প্রতিধ্বনি the Echo
Pratidhwani the Echo
A Peer-Reviewed Indexed International Journal of Humanities & Social Science
Published by: Dept. of Bengali
Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India
Website: https://www.thecho.in
ISSN: 2278-5264 (Online)
ISSN: 2321-9319 (Print)

Decentralization in the Eastern India and Political Participation

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Abstract

The eastern state of West Bengal in India has been characterized by devolution to local governments (panchayats) for over a quarter century now, in striking contrast to much of the rest of India. This is primarily the result of a conscious strategy of agrarian transformation pursued by a coalition of left parties (known as the Left Front) that has held power at the state government continuously since 1977. While a handful of other Indian states periodically experimented with decentralization prior to the 1990s, it is only since the passage of the seventy-third and seventy-fourth constitutional amendments in 1993 that the rest of India has systematically begun to implement such a system. In West Bengal decentralization experiment thus predated the all-India experiment and is frequently hailed as an instance of successful implementation of decentralization that other Indian states would do well to emulate.In this article, we provide an account of the origins of the panchayat system in West Bengal, followed by a description of the range of responsibilities devolved and their functioning. We subsequently summarize results of recent research concerning patterns of local participation of local residents and their success in targeting resources to intended beneficiaries of various developmental programs. We conclude with an assessment of the system on normative grounds (the extent to which they have promoted accountability and responsiveness in the delivery of public services) as well as the political economy of the reforms (how well they have secured the political objectives of the Left Front government).

Historical Origins: The origins of the system can be traced to the efforts of the British colonial state to create a system of self-government in the late nineteenth century, starting with the 1882 Ripon Resolutions, the 1885 Bengal Local Self-Government Act, and the 1919 Bengal Village Self-Government Act. These acts culminated in a system of union boards, with each board covering eight to ten villages with a total population of 10,000. The jurisdiction of these union boards coincides with the current-day gram panchayat (GP). The union boards brought village administration into the formal administrative and revenue structure of the colonial state. Not surprisingly, these boards made no efforts to encourage popular participation of local residents. Their main purpose was to coopt local elites into the power structure of the colonial state, partly in response to the threat of rising nationalism among these elites. The ranges of powers or finances devolved were negligible.

If anything, the boards served to reinforce traditional patterns of agrarian inequality between a narrow landowning elite and large masses of poor tenants and agricultural workers.

Following independence, the Constitution of the new Indian republic encouraged decentralization to village governments but left the responsibility for implementing such a system to state governments. To assist this process, the central government set up the Balwantrai Mehta Committee in 1957, which provided a detailed set of suggestions for a three-tier system of local government.

The recommendations of this committee led to the formation of a model that has substantially affected the actual process followed in India in the subsequent half century. The lowest tier was proposed to be the village panchayat, whose members would be elected directly with special provision for representation of scheduled castes (SCs), scheduled tribes (STs), and women. Their duties would include managing local roads, water, sanitation, land management, and the welfare of underprivileged classes. Above these would be the panchayatsamiti (PS) at the block level, with members indirectly elected from representatives of the village panchayats and also with special provision for representation of women, SC, and ST residents. The PS was to be assigned responsibility for development of agriculture, livestock, public health, welfare, administration of primary schools, and the implementation of special development schemes entrusted to it by the central government. They were to be primarily financed by grants and aidfrom the state and central governments. The top tier of the system was to be composed of the zillaparishad (ZP), regarding which the Mehta Committee provided three alternative structures varying with regard to range of powers and mode of election.The structure proposed thus allowed very limited financial autonomy to local governments, which would have to rely on aid and grants from state and central governments. The range of responsibilities devolved excluded administration of public education (above primary schools) and was insufficiently detailed in its definition of public-health responsibilities to be assigned to local bodies. In other words, the system was to be part of a top-down centralized state, where the role of local governments would be to provide municipal services and implement development programs mandated by state and central governments. No mention was made of the processes by which local populations could express their need for different public services to higher levels of government. The administration of the three key areas of irrigation, schools, and health facilities could be retained by the bureaucracy appointed at the state or central government levels, without seriously contravening the recommendations of the committee. The seeds of the current system of limited decentralization prevailing throughout India were thus sown at this early stage in the life of the new republic. It reflected the consensus in the middle of the twentieth century that the centralized state would be the principal agent of economic development.

The Balwantrai Mehta Committee also left room, for state governments to experiment with the system as they saw fit, consistent with the constitutional assignment of responsibility, and was endorsed in this respect by the National Development Council in January 1958. The central government created a Ministry of Community Development, Panchayati Raj, and Cooperation in 1958 and issued a publication in 1962 entitled *A Digest on Panchayati Raj* reiterating its encouragement to state governments to implement a three tier system of local government. In the absence of any concrete political pressure from the center, state governments (with few exceptions such as Maharashtra and Gujarat in the late 1960s) were unwilling to embark on any serious effort to devolve powers to local governments at their own expense (Government of West Bengal, 1980).

West Bengal's own experience during this period was similar (Government of West

Bengal, 1980). It passed a Fanchayat Act in 1957, followed by the ZillaParishad Act of 1963, which established a four-tiersystem comprising village panchayats, anchalparishads with a jurisdiction of eight to ten villages, anchalikparishads at the block level, and zillaparishads at the district level. These were supposed to have four-year terms of office, with indirect elections at all levels above the village panchayats from representatives at lower levels and with representation of women, underprivileged communities, ranking bureaucrats at the block level and above, and elected politicians from local constituencies. Approximately 19,000 village panchayats, 3,000 anchalpanchayats, 300 anchalikparishads, and 15 zillaparishads were formally constituted by the mid-1960s. Yet these institutions were not delegated much effective responsibility or provided much financial support. Elections were rarely held, meetings of local gram sabhas (village assemblies) were poorly attended, and local political leadership was yet to emerge. In the words of UdayBhaduri, the assistant director of panchayats in 1980:

This was undoubtedly an important step towards democratic decentralization; its socio-economic significance is indisputable. But in the economic base on which the gradual evolution lay, there was very little place for the poor. The rural and panchayat leadership was one that emerged out of the green revolution in the farms of the big landholders. The zillaparishads and anchalikparishads met their inglorious death as soon as they were born. The reason behind this fact was that the unorganized landholder [jotedar]class could not be a match for the neobourgeoisie, a product of the industrial cities. Beginning right from the national movement up to the second decade after independence the national leadership was mainly in the urban areas. Therefore, though the rural institutions got the theoretical recognition, in practice it was beyond the notice of national leadership.

Webster (1992) identifies the two key problems that rendered these governments ineffective. First, responsibility for delivery of most important public services and developmental programs were retained by departments and ministries of the state government. Bureaucrats appointed by the state government and accountable only to their hierarchical superiors in the district and state capitals were the principal agents in the deliverv system. There was no scope for the voice of the local governments to be heard by the bureaucrats. Second, there was no scope for representation of the interests of the vast majority of tenants and agricultural workers, while the existing structure of land relations continued to remain highly unequal owing to the failure of the state government to implement any serious land reform.

Reorganization of panchayats under the left front: All this changed with the ascendance of a Left Front government to power at the state-government level in 1977. A decade earlier, they had shared a coalition United Front government with a breakaway fac-tion from the Congress Party for two brief years (1967 to 1969). This period was marked by growing unrest and anarchy, originating in a peasant rebellion led by the ultraleftNaxalite movement. This ended with the imposition of president's rule by the central government then dominated by the Congress Party headed by Indira Gandhi. The elections of 1972 saw the Congress back in power for a full five-year term at the state. The next state assembly elections in 1977 saw the Left Front coalition attain, an absolute majority.

The newly elected government set about implementing two key initiatives in the agrarian sector: land reforms and reconstitution of local governments. The former was intended to decisively alter patterns of agrarian relations, with recording and protection of sharecropping tenants from eviction (Operation Barga), vesting of land owned by large landowners above the legal ceiling and distribution of vested lands in the form of land titles to the landless. At the same time, it set about creating a three-tier system of local government analogous to the formula suggested by the Balwantrai Mehta Committee. With

the continuation of the Left Front at the state government through six successive elections, this structure is essentially the system prevailing today, though modified and amended in a variety of ways in the interim.

The lowest tier is the gram panchayat (GP), with a jurisdiction comparable to the British union boards or the postindependenceanchalparishads; they cover eight to ten villages, with approximately ten to eighteen elected members (each representing 500 voters in nonhill areas and 125 voters in hill areas). A bold departure from the Mehta Committee required the representatives at two tiers above comprising panchayatsamities (PS) and zillaparishads (ZP) to also be elected directly by voters. These elections are held every five years on a mandatory basis, starting with 1978. In other respects, the structure is quite similar to that recommended by the Mehta Committee.

Of particular note is the political will of the state government to devolve significant responsibilities to the panchayats, reducing the near monopoly power of bureaucratic departments in the previous regime. Relevant bureaucrats such as the block development officer at the PS level and the district magistrate at the ZP level have positions in thecorresponding PSs and ZPs but need to work with politically elected representatives who retain the chairperson authority in these bodies. Elections to these positions in local government are characterized by high voter turnout and are increasingly subject to greater contestation between the Left Front and its principal rival the Congress (and its breakaway faction the Trinamool Congress since 1998).

Range of Responsibilities and Finances Devolved:

The principal responsibilities of the panchayats have included the following:

- Implementation of land reforms, chiefly identification of sharecroppers and of those entitled to receive land titles;
- Selection and monitoring beneficiaries of various agricultural development (such as distribution of agricultural minikits and extension services) and antipoverty programs, including the Integrated Rural Development Program (IRDP), employment-generation programs creating rural infrastructure (including the National Rural Employment Program, NREP, and the Rural Labour Employment Guarantee Program, NRLEGP, during the 1980s, subsequently consolidated into the JawaharRozgarYojana, JRY, from 1989), and various welfare schemes (such as housing, old age assistance, pensions, and disaster relief);
- Construction and management of local roads, school buildings, and irrigation facilities (such as tanks, ponds, riverlift schemes, and wells);
- Community and cooperative projects, including management of common property resources such as wasteland, and forests;
- Collection of local taxes, levies and fees; and
- Since the early 1990s, administration of ShishuShikshaKendras (SSKs), alternatives to the primary schools runs by the state government.

Conspicuous by their absence are the management of primary and secondary schools and management of principal health facilities, which remain under the jurisdiction of relevant departments of the state government.

The extent of financial autonomy is also limited, with the panchayats relying principally on grants from state and central governments under various schemes. In the sample of panchayats that we have surveyed (described below in greater detail), employment grants comprised approximately 50 to 60 percent of the resources available to gram panchayats in any given year. A number of other fiscal grants tied to specific projects collectively accounted for another 25 percent of panchayat revenues. The rest was raised by the gram panchayats from local sources, mostly in the form of schemes involving sale of assets and collectively produced goods (such as fish produced in community ponds).

Taxes and fees accounted for a minuscule fraction, of panchayat revenues—less than 4 percent on average.

The panchayat system was amended significantly in 1985 and then again in 1992 and 1993 and in 1998. The 1985 amendment sought to create a system of decentralized planning or budgeting whereby panchayats would communicate their priorities and needs to higher-level tiers, which would subsequently incorporate them into allocations across districts, blocks, and GPs. The extent to which this has been effectively operationalized is difficult to assess, with some accounts suggesting that allocations depend insignificantly on upward flows of information from bottom levels. The 1992 and 1993 amendment created mandatory reservation of one-third of panchayat seats to women and a share equal to their population share for SCs and STs; this was supplemented by the 1998 amendment to include reservation of positions of pradhan (chair of the GP) for women, SCs, and STs. Apart from reservation for minorities, the 1992 Amendment also mandated twice yearly meetings of the gram sabha (village assembly) where accounts for the preceding period would have to be presented by GP officers, past developmental projects could be publicly discussed, and complaints or critical questions could be raised by local citizens.

The role of the GPs is partly to allocate resources within its jurisdiction—allocation of funds under various employment programs to different forms of rural infrastructure such as roads, water, sanitation, irrigation, or public buildings; the execution of such projects (selection of location, procurement of materials, selection of those employed from within the village); selection of beneficiaries of various programs, taking the form of creating a below-the-poverty-line (BPL) list of local residents; and selection of (or recommendation to the concerned block office about) recipients for specific programs from this list. It will also include subsequent monitoring of these recipients, such as for those receiving an IRDP loan, the use of the proceeds of the loan, or assisting in the recovery of the loan. The intra-GP allocation is highly visible within the village, as a result of requirements to have a system of accounts publicly available to local residents, which can bediscussed at gram sabha meetings. These accounts and minutes of GP meetings are legally required to be maintained by the GP secretary and to be submitted and audited by the PS directly above the GP in question.

The other role of the GP is to participate with higher-level bodies in determining how many resources it is to receive under various program heads. The inter-GP and sometimes also the inter-PS or interdis-trict (ZP) allocations are rarely defined by transparent formulas, with the exception of the centrally sponsored employment programs. With respect to the IRDP program or the distribution of agricultural mini-kits, for instance, discretion plays a big role in the deliberations at the PS level, involving a large number of elected representatives from the panchayats, bureaucrats of the concerned state departments, and other implementing agencies (such as loan officers in the corresponding lead banks administering the IRDP loans). Some formulas appear to exist for vertical allocation of funds across different tiers of the system (across ZP, PS, or GP levels), but there are comparatively few for their horizontal allocation at any given vertical tier.

The inter jurisdictional resource allocations are complex in other ways as well. There is a bewilderingly large array of developmental schemes flowing down from various ministries or various upper-level governments. Our review of the budgets of GPs indicated at least one thousand different schemes in operation at different times, contributing to the revenues and expenditure responsibilities of the GPs. These may flow from the central government, the state government, or a combination of the two (such as the majority of funds flow from centrally sponsored schemes where the bulk of funding comes from the central government, with matching contributions from the state government). They may flow from various employment programs or other welfare programs. Apart from the

programs showing up in GP budgets, there are others in which they have significant responsibility, such as land reforms, selection of beneficiaries of agricultural services, or the IRDP program.

Participation Patterns: We now turn to available empirical evidence concerning various aspects of the functioning of the panchayats. Many case studies are available, but these are usually conducted in. one or two locations, and there is heavy reliance on the subjective impressions of the investigators (see,for example, Lieten, 1992; Pramanick and Datta, 1994; Webster, 1992). So the representativeness of their conclusions can be questioned. For this reason, we report the results of recent studies based on larger and more representative samples, relying on empirical data generated by these studies that are far more reliable than subjective impressions reported by surveyed individuals or of investigators.

One such study involves a sample of over eighty villages throughout the state from which have collected data concerning the operation of panchayats between 1978 and 1998, covering five successive panchayat elections. Details of this sample have been described in Bardhan and Mookherjee (2003, 2004, 2005). This study collected data on panchayat composition, GP meetings, GP budgets, distribution of IRDP loans and agricultural mrnikits, employment programs, and details of expenditures on road construction and maintenance. In addition, it included land reforms implemented, a listing of all households in the village in 1978 and 1998 including landownership, irrigation status of land owned, occupation, SC or ST status, literacy, and gender of head of household. A survey of eight randomly selected farms across different size classes carried out by the Socio-Economic Evaluation Branch of the Department of Agriculture of the state government for a period of between three and fifteen years generates data on production in these farms and details of relevant prices and wage rates. This study focuses mainly on patterns in the activities of the panchayats with respect to implementation of land reforms and other developmental programs and how they changed in response to variations in landownership, demographic composition, occupational patterns, and literacy within the villages over the twenty-year period.

Another study has been carried out by Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) of all GPs (166 in number) in the district of Birbhum, focused specifically on the effect of reservation of GP and Pradhan positions for women, SC, and ST candidates on participation patterns in GPs and village meetings and on the allocation of public-sendee delivery between 1998 and 2000. It relies on cross-sectional comparisons between villages with and without reserved seats.

These two studies allow us to infer patterns of representation of different landowning classes and of minority groups in GPs. Table -1 presents the proportion of GP seats secured by landless, marginal (0 to 2.5 acres), and small (2.5 to 5 acres) landowners in different GP elections. It shows that these three groups collectively comprised approximately two-thirds of all GP seats throughout the period. From this

Table -1

Representation of poor households in GP seats (percentage)

	1978-1983	1983-1988	1988-1993	1993-1998	1998-2003
GP seats					
Landless	9.6%	11.2%	10.9%	20.8%	19.9%
Marginal	38.5	39.6	37.6	37.8	35.2
Small	18.3	16.9	21.7	12.1	15.7
Total	66.4	67.7	70.2	70.7	70.8
Households	96.1	-	-	-	99.2

Source: Bardhan& Mukherjee, Table – 1, P-212

point of view, they tended to retain majority control of GPs. On the other hand, these three groups were underrepresented relative to their demographic share, which rose from 96 percent of the village population to over 99 percent. This implies that households owning more than five acres of land were vastly overrepresented in the GPs: a group of less than 4 percent households in the village held approximately one-third of GP seats throughout the period. The underrepresentation was greatest for the landless, whose demographic weight was 44 percent in 1978 and 49 percent in 1998. While the proportion of seats secured by them approximately doubled from 10 to 20 percent over the period, their representation rate was less than half their demographic weight. In 1998, one out of every two households was landless, but only one out of every five seats in the GP was secured by a landless candidate. While the representation of the landless poor improved markedly (compared to the pre-1978 period or also during the period 1978 to 1998), clearly there is some way to go before they are to be effectively represented. If there is an issue that divides the interests between suppliers and employers of hired labor (such as an agitation for higher wages, distribution of surplus land to the landless, or allocation of panchayat funds between less employment-intensive and more employment-intensive infrastructure projects, such as irrigation versus roads), it would not be surprising if the majority of GP members would vote in favor of the interests of the employers.

Table - 2 provides data on representation of women, SC, and ST categories in the population. Prior to 1993, when the mandatory seat-reservation policy was introduced, women were heavily underrepresented. This changed drastically from 1993 onward, when they secured approximately one-third of all GP seats. SC and ST candidates also

Table – 2

Representation of minorities in GP seats (percentage)

	1978-1983	1983-1988	1988-1993	1993-1998	1998-2003
GP seats					
Women	2.4%	1.7%	1.3%	31.1%	34.1%
SC/ST	23.1	20.3	22.1	33.9	33.4
Households	32.8	-	-	-	34.4

Source: Bardhan & Mukherjee, Table2.P-213

Table –3

Minority participation in Birbhum GPs with and without reservations (percentage)

		GPs with Reserved Pradhan Positions	GPs without Reservations
GP with female pradhans	-	100.0%	6.5%
GP with SC/ST pradhans	-	100.0	7.5
Women attending gram sabha meetings	-	9.8	6.9
GPs where women file complaints	-	20.0	11

Surce: Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004,

tended to be underrepresented before 1993 but to a substantially less degree. They secured approximately one out of every four or five GP seats, while representing one out of every three households. The reservation policy ensured that they were evenly represented from 1993 onward.

The effect of reservations policy on representation is also borne out by the Chattopadhyay-Duflo study, as indicated in table 6.3. Seat reservations for women, SC, and

ST candidates for the position of GP pradhan were properly implemented, and increased the frequency of minority Pradhans dramatically. The seat reservation for the women increased the participation of women in gram sabha meetings and in their filing of complaints or requests to the GP; these differences were statistically significant.

A detailed study of attendance at gram sansad meetings in a sample of twenty panchayat constituencies has been carried out by Ghatak and Ghatak (2002). This study covers constituencies located in fourteen GPs in three different districts—twenty-four Parganas (N), twenty-four Parganas (S), and South Dinajpur—in May 1999. It is based on a survey of villagers by the authors following recent gram sansad

Table -4: Gram Sansad Attendance Rates (percentage)

	Men	Women	SC	ST	Mus-lims	Land-less	Marginal and Small Land owners	Left Front Political Affiliation
Attending	91	9%	55	13%	3%	43%	41%	67%
Voters	54	46	58	15	4	-	-	65

Source: Ghatak and Ghatak (2002, Tables 4, 5, 6).

Note: a. Constituencies secured by Left Front candidates.

meetings and concerning their participation in these meetings. The sample is smaller and less representative than the other two studies reported above but covers a larger range of situations than most other case studies (which typically focus on two or three villages). It provides valuable insights into the extent and nature of popular participation in meetings discussing the activities of the GPs.

Table 6.4 presents some of the participation rates in the gram sansad meetings reported by Ghatak and Ghatak. The overall participation rate in these meetings was 12 percent of all voters, somewhat below the 16 percent rate they report for West Bengal as a whole. This suggests one out of every seven or eight voters attended the gram sansad meetings, where the minimum required for a quorum is one out of ten. Of those attending, 43 percent on average were landless, 41 percent were marginal or small landowners, and the remaining 16 percent were medium or large landowners. Similar to the GP representation rates, a majority of attendees were therefore small landowners or poorer, but medium and large landowners were vastly overrepre-sented. However, the landless were more evenly represented in the meetings than in GP positions.

Minority groups such as SC or ST voters or Muslims were evenly represented. However, the most pronounced asymmetries arose with respect to gender and political affiliation. Women were vastly under-represented, with a 9 percent attendance rate (roughly consistent with gram sabha attendance rates reported by Chattopadhyay and Duflo in their study). Moreover, there was a marked tendency for attendees to be associated with one of the main political parties, with a heavy bias in favor of the dominant party in the constituency. On average, two-thirds of the constituencies were secured by the Left Front, and a similar proportion of attendees reported a political affiliation with a left party. In constituencies where a non^Left Front candidate had secured the seat, the attendance rate of Left Front-affiliated voters was conversely less than one-third uniformly. Hence those voters who were affiliated with the opposition tended to stay away from these meetings disproportionately.

The Ghatak and Ghatak study also provides details of the nature of discussions in these gram sansad meetings. The main issues concerned review and monitoring of past and current GP projects (including location of projects, quality complaints, and corruption or mismanagement complaints); agenda for future projects (demands for new programs and

priorities for GP spending); and selection of beneficiaries (distribution of water or housing benefits). Their account suggests a forum that enables genuine participation by diverse groups within these villages in public discussions, inducing a measure of accountability of elected members to their constituency (Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002, p. 53): The participants actively voice demand for new projects, suggest how allocated funds should be spent and debate how projects should be designed. The pradhan and the local representatives are questioned on the progress of implementation of projects, and often face allegations about misuse of funds and selection of beneficiaries. The response of elected officials to these criticisms showed that they could not take the voters present at the meeting for granted. In some cases where there was overwhelming evidence in favour of the criticisms raised by the people, the village council officials admitted their error 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 delay of arrival of funds from the state government.

This represents a marked improvement over the previous situation where the power of the village council [gram panchayat] was totally concentrated in the hands of the pradhan.... The pradhan's power could be maintained mainly by the fact that the common villagers were not privy to information about the allocation of resources and there was no forum to voice their opinions and criticisms. The village constituency meetings seem to be an important institutional innovation to contribute to the ideal of participatory governance, although from our study we cannot judge how much of an effect it will have in making the allocation of resources responsive to public demand, or improving the implementation of projects.

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