

## **Panchayati Raj Institutions in West Bengal: An analysis from historical and people's perspective.**

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### **Abstract**

A number of studies has been carried out on the Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) in West Bengal by political scientists, economists, administrators, sociologists, and historians. However, most of the studies have focused on a particular point of time rather than studying the changes over time in development administration and governance of PRIs. The earlier studies have also not taken into account the people's perception on the changes as they are primary witness of the changes over time. Thus, this research aims to analyze the progress and changes in the development administration and governance of PRIs from both historical and people's perspective.

**Keywords:** Administration, Governance, Historical, People, Panchayati Raj institutions.

The development of rural areas of India determine the growth and development of the country as India is a country of villages where about seventy percent population resides (Paul and Paul, 2005). After independence India's economic growth increased considerably but the fruits of this growth did not help in improving the living conditions of the rural people. The government has realized this problem and subsequently several development programs and schemes were implemented since independence. However, these efforts and programs have not made much difference in the conditions of rural people in particular and villages in general. One of the reasons behind failure of the programs is that these are centrally sponsored schemes, and plans were formulated at the center without taking into consideration people's real needs and preferences. Studies have found that people's perception and preferences is one of the significant factors that determine the performance of the development projects in rural areas. These factors and circumstances has paved the way for the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) of 1993 through which the panchayat raj institutions (PRIs) were given a constitutional status. The amendment of 1993 provided them the power to formulate and implement plans for economic development, social justice and equality in rural areas.

The Panchayat system in India is not new. It existed since ancient times but they were not effective and efficient. Similarly, in the state of West Bengal, panchayat system was for the first time introduced by the British government in 1870 but the system has very limited powers and were not democratic in nature. In the post-independence period, the panchayat system for the first time was established in 1957 but they were dependent on the state government for funds and other guidelines. The three tier system of PRIs in the state was established after the implementation of 73<sup>rd</sup> CAA which has made these institutions more accountable to people and given more power in terms of fund, function and functionaries. However, these changes were more on the paper rather than on the ground (Finance Commission 2007; Panchayat and Rural Development Department 2005). The PRIs were controlled by the bureaucracy and have been to a large extent dependent on them for funds as well as guidance (Mukherji and Bandyopadhyay, 1992; Chakorborty, 2007). At the same time the political parties also played important role from behind in guiding and controlling the functions of PRIs (Bhattacharyya, 1998; Bhattacharyya, 2002; Bhattacharyya, 2009; Bardhan et al. 2009; Dasgupta, 2009; Kohli, 1987; Kundu, 2009). The studies have also identified several other problems with the PRIs in West Bengal including people's perception and preferences that are not taken into consideration in the planning and implementation of development schemes for rural areas (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2004). Hence, the PRIs and people still play very little role in the development administration and governance which requires attention of the policymakers. The present study aims to study the improvement in the involvement of PRIs in the rural development administration and governance in the state of West Bengal through historical and people's perspective.

Rural development programmes like Indira Awas Yojana, Jawahar Rojgar Yojana, Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme, Swarnajayanti Gram Swarajgar Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana, Provision of Urban amenities in Rural Area, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, National Rural Drinking Water Programme, Swatch Bharat Abhiyan, etc. were launched time to time by the Government of India as a structured attempt to promote the development of the countryside. The state government also launched several programmes like State Action against Hunger And Inequality, Mission Nirmal Bangla, etc. Earlier, the rural development was viewed as an attempt to promote community development by developing agro-based activities and improving the living standard of underprivileged section of the society. But of late, this process involved a transformation in a continuous effort to modernize the economic and social life of rural people (Desai, 1987). Although these programmes were implemented with the intension of holistic development of villages, it is evidently true that none of them became truly fruitful in delivering any comprehensive solution to various problems. Despite of structured initiatives, the problems continue to exist. The gaps left in each programme led to the initiation of a new policy. But, time and again, it failed to provide any integrated solution, leading to ever increasing disparity with urban areas.

In spite of constitutional provision (73rd Constitution Amendment Act, 1992) of including the villagers in developmental planning, the ground reality shows that so far none of the policies and programmes include any effective stakeholders' participation. As a result, neither the root causes are identified nor the problems are resolved properly. Lack of participation of the beneficiaries is considered as the prime drawback of the majority of the policies and programmes. Peoples' participation in the broadest sense can be regarded as a political process in which the previously underprivileged sections of population tend to take part and enjoy the fruits of social and economic development (Oakley, 1995). There is a

common perception that poor people do not know their needs, hence the development projects in most cases are designed without considering the opinion of the local stakeholders. Inevitably, the needs of the villagers are not reflected in policy designs. Actual beneficiaries are not identified, funds are not transparently allocated. In reality, a large number of ghost beneficiaries are found to exist.

The Panchayats and government bodies are not accountable enough. Therefore, it is required to establish transparency and accountability in the entire system. A system of social audit is also required to be imposed. Besides, dissemination of knowledge and information on behalf of government is poor. Lack of coordination among different hierarchy of functionaries is well observed. Unique problems regarding infrastructure still exists. In such a circumstance, structural alteration in rural governance is demanded. Alongside, utilization of technologies in policy management is nominal in India. The existing top-down approaches of policy administration are not capable enough to address the existing problems, and in these circumstances, inception of good rural governance is the toughest challenge for the government.

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