DECENTRALISED GOVERNANCE
AND
PLANNING IN INDIA

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Preface

'Decentralised Planning' which emerged as a new planning strategy has been expected to take care of the local development needs focusing mainly on weaker sections, backward sub-state regions and traditional sectors. A major justification for decentralisation of governance has been that local bodies are more effective in providing public goods and services. In India, decentralised planning, although made its mark as far back as Fourth Five-year Plan, gained momentum only after the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution in 1992. Several development objectives like eradication of poverty and illiteracy, promoting universalisation of primary education, providing immunisation for all and health facilities particularly to the poor, ensuring safe drinking water and sanitation for all, improving housing facilities to the poor, guaranteeing employment in lean seasons, and the like, have received massive allocation, and led for planning and implementing a plethora of development schemes and projects. Some of these programmes and schemes have been handed over to the local bodies, and some retained by the state government departments themselves. In spite of some observed negative results, it should go to the credit of the panchayats and municipalities that they have improved, to a large extent the quality of life of the people, especially of the weaker sections and people residing in urban slums by providing basic amenities like drinking water, housing, sanitation, street lighting and roads. Perhaps, they would have done better but for the financial constraints, local politics, lack of skilled leadership and non-cooperation of the citizens and villagers. This book aims to address the basic issue of how these constraints can be released and how the decentralised governance and planning system can be strengthened.

It is intended to present a critical review of the role of Panchayats and Municipalities in local development in the framework generated by the theoretical contributions and the blueprint provided by the 73rd and 74th Amendments on the subject with particular reference to three dimensions of local level planning viz., local resources mobilisation and

allocation, planning for local development and implementation of local development projects. For instance, the recently launched flagship programme Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) has mandated gram panchayats to prepare their perspective plans for economic development and social justice through utilising the resources available to them. The GPDP designed to be comprehensive and to be prepared based on participatory process will be an intensive and structured exercise for planning at Gram Sabha through convergence between panchayats and concerned line departments of the State. The cumulative application and performance of these are expected to result in bringing an all-round economic development of the region and ensuring social justice to vulnerable groups of society. Set in this backdrop, this book discusses and documents the experiences of decentralised governments, particularly of GPDP planning exercise of different states.

The book is an outcome of a National Seminar, jointly organised by Centre for Multi-disciplinary Development Research, Dharwad and Karnataka Panchayat Raj Parishath, Bengaluru, held during 28th to 29th March 2019. Research scholars and academicians of universities, research institutes, institutes of rural development and decentralised planning across the states and, non-officials and officials of Panchayat bodies of Government of Karnataka participated in this seminar. We thank all the paper contributors for making the said seminar successful and for their support in bringing out this volume in the form of a book. We thank Prof. Jeevan Kumar for his editing credentials.

We also take this opportunity to place on record our sincere thanks to Shri C. Naranayanswamy, Executive President, Dr. C. Chickakomari Gowda, Treasurer, and K.S. Satish, General Secretary of Karnataka State Panchayat Raj Parishath for their financial support and involvement in organizing the National Seminar. We thank our colleagues Shri Gururaj, Shri Jayathirth, Shri B.P. Bagalkot, Shri Mukund, Shri Sridhar and other staff members for their active involvement in organising the seminar. Our special thanks to Prof. V.B. Annigeri, Former Director, CMDR for extending his cooperation and support in organising this seminar. We thank Shri V.T. Hungund (Deputy Registrar-Admin) and A.S Raichur (Deputy Registrar-Accounts), CMDR for their administrative and logistic support.

We sincerely thank Concept Publishing Company Pvt. Ltd. for bringing out this book in an attractive manner. We hope this edited book would be useful for academicians, administrators, research students, policy-makers and society at large.

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A Prologue

S.S. Meenakshisundaram

The title of the book '*Decentralised Governance and Planning in India and its Impact on Economic Development and Social Justice'* contains four key words: (1) Decentralised Governance; (2) Decentralised Planning; (3) Economic Development; and (4) Social Justice. I will take up the first two words, i.e. Decentralised Governance and Planning to start with. There is an interesting coincidence between Decentralized Governance and Decentralised Planning. We have been discussing these subjects for several years may be, even centuries.

Decentralised Governance was in existence long before the British came to India. Our former Governor, Shri Rameshwar Thakur used to tell me when we were preparing the Constitutional 73rd Amendment that the *Rig Veda* contains references to Panchayats. So, historically, we have been having Panchayats in this country until the British came and destroyed it. Naturally, when you are managing someone else's country, you cannot have decentralization. It is easier to manage that country through centralized administration rather than having a decentralized system of governance. So, from a decentralized system we were pushed into a centralized system. Thus, when we got independence, we could inherit only that centralized system. Obviously, we could not immediately get back to our old system of decentralised governance.

Gandhiji very strongly felt that we should go for *Gram Swaraj,* but that was not agreed to for very valid reasons, particularly in view of the conditions prevailing in our villages at that time. Dr. Ambedkar genuinely felt that the time was not ripe to recognize Panchayats as the basic units of administration. I always had a doubt why the Constituent Assembly did not think of any other level below the State and above the Village Panchayat at that time? Dr. Ambedkar was not against District Level Governance. At the time of independence, to ensure democracy at the

national level, we replaced the Governor-General by the Parliament; we ensured democracy at the State Level, by replacing the Governor with the State Assembly. But what happened at the district level? We did not touch the Collector and that office was continued. Instead of having a white man to rule over us, we had brown man. That is all the difference and there was no real democracy at the district and levels below. Probably, nobody had pushed that idea at the time of constitution making. When we are now doing a postmortem, we think probably it would have been better to have had an elected District Government at that time, but anyway, that did not happen. We missed that opportunity.

One thing I am very certain about. It is easy to start something new, but it is very difficult to change what is already in existence. Fortunately, we created State Governments at that time; if we had not, I am sure each Member of Parliament (MP) would have perhaps said, *"I will run my own administration and let us have 600 units of administration with supporting staff under the control of the MPs"*. Luckily that did not happen and we had State Governments in position everywhere, but below the State, we did not think of decentralization at the time of independence. But there has always been a feeling that for a large country like India, decentralised governance is the only solution to deliver services and keep the people happy.

We have been not only talking about decentralisation in Karnataka ever since independence but also making unsuccessful attempts to introduce the same in the State. In 1987, when we introduced the two-tier Panchayati Raj System in Karnataka, we had a very clear view that was going to be the future. We wanted to introduce an elected district government at that time, replacing the *Collector Raj*; but there was a very strong view against it. Some of my senior colleagues felt that before creating something new, we should ensure that the two-tier system functions well and it takes firm root. Our former Chief Secretary very rightly said, *"Do not remove the office of the Deputy Commissioner now; maybe you can do it after five years and bring him into the district government. Once the Zilla Parishad becomes strong and you think that it is working to its capacity, that is the ideal time for you to think of a district government and merge the office of the District Collector/ Deputy Commissioner with that system."* Unfortunately, that did not materialize. I find to my horror that we have in fact gone back to the old system and the Collector/Deputy Commissioner remains powerful in most parts of the country, even now.

Thus, decentralized governance is something we have always been talking about; but we have not been successful in most parts of the

country. Tragically, the same thing applies to decentralized planning as well. We have been talking about it for years. In the Second Five-Year Plan, there was a reference to the need for developing village plans. The Government appointed a Committee under the Chairmanship of Dr. Hanumanth Rao which recommended that there has to be a District Plan which amalgamates all the village plans. Every time there will be talk on the need to have decentralized plans, but nothing would be done to put that into action. Only the persons change but the discourse remains. As a Deputy Commissioner, I did prepare a District Plan and I can tell you how it was prepared. Each Department was asked to give a plan for the District and all of them were stitched together and that became the District Plan. We never went to the people and we never asked them what their needs are. Whatever the departmental head and/or the local MLA wanted, that got into the District Plan.

When we introduced the two-tier Panchayati Raj System in 1987, we consciously felt that this had to be changed. If I remember right, on 1st of April, 1987, a circular was issued by Dr. D.M. Nanjundappa, the then Planning Secretary to the Government of Karnataka detailing how a district plan has to be prepared. In fact, the circular lays down a calendar of events. It starts with the Gram Sabha meetings and goes on to prescribe when the Gram Sabha should meet and collect the requirements of the people, when the Gram Panchayats should meet to look at the Gram Sabhas' requirements and prepare a plan, when it should go to the Block Panchayats for consolidation and then to the District Panchayats, and who will prepare the District Plans which will go to the State Planning Board for inclusion in the State Plan. We had a district plan meticulously prepared in that fashion for Mysore District under the leadership of Mr. M.R. Srinivasamurthy who was then the Chief Secretary of Mysore Zilla Parishad. That happened in 1988-89 and that was the first ever District Plan prepared in a participatory mode. I do not know what happened afterwards. I am afraid that habit disappeared over a period of time.

I had gone to the Government of India thereafter to prepare the Constitutional 73rd amendment. We originally proposed to leave it to the States to decide whether they should have a two-tier or three-tier system of decentralization; but that was not agreed to. There was a feeling that we should go in for a three-tier system uniformly throughout the country because that is what Balwantrai Mehta Committee had originally recommended. I came back to Karnataka to convert the two-tier systems into a three-tier system to fall in line with the constitutional mandate. We re-did what all we had done earlier, but the decentralized planning,

somehow, was lost in the bargain. We did not prescribe a proper planning process in the Constitutional 73rd amendment; but the Constitutional 74th Amendment did bring in a District Planning Committee (DPC). Thus, the DPC became a necessity and the plans of both rural and urban areas were to be considered and taken together, while preparing the District Plan.

Some States like Kerala, Karnataka and Sikkim did follow the participatory process to finalize their district plans. But suddenly we find all the structures above the District Plans disappearing. Since the District Planning Committee is a constitutional compulsion, we cannot abolish the same. The national Planning Commission unfortunately was created by an administrative order and that can be removed by another administrative order, which is precisely what the Government did. Now we have an interesting situation. There is a village plan that will ultimately get into the district plan because there are DPCs in every State constituted as per the constitutional mandate. But then what happens? Does it stop with the DPC? Luckily, in some States there are State Planning Boards; the district plans do go to the State Planning Board and then become part of the State Plan. Since there is no National Planning Commission, what will happen to these State Plans? Who will give the money for Plan implementation? The real problem is unless we give the money and execute the programmes which are listed out in the Plan, nobody will have faith in the planning process subsequently. When you go for the next Plan, they will ask you what happened to the previous Plan? Why should we waste our time in coming and talking every time about plans which do not get implemented? Thus, despite some efforts, decentralized planning has not become a reality yet.

Coming back to both decentralized governance and planning, we are certain that they should be there; they should be continued and we are all for that. But the hard reality is that they are not taking place. We have to find out the reasons in each one of the States and come up with suggestions on what needs to be done. The solutions will vary from State to State, depending upon the local needs and culture.

Let me now take up the other two key words: Economic Development and Social Justice. About economic development, I see a good number of economists in this hall and they know better than me. But still let me say that according to the Government documents, economic development has been good in India and that extreme poverty has been reduced. According to one document, in the year 2003-04, we had 270 million people coming under the Below Poverty Line category which came down to 73 million in the year 2018. They say that extreme poverty has

been significantly coming down. India does not now have the distinction of being the single largest country with poor people, as Nigeria has taken it over. Nigeria has got 87 million and we have only 73 million. So, we can take some pride in saying that we have moved down from place one to place two.

No doubt, extreme poverty has come down in India. But it still exists in some areas where there are tribal people and people who have not yet been reached by the welfare programmes of the Government. We need to identify them among the categories of the landless tribes, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Even in the other categories, the poor may have improved their position from extreme poverty, but the gap between poor and rich has widened very significantly meanwhile. Growth has taken place both for the rich and the poor, but the growth rate among the rich is far higher than the growth rate among the poor. Therefore, the gap between the rich and the poor has hugely widened. That means there is a great amount of inequality and when we discuss economic development, we need to concentrate on the need for equitable distribution of economic benefits across different sections of the society.

That takes us to the question: Do we have Social Justice? Among the four points which we need to discuss in this workshop, decentralized governance, decentralized planning, economic development and social justice, the most difficult issue is that of Social Justice. Not only in the Panchayati Raj Institutions, but also from the Government, we have always been paying lip-service to social justice. What has happened after the Panchayati Raj set up? If you talk about reservations, under the category of women among the weaker sections, the numbers are certainly going up. We started with 25 per cent in Karnataka, moved to not less than one-third under the Constitution amendment, and in most States, it has now gone up to 50 per cent. Number-wise we have created enough political space for women, but has it been translated into women asserting their rights and powers in these organizations? Still, I am not unhappy about that, it takes time. I still remember having seen Mrs. Indira Gandhi when she came to Karnataka for the first time as Prime Minister of India for a district review. She was keeping quiet throughout the meeting and it was Mr. C Subramanyam, her Agriculture Minister, who was conducting the meeting on her behalf. Later, after another 10 years, I found a total change and the newspapers used to report that there is only one man in the Indian Cabinet and that is Mrs. Gandhi. So, in my opinion, if you give women the power and a reasonable period to perform, they will definitely rise to the occasion. In the case of Panchayats, 25 years may not be the

adequate period in some States and hopefully in another 5 to 10 years, things may improve. It is good to have the reservation and hope for improvement.

The OBCs have done much better and according to all calculations, whatever may be the reservation percentage, they have taken the power into their hands and they have been able to deliver. The problem seems to remain with the SCs and STs. Anyway, this only relates to the positions of power, but the larger question is, have the Panchayats been able to deliver social justice to the people within their jurisdiction. The available evidence answers this question in the negative.

Let me stop raising further questions in this Keynote Address now and move on to concluding this address. Fortunately, or unfortunately, I have been a professional bureaucrat. I cannot simply list out the problems and put a full stop. I also have the duty to say what can be done to deal with those problems. I have some solutions to offer with which you may or may not agree. They are based on my hands-on experience over a period of time, and not through research. According to me, the first golden opportunity is to make the best use of GPDP (Gram Panchayat Development Plan). Dr. Sivanna was mentioning that when we prepared the plans earlier, there was no money; but the GPDP now has the money. Thanks to the 14th Finance Commission recommendations, the money directly goes to the Gram Panchayat and nobody can stop it. Some State Governments may still try to keep the money to meet their ways and means problems, but that is very temporary. No doubt the money is available to the GP; but we need to ensure that plans are prepared to meet the twin objectives of economic development and social justice. This is an opportunity which we should not miss. So, my first point is, as a rule we should all help building the capacities of the GPs to prepare Gram Panchayat Development Plans and get them implemented as envisaged under the Constitution.

That takes me to my second suggestion: that is building the capacities. As we all know, political power is never given. It has to be taken. That is the point that we need to clearly communicate when we build the capacities of the people. Leadership building is something that is lacking in all our training programms, we only talk about Panchayati Raj Acts, rules, amendments etc. That may be necessary but the more important thing is to build the GP members to become future leaders. Are we doing that kind of capacity building? Secondly, is our capacity building demand driven or supply driven? In today's situation, it is supply driven. SIRDs give the pre-designed training and the stakeholders come and

participate. No opportunity for the participants to say what they want. My suggestion is: let them choose what they want. Supply them with a list of institutions indicating what these institutions are capable of doing. If a Panchayat wants to send its people to particular institutions, so be it. We need to build that kind of demand-driven capacity building.

My third point is what we were discussing very recently in Mysore. At one point of time, to empower the women economically, we had promoted Self-Help Groups. Largely, the Self-Help Groups were for women only. In today's situation, we need to promote self-help groups for all the youth. We in India have a substantial number of youths in the age group between 18-30 and their potential has to be harnessed. We have a Youth Service Department in the Government, youth clubs in some Panchayats; but they do very little to build leadership capacities in the youth to manage and develop this country. Can we in the non-government sector take up this activity?

Before I conclude, I just want to make two more points: the first is, let us not think of a *'one size fits all' solution. When* we prepared the Constitutional 73rd Amendment, the then Prime Minister Shri P.V. Narasimha Rao used to tell us that if we cannot decentralize throughout the country, we should not worry about it. If it succeeds in five States, that should be good. Let us start. If it succeeds in ten States later on, that will be better. May be some States will do well at some point of time and some others will not. Rural development is a slow process and our country is huge. We cannot expect what is working in Jammu & Kashmir to work in Kanyakumari. It will not. Let us look at each State separately. Our goal is: decentralised governance through decentralised planning resulting in economic development, ensuring social justice. This is what we want. We will leave it to the States concerned or even the districts concerned as to how they should work out the process for that. That is my first point.

The second point is: I strongly feel that we should identify some champions for this cause. Unfortunately, that is not happening. We have not been able to bring more and more new and young faces into the decentralization discourse. That is the case not only with us, but also among the politicians. People who are pro-Panchayati Raj are very few in number. I keep seeing them in every conference and meeting but new faces are not coming up. We need to identify new champions, build up their capacities and ensure that they carry this movement forward and I hope they will continue and bat for decentralization. That certainly is my hope for the future.

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Dynamics of Decentralized Planning in Rural India
Lessons from Participatory Planning in West Bengal

Prabhat Kumar Datta and *Inderjeet Singh Sodhi*

Planning as a tool of socio-economic transformation and development is an organized intelligent attempt to select possible alternatives for the achievement of specific goals. It may be recalled that starting with Soviet experiment in 1928 where the focus was on centralized top-down planning, planning gradually swept over a fairly large part of the globe. And currently it is decentralized planning which has created a new wave and is sweeping across the developing countries of the globe. Conceptually, Decentralized Planning or bottom-up planning stands on two interlinked pillars, namely decentralization and democracy. The former is a mode and the latter is the essence, where the spotlight is on participation. And the locus of decentralized planning is local self-government which can institutionalize participation of the target groups.

In this concept of planning, individuals and groups are assigned the role of key actors in defining the goals, controlling the resources and directing the processes affecting his/ her own life. To quote Robert Chambers, "although the freedom and power of the individuals vary enormously, all can do something" (Chambers,1983). This approach highlights that people's participation has to be regarded as "a means of re-interpretation and re-enforcement of the democratic ethos" (Michael, 1977). Inbuilt in this approach is a strong belief in the latent human potential to decide for themselves what is best suited for them. Interestingly, for Amartya Sen, participation of the common people may be regarded as one of the elementary human freedoms (Dreeze and Sen, 1977).

In this chapter, an attempt has been made to capture the different phases in the evolution of the Decentralized Planning processes in West

Bengal during the Left Front regime, against the backdrop of the national situation in this regard, and to assess and analyse the experiences of introduction of Decentralized Planning in West Bengal. To help readers understand the backdrop, care has been taken to present a brief review of the different phases leading to the introduction of participatory planning during the last phase of the Left Front rule in the state. We would rely on field data based on a small study in a Block to discuss critically what has happened on the ground. Another objective is to identify the lessons from this experiment which might be useful for the country as a whole.

The Roots of Decentralised Planning in India

In India, the roots of Decentralized Planning can be traced back to the ideas of Sir M. Vishveshwaraya who in his *District Development Scheme: Economic Progress by the Forced Marches (*1942) conceived of a four-tier planning structures for Mysore. Incidentally, Gandhians have always pleaded for local-level planning as the basis of the planning process for the country as whole. The Report of the Dantwala Committee on Block Planning (Dantwala, 1978) stressed the need for Block-level planning and suggested methods for preparing Block plans to be implemented in some select Blocks in the country. But the progress was not very satisfactory. In 1984, the focus was shifted back to the District, following the recommendations of the Working Group on District Planning headed by C.H. Hanumantha Rao (Rao, 1984).

This led to the rise of first generation Decentralized Planning in the form of district level planning in many states, although the states differed widely in their experiences "along a centralization-decentralisation continuum". Only a few states, namely, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Jammu & Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka could make some headway in this regard (Datta and Bandyopadhyay, 2003).

First Generation Decentralised Planning: Lessons

The experiences of first generation Decentralized Planning has not been happy due to a number of factors. For example, the local bodies were kept at a distance from the planning process which gave a wrong signal. It stood in the way of the participation of the target groups which constitute the core of this kind of planning process. Second, adequate governmental support to this initiative was lacking ever since the journey had started off, presumably because the political leaders and the members of the bureaucracy were not used to this new mode of planning and they had developed misgivings and fears about the immediate political and

administrative implications of this kind of exercise. Decentralisation as a development process was something about which some apprehensions might have worked in their minds. The states where this idea had gathered some ground included West Bengal, Kerala and Karnataka.

Decentralised Planning in the Constitutional Amendment

Planning in India underwent a paradigmatic change following the Seventy Fourth Amendment of the Constitution. This amendment had also clarified the role of these bodies and sought to breath fresh air into the body of the local government institutions in India by mandating, *inter alia,* holding of elections at regular intervals and institutionalizing participation of the citizens. It was laid down in Article 243ZD (1) "There shall be constituted in every state at the District level a District Planning Committee to consolidate the plans prepared by the panchayats and municipalities in the district and to prepare a draft development plan for the district as a whole." It gave decentralized planning constitutional sanction and provided a model of planning for the whole country. It was also an acceptance of the participatory mode of planning by the Indian state.

Decentralised Planning in West Bengal: the First Phase

The first phase of Decentralized Planning in West Bengal initiated in 1985-86 was preceded by three important developments, namely, the holding of panchayat elections in 1978 and 1983 on party lines, the introduction of land reforms through the active participation of party-based panchayats and finally, the implementation of rural development programmes like Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), National Rural Employment Programme (NREP), and the Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP) through panchayats. "The impact of both the politicization of the panchayat elections and the implementation of land reform with the help of panchayats has been the buildup of a degree of political awareness and participation by the masses of rural people in panchayat activities" (Ghosh, 1988).

The grassroots planning organization in West Bengal of this phase had three tiers – District Planning and Co-ordination Council (DPCC), District Planning Committee (DPC) and Block Planning Committee (BPC). At the district level, there were two committees: DPCC and DPC. The government laid down detailed methodology of formulation of the decentralised plan. And all these bodies included elected representatives of the people, including the members of the appropriate line departments (Datta, 2001).

An Alternative Experiment of Village-based Planning in Midnapore

Interestingly, while the state of West Bengal was experimenting with Decentralized Planning at the block level, one of the districts in the state, Midnapore was implementing another model – the village level planning in 1985 (Bose, 2005). It was felt that decentralization of planning down the line up to the block level could not ensure people's participation. The main emphasis of the new model was to change the present socio-economic structure to organize a new society and to ensure that the down-and-out do not get domesticated and demoralized. The central core of this alternative exercise was to develop conscious organization of the toiling poor of the rural and urban areas, the purpose being to bring about a fundamental change in the present socio-economic structure.

The experiment revealed that full implementation of the poverty alleviation programme could not solve the problems of the wage-dependent rural poor. What was necessary was to develop their self-reliant conscious organizations, capable of claiming whatever could be obtained from the present government, without forgetting that their basic task was to change the present socio-economic structure. Thus, village level planning emphasized not only on creating objective conditions but also on subjective conditions in the sense of conscientisation of the rural poor. Evidently, this was an ideological push in this venture.

The experiment had brought out the impediments to this kind of planning exercise. The impediments included resistance from inertia, resistance arising from newly developed vested interests, resistance growing out of class interests, duality in the character of panchayats (panchayat as a people's organization and as an arm of the government) and wrong understanding of the political principle.

The experiment had shown that group meetings, prior to the meetings for the finalization of plans were more effective in generating awareness and interest of the people to work together for a common cause. Incidentally, Neil Webster's study had also indicated the significant role of group meetings (para meeting) in this regard (Webster, 1992).

Decentralised Planning in West Bengal: The Second Phase

The West Bengal District Planning Committee Bill was passed in 1994. It provides for the constitution of District Planning Committees at the district level for consolidation of plans prepared by the panchayats and municipalities in the district and preparation of the draft development plan for the district as a whole.

The West Bengal Panchayat Act was amended in 1994 to empower GPs [Section 19(1)], Panchayat samitis [Section 109 (1)], and Zilla Parishads [Section 153 (1)] to prepare plans for five years and one year, keeping in mind the objectives of economic development and social justice. The Gram Sabhas and the Gram Sansads have been given specific powers and responsibilities in terms of Sections 16A and 16B of the WB Panchayat Act, 1973, with regard to preparation and implementation of plans. Incidentally, while the Gram Sabha was a product of the constitutional mandate, Gram Sansad was an innovative institutional structure created at the electoral booth level to institutionalize more effective participation of the villagers. The Gram Panchayat plan will include the plans of the Gram Sansad, Gram Panchayat's own plan and also proposal for inter-Gram Panchayat schemes.

New Initiatives in Decentralised Planning

During 2000-01, the participatory planning model based on Community Convergence Action (CCA) was tried out as a pilot project in four blocks. The CCA was a UNICEF-supported project in some selected areas. The experiences tend to show that the methodology developed was sound. The para meetings in particular became very effective. Attendance in Sansad meetings had improved remarkably. Second, it was also found that rivalries between the political parties posed no problem. On the contrary, the holding of meetings at regular intervals led to the reduction of political tension in some blocks. Third, the quality of data collected was found to be rich and useful. Presentation of the reports in the Sansad meetings on the basis of data made the meetings lively, and the data helped in identifying and prioritizing the development schemes. Fourth, the pilot studies indicated that the Gram Panchayats were capable of preparing holistic area plans through participatory process. All the plans reflected convergence of services and a balance between sectoral plans. Fifth, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), wherever available, will be of great help in ensuring community convergence (Datta, 2001).

The Role of the Gram Unnayan Samitis (GUSs) in the Planning Process

The Gram Sabhas and the Gram Sansads have been given specific powers and responsibilities in terms of Sections 16A and 16B of the WB Panchayat Act, 1973 with regard to preparation and implementation of plans. The WB Panchayat Act was amended in 2003 to empower the Gram Sansads to set up GUSs.

The primary objective of the GUS is to ensure *inter alia* participation of the local villagers in the processes of planning, implementation and monitoring of development activities at the lowest rung of the panchayat ladder, namely, Gram Sansasd. The duties and responsibilities of the GUSs have also been spelt out as follows:

(a) Preparation of development plan and labour budget of MGNREGA, as per need and priority of the Gram Sansad;
(b) Assisting Gram Panchayat in preparing its plan;
(c) Assisting GP in convening the meetings of Gram Sansad and ensuring active participation of the people;
(d) Enabling citizens to have information on the important programmes taken up by the GP;
(e) Publishing defaulting tax payers' list in Sansad area and to assist GP in realizing arrear tax;
(f) To be accountable to Gram Sansad for the works of the GUS.

The GP member elected from a Gram Sansad shall be the chairperson of the GUS and in the event of there being two elected members from any constituency, the member senior in age shall be the chairperson.

However, the formation of the GUS raised a lot of hue and cry in the villages and the exercise came to a screeching halt in many districts. The changed political scenario in the villages compounded the situation. A close look and critical analysis of the situation bring out the following reasons:

(a) Lack of proper knowledge on the part of villagers as to the scope and objective of the creation of the GUS;
(b) Inadequate realization about the basic postulate that people's participation is not spontaneous and calls for active political intervention;
(c) Misconception among significant section of the villagers that GUS is emerging as a new centre of power and a source of fund to make use of for the promotion of personal and political ends.

The entire process faced a setback after the 6th Panchayat General Election held in 2008 when the unquestionable majority of the Left Front parties since 1978, and the consequential political domination of the left parties in rural Bengal suffered a jolt. The newly elected panchayats did not give adequate priority to it. The highly competitive nature of village politics added fuel to the fire. In this situation, the GUSs in most of the districts started working slowly and in course of time went out of steam.

Strengthening Rural Decentralisation Programme

It needs to be stressed here that the GUS received attention in the DFID-supported programme called Strengthening Rural Decentralisation (SRD) launched in 2005. This DFID funded SRD programme, among other things, aims at 'Capacity Building' of PRI functionaries and stakeholders along with awareness generation campaign and communication. One of the major outcomes expected of this programme was to strengthen and activate the Gram Sansads and the participatory planning process by empowering the powerless. Under the SRD Programme, Government of West Bengal (GoWB) initiated a participatory planning process in 304 GPs of 6 districts in West Bengal in the first phase. Here, GUS was expected to prepare sector-based Gram Sansad plans with a voluntary approach, mobilizing all the villagers and ensuring their participation in the entire planning process. At the Gram Panchayat level, another voluntary team was formed. It was known as the Gram Panchayat Facilitating Team (GPFT) for providing facilitation and capacity building support to the GUS.

The villagers were required to provide contributions in terms of cash/ kind/labour for effective implementation of different schemes and optimal utilization of government resources. This entire planning process was based on the voluntary services of GPFT and GUSs. GUS was supposed to play an important role in preparation of plans for NREGS and its implementation. They were given the responsibility of supervising the activities under MGNREGA on one hand, and on the other hand, conducting awareness camp for making the villagers conscious of their rights.

Under the initiative of the SRD, GUSs had facilitated the formation of "social capital" (Putnam, 1993). Social capital here refers to features of social organizations such as trust, norms and networks that facilitate spontaneous social cooperation and coordinated action. One World Bank study has also acknowledged the key role played by the Gram Unnayan Samitis in building up social networks of trust in the countryside (Islam, 2005).

Though much remained to be done, yet the training initiatives and capacity building measures, together with the awareness generation campaigns undertaken by the SRD team placed in the districts, did pave the way for small "community initiatives" for development, independent of any financial assistance of the government or the Panchayats in many areas within the state. For instance, in the Sukhdevpur Gram Panchayat in Dakshin Dinajpur, women SHG members have been very active in campaigning for primary education of the local children (Datta and Sinha,

2008). With the initiatives of the women-led SHGs in five Gram Sansads in the said area, the local residents were found to be collectively engaging themselves in renovating the village road in some of the villages. Such success stories of "spontaneous participation" have nevertheless been very few and are largely confined to small pockets. To the individual these may seem insignificant, but the sum total of small actions makes great movements (Chambers, 1983).

The Phases in the Preparation of Sansad-based Participatory Planning

There were five phases in the preparation of the Sansad-based plans. The first phase focused on the campaign, training and empowerment. The second phase related to conducting surveys for the collection of data and information. The data and information were required to be collected for the preparation of plans. In this phase, the members of the GUS were given the task of preparing the village register containing wide-ranging useful data about the village. The third phase in the process related to analysis of problems, resources and potentialities and determination of programmes. Some of the major activities of this phase included examination and understanding of the overall situation of the Gram Sansad, analysis of the resources and exploration of the possibilities of how they can be fruitfully utilized and to prepare the sectoral plans accordingly. While making prioritisation of plans and programmes, the villagers have to be consulted.

The fourth phase was a phase of preparation of draft plans and their primary approval. This work was preceded through the formation of a small team which was entrusted with job of preparation of the draft plans. The draft development plans were to be placed in the special general meeting of the Sansad which was authorized to approve it. After this exercise is done the draft plan was put up in public places. A copy was sent to the GP concerned.

This was followed by a meeting of the Task Force and development seminars, which can be considered as the fifth phase in the planning process. The seminar was required to be attended by all the Gram Panchayat members, representatives [10 to 12] from each Gram Sansad area, local and block officials, Task Force members, locally available experts, representatives of the NGOs working in the area and the representatives of all the political parties.

The development seminar was followed by the attempts to finalise the Gram Panchayat plan in the light of the documents prepared by the Task Force and the recommendations of the seminar. There were two plans–one for five years and the other, for one year. The plan became final after the Gram Panchayat approved it.

Findings from the Field Study

Our field study indicates that there had been significant erosion in the political support to the GUS after the panchayat elections held in 2008 which brought about a remarkable change in the political scenario of the villages in the state. We collected information about the office bearers which indicated that most of the office bearers of the GUS were replaced by a new set of office bearers. It has acted negatively in two ways. First, the old office bearers were trained and they learn through handholding support how to make the GUS work. The new ones were freshers without training and motivation. Our field investigations brought out that it was done primarily to break the system which emerged as centres of vested interest, made use of by the earlier ruling parties for political mobilization and distribution of small economic favouritism and nepotism.

Second, our field study brought out that the idea of village-based planning through Village Development Society did not trickle down to the lower level of the party as a political agenda, although the ruling Left Front had created this new institutional setup and there was almost overwhelming domination of the left parties in all panchayats. The fall-out was lack of discussion about proritisation in the Gram Sansad meetings. At the other end, people did not have a clear understanding about it. Added to it was the continuation of the tradition of sectoral planning, which the official functionaries found convenient. The local political leaders we interacted with, were found to be ill-equipped to talk about the holistic village based planning.

The support of the DFID-sponsored Strengthening Rural Decentralisation programme was expected to change the perception of the villagers at large, but our findings are that most of the SRD members preferred to interact with the members of the Gram Panchayat, leaving aside their primary target group. While taking to them, we gathered that it was easier for them to work with them. Second, they felt that they were the influential people to carry forward the message down the line.

Third, the size of the Village Development Society was very unwieldy, as an attempt was made to ensure representation of not only all sections of the rural society but also to ensure the representation of the school teachers, retired and serving government employees. Apparently, this was an innovative meaningful initiative because their services are of immense importance in the preparation of the village development plan. In course of discussions with office bearers, it came out that the school teachers including retired and serving government functionaries did not attend meetings. We cross-checked with a section of them and found that

they were reportedly preoccupied with ever-increasing work load in their respective offices. Some of them argued that the meetings hardly took place with proper notice. In fact, they were not duly motivated and there was also a lack of mutual respect for each other (Datta and Sen, 2011).

Fourth, there are subject-wise standing committees at the level of the GP but they did not take any active interest in GUS-based planning. In fact, there is no functional linkage established through rules etc. between these two bodies although they work for a common purpose. More importantly, the standing committees themselves were in disarray and were found to be out of steam after some time. In fact, our deep probe showed that they had worked well during the initial years. Later on, the party leaders overpowered them and gradually they went into oblivion.

Fifth, line department officials did not take adequate interest in the planning process, as is evident from the absence of their representatives in the meetings of the GUS, which have been deprived not only about their contribution but also of necessary information about the expected allocation of funds from these departments. In fact, coordination of development activities at the village level has become a big challenge. There is an inherent undercurrent in the relationship between the panchayats and government representatives. The local government demands horizontal coordination with line department and vertical coordination among their organs. Another study done by Bhaskar Chakrabarty and others have brought how it has not happened in West Bengal (Chakrabarty, 2011).

Sixth, Gram Sansads were supposed to emerge as the real centres of discussion and deliberation about Decentralized Planning, but the meetings of the Gram Sansads were not held regularly and even when meetings were held the discussions became more a ritual rather than real. Even when meetings used to take place, attendance was far from satisfactory.

It was reported that in some Gram Sansad meetings, signatures were collected from house to house, after the meetings were over to ensure quorum. Things were different during the heyday of the Left Front as our study indicated (Datta and Pramanik, 1994). The Gram Sansads as participatory institutions of democracy lost political momentum after about a decade of its existence, as soon as political parties started played key roles in the meetings (Datta, 2013). During the initial years, as our studies and studies by other scholars indicated, the frontal organizations of the party, namely the youth, students and women's wings were galvanized into action to ensure attendance of the Sansad meetings. But subsequently, the partisan attitude of the principal players at the meetings discouraged a good number of the villagers from attending meetings. The villagers lost

interest as the critics were not allowed free play, as indicated by the study done by Maitreya Ghatak and others (Ghatak, 2002).

A study of the sex-wise breakup of the members of the GUS showed that representation of women was highly disproportional. West Bengal passed a law for fifty per cent reservation of women in the panchayat institutions but their representation in the GUS was less than one third. Women have higher stakes in village planning. Their inadequate representation meant their voices were not properly heard. The rise of the self-help groups in 1990s did bring about some change in terms of increasing presence of women in the meetings, but it was shortlived because later on they were co-opted into the political fold for doing the work of political mobilization.

Seventh, the study indicated that the members of the GUS lacked adequate knowledge about the methodology and significance of Decentralized Planning in which individuals and groups, as the conceptual basis indicates, would be playing the roles of key actors. Huge material was prepared under the SRD programme to sensitize them about their roles and responsibilities, but our findings showed that they were not used properly. And the SRD team did not care to check it or motivate them to increase their knowledge by reading the literature prepared in local languages. Although inadequate literacy can partly explain this phenomenon, their lack of motivation contributed to the situation.

Eighth, our field interactions revealed that SRD interventions had resulted in myopic planning, as the focus was on utilization of funds. The SRD staff was under pressure to spend money, and unfortunately it became a major driving factor. The output aspect became secondary. The respondents also drew our attention to another weakness. They confided that shortsighted plans prepared under the SRD funds without intensive discussion with stakeholders, could not be integrated into the comprehensive village plan (Datta and Sen, 2011).

Some degree of political consensus on village issues is a *sine qua non* for any kind of participatory exercise in matters of development and or planning. The party symbol based panchayat elections politicizes village society which was tied together by multiple bonds dividing the villagers along the line of political party...It has both positive and negative sides. It was this politicization which was very helpful to implement land reforms programme effectively but it caused a sharp rupture in the social relations in the villages.

The GUS was conceived at a time when the rural society in West Bengal was undergoing a process of change. There is a view that it was

politically motivated legislative action to create another body in the villages for political mobilization of the villagers. But it did not happen. Politics became extremely confrontational because neither the ruling party nor the emerging opposition party had agreed to leave any political space to their opponents. In this kind of a situation, building consensus in the village became more a fiction than a fact.

Takeaways from West Bengal for India

It is very difficult to implement decentralized participatory planning in village. India is a state with highly politicized society, without spontaneous and sustained bottom-up political initiative and support. And it is possible only when the ruling political party or coalition of parties realize that there is electoral dividend in this kind of programme. Political initiative and interest can hardly be isolated from political incentive.

Planning is not simply a socio-economic exercise; it has a technical dimension in the sense that it calls for some knowledge about how to weave all the components identified. Through participation of the stakeholders in the form of a document. In most of our villages, this expertise is not easily available. And that is why the Gram Panchayat Facilitating Team was created under the DFID-sponsored SRD programme. It was to ensure this that provision was made to enlist the support of school teachers and serving and retired government employees. They have to be motivated for which some incentives need to be provided, more particularly, when consumerism has slowly crept into rural political life.

The villagers need to be sensitized about their roles and responsibilities. This is a very difficult task for which informal *para* meetings or meetings of a section of the villagers who might be considered useful, needs to be organized before the formal meetings are held. There are no established tested methods of doing it. Attempt has to be made to innovate methodologies for this purpose, in keeping with local situations.

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

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