



# **WORKING PAPER 131**

## **DECENTRALISED GOVERNANCE AND PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION : LESSONS FROM WEST BENGAL**

**Md. Nazrul Islam  
S N Sangita**

ISBN 81-7791-087-6

© 2003, Copyright Reserved

The Institute for Social and Economic Change,  
Bangalore

*Institute for Social and Economic Change (ISEC) is engaged in interdisciplinary research in analytical and applied areas of the social sciences, encompassing diverse aspects of development. ISEC works with central, state and local governments as well as international agencies by undertaking systematic studies of resource potential, identifying factors influencing growth and examining measures for reducing poverty. The thrust areas of research include state and local economic policies, issues relating to sociological and demographic transition, environmental issues and fiscal, administrative and political decentralization and governance. It pursues fruitful contacts with other institutions and scholars devoted to social science research through collaborative research programmes, seminars, etc.*

*The Working Paper Series provides an opportunity for ISEC faculty, visiting fellows and PhD scholars to discuss their ideas and research with their colleagues and to get feedback from their peer group. The papers published in the series present empirical analyses of development issues and consider issues of public policy at a sectoral, regional or national level. These working papers undergo review but are not refereed. They present research results, and constitute works*

# DECENTRALISED GOVERNANCE AND PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION: LESSONS FROM WEST BENGAL

Md. Nazrul Islam\*

S N Sangita\*\*

## **Abstract**

*It is proposed in this paper to examine the relationship between decentralised governance and people's participation from empirical evidence. The present paper considers people's participation as an important condition internal to decentralised governance. The study reveals that block planning committee (BPC) and convergent community action (CCA) initiated in decentralised governance which ensures people's involvement in planning and implementation, enables mobilisation of village resources, and also ensures cooperation and network between households, leaders and officials. CCA holds important lessons for effective people's participation in rural Bengal and elsewhere.*

## **Introduction**

The growing discussion on decentralised governance has attracted the attention of scholars and policy makers all over the world. Decentralised governance has been conceived as an instrument for promoting development. It is expected to facilitate effective people's participation, enhance transparency and ensure greater accountability. Decentralised governance is a wider process to local government which encompasses and enables people, community, community-based organisations (CBOs) or non-governmental organisations (NGOs), public and private agencies to work together and to participate in policy formulation and implementation for effective development (Islam and Vyas 2002:6), whereas, the local government

---

\* ICCR Doctoral Fellow in the Development Administration Unit, Institute for Social and Economic Change (ISEC), Nagarbhavi, Bangalore – 560 072, India. E-mail: nazrul71@hotmail.com/nazrul@isec.ac.in

\*\* Professor and Head, Development Administration Unit, ISEC, Nagarbhavi, Bangalore – 560 072, India. E-mail: satyansangita@hotmail.com/sns@isec.ac.in

We thank the anonymous referees and Dr. Alia Ahmad, Lund University, Sweden, for invaluable comments and suggestions on an earlier draft. We also thank Dr. Kripa Sridharan, The National University of Singapore, Singapore, for incisive comments made on a preliminary draft of this paper.

includes people's representatives (elected by the people or nominated by the local officials) and public agencies who can only take part in policy implementation rather than policy formulation (Bhargava and Rao 1978). Decentralised governance is thus a process which allows peoples' involvement in administration and development programmes. It remains significant for the realisation of people-centred development and, therefore, decentralised governance is a strategy for the people to enjoy equal rights, and is an instrument for building the capacity for economic development.

People's participation and its relationship to development has become the favourite topic of discussion and has now moved into government, donor and private sector agencies. It is a revolution in the thinking of scholars, and particularly, donor organisations that makes people's participation the central objective in all parts of life (UNDP 1993). Donor organisations are very enthusiastic about supporting such initiatives. For the first time the United Nations Economic and Social Council has recommended that government in any country should adopt people's participation as a basic policy measure in national development strategy and should encourage the widest possible active participation of all individuals and NGOs, such as trade unions, youth and women organisations in the development process in setting goals, formulating policies and implementing plans. Other donor agencies like USAID (1975) have also made it clear that the American Development Assistance is to be extended in ways that the beneficiaries' involvement becomes mandatory in the planning and implementation as well as in the gains of development. Besides this, the World Bank (1994) has formally agreed to support the government in an effort to promote a more enabling environment for participatory development within the client countries.

All these recommendations have not emerged from any romantic tendency or fashion of change but through experience. Michael Cernea, in his review of twenty-five World Bank projects found that thirteen of them had not achieved the desired result or capacity building in large measure owing to lack of people's participation (Cernea 1987). In this context, the governments of some developing countries have assured that they would devolve power to the local elected bodies for ensuring people's participation to bring effectiveness, efficiency and equity in development programmes (Blair 2000:23). The prevailing view is that people's participation in planning and implementation ensures effectiveness, efficiency and equity in development (Aziz *et al.* 2000:175). Participation gives ordinary citizens a means of voicing their opinion and also a forum for demonstrating their ability to take on the responsibilities in planning, organising, implementing and evaluating community development programmes (Thomas 1992:1).

The issue of participation is primarily associated with the people at the grassroots including the poor and weaker sections, not only because they are the most disadvantaged within the society but also because the rural areas, in comparison to urban areas, have been relatively neglected by various development strategies. This philosophy of a 'people-based' development 'from below' assumes that participation is not only an end in itself but also a fundamental condition as well as a tool of decentralised governance and successful development. The failure of past development strategy is fundamentally linked to the absence of decentralised governance and people's participation (Oakley and Marsden 1984:10).

Today, people's participation has become the heart of good governance that can be considered significant for a number of reasons (Sharma 2000:178). First, it is a means of obtaining information about local conditions, needs and attitudes without which development can fail. Second, people involve themselves in planning and implementation of the project thereby portraying their commitment in its success and thus are more likely to identify with it and see it as their project. Their contribution and assistance in the construction and maintenance of the project is also very much required. People's power is the only mechanism by which they can articulate, protect and promote their interests. It is assumed that they are always looking out for opportunities for participation to protect their individual and collective interests.

In India, people's participation has long been considered a mechanism for village development (Vettivel 1999:21). People's participation was understood in the glorious alternative ways in India, such as *Shram dan* (voluntary labour), *Bhoomi dan* (gifting of land) and *Gram dan* (gifting of Gram). Gandhi was inspired by such an idyllic view of village life and village organisations and formulated his ideas of an alternative policy for a free India with the village as the cornerstone. Many initiatives have been taken by the Government of India to ensure effective people's participation for promoting development at the grassroots level.

However, there has been argument that the Government of West Bengal (GOWB - Left Front) first ensured people's participation at the grassroots level for development by conducting party-based panchayat elections in 1978. Since then, the GOWB has been performing a whole variety of functions such as decision-making on project location, implementation of land reforms (identification of land and beneficiary) and so on (Sundaram 1999:25). The government has identified a local level planning process in a multilevel framework from the village upwards. The village panchayats have been empowered to prepare their own plan for the development. They

mobilise people at the grassroots to participate in planning and mobilise resources as well. The panchayats have even been empowered to borrow from banks for the implementation of development projects.

Further, the GOWB has empowered panchayats by incorporating the provisions of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act into its own conformity legislation. The State Act has provided for seat reservation for scheduled castes (SCs), scheduled tribes (STs), other backward classes (OBC) and women in panchayats, thereby widening the social base of the local governance system.

The GOWB has taken another step forward by making provision for a Gram Sangsad (GS) apart from the Gram Sabha (GSb).<sup>1</sup> Every constituency of a GP (Gram Panchayat) has a GS, consisting of persons whose names are included in the electoral roll of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly. The power and functions of the GS are provided in the West Bengal Panchayat Act and the Act also insists that every GS should hold annual (May) and half-yearly (November) meetings. In the meetings, the GS should identify schemes for the economic development of the village, beneficiaries for various poverty alleviation programmes and constitute one or more beneficiary committees (by the ordinary people) for ensuring active participation of the people in implementation, and maintaining equitable distribution of benefits. GS may mobilise people for participation in community welfare programmes. Importantly, GS should guide and advise the GP in regard to the scheme for economic development and social justice.

Similarly, every GP should hold an annual meeting of the GSb within the local limits of the village, generally in the month of December, after completion of the half-yearly meeting of the GS. All questions coming up before a GSb should be discussed and points raised there should be referred to the GP for its consideration. The proceedings of the meeting of the GSb should be recorded and read out before the meeting is concluded and the presiding member should then sign the proceedings.

At this juncture, it is essential to know whether decentralised governance (panchayats) has made any useful contribution to the process of people's participation. People's participation here is seen as a process variable to decentralised governance. However, decentralised governance and people's participation have been viewed as independent and dependent variables respectively. Conceptually, the governing process can be seen as the product or outcome of the interactive process among the people, elected members and officials. The nature of the outcome can be reasonably assumed to depend on the quality of such interactive process which, in turn, depends on the

level of awareness and perception of these actors. It is also proposed to assess the relationship between participation, and the level of awareness and perception of the actors about these institutions. More specifically, the objective of the present study is to examine the relationship between decentralised governance and people's participation from empirical evidence.

## **Methodology**

West Bengal was selected for the field study. The selection was through a multistage purposive sampling at levels such as state, district, GPs and respondents. The justification for the selection of West Bengal was as follows.

In the first place, West Bengal is one of the states in India to have established a three-tier structure of panchayats in 1978. It achieved some degree of success in achieving development. Besides, the State has initiated various active steps to promote rural development using the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) as instruments of development. In addition, the researcher's familiarity with the local language was another favourable consideration in the selection of West Bengal for the study.

In-depth case studies of two-selected GPs were carried out in Burdwan District. Burdwan District was selected since it is considered to be typical in terms of social, political and economic features. Also, it is regarded as a representative unit, especially for field investigation. The district of Burdwan is an important district of West Bengal and is known for its various agricultural and industrial activities. It is one of the main rice-producing districts in the region and was the first district to be chosen for the Intensive Agricultural Development Programme in the state in 1962, and thereby became a forerunner in the green revolution (Webster 1992:37). It has also been successful in the cultivation of other important crops for the market including potatoes, sugarcane, oilseeds, onion, jute, pulses and vegetables, like brinjal and cabbages. The district is a net exporter of agricultural products, and occupies a strategic place in the economy of the state. The history of the region is quite old, and the district has taken its present shape after passing through various historical changes.

Two GPs from this district were selected for the study on the basis of their performance. Here, it may be mentioned that the District Panchayat and Rural Development Department evaluate the performance of all the GPs and rank them under three categories – best performing, moderate performing and poor performing – on an yearly basis. From out of this list pertaining to 1999-2000, two GPs –

one from among the best performing and another from the poor performing – were selected for our study. State and district level officers, elected members and knowledgeable persons, including academics and political leaders, were consulted while selecting these two GPs. In order to make the selection more meaningful, a field survey was undertaken based on some criteria.

To sum up, this study covered the zilla parishad of Burdwan district along with two panchayat samitis (two blocks) covering one GP in each block. Data were collected from the households, members, and officials of the GPs. Three distinct interview schedules (structured) were prepared to collect data from the respondents. The respondents were identified and interviewed, based on their perception, awareness, participation and opinion, as to how to strengthen and sustain the panchayat. As for the selection of respondents, 60 household heads were selected purposively from each GP across the three villages. In addition, all the elected members from Bondul and Nadai GPs, 19 and 18 respectively, were also selected. Besides this, 2 panchayat officials (Secretary and Job Assistant) from each GP were selected.

It may be mentioned that the participation is measured through the perception of individuals. Perception in this context is measured in terms of the 'score' obtained by individuals on the scale used for the present study.<sup>2</sup> The perception score depends on the nature of response (Yes/No) expressed by the respondents for the different statements given in the scale. A scale was developed for people's participation by using different indicators as Table 1 shows.

**Table 1: Measuring Indicators of People's Participation**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Indicators</i>
People's Participation	Free to elect a candidate for the GP; attendance in gram sangsad meeting; attendance in gram sabha meeting; involvement in the identification of needs, location and beneficiary; involvement in the implementation of plan/scheme; interaction with members/officials over the benefits; vocalisation of needs

Besides this, the level of awareness and perception was measured by selecting the following indicators as Table 2 shows. It was conceived that the people, elected members and officials should be aware and knowledgeable about the nature and functions of the panchayat system. Similarly, they should take a favourable view regarding the functioning of this institution so that they may support it whole-heartedly.



**Table 2: Measuring Indicators of Awareness and Perception**

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Indicators</i>
Awareness	Knowledge about the activities of panchayats, gram sangsad meeting and gram sabha meeting, Knowledge of regular panchayat elections and its importance, idea about elected member or pradhan of panchayats
Perception	Desirability of panchayat, gram sangsad and gram sabha meetings, panchayat elections, selection of quality members, participation in the meeting and contribution in implementation

## Results of the Analysis

### Households

As stated earlier, 60 households from each GP under study were drawn for interviews. For the purpose of analysis, the heads of the households were grouped on the basis of gender, age, caste, occupation, land, education and income, with a view to ascertaining whether these socio-economic factors have had any impact on the levels of awareness, perception and participation. Data relating to these levels are presented in Table 3. It may be observed from the table that both the GPs obtained the highest score of 1.00 with regard to awareness. However, the lowest score of 0.78 in perception was obtained in Bondul and the higher score of 1.00 was obtained in Nadai. The Bondul GP had the lowest score of people's participation (0.0083), whereas the highest score of people's participation of 0.28 was noted in the Nadai GP.

**Table 3: Distribution of Average Scores of Awareness, Perception and Participation of Bondul and Nadai GPs Attained by Household Heads**

	Bondul GP N=60	Nadai GP N=60
Awareness	1.00	1.00
Perception	0.78	1.00
Participation	0.0083	0.28

Nearly 85 per cent of those who attended the GS meeting in Nadai GP admitted that they attended the meeting for discussing village development (identifying needs, location and selection of beneficiary), 15 per cent of them said that they went to the meeting to know what went on in the meeting. However, none of the respondents was found to have raised any issue in the meeting regarding education and health. Women participants who attended did not involve themselves in the process of development of the

community. As a woman said, "Women attend meetings but they usually talk about their husbands and family problems; how husbands or husbands' brothers beat them, how husbands drink and demand money from them and want to divorce them etc."

It was found that in Nadai GP, 33 per cent of the respondents contributed labour and 41 per cent did so in cash or kind. Some respondents said that they regularly contributed, while some others said otherwise. Respondents who did not contribute in both the GPs gave reasons as for their inability to contribute or that they were in their work place and thus away from the scene. In Bondul GP 20 per cent of the respondents agreed that they contributed labour and only 14.3 per cent contributed in kind, sometimes if the GP asked them to contribute during the implementation of any scheme. Similarly, in Bondul GP, 46 per cent of the respondents admitted that they did not interact with or ask any of the members about any needs/demands because party leaders were handling the matters of panchayat, whereas, only 10 per cent of the respondents in Nadai expressed similar views.

Table 4 shows the average score relating to perception and participation in terms of caste, education, gender, age, income, land and occupation. These factors are important in determining these levels. The level of awareness was found to be equal with a score of 1.00 in both the GPs. However, the scores for perception and participation differed from one GP to another.

Further, Table 4 shows that perception score of SCs was higher (0.80) than that of non-scheduled caste respondents (0.76) and STs (0.75) in Bondul. It also shows that people's participation score of SCs was higher than that of any other caste. One possible reason is that the SC population was more than 31 per cent in Bondul and a majority of them were workers or supporters of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) – CPI (M), the ruling party. As supporters of the party they had more opportunities to know about the GP's activities, got more benefits from the GPs and were also motivated by the party. Again, instead of obtaining the highest score of awareness (1.00) and a score of 0.75 in perception, the participation score of STs was zero. This was because the ST population was very small (3%) in Bondul. A majority of them including female members were agricultural labourers who had to go far away for work.

**Table 4: Group-wise Scores of Perception and Participation**

Groups		Bondul GP		Nadai GP	
		Percep- tion	Partici- pation	Percep- tion	Partici- pation
Caste	STs	0.75	0.00	1.00	0.50
	SCs	0.80	0.10	1.00	0.20
	Non-scheduled	0.76	0.0095	1.00	0.33
	OBC	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00
Education	Illiterate	0.50	0.0055	1.00	0.00
	Literate	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.22
	Primary	0.71	0.29	1.00	0.31
	High school	0.92	0.0076	1.00	0.40
	Pre-university	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.43
	Graduate	0.87	0.0062	1.00	0.28
Occupation	Household worker	0.25	0.00	1.00	0.15
	Agricultural labourer	0.94	0.0062	1.00	0.36
	Small peasant/ businessmen	0.70	0.10	1.00	0.38
	Semi-medium peasant/ businessmen	1.00	0.50	-	-
	Schoolteacher/other	1.00	0.0055	1.00	0.001
Landholding (hect.)	Landless	0.67	0.0066	1.00	0.17
	<1 (Marginal)	0.94	0.0058	1.00	0.31
	1-2 (Small)	0.71	0.00	1.00	0.29
	>2 (Semi-medium)	1.00	0.33	1.00	0.63
Age (in yrs)	20-30	0.89	0.11	1.00	0.14
	31-40	0.75	0.0062	1.00	0.31
	41-50	0.68	0.11	1.00	0.33
	Above 50	0.83	0.00	1.00	0.50
Gender	Female	0.62	0.0076	1.00	0.0074
	Male	0.91	0.0088	1.00	0.45
Income, pa (in Rs.)	<10,000	0.40	0.0066	1.00	0.20
	10,001-20,000	0.88	0.00	1.00	0.20
	20,001-30,000	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.14
	30,001-40,000	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.29
	>40,000	0.89	0.15	1.00	0.44

Similarly, in the case of Nadai, the score of awareness and perception was equal (1.00) among all the groups. However, the score of participation differed from one group to another. It was higher in the group of STs (0.50) which was followed by the non-scheduled castes (0.33) and then by the SCs (0.20). The ST population was more than 10 per cent in this GP. A good number of them were educated and involved in agriculture and small business and a few of them were school teachers. They also were involved in politics. Overall, they were motivated by CPI (M), and had a good position in the party.

Gender was another important factor in determining the level of participation. It is interesting to note that female respondents achieved the highest score of awareness (1.00) in both the GPs. However, the score of perception and participation of females was less than the score of males in both the GPs. The female participation score was 0.0076 and 0.0074 in Bondul and Nadai GP respectively, whereas the male participation score was indicated as 0.0088 and 0.45 in Bondul and Nadai respectively. The main reason behind the low participation level of female respondents in both the GPs was apparently the fact that they were not allowed to do so by their families who vehemently held traditional notions with regard to womenfolk, discouraging their active participation in public meetings. Their affiliation with political parties (women's wing) determined their awareness. Political and socio-cultural factors for low participation cannot be denied. Beside this there were many other factors responsible for low participation in Bondul.

Education, of course, played an important role in ensuring effective participation. As Table 4 shows, the score of awareness was equal (1.00) in both GPs in terms of the level of education. The highest perception scores (1.00) were obtained by the group which had pre-university education and by literate respondents whose level of participation was surprisingly the lowest at 0.00 in Bondul. The highest score of participation (0.29) was obtained by the group which had only primary education. In Nadai, awareness and perception scores at different levels of education were the same, 1.00 (the highest level). However, the score of participation was higher (0.43) among respondents who had pre-university education which was followed by respondents who had high school education.

Size of the landholding and level of income may be regarded as other factors in determining participation. In both GPs those who had the largest area of land as well as the highest income also had the highest participation score. In both the cases, as Table 4 shows, higher scores of perception and participation could be explained in terms of these factors. However, these scores were higher in Nadai

GP than the Bondul. This was because membership in political parties and other organisation was higher among respondents who held large areas of land in Nadai. They put in effort to mobilise the others and succeeded to some extent.

Occupation certainly influences people’s participation. According to Table 4, the score of participation of semi-medium peasants or semi-medium business group was higher than of any other group at both levels of GP. However, the scores of perception and awareness of different groups were not very much different from one group to another, which was almost close to the highest score of 1.00.

The factor of age, of course, did not seem to have much impact on participation. The scores obtained from different age groups on perception and awareness were equally close to the highest level of 1.00 in both GPs. As Table 4 shows, persons who were above 50 years of age obtained the highest score (0.50) in Nadai GP, whereas, in Bondul it was those who were from the age group of 20–30 and 41–50 who obtained the highest score (0.11). In Nadai GP different organisations played crucial roles in mobilising villagers in plan formulation and implementation. Age (>50) was shown respect in the organisations as well as in policy formulation. This group was actively involved in decision making and implementation.

**Elected Members**

It may be observed from Table 5 that the score of elected members in Bondul was the lowest (0.44) with regard to participation, whereas, the highest score (0.93) was obtained by these members in Nadai GP. Further, in both places members scored the highest in awareness and perception. Of course, this is the desired level of score and is higher than that of households.

**Table 5: Distribution of Average Scores of Awareness, Perception and Participation Attained by Elected Members**

	Bondul GP (16 elected members +3 ex - officio)	N=19	Nadai GP (15 elected members + 3 ex -officio)	N=18
Awareness	1.00		1.00	
Perception	1.00		1.00	
Participation	0.44		0.93	

As Table 6 shows there is a clear difference among the scores of different groups in participation in both the GPs. But the non-scheduled castes members’ participation in Bondul GP was the highest (0.86), whereas, in Nadai GP the score of participation of Non-scheduled castes members was the lowest (0.86) among all.

**Table 6: Group-wise Scores of People's Participation**

Groups		Participation	
		Bondul GP	Nadai GP
Caste	STs	0.00	1.00
	SCs	0.14	1.00
	Non-scheduled	0.86	0.86
	OBC	0.00	-
Education	Illiterate	0.00	0.00
	Literate	0.00	1.00
	Primary	0.40	1.00
	High school	0.50	1.00
	Pre-university	0.00	1.00
	Graduate	0.75	1.00
Occupation	Household worker	0.17	0.75
	Agricultural labourer	0.40	1.00
	Small peasant/businessmen	0.50	1.00
	Schoolteacher/other	1.00	1.00
Landholding (hect.)	Landless	0.22	1.00
	<1	0.67	0.67
	1-2	1.00	1.00
Age (in yrs)	20-30	0.20	1.00
	31-40	0.50	0.88
	41-50	0.50	1.00
	Above 50	1.00	-
Gender	Female	0.17	0.83
	Male	0.60	1.00
Income, pa (in Rs.)	<10,000	0.25	1.00
	10,001-20,000	0.33	0.75
	20,001-30,000	0.00	1.00
	30,001-40,000	1.00	1.00
	>40,000	0.75	1.00

Similarly, the score of participation of female members was lower (0.17) in Bondul than in Nadai (0.83). Further, it was observed that among the various groups, neither caste nor the level of land holding determined the level of participation in any of the two GPs.

Female representatives did not participate in GS or GSb meetings. Their husbands represented them as proxy. But husbands did not inform their wives what went on in the meeting. Female members wanted to participate but the families did not allow them to go to meeting other than general body meetings. Female members seem to be there only for form's sake. As a Muslim woman member said, "I am participating only in general body meetings of the GP. I do not go to the village meetings. It is said that in rural society the housewife should stay at home. The family members go to the meeting as my representatives. They do not inform me about the meeting proceedings. I am interested in attending the meeting and to do something for the people who cast their vote for me".

## **Officials**

It is evident that the awareness and perception levels of officials were the highest with a score of 1 in both the GPs. However, their level of participation was not at the expected level. The level of participation of officials in Bondul was very poor unlike people and elected representatives. It was observed that officials in Bondul were inactive. They did not like to conduct meetings and participate in them since the ex-officio members (local political leaders) controlled the activities of the GP.

From the above analysis, it is clear that the score of awareness, perception, and participation of respondents was higher in Nadai GP than in Bondul. It is understood that there is a difference between the two GPs in terms of awareness, perception as well as people's participation and that the Nadai GP fared better compared to Bondul GP. The field evidence shows that decentralised governance ensures people's participation. However, factors responsible for low participation in the Bondul will be discussed in the following section.

## **Factors Responsible for Low Level of Participation**

The reasons for the low participation level in Bondul are many. The first possible explanation for the lower scores in Bondul GP could be due to local politics. Senior political party leaders who were the members of the Panchayat Samiti (intermediary level of panchayats) repress the functionaries of the GP as ex-officio members. The

Pradhan (President) who was a SC woman elected under the reservation provision had no power to deal with the panchayat affairs. Local leaders captured the office of the GP. GS and GSb and the general body meetings of GP were jeopardised which could play an important role for effective people's participation. The general body meeting was presided over by ex-officio members. The Pradhan or members had no power over conducting meetings, plan/scheme formulation and implementation. Neither GS/GSb was being conducted nor was people's involvement in implementation and in contribution of cash forthcoming. According to members and officials of the GP it was difficult to conduct the meeting in every village due to disorder of system. Hence they went door to door sometimes with the GS Register, collected information from the people which was then produced as a report of the GS/GSb meeting and sent to the Panchayat Samiti for approving the budget for the current year. People did not demand or articulate their needs before the pradhan/members. Decisions were taken in the political party meetings at the GP level. As a Pradhan put it, "senior political leaders act as a Pradhan. The Pradhan has no powers and exists only for putting signature on the paper and she has no right to ask the reason why her signature is needed. If the Pradhan wanted to take decisions independently on any matter, she would be changed and another put in place".

The second possible reason for lower scores is the socio-cultural condition which is nothing other than social capital as Putnam, and others illustrate (1993). If the community-based organisations such as Village Club, Krishok Samiti, Handloom Association, Fisherman Association or Agricultural Labour Organisation were existing in Bondul, one could not have found a low level of participation in decision-making as noted in Nadai. Even though political influence was present in Nadai GP, it was not to the extent found in Bondul. Organisational strength favoured them to be influential in shaping their interest and preferences than the unorganised citizens in Bondul. The level of education did have some influence over the formation of organisations. However, occupations determine the efficacy of organisations in Nadai. Unfortunately, there were no such organisations in Bondul. Unity and trust among the neighbours and fellowmen were very low. There were some organisations in Bondul but they were ineffective and it seemed that their relationship with the political party CPI (M) or senior leaders was that of patron-client. They usually preferred their self-interest to group benefits. It is noteworthy that CCA was initiated to ensure people's participation in plan formulation and implementation. CCA is a plan materialised by the villagers themselves with the view of meeting their needs.<sup>3</sup> The aim of the CCA is to ensure synergy between community, community organisations and other local institutions, to enable them to act as



part of the local governance and ensure people's participation, to analyse common pool resources of villages, to identify villagers' needs and demands, to mobilise funds from various sources like people's contributions, bank loans, panchayats own funds and government funds. However, owing to lack of social capital, CCA had not started in the Bondul.

## **Concluding Observations**

This study sketches decentralised governance and its relationship to people's participation in planning and implementation from empirical evidence from the two GPs. In the first place, it is observed that there is a close relationship between decentralised governance and people's participation. The level of awareness and the right kind of perceptions about the decentralised governance and particularly participation are considered essential for ensuring people's participation. The study reveals that there was no relationship between awareness, perception and participation. The awareness and perception of villagers were found to be at a higher level but their participation was very disappointing in both the study areas.<sup>4</sup> The level of awareness and perception was found higher among the SCs, STs and OBCs than among the general castes. Again, the level of awareness and perception of females interestingly was encouraging, though the level of participation of elected female members was very poor.<sup>5</sup>

GS and GSb meetings were the prime mechanisms of obtaining inputs for planning and implementation. However, the study reveals that meetings were not held, wherever held, they were not regular. Further, when a meeting was held it was repressed by the political parties.<sup>6</sup> Meetings of the GS and GSb that are considered responsible for effective people's participation at the grassroots level, were jeopardised in Bondul GP. Elected representatives including villagers did not like to attend GS/GSb meetings. There was lack of social capital in Bondul which influence people to mobilise themselves and participate in the meetings. As study finds in Nadai GP, different self-help groups mobilised their members to participate in the meetings and demanded that their needs be met. It is striking to find that the power of ordinary people over decision-making had declined to a great extent. Owing to the dominance of politicians, ordinary people's involvement in implementation as well as attendance in GS and GSb meetings was decreasing to a great extent. These two were the very important institutions for ordinary people to participate in planning, implementation, evaluation and monitoring at the bottom of decentralised governance. Nevertheless, CCA was initiated to ensure synergy between community, community organisations and other local

institutions to enable them to act as part of the local governance and to ensure effective people's participation.

Another important finding needs to be mentioned here. This is the gradual decline in attendance in GS and GSb meetings due to lack of funds. This was because, while people attended the meeting, usually they demanded more than the GP would do, which made them unhappy. The villagers perceived that the GP provided some routine works and services that were related to the village infrastructure development and that these were in any case provided even if they did not attend the meeting. However, the BPC accompanied by financial devolution at the block level was initiated. It became easier for the GP to make small plans or schemes without depending on the Sub Assistant Engineer for vetting them to ensure cost-effective planning and implementation.

The general meeting of the GP was presided over by the ex-officio members (senior leaders) since they were the members of the Panchayat Samiti. The Pradhan or elected member had neither the power nor administrative capacity to take action in any of the areas like decision-making, selection of beneficiary, identification of location etc. These were done at the political meetings of the ruling party CPI (M) which prioritised their own supporters ignoring the rest of the community. It is understood that the party did not want panchayat members to perform their functions without prior consultation with the concerned local party units.<sup>7</sup> The Pradhan had no responsibility except signing the papers forwarded from the senior leaders in Bondul GP. Elected members including the Pradhan were kept out of the decision-making by senior leaders of the ruling party in Bondul GP.<sup>8</sup> Reservation provision for weaker sections in GP was found to exist only in name. It is observed that the state government allocated reservation by rotation.

## **Lessons Derived**

The CCA experiment holds important lessons on how to ensure effective people's participation. The experience of CCA shows that West Bengal panchayats have turned from local government into local governance. This CCA ensures synergy between ordinary citizens, community organisations, political parties and leaders and officials in the effective formulation and implementation of the development plan. It enables local organisation to be a part of the local governance as well as policy formulation and implementation. Also, it ensures mobilisation of local and other resources before the implementation of the plan. It has emerged as an innovative process for ensuring effective people's participation at the grassroots level. It appears that

some progress has been achieved in adopting enabling practices in policy formulation and implementation through CCA.

BPC accompanied by financial devolution can be another lesson in effective planning and implementation. BPC ensures cost-effective planning and implementation at the GP level. BPC could approve a scheme/project which is expected to cost less than Rs. 50 thousand. Similarly, the Job Assistant of the GP can prepare any project/scheme which costs less than Rs. 10 thousand. If the scheme costs less than Rs. 50 thousand the Sub-Assistant Engineer (SAE) of the PS vets the scheme. It becomes easier for the villagers and the GP to make small plans or schemes without depending on the SAE for vetting.

## **Policy Implications**

The state governments should give special consideration in the Five-Year Plan of the GP for the development of villagers including the weaker sections. There may be a link established between the Five-year Plan of the State and decentralised institutions. Usually, whatever plan emerges from the Five-Year Plan at the top ultimately trickles down to the GPs for implementation. Even though, panchayats prepare their own Five-Year Plan, importance has not been given to this at the implementation stage. Different schemes have been created under various plans of the State as well as the Centre which have been implemented by the panchayats. The First Five-Year Plan (1951-55) began with community development programmes for promoting rural development. This tradition of planning at the central or state levels has not changed even after the passing of the Seventy-Third Amendment Act which has empowered decentralised governance and enumerated 29 subjects for planning and implementation of economic development and social justice at the grassroots level. Virtually, the GP neither involves itself in the preparation of the plan nor in poverty alleviation programmes except for participation in the implementation of the programme.

The number of schemes and the frequency of formulation of new schemes undermine the effectiveness of plan formulation at the panchayat level and their effectiveness in the delivery of services. Even though the panchayats prepare the five-year plan, it is not implemented by the state for lack of funds. This impedes the success of decentralised governance. GP plays its role as implementing agency, and elected representatives do not involve themselves in the formulation of the local plan. Also they do not feel confident about their responsibility. As a result, people lose their faith in elected bodies and they become close to local leaders of the ruling party and officials.

It is recommended that the GP should be freed from state or union government control regarding plan formulation and its implementation, so that local politicians do not interfere in the process of local governance. Local governance institutions should be encouraged to prepare plans according to people's preferences, and the centre or state should transfer untied funds to implement them. Again, if this is not possible, the centre or state may transfer the funds based on the subject matter such as infrastructure development, promotion of education, health, agriculture, irrigation etc., but not on the scheme basis like JRY, EAS etc. Also, the centre or the state may encourage the GP to implement its own plans with borrowed funds. CCA may become an effective mechanism to ensure people's participation, and to mobilise villagers and their resources, if the GP is empowered and freed from unnecessary control of the state and the centre.

## Notes

1. There are two institutions called Gram Sangsad (GS) and Gram Sabha (GSb) which exist below the GP level in West Bengal. GS meeting is held at the gram (village) level. Gram is a constituency of GP. Gram Sabha meeting is held at the GP level. This is a meeting of all the constituencies of a particular GP.
2. With a view to measuring people's participation seven questions are posed to the respondents, seeking their responses (yes or no). A person may attain a maximum score of "1" if his/her response is "yes" to all the seven questions or he/she may attain "0" if only "no" is the response to all the seven questions. If a respondent responds to some questions positively (as yes) and to some negatively (as no) he/she may attain a score between 0 and 1.
3. At the GP level, the CCA coordination committee consists of *Up-pradhan* as convenor and job assistant and all the government employees at the GP level as members. At the GS level, the committee consists of village education committee and ICDS employees. Besides, NGO workers are included in the committee.
4. In a different line a conclusion has been advanced (Aziz 1994:120-1) from the study where it is revealed that people's participation is determined by people's awareness and perception.
5. In a similar line a conclusion has been arrived at by others, see, Mukerjee and Bandopadhyay (1993:216) and Bhattacharya (2002:193). This is a success story of political panchayat in West Bengal, whereas in other part of India the awareness of weaker sections is found very much less than that of the privileged sections, see Aziz (1994: 105).

6. Bhattacharya (2002:194) observes a similar finding in her study. However, Lieten (1996:176) found 55 per cent of his sample had attended the meetings and less than 40 per cent female attended. Our study did not reveal such percentage of participants.
7. For further support to these findings, see Bhattacharyya (1998b: 113).
8. A similar finding has been revealed by Bhattacharya (2002:195) based on an empirical study in two gram panchayats in two districts of West Bengal, who concludes that the people have been kept away including elected members from the decision making process and enjoyment of political power. See also Lieten (1996:175).

## References

- Aziz, Abdul (1993). *Decentralized Planning: The Karnataka Experiment*. Newbury Park/London: Sage Publications.
- Aziz, Abdul (1994). *Decentralization Mandal Panchayat System in Karnataka*. Hyderabad: National Institute of Rural Development.
- Aziz, Abdul, S.S. Meenakshisundaram and K. G. Gayathri Devi (2000). Management of Poverty Alleviation Programmes under Panchayats Raj Institutions in Karnataka. *Journal of Social and Economic Development*, 2 (2): 174-94.
- Bhargava, B. S. and Rama Rao (1978). *Indian Local Government: A Study*. Calcutta: Minerva Associates (publications) Pvt. Ltd.
- Bhattacharyya, Harihar (1998a). Post-Colonial Social Capital and Democratic Governance: The Case of West Bengal. *West Bengal Political Science Review*, 1 (1-2): 126-46.
- Bhattacharyya, Harihar (1998b). *Micro Foundations of Bengal Communism*. Delhi: Ajanta.
- Bhattacharya, Moitree (2002). *Panchayat Raj in West Bengal: Democratic Decentralisation or Democratic Centralisation*. New Delhi: Manak Publications Pvt. Ltd.
- Blair, Harry (2000). Participation and Accountability at the Periphery: Democratic Local Governance in Six Countries. *World Development*, 28 (1): 21-39.
- Cernea, Michael (1987). Farmer Organisation and Institution Building for Sustainable Development. *Regional Development Dialogue*, 8 (2): 1-24.
- Islam, Md. Nazrul and Amitayush Vyas (2002). Decentralised Governance: A Review of the Idea and Issues. *Working Paper*, No. 108. Bangalore: Institute for Social and Economic Change.

Lieten, G. K. (1996). *Development Devolution and Democracy: Village Discourse in West Bengal*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Mukerjee, Nirmol and D. Bandopadhyay (1993). New Horizons for West Bengal Panchayat. In Amitava Mukerjee (eds.), *Decentralization of Panchayats in the Nineties*. New Delhi: Vikas Publications House Pvt. Ltd.

Oakley, Peter and David Marsden (1984). *Approaches to Participation in Rural Development*. Geneva: International Labour Office.

Putnam, Robert (with Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Y. Nanetti) (1993). *Making Democracy Work: Civic Tradition in Modern Italy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Sharma, Keshav (2000). Popular Participation for Good Governance and Development at the local level: The case of Botswana. *Regional Development Dialogue*, 21 (1): 176-91.

Sundaram, K. V. (1999). Decentralization Planning and Financing of Rural Development in India. *Regional Development Dialogue*, 20 (2): 21-39.

Thomas, Gracious (1992). *People's Participation in Community Development*. New Delhi: Uppal Publishing House.

UNDP (1993). *Human Development Report*. New York: Oxford University Press.

USAID (1975). *Implementation of the New Directions in Development Assistance. A Report to the House Committee on International Relations*. Washington: US Congress

Vettivel, Surendra (1999). *Participation: Concept, Approach and Techniques*. New Delhi: Vetri Publishers.

Webster, Neil (1992). *Panchayat Raj and Decentralization of Development Planning in West Bengal*. Calcutta: K. P. Bagchi and Company.

World Bank (1994). *The World Bank and Participation*. Washington DC: The World Bank.

# Recent Working Papers

91. **VEERASHEKHARAPPA**  
Community Participation in Rural  
Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation:  
A Case Study of Karnataka
92. **M JOHNSON SAMUEL**  
Communication and Linguistic Situation  
in Karnataka: Demographic Perspectives
93. **K V RAJU AND H K AMAR NATH**  
Irrigation Subsidies in Karnataka:  
A Growing Constraint For Reforms
94. **ANAND INBANATHAN**  
Elite Perceptions of Poverty:  
The Case of Karnataka
95. **AMALENDU JYOTISHI**  
Institutional Pluralism:  
Case of Swiddeners in Orissa
96. **ANAND INBANATHAN**  
Representation and Accountability  
in Local Government:  
The Panchayats of Karnataka
97. **M GOVINDA RAO**  
Challenges of Fiscal Decentralization  
in Developing and Transitional  
Economies — An Asian Perspective
98. **M GOVINDA RAO**  
Fiscal Decentralization  
in Indian Federalism
99. **PURNA CHANDRA PARIDA,  
B KAMAIAH AND  
MAATHAI K MATHIYAZHAGAN**  
Productivity Differentials and  
the Real Exchange Rate:  
Empirical Evidence from India
100. **PURNA CHANDRA PARIDA,  
MAATHAI K MATHIYAZHAGAN  
AND G NANCHARAI AH**  
Purchasing Power Parity and its  
Validity in the South Asian Countries
101. **MADHUSHREE SEKHER**  
Tackling Society's 'Detritus':  
Stakeholder Partnership  
Urban Service Delivery
102. **V VIJAYALAKSHMI**  
Gender Accountability and Political  
Representation in Local Government
103. **M DEVENDRA BABU**  
Working of Gram Sabhas in Andhra  
Pradesh: Problems and Prospects
104. **PURNA CHANDRA PARIDA,  
HRUSHIKESH MALLICK AND  
MAATHAI K MATHIYAZHAGAN**  
Nexus between Fiscal Deficits,  
Money Supply and Price Level  
in India: A VAR Approach
105. **M D USHA DEVI**  
Participatory Institutional Structures  
in Decentralized Management of  
Elementary Education in Karnataka
106. **V VIJAYALAKSHMI AND  
B K CHANDRASHEKAR**  
Authority, Powerlessness and  
Dependence: Women and  
Political Participation
107. **D V GOPALAPPA AND  
R S DESHPANDE**  
Education, Agriculture and Rural  
Development - A Study of Two  
Villages in Southern India.
108. **MD. NAZRUL ISLAM AND  
AMITAYUSH VYAS**  
Decentralised Governance:  
A Review of the idea and Issues
109. **AMALENDU JYOTISHI AND  
MADHUSHREE SEKHER**  
Rural Development in Tribal  
Areas: A Study from the  
Hill Areas of Orissa
110. **DESHAPANDE AND K V RAJU**  
Measuring Poverty and Human  
Development Indicators: A Framework
111. **D RAJASEKHAR**  
Action Research for Poverty Alleviation

- 112. ANAND INBANATHAN AND D V GOPALAPPA**  
Fixers, Patronage, 'Fixing', and Local Governance in Karnataka
- 113. M GOVINDA RAO**  
State Finances in India: A Critical Review
- 114. D RAJASEKHAR AND R R BIRADAR**  
People, Government and the NGOs
- 115. DUKHABANDHU SAHOO AND MAATHAI K MATHIYAZHAGAN**  
Economic Growth in India: Does Foreign Direct Investment Inflow Matter?
- 116. GAGAN BIHARI SAHU AND D RAJASEKHAR**  
Credit Flow to Indian Agriculture: Trends and Contributing Factors
- 117. SATYAPRIYA ROUT**  
Joint Forest Management in Orissa: Challenges and Opportunities
- 118. DEEPIKA M G AND R S DESHPANDE**  
Trade Policy and Determinants of Trade in Agriculture
- 119. SITAKANTA SETHY**  
Rural Poor's Participation in Decentralised Multilevel Planning and Development
- 120. G S SASTRY AND R JAGANNATHA RAO**  
Emerging Development Issues in a Resource Region
- 121. MEENAKSHI RAJEEV**  
Collusion in Corrupt System: A Game Theoretic Approach
- 122. L VENKATACHALAM**  
Theories of Failure, Failure of Theories and Non-Market Valuation: A Survey
- 123. L VENKATACHALAM**  
Factors Influencing Household Willingness to Pay (WTP) for Water: A Case Study
- 124. K GAYITHRI**  
Who Benefits from Industrial Incentives? A Study of Capital Investment Subsidy in Karnataka
- 125. V VIJAYALAKSHMI**  
Accountability and Governance: Local Government in Kerala and Karnataka
- 126. SHASHI KOLAVALLI AND K V RAJU**  
Protecting Drinking Water Sources: A Sub-Basin View
- 127. K GAYITHRI**  
Reducing Fiscal Deficit: Canadian Experiment and Lessons for India
- 128. V VIJAYALAKSHMI**  
Scheduled Tribes and Gender: Development Perceptions from Karnataka
- 129. MEENAKSHI RAJEEV**  
A Search for a Theory of Entrepreneurship: A Case Study of the Foundry Industry in Howrah and Coimbatore
- 130. M SIVAKAMI**  
Does Labour Force Participation Enhance Autonomy of Poor Women/ Evidence from Tamil Nadu, India

ISBN 81-7791-087-6

Price: Rs.30-00



## INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGE

Prof. V. K. R. V. Rao Road, Nagarbhavi, Bangalore - 560 072, India  
Phone : 0091-80 - 3215468, 3215519, 3215592 ; Fax: 0091-80 - 3217008

Grams: ECOSOCI, Bangalore - 560 040

E-mail:kvraju@isec.ac.in, Web:http://www.isec.ac.in