Village Council relented and agreed to follow the original priority order. In Pakhiralaya, Dayapur and Nimgachhi villages, similar charges were made about changes in priority order decided in earlier meetings.
7. Inefficient utilisation of funds or injudicious utilisation of funds was another issue that generated deliberations.. In Sonagan, a particular drainage project had been undertaken. The people of the village pointed out that the money was not being used properly and as a result wastage was taking place. In Dayapur village, a sum of Rs.10000/- was shown as office expenditure by the Village Council. Many pointed out that it was excessive and if this type of expenditure was allowed, soon there would be very little money left for development work.

II. In several meetings, people demanded new plans and programmes for their own areas. In Banstola village, where 60 per cent of the voters present were farmers of various categories, demands were raised for the installation of a deep tubewell for irrigation, ensuring supply of good quality seeds and fertiliser and educating the farmers about new seeds and proper use of fertiliser and pesticides. In Sadhupur, demands were raised for action to pump out saline water that had accumulated in some parts of the village. In South Harishpur, demands were made for old age pension under a central government programme, drainage, tubewells for drinking water and supply of good quality seeds. In Dayapur, there was a demand for taking up a new road maintenance project.

III. There are several poverty alleviation and welfare programmes for which the major part of the funds comes from the Central government. In most states of the country, there is a high degree of leakage and corruption in the distribution of these resources. Selection of ineligible beneficiaries is also known to exist on a large scale. Even in West Bengal, till a few years ago, the selection of beneficiaries was under the control of the powerful leaders in the local Village Council. In recent years, particularly after the Village Constituency meetings started picking up, in many areas people themselves are participating in the process. Sometimes they directly identify potential beneficiaries. On other occasions, Beneficiary Committees are formed by the voters for selection of beneficiaries, or for overseeing a program . Such committees are also being formed to choose a specific location where a programme within a village should be undertaken if there is disagreement among the people. For example, in Madhavpur, there was provision for support to two persons for a housing scheme. The people themselves selected two very poor persons. But interestingly, they cautioned the Village Council that these two persons were so very poor that if the money was handed over to them, the houses would never be built. Under the rules, the money has to be paid to the beneficiaries. So the assembly formed a committee of locals to oversee the work to ensure that the money went for building the house. In Kantamari, two persons were selected for housing. But as money was at the moment available for only one, the voters present decided who should get a priority. In Mathurakhand and Ganahar, the voters present formed a Beneficiary Committee at the request of the chair to oversee selection of beneficiaries and locations for various programmes

3.4.2. Participation of Women

We have already seen that from a purely quantitative view, the participation rates of women in the Village Constituency meetings are very low despite the formal reservation of seats in the Village Councils. Women were present, even if in small number, in 13 of the 20 meetings. Out of these 13 meetings, no questions were asked by women in seven. But in the other meetings, the female participants played an active role. Some of the issues raised by female participants were not about projects involving women per se, such as the inadequacy

of drinking water in their village (Manmathnagar), and the poor functioning of the local primary school for children where the teachers came irregularly (Nimgachhi). But most of the issues raised by them related to the implementation of public projects relating to women, such as :

- Demanding increased opportunities for earning by women by funding skill-development training programs and recruiting more women for wage-labour work in public programs (Sitalia (1), Banstala, and Manmathnagar).
- Demanding formation of committees consisting of only women to oversee women related projects (Banstala).
- In Kalidaspur, female participants openly criticized the Village Council functionaries for diverting the money sanctioned for a nutritional program for pregnant women for other purposes. The latter explained that the previous Village Council administration did not utilize these funds which were lying idle. Since there has been long delays in the disbursement of funds for several other important projects under the tenure of the current Village Council administration, they were reluctantly using these funds. At this point, they were criticized by the female participants for demonstrating the low priority they gave to projects involving.

3.4.3. The Response of the Officials

Whether or not those present are largely members or supporters of the locally elected representative's party, one thing is clear. The Village Council functionaries and the elected representatives cannot always take the voters present in the meeting for granted. They have to allow their past performance to be reviewed by the people and prepare themselves for many uncomfortable questions. The importance of the issues raised may not always be clear to an outsider, particularly from a different cultural context, but, for the people themselves, they are of utmost importance. How do the Village Council functionaries react and how are conflicts managed? A few broad observations are listed below.

1. In some cases where there is overwhelming evidence in favour of the charges brought about by the people, the Village Council functionaries accept the criticism and change

their own position. For example, faced with a concrete charge of manipulating a beneficiary list in Sitalia(1) village, the elected representative and those present from the Village Council had no alternative to restore the original list on the spot. Sometimes, those present themselves are asked to select the beneficiaries or locations of projects.

2. Sometimes the elected representatives and other Village Council functionaries gave a detailed account of the financial situation in respect of various schemes and tried to explain their poor performance in terms of non-availability of funds. For instance, for several months before the meeting, very little of the sanctioned money was released by the state government. In most of the 14 Village Councils under which our 20 constituencies were studies, the money was being released even at the end of May, with a strong directive that the entire money has to be spent before the end of June.
3. In several villages, the voters present were asked to prepare a list of beneficiaries for one scheme or another. When the voters pointed out that those selected earlier had not got their dues, the Panchayat functionaries pacified people by saying that the list should be prepared in advance because very little time is left when the money is released.
4. In one village voters had charged that labourers who had worked in a road repair project had been paid less than the official rate (Dayapur). The explanation given by the officials was that for the same amount of money this would allow giving work to more poor people.
5. In some cases, when concrete charges of corruption were made (i.e., South Harishpur), a promise was made that an enquiry would be held within seven days.

4. Concluding Observations

That the Village Council officials have to give an account of their performance and reply to charges of non-performance or other acts of impropriety and even corruption to the voters in the Village Constituency meetings, is in itself a major development. It stands in sharp contrast with other Indian states, or even the situation in West Bengal a few years ago.²⁴ For example, in many states in Northern India such as Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) most villages still function the way they used to in the colonial period, with a single village ‘headman’ acting as an all purpose intermediary between the local community and the state (Dreze and Sen, 1995, pp.. 105). A recent survey in eastern Uttar Pradesh where two-thirds of the headmen in 82 surveyed villages belonged to traditional landowning caste in that region, notorious for their feudal oppression of lower castes.²⁵

Until very recently the people in the state of West Bengal, like most other states in India, did not have as much access to information about development programs and availability of funds for their own areas as they have today. The only control they had was the ability to vote elected officials out of power every five years. With the introduction of the system of mandatory Village Constituency meetings the people now have access to the accounts of expenditure, are able to question elected officials for the use of public funds and implementation of public projects, participate in deciding the kind of programs that should be undertaken in their villages and who should get priority for specific programmes. Our study of the operation of these meetings indicate a dramatic potential for the true empowerment of the people and democratic decentralisation.²⁶

²⁴ See Pranab Bardhan “Decentralized Development”, Indian Economic Review, Vol. XXXI, No. 2, 1996 for a discussion of the comparative experience of other Indian states, and developing countries.

²⁵ See Dreze and Sen(1995) pp. 105-6. In some cases the rural elite have not only been indifferent to the general promotion of local public services and even to actively oppose their expansion to prevent the empowerment of disadvantaged groups. For example, there is much evidence on landlord resistance to the expansion of primary education in villages in U.P (Dreze and Sen (1995), pp. 105-107).

²⁶ An encouraging trend in some Indian states such as Rajasthan is a growing movement spearheaded by NGOs demanding the right for villagers to have access to information on bills, vouchers and muster rolls on

Yet, there are several reasons for being cautious in our assessment. In the ultimate analysis, the success of the institution of Village Constituency meetings depends on participation of the people.. A single-member constituency has, on an average, less than 700 voters. Even though so few people are involved, participation rates are low, especially for women and other minority groups. Those who do not belong to the ruling political party mostly stay away. Those who do not see any direct benefit for themselves stay away. Even a section of the poor stay away because they do not belong to the right political party or they are busy trying to earn their living.

Second, much of the responses given by the Village Council officials had to do with scarcity of funds or irregular availability of funds, which come from the central and state governments. The Village Councils are almost totally dependent on these funds. They have been empowered to raise their own resources, but do not want to take politically unpalatable decisions. An analysis of the annual budgets of Village Councils to which the 20 constituencies covered in this study show that a Village Council raises on its own only 2-4% of the money spent by it a year. On the other hand, without more funds, the rising demands and aspirations of the people for improved civic amenities and infrastructural development cannot be met. That this is being increasingly realised by the elected functionaries is evident from the fact that in at least two meetings (Banstala and Sadhupur), the locally elected members called upon those who are supposed to pay taxes to the Village Council to pay their taxes regularly.

So long as the Panchayat system remains a channel for distribution of funds targeted for specific programs decided from above, the institution of the Village Constituency meetings would have an important role to play as a grassroots-level monitoring and reviewing body for the utilization of public funds. It would also tend to encourage transparency and accountability of the elected representatives. These are by no means modest achievements. But to move closer to the true ideal of decentralization a necessary condition is that the local governments should raise a minimum amount of the resources from the local area.²⁷ This would give them some degree of autonomy in relation to the central and the state governments and also provide the economic discipline that is required to efficiently produce local services.

²⁷ See Rudolf Hommes “Conflicts and Dilemmas of Decentralization” *Annual World Bank Conference on*