

**PLANNING AT LOCAL LEVEL:
REFLECTION ON LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN WEST BENGAL, INDIA**

Dilip Kumar Ghosh *

In India the process of decentralization resulted in the creation of “people’s institutions”, local self-governments known as *panchayat*. These local government institutions were granted constitutional legality in 1992 - but in the State of West Bengal they had been created almost two decades before. The 1973 West Bengal *Panchayat* Act established the *panchayat* system (consisting of *gram panchayat*, *panchayat samiti*, and *zilla parishad* respectively at village, block and district level) aiming to further the development of the community as a whole and to the socio-economic betterment of its individual members. Further amendments to this Act encouraged participative governance at the local level and networking among the three levels (village, block and district).

This article focuses on the West Bengal case as it is considered a successful model of decentralization in India: a three tier *panchayat* system has been effectively running since 1978; regular elections of the representatives are held every five years; the decision making from the very base of the system is decentralized and the opposition members also have a voice. This is the “beauty” of the West Bengal system. After presenting a detailed account of the characteristics of this system, the author offers some critical reflections based on his personal and professional experience.¹

Institutional arrangements for local planning

With the 73rd amendment to the Constitution the *panchayat* were granted constitutional legality as local government bodies responsible for the socio- economic development in the rural areas. There are 29 subjects for which the *panchayat* are responsible, and in West Bengal there are ten standing committees - both at block and district level - to cover the 29 subjects (see Table 1). Each standing committee has the responsibility for the financial and executive administration of the schemes and programmes within the budgetary provisions of the *panchayat samiti* at the block level. The budget of the *panchayat samiti* includes both resources mobilized locally and funds devolved by the State government. The standing committees deal with the funds relevant to their subjects (as in Table 1).

* Dilip Kumar Ghosh is the Secretary of Howrah *zilla parishad* (the district level *panchayat*), West Bengal, India.

¹ The analysis in the present article is based on the published reports of the Government of West Bengal in the Department of Panchayats and Rural Development and the working experience of the author since 1983. Working experiences, interactions with the *panchayat* members, field observations in the course of discharging responsibilities by the author etc. make the development of this paper possible.

Table 1

Standing Committee	Subjects covered
Finance, Establishment, Development & Planning	Poverty alleviation programmes; Market and fair; Ferries and waterways
Public Health and Environment	Health and sanitation including hospitals, primary health centres and dispensaries; Family welfare; Drinking water
Public Works and Transport	Rural housing; Road, culverts, bridges and other means of communication; Maintenance of community assets.
Agriculture, Irrigation and Cooperation	Agriculture including agricultural extension; Land improvement, land consolidation and soil conservation; Minor irrigation, water management and watershed development
Education, Culture, Information and Sports	Education including primary and secondary schools; Adult and non-formal education; Technical training and vocational education; Cultural activities; Libraries
Women and Child Development, Social Welfare and Relief	Women and child development; Social welfare including welfare of the handicapped and mentally retarded; Welfare of the weaker societies and in particular, of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.
Forest and Land Reforms	Social forestry and farm forestry; Minor forest produce and implementation of land reforms.
Pisciculture and Animal Resource Development	Fisheries; Animal husbandry, dairying and poultry.
Food and Supplies	Public distribution system
Small Industries, Power and Non-conventional energy	Small scale industries; <i>Khadis</i> , village and cottage industries; Rural electrification including distribution of electricity and non-conventional energy sources.

To enable the process of devolution of powers to the local bodies, District Planning Committees (DPC) were created in every district of the country in 1992, through a constitutional amendment. The DPCs are responsible for the consolidation of the plans proposed by the *panchayat* and for the drafting of a development plan. Following this amendment, the West Bengal District Planning Committee Act was approved in May 1994. It specifically delineates that members are to be elected by and amongst the elected members of the *zilla parishad* and all the municipalities of a district; and others appointed by the State Government from amongst: the chairpersons of the *panchayat samiti* and municipalities, members of the Legislative Assembly and members of Parliament; officers of the State Government and eminent personalities in the fields of economy, politics and social issues.²

² The fact that not **all** the chairpersons of the different *panchayat samiti* are appointed in the DPC sometimes creates a problem of prioritization of schemes. For example, a *panchayat samiti* whose chairperson is not a member of the DPC may find that DPC extends approval to a certain scheme which is not so urgent for the area. As a result, the *panchayat samiti* may delay its implementation resulting in an escalation of project costs and stagnation of money. To avoid such operational problems, the Government of West Bengal provided for the district *panchayat (zilla parishad)* chairperson to be the head of the DPC. This provision reduces the differences of opinion between the *zilla parishad* and the DPC in the prioritization of the schemes for approval.

People's participation in the *panchayat*

In order to make the *panchayat* participatory bodies, they are legally required to hold public meetings at the *gram sansad* (a body consisting of persons registered at any time in the electoral rolls of a constituency of a *gram panchayat*) and at the *gram panchayat* levels. The *gram sansad* is authorised to guide and advise the *gram panchayat* in planning and implementation of programmes. All electors in a constituency of a *gram panchayat* are thus the members of a *gram sansad* (on an average 700 members are there). Each *gram sansad* is required to meet twice a year, (ordinarily in May and November) although an extra-ordinary meeting of a *gram sansad* may be convened at any time if the situation so requires or if the State Government issues an order. The West Bengal Panchayat Act establishes that one-tenth of the total number of members shall be present. But there is no specific provision for attendance/participation by minorities and women, which tends to be low in these meetings.

In order to enhance the role of the local people, the Act requires that a *gram sansad* shall guide and advise the *gram panchayat* with respect to the programmes/schemes for economic development and social justice in the *gram panchayat* area. The *gram sansad* has the responsibility to define principles for the identification of (i) the beneficiaries for these programmes, and (ii) the schemes which are to be implemented on a priority basis for economic development of the villages under their jurisdiction.

The Annual Administrative Report, 2003-04 of the Department of Panchayat and Rural Development (DPRD), Government of West Bengal elucidates the relevance of the *gram sansad*: «the main function of *gram sansad* is to guide and advice the *gram panchayat* in regard to the schemes for economic development and social justice, identification of beneficiaries for various poverty alleviation and food security programmes, constitution of one or more beneficiary committees for ensuring active participation of people in implementation, maintenance and equitable distribution of benefits of one or more schemes in its area. (...) Further, it is mandatory for a *gram panchayat* to place in the meetings of *gram sansad*, the budget and audit report of the accounts of *gram panchayat* for deliberation, recommendation and suggestion of *gram sansad*»

The importance of the *gram sansad* meetings is such that if a *gram panchayat* establishes that the recommendations of a *gram sansad* cannot be implemented or are not acceptable, this decision has to be reported by the *gram panchayat* in the following meeting of the *gram sansad*. Apart from *gram sansad*, at the *gram panchayat* level there is a *gram sabha* (coterminous with the area of a *gram panchayat*) where all electors of the *gram panchayat* are members (on an average 10,000 members). The quorum is one-twentieth of the total members.

In spite of the State Government's keenness on increasing people's participation, the attendance in meetings is not comparable to the efforts made. Participation is not a physical ingredient. Participation is a process that blooms gradually and ultimately creates a sense of belonging to the community and the *panchayat*. So far, the sense of belonging of common people to the *panchayat* is lacking. Impressions gathered during the field study made in four districts often lead to the feeling that in the course of carrying out their duties and

responsibilities, the *panchayat* representatives - who in general are very close to the people - are becoming “bureaucrats”: while there are certainly exceptions, in many cases there is a patron-client attitude. Moreover, in analyzing the average attendance of people in the *gram sansad* meetings over the years since 1996, it can be assumed that there is an unwillingness to participate in the affairs of *panchayat*.

Table 2. Average attendance in Gram Sansad and Gram Sabha meetings in West Bengal

Year	Gram Sansad (May)	Gram Sansad (November)	Gram Sabha
1996	11%	18%	3%
1997	15%	18%	3%
1998	11%	16%	2.9%
1999	12%	13%	5.5%
2000	12%	13%	5%
2001	12%	11%	9%
2002	12%	12%	5%
2003	12%	11.7%	7%
2004	12.08%	13.3%	7%
2005	12.6%	12.7%	7.3%
2006	11.9%	12.8%	7.4%

Source: Annual Administrative Report of DPRD.

Table 2 shows that attendance is the minimum required to reach the quorum, which is 10% of the total members. The main issue is that people in general are not interested in the affairs of the *panchayat*, except for the elections, when on average around 85/90% of the people vote. On the contrary, only 10 to 12% of these voters usually attend a *gram sansad* meeting. This indicates the aversion of the common people towards these meetings. The Report of the Second State Finance Commission (2002) of West Bengal observes that: “the attendance in the meetings of the *gram sansad* declined when the participants found that their aspirations could not be fulfilled by the *gram panchayat*. It seems that a vicious circle is operating here. Because of their experience of not receiving funds promised in the past, no planning activity is undertaken till funds actually flow to the *gram panchayat*”.

As a consequence, people are gradually losing their faith in the activities of the *panchayat* and prefer to remain silent. In West Bengal, *panchayat* have virtually no funds of their own and with uncertain availability of untied funds in their hands, they have no other alternative than waiting for funds from the State Government. Moreover, the *panchayat* implement mostly the centrally sponsored schemes/programmes where funds are very much tied in nature and practically no scope remains for change in norms on the basis of the local demand.

For strengthening the decentralization process and the involvement of people in the process of development, the State Government, through the 2003 amendment to the West Bengal

Panchayat Act, created a *Gram Unnayan Samiti* (GUS) in each *gram sansad*. The vision of the State Government is that the GUS will be the representative body of the village inhabitants and serve to interact with the common people and maintain constant liaison with the *gram panchayat*. In reality, there is more enthusiasm in the creation of this body than in its effective functioning. The main factor is the ubiquitous presence of the ruling party, and its capturing of space and people with the aim of grabbing benefits of the programmes for their followers.

Through a study conducted in four districts of West Bengal efforts were made to capture the responses of common people in terms of their awareness about the *gram sansad* (see table 3).

Table 3. Responses on awareness about *gram sansad* meetings

District	Number of respondents			Affirmative responses		
	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total
Purulia	580	127	707	474 81.72%	72 56.69%	546 77.23%
Burdwan	616	165	781	549 89.12%	106 64.24%	655 83.86%
North 24 Parganas	506	201	707	352 69.56%	138 68.66%	490 69.31%
Jalpaiguri	338	122	460	336 99.41%	117 95.90%	453 98.48%
Total	2040	615	2655	1711 83.87%	433 70.40%	2144 80.75%

Source: field survey

Although the *gram sansad* was introduced in the *panchayat* system in 1994, this participatory decision-making forum is still unknown to around 19% of the population in rural West Bengal. More women than men are unaware of the *gram sansad*. In the rural areas, women have very few occasions to participate in public meetings and events. Even after four elections (1993, 1998, 2003 and 2008) of the *panchayat* bodies with reserved seats for women, the information gap still remains high. Neither the DPRD of the State Government nor the political parties (except for small initiatives) organize Information, Education and Communication (IEC) activities to make people aware of the *gram sansad* and of the possibilities for participation. Occasionally there are advertisements on TV or in newspapers, but one wonders how many of the rural people have access to these two media.

From the responses of the people interviewed, there are several reasons (grouped in 5 categories in table 4, below) that inhibit them from attending the *gram sansad* meetings.

Table 4

Category	Factors
Inadequate publicity	(i) We do not know (ii) <i>panchayat</i> does not invite (iii) Do not get information (iv) Do not understand
Attitude of <i>gram panchayat</i>	(i) Do not hear us (ii) Do not accept our views
Personal reasons	(i) Not reside in the area (ii) Time does not permit (iii) No purpose in going to the meeting (iv) No intention to attend the meeting (v) Not engaged in party politics (vi) We are in opposition party (vii) Due to old age and infirmities
Social inhibitions	(i) Women of the families do not go (ii) Women of our village do not go (iii) Women attend <i>mahila samiti</i> meetings only.
Benefits not received	(i) <i>panchayat</i> does not take up any work (ii) Not received any benefit from the <i>panchayat</i>

From the discussion in this section it appears that the linkage between the people and the *panchayat* is uneven. The next section, however, looks at an example of *panchayat*'s direct involvement in the process of human development at local level relating to primary education where the leadership is given by the village *panchayat* in close collaboration with the local people.

Sishu Siksha Kendras

Sishu Siksha Kendras (SSK, child education centers) are set up in villages where there are at least 20 children without access to primary school or requiring some special attention not available in the formal primary schools. The Shishu Shiksha Karmasuchi is described in the Annual Administrative Report 2004-05 of the DPRD: "this alternative system is less costly but qualitatively comparable with the formal education system. Syllabus, curriculum, text books are similar to those of the formal schools. Education is imparted by teachers called *Sahayikas*, who are generally women with minimum qualification of *Madhyamik* passed. They are engaged by the Managing Committees from among the locality. The state government provides an honorarium of Rs. 1000 per month to the *Sahayikas* through the *panchayat*. The programme is essentially a community managed initiative with strong support of the *panchayat*". Since its beginning in 1997-98, the programme has expanded: the number of Sishu Siksha Kendras has grown enormously, and so has the number of student enrolled (see table 5).

Table 5. Progress in Sishu Siksha Karmasuchi in West Bengal

Year	N. of centres in operation	Change over the previous year (in %)	Number of students enrolled	Change in enrolment over the previous year (in %)
1997/98	410	-	30100	-
1998/99	839	104.63	59700	98.34
1999/00	3116	271.39	202500	239.19
2000/01	7802	150.38	503600	148.69

2001/02	10871	39.34	749100	48.75
2002/03	13496	24.14	755400	0.84
2003/04	16403	21.54	1043400	38.12
2004/05	16100	-1.85	1252400	20.03
2005/06	16117	0.10	1429156	14.11

Source: DPRD, Government of West Bengal

From Table 5 it can be noted that the programme started with great enthusiasm. Enrolment of children that were out of school has expanded. The Annual Administrative Report 2005-06 of the DPRD mentioned that just over 50% of all the learners in such Kendras are girls. Possibly because these community initiatives are backed up by the *panchayat*'s own urge to universalise primary education, there is improvement in retention of students in learning centers. The 2002 Pratichi Education Report (the study covered only three districts viz. Birbhum, Midnapur and Purulia) gives an assessment of these centers: "in providing a caring atmosphere for teaching students from diverse backgrounds and also in channelling devoted and efficient work through mobilising neglected and previously unused resources, the SSKs stand out as great achievers at an extremely little cost".



SSK students in a classroom

The costs of this programme are low because the community shares a large portion. Each centre is managed by a committee comprised of nine members. Of these, seven have to be selected amongst the parents of the students enrolled, with the purpose of generating among the parents a sense of belonging to the centre. These managing committees are financially supported by the State for the teachers' salary, contingency and building expenses, etc. Along with the government funds, contributions from the community and the *panchayat* augment the other available resources.

The State Government decided to respond to the requests of the rural people and announced the launching of a programme called Madhyamik Siksha Karmasuchi (MSK) meant for secondary education. The Annual Administrative Report 2003-04 of the DPRD explained the launching of the MSK: “the problem of accessibility of students in the upper primary schools is more acute. About 12,000 secondary schools can hardly do justice to about 20 lakh (2,000,000) children who complete primary education every year in the State. Therefore, to meet the requirement of so many children aspiring to continue studying, the DPRD took up Madhyamik Shiksha Karmasuchi under which the community is encouraged to set up Madhyamik Siksha Kendras in the same philosophy as in the case of the SSK”.

Under this programme, the community is encouraged to set up Madhyamik Siksha Kendras with four classes from class V to VIII. Syllabus, curriculum and textbooks are similar to those of the formal secondary schools. The *panchayat* are advised to facilitate the programme in their respective jurisdiction and to invest funds received from government to run the centres. According to the sources of the DPRD, 50.6% of the students enrolled in Madhyamik Siksha Kendras are girls. This implies that through community initiatives and the *panchayat* support, both SSK and MSK can deliver the desired services effectively.



SSK students celebrating Tagore's birthday

Conclusion

The weak area in the decentralization process is that funds and functionaries are not devolved at par with the devolution of functions to the *panchayat*. Table 1 shows that around 29 subjects are devolved to the *panchayat*. In conformity with this devolution neither the employees of the state government are placed at the hands of the *panchayat* at the appropriate tier nor are all funds of the state budget allotted to the *panchayat* by the

departments concerned with 29 subjects. Only the DPRD makes allotment to the *panchayat* for the programmes implemented by this Department. As we saw with the Sishu Siksha Karmasuchi, the local *panchayat* have practically no control over these teachers (Department of School Education is the administrative department of the primary teachers). The *panchayat* have no administrative control over the government officials. Most of the officers placed in the *panchayat* are under the direct control of their respective departments. The business of government is vertically arranged, with departmental hierarchies stretching from the Minister in charge of a particular portfolio at the top to the lowest departmental functionary at the bottom. The *panchayat* are horizontal interventions in this vertical administrative arrangement and this makes it difficult for the *panchayat* to bring government officials within their coordinating discipline. Different attempts on the part of the State Government have been initiated. But the vision of the State Government for making the *panchayat* local self-government may remain elusive without control over the departmental employees of the state government implementing different programmes .

In general, the *panchayat* at all three levels are simply implementing different government sponsored schemes. Most of them are funded by the DPRD and Ministry of Rural Development of the Government of India. All these programmes are designed centrally and the *panchayat* implement them according to pre-defined guidelines. Little flexibility exists there. For making decentralization successful it is essential that there should be some funds of an untied nature, without any conditionality, for meeting the needs and aspirations of local people. Availability of such funds is very limited and hardly able to meet the local people's demands within the five years of the *panchayat*' tenure. The level of people's participation is also not encouraging in West Bengal in spite of continuous efforts from the administration to sensitize the population. However, *panchayat* in West Bengal have been functioning in the interests of rural people since 1978. Certainly there is scope for further improvement.

Lastly, it must be mentioned that Sishu Siksha Kendras in West Bengal are the real examples of intertwined action of the local community and the village *panchayat*. No government officials are involved in the process of running these centers. Not even the higher tiers of the *panchayat* are associated with these centers with the exception of some official formalities.