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PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE REFORM IN WEST BENGAL:  
POLICY AGENDAS AND LOCAL RESPONSES

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## ABSTRACT

This research study adopted the vision articulated by Evans (2008) that successful implementation of development goals as envisaged by the MDGs or SDGs necessitates creation of more effective State-society linkages by the twenty-first century State. Evans highlights the importance of creating or re-structuring governance structures at the grassroots, leading to substantive citizens' participation in the developmental processes of the State. Based on this theoretical location, this research seeks to understand the factors which shape the opportunities for 'effective' people's participation in local governance structures under different political regimes, and also identify the conditions, possibilities and limitations for forging more effective State-society linkages.

Several initiatives of decentralised state reforms were undertaken in the Indian State of West Bengal by a three-decade long Left regime, that was replaced by a populist right wing regime in 2011. Some of these initiatives were ideology-driven, while some were launched with financial assistance from international donor agencies, making West Bengal a strategic case to look at the factors connecting global discourses with the complex power relations operating in developing country contexts. This research therefore, specifically asks questions about the actors and the motives driving the 'participatory agenda' at various levels, how this agenda is shaped by changing political conditions and the effects of policy prescriptions on the decentralised governance structures, based on the case of West Bengal.

This research draws together a number of different sources to investigate these questions: government and party documents, interviews with senior civil servants and politicians responsible for setting the agenda for state reforms, and detailed insights into their operation gained through extensive field visits and interviews within five Gram Panchayats (village councils) in Bankura District. Together, these provide an understanding of the longer-term impact of state reform on spaces for popular participation. The thesis highlights the motivations and ideologies of political leaders, the role of bureaucratic elites, and that of global discourses in shaping governance practices. It contributes to the academic literature on building effective participation, arguing for a careful analysis of the interests shaping processes of institutional reform and of their effects on state-society relations.

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who took time out of their hectic schedules for this study. They went the extra mile searching for documents and records that had been archived, set up my meetings with appropriate respondents, and enthusiastically organised focus group discussions with community members for facilitating my research. Parimal Roy, Sandip Karmakar, Subrata Karmakar, Satyaban Pal, Rukubuddin Khan, Tarapada Khan and Prakriti Ranjan Praharaaj deserve special mention in this regard.

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## **ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS**

ABPTA: All Bengal Primary Teacher's Association

ADM: Additional District Magistrate

APA: Annual Performance Assessment

BDO: Block Development Officer

BJP: Bharatiya Janata Party

CCA: Convergent Community Action

CM: Chief Minister

CPI: Communist Party of India

CPI(M): Communist Party of India-Marxist

CPI(M)L: Communist Party of India, Marxist-Leninist

CSDS: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies

CSSP: Civil Society Support Programme

DFID: Department for International Development

DM: District Magistrate

DPRDO: District Panchayat and Rural Development Officer

ESMF: Environmental and Social Management Framework

FGD: Focus Group Discussion

GIS: Geographic Information System

GO: Government Order

GoI: Government of India

GoWB: Government of West Bengal

GP: Gram Panchayat

GPFT: Gram Panchayat Facilitating Team

GPMS: Gram Panchayat Management System

GS: Gram Sansad

GUS: Gram Unnayan Samiti

ICT: Information and Communication Technology

IDA: International Development Association

IEC: Information, Education and Communication

INC: Indian National Congress

ISGP: Institutional Strengthening of Gram Panchayats

KSSP: Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad

LCM: Local Committee Member

LCM: Local Committee Secretary

LDF: Left Democratic Front

LF: Left Front

LKP: Lok Kalyan Parishad

MDG: Millennium Development Goals  
MIC: Minister in Charge  
MIS: Monitoring and Information Systems  
MLA: Member of Legislative Assembly  
MP: Members of Parliament  
MMC: Minimum Mandatory Conditions  
MOU: Memorandum Of Understanding  
NCP: Nationalist Congress Party  
OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development  
PLA: Participatory Learning and Action  
PPP: Purchasing Power Parity  
PRA: Participatory Rural Appraisal  
PRDD: Panchayat and Rural Development Department  
PRI: Panchayati Raj Institution  
PS: Panchayat Samiti  
SAP: Structural Adjustment Programme  
SC: Scheduled Caste  
SDG: Sustainable Development Goals  
SEC: State Election Commission  
SFC: State Finance Commission  
SHG: Self Help Group  
SIPRD: State Institute of Panchayat and Rural Development  
SRD: Strengthening Rural Decentralisation  
ST: Scheduled Tribe  
STARPARD: Society for Training & Research on Panchayats & Rural Development  
SUCI: Socialist Unity Centre of India  
TMC: Trinamool Congress  
VDC: Village Development Committee  
ZP: Zilla Parishad

## **Declaration**

*I, the author, confirm that the Thesis is my own work. I am aware of the University's Guidance on the Use of Unfair Means ([www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means)). This work has not been previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, university.*

## **Dedication**

For *BABA*

Who is always there with me

## **PREFACE: A field-experience that motivated my research**

The incident I am about to relate dates back to a sweltering summer afternoon in India back in 2009. I was posted as the District Coordinator of the Strengthening Rural Decentralisation (SRD) Project for Birbhum district in the Indian State of West Bengal. The SRD project was funded by the Department for International Development, UK, and implemented by the Panchayat and Rural Development Department (PRDD) under the Govt. of West Bengal. Establishing 'pro-poor, participatory planning, implementation and monitoring systems' across the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) was expected to be one of the main outputs of this project. The participatory planning exercises were supposed to be executed by the *Gram Unnayan Samity* (GUS) or the Village Development Committee (VDC) at the village level, for which, selected VDC members used to undergo intensive training at the *Gram Panchayats* (village-council). Monitoring smooth implementation of this activity was one of the main responsibilities of the District Coordinator, SRD. Accordingly, I was doing my routine rounds of inspection of the *Gram Panchayats* (GP) to check the preparations for and progress of training programmes for the GUS members on the said afternoon.

The elections for electing new bodies for the local governance structures (Panchayats) in West Bengal are called *Panchayat* elections, which are conducted every 5 years in this State. Different political parties participate in this election, which is conducted on the basis of a secret ballot system. Following the elections, when the new *Gram Panchayat* boards are formed with newly elected representatives, it is also time to form the new *Gram Unnayan Samity* ('village development committee': GUS hereafter) comprising of different categories of people from the concerned polling area.

The results of the last Panchayat elections held in May 2008 made this summer slightly different than the previous summers in the rural belts of Birbhum. The usual relaxed pace of life and tranquillity of this district seemed disturbed. There was unrest in the air. The Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI(M)), the party leading the Leftist alliance that formed the State Government of West Bengal for the last three decades, suffered unexpected setbacks in the Panchayat elections in May 2008. Even though more than a year had elapsed

after the elections, most of the GPs in Birbhum had still failed to constitute the new bodies of the GUS for the fresh term (2008 – 2013). The situation was said to be politically volatile after the shock-defeat of the three-decade long ruling party. Over the past few months, my office was receiving reports of sporadic violence and clashes taking place over the formation of the GUS, (the reasons for which were not very clear apart from the fact that these could be local power struggles), due to which the process of GUS formation has been stalled in various GPs, under the instructions of the concerned Block Development Officers. Consequently, this controversy over GUS formation had also stalled the participatory planning process in different areas of Birbhum, since the GUS was mainly responsible for preparation and implementation of the village-level plans. This would have adverse effects on the project performance in the long run, and thus, was a source of anxiety to me, as the SRD District Coordinator for Birbhum.

After having visited the training preparations in two other GPs, I was entering the premises of Bhutura GP under the jurisdiction of Mohammad Bazar block in Birbhum district towards the end of the day. Bhutura GP is situated on a main motorway and always buzzing with people and their activities. The scenario was the same on the day of my visit, and I was seated at the office of the GP Secretary to discuss the progress of the training programme of village-based participatory planning exercises with him. I checked the registers, and through the corner of my eyes, saw a small crowd of men gathering in the larger room outside, talking among themselves in low voices. As I finished my work and made a move to go out, a stout man blocked the door leading to the bigger room. “Madam”, he said, “You need to answer our questions before you go out.” I was somewhat struck by his harsh tone and looked towards the GP Secretary, who whispered in my ears that this person was a local political leader affiliated to the CPI(M). As employees of the PRDD, it was part of our duty to interact with political workers at different levels on a daily basis, and we had been trained to engage with the local political dynamics in a sensitive manner. At that moment, I knew I had more urgent administrative matters to attend to in my office, but decided to hear this person out first.

I was led to the larger room outside by the GP Secretary, and given a seat, with 15-20 men sitting around me. The doors leading to the main gate where my official vehicle was waiting

for me, was shut. Considering the politically volatile atmosphere all around, I was somewhat unnerved, but resolved to maintain a brave front.

“Madam, which party do you vote for?” He shot-off.

“Why should I tell you that?” I replied.

“You must. Or else, why do you expect us to reveal our political preferences?” He insisted.

I was taken aback. “But who asked you to do that?”

“Why! During formation of the GUS of course! When we are asked to raise our hands in the support of such and such persons who will be GUS members, obviously our political preferences stand exposed. Why should we reveal our preferences if you don’t reveal yours?”

He almost shouted, “Do you know this is the cause of all the fights happening during GUS formation?”

He went on taking out his frustration on me, with other men in the room joining voices with him in unison. As the noise swelled around me, I stared at them, with so many thoughts rushing through my mind. According to the Panchayat Act, the GUS was supposed to be an apolitical body acting as an executive wing of the *Gram Sansad*<sup>1</sup>. This is why the process of its formation was not supposed to be by secret voting, but by reaching consensus among the villagers through debate and discussion. But this is the unfortunate dead end that the deeply fragmented ‘political society’ of this State has reached, where every person is known only by his political identity. The realisation was a deep blow for me. I tried to pacify the leader, and asked the men if they are in a mood for hearing me out. They calmed down and answered in an affirmative, after which we opened a discussion on what has been actually stated in the Panchayat Act regarding the process of constitution of the GUS, its apolitical nature, and its duties and responsibilities. Silence gradually engulfed the room, with everybody listening with rapt attention. When I finished, the same person thanked me profusely for having explained the issue to them all, with a parting comment, “But no one ever came and said all this to us.”

On the return journey to my office, I felt ashamed of the high-handed manner in which we, as part of the government machinery function and (mis)-communicate with the people, the

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<sup>1</sup> An electoral booth consisting of approx. 700 voters. Each GP comprises of 10 – 15 *Gram Sansads* (Ghosh, 2010)

gaping information gaps in this system that cause so many misunderstandings and unhappy incidents leading to unnecessary conflicts. I pondered on the results that could have been achieved only if the system could really reach out to the people and include them in the decision-making processes of the State.

*Concluding remarks.....*

The reports of violent clashes over constitution of the GUS kept pouring in to the PRDD, not only from Birbhum, but from all parts of the state, and a revised order on the constitution of the GUS was issued by the PRDD in May 2010. This order curbed the powers of the GUS to a large extent and in effect almost stalled the participatory planning process all across the state. Like many other employees of the PRDD who became emotionally attached with this process, and in turn developed a deep-rooted conviction in the power of the illiterate and semi-literate villagers in rural India, this order came to me as a heavy blow. The emotions, frustrations and queries that the incident in Bhutura GP triggered in my mind, kept coming back repeatedly and had a deep impact on my 'self' in the long run. This was one of the life-changing experiences that motivated this research.

# 1 Chapter One: Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

Various evaluations of global developmental objectives like the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) made it clear that i) the poor and marginalized have not really benefitted from the MDGs (IDS, 2014), and ii) a different approach that redefines the relationship between the state and civil society will be required for successful implementation of such development goals (UN, 2008). These findings echo the predictions by Evans (2008) that the 21<sup>st</sup> Century state must facilitate creation of more effective state-society linkages which would be much more 'bottom-up' in nature. McGee et.al (2010) claimed that transparency and accountability initiatives founded on participatory processes of citizen engagement can lead to increased state responsiveness in the form of improved governance and developmental outcomes, but further research is required to understand the enabling conditions of success and the factors that sustain these conditions over a longer time-frame. According to Hickey and Mohan (2004), conditions within which participation can be transformative requires further elaboration from both empirical and theoretical perspectives. Mansuri and Rao (2013) have also stated that more research is required on how to make the state and its agents more responsive to communities. These are the concerns that initially motivated this research that had been designed to look at the conditions, possibilities and limitations for forging effective state-society linkages.

Drawing on Evans and Heller (2014), this thesis conceptualizes a 21<sup>st</sup> century 'strong' state as one with capacity for transformational change in governance, which, as a central agent, provides a vision for 'development' based on a structural change in future. Such a capacitated state, along with building technocratic and organisational capacities, also creates state-society relations based on capability enhancement of disadvantaged sections by extending scope for their democratic and substantive participation. A crucial pre-condition for building such transformational state capacity appears to rely heavily on the vision of 'developmental challenges' or 'under-development' held by the state-elites responsible for formulating strategies and putting appropriate policies in place. In other words, whether under-

development is viewed by the policy-makers merely as scarcity of economic resources caused by only lack of economic opportunities, or in more holistic terms of material as well as subjective experiences, caused by historical processes of deprivation and social exclusion operationalised through various formal and non-formal institutional processes (Green and Hulme, 2005) is a major deciding factor. In case it is the latter, it becomes imperative on the state aiming for a structural change to forge effective state-society linkage by extending capability enhancing mechanisms to the disadvantaged sections of the society and safeguarding their interests by confronting the dominant and powerful classes on their behalf.

My starting assumption is that such a project can be made achievable on the part of the state by creation of democratic spaces at the local level, and putting in place appropriate institutional arrangements to facilitate 'effective participation' by the people in the decision-making processes of the state. Decentralised governance structures at the local level can provide that key terrain to be used as participatory spaces, by expanding the institutional surface of the state and enhancing the points of contact between the state and its citizens (Heller, 2009). This in turn can extend the scope to the masses to enhance their awareness about the exploitative institutional processes they are subjected to, and build their political capabilities in order to enable them to claim their citizenship rights by challenging and reframing the dominant ideologies of existing power-holders (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2008). There have been instances of such initiatives undertaken towards the close of the twentieth century in different parts of the world.

However, ascertaining the intent of the state and the strategies related to decentralisation reforms is crucial, since 'participation' through decentralisation can also be seen through different lenses and used by the state-actors to achieve different purposes. 'Participation through decentralisation' as an integral part of the 'good governance' agenda of the World Bank and 'participatory experiments' by the Latin American Left as part of a bigger political process, and are two such contrasting cases in point. While the World Bank advanced the concept as a means of ensuring accountability by enhancing efficiency and efficacy of the state; the concept of 'empowered participatory governance' was mostly operated by political parties originating in Leftist ideologies, to achieve emancipatory ends by creating and opening up spaces for practicing informed and active citizenship through substantive participation of the people.

Exploring the debates on the 'good governance' agenda circulating in the development discourses of the western world is important in this regard, since the policy prescriptions representing the policy-frames of the global funding agencies are strategic devices (Gales, 2011), which might serve to change the institutional values in the recipient countries. It is even possible to sustain these changes in the long run, if, along with other favourable conditions, the state-elites in the recipient countries share the same set of values with the global funding agencies. With such conversions in the key institutional values of the recipient countries, possibilities might exist that the vision for state-led transformational governance change might be reduced to a mere enhancement of technocratic and organisational state-capacity. It might be possible that this in turn, is used to extend state authority by domination instead of forging closer state-society relations based on the values of democracy and substantive participation.

Debates among the state-elites in post-independence India (in late 1940's) on the need to incorporate provisions for decentralised governance structures in the Indian Constitution, and its implementation in the Indian State of West Bengal (1978 - 2016), provide the ideal country-context to examine these conditions. The different motives driving the participatory experiments rolled-out by two different political regimes in West Bengal, and the effects of the policy prescriptions of the global funding agencies in shaping the participatory agenda of the State, raise important theoretical questions regarding the role of the state and its interface with the global powers.

This research specifically asks questions about the actors and the motives driving the 'participatory agenda' at various levels, how this agenda is shaped by changing political conditions and the effects of policy prescriptions on the decentralised governance structures. The overarching aims of this research are: i) to analyse the factors which shape the opportunities for effective people's participation in local governance structures under different political regimes, and ii) to identify the conditions, possibilities and limitations for building closer state-society relations based on the case of the Indian State of West Bengal.

## 1.2 West Bengal as a Strategic Case

The Indian State of West Bengal is considered one of the high-profile cases of successful participatory governance driven by a long history of social and political activism by a left-of centre political party, the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI(M)) (UN, 2008). It is the world's most populous unit to be governed by a democratically elected Leftist government for more than three decades (1977 – 2011) at a stretch. This Leftist regime led by the CPI(M), assumed power in West Bengal in 1977, and undertook several initiatives for state-reforms leading to a distinct shift in the power structures of rural Bengal from the 1980s. Installation of the decentralised rural governance structures or the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) in the State was one such major reform that caught the attention of scholars like Atul Kohli (1987), Neil Webster (1992) and G.K. Lieten (1994).

Kohli (1987)'s study examined the political conditions under which redistributive outcomes<sup>2</sup> resulted from developmental reforms, and was conducted when the decentralisation reforms carried out by a Left regime in West Bengal were 8 years old. Kohli (1987) described the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI(M)) as 'a party that is communist in name and organization but "social democratic" in ideology and practice' (ibid:9), that was led by a coherent leadership and committed to the interests of the lower classes. The main analytical point in Kohli's study was that a reform-oriented, well-organized, leftist regime with a pro-poor ideology appeared to be a critical component in ensuring the success of developmental reform. Moreover, these reform processes require institutionalisation of the pro-poor ideology within the state structures, which, translated into an organisational arrangement, can effectively exclude the privileged and propertied interests from dominating the process of governance. Kohli concluded, that after 8 years of conducting the participatory experiments, the CPI(M) regime in West Bengal revealed the political characteristics with the potential for such institutionalisation to take place, and therefore, came closest to the idea of

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<sup>2</sup> Redistributive outcomes were interpreted in terms of poverty eradication by 'state intervention within the framework of democratic politics and a largely capitalist economy' (Kohli, 1987: 11).

a successful, left-of-centre, reformist regime within the context of a developmental-capitalist country like India.

Twenty-two years into the Leftist regime in West Bengal, Crook and Sverrisson (2001) maintained that the Indian case of West Bengal is a 'paradigm case' with respect to responsiveness of the state to pro-poor reforms. In a study conducted by the authors covering 11 case studies across the world, only the evidence relating to West Bengal indicated distinctly positive outcomes on dimensions like responsiveness of the state to the poor and impact on social and economic poverty (Crook and Sverrisson, 2001 & 2003). This study considered cases like Brazil and West Bengal to be more successful in conducting decentralisation reforms in which i) pro-poor outcomes were produced by a collaborative effort between the local and the central governments, ii) conservative local elites have been challenged by local political activists supported externally by an ideologically committed party and iii) use of existing, well-established administrative machinery and strong organisational commitment of employees at the local level. West Bengal was the only case in their study, that scored consistently high in indicators like commitment of the Central government to supporting decentralisation reforms, enforcing accountability, pro-poor policies, representation of poor, challenging local elites, targeted funding, administrative capacity and the length of time. Moreover, West Bengal earned prominence as possibly a very systematically studied and richly documented case of decentralisation reforms (Crook and Sverrisson, 2001 & 2003).

The decentralised governance structures installed by the Left-regime in West Bengal went on to experience a long and stable existence lasting 34 years. Since the time-duration that a system has been operational is an important variable for any reform to show meaningful results, the case of West Bengal can be considered a strategic case in this regard. The left-regime was defeated by a right-wing populist party, the Trinamool Congress (TMC) in 2011 (Magnier, 2011), which is leading the State-government of West Bengal at present. Hence West Bengal provides an ideal case to examine the factors that lead to sustenance or transformation of the institutional values that decentralised governance structures represent in the long run across different political regimes.

In a series of participatory experiments undertaken by the Left regime through the PRI, a participatory village planning initiative was launched initially as a pioneering pro-people

movement in the 1980s in Midnapore district of West Bengal, followed by another pilot project in 1999 in the same model, called the Convergent Community Action (CCA) (Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002). Outcomes of the CCA encouraged the GoWB to scale up participatory planning processes with launching of the 'Strengthening Rural Decentralisation' (SRD) programme in 2005 with support from the Dept. For International Development, UK. The programme covered 921 *Gram Panchayats*<sup>3</sup>(GPs) which is approximately 27% of the GPs in the State (GoWB, 2004b; GoWB, 2009b).

The foundation laid by the SRD programme made West Bengal a suitable ground for launching another project with World Bank support, which aimed to advance the positive outcomes of SRD to the next level. This was the rationale provided in the official project information document of the World Bank for the project 'West Bengal Institutional Strengthening of Gram Panchayats' launched in West Bengal in 2010. The project objectives mentioned 'improved service delivery and governance in rural and peri-urban areas' and proposed to help the GoWB in 'expanding and deepening' the process of decentralisation by providing financial resources, incentives and support for capacity-building, performance monitoring and project management. The project intended to achieve this by supporting 1000 GPs in West Bengal to strengthen their institutional capacity and ability to deliver basic public services. (World Bank, 2010; wbigpp.gov.in). Hence, West Bengal is also an interesting case to examine whether such intentional programmes driven by policy prescriptions of external funding agencies have any notable impact on the institutional values of the decentralised governance structures.

Moreover, since the change in regime in this State in 2011 is a recent phenomenon, the nature of this change remains comparatively a less explored domain as yet and can fill a gap in the academic literature about this period. A significant factor that is expected to contribute to the originality of this study is the positionality of the researcher, who has been part of both the SRD and the ISGP projects as well as the PRDD both as an insider and an outsider. 'Insider' - as a part of the mid-level administrative wing under the PRDD that was in charge of implementing both these projects in the field; 'outsider' – as an externally hired personnel in

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<sup>3</sup> Gram Panchayat or Village Council was conceived as the lowest electoral unit as well as the lowest unit for local governance, covering around 10-12 contiguous villages and a population of around 10,000 (Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002).

a specific, programme-oriented and externally funded department created for the duration of the programme. This unique positionality has given her the benefit of viewing the system from the perspective of a distant onlooker, while having situated knowledge of the internal operations of both the projects that are critical pivot points of this thesis.

### **1.3 Purpose of Study**

Although West Bengal is a unique case in itself, the lessons learned there also has the potential of general applicability of the participatory agenda and its role in the creation of effective state-society linkages to other developing country contexts. These lessons raise important theoretical questions and provide plausible theoretical understanding regarding this phenomenon, which can be developed and corroborated by further research in other settings. In the current world scenario, difficulties and scarcities engendered in particular contexts cannot be isolated from the damaging effects of globalization (Mohan and Stokke, 2000). Gaventa (2006) states that the visible, hidden and invisible natures of power, as well as the local, national and global levels of power are inextricably connected with each other. Therefore, simultaneous contestation of all these power structures is a pre-requisite of transformative change. This thesis too, sees the outcome of intentional programmes to deliver governance reform as dependent upon power relationships that operate at a number of different scales. It not only considers the case of local governance structures in West Bengal as one that encourages the study, analysis and interpretation of the deeper causal processes underpinning the participatory agenda in a particular context; drawing on Gaventa (2006), this research also claims that causal processes in specific contexts are not entirely divorced from the structural power relations in force at multiple levels.

### **1.4 Structure of study**

This research study has been structured into eight chapters. Chapter One gives a brief overview of the context and purpose of this thesis. The rationale for this research in Chapter Two explores the concepts underlying the governance reform processes that enable a capacitated state to forge effective linkages with the society and also examines the structural

power-relations at the global and local levels underpinning the concepts of 'effective' participation, decentralisation and the 'good governance' agenda. In this context, Chapter Three delineates the Research Aim and Research Questions for this research and explains the main research strategy and the methodologies adopted for this study. Chapters Four, Five, Six and Seven are the empirical chapters that deal with detailed analysis of the collected data. Chapter Four sketches the crucial ideological trends emerging between 1985 and 2005 that decided the course of the participatory agenda in the State of West Bengal. Chapter Five examines the motives driving the creation and sudden withdrawal of participatory institutions at the local level between 2005 and 2010 in the light of an externally aided (funded by DFID-UK) project 'Strengthening Rural Decentralisation'. Chapter Six traces the institutional changes in the local governance structures brought about by the policy prescriptions of the World Bank funded project 'Institutional Strengthening of Gram Panchayats' operational since 2010. Chapter Seven examines the factors that hinder the institutionalisation of certain interventions, and also the strategies adopted (by the state or the aid agencies) so that certain changes may be deeply entrenched and sustained by the system in the long run. The overarching conclusions from the research study have been drawn in Chapter Eight.

## **2 Chapter Two: Rationale for this Research**

### **2.1 Introduction**

In order to explore the issues mentioned in the introduction, section 2.2 of this chapter lays out how the role of the state has been defined in different schools of thought and also outlines the framework through which this thesis looks at what constitutes state capacity. Assuming a capacitated state as one that has a vision for a state-led transformational governance change by forging effective state-society linkages, Section 2.3 examines how a deeper understanding of the structural power-relations embedded in the society could critically evaluate state reform and help to formulate appropriate strategies for more effective state-society linkage. This section therefore, traces the debates around the discourses of 'development' or 'underdevelopment' over the years, and situates concepts like 'participation' and 'empowerment' against this backdrop to comprehend how different perception of these concepts may lead to divergent visions on constructive state-society relations. The argument that emerges in this section is that, it is essential for a state on a developmental mission to create political spaces for the masses at the local level and extend opportunities for their 'effective' participation in the decision-making processes of the state in order to develop coherent goals on the basis of a shared vision. Section 2.4 explores the ways in which this vision for a state-led transformational governance change can be actualised by creating and putting in place appropriate institutional structures at the grassroots for building a strategic connection between the state and its citizens. This section also examines the tentative founding principles and the desirable design features of these institutional arrangements, that lead us towards the usefulness of decentralised governance structures that can be used as power-sharing mechanisms between the state and the society. Section 2.5 touches upon the merits and demerits of decentralised governance structures in creating spaces for people's participation, and how the different political regimes have used the mechanism of decentralisation reforms to achieve divergent purposes. Since this involves the power of the state to formulate and execute policies, Section 2.6 explores the political dimensions and the ideological positions of state-wide parties on decentralisation.

Decentralisation reforms also formed an integral part of the 'good governance' agenda of the global funding agencies in western development thinking. Hence, Section 2.7 will focus on the evolution of the 'good governance' discourse of the World Bank and the Department for International Development (DFID)-UK, to have an understanding of the concepts that inform the policy-frames of these two donor agencies, specially related to the 'good governance' agenda. These policy-frames are represented by their policy-prescriptions, that act as power-devices and could serve to bring about normative changes in the institutional values of even long-standing institutions of the countries receiving development assistance. Section 2.8 therefore, looks at these processes of institutional change and the complex power relations between the funding agencies and the recipient countries inherent in terms like 'country ownership' which, again, is a component of the 'good governance' agenda. The debates surrounding the establishment of decentralised governance structures in India, and the way this policy was implemented in the State of West Bengal provide the ideal context to examine all the abovementioned conditions. Hence, section 2.9 will briefly review the broader country context of India, and the specific context of the State of West Bengal to lay-out the backdrop of this thesis. The conclusion will summarise the issues raised in this chapter to provide the rationale for this research.

## **2.2 The State-Society Linkage**

### **2.2.1 Nature of the State**

In the latter decades of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, the increasingly powerful state and its role in the society was a major area of study. Scholars like Karl Marx, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim were trying to grapple with the idea of the state in the modern era. For Weber, the modern state is characterized by a system of administrative and legal order (Weber, 1964), while for Skocpol, 'the state properly conceived' consists of 'a set of administrative, policing, and military organizations headed, and more or less well coordinated by an executive authority' (1979:29). It is assumed that state is the framework for authoritative making of rules. The question of domination or authority in the state's claimed territory lies at the core of most of these definitions, as well as the extent to which the state institutions can assume voluntary compliance with their rules or need to resort to coercion

on the part of the citizens. (Migdal, 1994). Thus, power of the modern state usually implies what Michael Mann has called, 'the capacity of the state actually to penetrate civil society' (1986:113)

Since the second World War, scholarship has been trying to comprehend the role of the state in its entirety. There have been accounts treating the state as a unitary actor, thus portraying the state in undifferentiated terms. In the process, the dynamics for struggle by different forces for domination in societies have been rendered incomprehensible. These struggles are more pronounced in the Third World contexts, where established social relations and institutions came under severe pressure particularly in the nineteenth century, as most of these areas outside Europe became 'dependent zones of support' in a capitalist world (Wolf, 1982:296).

In the twentieth century, the state has been viewed as a key actor in such struggles for domination, that has promoted economic development and redistribution at times; while in other cases, it has advanced an agenda of preserving existing patterns of economic domination (Migdal, 1994). Migdal also speaks about the idea of the transformative state, which, along with technological change and industrialization, aim to shape people's entire moral orders through a penetration into their daily lives. The common goal among the leaders of transformative states has been to create a hegemonic presence of the state even in the remote corners of society. This is usually done through institutions like schools (to promote the state's system of legitimacy), legislative bodies (to make the rules), bureaucracies (to execute these rules), armies and police (to coerce) and courts (to adjudicate) (ibid)

In the discourse of international development, the state is often viewed as a policy-making actor, which would bring about growth or eliminate poverty. Fuller and Harriss (2001) consider this view to be problematic since this concept presupposes a 'unified intentionality and internal consistency', whereas in practice state functionaries often 'pursue competing agendas at cross-purposes with each other' (ibid:3). According to Abrams, the state is not an institution, but 'an ideological project' (1988:75), while for Mitchell, the state is important because 'of its political strength as a mythic or ideological construct' (1991:81). Mitchell analyses the state 'as a structural effect', that is, as the effect of practices that make state structures appear to exist. Significant among these practices are Foucauldian 'disciplines'

helping to produce the armies, schools, bureaucracies and other distinctive institutions of the modern state (Fuller and John Harriss, 2001).

Migdal (1994) disaggregates the different rungs of the organizational hierarchy of the state system, where the engagement between the state actors and the society occurs in different ways. From bottom to top, he arranges these levels as: i) *The trenches*: the officials who directly implement the state policies at the grassroots, and thus have direct contact with the target groups. This category includes tax-collectors, teachers, police-officers, bureaucrats with the mandate to apply state rules and regulations directly. ii) *The dispersed field offices*: these are the regional and local bodies (like legislative bodies, courts, military and police units) that rework the state policies for local consumption or even formulate and implement wholly local policies iii) *The agency's central offices*: these are in capital cities where state policies are formulated centrally and resources for implementation are arranged. These agencies are technically responsible to the top political leadership iv) *The commanding heights*: this is the highest level of executive leadership of the state. (Migdal, 1994)

Adopting this framework as a reference for organisation of the state-system, the actors who have represented the state for the purpose of this thesis are mostly bureaucrats and politicians situated at levels (i), (ii) and (iii) of the abovementioned organizational hierarchy. Though this thesis does not look at the state as an undifferentiated, unified actor, it is necessary to qualify at this juncture that in subsequent references to 'the State', this thesis will refer to the state actors (bureaucrats and politicians) who are situated at mostly at level iii (and sometimes at iv) where policies are centrally formulated and resources for implementation at the grassroots are organised. Thus, while discussing what is meant by a 'capacitated state', this thesis will look at the visions, potentials and capacity-enhancing mechanisms for the top-level policy-makers of the state system.

### 2.2.2 State Capacity and State-Society Linkage

According to Evans & Heller (2014), capability-enhancement of the disadvantaged sections of the society and removing their unfreedoms add up to a structural change in the long run, since this process is about confronting organized power of the traditional authorities (clans, castes, patriarchs) as well as providing a countervailing power to the political hegemony of

capitalist elites. Such a structural change requires formulating appropriate strategies and providing a vision for the future, which can be done effectively by a capacitated state as a central agent (Chang, 1994), specifically by state actors in charge of policy-making for state-reforms. Referring to state level governance capacities required to bring about transformational change in the context of developing countries, Mustaq Khan (2001) upholds the need for building capacities within the state institutions, so that both 'redistributive reforms' (like service-delivery reforms) and 'transformative' reforms (like restructuring of property rights or assisting technology acquisition) might be undertaken by the state. According to Khan, 'redistributive reforms' produce immediate pro-poor results that are short lived. On the other hand, 'transformative reforms' potentially have sustainable benefits for the poor, but are hard to implement due to resistance from social forces with vested interests (ibid).

Migdal (1994) defines social forces as powerful mechanisms for associative behaviour which encompass informal as well as formal organizations. Sometimes relationship between state and society is mutually empowering, while in other instances engagement between state and social forces is a struggle for agency, marked by mutually exclusive goals. Evans & Heller (2014) argue that state-society ties are inextricably linked to state capacity, since a state with the ability to deliver services is one with the power to reach out to society, as well as with the authority to confront vested interests and get individuals and groups to willingly follow its instructions. Baiocchi, et al. (2011) too agree that synergetic exchanges between the state and the civil society are key to policy innovation. Evans & Heller (2014) cite the instances of South Africa and Brazil to contend, that ability of the state to deliver human development outcomes as well as reinforce capability-enhancing state interventions rest on both technocratic capacity as well as democratic deepening. The participatory institutional structures integral to South Africa's new democracy were somewhat weakened after the State adopted a more technocratic and managerialist strategy of service delivery effected by the neoliberal reforms in 1996 (ibid; Arrighi, et al., 2010). In contrast, a wide range of participatory structures had been institutionalised and the local government strengthened in Brazil, resulting in an improvement in the delivery of public goods as well as a reduction in inequalities in very basic measures of human capabilities (Evans, 2004; Heller 2011; Evans and Heller, 2014). However, there has been a reversal in this project after the fall of the Worker's

Party from power in Brazil, the reasons for which are being related to poor governance as well as the failure of the government to scale up democratic participation (Braathen, 2018).

While it is irrefutable that building institutions with technocratic and organizational capacities are essential to build a strong state, these technocratic capacities would be rendered ineffectual in the absence of an intense engagement with cross-sections of the society at the local level, so that priorities are established through democratic participation (Evans and Heller, 2014 and 2018). Contending in favour of building deliberative and participatory institutions as foundations of democratic politics, Evans (2004) upholds Sen's argument on 'participatory political institutions'. According to Sen (1999), the priority accorded to the 'participatory political institutions' is founded on the idea that 'thickly democratic' decision-making institutions based on public discussion, exchange of ideas, information, and opinions are the only way to effectively define desirable developmental goals. As Sen explains, 'processes of participation have to be understood as constitutive parts of the ends of development in themselves.' (1999: 291).

Adopting Evans & Heller's (2014) definition of a capacitated state, this thesis also agrees with their view that policy-makers of the twenty-first century capacitated state are required to visualise and construct shared coherent goals to be implemented jointly by public agencies and the communities themselves. Actualizing such a vision demands strong institution building at both ends of the spectrum, rather at different levels of the state hierarchy as suggested by Migdal (1994), to facilitate 'effective participation' by citizens in engaging with issues of institutional change and enhance state-responsiveness to the demands of the citizens (Gaventa, 2002).

Drawing on the views of Sen and Evans, this thesis argues that a crucial pre-requisite for building such transformative state capacity is the motivation and values of the state-elites responsible for formulating strategies for state-reform, and putting appropriate policies in place. Creation of a vision for transformative change in governance depends considerably on the different lenses through which developmental challenges are perceived by the policy-makers, as well as the causes they ascribe to the process of under-development. The following section therefore, will explore the structural power-relations underpinning the concepts of 'under-development', 'participation' and 'empowerment' situating them against the backdrop of global 'development' discourses surfacing since the post-war twentieth

century. It will also make a detailed examination of the deeper causal processes through which 'effective participation' can facilitate empowerment of the most under-developed and marginalised sections of society, making way for more effective state-society relations in the process.

## **2.3 Situating Empowerment and Participation in 'Development'**

### **2.3.1 Changing Discourses of Development**

Development thinking of the post-war era of modernization was based on the assumption that 'development' would occur automatically through the 'trickle-down' effect of economic growth, driven by industrialization and technological advancements. Underdevelopment and poverty were viewed only in economic terms, and the poor perceived as mere passive recipients were regarded as faceless homogenous beings living in the 'underdeveloped, Third World' (Escobar, 1992). However, the academic literature of this period recognised the central role of the state in the developmental process, with economists pushing for increased investment to stimulate economic growth, and political scientists emphasizing the significance of centralized states for modernisation and nation building (Grindle, 2010). With acute poverty and rising inequality all around, there was growing realization in the 1970s about the failure of this approach, and the states seemed to adopt repressive characters while withdrawing from their responsibilities (Escobar, 1992; Brock, et. al, 2001).

In this context, concepts developed by Paulo Freire in his 'The Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (1972) such as 'conscientization' and 'dialogical education' were widely used in some development circles, and applied by the more progressive NGOs not only in Latin America but also in grassroots movements throughout, Africa and Asia. On very basic terms, 'conscientization' can be understood not only as the process by which the oppressed people gradually develop the capacity of critical thinking and become more aware of the causes of their oppression, they also become involved in actions to change this reality. These concepts spurred notions of participation that located the community at the centre of development, and the decade of the 70's witnessed several local movements by marginalized sections (like women, peasants, urban squatters) attempting to contest power relations and hierarchies in the public sphere (Escobar, 1992; Blackburn, 2000; Cornwall, 2006). However, Chambers

(2008) views these movements in the global south as loosely interconnected approaches drawing on different theoretical and practice traditions<sup>4</sup> rather than an academically theorised process:

[p]ractice was driven and drawn not by academic analysis, nor by a reflective analytical book like *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 1970) but by the excitement of innovation, discovery and informal networking.

(Chambers 2008: 89)

This fleeting focus on people-centred development approach faded with the emphatic return of the economic growth agenda as neo-liberalism in 1980's, that regarded the market to be morally and practically superior to any form of government or political control. Free market economists like Friedrich Hayek argued that planning and intervention in any form is bound to be economically inefficient and hence the role of the state should be limited to the creation of appropriate institutional frameworks for the market to function freely. Reducing people to mere economic agents once again, this view allowed a limited supervisory role for the state, that of preserving law and order so that private property rights are secured (Brock, et. al 2001; Harvey, 2007; Heywood, 2007).

Simultaneously, the 1980's also saw strong theoretical contestation of this inadequate economic approach in Amartya Sen as an academic, and Robert Chambers from a practitioner's perspective. While Chambers focused on social and psychological aspects of poverty like powerlessness, isolation and vulnerability based on his participatory research practices<sup>5</sup>, Sen emphasized the value of money only when it enhanced the 'capabilities' of individuals enabling their 'functionings' in society (Maxwell, 1999). We will return to Sen and Chambers at a later point in this chapter to examine their theoretical underpinnings of development in greater detail.

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, Marxist ideas were more dominant in Latin America where participatory approaches were often more political, rooted in struggles over land (Connelly, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) in the 1980s, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) in the 1990s and 'Participatory Learning and Action' (PLA) in the 2000 were participatory methodologies introduced by Chambers that are characterised by an active involvement of the people in the process of participatory development (see Chambers, 1994, 1997 and 2007).

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, followed by a very quick and chaotic transition to a market economy in Russia highlighted the indispensable role of institutions (e.g. property rights, rules and regulations) required for a properly operational market. By the mid-1990s, 'Governance' was a buzzword for leading aid agencies who were pursuing structural adjustment and policy-based lending. For these agencies, conditionality related to privatization, transparency and 'good governance' through institutional reform became very common (Pomerantz, 2011). While governance involves factors like institutions and systems for making decisions and allocating resources, the concept of 'good governance' refers to a list of purportedly positive traits of how the government should operate, and this idea re-acknowledges the central role of the state in the developmental process, albeit as an agent that helps to provide the conditions for ongoing capitalist development (Grindle, 2010). We will examine the concept of 'good governance' in further detail in section 2.7 of this chapter.

Returning to the development discourse, possibly the failure of the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) once again resulted in a shift in the development thinking of the times, this time with a move to involve 'the poor'. For the first time, the World Development Report *Attacking Poverty* (World Bank, 2000) put forward issues of empowerment linked with people's participation as a means of ensuring national ownership of countries receiving development aid<sup>6</sup>. The stage had probably been set by the Post Washington consensus of the mid-1990s that recognised the possibility of the poor and disadvantaged being excluded from the development process due to corruption and collusion of governments. A shift in orientation towards peoples' participation was visible in other international organizations as well, including the rhetoric of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) (World Bank, 2000; Hayami, 2003). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) that replaced the MDG in 2015 as the centre of current development thinking, have the stated commitment to work towards a more inclusive society with reduced inequalities (undp.org). At this point, this discussion necessitates contextualisation and elucidation of the specific lenses through which the

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<sup>6</sup> The World Bank is also internally differentiated, but this thesis refers to the Bank as a single entity for simplicity. Therefore, shifts and inconsistencies in Bank policy/publications, like this turn to participation, result from different discourses and factional struggles within the Bank (see Wade, 2001).

processes leading to poverty, inequality and underdevelopment are viewed in different development discourses.

### 2.3.2 Conceptualising Empowerment Through Participation

The mainstream view of underdevelopment understands poverty and deprivation in monetary terms of income or consumption shortfall, and are measured through processes mostly prescribed by World Bank and other aid agencies. For instance, the new poverty estimates of the World Bank combine Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) exchange rates for household consumption according to which, the extremely poor people are defined as those who live on \$1.90 a day or less (World Bank, 2019). This view of poverty and deprivation focus on households as units of economic engagement, and ascribe the causes of poverty mainly to reduced income opportunities. This quantified analysis that treats under-development as an 'economic' rather than a political problem, prove inadequate to provide an explanation about why certain specific groups of people are deprived, rather than others (Green and Hulme, 2005). A more holistic understanding of poverty emerged from Amartya Sen's (1981) work on famines with the insight that poverty is a matter of social relations, which largely corresponded to Robert Chambers' 'Cluster of Deprivations' (combining material, physical, social and psychological deprivations) as the multidimensional nature of poverty (Chambers, 2006b).

Such relational understanding of poverty takes into account deeper causal processes, and defines under-development as the consequence of social relations, which become institutionalised within legal and political systems. The causes are ascribed not only to material or economic deprivations, but also to historical, social and structural processes resulting in social exclusion of specific categories of people on the basis of gender, race, disability, ethnicity, and so on. Such exclusions are operationalised by groups of people who hold more powerful positions in the existing structure, thus having an interest in reproducing their own privileges, while systematically denying access to resources, recognition and opportunities to less powerful groups. This is done not only by producing and reproducing unequal power relations and social relations through daily practices, but also by using institutional and governance mechanisms operating in a society (in the form of norms,

entitlements or rights), as instruments to reinforce inequalities (Kabeer, 2000; Hulme and Shepherd, 2003; Green and Hulme, 2005; Heller, 2009; Mosse, 2010).

As mentioned earlier, a major shift in development thinking was caused by Amartya Sen's (1999) capability approach, that focused on the significance of capabilities in securing substantive human freedoms, defined in terms of claiming certain human and civil rights by exercising human agency and thus involving 'active participation of informed human beings in the processes of social change' (Corbridge, 2002: 191). However, Sen has often been criticised for being situated within a normative liberal framework that cannot specify institutional mechanisms through which effective rights regimes could be established (Green and Hulme, 2005). While accepting this critique, this research-study would like to underscore that Sen also regards individuals as socially embedded agents who flourish completely only when they participate in political and social affairs and therefore emphasises the necessity to accord priority to participatory political institutions (Sen, 1999 and 2002).

As Corbridge (2002) says, individual freedoms are best expanded by collective mobilizations. On the other hand, since the phenomenon of social exclusion takes place on the basis of depriving specific social groups through institutional and structural processes, it has been argued that this can be countered only through strategies of group mobilization and by exercising collective agency to challenge the existing power structures (Sen, 1997). As argued earlier in this chapter, a state with transformative capacities can facilitate this process to a large extent through creation of participatory governance structures to support people's participation as a means to empowerment of the poor and marginalized.

Prospects of participatory processes though, came under attack from a school of critics who articulated doubts about viewing participation in terms of technical project work rather than part of a political process (Cleaver, 1999), for being obsessed with the local rather than broader structures of injustice and oppression (Mohan and Stokke, 2000), or inadequate understanding about the power structures (Kothari, 2001). Mohan and Stokke (2000) caution against a view that links participation to a softer version of neoliberalism, in turn conceptualising 'empowerment' in narrow market terms. Williams (2004) on the other hand, envisions 'empowerment as a relative (and reversible) process built from within longer-term political struggles' (ibid:572). Other scholars have described 'empowerment' as complex processes of negotiation that build capacities of individuals or groups of 'marginalized or

oppressed people to recognize and exercise their agency' (Cornwall, 2004a:77; Chambers, 2006b). This explanation of 'empowerment' is closest to the conceptual framing of this thesis.

In his analysis of power-relations, Gaventa (2006) introduces the concepts of 'closed' spaces which are dominated by elites and decision-makers, and 'invited' spaces which are sites where the authorities invite the citizens or beneficiaries to participate. In this analysis, 'empowerment' has been construed in spatial terms of creating new 'claimed' spaces by less powerful actors from the power holders; spaces that can potentially emerge as sites of resistance. These spaces are said to have a 'dynamic relationship' to one another, since after attaining power in one space, one can move to another with the help of newly acquired knowledge, skills, experiences and capabilities (Gaventa, 2004 and 2006). Development, therefore, far from being a smooth and passive process, involves intensive struggles against existing power structures and vested interests, at all spatial scales (Corbridge, 2002). Whether these spaces can generate possibilities of resistance where dominant discourses can be challenged and reframed, can be decided by crucial strategies of 'participation' (Cornwall, 2004a).

Knowledge production by the rural poor has been the central theme for Chambers, for whom the concept of 'participation' has evolved over the years from research techniques to means of empowerment, where knowledge enables the poor to gain competence and challenge the powerful (Chambers, 1997, Williams, 2004). Such knowledge could be in the form of language to counter arguments of technical experts, scrutiny of complex information on expenditure, or any other form that is contextual and conditional to a host of factors. Since these factors could be varied, participatory strategies cannot be standardized into a fixed set of methodologies (Cornwall, 2004a). Williams (2004) argues that knowledge in any form has the potential to open up new spaces and create its own moments of resistance, and therefore, the consequences of participation can never be pre-determined. Adopting the multidimensional and relational view of underdevelopment within the framework of power-analysis espoused by Gaventa (2006) and Cornwall (2004a), this thesis sees 'effective participation' in terms of generating such political spaces for the poor and marginalised, which necessarily involves strategies to enhance knowledge, skills and political capabilities of the oppressed that equip them with 'weapons of the powerful' (Chambers, 2006a). Through effective participation, citizens can develop and use their civil and political rights and help to

make democratic institutions more accountable, by exposing them to continuous forms of scrutiny. This then leads to 'effective citizenship, that is, the actual capacity of citizens to make use of formal political and civic rights' (Heller, 2012:643).

For 'effective' participation to be sustained in the long term and actually get translated into 'outputs' in concrete terms (Heller, 2012), institutional cultures need to undergo a transformation (Chambers, 1998). As argued earlier in this chapter, a state with transformative capacities can facilitate this process of institutional reforms to a large extent through creation of participatory governance structures at the local level. 'Outputs' in this context can be seen in terms of an effective linkage between a capacitated and enabling state and its empowered, active citizens who share coherent goals for development. In much of the developing world, this integration between states and citizens is very weak, since there are very few points of contact with the state for ordinary citizens (Heller, 2012). Institutions provide an interface between the policy makers and the common people, and has been envisioned by scholars in terms of space, that can be either be an opening to speak or act, or can be hollowed out or shut down in particular contexts Cornwall (2004b).

As mentioned earlier, government provided intermediary institutions are often described as 'invited spaces'. Some of these could be policy moments where 'space' is temporarily opened up for the public to communicate and deliberate and then shut later on by the concerned authorities, or it could also develop into regularised institutions of durable nature, with the potential to reframe power-relations. Even where institutionalised participation does not seem to have much policy impact in concrete terms, it can potentially emerge as an important site for building alliances or trying out tactics to practice democracy on an everyday basis (Cornwall, 2004b). As suggested earlier, 'effective' participation and active citizenship can be achieved through practice, which can be made feasible by improving institutional design so that institutions emerge as more inclusive and equitable spaces (Cornwall, 2004a & 2004b). Ensuring inclusiveness and equitability within institutions is an essential step since the institutional and governance mechanisms are responsible for creating and reinforcing unequal power-relations through their daily practices. This is why the process of institutional reform is deemed to be 'an inherently political project' (Williams and Thampi, 2013: 1338) in which the power-relations operating in society are reflected through the ideological stances

of the political parties involved, and are as important as the technical details of institutional design. This topic will be developed in further detail in section 2.6 of this chapter.

For Williams and Thampi (2013), institutional channels are a key factor that creates a political space for the poor, a site where political discourses and policy formulations can be contested. Creation of institutional channels through the democratic decentralisation policy in the Indian State of Kerala can be cited as a case in point that combines both political and administrative dimensions (Bénit-Gbaffou and Lama-Rewal, 2011). It has been widely discussed how in Kerala a process of administrative-institutional reform has created avenues for the poor to enhance their direct engagement with the local government (see for instance, Isaac & Franke, 2001; Isaac and Heller, 2003; Heller, 2001, 2009 & 2012). In addition to providing the Village Panchayats in Kerala with adequate financial resources, functions and functionaries from the Development Blocks have also been transferred to the Village Panchayats. Everyday state practices like joint-planning for area-based development or the distribution of welfare benefits have been assigned to the government at the local level, thus bringing them closer to the rural population of the State, and institutionalising decentralised democratic practices at the same time (Williams and Thampi, 2013). The aspect of party-political dynamics in Kerala will be discussed later in this chapter.

Institutions comprise of individuals who internalise and then represent institutional values through their day-to-day practices. Therefore, the process of institutional reforms at the local level raises questions about the responsibilities and interrelationships between different actors who have important roles to play within this expanded institutional area of the state. In other words, a set of ideals like 'empowered participatory governance' requires everyday maintenance at the local level either to be translated into meaningful results, or conversely can be undermined at the grassroots because of a lack of daily maintenance, by those who are in positions of mediation between the state and the community at the local level. They may be the elected representatives at the local level, who are often criticised for their lack of expertise or skill, or the local bureaucrats who are often suspected of following a conservative agenda (Bénit-Gbaffou and Lama-Rewal, 2011).

Local bureaucrats, who often perform crucial functions, control public resources and consequently enjoy substantial authority at the local level, often come from the lowest rung

of the government machinery.<sup>7</sup> Functionaries in this stratum may range from extension officers, junior engineers, local government officials or development project facilitators, who interact with communities on a daily basis. The responsibility of converting the local government structures into more inclusive and participatory institutions is often entrusted to these local level functionaries, who themselves are often inexperienced and badly paid (Mansuri and Rao, 2013). This could be one of the possible explanations why scholars (Kaviraj, 1991; Evans & Heller, 2018) notice a deterioration in state capacity as one moves downward through the sub-national state and into local government, which is actually where the direct interface between the state and the society takes place. This issue in turn raises questions about the focal points that must be emphasised in order to execute institutional reforms successfully, so that democratic and participatory institutions may function smoothly and yield meaningful results.

There is prevalence of a debate between those who highlight the significance of building ‘good institutions’ and those who underscore the intrinsic value of citizen engagement through participation. The former group, whom Heller (2012) has called ‘institutionalists’, believe in equipping the local bureaucracies with the right incentives, rule-based procedures, specialised knowledge and clearly defined lines of authority, so that they can emerge as “effective instruments of development” (Heller, 2012:648). The latter group, named ‘participatistas’ by Heller, are concerned that too much weightage on ‘getting the institutions right’ (ibid:649) can squeeze out civil society. The institutionalists on the other hand, worry that too much participation can disrupt the smooth functioning of democratic institutions (Heller, 2012). This implies that individually both camps are incapable of providing a comprehensive vision of the local democratic state with the ability to create a shared goal for the state-agencies and the people. Drawing on Gaventa (2002), this thesis sees the actualisation of this vision through strong institution building at different nodes of the spectrum, or different levels of Migdal’s (1994) state hierarchy – starting from the ‘trenches’ at the grassroots to the central offices where state policies are formulated.

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<sup>7</sup> Equivalent to ‘the trenches’ or the officials who implement the state policies at the grassroots, and directly interact regularly with the target groups in Migdal’s (1994) state organisations, see section 2.2.1

According to the arguments of this thesis, if 'under-development' is envisioned by the policy-makers in more holistic terms of economic, as well as social, political and human development indicators, it becomes imperative on the state aiming for a structural change to forge closer state-society relations and devise shared goals. This can be done by extending capability enhancing mechanisms to the disadvantaged sections to the society and safeguarding their interests by confronting the dominant and powerful classes on their behalf. Local governance structures of the state emerge as that specific key terrain that widens the institutional surface area of the state, thus increasing the points of contact between the state and ordinary citizens (Heller, 2009). The capacitated state might succeed in actualizing the vision of transformative change in governance, by putting in place appropriate institutional arrangements to establish closer state-society relations, the possibilities of which will be examined in the following section.

## **2.4 Creating Institutional Structures for Forging State-Society Linkage**

Gaventa (2002) speaks of an increasing crisis of legitimacy all around the world that has adversely affected the relationship between the citizens and the institutions touching their daily lives the reasons for which are varied and contextual. While the reactions to the decline in representative democracy in the North / West took a turn towards neo-liberal forms of decentralisation and privatisation linked to market forces (Saito, 2008), in the South it was more driven by a recognition of the practical problems of top-down development, and also by Left reactions to oppressive regimes (Connelly, 2015). Some common features of this crisis are growing disillusionment with the government, concerns with corrupt practices, institutions that are unresponsive to needs of the poor and a sense of disconnect with the elected representatives and the bureaucrats. Tornquist (2009) explains this in terms of the impact of neo-liberalism and globalisation, that has hollowed out the state and reduced public resources, leading to fragmentation and shrinkage of intermediary democratic institutions from citizen associations to political parties, who seem to be losing firm roots among people.

Tornquist (2009) outlines two major approaches to democratic representation, the chain of popular sovereignty and direct participation. The former relies on political parties and politicians aggregating and expressing the interests of people, and thus gaining the legitimacy

to formulate policies and to exercise executive power. However, this approach is threatened by the 'tarnished' nature of the links within the chain (*ibid.*: 7), erosion of trust stemming from politicians exploiting their position for private gain, or building their authority through brokering privileges for specific groups. Within direct participation, the immediate stakeholders are expected to participate in the democratisation processes through both formal and informal arrangements like neighbourhood associations, pressure groups or popular movements, etc. The weakness of this approach is that it tends to ignore the fundamental power issues by setting aside the links to formalised politics, from two directions. The first one is through market-oriented solutions of consumer participation, and the second is by turning against all modern concepts like the state, parties or class-struggle in favour of only culturally rooted grassroot initiatives, that are pluralistic in nature and challenge any singular site of representation (Törnquist, 2009; Corbridge, 1994). Scholars like Mohan and Stokke, (2000) have warned that obsession with only local problems, and isolating deprivations generated in particular contexts from the detrimental effects of globalization of the market economy, in effect fragments, and thus weakens the narrative of resistance to the forces of exploitation.

In this context, Törnquist and his co-researchers propose initiating a new layer of representation that forges a link between these two approaches so that electoral representation may be connected to substantive outcomes, where subordinate groups are able to meaningfully exercise formal political rights in order to demand and effectively bargain for their social rights. This alternative calls for creating new institutions that can facilitate initiatives like participatory planning and budgeting, as has been witnessed in the Brazilian case of participatory budgeting or the People's Plan Campaign in Kerala. For Baiocchi and Heller (2009), these experiments represent 'instituted participatory democracy', or deliberate attempts to break existing patterns of patrimonial representation by enhancing the channels for citizens to actively engage with the local state, exercising their citizenship rights and negotiating for the implementation of their demands. Such initiatives help to establish a strategic connection between representation and governance, and are supported by authors like Stokke and Selboe who think that the mediation reflects representation of 'voiceless groups and interests to regular representative government.' (cited in Törnquist, 2009: 16). Evans (2004) has labelled this mode of functioning as 'deliberative democracy', in

which 'strategies and solutions will be articulated and forged through deliberation and planning with other participants,' (ibid: 36-37). Fung and Wright (2003) have also promoted a specific notion of 'empowered participatory governance' (ibid:20) through which it might be possible to advance the values of participation, deliberation and empowerment as transformative democratic strategies.

Fung and Wright (2003)'s model of 'empowered participatory governance' is tentatively founded on three basic principles, the first of which focuses on solving specific, practical problems (e.g. providing public safety, caring for habitats or preparing budgets for local areas) in situations where local actors begin to resolve conflicts and cooperate with each other. Secondly, people and officials directly affected by these problems should be involved in the process where they can apply their knowledge and interest to formulate solutions to these problems. Thirdly, these processes should involve joint-planning, problem-solving and strategizing sessions based on participatory and deliberative solutions to these problems.

Fung and Wright (2003) have also outlined three distinct design features in the context of institutional reforms to actualize the concept of 'empowered participatory governance'. The first feature entails devolution of substantial administrative and political power to local action units, which the authors defined as 'creatures of a transformed state endowed with substantial public authority' (ibid: 20). However, instead of functioning as entirely autonomous sites, these local units will have vertical linkages of communication and accountability to superordinate bodies, which can strengthen the quality of local democratic governance. Hence, the second design feature advanced by Fung and Wright (2003) is a new form of coordinated decentralisation that incorporates centralized supervision as a major component. The third design feature necessitates transforming 'mechanisms of state power into permanently mobilized deliberative-democratic, grassroots forms' (ibid: 22). in order to make these practices more enduring and widely accessible. The authors argue that this design feature will enable reconstitution of decision-making processes within state institutions and consequently have larger reform scopes. Fung and Wright's model thus posits a challenge for re-designing state-institutions and might begin to address certain problematic areas related to state-society relations. This is a design that could guide the investigation of our case for opening up spaces for participation, and will be explored further in the empirical chapters for this thesis.

Putting in place such institutional arrangements at the local level as suggested by Tornquist or Fung and Wright, might open-up ways to facilitate substantive participation by the masses, which has been explained by Gaventa (2004 and 2006) in terms of a strategy to counter the most insidious but invisible form of power. Such invisible power permeates one's identity and social behaviour, through internalization of the dominant ideologies, values and social norms so that the powerless voices either fall silent or only echo what the power-holders want them to say (ibid). Gaventa and Cornwall (2008) emphasize the need for awareness building among the powerless people to counter forces of invisible power as the first step towards empowerment. This might be undertaken through participatory exercises like reflection and development of critical consciousness by analysing their own reality. For Cornwall (2004a), the starting point is to bring the members of the powerless groups together, and then introduce them to strategies that allow them to share their experiences and articulate their perspectives for constructing their own realities. Joint planning exercises at the micro-level allow the citizens access to detailed information about the allocation of public resources, and active participation in the decision-making processes also allow them claim their share in monitoring implementation of these decisions (Evans 2004). Creation of this knowledge might open up previously unexplored spaces for them as sites for negotiation and claiming their citizenship rights (see section 2.3). However, Fung and Wright (2003) also warns that the dominant classes and elites might seek to dismantle these deliberative and participatory bodies, if these throw up genuine challenges to the power and privileges of the existing power structures.

There have been quite a few positive instances in different parts of the world where local government institutions of the state have provided citizens with opportunities of participating directly in the decision-making processes of the state institutions by engaging in public deliberations and forming associational ties (Heller, 2009). However, ascertaining the intent of the state and the strategies related to undertaking decentralisation reforms is important, since 'participation' through decentralisation can be seen through different lenses and used by the state-actors to achieve divergent purposes. This calls for a detailed examination of the motives driving the concept of 'decentralisation' of governance structures of the state, and how this governance reform has panned out in different country contexts of the global south.

## **2.5 People's Participation through Decentralised Local Governance Structures<sup>8</sup>**

Democratic-local-governance is often considered to be a desirable state in the context of developing countries, since local governments seem better positioned to provide public services, and be more accountable and responsive to their constituencies, due to their proximity with the grassroots (Saito, 2008). In its report 'Governance and Development' (1992), the World Bank for the first time advanced the notion of decentralisation as a means to ensure accountability by (theoretically) enhancing the efficiency and efficacy of the state. This can be achieved by reducing overloaded functions of the central government and improving access to decision-making and participation at lower levels of government (World Bank, 1992:21) This instrumentalist approach to participation through decentralisation reforms of the state projects 'decentralisation' as a management tool to ensure economic efficiency. This approach views the poor as 'users' of services, who can ensure micro level accountability by i) exercising their 'exit' option (when dissatisfied with a service) in a competitive market (ibid : 22), or by ii) 'participating' in consultative processes like public hearings, advisory panels or consumer action groups (ibid : 25).

The 'exit' option that equates the notion of 'decentralisation' with 'privatisation' of services is entirely aligned with the neo-liberal agenda of shrinking up the state since it endorses transfer of power from the centre to the local units or market forces (Saito, 2008). This idea has been critiqued as 'conceptual misnomer' by critics for whom decentralisation is more connected with terms like Deconcentration, Delegation and Devolution that imply sharing of power and responsibility between central government and local government units in the decision-making process. Deconcentration is a form of (administrative) decentralisation, in which specific functions performed by the staff of the central administrations are assigned to the staff posted at local levels within the national territory with the objective of improving efficiency. On the other hand, devolution also opens up the system to the influence of the beneficiaries of the services delivered, so that they participate in planning and evaluation of

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<sup>8</sup> Parts of this section (pages 28-30) draws on discussion of the literature conducted within my earlier Masters Dissertation (University of Manchester, 2014).

the services provided. Therefore, devolution indicates changes in the administrative, financial as well as political dimensions of the governance system (Smith, 2001), whereby responsibility, resources and real authority are transferred from the central to local units of governance, that are accessible and accountable to local citizens (Blair, 2000). Local governments then acquire the power of decision-making, along with formulating and implementing its own rules and policies in devolution (Smith, 2001), whereas the central government retains the main authority in deconcentration and delegation (Oyugi, 2000). Hence, 'devolution' is considered by scholars to be the more meaningful form of decentralisation.

The issue of people's participation through decentralisation was initially approached by the World Bank with caution, by advocating participation mostly through consultative processes as a route to build consensus among potential users of services, which could enhance the chances of success of the government programmes (World Bank, 1992 and 1997). That mere consultation exercises show a strong tendency to fail has been demonstrated by the case of decentralisation reforms in Uganda where it was largely driven by the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers processes (see Craig and Porter, 2003; Stewart and Wang, 2003; Hickey and Mohan, 2004). It was only in 2000, that the World Bank fleetingly recognised 'facilitating empowerment' as a development strategy brought about by 'strengthening the participation of poor people in political processes and local decision making' (World Bank, 2000: 7).

Scholars like Kothari (2001) and Mohan (2001) argued that conceptualising the community as a homogenous and consensual entity, which is willing to participate in local governance, stands the risk of eliminating group differences. It might lead to powerless groups falling silent or echoing elite interests due to internalization of dominant values and social behaviour. The most damaging consequence of decentralisation, thus, can be the inadvertent reinforcement of local inequalities and capture of the socio-economic resources by local elites (DFID, 2010). This aspect of decentralisation has been exploited by some political regimes with specific political motivations. Studies have revealed that it is essential to determine the purpose of elites at higher levels of government for introducing decentralised forms of governance in different contexts.

For instance, a decentralised system of governance was introduced in Bangladesh in 1985 by a military regime with the actual intention to enhance the legitimacy of the central

government in power. This system relied on rural landed elites and power-holders to build a political base for the newly created *Jatiyo* Party, with no political commitment to power sharing with the poorest population. Developing countries like Nigeria and Mexico had similar experiences, and in all these cases, the consequences were disastrous for the poorest and the most vulnerable groups (Crook and Sverrisson, 2001). These examples direct us towards the politics of participation, that involves the intentions of the key actors, as well as the strategies applied by them for promoting or resisting participatory institutions. Whether the intent of the central government is to legitimize their own misrule at the cost of empowering the poor, or confront local elites and other oppressive power-structures in the interests of the oppressed, is the question (ibid; DFID, 2010).

Considering the differentiated nature of the state, both positions might have some element of truth in them, since the 'central government' may be represented by different fractions having different motivations. However, if a majority of these fractions have the genuine intent of facilitating transformational change in governance, it becomes imperative upon the state to extend capacity building support to the local government institutions as well as the poor and excluded. This in turn, could create political spaces for the poor to participate directly in policy formulation and monitoring the implementation of developmental programmes at the local level thus asserting their active citizenship rights (Cornwall and Gaventa, 2000). As Williams (2004) says, in spite of its many shortcomings, it is only through substantive people's participation that state power can be made accountable to the citizens.

The most cited positive instances of decentralised governance, where the central government showed genuine signs of political commitment for power-sharing are Participatory Budgeting initiatives in Brazil, 'People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning' in the Indian State of Kerala, and the three tier Panchayati Raj system in the Indian State of West Bengal. In all the three cases, left-of-centre political parties originating in popular struggles held power in the central government and their decentralisation initiatives are said to be part of a transformative political project aimed at grassroots empowerment (Crook and Sverrisson, 2001; Heller, 2001, 2011; Hickey and Mohan, 2004). It follows that decentralisation reforms involve the power of the State to formulate and execute policies. Consequently, understanding the political dimensions and the ideological positions of state-wide parties on decentralisation is important, which will be explored in the following section.

## **2.6 Party-Political Dynamics of Decentralisation**

In their study about preferences of political parties regarding decentralisation, Toubeau and Wagner (2013) claim that ideological dimensions, rooted in a specific country context, are a deciding factor for visualising and implementing decentralisation reforms. The authors claim that decentralisation is a preferred option for those on the economic right owing to the prospect of the reforms promoting efficiency in government. The economic left on the other hand, for whom redistribution among citizens is a major policy goal, may oppose decentralisation because of its prospects of removing power from the all-powerful central government, which consequently, may hinder the implementation of redistributive policies (Toubeau and Wagner, 2013). Their study has been based on data from thirty-one countries, mainly from the global North.

However, other widely cited case-studies on decentralisation by scholars working on countries from the global-South, do not support this claim at all. The case-studies of South Africa, Brazil and the Indian State of Kerala have been very well-researched and are widely cited. All three countries have a history of intensive efforts to uphold the developmental role of local governments by strong, left-of-centre programmatic parties, although decentralised governance had long-lasting effects in Kerala and Brazil but was short-lived in South Africa. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) in Kerala and the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), or the Workers' Party in Brazil, have advocated participatory reforms as part of an overall political strategy of strengthening the associational capacities of subordinate groups, and forged alliances with broad-based and vibrant civil society organizations with a track record of promoting participation. The African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa on the other hand, emphasized the political objective of consolidating its control over public institutions in the long run with the goal of establishing electoral hegemony (Heller, 2001 & 2012).

Having inherited decentralised and high capacity local states in major metropolitan centres, South Africa had a clear advantage in institutional terms, but the transformative potential of local democracy was limited in political terms. The ANC's vision of social transformation was not about protecting the interests of minorities, but about aiding the 'demographic majority (black) to access positions of power' (Bénit-Gbaffou and Lama-Rewal, 2011: 186). The ANC as a dominant party in South Africa, saw itself as the embodiment of transformative politics and

as the sole legitimate inheritor of what the ANC calls the “National Democratic Revolution,” (Heller, 2012). In this context, ANC perceived of decentralisation as only providing a platform for opposition parties which would waste time and resources contesting ANC policies. Opposition parties in South Africa with a more radical ideology (like the South African Communist Party), lacked the necessary resources to develop and implement a concrete programme on participatory democracy (Bénil-Gbaffou and Lama-Rewal, 2011).

In the name of rapid and efficient service delivery, local government systems in South Africa became increasingly centralized, and a bureaucratically driven process with a top-down approach. Processes that could provide autonomous spaces for the citizens or the civil society to actively engage with the local government were swiftly brought under the control of party structures and eventually hollowed-out. Possibly this was an inevitable consequence of the ANC’s rejection of a redistributive and transformative agenda in favour of an orthodox neoliberal strategy of ‘growth-led development’ (Heller, 2001:134), that emphasised technocratic reform. This model of governance reform was aided by private sector consultants with expertise on technical knowledge and was in total contrast to the experiments with participatory democracy in Brazil and Kerala, where private consultants played no role (Heller, 2001 & 2012). Thus, though there were ample institutional provisions for participation at the local level in South Africa, the political context and the party-dynamics emerged as a crucial factor that explains the lack of progress of participatory democracy in South African local governance (Bénil-Gbaffou and Lama-Rewal, 2011).

A closer look at the conditions in which the Left parties in Latin America undertook experiments in participatory democracy also underlines the significance of the ideological dimensions associated with party-dynamics. Although the Latin American Left was historically conceived as being inspired by socialist and Marxist ideologies, it underwent a significant ideological transformation by the 1980s, possibly driven by the global crisis of Marxism. Renouncing violence, the leftist platforms grew more moderate, and some of the Left parties began to re-conceive their political project as an ‘open-ended process of social transformation’ (Levitsky and Roberts, 2011:4). By the 1990s, many of them proposed more collaborative state-society linkage by offering citizens a more direct role in public policy-making processes leading to experiments in participatory governance at the grassroots. These experiments elicited positive response from the voters in countries like Brazil, Columbia,

Mexico, Peru, Uruguay, Venezuela and El Salvador where Left parties were voted in power in several cities (Goldfrank, 2011).

The 'master frame' for the renovated Left parties now was 'deepening democracy', that suggested 'both procedural and substantive connotations, ranging from popular participation in the policy-making process to redistributive socio-economic reforms' (Roberts, 1998:3). While retaining its traditional stances of redistribution, social justice, anti-imperialism and a strong state, the new Left reconceptualized the notion of the all-powerful, centralised state, and substituted this with the idea of a permeable and decentralised state that would create mechanisms for opening up spaces for active participation and monitoring by the citizens (Goldfrank, 2011).

The case of participatory experiments undertaken in Brazil can be cited to support this claim. The Workers' Party (PT) in Brazil evolved from a culture of confrontational politics during the struggle for democracy. It was a social movement party formed in 1980 as an alliance of progressive elements, that believed in using state-power as an instrument for mobilising the working classes, and viewed decentralisation as the most effective means for reaching this end (Heller, 2001). The Participatory Budgeting exercises in Brazil in which the common citizens actively participated in planning exercises, resulted in 'measurable increases in the associational activity of civil society organizations and of their capacity to effectively engage government' (Heller, 2012: 656). It was also presented as an alternative to the conventional mechanisms of the local clientelistic state and as a means for dislodging authoritarian party control (ibid). Although the participatory experiments in Brazil suffered a setback after the Worker's Party lost power of the central government, this thesis does not allow scope for examining the Brazilian case. However, the Indian State of West Bengal under a left-regime is a similar case which will be explored in detail within the purview of this thesis.

The cases of the Indian States of West Bengal and Kerala also underscore the significance of political strategies adopted by the Leftist political parties in explaining the execution (or non-implementation) of programmes for mass-participation through the local governance institutions. Both Kerala and West Bengal are federal States within a nation in which the CPI(M) had assumed control of state-power. The CPI(M) also has a federal organisational structure that allows the State-level party units great deal of autonomy, and the authority to formulate strategies to suit the conditions and respond to the demands of subaltern classes

in the State (M. Williams, 2011). In keeping with a vision of socialist democracy, the CPI(M) in Kerala placed a radical conception of participatory democratic politics at the centre of their programme on the 'People's Plan Campaign', in which ordinary people were authorised to take and execute decisions in the political and economic spheres of social life (Isaac, 1994). The CPI(M) looked to decentralisation as a primary mechanism for advancing this cause (Namboodiripad, 1994) not as a substitute for class struggle against the bourgeois-landlord policies, but as an effort to continue the political struggle within the concrete conditions that existed (M. Williams, 2011). The political path charted out by the CPI(M) in West Bengal will be analysed in detail later in this thesis.

The CPI(M) in Kerala argued in favour of using the formal democratic institutions for extending the role of civil society into the political and economic arenas. Consequently, a close alliance was forged between the reformist faction of the CPI(M) and civil society actors in Kerala during the People's Plan Campaign, which aided pushing through the local governance reforms in the State as part of a larger political project (Heller, 2012). Though this was an instrumental approach to democratic institutions, which were to be used to develop popular consciousness and expand organisational networks, the party did not lose sight of the revolutionary struggle as the primary objective. The implicit idea here was using the state institutions as agents of change through a process of democratic decentralisation. This translated into concrete steps to transform the state administration to play a crucial role in involving people to actively engage in deliberative exercises, and decision-making processes of the state (M. Williams, 2011).

Michelle Williams (2011) has made a fascinating comparison between the ideological journeys of the two Communist parties – The Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) - which developed similar visions for socialism but pursued two different paths in actualising these visions, leading to completely dissimilar outcomes. While the CPI(M)'s change in perception about the traditional command and control role of the state proved much more favourable in involving the civil society as a major player in pushing through the participatory governance reforms, the SACP's approach relied heavily on the classical Marxist-Leninist principles. The SACP, that had access to state power through its strategic alliance with the ANC, projected the vision that socialism would occur inevitably once the working-class takes control of state-power. This top-down view did little

to pave the way for participatory democracy and resulted in a political project that subordinated civil society to the state and economy (M. Williams, 2011). The CPI(M) on the other hand, had historically been a Leninist Party, but in which the centralising elements co-existed with a more democratic and mass-mobilizational element leading to a different outcome in due course (Heller, 2001).

Ideological stances driving party-political dynamics thus emerge as a crucial factor in translating the vision of transformative change through democratic decentralisation into practice. Although in all the cases mentioned above, local government has been used as an instrument for social engineering, the success of democratic governance, according to Heller (2012), is reliant to a great extent on the intent and ability of the state and political actors to be able to mould institutional designs to participatory dynamics. This claim will also be explored while analysing the case of West Bengal in the empirical chapters later in this thesis.

The concept of 'decentralisation' was initially conceived as an integral part of the 'good governance' agenda of the global funding agencies of the west. This calls for an exploration of the debates surrounding the 'good governance' agenda promoted by the World Bank and the Department for International Development (DFID)-UK, to understand the policy frames of these donor agencies with regard to the concept of people's participation. Understanding the concepts driving the policy prescriptions of these two agencies (since late twentieth century to the first decade of the twenty-first century), and the probable effects these concepts might have on the institutional structures within the countries receiving development aid, will enable an informed inquiry in the light of two projects funded by the DFID and the World Bank in the empirical chapters later in this thesis.

## **2.7 'Good Governance' Discourses of the Global Funding Agencies**

### **2.7.1 'Good Governance' and the World Bank**

As mentioned earlier, the neo-liberal rhetoric advocated for minimum role of the state, and defined 'bad' governance in terms of too much state intervention in the economy, emphasizing the power of the free market for 'development'. International financial institutions like the IMF and the World Bank began to push this agenda aggressively, as was reflected in the 1981 report by the World Bank, 'Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan

Africa' (Williams, 2009). In this report, the grim economic scenario in most countries in Africa was mostly ascribed to 'internal structural constraints' that were made worse by domestic policy deficiencies. Hence, the recommendations included reducing administrative 'overcommitments' to the public sector and enhancing managerial capacities of private individuals and farms instead, since the latter were more equipped to respond to local needs and conditions.

Even though the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) failed to show desired results, the World Bank reinforced the theme of poor governance in developing countries as the reason for the failure of the SAP in its report on Sub-Saharan Africa, *From Crisis to Sustainable Growth* (1989) (Leftwich, 1994). This report argued that 'sound macroeconomic policies' and an 'efficient infrastructure' are essential but not sufficient conditions to bring about a positive change in the African Economies. The concept of 'good governance' was thrown up in this context, which must go hand-in-hand with market mechanisms and private-sector initiatives. Good governance, in this report, has been explained in terms of efficient public services, reliable judicial systems and an accountable administration. The need of the hour in Africa has been said to be 'not just less government, but better government', that translates as better economic management capabilities and a bottom-up approach (World Bank, 1989: 5).

After the end of the cold war in 1989, there were no longer any constraints for the western powers to issue prescriptions to the developing countries about how their internal affairs should be managed. The 'good governance' agenda simply provided a logical framework to justify such intervention in the affairs of developing countries in return for funds (Doornbos, 2001). Hence, the World Bank continued to pursue this theme in the report 'Governance and Development' (1992), where 'good governance' has been defined as 'the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a county's economic and social resources for development' (ibid: 1). In this report, four key areas of governance have been identified as being consistent with the Bank's mandate: public sector management, accountability, the legal framework for development, and information and transparency. The Bank is solely interested in the laws that would make the markets work efficiently, and is thus prepared to provide aid to developing countries in order to build the institutional capacity to create and sustain institutional frameworks for proper implementation of such laws.

The 'good governance' agenda, thus, was an instrument that opened up avenues for launching of a new generation of political conditionalities in exchange for financial assistance from the global funding agencies. These included deregulation and liberalization of their economies, opening up borders to foreign investment and trade, adopt macroeconomic policies favouring price stability over growth, etc. (Alcantara, 1998). These conditionalities, says Doornbos (2001), were 'disciplining' techniques meant for the client states through which new global-institutional patterns of 'hegemony' could be established in the developing countries. Doornbos (2001) makes the interesting observation that the use of the adjective 'good' invariably implies a value judgement about the internal governance mechanisms of a country. Consequently, the notion of 'good governance' as conceptualised by the donors definitely implies an assertion on Western ideals of behaviour to be adopted in other cultural and political contexts (ibid). Doornbos also proposed that designing a good governance approach by the Bank appears to have been made with the target to create 'state-market relationships that have been characteristic for Western neo-liberal systems' in developing country contexts (2004:377, mentioned in Nanda, 2006). Santiso (2001) on the other hand, tries to focus on the 'legitimizing arguments' in favour of the aid-conditionalities, which, he says, are attempts to provide 'incentives' to reform policies and institutions in the recipient countries.

The Bank discourse on 'good governance' took a fascinating turn with the revelation of the 'East Asian Miracles' in the early 1990s, where micro-institutions and state intervention had a major role in the promotion of economic growth. The East Asian Miracle Report of the World Bank (1993) widened the scope for debate on the role of the state in furthering development. It acknowledged the role of government intervention and deviation from the free-market model-based development on one hand; but on the other attributed this success to the 'market-friendly approach' advocated by the Bank (Amsden, 1994; Kiely, 1998).

Possibly spurred by the 'miracles' of East Asia, the World Development Report (1997) report signalled the return of the state, albeit with a cautious approach. The focus on the changing role of the state in economic management and in the regulation and supervision of financial markets became even more prominent in this report. It was reiterated time and again that though the role and effectiveness of the state is central to economic and social development

of a country, the state has to be more of a partner, catalyst or facilitator 'for the provision of the goods and services and the rules and institutions that allow markets to flourish' (ibid:1).

According to Kiely (1998), the assumption that state intervention must be inefficient because state officials always act in a self-interested way, is built into the theoretical system of the Bank, which is the neo-liberal critique of the state. This could well be linked to the issue of 'strengthening of public institutions', that is offered as part of the strategic-framework for state-reforms in this report. Apart from designing effective rules of law and combating corruption, this also implies narrowing the gap between the government and the people by introducing people's participation and decentralisation (World Bank, 1997:3). A note of caution has been sounded though, to devolve power 'carefully', so that dangers like 'rising inequality, macroeconomic instability, or risk of local capture' can be avoided. On proceeding further, it becomes evident that an instrumentalist approach has been adopted to the issue of people's participation, as a route to consensus building among potential users, that could enhance the chances of success of the government programmes (ibid:11).

The instrumentalist approach to the issue of 'participation' becomes even more pronounced at a juncture, where, pre-supposing that reform of state institutions would encounter political opposition, the report proposes to take 'reform-oriented' political leaders and elites into confidence, and let them take the decision on behalf of the 'often-silent beneficiaries'. This, according to the report, would speed up reforms, and at the same time would foster a sense of ownership of the reforms among the stakeholders, making the reforms sustainable (ibid:14).

Meanwhile, possibly the failure of the Structural Adjustment Programmes compelled a deeper understanding and analysis of the multidimensional nature of poverty and importance of social capital, that co-existed uneasily with the economic reform agenda in the development thinking of the day (Brock et al., 2001; Bebbington et al., 2004). In the perception of poverty and well-being reflected in World Bank's *Voices of the Poor*, subjective elements like insecurity, powerlessness and voicelessness occur as recurrent themes in addition to economic and material deprivations (Narayan, et al., 2000), that called for explicit political strategies to counter poverty and under-development. As observed earlier, in a notable shift in discourse, the World Development Report 2000/2001 proposed a threefold strategy to poverty-reduction, promoting opportunity, facilitating empowerment, and

enhancing security, where poverty is defined as a result of economic, political, and social processes. The concept of empowerment was introduced incorporating issues like laying the legal and political foundations of inclusive development, promoting inclusive decentralisation and supporting social capital of the poor.

However, this shift<sup>9</sup> was fleeting and there was complete backtracking of the 'empowerment' theme in the World Development Report: 'Building Institutions for Markets' (World Bank, 2002), though the foreword to this report claimed to be a 'natural continuation' of the 2000/2001 report. Rather, this report identified processes by which 'inclusive and integrated markets' might be promoted by institutions to ensure economic growth, which in turn was expected to improve people's incomes and reduce poverty. It is evident that this report once again adopts an inadequate economic view of poverty and under-development disregarding social and political processes at play. Political practices were undermined by referring to them only in terms of political conflicts, that can merely serve to stall or reverse the processes of institutional reforms.

Such a narrow view of politics held by the Bank has been ascribed to its neo-liberal conception of the state by Kiely (1998) whereas scholars like Santiso (2001) or Nanda (2006) think that the Bank's 'governance' discourse reflects a tension between the economic and political dimensions. However, Alcantara (1998) claims that the use of the term 'governance' allowed the global funding agencies to address many sensitive social and political questions by couching them in technical terms. This is because of the realisation by the said agencies that 'the market' is a social and political construction, and that an economic venture cannot succeed if 'minimum conditions of political legitimacy, social order and institutional efficiency' are non-existent (ibid, 106). For Santiso (2001), one of the important dimensions of the post-Washington consensus was the recognition that politics do matter for development. This translates as reforming the state-institutions in order to sustain market reforms and consolidate democracy concurrently.

The theme of restoring citizen's trust by building and strengthening institutional capacity of the state, specially in conflict situations continues in the World Development Report, 2011,

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<sup>9</sup> As mentioned earlier, shifts and inconsistencies in Bank policy/publications result from different discourses, groupings and factional struggles within the Bank (see Wade, 2001).

that emphasizes institutional legitimacy as the key to stability. However, in conflict situations, state reforms should be sequenced, where institutional reforms should be prioritised over other political reforms like decentralisation or changing attitudes towards marginalised groups. This, says the report, is necessary to avoid 'premature load-bearing' (ibid:100) on institutions where they face too many demands that they are unable to deliver leading to failure in state reforms. This report though, is far more cautious in its approach while it speaks on themes like adaptation to local conditions or adopting procedures for greater staying power and a long-term perspective. Inclusion of these ideas appears to give out signals of a more flexible approach with regard to state-reforms.

According to Weiss (2000), the 'good governance' discourse of the World Bank in the later phases is more about improving functioning of the democratic institutions due to the influence of UN institutions that have somewhat tempered the momentum of the Washington Consensus<sup>10</sup>. The UN system has mostly emphasized the need to maintain a balance between the public and private sectors. Moreover, the UNDP, through its Human Development Reports, has consistently focused on the complex realities of governance, including meaningful participation of citizens in decision-making processes of public-institutions, thus revealing an inclination towards the 'empowerment' approach, which is essential to the political dimension of governance (UNDP, 1990). These intricate dimensions of governance embracing concepts of 'citizen participation' and 'empowerment' will be taken up in detail in the empirical chapters of this thesis.

Alcantara (1998) claims that the 'good governance' agenda promoted in the developing countries by the bilateral donors of the OECD<sup>11</sup> (e.g. DFID) adopted a broader meaning. This agenda linked aid to the record of human rights of the recipient countries, with a vision to build capacities of the people to organize and take control of their own affairs (ibid). This

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<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that in its Articles of Agreement the World Bank was barred from taking into account political considerations which is possibly why its actions regarding governance-processes were limited to accountability, transparency, rule of law, and government, efficiency and effectiveness (World Bank, 1992). There were no such restrictions for the bilateral donors like the DFID, that made it easier for the bilateral aid dialogue to incorporate issues like human rights, freedom of speech or civil society participation in its discourse on good governance (Pomerantz, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

drives us to also conduct a detailed examination of the discourses of the bilateral agencies, an example of which is the Department for International Development (DFID) of the UK government.

### 2.7.2 'Good Governance' Discourse in the DFID

The 1997 report by the Department for International Development, 'Eliminating World Poverty: A Challenge for the 21st Century', identified three major development challenges, viz. encouraging economic growth, creating sustainable livelihood opportunities for the poor, and promoting human development (DFID, 1997). Though much of the argument put forward in this report echoed the World Bank strategy of poverty-reduction through trade, investment, financial stability and achievement of economic growth, discourses related to human rights, transparent and accountable government, political stability and social cohesion have also been introduced. The definition of poverty adopted combined the World Bank definition of \$1 a day as well as isolation, powerlessness and social exclusion of particular social groups based on gender, caste, ethnicity, etc. This combination indicates a deeper understanding of the socio-political processes leading to deprivation and under-development. While acknowledging the great opportunities offered by globalisation and critiquing the inefficiency and corruption fostered by the state-centric development model, the report admitted the benefits of globalisation are not equal for everyone, and also disapproved of the minimalist-state-approach leading to inequality. The report, thus, advanced a concept of synthesis between facilitating economic growth and building an effective state for supporting the poor.

Building partnerships with developing countries was another major policy recommendation flagged by this report, though partnerships could only be forged with poorer countries 'committed' to international development targets, in order to mobilise 'political will' in these countries. Mercer (2003) argues that such 'partnerships' only serve to cover up continued conditionalities and function as a more subtle but dangerous expression of donor-power exercised by rewarding governments committed to the norms of democratic, neoliberal market-reform (ibid). This is a significant observation for the purpose of this study, and will be explored in greater detail at a later phase of this chapter.

Tensions within the DFID discourse were also reflected in the DFID (2000) Report, 'Eliminating World Poverty: Making Globalisation Work for the Poor', which fell back on typical World Bank tenets of poverty reduction through globalisation and economic management. In spite of cursory references to issues like corruption, human rights, promoting health, education and voices of the poor people, the 'globalisation' refrain clearly overshadowed all other themes in this report. The political dimension of 'governance' though, made an emphatic comeback in the 2006 White Paper by DFID, 'Eliminating Poverty : Making Governance Work for the Poor', which promoted a wider meaning of 'governance', and explained 'good governance' in terms of national ownership of the developing countries, who need to work out their own economic and social priorities. The concept was based on three key principles, 1) capability of the state to get things done 2) responsiveness of the state to the needs of its citizens, and 3) accountability of the governments and its public institutions to its citizens, civil society as well as the private sector.

Underlining that 'effective states' are central to development, the DFID (2006) document, for the first time, brought politics to the centre-stage. Claiming that involvement of people as active citizens was more important than formal institutions in effecting a positive change in the quality of governance, it claimed that 'good governance' was not just about the government. It was also about political parties, parliament, judiciary, media, civil society, and their inter-relationships. Its claim that 'good governance is about good politics' (ibid : 23) has been viewed by Armon (2007) as a positive shift in the conception of politics, no more in negative terms, but as a conviction that 'development is all about making politics work for the poor'.

In a continuation of the abovementioned discourse on 'governance', the DFID (2010)<sup>12</sup> document 'The Politics of Poverty: Elites, Citizens and States', described 'governance' as the way countries and societies manage their affairs politically and the way power and authority are exercised. This report argued for the centrality of political settlements to all development,

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<sup>12</sup> This was not a policy document though, as recorded in its disclaimer: "*This synthesis presents some key findings of DFID-funded research and the resulting policy recommendations of the researchers: it does not necessarily reflect DFID policy.*" However, this paper was written by DFID Research and Evidence Division Staff with help and advice from experts from Research Centres of different academic institutions (DFID, 2010)

and that such settlements, representing different interest groups, need to work at the grassroots. The report looked at ways of building a more inclusive government, and also highlighted the benefits that could accrue to both the state and society through active participation of its citizens in the reforms of basic public service delivery mechanisms. The report placed the theme of 'participation' within the 'citizenship' discourse, which by itself is a political term. The term 'citizen' signifies someone with rights and responsibilities, someone in relationship with the state as well as other members of the community. This imagery of active and organized citizens articulating demands for their rights, mobilizing pressure mechanisms to effect policy change and monitoring performance of the government is a far cry from the representation of the 'silent beneficiaries' depicted in the 'good governance' discourses of the World Bank, or even the earlier discourses of the DFID.

### **2.7.3 Good Governance and Country Ownership**

Another central theme featuring in the DFID discourse and also in the World Bank discourse on 'good governance' in the later phases (e.g. World Bank, 2011) is the centrality of a meaningful ownership of the state-reforms by the people and the government of the recipient country. Nanda (2006) echoes this theme of country ownership when he suggests that if development aid is expected to fulfil its objectives of 'good governance', factors like history, cultural context and domestic support of the recipient country must also be taken into account. Mercer (2003) on the other hand, based on the experiences of the State of Tanzania, views 'partnerships' with recipient countries as a more insidious and subtle form of donor power, which only serve to conceal continued conditionalities. This is done through a practice of selectivity on the part of the donors, whereby only those governments committed to the norms of democratic neoliberal market reform are rewarded, and there is no longer any discussion on the alternatives to the neo-liberal agenda. Fowler (2000:7) too regards partnerships as a 'more subtle form of external power imposition' where the neo-liberal economic framework is made non-negotiable for countries wishing to receive aids.

Abrahamsen (2004) observed that although the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) seemed to have abandoned aid conditionality in favour of partnerships with

developing countries<sup>13</sup>, the powerplay latent in these partnerships with recipient countries were 'voluntary and coercive at the same time, producing both new forms of agency and new forms of discipline' (ibid : 1454). Such hidden power plays out in terms of the ability to shape political agendas and thwart issues from entering the arena of public debate, or even by shaping 'perceptions, cognitions and preferences' (ibid:1458) of the people in ways that might even contradict their own interests, making people accept their domination -

Power in this understanding is not purely instrumentalist, but works through systems of knowledge and discursive practices to provide the meanings, norms, values and identities that not only constrain actors, but also constitute them. In this sense, human beings, or the subject, are not only power's intended target, but also its effect.

(Abrahamsen, 2004: 1459)

Quoting Joseph Stiglitz, where he expresses a view to the effect that the degree of country ownership tends to be greater, when the strategies and policies are developed by the state actors within the recipient country who then assume the driver's seat, Cammack (2004) observes that the success of such a proposition of the Bank is dependent on the adoption and endorsement of such strategies by the population of the recipient country. Thus, country ownership has been understood as the commitment to carry out policies prescribed by the Bank, and the key to long-term sustainability of these policies is the strategy of 'institutionalisation of the micro-level incentive structures that shape behaviour in ways conducive to the promotion of competition and capitalist accumulation' (Cammack, 2004:199): According to Cammack, the Bank's demand of 'country ownership' rests on its awareness that it cannot enforce the strategy all by itself, and also because 'the legitimization of its project vis-a-vis citizens around the world depends upon its adoption by national governments, which remain indispensable intermediaries in the project' (Cammack, 2004:203).

Thus, resting on legitimacy built on the consent of state-actors, partnerships emerge as a more insidious and subtle form of power with the clear-cut objective of disseminating a

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<sup>13</sup> The World Bank's Comprehensive Development Framework (launched in 1999), advocated in favour of homegrown policy reform and institutional development. The UK government too maintained a stand against over-prescriptive aid conditionality to enhance efficiency and efficacy of development aid. (Abrahamsen, 2004)

hegemonic discourse 'embedded in and shaped by effective institutions and incentives' (Cammack, 2004:198). Situating this in the contemporary contexts of development aid, it might be inferred that if the elites and the bureaucracy in the developing countries come to internalise the neo-liberal values of global governance, the poor in the recipient countries are prevented from realising their 'real' interests due to the hegemonic ideology of neo-liberalism. Since many developing countries do not have the requisite bureaucratic and technical capacities to do their development planning, aid-partnerships are usually combined with programmes for institution and capacity building. In fact, even when the state does have strong structures and capacities, the new approaches to governance made institutional reform part of the aid partnerships. While such capacity building initiatives involve essential transfers of technical expertise and procedures, Abrahamsen (2004:1462) cautions about the necessity to recognise these policy instruments as political interventions 'designed to produce particular modern subjects'.

The next section of this thesis will therefore try to understand, how these policy frames are transferred through policy prescriptions of the global funding agencies, and are used as strategic devices to change the institutional values in recipient country contexts.

## **2.8 Policy Prescriptions and Institutional Changes**

Institutions have been viewed as reflections of the socio-political values that surround them Styhre (2001), and also as 'action driven entities that have a vital role in reflecting and responding to the environment in which they are situated' (Farmbry and Harper 2005:679). The good governance literature from the World Bank lays emphasis on values such as the rule of law and reliability that depend upon institutionalisation (Peters, 2011). The process of institutionalisation, thus, has been conceptualised as a fundamental element that creates the capacity for governing. These processes can be sustained successfully over a considerable period of time, or beyond an immediate small group, only if the routines established for governing and decision-making can be maintained for a length of time. Thus, in normative institutional theory, institutionalisation is conceptualized as permeating a structure with values, where individuals become integral part of the institution 'by learning the symbols, values, and routines of that institution, and then internalise those values. (Peters, 2011:87).

Once this learning process is complete, the individual is expected to conform to the normative structure of the institution, which in turn will influence the performance of the institution. As Peters (2011) claims, the most important and challenging linkages in contemporary views of governance may involve actors within the public sector and actors who are external to the institution, coming with different goals and different values about the policy problems they are addressing. Institutionalisation therefore, is a dynamic process, constantly adjusting to new governance requirements arising within the milieu (ibid).

Policy instruments deal with how governance processes are operationalised, and represent particular policy frames. Far from being neutral devices, policy instruments are a form of power which produce specific effects (Gales, 2011). Public policy instruments have been defined sociologically as -

A device that is both technical and social, that organizes specific social relations between the state and those it is addressed to, according to the representations and meanings it carries. It is ... a technical device with the generic purpose of carrying a concrete concept of the politics / society relationship and sustained by a concept of regulation.

(Lascoumes and Le Gales, 2007:4)

In Weber's (1978) view, public policy instruments were a technique for domination, while Foucault perceived this as a disciplinary concept based on concrete techniques for framing individuals, so that their behaviours could be controlled from a distance (Gales, 2011). Using Bourdieu's metaphor, Gales (2011) has further explained this in terms of a tool where a leftist democratic mode of governance promoting negotiation might be contrasted with a rightist mode of governance using indicators, standards and technical instruments in order to promote a more market-oriented society.

According to Miller and Rose (2008) the legacy of this concept has continued in the present times in the making of new forms of neoliberal governmentality that explores new connections between public authorities and economic and social actors in an internationalized framework. Gales (2011) considers this new form of governmentality as a 'postmodernist form of government at distance, where self-disciplined subjects change their conducts in relation to assimilated norms and legitimate behaviours promoted by state organizations'. (ibid:149). Miller and Rose used this idea to highlight not only the actual instruments, but also 'the ways of thinking, intellectual techniques, ways of analysing oneself,

and so forth, to which they were bound' (Miller and Rose, 2008:11). This led these authors to increasingly consider the idea of construction of a neoliberal governmentality founded on the notion of forging a link between technical expertise, management skills and calculating techniques (Gales, 2011). Recent scholars (Salamon, 2002; Howlett, et.al., 2005; Lascoumes and Le Gales, 2007) consider policy instruments as institutions, since behaviour of social actors are partially determined by them by bringing about changes in the balance of power, by according advantages to certain actors and excluding others (Gales, 2011).

According to Gales (2011), performance indicators are preferred policy instruments for the government since these can be changed without difficulty in the name of efficiency and rationality, thus increasing elite-control since these instruments constitute social-control in the form of knowledge and ways of exercising it. Gales argues that government elites might use the debate on policy instruments as a smokescreen 'to depoliticize fundamentally political issues, to create a minimum consensus on reform by relying on the apparent neutrality of instruments presented as modern' (ibid:151)

Gales' view is very similar to that of Doornbos (2001) who claimed that the establishment of new global-institutional patterns of 'hegemony' in the developing countries is achieved through 'disciplining' techniques (to be interpreted as policy instruments) of the World Bank model of 'good governance'. As discussed earlier, the dominant method adopted by the aid agencies was to impose uniform institutional blueprints on the recipient countries, a process termed as 'institutional monocropping' by Evans (2004). Drawing on scholars like Dani Rodrik and Amartya Sen, Evans (2004) argues that, instead of imposing a one-size-fits-all approach based on the model of now-developed countries, development thinkers should be looking for ways to foster institutions that enhance the ability of the citizens to make their own choices. According to these scholars, effective people's participation will definitely result in diminished power for the elites with reduced ability to manipulate allocation of public resources to suit their interests. Sen (1999) points out that public deliberation, therefore, may be equally threatening for technocrats since imposition of institutional blueprints works in their favour by enhancing their power and authority. According priority to people's participation in the decision-making processes of the institutions, thus, may be frustrating to the technocrats (Evans, 2004).

A major theme related to the 'good governance' discourse that emerges in this chapter underscores the importance of socio-political and historic contexts of the countries receiving development aid, and how policy-prescriptions of the external funding agencies may serve to change the institutional values in the recipient countries. It is even possible to sustain these changes in the long run, if the state-elites in the recipient countries share the same set of values with the global funding agencies. These discourses will inform a significant part of this thesis, since this research has been conducted in the light of two projects on rural decentralisation in the Indian State of West Bengal funded by the DFID-UK and the World Bank.

The discussions in the earlier sections upheld the notion of a state possessing capacity for effecting transformational change in governance by forging more collaborative state-society relations. This thesis argues that a pre-requisite for this is a vision held by a majority of the state-elites to establish effective state-society linkages, where the state as a central agent is expected to safeguard the interests of the oppressed, and provide the countervailing power to contest the hegemony of existing power-holders. One way to do this is by putting in place appropriate institutional arrangements through decentralised governance structures as power-sharing mechanisms between the institutions at the state and the local level. These institutions would be expected to create spaces for substantive participation by the masses at the local level, and extend capability-enhancing mechanisms to enhance their effective engagement with the state as active citizens. The next section will place this concept against the broader country context of post-independence India, as a State possessing vision and capacity for transformational change, as well as the manifestation of this vision in its sub-national contexts with specific focus on the State of West Bengal.

## **2.9 Country Context**

### **2.9.1 India as a Capacitated State**

The description of the Indian State by various scholars have ranged from predatory (Bardhan, 1983) and exclusionary (Heller and Mukhopadhyay, 2015) to a 'well-functioning democracy that delivers a poor quality of government' (Kohli 2012: 225). Evans and Heller (2018) perceive the formal institutions India to be of good quality in terms of both a strong bureaucratic

structure and systems of political representation in place that have so long successfully united a highly pluralistic society. High calibre officials of the Indian Administrative Service constitute its state machinery which operates within a robust rational–legal governing framework. Pedersen (1992) observes that the top bureaucrats (e.g. Indian Administrative Services) traditionally came from the middle classes with a distinct high-caste flavour, and were distinctly in a position to influence public policies. He also suggested that a gradual erosion of the dominant Congress Party in independent India pushed the bureaucracy into the institutional vacuum created at the top, and thus, several policy initiatives originated from within the bureaucracy in India.

The post- independence mid-twentieth-century Nehruvian State was heavily influenced by a modernist vision and an institutionalist perspective that placed enormous faith on state intervention, centralised planning, technical expertise and the bureaucracy. Some of its other strong institutions include the judiciary, the armed forces, the electoral commission and the Reserve Bank of India. All these, along with the focus on higher education, partially set the stage for the post-1991 take-off for globalisation. In the liberalisation era of the 1990s, coalitions with global capital have gradually transformed the comfortable co-existence of the state-controlled economic framework and protected local capital in India. Over the last three decades, the pre-dominance of the social democratic ideology has gradually been replaced by the combined forces of neo-liberal economic ideology and Hindu nationalism (Evans and Heller, 2018).

Bardhan observes that the Nehruvian model of the State in India had the requisite capacity, but its transformative ambitions were thwarted by ‘a regime of clientelist machine politics’ (1983:221). Therefore, the implementation of policies adopted by the State in India continued to be highly top-down, dominated by the ‘bureaucratic-politician nexus’ and subject to massive leakage. Other scholars have also explained the reasons for implementation failure of the state-policies in India by analysing the dynamics of conflicts and cooperation between different actors who constitute the state and other social forces in the Indian context. According to Fuller and Harriss (2001), the State in India has often been interpreted in terms of the linkage between the ‘state-as-actual-organization’ and the dominant-class ‘ruling coalition’ (ibid:6), which Vanaik (1990) found to be constituted primarily by the rich capitalist farmer class and the industrial bourgeoisie led by big capital. When viewed through this lens,

the State's capacity to achieve the democratic principles enshrined in the Indian constitution seems persistently damaged by the power of these dominant classes (Fuller and Harriss, 2001). Bardhan (1983) defined the Indian State in terms of conflicts and cooperation between three dominant proprietary classes which are industrial capitalists, rich farmers, and a class of bureaucrats and professionals, none of whom are able to establish hegemony over the others.

Another line of thought appeared in the works of Partha Chatterjee and Sudipta Kaviraj, who mostly agreed with the conclusions about the dominant classes, but analysed the weaknesses of the Indian State differently. Chatterjee viewed the planned development of the Nehruvian era as a supremely Statist utopia, since the autonomy of the State's planning elite was being eroded rapidly by various social forces that continually undermined the Indian elite's ability to pursue the developmental project. (1997, 287 – 90). Kaviraj also argued that a 'passive revolution' had occurred since the modernizing Indian bourgeoisie was somewhat isolated politically within the society, that compelled it to rely heavily on the 'state-bureaucratic agency' (1984:225) for effecting social transformation.

However, the bureaucratic agency was still based on the institutional structures of the colonial rule. With the expansion of the state in due course, this led to the creation of a profound gap between the bureaucratic elite, familiar with a 'modernist discourse', and the personnel at lower levels, whose 'vernacular everyday discourses' were not founded on the principles of formal rationality at all. This difference has been flagged as a significant reason for the modern Indian State to implement its policies that are formulated at the top-level, but when finally, these are implemented 'very low down in the bureaucracy, they are reinterpreted beyond recognition' (Kaviraj, 1991:91). Such arguments point towards a scenario where there has not been popular acceptance of the institutions, disciplines, arrangements and practices supported by a modernist ideology, that were pre-supposed by the modernizing aspirations of the political elites who were the founders of the post-colonial State in India. Thus, emphasizing the gap between the elite and the subaltern populace in India, Chatterjee and Kaviraj claimed that the state-idea is not part of the ordinary Indian's understanding.

Fuller and Harriss (2001) do not reject Chatterjee and Kaviraj's claim entirely, but they also observe that the state-system in India is profoundly influenced by social forces making the

boundary between the state and the society rather blurred and porous in reality. They move a bit further and support Jonathan Parry's (2000) claim that the impersonal norms and values of the modern state have gradually been internalised by ordinary Indians – local-level bureaucrats, local politicians and the masses alike in the course of time. The modern Indian State though, is not a discrete, unitary 'actor', because it does not consist of an 'actual organization' separated from society. Instead of acting impersonally as a monolithic entity, the State in India appears on many levels and many centres, with its lowest rungs being staffed by personnel, with whom, ordinary people have social relationships. These personnel are often in dispute or competition with each other, which is why they have not been able to form themselves into an organized dominant class. Thus, like all other States, India too confirms Migdal's (1994) view of the State as a differentiated idea that operates on many levels, as discussed earlier in section 2.2.

Pritchett (2009) has described India as 'a nation-state in which the head, that is the elite institutions at the national (and in some states) level remain sound and functional but that this head is no longer reliably connected via nerves and sinews to its own limbs' (ibid:4). In a similar strain, Evans and Heller (2018) too have observed that state capacity in India seem to deteriorate as one moves downward through the sub-national State and into local government, which is where the direct interface between the state and the society takes place. They have interpreted this in terms of the power and authority hoarded at the State level since important developmental functions like planning, housing, health, education, policing and other basic services are controlled by line departments at the State level. Urban municipalities and rural local governance structures (Panchayats) have never been really nurtured as a third tier of government except for a few States like Kerala, Karnataka and West Bengal. Moreover, state interventions are captured by narrow, patronage driven political obligations that are deep-rooted at the sub-national and local level. It has been argued that in the absence of effective decentralisation of power and authority, the penetration of the state at the local level remains highly constrained, and the prospects for capability-expansion remain restricted due to the absence of neutralising civil society organizations with the ability to hold the institutions accountable and raise the demands for effective delivery of the public services (ibid).

However, in spite of the limited nature of state-society linkage in the country, there are variations at the sub-national level that demonstrates more inclusive development in States where democratic institutions and practices are comparatively deep-rooted. The States referred to are the Southern Indian States of Kerala and Tamil Nadu where the progress in social development has been explained by the history of social mobilisation. There have been broad-based anti-caste movements in these States that strengthened the civil society and also gave rise to more competitive, redistributive party politics by producing long-lasting political formations (Heller, 2000; Harriss, 2003). These cases give credence to the argument that the key for fostering development as capability expansion lie in transforming state-society relations and fostering participatory institutions at the local level (Evans and Heller, 2014). This leads us to examine the debates surrounding the emergence of the local government institutions in the context of India and the sub-national context of the State of West Bengal for the purpose of this study.

### **2.9.2 Emergence of Local Government Institutions in India**

Without denying the self-serving facet of an elitist democracy in which a group of competing elites collectively share privilege and power, the role of the elite Indian nationalist leaders must be acknowledged, who offered a democratic framework to the people of India as a means to include them into the decision-making processes (Kohli, 1988). M.K. Gandhi, J. L. Nehru and B.R. Ambedkar were three such important leaders of modern India who became symbols of 'India's independent nationhood' (Jodhka, 2002:3351) and the views they held about rural society and the Indian village were crucial in shaping the nature of the decentralised governance structures in India. These three leaders had divergent perceptions about the Indian villages, that Gandhi saw as a site of authenticity, Nehru viewed as a site of backwardness, while for Ambedkar the village was the site of oppression (Jodhka, 2002).

Among these three, Gandhi's advocacy for installation of a decentralised administrative machinery was the most powerful discourse that strengthened the legitimacy of the decentralisation initiatives in independent India. In contrast to the international discourse on decentralisation in instrumental terms, Gandhi conceptualised decentralisation in normative terms, as an integral part in the life of the Indian masses. In Gandhian view, Panchayats were not mere agencies to perform only civic functions, these were comprehensive, self-sufficient

units that were assigned an economic role of addressing poverty in rural India through stimulating local production and creating employment (John, 2007).

While Gandhi spoke of retaining the harmonious spirit of the traditional village life uncorrupted by urban influences, Nehru advocated developing the village through introduction of new technology, and changing agrarian relations between the land-holders and the peasantry. A person with a modernist vision, Nehru viewed Indian villages as being marked by backwardness, class-divisions and ignorance, and did not find any merit in reviving the traditional social order that emphasised only 'the duties of the individual and the group' and not 'their rights' (Jodhka, 2002:3348). Nehru visualised the village as an electoral unit within a larger political framework for truer representation of the masses, rather than a self-contained economic unit. Being the first Prime Minister of independent India, Nehru had the opportunity to translate much of his vision into government policies on rural development in India, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s (ibid).

B.R. Ambedkar, the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, strongly believed village life in India to be exclusionary, exploitative and undemocratic, and located the primary source of exploitation in the caste system of Indian society (Palshikar, 1996; Jodhka, 2002) -

...What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism?

[Ambedkar quoted in Moon, 1994:62].

A fervent believer in the emancipatory potentials of modernism, Ambedkar considered any village-based political establishment to be inimical to the interests of the oppressed lower castes by the higher castes in the name of local governance (John, 2007). These differences led to intense debates among these key figures of the times about the necessity and nature of creating village level local government institutions in independent India, with M.K. Gandhi arguing for village self-sufficiency as the aim for independent India and Ambedkar opposing it.

Another notable champion of the idea of decentralisation in post-independence India was EMS Namboodiripad, who started his political life as a Gandhian, but joined the Communist Party of India at a later phase. Though he adhered to and practised orthodox Marxism all his

life, his consistent advocacy of a decentralised governance system was closer to the Gandhian tenets (John, 2007; Namboodiripad, 2010). Such multi-hued, multi-layered and deeply political views on the idea of decentralised institutional structures emerging in the mid-twentieth century post-independence Indian context, set it far apart from the narrower conceptualization of 'decentralisation' in more instrumental and depoliticised terms, driving the western development thinking in the 1990's. These debates though, once again confirm the idea of the state as a differentiated entity (see section 2.2), divided between different groups and factions, where even the state-elites have their own contestations about the founding principles of a transformative state.

The debate in which Gandhi and Ambedkar led the two main fronts, finally reached a consensus on the question of making provisions for the Panchayati Raj Institutions in India, since both the leaders were convinced that social transformation could only be brought about by social action in the form of popular struggles through popular participation, (Palshikar, 1996). Describing the nature of Ambedkar's argument, Lieten commented –

Since India had embarked on the path of modernisation and state-building, it was better, the argument continued, to have enlightened intervention by the centralising state. The state has an enlightened and developmental mission, and has to intervene at local levels against the prevailing power structures. If the intervention in hegemonies of high-caste landlords, with their bent for archaic cultures and suppressive economies is permissible, decentralisation has to remain guided from above.

(Lieten, 2003:21)

This line of argument prevailed, and a provision to this effect was included in the Directive Principles of State Policy (Article 40) of the Indian Constitution that states:

The state shall take steps to organize village Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government.

(GoI, n.d., Constitution of India, Part IV)

The Balwantrai Mehta Committee was formed in 1957 to make Article 40 operational, and based on the recommendations of this committee, concept of the three-tier *panchayati raj* was introduced with the *Zilla Parishad* at the district level, *Panchayat Samiti* at the block (intermediate) level and the *Gram Panchayat* at the village level. However, since these recommendations were not followed up at the sub-national level by the federal States, the

concept of the *Panchayati Raj Institution* (PRI) gradually lost its relevance in the development discourse in the Indian context. Subsequent attempts to revitalize the PRI was made with the formation of the Ashok Mehta Committee in 1977 and the G.V.K. Rao Committee in 1985. Still the concept had limitations like the lack of clarity in the relationship between the PRI bodies and the development administration, or no specific mechanism to involve the marginalised sections of the society in the PRI system (Singh, 1994).

There were some attempts in States like Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh to make the system work, but the initiatives did not yield results due to defective structure of the PRI bodies, financial crunch and half-hearted policies by the State authorities. The system was reportedly working well in States like Karnataka, Kerala and West Bengal<sup>14</sup> (ibid), though studies by George Mathew (1985) and Gurumurthy (1987) suggested that even in these States, power was being captured by the dominant caste and classes at the cost of the weaker and marginalised sections. The reasons for decline were varied, like the State-level leaders were unwilling to cooperate with the PRI, since they viewed the latter as rivals and felt threatened, inefficient and unqualified officials who were opposed to the system and did not want to be subordinate to elected PRI representatives who had no training on how to make the system work, devolution of inadequate financial resources by the State authorities, etc. It is in this context, that the 73<sup>rd</sup> constitutional amendment was passed in the Indian Parliament in December 1992, and went into effect from April 1993 (Singh, 1994).

This was a major initiative adopted at the national level with the stated aim to revitalize the government at the local level and promote community participation in developmental efforts of the Indian State. This amendment provided constitutional status making it obligatory for all the States to have PRI bodies at the district and sub-district levels, and directed the PRIs to have regular elections to these locally elected bodies, with a five-year term for each *panchayat*. This amendment had the potential for ushering in a new era of democratic decentralisation by strengthening people's institutions at the grassroots. On one hand, it mandated reservation of official posts for women and individuals from two traditionally

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<sup>14</sup> The case of West Bengal as a case of 'successful' participatory governance will be studied in detail in the later chapters of this thesis.

disadvantaged groups (*Dalits* and *Adivasis*) in the Indian social order; on the other hand, it emphasized the decentralisation of the decision-making process so that the plans prepared by the panchayats reflect the needs and aspirations of the local community (Chatterjee and Ghosh, 2003:137). Article 243A made the provision for the *Gram Sabha* at the village level as a forum for community participation. According to Article 243 A, "a gram sabha may exercise such powers and perform such functions at the village level as the legislature of a State may by law provide" (GoI (n.d.)).

To remove the obstacle of financial scarcity, the *panchayat* bodies were empowered to levy and collect appropriate tolls and taxes from the area under their jurisdiction and were also made entitled to receive grant-in-aid from the State funds. A State Finance Commission would be formed every five years to advise the State on the devolution of funds to the panchayats. The State would also devolve to the PRI to power to prepare plans for economic development and social justice for the area under its jurisdiction (Singh, 1994).

### 2.9.3 Emergence of Local Government Institutions in West Bengal

The West Bengal Panchayat Act of 1973 provided the legal framework for establishing the three tier PRI system in West Bengal, based on which, *panchayat* elections were held every 5 years since 1978. However, this Act was actually implemented by the Left Front (LF), an alliance of Left parties that assumed power in the State in 1977. The Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPI(M)) emerged as the most prominent Left party in India in the 1970s. While the pro-Soviet Communist party of India (CPI) and the 'Maoist' Communist Party of India, Marxist-Leninist (CPI(M)L) gradually faded into political insignificance, the CPI(M) gained parliamentary majority in the three Indian States of Kerala, Tripura and West Bengal. The party adopted a more moderate stance over the years as its political orientation underwent a shift from a 'revolutionary' ideology based on 'class confrontations' to a 'reformist' position characterized as a 'developmental and a democratic-socialist ideology' (Kohli, 1983:786). This reformist reorientation of the CPI(M) was based on its emphasis on safeguarding democratic institutions, using state power for facilitating development practices through redistribution, and a strategy to build broad-based political alliances in contrast to the Marxist emphasis on social classes. A consolidation of their rural power base necessitated involving the lower-middle and lower classes in the political process, which was not feasible in the older

institutional arrangements mainly dominated by propertied elites in India. The CPI(M) therefore, strategically restructured the local government institutions (*panchayats*) in West Bengal assigning a crucial supervisory role to their party cadres, and denying direct access to the upper classes into the political arena. The panchayats thus provided the Left party with organisational penetration in rural West Bengal, as well as altered the power structure of these institutions (Kohli, 1983).

In the early years of its rule (1977–1983) the LF government undertook several reforms that led to a notable shift in the power-structures of rural Bengal. Decentralisation of local governance structures was combined with pro-poor reforms like land-redistribution, sharecropping and mass mobilization programmes, that almost overthrew the socially and politically influential old landlord class from its position of power in rural society. This shift came as the successful culmination of a long struggle of the poor and landless peasants led by the Left parties (see Kohli, 1987; Lieten, 1994; Crook and Sverrisson, 2001; Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002; Chatterjee, 2009). The case of West Bengal, thus appears to be aligned with Ambedkar's line of argument upholding the case of an enlightened and developmental state intervening at the local level to counter the prevailing power structures. It also appears to correspond with the claim of Crook and Sverrisson (2001), that ability of the state to provide essential financial, administrative and capacity building support to local governance structures, as well as the political will to execute accompanying programmes for safeguarding the poorest from locally hostile elites are pre-requisites for successful decentralisation mechanisms.

However, scholars like Webster (1992), Echeverri-Gent (1992) and Williams (2001) have also drawn attention to the concerns that may arise if the issue of political will is not questioned initially, since different purposes of promoting decentralisation can lead to completely different outcomes in the long run (see section 2.5). For instance, studies have shown that the panchayats in West Bengal created formal processes for the CPI(M) to gain political control over rural development planning by building patronage networks, that involved distribution of welfare benefits from development programmes controlled by the local government (Williams and Nandigama, 2018). Gaining control of this political space was an extension of the party's mode of operation based on 'democratic centralist' principles, which is an essential component of party discipline, and has been viewed by Kohli (1983:785) in a

positive light. For Kohli, the disagreements and power ambitions of the party do not pose obstacles to coherent policy-making because the party operates on the basis of democratic centralism<sup>15</sup>. However, another study on West Bengal Panchayats conducted between 1996 – 1998 observed that the rigorous control exercised by the CPI(M) in the ‘garb of democratic centralism’ have reduced its elected representatives to ‘nominal centres of power’ (Bhattacharya, 2002:17), that has challenged the democratic spirit of the panchayats in the long run. Nevertheless, the establishment of local government institutions was a key political reform that had a major contribution in the political stability of the Left Front government (1977 – 2011) in West Bengal before it was unseated by the populist Trinamool Congress regime in 2011.

Over the years the LF government also undertook further reforms in the decentralised governance structures of the State with the stated intent to make them more participatory. The West Bengal Panchayat Amendment Act of 1994 made provisions for people’s participation through two forums – the *Gram Sansad* (coterminous with the village level) and the *Gram Sabha*<sup>16</sup> (jurisdiction of the *Gram Panchayat* area covering 10-12 villages) (Chatterjee and Ghosh, 2003). An amendment to the Panchayat Act in 2003 provided for the *Gram Unnayan Samity* (Village Development Committee) (Bandopadhyay, 2003). Further initiatives on rural decentralisation were launched in 2005 and 2010 with fund support from DFID-UK and the World Bank respectively. The LF government lost power in 2011, but the PRI structures had already taken firm roots in the State, making the new TMC government continue with the structures as well as the World Bank project for ‘Institutional Strengthening of Gram Panchayats’ (ISGP).

In its empirical chapters, this thesis will investigate the motives driving the decentralisation initiatives rolled-out across both the political regimes in West Bengal, and the effects of the policy prescriptions of the global funding agencies in shaping the participatory agenda of the State. This enquiry will raise important theoretical questions regarding the vision held by

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<sup>15</sup> In CPI(M)’s Party Constitution, democratic centralism “means centralised leadership based on inner party democracy and democracy under the guidelines of centralised leadership” (CPI(M), 1989: pp.6-7).

<sup>16</sup> The constitutional provision of the *Gram Sabha* is the *Gram Sansad* in West Bengal (Chatterjee and Ghosh, 2003).

state-elites for a state-led transformational change in governance in the global south, and its interface with the global powers.

## **2.10 Conclusion**

The differential nature of the state, and the reasons why the state cannot be seen in terms of a single policy-making entity has been explained at the outset in section 2.2 of this chapter. As the power of the modern state is understood in terms of its capacity to penetrate the civil society, this section outlined the conceptual framework through which this thesis looks at a capacitated state. In this framework, the capacitated state is one with the vision of bringing about a state-led structural change in the long run, both by possessing technological capacities, as well as the capacity to penetrate in the daily lives of its citizens, by forging closer state-society relations. This involves the state-elites providing a vision for transformational change in governance in the future, as well as building transformative capacities within the state-institutions, for removing the unfreedoms of the disadvantaged sections of the society, and confronting the organised, existing power-structures on their behalf in the process.

A crucial pre-requisite for building such transformative state capacity is the motivation and values of the state-elites responsible for formulating strategies for state reform, and putting appropriate policies in place. Understanding these motivations is important in order to critically evaluate how the programme of state reform is looking at 'development'. Creation of a vision of transformational change depends considerably on the diverse frames through which developmental challenges are perceived by the policy-makers, as well as the causes they ascribe to the process of under-development. Section 2.3 therefore explored the structural power-relations underpinning the concepts of 'under-development', 'participation' and 'empowerment' and examined the deeper causal processes through which 'effective participation' can facilitate empowerment of the most under-developed and marginalised sections of society. This section concluded that if 'under-development' is envisioned by the policy-makers in more holistic terms of economic, as well as social, political and human development indicators, it becomes imperative on the twenty-first century transformative state to create participatory spaces for the masses, and putting in place appropriate participatory strategies to extend capability-enhancing opportunities to the oppressed. These

participatory strategies originate from an understanding that shared experiences, access to information and active participation in joint planning exercises lead to awareness building and development of critical consciousness among the powerless groups who otherwise tend to internalise the dominant ideologies of the existing power holders. The knowledge, skills, experiences and political capabilities gained through such strategies can empower them to recognise and exercise their agency in claiming their civil and political rights as citizens and also call the institutions to account.

Basic principles and specific designs of the institutional arrangements that could help to advance democratic strategies of substantive participation and empowerment of the citizens have been dealt with at length in section 2.4. Fung and Wright's (2003) notion of 'empowered participatory governance' or Tornquist's (2009) proposition to establish a strategic connection between the two approaches of representation, could have the potential to extend channels to the excluded and voiceless sections, to meaningfully engage with the local state and bargain for their citizenship rights. From all these discussions, decentralised governance structures of the state emerge as that crucial terrain that can create that political space, by widening the institutional surface area of the state, increasing the points of contact between the state and ordinary citizens, and extending opportunities for 'effective' people's participation.

However, other than this view of 'effective participation' as a route to people's empowerment, decentralised governance structures have also been promoted by global funding agencies for instrumental purposes of enhancing economic efficiency and efficacy of the state. Critics have warned that 'decentralisation' can also lead to inadvertent reinforcement of local inequalities and capture of the socio-economic resources by local elites. Section 2.5 looks at all these different approaches to decentralisation, as well as the politics of participation through decentralisation, that involves the intentions of the key actors, and the strategies applied by them for promoting or resisting participatory institutions. Since this involves the power of the state to formulate and execute policies, Section 2.6 explored in further detail the political dimensions and the ideological positions of state-wide parties on decentralisation.

Since 'decentralisation' was initially conceived as an integral part of the 'good governance' agenda of the global funding agencies, section 2.7 explores the debates surrounding the 'good governance' agenda promoted by the World Bank and the Department for International Development (DFID)-UK, to understand the policy frames of these donor agencies with regard to the concept of state reform and scope for people's participation. The 'good governance' agenda of the World Bank, was mostly seen as an instrument to open up avenues for introducing neo-liberal reforms of market-liberalisation and privatization in the recipient countries in exchange for financial assistance, where the role of the state would only be limited to economic management, regulation and supervision of financial markets as a catalyst. This discourse adopted a cautious and instrumentalist approach on the issue of decentralisation and people's participation, as a route to consensus building among the people, mostly viewed as economic agents or passive users of services. However, brief references to political processes like promoting opportunity, facilitating empowerment, and enhancing security have surfaced at times, reflecting a tension between the economic and political dimensions, and the presence of internal debates within the Bank's 'good governance' discourse.

The DFID discourse on the other hand, indicates a deeper understanding of the socio-political processes leading to deprivation and under-development, though this too sometimes reflects a tension by falling back on typical World Bank tenets of poverty reduction through globalisation and economic management time and again. However, the political dimension of 'governance' dominates in the DFID discourse of 'good governance', that describes 'governance' as the way countries and societies manage their affairs politically and the way power and authority are exercised. This discourse looks at ways of building a more inclusive government, and also highlights the benefits that could accrue to both the state and society through active participation of its citizens in the reforms of basic public service delivery mechanisms. Emphasizing the 'citizenship' discourse, 'good governance' agenda promoted by the DFID adopts a broader meaning with a vision to build capacities of the people to organize and take control of their own affairs, and is closer to the idea of 'building effective state-society linkage' being forwarded in this thesis.

Section 2.7 also takes up the theme of country-ownership as a more insidious and subtle form of donor power with an objective to disseminate a hegemonic discourse and long-term

sustainability of donor policies. Such power works through knowledge and discursive practices, and have the ability to shape political agendas or even people's perceptions, in ways that might even contradict their own interests. Situating this in the contemporary contexts of development aid, this section infers that if the elites and the bureaucracy in the developing countries come to internalise the neo-liberal values of global governance, the poor in the recipient countries are prevented from realising their 'real' interests due to the hegemonic ideology of neo-liberalism. Aid-partnerships are usually combined with programmes for institution and capacity building, involving transfer of technical expertise and procedures. Scholars have therefore warned about the necessity to recognise these policy instruments as political interventions in the recipient countries.

In continuation of this theme, section 2.8 tries to understand how the policy frames of the donor agencies are transferred through their policy-prescriptions and are used as strategic devices to change the institutional values in recipient country contexts. Institutions have been viewed as reflections of the surrounding socio-political values, while institutionalisation is a dynamic process involving constant adjustment to new value systems introduced by external actors with different goals and different values. Policy instruments, representing particular policy frames of donor agencies, are the devices through which processes of Institutionalisation are operationalised. Considered as a form of power to produce specific effects, these instruments are far from neutral and are key to governance mechanisms, that determine the behaviour of social actors and bring about a shift in the balance of power in the institution, more so if the state-elites in the recipient countries share the same set of values with the donor agencies.

All the issues raised in the earlier sections of this chapter on the nature of a transformative state, necessity for more collaborative state-society relations, role of decentralised governance structures, its association with the politics of participation, and the role of the state-elites in creating policies for all of the above – have been placed against the broader country context of India and the specific context of the Indian State of West Bengal in section 2.9. The debates among the state-elites in post-independence India on incorporating the provision for decentralised governance structures in the Indian Constitution, demonstrates the differentiated nature of the state as well as the significance of having a vision for transformational change in governance. Manifestation of this vision in different Indian States

confirmed that the motivations and capacity for undertaking state reforms were varied at the sub-national level. In West Bengal, the implementation of the constitutional provision was undertaken as part of a bigger political project within a leftist-framework, the details of which will be taken up in the empirical chapters of this thesis.

In the opening decade of the twenty-first century, the Panchayat and Rural Development Department (PRDD) of the Govt. of West Bengal launched successive reform initiatives through decentralised governance institutions, some of which were undertaken with financial assistance from international donor agencies like the DFID-UK and the World Bank. Drawing on Mercer (2003), it can be argued that examining the factors playing out on the socio-political processes of developing country contexts, along with their linkages with the discourses operating at the global levels is important, in order to understand the complexities of power-relations at multiple levels. Hence, while tracing the successive decentralisation initiatives undertaken in West Bengal (since 2000 till date), this research study tries to understand the factors operating at the local, national and global levels, that shape the opportunities for effective community participation in local governance structures across different political regimes. This has been done by placing the two externally aided projects on rural decentralisation against the changing political backdrop of West Bengal, to find out in what way did the policy prescriptions of these projects shape the participatory agenda in the State. Drawing together the different issues discussed in this chapter, this research will examine the factors which shape opportunities for effective people's participation, and also try to identify the conditions, possibilities and limitations for forging more effective state-society linkages.

## **3 Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter on Methodology opens by stating the research aim and the research questions guiding this thesis. Section 3.3 introduces the research design for this study, and consequently discusses the Interpretive strategy of case-study analysis, based on the Indian State of West Bengal as the case study. Section 3.4 examines the qualitative research methods adopted for this study. In the following sections and subsections, I have discussed about the significance of diverse research practices that have informed this thesis, like conducting elite-interviews, negotiating with institutional gate-keepers for gaining access to the field, importance of reflective research and trust-building exercises at various levels of interaction. Section 3.6 is about the research contexts, that includes justification for selecting of Bankura district in West Bengal as the site of conducting micro-level field-research for this study, and on the specific research contexts of 5 Village Councils in Bankura as sub-case studies. Section 3.7 explains how the collected data was organised and analysed to arrive at the conclusions for this research followed by a brief section on the limitations of this methodological approach. The crucial Section of 3.9 elucidates how I negotiated my positionality while conducting this research, before ending with the conclusion.

### **3.2 Research Aim and Research Questions**

Drawing on the issues raised in Chapter 2, this research study aims to i) understand the factors which shape the opportunities for 'effective' people's participation in local governance structures under different political regimes, and ii) identify the conditions, possibilities and limitations for forging more effective state-society linkages.

The following research questions have been identified to conduct the investigation for this research:

- i. Who has set the agendas for the successive waves of 'people's participation' in West Bengal at global, national and local levels? What were the motives behind setting these agendas?

- ii. How (in turn) is the 'participatory agenda' shaped by the changing political conditions in West Bengal?
- iii. What were the effects of the 'participatory agenda' and the accompanying policy prescriptions on the decentralised governance structures in West Bengal?

### **3.3 Research Design**

This research was conducted through the Interpretive strategy of case-study analysis, which is generally supported by evidence based on people's perceptions, attitudes or priorities about an issue (Kanbur, 2005), as well as unveiling the multiple meanings and ambiguities in policy discourses (Yanow, 2007). Since my research questions seek to understand in what way the changing political regimes as well as the policy prescriptions of the external funding agencies shaped the participatory agenda in West Bengal, a case study strategy is the most appropriate methodological choice which is said to provide major insights about the study of human affairs through context-dependent knowledge based on concrete experiences and a more nuanced view of reality (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2009).

The basic case study usually entails the detailed and intensive analysis of a single case which is why one of the standard criticisms of the case study is that findings deriving from it cannot be generalized. But it can be argued that the principal aim of a case study is to generate an intensive examination of a case, which then can be used to engage in theoretical analysis and theoretical understanding of a specific phenomenon, and thus contribute to scholarship (Bryman, 2012). Flyvbjerg (2006) though, has observed, that strategic selection of a case contributes to a great extent to the process of knowledge accumulation, which is the principal aim of any research. The case of the Indian State of West Bengal has been selected as such a strategic case.

As mentioned earlier in Chapter 2, the *Panchayati Raj* institution (PRI) in West Bengal has been held as one of the instances of 'successful' participatory governance driven by a long history of social and political activism by an alliance of Leftist political parties, that lost power to a right-wing populist party after a rule of 34 years. This makes the case of local governance structures in West Bengal an ideal case that encourages the study, interpretation and analysis of the deeper causal processes underpinning and shaping the participatory agenda across

different political regimes. The case of West Bengal also raises interesting theoretical questions about how politics and macro-level policy interact to explain the processes by which participatory initiatives play out in practice.

### **3.4 Research Methods**

Mansuri and Rao (2013) observed in their study that processes are comprehended better with the help of qualitative tools. Since this research mainly studied the socio-political processes in West Bengal, it was mostly based on qualitative research methods that are said to provide better insights to situation-specific causal processes (Kanbur, 2005). I tapped various sources of information to answer the research questions for this study.

Analysis was done of basic quantitative (secondary) data on literacy and population profile for West Bengal and the district of Bankura (accessed from the website of Census 2011, GoI); data on poverty estimates and population lying below the poverty line for West Bengal (from the website of the Planning Commission, GoI); and data on Parliamentary, Assembly and Panchayat elections (from the Election Commission of India and the State Election Commission, GoWB). Being an ex-employee of the Panchayat department enabled my access to key official documents and reports of the Govt. Of India, Govt. Of West Bengal and donor organisations (DFID and World Bank) and Government Orders on local-governance structures which were used for analysing the discourse for policy-making. A bi-lingual competence and situated study during the field-work facilitated archival research, and my close reading and interpretation of grey literature like local news-papers, election manifestos and internal documents of political parties in West Bengal, leading to the discovery of henceforth unexplored writings by Leftist ideologues like Satyabrata Sen, which have not been used by other researchers till date.

To understand how the policies related to rural decentralisation were put in place in the State of West Bengal, semi-structured interviews were conducted of key resource persons and members of staff who designed the SRD and ISGP projects and had oversight of these projects during their implementation. These interviews also helped me appreciate the conditions under which negotiations with the foreign funding agencies took place. Interviews with people of such elite category also included other influential state-level bureaucrats

(Departmental Secretaries), politicians (ex-Minister), academics, journalists and NGO activists. As explained further below, I was able to have full and open discussions with these experts because of my prior role as a development professional within the Panchayat Department for a considerable length of time and this has allowed the thesis to uncover intricate processes playing out in the realm of policy-making in the State.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with politicians from ruling as well as opposition parties at different levels to gauge the political dynamics involved. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with district and sub-district level (in-service or retired) bureaucrats (e.g. District Panchayat and Rural Development Officers, Block Development Officers), *Gram Panchayat* (Village Council) functionaries as well as project personnel (State, district and field levels) from SRD and ISGP projects to gauge the institutional processes involved. Interviews with the intermediate level functionaries like Block Development Officers (BDO) and Joint BDOs (representing the mid-level bureaucracy) as well as members of the block-level council (the *Panchayat Samity*) and the chairs of its standing committees<sup>17</sup> (representing the intermediate tier of the PRI structure) facilitated my understanding about the existing gaps in the vertical linkage of the PRI system in West Bengal.

Five Gram Panchayats (GP) were finally selected as my sub-case studies, from which the GP level functionaries (employees as well as people's representatives) were selected as interviewees at the lowest unit of the Panchayati Raj Institution. The criteria for the selection of the GPs were as follows:

- ✓ The GPs should have been covered by both the DFID-UK funded Strengthening Rural Decentralisation (SRD) project and the World Bank funded Institutional Strengthening of Gram Panchayats (ISGP) project between 2005 – 2016
- ✓ The GPs should have either the GP *Prodhan* (Chairperson) or a vocal elected representative serving for more than one term (5 years) or one or more key GP employees with an institutional memory of both the projects

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<sup>17</sup> The Bengali term is *Karmadhyakshas*: there are 10 standing committees at a Block level.

- ✓ The political composition of the GPs should have a balance of both the current ruling party (TMC) and the current opposition party (CPI(M)) in the State since this research also looks at the policy-change on local governance across political regimes.

To obtain data which would allow comparisons to be made, the initial plan was to select two GPs where political authorities have remained same (e.g. CPI(M) to CPI(M) or TMC to TMC) and two more where political authorities have changed (e.g. CPI(M) to TMC or TMC to CPI(M)) over the same time period. The plan was not to do a 2/2 comparison between the CPI(M) and the TMC controlled Gram Panchayats, but to hear voices from a full-range of political conditions and to look for differences across political regimes when I present this work later. However, all these categories could not be followed very strictly in the GPs in which I finally conducted my field research, particularly in cases with good reasons for alternatives. Thus, one extra GP was selected for practical considerations like its experienced staff profile and favourable political dynamics. The process of finalising the GPs have been discussed in detail in section 3.6 of this chapter.

A key set of respondents (Pradhan / Ex-Pradhan, GP members GP officials, etc.) were interviewed in these 5 GPs, and focus group discussions were also conducted with the members / ex-members of the *Gram Unnayan Samity* (Village Development Committee / GUS) representing the village community within the jurisdiction of the same GPs. This helped me to understand people's perception on state responsiveness and scope for people's participation at different levels of interaction. Since the GUS led the participatory planning processes involving the villagers, the GUS members were taken as a reasonable proxy for the common people<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, considering the politically sensitive situation in the State<sup>19</sup>, approaching people through their official roles and categories was deemed to be safer.

During my field-work in India, I had spoken to **66** respondents, out of whom **17** were elite-interviewees (politicians or bureaucrats who are state-level policy-makers, influential academicians, activists and media persons), **12** were mid-level (district / block) bureaucrats

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<sup>18</sup> GUS members are 'common people' or community members, but at the same time more-than-normally active, engaged and (sometimes as a result of this) better informed about local government operation

<sup>19</sup> Since the Left Front had lost power in 2011 after 34 years of uninterrupted rule, the State has been a witness to intense political clashes between the LF and the current ruling party Trinamool Congress (TMC).

or politicians and **37** were either people's representatives or officials at the village-councils or community-representatives at the grassroots level.

Another method I used was documenting my daily lived experiences through my field-notes, which is sometimes called 'observant participation' (Campbell and Lassiter, 2015) in recent times, that follows from the concept of Tedlock's (1991) 'narrative ethnography'. Such observant participation was resorted to throughout the period of my field-work, but more intensively during my stay in Bankura, for in-depth understanding of the issues related to donor conditionality, as well as day-to-day practices at the GP level. This method generates a specific kind of field-based knowledge based on impressions, observations and reflections based on daily field-notes, that provide an intimate, personal and 'on the ground view' (Campbell and Lassiter, 2015 : 56) of events:

In the observation of participation, ... ethnographers use their everyday social skills in simultaneously experiencing and observing their own and other's interactions within various settings.

(Barbara Tedlock, 1992, quoted in Campbell & Lassiter, 2015:64)

Through 'observant participation', the researcher records both sensory and intellectual perceptions as well as her reflections on the unfolding field-experience via field-notes. According to scholars (Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, 1995), a deep immersion of the researcher in the world of the research-site strengthens her sense of place, and enables her to write detailed, context-sensitive, and locally-informed field-notes as 'thick description', which are always mediated by history, experience and perspective. I maintained field-notes by documenting daily field-narratives in detail that were later expanded for interpretation and analysis

Placing such lived experiences at the centre of this method generates opportunities for deeper understanding by seeking to be more honest and open about the lens rather than assuming authoritative positions of 'objectivity'. Campbell and Lassiter (2015) think that such a position partly resolves the inherent tensions between 'participation' as a form of close, intimate and engaged immersion and 'observation' as active documentation in a distanced

and separated mode. Following Tedlock (1991), I believe in embracing the full range of my experiences and subjectivity rather than discarding them in the name of ‘objectivity’.

I keenly observed the ambience, and all the events taking place in the selected GPs, including interpersonal relationships between the elected representatives and the GP employees as well as the interactions between the GP functionaries and the common masses frequenting the GP. While I occupied a corner of the GP office studying the official plan and budget documents, accounting system and monitoring mechanism of the GPs in detail (to comprehend the changing institutional processes within these local governance structures), I also kept my senses alert towards how the activities within the GPs were being carried out on a day-to-day basis, how the GP functionaries dealt with the public demands as well as sudden exigencies.

Sl. No.	Research Method	Source of data
1.	Document analysis	Official documents and reports from the Gol, GoWB, PRDD, SRD and ISGP projects, political documents in the form of election manifestos, journal articles, news-reports and editorial features from local dailies (both in Bengali and English).
2.	Analysis of basic quantitative data	Secondary data available in public domain, e.g. websites of the Planning Commission of India, Election Commission of India, Census 2011, Gol.
3.	Semi structured interviews	Elite interviews involving state level policy-makers, interviews of key informants (politicians and bureaucrats) at district / block / GP level
4.	Focus Group Discussion	With <i>ex-Gram Unnayan Samity</i> members as community representatives.
5.	Observant Participation	Recording day-to-day lived experiences through narrative style field notes of the 5 Gram Panchayats selected as sub-case studies.

### **3.5 Reflections on Research Practice**

The main purpose of this section is to reflect on how my conduct as a researcher in different circumstances allowed me to make the most of the opportunities for data collection outlined in table 3.1.

#### **3.5.1 Conducting elite interviews**

The preparatory activities for my field work started immediately after receiving the approval for my ethics application. For this research, most government bureaucrats and the project-personnel had to be approached through the formal route, that is, through the Department of Panchayat and Rural Development (PRDD)<sup>20</sup>, Govt. Of West Bengal (GoWB). As a first step, my PhD Supervisor issued a letter addressing the Principal Secretary of PRDD as well as the Project Directors / Managers of the projects – with a brief overview of the research and introducing me as the lead researcher, to facilitate my access to the participants as well as the local government units in West Bengal. Secondly, I had planned to recruit some of the participants purposively (e.g. those specifically involved in the policymaking and implementation of rural decentralisation projects) in order to seek answers to the relevant research questions, and then use the snowballing technique for participants who cannot be contacted in advance. Accordingly, e-mails (along with the Project Information Sheet) were sent to four senior bureaucrats (known to me earlier) of the GoWB, explaining my current status as a PhD student in the UK, briefly introducing my research topic and seeking their advice and cooperation during my field-work in India. Three of them responded positively, and I contacted them within a few days of arriving in India for my fieldwork commencing in September 2016.

The interviews of these four top-level policy makers were my first ventures into the domain of elite-interviews, the experiences of which were really beneficial in shaping my forthcoming field-work, in terms of framing questions on the basis of background research for each interview. According to Mason (2002), social realities are given meanings through people's perception and interpretation of their experiences, and the interview method also relies

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<sup>20</sup> The PRDD is also referred to as the Panchayat Ministry

considerably on the capacities of the interviewees to remember, conceptualize, interact and verbalize. Background research was thus important so that situated knowledge could be produced through relevant contexts, and a common understanding of the social reality could be created through effective interactions between the researcher and the interviewees (ibid).

With each of these bureaucrats, I had an informal meeting first in which I explained my research project, fixed an appointment for formal interviews, and sent them the consent form via e-mail. Over the next few days, I prepared myself for these formal interviews by going through their CV, in order to ask specific, contextual questions relevant to the work experiences of each individual. Two of them are still in service and two of them were retired civil servants. Those who are in service met me in their offices for the formal interview, and the ones who've retired preferred to have the interview in the comfort of their homes. I purchased a small voice recorder for recording these interviews, and was fortunate that none of my respondents objected to the recording, though I made it a point to always seek formal permission of all my respondents to record their interviews or FGDs.

Since all these four interviewees were bureaucrats who are either serving or had served in senior positions in the GoWB as top-level policy makers of the State (ex-Principal Secretary, Special Secretary, Joint Secretary of the PRDD), these interview sessions had been enormously enriching and gave me an overview of the policy outlines in the State. Insights gained from these interviews were helpful in selection of Bankura district as the ideal site for conducting the fieldwork. They were also the starting point for the 'snowballing' technique for further elite interviews, since they referred me to other prominent persons at the State-level – politicians, bureaucrats, journalists and NGO activists. A brief description of some of the other research participants in the 'elite interviewee' category is given below, and an exhaustive list of interviewees can be found in Appendix One.

The senior bureaucrat now deputed as a Special Officer in the 4<sup>th</sup> State Finance Commission was also associated with the State Institute for Panchayats and Rural Development (SIPRD)<sup>21</sup> as a faculty member. In his initial days as a junior bureaucrat, he was posted as a Block Development Officer in Birbhum, where he observed the activities of the GUS from close

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<sup>21</sup> SIPRD is the key institution for training both civil servants and elected members on the operation of the panchayat system in West Bengal

quarters. Another senior state level bureaucrat I interviewed for my research earlier served in different capacities (as Block Development Officer, Sub-Divisional Development Officer, Additional District Magistrate, Project Director – District Rural Development Cell) in different districts like Birbhum, Bankura, Purulia, Jalpaiguri and Murshidabad. He had wide exposure to the different levels of the PRI system and had developed a passion for rural development activities over the course of time.

The ex-Panchayat Commissioner, who was in office at the Panchayat Ministry when the GUS was conceived and provided for by the amendment to the Panchayat Act was another elite interviewee for my research. He was now retired and worked in the capacity of a consultant to *Lok Kalyan Parishad (LKP)*, a non-profit organisation working on livelihood opportunities of the rural poor, with an intensive focus on a grassroots level participatory forum like the GUS. I also met another advisor of the LKP, an octogenarian overflowing with rich grassroots experiences. He joined the civil service in the early days of his career, retired as a banker and plunged full-time into community work after retirement.

I sought the help about the political front of my research from an old acquaintance, a very well-read leftist activist and a member of the CPI(M) party for the past few decades who mainly operated at the grassroots. This reference helped me to gain easy access at the CPI(M) library located in Alimuddin Street, Kolkata, which was a major part of my archival research. Here, I could take a look at the election manifestos of the Left as well as the articles published in '*Ganashakti*' and '*Desh-Hitaishi*', the CPI(M)'s Bengali language magazines, which are its main mechanisms for publicising and debating ideas within the party. This reference also helped to fix a crucial appointment for an interview with the ex-Minister-in-charge of PRDD and the current Secretary of the State Unit of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), who was the key figure in initiating and upscaling of the participatory experiments in the State.

I met a senior editor of the leading vernacular daily *Anandabazar Patrika* whose PhD was on the interface of the state and the people in Gram Sansad meetings. As a journalist, she regularly interacted with PRI bodies at different levels for collecting materials on 'development' related articles and she was the principal research investigator in a DFID-India commissioned study on the *Gram Unnayan Samity (GUS)* in 2010.

I had an interesting interaction with a young lecturer in Anthropology, who has just submitted his PhD thesis on the issue of political change in West Bengal. The time-frame for his field-work was 2008 to 2013 – the period of political transition at the grassroots – coincided with a crucial part of my research. Therefore, this exchange of ideas and insights, and the anecdotes from his field-work were very helpful in strengthening my understanding about the changing political dynamics of the State.

Finally, I met two very senior academics one of whom was one of the main think-tanks of the erstwhile Left Front regime. He allowed me to record his interview but repeatedly asked me to keep his name confidential. The other senior academic is an advisor to the regime in power at present, who acts as members of several policy-making bodies of the current government.

While I was still in Kolkata, the State head-quarters of West Bengal, I got in touch with some of my ex-colleagues who had been part of both the DFID-funded Strengthening Rural Decentralisation (SRD) programme and the World Bank funded ISGP project in various capacities. I explained my research project over phone and fixed meetings with them as interviewees for the category of project personnel.

### **3.5.2 Negotiating gatekeepers**

A small group of managers or administrators within any organisation are usually vested with the institutional authority to grant or deny approval for research endeavours or access to data involving activities and functionaries of the institution. This group can be called the 'gatekeepers' who play a crucial role in deciding the fate of the research. Approval of gatekeepers can be obtained either through manipulation or covert strategies, or through official and consensual negotiation with the gatekeeper (Broadhead & Rist, 1976). Having been part of the bureaucratic system in West Bengal for over a decade, I was well aware of the specific nodes within this top-down administrative machinery that could block my access to field level data as gate-keepers at various levels, and I decided to gain access through official and consensual negotiations with them. Having served in the ISGP project myself, I also knew that the field-level project personnel of ISGP had thorough knowledge about the ongoing dynamics of the local governance units in India and hence the inputs of the Bankura ISGP team would be crucial for the site selection of my field-work as well as selection of

interviewees at the GP level. Accordingly, I decided to start negotiating with the gatekeepers at the state level by meeting the Project Manager of ISGP, (a senior civil servant) in Kolkata beforehand, and obtained his assurance of cooperation for my research, and his instruction to this effect to the project personnel in ISGP, Bankura.

DRI (codename), District Coordinator, ISGP-Bankura became my contact person during my field-research at the district level, and in due course, it was revealed that choosing DRI as the contact person was a key decision for my field-research. Having started his career as a GP Proddhan and an active political worker of the CPI(M), and later having served in both SRD and ISGP projects in administrative capacity across 4 different districts of West Bengal, DRI had vast experience and understanding both as an elected representative as well as part of the bureaucratic machinery in the State. My field-research in Bankura immensely benefitted from his valuable insights on the dynamics of local governance structures at the grassroots as well as his negotiating skills both with the bureaucrats and the local political persons. For instance, during my initial 2-day visit to Bankura, DRI introduced me to the District level bureaucrats - District Magistrate (DM), Addl. District Magistrate (ADM), District Panchayat and Rural Development Officer (DPRDO), who received me cordially, but also asked for a letter of introduction from the state-level officials of the Panchayat Ministry, before allowing me access to the *Gram Panchayats* (GP / Village Councils) in Bankura. He also organised an informal meeting of his team members with me at the ISGP project office where I explained the selection criteria of GPs for my field-work, so that the site-selection is as accurate as possible for the purpose of this research. DRI also arranged my accommodation and vehicle for the few months of my field-research, along with a trusted driver who was well acquainted with the entire district, including its remotest corners. All these were minute details that facilitated my field-work.

The much-needed letter of introduction from the Panchayat Ministry was given to me by a senior bureaucrat of PRDD, who had been my supervisor for 5 years. The main concern of the institutional gate-keepers are reciprocity which implies they try to understand in what way the research benefits the institution as a whole (Broadhead & Rist, 1976), and my case was not made an exception to this rule. This was a tricky negotiation, (which will be discussed in further detail in the section on 'positionality'), but being convinced by my answers, he finally gave me a detailed letter of authorization, mentioning that this research will be a matter of

‘prestige’ for the concerned department, and that the district authorities should extend their cooperation to facilitate this research.

Consequently, the DPRDO<sup>22</sup> Bankura assured the cooperation of his entire district level team to support my field-research, and my field-work in Bankura commenced with an introduction to the concerned block officials in a district level meeting convened by the DPRDO. In this meeting, I introduced myself, explained the purpose of my research to the officials present and answered their queries. The DPRDO also issued a formal letter to the concerned Block Development Officers and GP *Prodhans* seeking their cooperation for my research. These negotiating and trust-building exercises during the preparatory phase were extremely helpful to gain access to the local governance structures, which were the fulcrum of my research.

### 3.5.3 Observations, Reflections, Learnings

Mason (1996) defines reflexivity in research as the state where the researcher constantly reflects on her role in the entire process of undertaking the research, carefully scrutinizing her actions and reflecting on the possible interpretations and consequences of these actions. Guillemin & Heggen, (2009) think such reflexivity is important to ensure methodological rigour as well as ethical rigour of the research. These tenets on reflexivity were important during interim time periods during which some other activities played a supplementary role to help me develop insights facilitating the process of data analysis at a later stage of my thesis.

For instance, most government offices were closed for almost two weeks during a spate of religious festivals in the State. I used this break to explore literature dealing with the past and present political context of West Bengal mostly through newspaper articles (both English and local Bengali newspapers) commenting on the present ruling regime. At the same time, I was keenly taking in all that was happening in the State and the city through the lens of the media, and trying to understand the context from a researcher’s perspective. I could sense a distinct difference in these religious celebrations compared to the past when I was a resident of this

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<sup>22</sup> District Panchayat and Rural Development Officer is a district level bureaucrat who controls all the administrative functions and fund allocation of the panchayats within the district.

city. During the left-regime, the government was only responsible for maintaining law and order in the public sphere and was never actively involved in religious festivals. The current government on the other hand, seemed to actively use the religious symbols through direct involvement of government funds in this carnival. This sent out a message to the electorate that the present ruling regime is much more sensitive about the cultural sentiments of the masses, something that was neglected so long under the influence of a foreign (Marxist) ideology. This keen observation of the contemporary events facilitated my understanding about the populist nature of the current political regime to a large extent as will be reflected in chapter 6 of this thesis.

During this break, I also looked up the well-maintained archives of the Communist Party of India (CPI(M)), to explore articles in magazines, election manifestos and party letters published by the CPI(M) since 1978. However, I was denied an access to the party letters, which were meant exclusively for the party members. This denial (in spite of repeated requests to the librarian) reinforced my perception about the lack of transparency in the regimented party structure of the CPI(M), which I have discussed in detail in chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis.

In between my various visits to Bankura, I attended a two-days State-level workshop organised by the Panchayat Ministry on receiving a formal invitation from them. This workshop helped me to gain insights on the current dynamics of the Ministry as I observed very interesting interactions between the officials operating at different levels within the PRDD, specifically those who have served in the externally funded projects on rural decentralisation. Since this was a residential workshop, I gathered information from my interactions with the participants of the workshop during lunch time and after dinner walks. Several participants were my ex-colleagues who opened up spontaneously about their frustrations and emotions during our candid discussions on the state of affairs in West Bengal. I was also introduced to people who could be probable respondents for my research in near future. These were crucial takeaways that helped shape my thought processes during the data-analysis phase of my thesis.

#### 3.5.4 Rapport-building and Trust-building Exercises

Rapport building and developing good relationship between the researcher and the research participants have been accorded supreme importance for qualitative research, particularly for methods like semi-structured interviews and participant observation (see Whyte 1984; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Building trust and mutual responsiveness with the research participant gives access to rich and insightful data to the researcher through more effective communication, while a lack of trust and rapport between the two sides gives rise to scepticism and suspicion, which could jeopardize the process and invalidate research data (Molden, 2011; Youell & Youell, 2011; Bartkowiak, 2012). However, the researcher is required to maintain a balance between developing rich relationships with participants while maintaining distance out of respect for participants' privacy or sensitive issues as a part of maintaining research ethics (Løgstrup, 1997; Gordon, 2005).

My rapport-building and trust-building exercises in the selected GPs at Bankura commenced with familiarizing myself with the context in each of these GPs. Being somewhat familiar with the cultural values and norms of these areas, I was careful about my appearance (sticking to traditional Indian attires) as well as my language by consciously avoiding English words while speaking. I tried to visit each of these GPs once every week for two months, in order to maintain visibility and maintain contact with the GP officials or the Proadhan consistently, as a part of the trust-building exercise. Rather than collecting data during the initial meetings, I tried to be acquainted with the employees and representatives of the GPs and engaged in simple conversation without using any jargon or technical language while explaining the purpose of my research to them. I firmly believed it was a good idea to familiarize the research participants with the data collection process in which they are expected to participate, so that they do not become nervous and clueless during the actual exercise (Leach, 2005; Elliott and Martin, 2013).

From my second visits in all the selected GPs, I initiated an informal discussion about how the planning process and the documentation of the annual GP plans have undergone a change over the last 10 financial years, which was familiar terrain for the GP employees as well as some of the elected members. This was usually in the form of a group discussion, that helped me to understand the inner dynamics of the GP and also helped me to gauge the level of

knowledge and expertise of the GP officials, without making my purpose too obvious to them. Being a mid-level professional in the Panchayat and Rural Development Department (PRDD, GoWB) in my pre-research days, I had to be doubly cautious to avoid any kind of authoritative demeanour, with a firm belief that non-verbal communication pattern and body language are also very important in gradual build-up of this mutual trust. All through my field-work, I worked deliberately on such non-verbal patterns like maintaining eye-contact, being attentive to the research participant and active listening through verbal cues (Leach, 2005; Elliott and Martin, 2013).

### 3.5.5 Informed Consent

The issue of obtaining informed consent from the participants was an integral part of maintaining the ethics and integrity of my research. A standardized consent form was prepared for this purpose, that was e-mailed beforehand to some participants who had access to computers (mostly bureaucrats or other elite interviewees), or were signed by some in person before or after the interview. However, several interviews and focus group discussions (FGD) were held in remote, rural areas that did not have access to computers, and many of them also had a language barrier. For the benefit of this group, the Project Information Sheet was translated into Bengali and the FGDs were also conducted in Bengali. Being conversant on both Bengali and English, I was easily able to transcribe the interviews and the FGDs from the audio-recordings and later translate the same into English.

Many of these participants were from poorer socio-economic groups within rural Bengal who were contacted with the help of the functionaries from the GPs selected as sub-case-studies. Approaching this participant group was absolutely essential in order to understand the effects of the participatory agendas and the accompanying policy prescriptions on the marginalised sections of the community, i.e. how the scope of their participation in the decision-making processes of the decentralised governance structures (Gram Panchayats) in West Bengal has been shaped over time. These participants cannot be said to be particularly 'vulnerable' though, in that they were able to exercise unfettered informed consent.

At the beginning of each interview, I used to briefly discuss my research topic and what consent entails before giving a consent form to obtain informed consent for the interview.

However, if the interviewee was not comfortable with the idea of the consent form, verbal consent was sought for audio-recording of the interview. For the FGD sessions, the translated Project Information Sheet (in Bengali) was distributed to the participants in advance. Considering the politically sensitive situation of the State, many of them did not agree to give their consent in writing. In such instances, I gave a verbal introduction at the outset of the session explaining the research purposes and mentioning that the entire session would be recorded, in which, verbal consent would be obtained for participation as well as for the recording of the FGDs.

Since this research is looking at the factors that shaped opportunities for people's participation in grassroots level governance structures across two different political regimes, the questions / discussions that were somewhat politically sensitive could not be avoided in order to fulfil the principal research aim. This could potentially be an impediment in securing consent from the participants, if they had felt insecure about their own safety. But since most of these interviews or FGDs were held in the comfort zones of their own workplace / locations and times suitable to them, they were able to discuss even sensitive political issues (like the effect of political regimes on governance structures) quite publicly, without any discomfiture. I assured them repeatedly that all data would be kept anonymous and confidential.

## **3.6 Research Contexts and Case Selection**

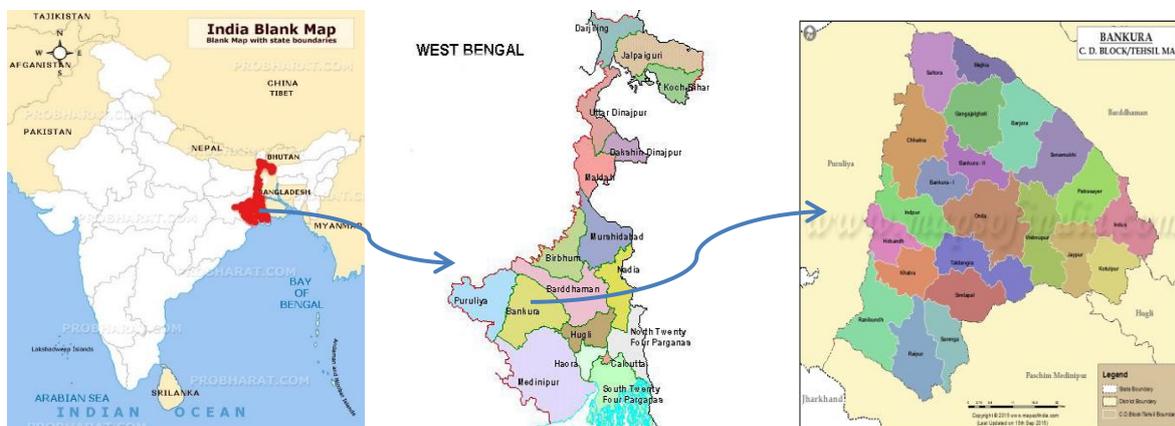
### **3.6.1 Bankura**

In the rationale for this research (Chapter 2), there has been an attempt to address the issues of relational poverty, backwardness and social exclusion through the lenses of decentralisation and participation leading to empowerment of the deprived and marginalised sections of the community. Hence, I intended to carry out my field-research in one of the economically and socially backward districts of West Bengal, to gauge if the participatory initiatives rolled out through the decentralised governance structures of the State had any interface with the backward communities. With the Scheduled Caste (SC) and the Scheduled Tribe (ST) population comprising about 43% of the total population, **Bankura** is one of the most backward districts of the State. 91.7% of the district's 3.5 million population live in the

rural areas (Gol, 2011). The West Bengal Human Development report, 2004 (GoWB, 2004c) ranked Bankura 11<sup>th</sup> among 17 districts of the State on the basis of human development attainments. While the district is closer to the State average on health and educational attainments, it lagged far behind in the income sector.

Bankura is the fourth largest district of West Bengal with a geographical area of 6882 Sq. kms, and is located in the western part of the State. Lying between the fertile alluvial plains of Bengal to the east and the Chotonagpur plateau on the west, Bankura is divided into three topographic regions: the hilly uplands of the west characterised by large granite rocks, slightly undulating terrain of red lateritic soil in the middle, and the level alluvial plains to the east — one merging into another. The hard granite base has less scope for economic production, while the undulating midland is susceptible to soil erosion and has low water retention capacity. Though the average annual rainfall in Bankura is nearly 1500 mm., most of the rainwater runs off and goes waste.

**Figure 3.1: Map of India, West Bengal and Bankura**



The economy of Bankura district is predominantly agrarian with a cropping intensity<sup>23</sup> of 147%, which is representative of the all-India average of 142%, but is considered quite low

<sup>23</sup> Cropping intensity is conventionally defined as the ratio (expressed as a percentage) of gross cropped area to net sown area (Agarwal, 1984). The cropping intensity may exceed 100 percent where more than one crop cycle is permitted each year on the same area (fao.org).

for the State of West Bengal, which has a cropping intensity of almost 184% (RBI, 2017). Land utilisation pattern reveals that only 59.5% of total land is under cultivation where traditional agricultural practices are deployed to do mostly paddy cultivation. There is hardly any scope for mechanized farming practices due to unconducive topography and small size of land holdings. Average size of land holding in the district being 1.02 acre, marginal and small land holding size classes together constitute nearly 90% of the total land holding. Moreover, poor irrigation facilities, uneven distribution of rainfall and low water retention capacity of the soil often lead to low productivity and crop failure.

Other alternative sources of income are agricultural wage labour or wage-employment based public works schemes (e.g. NREGS),<sup>24</sup> collection and sale of non-timber forest produce, small industrial and mining wage-labour (in some areas) and seasonal migration for wage labour. Poverty and backwardness are specifically concentrated in the drought-prone areas of western and southern Bankura. A major chunk of the population from these areas migrate to the more fertile eastern parts or other neighbouring districts for 1-6 months every year in search of livelihood. Out of the total population, 40.77% are involved in works as main workers (who are working and earning for more than 6 months) and marginal workers (involved in any marginal activity that provides livelihood for less than 6 months). Cultivators and Agricultural labourers constitute the main work force of the district. They are 21.1% and 44.2% of the total workers respectively (Gol, 2011; GoWB, 2007a).

Bankura has a total literacy rate of 70.26% and a female literacy rate of 60.05 % with a gender gap of 20%. The literacy rate of the SCs in West Bengal is 69.43, (corresponding female 61.23%) the corresponding figure for Bankura is a meagre 54.03% (SC female literacy being appallingly low at 42.1%). The literacy rate among the STs in Bankura is about 59.37% (female literacy being 46.01%). 59.61% of SC population and 56.72% of the ST population in Bankura are engaged as agricultural labourers (Gol, 2011; Chattoraj and Chand, 2015).

Being one of the backward districts of West Bengal, Bankura was selected for extension of the DFID funded Strengthening Rural Decentralisation (SRD) project from 2007 – 2011, and is also under the coverage of the World Bank funded Institutional Strengthening of Gram

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<sup>24</sup> National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme

Panchayats (ISGP) project since 2010. Since the policy prescriptions of both these externally funded projects have been studied in this thesis, the *Gram Panchayats* in Bankura proved to be ideal sites for conducting the field-work for this research.

There were other practical considerations that made me finalise Bankura as the site for field-research. Located at a distance of 281 kms from the capital city of West Bengal, Bankura has good rail and road connections with Kolkata. It was not very difficult for me to commute between Bankura and Kolkata in different phases of my research, a major part of which also had to be conducted in Kolkata. Moreover, I had known some of the key district officials posted in Bankura at the time of my research from close quarters earlier, which was an important factor in obtaining the necessary cooperation at the field level.

Lastly, personal safety was also an issue. Since most of the interviews and FGDs were scheduled to take place in remote, rural countryside involving working alone and out of office-hours, I also had to factor in issues like unsafe travel and encountering political unrest (given the politically volatile situation in the State at present). My personal contacts and acquaintances in Bankura who could act as a safeguard in emergency situations, were positive considerations in this respect. Also, there were not many reports of political clashes in the district of Bankura during that period, which made it a relatively safer place to conduct my research.

### **3.6.2 Gram Panchayat (sub-case) Selection**

After the initial meeting in which I discussed the criteria for *Gram Panchayat* (GP) selection for the purpose of my research, the team members of ISGP, Bankura had shortlisted 8 - 10 GPs for the purpose of my research. Accompanied by the District Coordinator, ISGP, I visited these shortlisted GPs for a few days, before finalising the ones in which I would work intensively over the next three months. The GPs finally selected were the following:

**Table 3.2: Gram Panchayats selected as sub-case studies**

Sl. No.	Gram Panchayat	Sub Division	Block	Coverage by SRD / ISGP	Political Category	Elected Representative	GP Employee
1	Aanchuri	Bankura Sadar	Bankura I	SRD & ISGP	TMC to TMC	Prodhan for 2 terms	2 GP employees posted for a decade
2	Dhaban		Chhatna	SRD & ISGP	TMC to TMC	Prodhan for 2 terms	GP Assistant posted for last 11 years
3	Mashiara	Khatra	Hirbandh	SRD & ISGP	TMC to CPI(M)	Prodhan from backward community	All part-time and casual employees except GP Secy
4	Motgoda		Raipur	SRD & ISGP	CPI(M) TO CPI(M)	Active and vocal GP members for more than two terms	All GP employees posted for a decade
5	Brahmandiha		Indpur	ISGP	CPI(M) to TMC	Vocal Ex-Prodhan & Local Committee Member	GP Secretary earlier posted in SRD GP

The contexts and internal dynamics of all the selected GPs were very different, which were very helpful in making me realise the shifting balance of power within this lowest unit of the Panchayati Raj Institution, as will transpire in the empirical chapters of this thesis. In this section, I will briefly discuss the different research contexts of these research sites.

In Dhaban GP I was mostly attended by one GP official - a *Sahayak*<sup>25</sup> by designation, but who shouldered multiple responsibilities as the Secretary-in-Charge of this GP. Being a local resident and the longest serving official in the GP, he seemed to have a fairly thorough knowledge of the GP. In this GP, documentation of GP plan could be traced back to 2008-09,

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<sup>25</sup> GP Assistant

when SRD programme was launched in Bankura. Being a local resident, the *Sahayak* was still in touch with many of the ex-members of the GP as well as ex-members of the GUS, and arranged a focus group discussion with them in due course to facilitate my field work. Since he also had expertise in the GPMS software, and the planning software, he was ideal for demonstrating the technological advancements brought into the GPs through the ISGP project. At the same time, being posted in this GP for 11 years, he had the institutional memory to recall the institutional changes brought about by these two externally funded projects within the local governance structures in the State.

In Aanchuri GP, on the other hand, the GP employees were not so forthcoming, and seemed to be much more immersed in their routine office-work. Rather, the *Prodhan* (GP Chair), a people's representative who had been in office for two consecutive terms since 2008, played a similar cooperative role for my research, and organised my meetings with other elected representatives and the ex-GUS members. The *Prodhan* also had much more institutional memory than the GP Secretary who was also posted in this GP for about a decade.

Motgoda GP, located in the notoriously disturbed '*jongol-mohol*' (forest region) was said to be under Maoist control before the change in the political regime a few years back, but I found this GP meeting almost all the criteria for my research. Both the externally funded projects, SRD and ISGP had been operational here. All GP employees were well trained, experienced and articulate, the GP was a hub of activity frequented by current as well as ex-elected representatives. The current GP board comprises of 13 elected members, 6 affiliated to Trinomool Congress (TMC), 6 affiliated to the Communist Party of India (CPI(M)) and the *Prodhan* was an Independent supported by the CPI(M). Interestingly, there was such a harmonious relationship between the members that I did not realise in my first visit that they belonged to different parties. This was a unique feature of Motgoda GP, as will be revealed in my empirical chapters later in this thesis. In this GP, I noticed that the people's representatives explained the planning process with an ownership, particularly with a vivid description of the social and natural resource maps. On the other hand, as soon as the discussions veered towards ISGP, the GP employees enthusiastically articulated the technological advancements introduced under the World Bank project with much more confidence. This separation of the domain of ownership at a sub-conscious level of the

research participants helped me to grasp the changing institutional dynamics of the GP during the two different project periods.

Selection of the remotely situated Mashiara GP was initially a compulsion, since it was one of the very few GPs in the district that had a TMC board in the previous term (2008-2013) and a CPI(M) board since 2013. The GP was also covered by both the externally funded projects, SRD and ISGP, but this GP had an acute shortage of GP staff, and most of the elected representatives in this very remote GP were also new and inexperienced. However, I finalised this GP because of its political dynamics, and in due course, this almost non-functional GP emerged as a starkly contrasting sub-case study to a smoothly functional GP like Motgoda, clearly demonstrating how technical tools could be used as political weapons at the local level.

Brahmandiha GP on the other hand had not been covered by the SRD project, but this GP played a major role in the field research because of its political dynamics, and the presence of a very strong GP official, who was well trained in the SRD planning processes in the GP where he was posted earlier. He also played a catalytic role in setting up my interviews with several key political persons in the area including the Ex-Prodhan, Local Committee Member (both affiliated to CPI(M)) and a *Panchayat Samity* (block level) *Karmadhyaksha*<sup>26</sup> (affiliated to TMC). This GP also provided me with the scope of observing the current dynamics between the GP and the block, and how it has changed over the last few years.

What we obtained from these five sub-case studies at the end of the field-work was a breadth of conditions and experiences, which we have used to get a collective snapshot of the implementation of different activities, taking place over the last two decades at the grassroots of rural Bengal.

### **3.7 Data Analysis and the challenge of finding my voice**

On my return to the UK, I started translating (from Bengali to English) and transcribing the interviews and analysing them at the same time. Some of the interviews were transcribed in

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<sup>26</sup> Chair of Block Council Standing Committee

totality, not leaving out a word or even a pause. These interviews mostly came from top-level policy makers, containing extremely rich information on individual perspectives and experiences about the exact circumstances that went into formulating particular policy guidelines. The district or sub district level respondents (specially GP functionaries or GUS members), often repeated similar experiences since they all worked within the same institutional framework and had similar institutional memories. Transcription for these interviews and FGDs have been done selectively, although detailed notes and summaries of all were recorded in all cases. As mentioned earlier, I had spoken to **66** respondents at various levels viz. State, district, block, village-councils and community-representatives at the grassroots level: details of my respondents are mentioned in Annexure A of this thesis.

Since I have had the advantage of being directly involved with all stages of the interviewing process (interviewing, translating and transcribing), the analysis of the collected-data had begun and continued almost simultaneously throughout the process of my field-work. Such analyses were recorded in my field-notes, in which I reflected on my field-experiences on a daily basis. These notes and reflections have been very useful in reconstructing specific contexts, once I returned to the UK after completing field-work.

A huge challenge that I faced while writing the analytical chapters was to maintain a balance between these often-conflicting view-points of the same story. Let me try to elaborate this point with an example. One of the principal narratives emerging from the interviews is the creation and withdrawal of participatory spaces at the village-councils of West Bengal in India. In this narrative, such participatory spaces are signified by the *Gram Unnayan Samity* (GUS) or the Village Development Committees, the provision for which was created through an Amendment of the Panchayat Act of West Bengal in 2003, and the powers of the GUS were withdrawn once again by the same political regime in 2010. Examining the conditions that led to the formation of these grassroots-level institutions, I have come across several versions of the narrative, many of which are contradictory in nature. I have the view from the top (state-level policy-makers) vs. the view at the middle and lower levels (block / village-council), bureaucratic views vs. views based on a specific political ideology. Political reasons for creating the GUS too vary from viewing the GUS as a vehicle for empowering the masses, to a political tool to capture the local governance units; while bureaucrats mostly viewed the GUS as an instrument of the State to facilitate smooth implementation of different schemes

at the grassroots. There seemed to be different versions of the narrative, and each version of the story seemed justified from the standpoint of the concerned person. My task as a researcher was not only to look for threads and links in one version that are validated by the points of another version, but also to look for inherent contradictions in each version of the story. In the process, a pattern emerged from these apparently chaotic viewpoints, which clearly showed that these 'varied' voices were very much embedded in their 'structural contexts', rather than being simply different 'categories' (Auyero, 1999).

### **3.8 Limitations of the Methodology**

While the methodological approach described in this chapter had distinctive advantages in uncovering and understanding the range of processes that have shaped the participatory agenda in the State of West Bengal, it also had its own limitations. Firstly, approaching the respondents of elite-interviews through personal and professional networks, and consequently using the snowballing technique may have resulted in some sampling bias towards more articulate and experienced participants.

Secondly, the number of interviews conducted at the district and block (intermediary) levels seem too less compared to the ones conducted at the top level and the micro-level. However, since this study is primarily looking at how the policies formulated at the state level have played out at the grassroots, the intermediary Development Block or the District was not a major focus of this study.

Moreover, in spite of several attempts, access could not be secured to the top-level politicians of the current regime due to time-constraint. Therefore, the number of politicians interviewed at the state level (in the category of top-level policy makers) was much less compared to the bureaucrats interviewed in the same category, making this the third limitation of this study. However, quite a few among the top-bureaucrats interviewed had very close interactions with the political elites on a regular basis. Hence, they were well informed on the process of policy-making within political circles during the current regime as well as the previous political regime. On the other hand, this tilt in favour of the bureaucrats was also a telling evidence on the power exercised by them in this State as far as policy-making was concerned.

### **3.9 My positionality**

Before embarking on my PhD journey, I had thirteen years of work experience as a development professional within the bureaucratic system in West Bengal. In fact, my direct involvement with externally funded development projects like DFID-UK funded Strengthening Rural Decentralisation (SRD) and World Bank funded Institutional Strengthening of Gram Panchayats (ISGP) for more than 7 years (December 2005 to February 2013) actually kindled my interest about their effects on the decentralised governance structures and the local power relations in the State.

During my 7-year tenure with the PRDD, there was a period of around 7 months (September 2010 – March 2011), when I had been the District Coordinator (for Birbhum district in West Bengal) for both the SRD and ISGP projects simultaneously. This was a period when SRD was drawing to an end and ISGP was being launched, and the projects overlapped. I was one of the project staff from the SRD project who were being deployed in the ISGP project as well. In these crucial 7 months, I was often puzzled by the contradictory objectives and work culture of these two projects which often landed me in a dilemma. For instance, as the project coordinator of SRD, I was expected to instruct the GP functionaries to prepare GP plans with enhanced involvement of the community, and emphasize the human development and livelihood components (health, education, women and child development, agriculture, etc.) more than infrastructural aspects. At the same time, as the project coordinator for ISGP, I was once again expected to train and instruct the GP functionaries to prepare the GP plan that mostly highlighted the infrastructural needs of the GP area. This plan could be prepared through an in-house discussion within the GP, involving only the elected GP members and the GP staff, and the stipulated time-frame for this planning did not provide much scope to involve the community at large. Dealing with such conflicting 'role-play' (at work) made me (as an individual) increasingly curious about the motives driving the funding of such projects both on the part of the domestic government as well as the donor organisations. The changing political scenario in the State also seemed to point towards the playing out of a larger politics involving actors at sub-national, national and global levels, which I felt was worth exploring to gain insights on some of the crucial development debates involving the participatory agenda.

This background in the government sector in West Bengal provided me with the necessary support system to conduct the field-work as outlined in my research proposal and gain access to a large cross-section of the society within the State. My familiarity with the complex bureaucratic structures of India helped me to build the right networks and adopt essential precautionary measures while negotiating with the gatekeepers at various levels and gain access to the field. For instance, while introducing my research to the stakeholders at different levels, I carefully worded the details of my research project, being aware that any wrong message regarding this aspect could jeopardize my field-work on one hand, and could also give rise to unrealistic expectations from the respondents. My dual identity as an ex-development practitioner turned researcher sometimes threw up ethical challenges resulting in a constant conflict between my autonomy as a researcher and my embeddedness (in the same system that I was looking at) as an ex-development practitioner.

During my two months of stay in Bankura, I had frequent interactions with the ISGP team, Bankura. I *was* very much a part of a similar set-up in a different district, and I am still very much in touch with many of them – but not exactly as a part of the system anymore. I was aware of their grasp over the ins-and-outs, the micro-level dynamics of the Gram Panchayats, which made their inputs crucial to zero-in on the perfect-fit GPs and the appropriate persons for the purpose of my research. At the same time, I was also constantly aware of my new identity as a distant onlooker, somewhat detaching myself from the situations - consciously. I listened to, observed and absorbed everything – but not as one of them – as I used to do before. I told myself that I needed to relax, that the insights and reflections that I gained during my years of service cannot be wished away, and I do not intend to wish them away. Rather I intended to use those rich experiences to understand the current dynamics in a deeper manner.

Another face-off with this autonomy vs. embeddedness issue was when I met a senior bureaucrat at the Panchayat Ministry, to request a letter of introduction from the department. This person was my immediate supervisor for 5 years of my professional life with whom I have always had a mutually respectful relationship. When I explained my research project and the kind of cooperation I needed from him, he was very forthcoming. But then he went on to elaborate about the new initiatives being undertaken by the Panchayat Department under his leadership at present, and gave me a proposal to be a part of the State

level training team for the next few months while I was in India for my PhD field-work. I was a bit unsettled with this proposal. It was difficult to refuse him upfront. Not only was he a key person in the elite interview category of my research project, he could also help me to gain access to the district level authorities, as well as the state level authorities in Kolkata, since he was still serving in a very senior position of the PRDD. Possibly he was still viewing me in my earlier role, very much embedded in the system, a sincere employee of the Department. Developing an image of an autonomous researcher would take time, I realized. Instead of committing myself immediately, I expressed an interest to attend the state level training workshops organised by the PRDD, to acquaint myself about the latest developments in the Ministry, which he assumed to be a positive response and gave me the much-needed letter of introduction to facilitate my field-research.

Negotiating my positionality thus, was tight-rope walking during which I had to be constantly aware of my dual identities. On one hand, this placed me in an advantageous position so far as gaining access to the field and different forms of data was concerned. I had to spend much less time on trust building issues, specially with the top-level bureaucrats with whom candid discussions were held giving me access to rich data of confidential nature. This identity and the authorisation of my research by the PRDD also made it easier for me to bypass the long-winded bureaucratic routes before gaining access to the internal documents of the *Gram Panchayats* (GPs). At the grassroots too, trust-building was easier, as I was perceived as 'one of them' by the GP functionaries and the GUS members alike – a person who was conversant with the institutional processes of the GP or the activities of the GUS. Possibly, this perception facilitated free and frank discussions most of the times, once again opening up a wealth of rich data for my research. Moreover, my previous valuable experiences of assisting and supervising various field surveys commissioned by the DFID, World Bank, University of Manchester and the Erasmus University had built my confidence to conduct a coherent field-study required for my PhD. I also had certain advantages as far as my personal safety was concerned, since as my home-State, I was fully aware of the socio-cultural and political environment in West Bengal. Moreover, having served in remote, rural areas for more than a decade, I already had considerable experience in handling difficult situations in this State. Hence, I always took adequate precautions beforehand in order to avoid any undue risks.

However, as mentioned earlier, I had to be on my guard constantly, not to give rise to unrealistic expectations among the respondents, and persistently switched between my two identities to maintain a balance and retain the detached view of a researcher. This was sometimes stressful and draining to me as an individual, and often threw up ethical challenges which, as stated earlier, I tried to negotiate with utmost care.

### **3.10 Conclusion**

This chapter on Methodological Approach explained the reasons for adopting the Interpretive strategy of case-study analysis as the research-design, based on the Indian State of West Bengal and elaborated on the qualitative research methods adopted for this study. It also highlighted the researcher's conduct in different research practices, e.g. negotiating with institutional gate-keepers for gaining access to the field, importance of reflective research and trust-building exercises – to make the most of the opportunities during data collection. The justification for selecting of Bankura district and the 5 Village Councils in Bankura as the site of conducting micro-level field-research for this study was provided, followed by a brief note on data analysis, limitations of this methodological approach and the positionality of the researcher.

The uniqueness of this study is also marked by the positionality of the researcher as an insider to the decentralisation initiatives undertaken in West Bengal, that facilitated her access to rare documents bearing political and policy-level significance and informed access to participants at various levels. A situated bi-lingual competence aided putting together and interpretation of historical materials as well as recent government orders, thus enabling construction of the West Bengal narrative from a different point of view, especially in the post-2011 period. Discovery of some rare and henceforth unexplored documents through archival research, which will inform the investigations in the empirical chapters of this thesis, has contributed to the originality of this study from an empirical perspective.

## **4 Chapter Four: Early Stages of the Participatory Agenda in West Bengal (1985 – 2005)**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter aims to trace the early phases of the participatory agenda in the State of West Bengal spanning over a period of twenty years (1985 – 2005). The chapter has been divided into four substantive sections. The first of these (section 4.2) focuses on the legal framework and the political context for decentralisation initiatives in West Bengal, that led to the installation of the 3-tier Panchayati Raj Institutions in the State. The section 4.3 outlines the different concepts and ideological trends during this period that were crucial in deciding the course of the participatory agenda in West Bengal. Section 4.4 briefly outlines three grassroots level participatory planning experiments – the Midnapore village-planning, the People’s Plan Campaign in Kerala and the Community Convergent Action - that influenced the dynamics of the participatory agenda in the State. Section 4.5 then discusses the effects of these experiments in the form of entry of global funding agencies in the development initiatives of this State, the results of which will be explored in the subsequent analytical chapters. Summarising the evolving themes of this chapter, the conclusion in section 4.6 highlight the significance of the vision, motivation and commitment on the part of state-elites for putting in place appropriate strategies to bring about state-led transformational change in governance by building closer state-society relations.

### **4.2 Context**

#### **4.2.1 The Broader Context: Legal Framework for Decentralisation in India**

Since India has a long heritage of local governance through the village panchayat system, local governance in India cannot be seen as a legacy of the ‘good governance’ agenda emerging from the World Bank. Rather, as discussed in Chapter 2, the system of Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) resulted from of intense debates between leading figures of post-independence India about the necessity and nature of the local government institutions.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, argued in favour of a model of decentralisation that would be guided from above, allowing an enlightened state on developmental mission to intervene at the local level against the prevailing power structures. Accepting the spirit of this argument, Article 40 of the Indian Constitution came into force on the 26th of January, 1950, which provided for local government units under the Directive Principles of State Policy. This required the state to organise village panchayats (village councils) and endow them with necessary powers and authority required to function as units of self-government. The First Five Year Plan of India (1951-56) also recognised the need for a disaggregated planning exercise through a process of democratic decentralisation (Gol, n.d.). However, there was no effort to develop the village Panchayats, until the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957) emphasized the necessity of building grassroots level democratic institutions for implementing development programmes at village level. This committee called for the creation of -

Single representative and vigorous democratic institutions to take charge of all aspects of development work in rural areas. Such a body, if created, has to be statutory, elective, comprehensive in its duties and functions, equipped with necessary executive machinery and in possession of adequate resources. It must not be cramped by too much of control by government or government agencies ... it must be an instrument of expression of local people's will in regard to local development.

(Quoted in Datta, 2001 : 10)

This Committee stood for non-political panchayats and seemed to consider panchayats as instruments of rural development supported by people's participation. These recommendations were more in the spirit of Deconcentration than Devolution, and implied shifting of administrative functions, rather than transfer of real authority to the local governments to undertake autonomous initiatives (see Section 2.5). The Government of India (Gol) accepted the recommendations of this Committee, but very little progress was made on the ground over the next twenty years. The idea driving the first generation of panchayats in India, thus, did not grow any further.

In 1977, with the formation of the first non-Congress government at the Centre in post-independence India, a high-powered Committee called the Ashok Mehta Committee was set up to examine the functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) and to suggest measures for making them effective. A number of issues were mentioned by this committee that had

undermined the panchayat structures and rendered them ineffective. The attitude of the political elites at the higher levels like Members of Parliament (MP) and Members of Legislative Assembly (MLA) who perceived a threat to their position from the emerging panchayati raj leadership was one of the key factors. No less important was the role of the bureaucracy which had its own interest in disconnecting the development processes from the panchayati raj institutions (PRI). A ground-breaking recommendation of this committee was the party-based panchayat, that acknowledged the grassroots reality in India. The rise of the second-generation party-based panchayats in the Indian States like Karnataka, Kerala and West Bengal is the outcome of the recommendations by the Ashok Mehta Committee. However, in most other States, the concept of panchayats did not go down well with both the bureaucrats and politicians at the state level possibly because of its potential to emerge as new power centres (Datta, 2001).

But it was only during the Eighth Plan period (1992 – 1997) that democratic decentralisation received a boost with the enactment of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts (1993) that paved the way for third generation panchayats in India. These Acts made the PRIs a third stratum of government under the Central and the State Governments. Consequently, State Governments were required to enact enabling legislations, providing for elected bodies at the village, inter-mediate and district levels with adequate representation from the weaker sections and of women (GOI, 1997; Roy, n.d.; Datta, 2001).

India being a federal union of 29 States and 7 Union Territories, it is imperative upon each State to devise its own administrative arrangements to make democratic decentralisation functional on the ground. The constitutional provisions also require the State to resolve different conflicts arising in the process and establish institutional linkages between democratic institutions and the bureaucracy in order to facilitate smooth functioning of the PRIs. Other major tasks of the PRIs involved preparation of plans for fostering economic development and social justice, and ensuring greater participation of people in the functioning of institutions and consequent delivery of services. Some States like Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Gujarat have made new legislations based on this Act, while States like Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and West Bengal have suitably amended their existing legislations (ibid)

#### 4.2.2 The Specific Context: Legal Framework for Decentralisation Initiatives in West Bengal<sup>27</sup>

The first-generation Panchayats in the State of West Bengal came into being with the West Bengal Panchayat Act of 1957, which was passed following the recommendations of the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee. However, with hardly any responsibilities assigned and very little fund-flow to these local bodies, the decentralised system of governance never really took off. As mentioned earlier, this form of Decentralisation was more of Deconcentration of administrative functions rather than Devolution of real authority. The ruling party, Congress was defeated in the general elections of 1967 and made way for coalition ministries that did not last long. President's Rule<sup>28</sup> was imposed on the State for a short period in 1968, and once again from March 1970 to March 1972, before the Congress captured power again. All local bodies were brought under the control of Administrators in 1969, which continued until Panchayat elections were held in 1978. However, the Congress government made an effort to pass a legislation called the West Bengal Panchayat Act in 1973. This new legislation aimed to make panchayats instruments for implementing rural development programmes, though the act remained unimplemented until 1978 (Datta, 2001).

The West Bengal Panchayat Act of 1973 provided the legal framework for establishing the second-generation Panchayats in West Bengal. The Act provided for establishment of three tier Panchayats, Zilla Parishad (ZP)<sup>29</sup> at district level, Panchayat Samity (PS) at Block level and Gram Panchayat (GP) to be constituted for a cluster of villages. At present there are 20 Zilla Parishads, 341 Panchayat Samities and 3354 Gram Panchayats in West Bengal. Gram Panchayat or Village Council was conceived as the lowest electoral unit as well as the lowest

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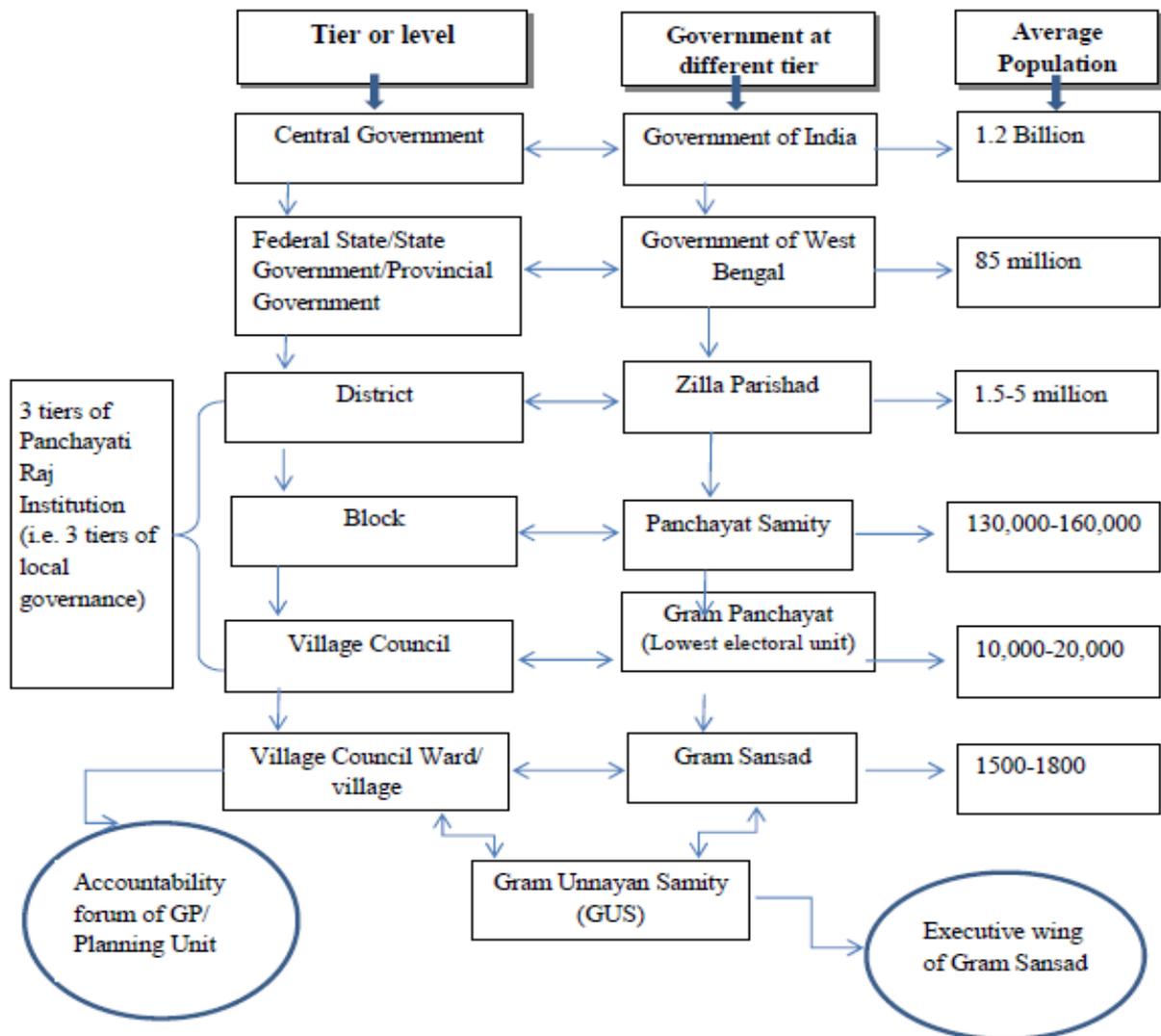
<sup>27</sup> Parts of section 4.2 (in pages 96-105) draws on discussion of the political context conducted within my earlier Masters Dissertation (University of Manchester, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> The suspension of the State Legislative Assembly and its replacement with direct rule from New Delhi. In both instances, political violence following the election of Leftist coalitions in West Bengal was the pretext for central government intervention

<sup>29</sup> Zilla Parishad is the local government unit at the district level, Panchayat Samity at the block level covering around 100-120 villages, and Gram Panchayat is the village council comprising of 15-20 representatives (Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002). Details in the table that follows

unit for local governance, covering around 10-12 contiguous villages and a population of around 10,000 (Roy, n.d.; Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002; GoWB, 2009a; wbsec.gov.in).

**Figure 4.1 : Organisational Structure of the PRI in West Bengal**



Source: Dasgupta, 2014

In the 1977 State Assembly elections of West Bengal, a coalition of the left-of-centre political parties was elected to power to form the State government. It cannot be called a Communist government, as it was a coalition of democratic and progressive forces many of whom were non-Marxists. The Left Front (LF) was created on the basis of a common programme, that was committed to, among other things, 'decentralisation of power, protecting the interests of the

poor, public participation in administration and thus to clip the wings of bureaucracy’ (Datta, 2001:32). This was a clear articulation of the projected future relationship between bureaucracy and the political activists in the State and all these motives had long standing implications, as will be seen later in this chapter.

Based on the 1973 Act, elections for the formation of Panchayats were conducted for the first time in West Bengal in 1978, resulting in the current form of local government units. This became a trendsetter for the Panchayati Raj system in India. For the first time, political parties were allowed to contest Panchayat elections with respective party symbols allowing for more competitive elections. Moreover, direct elections were held for all the three tiers. Finally, this is the first and the only State where Panchayat elections have been conducted every five years without interruption since 1978 till 2018 (Roy, n.d.; Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002; GoWB, 2009a).

**Table 4.1: Timeline for Panchayati Raj Institutions in India and West Bengal**

Time Period	Developments
1950	Article 40 of Constitution of India provides for local self-government units
1957	i. Balwant Rai Mehta Committee recommends setting up of village panchayats ii. West Bengal Panchayat Act 1957 launches first generation Panchayats in West Bengal
1973	West Bengal Panchayat Act (1973) provides legal framework for second generation Panchayats in West Bengal
1977	Ashok Mehta Committee set up to examine functioning of PRI
1978	First Panchayat elections held in West Bengal
1993	73rd Amendment of the Indian Constitution make PRI the third stratum of government below Central and State government
2003	Amendments to the West Bengal Panchayat Act (1973) provided for formation of Gram Unnayan Samiti (Village Development Council)

Source: Dasgupta (2014), Compiled by the author from official documents of the Planning Commission, GoI, and the PRDD, Government of West Bengal

#### 4.2.3 Political Context: Peak period of the erstwhile Left-regime

For the first three decades in the post-independence period (1947 – 1977), West Bengal was mostly ruled by the Congress Party that had spread its organisational structure across the districts and even sub-district levels of the State. However, in the political culture of the Congress, there was no concept of mobilisation of the masses at the grassroots, and the links with the people in rural areas were maintained through locally influential persons under the traditional power structure. These local elites, who were mostly the landed gentry, the village *Mahajan* (moneylender), or leaders of dominant castes – ensured electoral support to the Congress party by exerting their influence over the masses in exchange of patronage. Such patronage came in the form of accessing grants for different development programmes to being protected against strict application of laws that were likely to hurt their interest. Protection against the imposition of the Land Reforms Act is such an example, that allowed the big landowners to retain huge quantities of land beyond the permissible limit. These Congressmen also maintained links with the bureaucracy since the bureaucracy represented the state at the local level. The Congress party was somewhat complacent with its political strategy since this model of governance provided a stable government to the State for the first twenty years after independence, while the presence of the main opposition party, the Communist Party of India (CPI) was mainly restricted to the urban areas and did not have any roots in rural Bengal. The longest serving Congress Chief Minister, B.C. Roy possessed integrity and administrative competence, but was not interested in village democracy (Ghosh and Kumar, 2003).

1960's was a turbulent decade in the history of the State. Armed conflict with China (1962) and Pakistan (1965) caused immense hardship to the people, especially urban middle classes. Severe shortages of food and essential commodities were caused by droughts in two consecutive years and urban consumers were unhappy with the public distribution system. Moreover, an industrial recession in the mid-1960s led to industrial unrest. Meanwhile, a split took place in the Communist Party of India (CPI), and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) came into being. The radical elements of CPI joined the new party which fully exploited the discontent of the masses caused by inflation, industrial recession and food scarcity. Militant movements in the forms of processions, demonstrations and large-scale

arson were carried out to register protest and consolidate their position (Ghosh and Kumar, 2003).

While tracing the history of the CPI(M) regime, Atul Kohli (1987) states that the CPI(M) was primarily an urban-based party till the late 1960s. But it soon realised that with more than 70% of the population living in rural areas, political success in West Bengal necessitates building a rural constituency. Accordingly, the radical-leftist parties of the State embarked on this political project by: i) recruiting university-level students in Calcutta and other district towns and ii) organizing militant agitations for agrarian reforms in the late 1960s. However, the Congress government in power failed to realise the rising democratic aspirations of the rural masses who had remained outside the traditional power structure for so long (Kohli, 1987; Echeverri-Gent, 1992; Ghosh and Kumar, 2003).

After years of political conflicts, the Left Front (LF), a coalition of leftist-parties led by the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI(M)) swept power in West Bengal in 1977. It was a coalition government of democratic and progressive forces, many of whom are not Marxists. However, the biggest partner of the LF, the (CPI(M)) had participated in the government to use it –

As an instrument of struggle to win more and more people and more allies for the proletariat and in their struggle for the cause of people's democracy and at a later stage, for socialism.

(Basavpunnaih, 1985, quoted in Datta, 2001: 32)

Among the pre-electoral promises of the LF were several agrarian and political reform programmes. Agrarian reforms included implementation of tenancy laws to provide secure tenure and legally stipulated minimum crop-share to the tenants<sup>30</sup>; distribution of excessive land (held beyond legally permitted limits by the large land holders) to small, marginal farmers and the landless rural poor. The land reforms, commonly known as Operation Barga is considered a significant success – around 1.3 million sharecroppers were documented by 1984 (Baruah, 1990). Moreover, West Bengal achieved an impressive increase in agricultural productivity resulting in visible reduction of destitution in rural areas since the 1980s (Ghatak

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<sup>30</sup> In many parts of West Bengal, it was customary for tenant farmers to pay landowners a proportion of the harvest as rent, rather than a fixed cash sum

and Ghatak, 2002; Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2006). Agrarian reforms also attempted to bring the rural poor out of the clutches of the landed elites by making institutional bank-credit available to the beneficiaries of land reform. Previously, the poorer households were forced to take loans from richer households at exorbitant rates during lean agricultural seasons (Baruah, 1990).

Similarly, empowerment of the three-tiered Panchayat system was part of the State's political reform programmes. The first Panchayat election in West Bengal was held in 1978, a year after the Left Front Government came to power in the State. Ghatak and Ghatak (2002) maintain that the reformist agenda of the leftist parties was a rare combination of electoral compulsions of a political party and its ideological commitments. The stage had been set during 1967-70, when over a million acres of agricultural land held unlawfully by the land-owners was taken over by the United Front Government in West Bengal (*ibid*). This had already altered the power structure in the rural areas which facilitated the process of disempowering the rural elites and handing over power for the first time to people from the middle and lower rungs of the rural society, such as poor peasants, sharecroppers, agricultural labourers or school teachers. The Panchayats extended active support to enforce the agrarian reform programmes by identifying beneficiaries of land reforms, helping landed bureaucracy to register leases of share-holders and protecting the rural poor against possible threats of the powerful landlords. Thus, agrarian and political reform agenda of the left complemented each other and served the most important political purpose of the CPI(M), by building the base of the party in rural areas. Ideological commitments translated into durable institutional reform through the panchayats, thus presented an opportunity to the Left Front to reduce its dependence on the bureaucracy, and distribute the patronage through the panchayats to enhance influence of the party (*ibid*; Ghosh and Kumar, 2003; Chatterjee, 2009).

In a distinctive experiment, provision and maintenance of all local public goods and execution of most public projects (e.g. drinking water, sanitation, rural housing, etc.) was brought under the control of the formally elected Village Councils or GPs in West Bengal since 1978. The State government also devolved considerable funds as more than half of the State's developmental expenditures were made through the Panchayats including several poverty alleviation programmes (Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002). Empirical studies have shown that West Bengal has always been a positive case in terms of reaching out to target groups for anti-

poverty and employment generation programmes funded by the federal government. For example, Bardhan and Mookherjee (2004) confirms that the Panchayats in West Bengal channelizes considerable benefits from developmental and poverty alleviation programmes to the truly needy and poor. Similar claims have been made by Echeverri-Gent (1992) and Ghatak and Ghatak, (2002). G.K. Lieten (1994) has claimed that due to appropriate targeting by the Panchayats, out-migration from West Bengal villages has virtually stopped and destitution became less apparent.

This also confirms the proposition by Crook and Sverrisson (2001) to a large extent about the committed and capacitated State providing safeguards to the poor. Percentage of population living below the poverty line in West Bengal declined to below 20% in 2011-12 from over 63% in 1973-74 (GoI, 2014). But the rate of poverty reduction is higher in the case of West Bengal than India. Empirical studies have attributed this phenomenon to the combination of agrarian and political reforms implemented by the Left Front Government (Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002).

#### **4.2.4 Factors leading to stagnation of the Left-regime**

Scholars working on West Bengal have adopted different positions about the ways in which ideological stances of the Left have been translated into institutional reforms. Scholars like Kohli (1987), Lieten (1994) or Crook and Sverrisson, (2001) have identified capacity and political will of a 'disciplined' left of centre party like the CPI(M) as the most significant factor driving transformative and redistributive reforms. Unified leadership of the CPI(M) leading to clear, coherent policy response; disciplined party organisation that operates through a highly decentralised structure upto the village level<sup>31</sup> though the decision-making is highly centralised, direct access not allowed to upper classes<sup>32</sup>; ideological commitments to developmental tasks and longevity of CPI(M)'s rule - have been identified as factors that created favourable conditions in West Bengal for poverty alleviation through people's

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<sup>31</sup> The party structure from top to bottom operates through the State Committee (at State level) District Committee (at District level) Zonal Committee (at Block level) Local Committee (at Village Council level) Branch Committee (at village level)

<sup>32</sup> Upper classes are not directly given membership of the party unless they work up their way to the top through political activities beginning as a grassroots level party worker

participation (ibid). Another school of scholars have significantly drawn attention to the problems that arise if the issue of political will is not questioned initially (Echeverri-Gent, 1992; Williams, 2001). In the 1990s, Webster raised this question in unequivocal terms:

What is less certain is whether the principal reason for promoting panchayats remains that of a radical approach towards rural development with a political commitment to the poor or whether it has shifted to the more instrumentalist purpose of securing the party's electoral strength in order to remain in government, with all the compromises and alliances which that might require. While the two are far from being mutually exclusive, they can result in significantly different outcomes in the longer term.

(Webster, 1992:142)

Similar concerns were echoed by Baruah (1990) who apprehended that the Left Front is unlikely to push a redistributive agenda any further in West Bengal due to newly emerging issues such as economic expansion rather than redistribution. This prediction was gradually coming true through certain visible symptoms. Firstly, presumably in view of high political costs the issue of further lowering the land-ceilings to make more land available for redistribution was not raised further by the party. Baruah (1990) also emphasized the fact that the CPI(M) has never raised the question of forming land cooperatives among the land-poor, which was often mentioned in the Indian policy discourse even by liberal-national Indian leaders (like Nehru) till the 1950s. It is clear from Kohli's account (1987) that due to the compulsions of electoral politics, CPI(M) preferred not to 'pursue a more aggressive strategy of class mobilisation' (Kohli, 1987:142).

The second issue questioned by researchers like Williams (2001) was the way the CPI(M) not only built alliance with the middle-classes, but also accommodated them and institutionalised their power through the Panchayats. It is a well-known fact that the CPI(M) recruited many of its cadres / sympathizers as teachers. Subsequently, many of these teachers were recruited as the Pradhans (Chairperson) of Gram Panchayats. Education, social status and influence of these middle classes facilitated their emergence as the alternative political elite who could easily relate with the government officials. Thus, in spite of an increased representation of the landless labourers, scheduled castes, tribes and women in the panchayats under the left-rule (Webster, 1992), the party had also actively created specific interest groups, which resulted in the rural poor becoming dependent upon the largesse of the ruling party in the form of patronage (Echeverri-Gent, 1992; Williams, 2001). As mentioned earlier, even

scholars like Kohli (while mostly endorsing the political designs of the CPI(M)) have admitted that the CPI(M) gained electoral popularity by directing resources to its political sympathizers and creating patronage networks. This possibly, was a well thought out strategy rather than an aberration since the decision-making power of the CPI(M) is centralised in nature (Kohli, 1987). In a research supported by evidence from inner-party documents, Harihar Bhattacharyya (1998) has shown how the local party organisations retain control over the panchayats –

The party sources clearly establish the fact that as the centre for decision-making at the grassroots, panchayats are emptied of all real content, as the important decisions are taken at the level of the PSC [Panchayat subcommittee of the local party unit] ... The party's basic attitude towards panchayats is instrumental and manipulative: it wants to control ... and utilise them. Nowhere in the party's design is it even mentioned that the institutions of panchayats themselves are important and have even to be developed from within. Panchayats are thus typically subjugated to the authority of the party.

(Bhattacharyya, 1998:113-14, quoted in Ghosh and Kumar, 2003: 184-185)

The instrumentalist intentions of a majority section of the CPI(M) to use the panchayats mainly as vehicles for establishing party control comes out clearly in this quote. Harihar Bhattacharyya's claims have been corroborated by another empirical research by Moitree Bhattacharya (2002) who contends that the real authority lies with the CPI(M) party leaders, who take the decisions and the elected representatives merely endorse and implement those decisions. However, Kohli maintains (1987) that the active supervision of the panchayats by the party-members was to safeguard the interests of the poor against the vested interests. The discussion above hardly reveals any evidence of creating any space by the LF, for providing participatory inputs and building active citizenship at the local level. This theme will be explored in further detail in relation to the functioning of the *Gram Unnayan Samity* in the subsequent chapters of the thesis.

Empirical studies by Bardhan and Mookherjee (2004) found that targeting performance of the poverty alleviation schemes implemented by the LF government declined in areas where i) the poor were less literate, ii) there is more concentration of low-caste households and iii) there is less electoral competition at the local level. This suggests a decline in the accountability mechanisms of the local governments where the poor and the vulnerable lack the political capability to bargain for their share of the resources (ibid). This experience

demonstrates that the CPI(M) had not adopted a holistic 'empowerment' approach to address poverty and under-development that requires intensive efforts to build political capabilities of the poor through effective participation in democratic spaces and bargaining for their citizenship rights (see section 2.3.2 in chapter 2). This theme would be explored in further detail in the later phases of this thesis.

Finally, party membership of the CPI(M) had increased manifold over the three decades since it came to power in 1978. Such rapid organisational expansion created communication gaps with the grassroots and facilitated the influx of opportunists in the party who lacked either the party's professed ideological commitment to the poor or adequate political training (Echeverri-Gent, 1992). As per Kohli, the CPI(M) leaders in the 1980s knew that 'rapid expansion would destroy the party as a cohesive and disciplined political force' (Kohli, 1987:110). Evidently, this apprehension seemed to have come true. Williams observed evidences of violence and forceful suppression of oppositional voices where the organisational strength of the CPI(M) is weak (Williams, 2001). Such evidences increasingly undermined the narrative of maintaining 'political stability' through 'ideological commitment to developmental tasks' discussed earlier.

Inferences that may be drawn from the discussions and the information produced in this section are i) the GoWB under the LF had been more attentive to addressing under-development only in narrow quantitative terms rather than addressing it in a more holistic way as part of the bigger political project of the Left, ii) this could possibly be a conscious strategy to achieve this through creation of patronage networks rather than pursue policies of mass-mobilisation and empowering the poor, and iii) rapid organisational expansion for ensuring political stability in the State had resulted in erosion of ideological commitment of the leftist parties. However, there are also evidences of a reformist ideological strain within the LF that advocated the participatory experiments at the local level. All the above-mentioned themes will be further developed in the empirical chapters of this thesis. For the time being, the next section will focus on the ideological origins of the participatory experiments undertaken by the LF.

## **4.3 Ideas**

### **4.3.1 Ideological basis for village-level participatory planning - pioneers of the concept in West Bengal: the political lens**

Dr. Satyabrata Sen, a theoretician, an economist as well as a left ideologue, is said to be one of the pioneers in the conceptualisation of the West Bengal model of participatory governance through the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI). He was also one of the main driving forces behind introducing the concept of village-level participatory-planning in this State. Dr. S.B. Sen was the first Economic Advisor to the first Left government in Kerala in 1957 and exactly two decades later, he assumed the responsibility of the Planning Advisor for the first Left Front Government in West Bengal. In his memoirs on Dr. Sen, E.M.S, Namboodiripad (1997: 1) writes, "I met Satyabrata Sen in 1952-53, when Comrade Sen was actively involved with the ideological guidance of the West Bengal Committee for the undivided Communist Party of India." He later became an advisor to the Kerala government, and the First Finance Commission in Kerala, the Committee on decentralisation of powers to panchayat and municipal bodies came to be known as the Satyabrata Sen Committee (Mishra, 1997; Poddar, 1997).

The concept of Panchayats was not widely known to the people in West Bengal before the first Panchayat elections were conducted in 1978. People did not know much about rural development schemes before the Left Front (LF) government came to power in 1977. The model of creating employment opportunities through panchayats by involving these institutions in rural development, was conceptualised by Dr. Sen. The funds for this were arranged out of schemes implemented by the Government of India, which were channelised through the panchayats in West Bengal. After elaborate discussions at the administrative and political layers, it was decided that contractors will not be deployed for implementing any scheme at the Gram Panchayat and Panchayat Samity levels. Panchayat would directly implement these works. The 3-tier PRI would be entirely responsible for planning and implementation of all works related to Panchayat and Rural Development. Involving illiterate and semi-literate villagers in the planning and implementation of rural development works was a bold decision indeed (Poddar, 1997).

Several steps were adopted to ensure cooperation of the bureaucracy with the Panchayats. Firstly, the District Magistrate was accorded the status of Executive Officer of the Zilla Parishad (ZP), and Block Development Officer was made Chief Executive of Panchayat Samity (PS). Secondly, officers from various line-departments were appointed as ex-officio members of the standing committees of ZP and PS. Thirdly, the ZP Chairperson was made to head all the district-level coordination committees in which both the ZP Chairperson and the District Magistrate were members. Lastly, the responsibility of beneficiary selection for all kinds of departmental schemes had been devolved to the panchayats, making it difficult for different government departments to execute developmental schemes bypassing the panchayats (Ghosh and Kumar, 2003).

One of the reasons for this approach can be linked to a commitment on 'clipping the wings of the bureaucracy' made in the common programme adopted by the LF after it came to power in 1977 (see section 4.2.2). A reason for this could be the sceptical attitude of the CPI(M) towards the bureaucracy, especially those affiliated to the All-India Services. Prof. Prabhat Datta (2001) has commented that on a pan-Indian scale, the bureaucracy probably had its own role in distancing the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) from the development process as it means sharing of power with the people. This could have been the possible reason for a lurking suspicion among the Left Front (LF) that even if they came to power, the bureaucracy would not cooperate with them. Possibly this led to a model of governance involving the mass organisations of the people along with the bureaucracy (Ghosh and Kumar, 2003), and even side-lining the local administrative machinery to some extent.

The decision, that regarding all Panchayat related activities, all employees starting from the District Magistrate to the village-*Chowkidar* (village-watchman) would be controlled by the elected representatives of the Panchayats, - was not easy to come about. This was made possible by the full support of the then Chief Minister of the LF Jyoti Basu, Cabinet Ministers like Binoy Chowdhury and Ashok Mitra (within the government) and the State Secretary (CPI(M)) Promod Dasgupta on behalf of the party. Success did not come the easy way. Satyabrata Sen was immensely cooperated in this task by the State Coordination Committee, the party organisation and the elected representatives of the Panchayats (Poddar, 1997). Dr. Sen thus, had to make an immense effort to build a greater alliance with the leaders heading different branches of his party, the LF as well as the State government, to take them into

confidence about the necessity of executing the panchayat project in West Bengal. The role of Dr. Satyabrata Sen as a pioneer in the decentralised state reforms of West Bengal makes a point about the purpose and vision of the state-elites for bringing about structural change in governance being an important pre-requisite for transformative state-capacity (see section 2.2 in chapter 2).

Immediately after the new Panchayat bodies took position, the State experienced one of the worst floods in 1978 that rendered thousands of people homeless and caused enormous loss of food crops, livestock and other moveable property. The entire work of flood relief and post-flood reconstruction work was entrusted to the newly elected Panchayat bodies. They shouldered this responsibility in an exemplary manner demonstrating the strength of these representative institutions in providing services that require intimate knowledge of the grassroots and responsiveness to local needs (Ghosh and Kumar, 2003; GoWB, 2009a). At the same time, the panchayats gradually gained credibility among the rural community as the local government institutions that were closest to the people and helped the party to expand their rural base. The 1978 floods, in fact, helped the CPI(M) to actualise the recommendations of theoreticians like Dr. S.B. Sen. Dr. Suryakanta Misra, the Ex-Minister in-charge for the Panchayat and Rural Development Department (PRDD), and the current State Secretary for the CPI(M), West Bengal unit, in his memoirs on Dr. S.B. Sen writes -

In those days, each and every Government Order regarding the roles and responsibilities of the Panchayats had the touch of Dr. Satyabrata Sen. He had the capacity to simplify the complex bureaucratic procedures. ... He did not believe in any 'one-size-fits-all' formula either for the government or for the Panchayats and preferred to search for solutions through the 'trial and error' process. ... In order to comprehend the nature of the problems and the solutions, he believed in directly reaching out to the masses.

(Mishra,1997:13)

This comment once again underscores the significance of not only the commitment and role of the ideologue (Dr. S.B. Sen in this case) in pushing through state-reforms, but also about his modus operandi about formulating strategies to get the entire state-machinery to back his vision.

Some of his other comrades have also highlighted the fact that S.B. Sen was inspired by a deep conviction that only political will to ensure decentralisation through Panchayats cannot gather momentum unless one has a deep-rooted faith on the ability of the people. This is

confirmed in the interviews with the state level policy makers who joined the Civil Service in West Bengal in the proximity of 1977, who recall that in general the essence of the discussions making rounds during that period in the left-front circles was that panchayats are people's organisations. Participation was a major theme and giving a voice to the excluded was also a major agenda (interviews with SSKM, SMNR, SDG). On the eve of the first Panchayat elections in West Bengal, an article published in People's Democracy, argued:

Through the Panchayats, the left front intends to unleash the initiative of the rural masses and inculcate in them a spirit of self-confidence, so that a mass movement is gradually built up against the age-old exploitation. The more they are involved in the socio-economic affairs of the village, the greater would be their realisation of the problems created by the present bourgeois-landlord structure of our society and the way to solve them.

(quoted in Ghosh and Kumar, 2003:178)

The quote above reveals that the CPI(M) had not yet lost sight of its socialist dream, and that the ideological strain within the party aspiring to actualise this vision through people's participation was still very much prevalent. When the first Left Front Ministry came to power in West Bengal in 1977, the Panchayat Department had not come into being, and the rural development works were mainly implemented through the Department of Development and Planning. Since Dr. S.B. Sen was the Planning Advisor to the GoWB at the time, it might be worthwhile to have a look at his perspective of development planning for the State. In an article written in 1977, he says, -

The nature of economic planning cannot be the same in Socialism and Capitalism. In a capitalist society, ... any development planning on the part of the government implies such arrangements that enhances the production under private ownership. ... The benefits accorded by the government for the last 30 years have mostly benefitted the big owners and resulted in rising income inequalities. ... Even with very limited power, the government of West Bengal should see to it that such advantages are mostly given to benefit medium and small sized producers.

However, the danger of big capitalists appropriating the benefits using the power of capital always looms large. ... This is why the issue of transformative change of the social structure comes up. ... The Left Front government of this State cannot reach even the vicinity of that change with its limited powers that operate within a capitalistic framework. ... However, many things can be done even with such limited power. If, alongside these development efforts, a political consciousness can be generated through the experiences of the common people, that the present system of ownership is hindering the path of social development, only then an appropriate political ambience can be created for the people's democratic revolution in future.

(S.B. Sen writing under the pen-name of Ranjan Choudhuri, 1977, reprinted in 1997:83-85)

A very Freirean essence of generating political consciousness through the shared experiences of the common people (see section 2.3 in chapter 2) comes through in this passage, though there is no documentary evidence as yet about the influence of the Freirean discourse on the Indian Left. Another notable aspect of S.B. Sen is an acute awareness about the limitations of working within a capitalist framework, but a conviction about the strength and efficacy of strategies that might be adopted even within such limited power, to create the conditions for democratic revolution in future.

Resonance of these ideas were heard from Dr. Suryakanta Mishra, the Ex-Minister in-charge for the PRDD under the LF, as he recalled the experiences of the first village level participatory development and planning experiments undertaken in the district of undivided Midnapore in the 1980s. Acknowledging the ideological contribution of Dr. Sen in the entire process, he named Dr. Ajit Narayan Bose, (then the head of IIT Kharagpur Rural Development Centre), and himself (then the Sabhadhipati, Midnapore Zilla Parishad) as the main executors of the Midnapore experiment. Dr. Bose was a member of the Communist Party of India (CPI), while Dr. Mishra was a member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)). It is interesting to note at this point that the nascent stage of participatory planning in West Bengal was very indigenous in nature, mostly emanating from the Marxist framework, and not influenced by any later day 'development' thinkers from the western world. For Dr. Mishra, the larger goal of participation is definitely 'empowerment', the philosophical stand being that –

people realise from their own experiences that they are able to create history, so that they do not have to depend on any individual.

(SSKM interview, conducted on 14.02.2017)

As a team, Dr. Bose and Dr. Mishra felt that democracy could not be effective if it was only representative democracy and not participatory democracy, and that all panchayat activities should be carried out in consultation with the common people as a step towards ensuring participatory democracy. As sympathizers of the leftist-ideology, they felt it was imperative on them to make people understand that merely voting once in five years is not democracy. Rather, people should have an ownership of their government in which they need to participate every day and monitor its functioning. One way to achieve this was to prepare a

people's plan by the people themselves which would reflect the needs and priorities of the people. Though Robert Chambers had already started his participatory experiments by the 1980s, for Surya Kanta Mishra the idea that finally led to the Midnapore planning experiment (discussed in further detail in Section 4.4.1), once again referred back to the theoretical writings of Dr. S.B. Sen where he highlights the need for micro-level institutions that can represent the villagers and their needs and priorities:

It is not possible for someone in Kolkata or the District towns to know what kind development activities are required in a remote village inhabited by 38 thousand villagers. People who think they can are living amidst an unreal dream. One has to listen to what the villagers say to know about their demands. The ultimate decision on their needs and priorities should be left to them. They might be incorrect, but it would be even more erroneous if the ministers and bureaucrats set the priorities from Kolkata. That is exactly what has happened so long, resulting in the drainage of public money.

There are different classes in the village with different requirements. ... In case of different demands being raised simultaneously, only those demands should be accepted that benefit the majority. This underlines the need for a representative institution in the village that can decide on behalf of the villagers. This is why Panchayat elections are necessary. New possibilities will be created if the new Panchayats can represent the common people and the Left Front government can align its development efforts with the Panchayats.

(S.B. Sen writing under the pen-name of Ranjan Choudhuri, 1977, reprinted in 1997:86-87)

While the above statement reflects an awareness about the village community not being a homogenous entity, not much is said about the possibility of 'elite capture' at the local level, and there is also a degree of naivety about the prospect of harmonious resolution of conflicts among the members of the community.

During the interviews for this research, some of the top bureaucrats from Panchayat and Rural Development Department (PRDD) endorsed the view that the pioneers visualised the process of participatory planning as part of a bigger political process, a process of conscientization through which the common man would appreciate and recognize the phenomena of class and caste-based exploitation and conflicts taking place in the society. But the bureaucrats also highlighted another facet in saying that apart from power sharing and improved service delivery, it could also be a way of gaining and retaining political control over the rural areas (SDG, SMNR interviews). An endorsement of this view is found in the book

'State Politics and Panchayats in India' (2003) by Ghosh and Kumar, taking into account the politico-administrative realities facing the Left parties in 1977.

After assuming power in 1977, firstly, the CPI(M) perhaps anticipated the threat of arbitrary imposition of President's rule by the Centre to dislodge the constitutionally elected government in West Bengal. Secondly, they were sceptical about receiving cooperation from the bureaucracy and thirdly, they lacked an organisational base in the rural areas. After registering a landslide victory in the first panchayat elections in 1978, possibly the LF realised the full potentials of this institution and found in it an instrument to combat all these abovementioned problems. In the event of imposition of President's Rule by the Centre, the LF could still wield power, if they were able to capture and control the local government institutions. They could expand their political base in the rural areas, and involve the mass organisations in governance, along with the bureaucratic machinery (Ghosh and Kumar, 2003). Kohli (1987) too pointed out that the CPI(M) opted to restructure the local government as a strategy to control the panchayat through CPI(M) sympathizers. According to this view, thus, it was more political necessity rather than the commitment to the ideology of decentralised governance that was the driving force behind installation of the PRI system in West Bengal.

From the above discussions, two major trends come through as the ideas motivating the installation of the Panchayats in West Bengal at the beginning of the LF rule in the State. One directs towards a genuine ideological commitment among a section of the political elites to the cause of democratic revolution, while the other points towards a more instrumentalist approach towards the local government institutions keeping the compulsions of electoral politics in mind. Possibly both these trends played out simultaneously within the policy-makers of the LF, which ultimately resulted in the installation of the PRI system in West Bengal. In the next section, we will trace the conceptual origins of the *Gram Unnayan Samity* (Village Development Committee) the role of which will be examined in more detail in the Chapter 5 of this thesis.

#### 4.3.2 Conceptual origins of the *Gram Unnayan Samity* (GUS)

Most of the respondents interviewed during the fieldwork for this thesis who were directly involved in the Midnapore planning experiment, perceive it as having a real people-centric approach, in which there was no blue-print. Once the planning phase was over, the district authorities in Midnapore wanted these plans to be implementable to hold the people's interest in the process. To make plans implementable, Midnapore Zilla Parishad devolved untied funds – an amount of Rs.50000<sup>33</sup> to each of the concerned villages that had prepared the plans successfully through a village-level-committee (SSKM, SMNR interviews).

Suryakanta Misra, who was then the *Sabhadhipati* (Chairperson) for Midnapore ZP, considers the villagers in these villages to have done many innovative things with this fund that the elites would have never thought of. He cites the example of the loan-procedure of banks, which he thinks does not really cater to the demands and needs of the poor. For example, there is a specific season for breeding of fishes but maybe the villagers are unable to get necessary loans from the bank at that time, since the bank disburses loans according to its own schedule. But the village development committee could give out loans exactly when it was required by the villagers, which they could repay at their own convenience. Being a witness to this gave rise to a conviction in SKM that this could actually be done. The then District Magistrate too thought that the people utilized the money well, honestly, and with good dividends (SSKM, SMNR interviews).

When both the ex-Sabhadhipati, Midnapore ZP and the District Magistrate, Midnapore came to PRDD in 1991 as the Minister-in-charge and the Principal Secretary, they wanted to replicate this participatory planning experience on a larger scale. As a team, they were convinced of what people's participation could achieve. During their tenure with the PRDD, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment of the Constitution came into effect in 1993, the People's Plan Campaign in Kerala happened in 1996 and the UNICEF funded Community Convergent Action (CCA) took place between 1999 and 2002 (to be taken up in detail in section 4.4). The effects of all these experiences led to the Amendments to the Panchayat Act in 2003, which provided for the

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<sup>33</sup> Equivalent to around GBP 2,800 in 1980.

formation of the *Gram Unnayan Samity* (GUS), whose conceptual origins can be traced back to the Village Development Committees in Midnapore.

Before the GUS came into being, Beneficiary Committees were mandatorily formed in order to implement area-wise development schemes as per West Bengal Panchayat Amendment Act, (1994). Gram Panchayats (GP) were supposed to constitute these ad hoc statutory committees with the advice and guidance of Gram Sansads. According to the said Act, these committees were supposed to 'ensure active participation of people in implementation, maintenance and equitable distribution of benefits of one or more development schemes in the area'. However, in the absence of a specific process of its constitution, the ruling parties in the GPs had absolute control over the constitution of these powerful committees which in turn became instruments for manipulation of political power in the hands of the ruling political parties (Bhattacharya, 2002).

In reality, it seems that the Beneficiary Committees existed mostly on paper, and there was another informally constituted committee called the '*Gram Committee*', which assisted the elected representatives of the GP in their tasks. This was the real active support group of the GP members who depended on the recommendation of this *Gram Committee* for selection of beneficiaries for any development scheme. These committees were constituted on party lines, comprising of party cadres and supporters, giving rise to an apprehension among villagers that decisions of the GP were partisan in nature. Due to scarcity of resources, demand for benefits always exceeded availability of benefits, giving rise to discontent among villagers (ibid).

Seen from a bureaucratic lens, the Beneficiary Committee, used to receive cash in advance from the GP, for execution of area-development schemes, but could not be held accountable in case of leakage of these government funds. This was because since there was no legal provision for the Beneficiary Committee to have a Bank Account, all financial transactions were conducted in an informal manner. Therefore, the need was felt for a body with the statutory authority to hold a bank account through which financial transactions can take place, and consequently it can be held accountable in case of any malpractice but can be equally credited in case of doing good work. Thus, the concept of the GUS emerged, which, being a legal institution, could receive advance money from the GP in a perfectly legal manner for implementation of schemes. Secondly, being outsiders to a particular area, it is often

difficult for bureaucrats to assess the needs of the locality all of a sudden. But s/he would be able to execute her/his assigned responsibilities smoothly, if some selected people from the village come forward to help him know the locality better and understand its problems. This was another justification for constituting a body like the GUS (ex-Joint Secretary-2 interview).

The third justification for constituting the GUS was that the GUS also gave the villagers a scope for venting discontent that could resolve problems; thus, changing the obstructive role of the opposition. The GUS could thus emerge as a platform for conflict resolution through debate and discussion (interview with ex-Principle Secretary and ex-Joint Secretary-1). In the following section, we will take a look at the legal provisions for the formation of the *Gram Unnayan Samity* (GUS).

#### **4.3.3 Legal provision of the *Gram Unnayan Samity* through amendments in the Panchayat Act in 2003**

As mentioned in section 4.2.1, democratic decentralisation initiatives in India received a boost with the enactment of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts. These Acts made the PRIs third stratum of government under the Central and the State Governments. Consequently, most of the State Governments enacted enabling legislations. The West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 1994 was passed accordingly, creating three fora for people's participation, viz. Gram Sabha, Gram Sansad and Beneficiary Committees (Bhattacharya, 2002). A detailed discussion on the Beneficiary Committee has been made in section 4.3.2 of this chapter. In this section, we will briefly discuss the other two bodies before discussing the legal provisions of the *Gram Unnayan Samity* (GUS).

Gram Sabha is the Gram Panchayat (Village Council) level annual meeting comprising of 10000 – 15000 voters to review and authenticate the proposed plan and budget for the next year and the performance of the previous year. The Gram Sabha also had the authority to sanction and disburse benefits, selection of schemes and decide on the location of various community assets. But due to the presence of a large number of voters, the opportunities to provide effective inputs in the entire process was limited. Hence, the concept of Gram Sansad was introduced by the West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 1994, which is defined in the Act as “a body consisting of persons registered at any time in the electoral rolls pertaining to

a constituency of a gram panchayat". Gram Sansad meetings are held publicly twice a year at the lowest possible level of the Panchayat system covering around 700 voters to discuss local needs and priorities, choose beneficiaries of existing programmes, review past performances along with accounts of expenditures and validate future schemes along with budgets.

Formally, the Gram Sabha and the Gram Sansad have been given immense powers, but in reality, the percentage of attendance in both Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad meetings was extremely poor. None of the Districts in the State could achieve the quorum for Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad meetings, which is one-twentieth and one-tenth of their total members, according to the West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 1994. In some cases, quorum only existed on paper, which rendered any meaningful participation by the people in any of the said activities very difficult. Moreover, it was gradually becoming evident by the late 1990s that West Bengal was lagging behind other Indian States (like Kerala) in terms of devolution of authority, finances and functions to the local government units. Hence, the need for further amendments to the West Bengal Panchayat Act of 1973 was felt in order to deepen and consolidate the decentralisation process by strengthening governance and ensuring people's participation in local governance (M.N. Roy, n.d.; Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002; Bhattacharya, 2002; GoWB, 2009a).

Further amendments to the West Bengal Panchayat Act (1973) in 2003 paved the way for the third generation Panchayats in West Bengal. A significant provision made in 2003 with respect to people's participation was the formation of the Gram Unnayan Samitis (Village / Ward Development Committees) or GUS at the Gram Sansad (GS) level. As mentioned earlier, since the GPs in West Bengal are quite large, the West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act, (1994) introduced the concept of GS in West Bengal, which is the main forum for accountability of the GP. The GUS, on the other hand, may be interpreted as the executive wing of the GS, which acts as an extension of the GP. The GUS should comprise of all elected member(s) to the GP from the particular GS, the opposition candidate(s) obtaining the second highest votes in the election, specified number of representatives from local NGOs / CBOs, members of Self-Help Groups, Teachers, Government Employees and 10 common persons from the concerned GS. The GUS is supposed to be an apolitical body to be constituted on the basis of consensus between the elected and opposition members of the concerned Sansad. One of the main functions of the GUS is to assist the GS to prepare its five-year perspective plan, as well as

annual plans to achieve economic development and social justice (Roy, n.d.; GoWB, 2004a; GoWB, 2009a).

The GUS - created through the 2003 Amendment of the West Bengal Panchayat Act for enhancing people's participation and strengthening the decentralisation process – was supposed to maintain constant liaison between the common people and the GP (Bandyopadhyay, 2003; Ghosh, 2010). Provisions under Rule 74 of the West Bengal Panchayat (Gram Panchayat Administration) Rules (GoWB, 2004a) identifies nine functions for the GUS all of which are geared towards making the GUS a platform for effective participation and active citizenship. These provisions authorize the GUS to undertake a number of participatory activities ranging from identifying needs of the village and prepare a budget with participation of the villagers, receive and utilize development funds and maintain records for activities and fund utilisation, promote and nurture neighbourhood groups of the poor, lead awareness campaigns on issues like health, education, livelihoods, gender disparity, etc. and ensure participation of all in achieving these goals (GoWB, 2004a).

The narrative of activating the GUS as a participatory space for the people at the grassroots will be taken up in the following analytical chapters. Prior to that, we will briefly touch upon the different experiments related to village level participatory planning exercises, that had a significant influence on the participatory agenda in the State of West Bengal at different times.

## **4.4 Experiments undertaken**

### **4.4.1 Midnapore village-based planning experiments**

As mentioned in Section 4.3.1, the concept of participatory planning at the village level was initiated in West Bengal in the 1980s, jointly by the Rural Development Centre under the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Kharagpur, West Bengal led by Dr. Ajit Narayan Bose, in collaboration with the Zilla Parishad (ZP) of the erstwhile undivided Midnapore district of West Bengal, under the leadership of Dr. SuryaKanta Mishra. Being leftists, both the pioneers turned to the Panchayats to enable the process of participatory democracy, and decided that all activities of the Panchayats (e.g. receipt of funds, maintenance of accounts, beneficiary

selection for different schemes, etc.) should be carried out in consultation with the people. While brainstorming over the modalities of the participatory process, they were convinced it is possible for the villagers to prepare their own plans, whereby they will get to know their own village better by collecting village level data themselves. They will get to know important facts about their own village, like the exact number of agricultural labourers, landless labourers, area of cultivated land, area of cultivated land with single crop or double crops, system of irrigation, nature of small scale or cottage industries, number of artisans dependent on it, etc. The idea was to collect this data through participatory surveys in the form of neighbourhood meetings and documented in a village-register to be prepared by the villagers themselves. The villagers would assess their requirements, fix their priorities according to the available local resources and make their own plans that would reflect their needs and priorities. The main theme was that people should speak, and they should be listened to. A core team of volunteers would facilitate the process supported by the panchayat and different government departments. At the end of the planning experiment, the results were published in the form of a booklet - '*grambasider dara gram porikolpona*', (village planning by the villagers) and a general consensus was reached that such an exercise was indeed feasible (SSKM interview, Chatterjee, 2003).

According to Suryakanta Mishra, the planning experiment succeeded in a few places and these village-plans were later published for further dissemination and replication elsewhere. In 1985, the West Bengal government decided in favour of upscaling such decentralised planning, and Midnapore Zilla Parishad once again took up the challenge with support from the Rural Development Centre, IIT. Initially, Aurain *Gram Panchayat* (GP) under Kanthi II block was selected for application of the project, viz. planning for the village by villagers. By 1986-87, nine villages drew up their own plans through participatory surveys conducted through community meetings. The results of these surveys were very different from the official ones. In order to make the plans implementable, Midnapore ZP even devolved Rs. 50,000 as untied funds to each of the villages that prepared the plans successfully. The money was given to a '*gram committee*' (village committee) formed in each of these villages for the purpose. This '*gram committee*' is the earliest form of the '*Gram Unnayan Samity*' discussed in the earlier sections of this chapter. The vision was to prepare village plans, Gram Panchayat plans, Block plans and the District Plan based on such bottom-up, participatory approach. (SSKM

interview; Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002; Chatterjee, 2003). Recalling the Midnapore experience, one of the state-level senior bureaucrats said,

During the early 1980s, devolving untied funds directly to the Gram Panchayats in this manner was unthinkable. There were some restrictions though, e.g. BDO was one of the operators, since the post of Prodhhan still had not gained credibility. Today, Prodhans receive crores of rupees, it was not so then. A sense of distrust was there, which is quite natural in case of any experiment.

(Ex-Joint Secretary-1, PRDD; interview, conducted on 24.02.2017)

However, these exercises could not be sustained for long since the local powerful groups regained control over the process very soon, and the experiments could not be replicated on a larger scale immediately. The ex-Joint Secretary of PRDD, who joined the Midnapore administrative machinery in 1989 as the District Planning Officer, surmised that the experiment should have been scaled up gradually, after having built a strong and supportive institutional mechanism. With lack of all-out political support and appropriate institutional mechanisms in place, the ambition of the district authorities to replicate this initiative in all Gram Panchayats of Midnapore district, was not a feasible proposition at the time (SDKP interview; Chatterjee, 2003). The Panchayats were unhappy with such an experiment, in which villagers were directly receiving money in their bank accounts bypassing the Panchayats. This was hitting vested interests, local political-elites were feeling threatened and patronization suffered a setback. Bureaucrats directly involved in this experiment strongly felt that local politicians would have used that platform if they were really convinced of its advantages and disadvantages, irrespective of which political outfit is in power (interviews with ex-Principal Secretary and ex-Special Secretary).

Ghatak and Ghatak (2002) have identified a few obstacles that hindered the expansion of this experiment from a mimeographed note titled 'The Crisis in the Village Based Planning Movement' by Dr. Ajit Narayan Bose himself. According to this note, the elected representatives of the Panchayats felt threatened by the prospect of empowerment of the common people and the erosion of the newly acquired status of the representatives as a result. Secondly, several panchayat members as well as local political elites who were employers of wage labour felt threatened by the prospect of empowerment of the working population. Since Midnapore was a leftist bastion at the time, this attitude among the local leaders demonstrates that a large section of the LF were not aligned with the ideological

stance of people's empowerment adopted by the pioneers of the decentralised governance reforms in West Bengal, and viewed the panchayats through the instrumentalist lens of establishing party hegemony and political control. This signals the differential nature of the motivations driving the political elites within the CPI(M) from the very beginning, though there is no evidence of any explicit debate on this issue. A.N. Bose's observations about the reactions of the political elites to the village-planning experiment also reflects a degree of naivety on the part of the pioneers of the participatory reform agenda about the existence of the parallel, instrumental strain of motivations within the party.

Though it was discontinued for the time being, the importance of the Midnapore planning experiment will be emphasised repeatedly in the course of tracking the history of participatory governance reforms in West Bengal in this thesis.

#### **4.4.2 Impact of the People's Plan Campaign in Kerala on the bureaucratic circles of West Bengal**

Apart from the legacy of the Midnapore planning experiment, the bureaucrats from West Bengal were fascinated by the People's Plan campaign in Kerala, which was a major change occurring nationally with its ripple-effects touching West Bengal. The 'People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning' in Kerala launched by the Left Democratic Front (LDF) coalition in 1996, represents the most ambitious decentralisation initiative in India. There had been administrative decentralisation in the form of authority over officials from many line departments, apart from of new functions and decision-making powers for all three tiers of the PRI in Kerala. Political authority was devolved to the elected local representatives to design, fund and implement an entire range of new development projects. The wheel started rolling in 1996, when 40% of the funds controlled by the State government of Kerala were devolved to the panchayat village planning councils in addition to the Central Government funds. Along with this, the People's Plan campaign was launched to involve common people with the planning process at the grassroots. This 'people's plan' had been conceived to empower the people to formulate and implement their own plan, and in the process acquire and make better use of local information. On the other hand, the criticism was that due to lack of expertise, many villages either failed to produce plans, or made very poor-quality

plans. However, there were also some voluntary technical committees who provided the technical expertise. The point was to strike a balance between expertise and popular participation in the planning process (Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002; Isaac and Heller, 2003; Heller, 2009).

Around the same time, In the mid-1990s, UNICEF was trying to launch a small programme in West Bengal called the Convergent Community Action (CCA), with a bottom-up kind of process. In its discussions with the PRDD officials about the modalities of its implementation, attention was drawn to what was happening in Kerala, following which, the top bureaucrats decided to go and have a look at the developments taking place in Kerala in 1998. The Special Secretary, PRDD was in this team, and by his own admission:

Kerala fascinated us. At least initially. ... From Kerala we got ideas that what had been tried in Midnapore was not a wrong method. That was the method which can be tried.

(Special Secretary, PRDD; Interview conducted on 21.09.2016)

This exposure visit, thus, once again brought to the fore the significance of the lessons learnt during the Midnapore experiment, and set the ball rolling on how the Midnapore and Kerala experiences can be assimilated, and tried out once again in a different context.

Ghatak and Ghatak (2002) in their comparative analysis of the participatory governance models of the two States, have pointed out that the economic and political factors operating in the States of Kerala and West Bengal were very different. After the initial round of reforms (land-reform and panchayats) in rural areas, there was rapid economic growth in rural West Bengal, that toned down the popular demand for further reform in the State. Kerala, on the other hand, faced severe economic crisis calling for drastic measures, that came in the form of radical decentralisation initiatives. The political atmosphere in these two States are also different. Because of the intense electoral competition between the Left and the Centrist coalition of parties in Kerala, no administration has a long tenure in the State. In West Bengal, there was almost a three-decade rule by the Congress party followed by a three-decade rule by the Left Front. When the Left Democratic Front came to power in Kerala in 1996, the prospect of gaining electoral advantage in a competitive political environment motivated the party to do radical decentralisation. On the other hand, the secure tenure of the Left in West Bengal lowered the need for such radical reform (ibid).

However, there was an exchange of ideas between the political leaders of both the States, and the West Bengal bureaucrats felt the need to go to Kerala and see for themselves what was actually happening on the ground in the State. This resulted in the necessary push that succeeded in moving the State government of West Bengal in 1999 when Gram Panchayat level decentralised planning through participatory processes was about to be re-launched through the Community Convergent Action (CCA). UNICEF conceptualised it in a specific way while the PRDD officials added the Kerala and Midnapore experiences to that concept when it was launched (Interview with Special Secretary, PRDD).

#### **4.4.3 Community Convergent Action (CCA) funded by UNICEF**

The methodology followed in the Midnapore planning experiment was tried out once again towards the end of the 1990s, in the Community Convergent Action (CCA) project funded by UNICEF. This was a Central Government initiative funded by the UNICEF where the main support at the state-level was provided by the PRDD. A Task-Force was formed at the State Institute of Panchayat and Rural Development (SIPRD) in which competent officials were included along with Dr. Ajit Narayan Bose and other people interested in initiatives like village-based-development-planning. This was also a bottom-up kind of process where the villagers planned for themselves for their own development. This was finally started in 1999, at an experimental level in selected pockets within 4 districts in West Bengal, Shalboni in Midnapore, Mal in Jalpaiguri and Haringhata in the district of Nadia, and Kashipur block in Puruliya. Village-level meetings were held to collect habitation-wise data, but the plan was made for the entire Gram Panchayat. An official closely involved with the entire process said

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One departmental officer was attached to each of these places. He or she was assisted by external facilitators from NGOs. Apart from that villagers, GP Proddhan, GP Officials were also involved, and there was so much enthusiasm. Good plan documents were prepared. Actually, the model was in the making at the time, but the plans were not implementable, because there was no resource-matching with the plans. These were ideal plans, well-documented. ... The draft plans were made in good English, which was hardly understood by the GPs.

(Ex-Joint Secretary-1, PRDD; interview conducted on 24.02.2017)

It appears from the statement made above that this project was less of a people's plan and more of a bureaucratic agenda in a project mode, which was expected, given the fact that

CCA was a Central Government project. Apart from the involvement of Dr. A.N. Bose and Dr. S.K. Mishra, there was no mention of any political support at the State government level in this entire process. In other words, the CCA was very similar to the Midnapore planning experiment in form but not in its spirit of being part of a larger political process. The CCA initiative was short-lived, since it was closed as soon as the UNICEF stopped funding it, but the CCA model had a significant and long-lasting impact in the subsequent course of events, as will be discussed in the next section.

## **4.5 Effects**

### **4.5.1 Negotiations with global funding agencies**

At the end of the 1980s, two programmes funded by the Government of India were launched in Midnapore, the Central Rural Sanitation Programme (CRSP) launched in 1986 ([mdws.gov.in](http://mdws.gov.in)), and the National Literacy Mission launched in 1988 ([nlm.nic.in](http://nlm.nic.in)). Successful implementation of both these programmes relied a lot on the response of the citizens, making it imperative on the State government to enter into a partnership with the civil society to convert these government programmes into people's movements. At this juncture, in a significant development, Ramakrishna Mission, a non-profit religious organisation, and UNICEF as a funding agency, came forward to join the movement. This was the first time that panchayats and civil society worked together during the left-regime that was not prepared to collaborate with any NGO prior to this juncture. This partnership ended the political apartheid towards the NGO sector in West Bengal, and also made the development sector in the State accessible to the external funding agencies (interview with ex-Principal Secretary, PRDD).

At the turn of millennium, the Panchayat Ministry was an important Ministry, as would be revealed by the following statement of the Report of the Third State Finance Commission, Govt. of West Bengal:

Memo no. 1415/P/2M-6/99 dt. 24.05.1999 issued by the Chief Secretary indicated that the State Council of Ministers in their meeting held on the 10th May, 1999 resolved to implement the provisions of the 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Constitution and to extend and formally strengthen the process of participatory decentralised planning through the local self-government of Panchayats and Municipalities and in view of that, the Governor was pleased to order that the subjects covered under the Eleventh Schedule and Twelfth Schedule to the

Constitution of India were hereby transferred to the Local Self-Governments in the three-tier Panchayats and Municipal bodies.

(3rd SFC, 2008:22)

Around the same time, the Department for International Development (DFID) was funding some projects in India with West Bengal as one of their partner States. Possibly DFID found the initiatives of the PRDD to be a potential case to work on and approached the PRDD for working on poverty alleviation, planning and capacity building issues. Senior bureaucrats of the PRDD have voiced their own interpretations about the motivation for DFID to work with the government of West Bengal. According to the ex-Special Secretary, PRDD, DFID at the time was working on poverty-alleviation and possibly also had a mandate on decentralisation. At the time discussions were making rounds on the relationship between Panchayats in West Bengal and poverty-alleviation; academics like Lieten and Webster were writing on this. Crook and Sverrisson in one of their papers (2001) compared West Bengal not only with different States, but with different countries, and inferred that due to the political commitment of the ruling left regime, an environment had been created in this State to make decentralisation work for the benefit of the excluded. It is possible that DFID saw West Bengal as the only other State apart from Kerala, that could provide the ideal conditions to work on poverty alleviation and decentralisation (interview with Ex-Special Secretary, PRDD).

Now, based on the 'Scoping Study' prepared by Rajan Soni, a Memorandum Of Understanding (MOU) was made in 2002, that if the PRDD undertook such a programme for planning and strengthening of Gram Panchayats, it would be supported by the DFID. The Scoping Study led to the notion of a social development fund to be placed with the Panchayat for emergency purposes, which in the later days was brought about as a fund for activating and supporting the *Gram Unnayan Samity* (GUS). DFID initially committed a substantial amount (almost Rs. 1000 crores) for funding a seven-years project on rural decentralisation. After discussing with all concerned, the PRDD on behalf of the Govt. of West Bengal sent a proposal to this effect to the Govt. of India as well as DFID (interviews with ex-Principal Secretary, ex-Special Secretary and ex-Joint Secretary-1 of PRDD).

When the rounds of negotiations began, DFID proposed to deploy some external agency or consultants to prepare the design of the programme, but the Principal Secretary, PRDD did not agree. Since the top-level political and bureaucratic elites at the PRDD had already

assumed ownership of the programme, he wanted officials of the department to design the programme, though consultants were always welcome to give it an international perspective. That implied almost zero cost for the design phase, when compared to the international consultants, since the govt. officials were salaried staff of the government. DFID complied and allotted the portion of the funds earmarked for the external consultants to the PRDD. Under the instructions of the Principal Secretary, the Special Secretary (with exposure of Kerala) and the Joint Secretary of PRDD, both of whom had been associated with the Midnapore and CCA experiments, started to design the programme along with some representatives of the civil society (interviews with SMNR, SDG and SDP). Hence, the accumulated experience of the participatory experiments conducted in Midnapore, Kerala and the CCA were assimilated while designing this new project for rural decentralisation. In his interview for this research, the ex-Principal Secretary himself admitted this was a very important decision on his part. The underlying reasons for this relate to the thought processes of the donor agencies, which is why he did not want the donor agency to design the programme by themselves. The ex-Special Secy. of PRDD spelt this out in clear-cut terms:

The problem is that there is a kind of inadequacy in the thinking of the donor agencies or they don't have the capacity to understand the contexts. If we expect an external agency to implement programmes here all of a sudden, then it's difficult for them to carry forward.<sup>34</sup>

(Ex-Special Secretary, PRDD; interview conducted on 21.09.2016)

This discussion points towards a strong ownership towards this programme by the concerned officials (considered top-level bureaucratic elites responsible for policy-making in the PRDD), that created an expectation of a programme being implemented by a committed and motivated leadership at the state-level. This theme of country-ownership (see section 2.7.3 in chapter 2) will be explored in greater detail in the following chapters of this thesis.

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<sup>34</sup> As an example, DG cites the example of a Civil Society Support Programme (CSSP), which was conceptualised and implemented parallelly as a complementary to the main SRD programme. CSSP was also funded by the DFID and initially implemented by an external organisation, Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) from 2006 – 2009. DG was part of the Design Team in both the programmes, and followed both projects from close quarters. He feels that CSSP was done mechanically resulting in some problem halfway, and another organisation implemented the rest. Apparently, the design of CSSP was much more donor led, indicating which DG comments: The assumption (of the funding agencies) being - rural system is the same as the urban (interview on 21.09.2016)

A 13-member Design Team was constituted for designing the ‘Strengthening Rural Decentralisation’ (SRD) programme. Apart from PRDD officials, leading persons from different NGOs were included in the team, along with a Governance specialist from DFID. The process started at the end of 2003 and the programme design was prepared over the next one year. The design was divided in different themes like governance and institutions, capacity building and planning, resource mobilisation, programme management issues, etc., and a number of small teams were formed for conducting studies on each. For the next few months, the team members spoke to numerous persons, different institutions, collected opinions and analysed them. Simultaneously, they drew upon their long experience on how to bring about decentralisation, what should ideally be the characteristics of a Panchayat, what should be the right mode of planning, people’s participation and empowerment. Finally, the model was prepared in its rudimentary form and placed in front of the Standing Committee of the Legislative Assembly on Panchayat and Rural Development, which seems to be its first point of contact with other political elites at the state level. Hence the newly designed programme emerges mostly as an agenda of bureaucratic elites rather than the political elites, though the former were inspired to a large extent by the ideological stances of the reformist faction of the Left Front. Therefore, they aimed to strike a balance between institution-building and people’s participation while designing this project, as will be revealed in the following analytical chapter. The programme that was initially called DFID Support for Rural Decentralisation (DSRD) was later renamed ‘Strengthening Rural Decentralisation’ (SRD) (interviews with SDG and SDP). The next analytical chapter of this thesis will examine how the participatory agenda in West Bengal was transformed in light of the DFID-funded SRD project, in which, the Gram Unnayan Samity (GUS) had a crucial role to play.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

This chapter traced the narrative of the participatory agenda in West Bengal over two decades (1985 – 2005) in four broad sections. Section 4.2 laid out the political backdrop and the legal provisions for decentralisation initiatives in West Bengal, leading to the installation of the 3-tier Panchayati Raj Institutions in the State. Section 4.3 elaborated on the crucial ideological trends emerging in this period that decided the course of the participatory agenda in West Bengal. Section 4.4 focused on three grassroots level participatory planning experiments that

influenced the dynamics of the participatory agenda in the State, while Section 4.5 explained the effects of these experiments in the development initiatives of this State, the results of which will be explored in the subsequent analytical chapters. The key issues emerging from the analysis of this chapter are the following:

Firstly, an indigenous set of debates had been the starting point for securing the provision of the local government institutions within the Constitution of India. The Gandhi – Nehru - Ambedkar debate paved the way for enlightened state-elites to provide a larger vision and formulate strategies for a state on a developmental mission, aiming to build transformative capacities within the local government institutions. The Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) system implemented in West Bengal since 1978 was founded on this spirit of the Indian Constitution that visualised the local government institutions as the site for enlightened intervention by the state on behalf of the disadvantaged sections, to counter the existing power-holders of the Indian society. The ideological origins of the participatory local institutions in West Bengal, therefore, mostly lie in this Gandhian – Ambedkarite debate, and then a Leftist framework, rather than any later day western ‘development’ discourse on ‘decentralisation’.

It follows that ascertaining the motivation of the state-elites for introducing decentralised forms of governance and the strategies through which these policies are rolled out in different contexts is important. Chapter 2 of this thesis explains the significance of ideological stances of the parties driving state-reforms, and discusses the case of the ideologically transformed Left in the 1990s. In contexts like Brazil and Kerala, the reformed Left tried to build closer state-society relations facilitated by experiments in participatory governance at the grassroots for ‘deepening democracy’. In a reconceptualization of an all-powerful, centralised state that came through such experiments, a decentralised state put in place institutional arrangements at the local level for opening up democratic spaces for active participation and monitoring by the citizens. In a very similar reformist reorientation, the CPI(M) since the late 1970’s, started a political discourse that emphasised safeguarding of democratic institutions by using state power for facilitating development practices, while retaining its traditional stances of redistribution, social justice, anti-imperialism and a strong state.

The left ideologues in West Bengal like Satyabrata Sen, Ajit Narayan Basu and Suryakanta Mishra who pioneered the participatory planning experiments in the State through the

Midnapore planning experiment, conceived of these initiatives as part of a bigger political process to generate political consciousness by involving common people in the socio-economic affairs of the village. This was meant to be a process of conscientization through which the deprived masses would appreciate and recognize the phenomena of class and caste-based exploitation and conflicts operating in the existing social structure, and then act as agents of social change. In its basic spirit, this concept bears resemblance with Freire's concept of 'conscientization', that increases awareness of the oppressed about the causes of their oppression, who then get involved in actions to change this reality (see section 2.3.1). This concept was reformulated later by Gaventa in his power analysis, emphasizing the need for awareness building of the masses to make them recognise the processes of their systematic deprivation through institutional mechanisms, and to counter the insidious power of internalisation of dominant ideologies by the oppressed (see Section 2.4.2). The second key finding of this chapter is an observation about the existence of such a streak within the CPI(M), that was genuinely inspired by and had deep-rooted conviction on the ability of the masses. The pioneers of these ideas and experiments visualised panchayats as people's organisations that would create the opportunities for substantive participation and empowerment of the oppressed.

However, another element within the CPI(M) looked at installation of the PRI institutions in purely instrumental terms of a strategy to forge broad-based political alliances and build an organisational base to retain political control over rural Bengal, since the party was mostly based in urban areas till it assumed power in 1977 (see section 2.9.3 in Chapter 2). The presence of this element within the party was evident from their resistances to the Midnapore planning experiments on being threatened by the prospect of empowerment of the masses and the erosion of the newly acquired status of the representatives. Scholars like Ghosh and Kumar assert that the 'motive behind CPI(M)'s pro-panchayat policy is political and electoral interests' (2003:182) rather than 'commitment to the ideology of decentralised governance' (2003:181). While this is true for a large section of the CPI(M), this thesis also recognises the parallel existence of the other element, whose motivations were genuinely inspired by the leftist ideology. Possibly, both these trends played out simultaneously within the policy-making circles of the left-regime, and the 'instrumentalist' factions came to a compromise with the leftist ideologues probably because the 'empowerment' argument

provided them with a ground to justify their project of establishing political hegemony across the State through the Panchayati Raj Institutions.

The third major theme surfacing in this chapter deals with the emergence of a new model of governance involving de-bureaucratisation of the system to a certain extent by involving mass organisations in the planning and implementation of rural development works in a more instrumentalist approach. Clipping the wings of bureaucracy was one of the aims mentioned in the common minimum programme of the LF, since the left was sceptical about securing their cooperation of the bureaucracy considering their reluctance to share power with the people on a pan-Indian scale. This theme will be developed further in the following empirical chapters of this thesis.

The major argument developing from the abovementioned themes underscores the role of the state-elites in providing a vision for a state-led structural change, and also highlights the importance of motivation and commitment on the part of these elites to formulate appropriate strategies for transformative change in governance by establishing more collaborative state-society relations.

## **5 Chapter Five: Creation and Withdrawal of Participatory Spaces in West Bengal in 2005 – 2011**

### **5.1 Introduction**

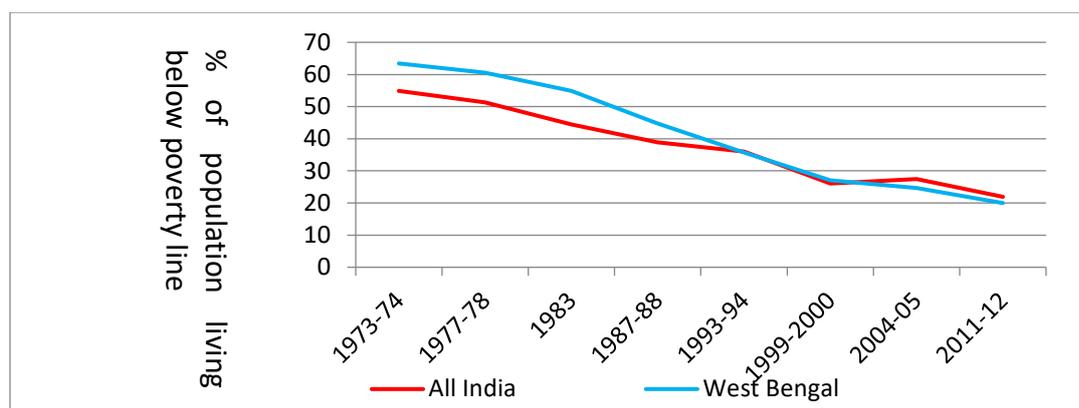
In this chapter, we will move forward with the account of the Left Front (LF) regime in its last few years when it made a desperate attempt to retain its grip on the State of West Bengal with a two-pronged approach before finally losing power in 2011. On one hand, it tried to shed some of its ideological baggage and reorient itself to fit into the globalisation mode that was being pursued aggressively at the Centre by the Government of India. On the other hand, a very marginalised section of the LF, with the help of the state-level administrative machinery, was still aspiring to deepen the democratic processes of the State by devolving more power to the local governance structures or the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) in West Bengal. We will depict this political context in Section 5.2, and then focus on the narrative of creation and withdrawal of participatory spaces at the lowest tier of the PRI in Sections 5.3, 5.4 and 5.5. The *Gram Unnayan Samity* (GUS) or the Village Development Committee was conceived of as a representative forum for the people at the grassroots by the LF government, and it was given statutory authority through an amendment in the Panchayat Act in 2003. The political as well as bureaucratic motivations for this move will be explained in Section 5.3.1, while the account of its abrupt suspension will be taken up in Section 5.3.2. The Panchayat and Rural Development Department Section (PRDD) decided to launch this decentralisation project with financial support from the Department for International Development (DFID), UK, and we will deal with this project at length in Section 5.4 – the experiments undertaken and the role this project played in shaping the participatory agenda in the State. In Section 5.5, we will analyse and explore if the GUS as a representative forum had the potential to develop political capabilities and awareness on citizenship rights among the rural masses in West Bengal. This will be done with the help of evidences in the forms of political documents, as well as data collected during interviews with a large cross-section of stakeholders, with the top-level policy makers on one end of the spectrum and the community representatives on the other. The chapter will be summarised in the concluding section in 5.6.

## **5.2 Political Context: Degeneration of the Left-regime and rise of the Trinamool Congress**

### **5.2.1 Changing nature of local political agents and the social disconnect**

The defeat of the Left Front (LF) after being in power in West Bengal for 34 years has been variously attributed to establishment of total party hegemony by the CPI(M) based on a violent control of territory and exclusion of political rivals (Banerjee, 2011), shrinkage of democratic space and backtracking of the party on its democratic commitments (Chatterjee and Basu, 2009), or the limits of social democratic experiments within parliamentary democracy (Basu and Majumdar, 2013). But the most widely held perception is that of a degenerated LF, which, being focused only on remaining in power through electoral renewal at regular intervals, violated its own initial stated goal of class struggle by forging an alliance of the different classes in rural West Bengal, and finally discontinued the land reforms altogether (Bhattacharyya, 2016). According to this interpretation, vested interests of the landed rich and middle classes gradually eclipsed those of the small and marginal farmers, share-croppers and agricultural workers, who were historically perceived as the main constituent of the LF, leading to a shift in the support-base of the LF. Continuing to suffer from widespread illiteracy and deep-rooted social inequalities, the poor and the marginalised once again became dependent on the 'cultural and political capital' of the dominant classes for their representation in local institutions and mass organisations like the peasant unions, the panchayat or the party. With increasing dependence and weakened representation of the poor, these institutions were captured by a new class of political elites, who were adept at negotiating conflicting interests, and thus contributing to the stability, electoral success, and 'social peace' of the left regime. However, the economic deprivation and the social exclusion of the rural poor continued, making the left's principal constituency fragile from within. (Chatterjee and Basu, 2009; Basu and Majumdar, 2013; Bhattacharyya, 2016). This will be evident from the following graph.

**Figure 5.1: Comparative trend in poverty estimates: India and West Bengal**



Source: Compiled from data in Gol, 2014 in Dasgupta, 2014.

Figure 5.1 depicts a downward trend for the percentage of population living below poverty line both for entire India and for West Bengal over the years. Percentage of population living below the poverty line in West Bengal declined to below 20% in 2011-12 from over 63% in 1973-74 (Gol, 2014). But the rate of poverty reduction is higher in the case of West Bengal than India. As stated in the preceding chapter, empirical studies have attributed this phenomenon to the combination of agrarian and political reforms implemented by the Left Front Government (Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002). However, there does not seem to be much improvement in the inequality status, as would be evident from Table 5.1.

**Table 5.1: Poverty and In-equality over the years: West Bengal Scenario**

Year	% Population Below Poverty Line	*Gini Coefficient in rural sector
1977-78	60.52	0.292
1987-88	44.72	0.272
1999-2000	27.02	0.224
2004-05	24.7	0.27
2011-12	19.98	0.239

Source: Gol, 2014

**\*Note:** The Gini coefficient is a number between 0 and 1, where 0 corresponds with perfect equality and 1 corresponds with perfect inequality

Trends visible from Table 5.1 indicate that in spite of considerable decline in the rate of poverty in quantitative terms, the measure of inequality remains roughly the same in West Bengal even after a leftist regime for more than three decades. This implies that the State Government in West Bengal has been more attentive to tackling poverty only in terms of income and material deprivations at the cost of perpetuating social exclusion and inequality (See section 2.3).

Another indicator for this continuity in systemic inequality and social exclusion might be found in the educational scenario of the State during the LF regime. Among 16 major States of the country, West Bengal was ranked 14<sup>th</sup> in creating infrastructure for primary education and ranked sixth in literacy in a Planning Commission document of 2010. A more critical indicator was the literacy rates of the Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and the Muslims, which were lower than the State's overall average. All Bengal Primary Teacher's Association (ABPTA) affiliated to the CPI(M) always remained silent on the issues of social exclusion or identity related backwardness, thus contributing to the perpetuation of lower literacy rates among the Adivasis, Dalits and Muslims. It has been mentioned earlier in Section 4.2.4 that primary school teachers, who were sent as village representatives to the Panchayats, became prime agents of the LF government in rural West Bengal. The teachers, with their capacity to 'mediate, negotiate, convince and control', occupied a critical space between the party and the rural society, thus contributing to the stability of the regime. However, in the course of time, the organised force of the school teachers, as well as their proximity to the ruling party were mostly helping to enhance their own social status rather than be of any use to the rural poor, and resulting in a social disconnect (Bhattacharyya, 2016).

In the 1990s, the Govt. of India (GoI) adopted some measures to decentralise education across the country in sync with the spirit of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment, and West Bengal conformed to these administrative changes. A District Primary Education Programme was launched, a Village Education Committee (VEC) was formed in every *Gram Sansad*, and the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* was carried out since 2001-02 to universalize primary and elementary education. All these programmes were bureaucratic initiatives with a top-down approach, often with strict financial implications, where there was no scope for the LF to exercise any political autonomy. This lack of autonomy, along with the social disconnect,

severely reduced the authority of the school teachers as the local agents of the LF. Securely entrenched in power, the sole aim of the left regime now was only to sustain their electoral renewal, and the role of the rural school teachers changed from an agent of political change to that of a manager of the 'party society'<sup>35</sup> who monitors and maintains social peace. (ibid.)

After the left stranded the land reform measures midway, there was a phase of stagnancy in West Bengal's agrarian economy in the 1990s. Agriculture was no longer a sustainable livelihood option because of rising input costs and increasing population pressure on land, causing to push-out a sizable section of the rural workforce from the agricultural sector. An increase in the percentage of the marginal workers in Bengal was observed in between 1991 and 2001 (Dey, 2010), implying a movement of unskilled and less educated rural people to informal sectors like construction or manufacturing units. Lack of employment generation in industry or government services forced people with some skills and education take up vocations as small-scale traders, real estate agents, construction material suppliers, labour contractors or ration shop dealers, etc. This intermediate class gradually emerged as some sort of local entrepreneurs with a level of affluence and networking comparable to the school teachers, whose political influence was eroding at the same time. The ruling regime now became increasingly dependent on this emerging class of petty entrepreneurs for exercising political control at the local level. However, the dynamics between the party and its new agents was very different from the school-teachers, as the former, driven by muscle-power and the instincts of survival also required the shelter of the ruling party, that is any party in power, irrespective of any political ideology. Hence, on sensing the downfall of the left-regime post the incidents of 2007, these local agents of the left quickly crossed over to the opposition party Trinomool Congress (TMC), who eagerly accepted this ready network for expanding their operations (Chatterjee, 2009; Bhattacharyya, 2016).

Detached from a movement of any kind for long and being embedded in the comforts of administrative power, a section of the party leadership developed bureaucratic habits, corrupt practices flourished and the party's linkage with the daily lives of the common people snapped. One of the respondents during the field-work for this thesis was the erstwhile

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<sup>35</sup> Bhattacharyya (2016: 126) defines 'party society' as the 'modular form of political society in West Bengal's countryside'. It operates through the Panchayat institutions with the goal of protecting and expanding the party's support-base from one election to another (Bhattacharyya, 2009)

*Sabhadhipati* (Chairperson) of Bankura Zilla Parishad (District Panchayat) from 2008 to 2013. An electrical engineer by profession, he has been politically affiliated to the CPI(M) since 1993, first as a youth leader, then as an elected representative for the PRI. Recounting his interpretation of the factors causing the degeneration of the CPI(M), he says:

Because of being in power for so long, a bureaucratic attitude crept into the party as well as all mass-organisation, be it Krishak Sabha (Farmer Union), or Labour unions, or Mahila Samities (Women's Associations), or Youth organisations. By 'bureaucratic attitude', I mean enjoying the power of a particular position, without being accountable to the people. This attitude is infectious ... it gradually infected all branches of the party. Earlier, the leader used to take everybody along with him during a deputation to the authorities, but now the leader has become an official. With a bureaucratic attitude, he says, 'let me see'. It was all about 'him', and how 'he' could take the credit for the move. He didn't feel the need to take the people with him.

(Ex-Sabhadhipati, Bankura ZP, Interview conducted on 12.01.2017)

This statement demonstrates that some of the key party members were able to detect the symptoms that signalled a disconnect between the party and the masses, but were unable to do much about it. With the disappearance of this link with the people, a series of processes were triggered off, that were beyond the control of the party. Due to a loss of moral authority and legitimacy on the part of the party to represent the masses, different social groups started looking for substitutes to continue their negotiations with the governmental processes, to which the party responded with violence and suppression, thus further widening the rift (Bhattacharyya, 2016). During the field-work for this thesis, an interview respondent, a block level leader of the CPI(M) who has been with the party for more than 40 years now, commented:

In the last 10 years of the Left rule, there was a tussle of egos between the Local Committee (LC) and the Zonal Committee. Both the Local Committee Secretary and the Zonal Committee Secretary thought they will have the last word. Suggestions are always welcome but having an attitude like a zamindar (landlord) and disrespecting the Prodhan (GP Chairperson) is not right. These things happened. ... We (CPI(M)) are also somewhat responsible for choking the democratic voices that's happening today ... gagging of the opposition was taking place strategically.

(GPBMP, Local CPI(M) leader, Indpur block, Bankura, Interview conducted on 6.01.2017)

Such confessions from a grassroots level party worker of the CPI(M) validate the allegation that the CPI(M) treated the panchayats as extension of party offices during the left regime and did not allow them to function as autonomous institutions. It is clear that the *Gram Panchayat* (village council) was subservient to the local party offices and the GP *Prodhans* and the GP employees had to act according to the instructions received from the local leaders of the party. Secondly, the tinge of remorse about the role of the CPI(M) in ‘choking democratic’ voices becomes significant when it is located in the backdrop of the current TMC regime in West Bengal, where the party workers of the CPI(M) were paid back in the same coin. Both these threads will be picked up and discussed in detail in the following empirical chapter. Let us now return to the scenario where the left was gradually losing grip over the rural society of West Bengal while the opposition was gaining ground. At this juncture, an opportunity was seemingly created for a turnaround for the left, the narrative for which will be continued in the next section.

### 5.2.2 “Brand Buddha” and the new economic policy of the Left

On the eve of the 2001 State Assembly elections, when the LF was encountering a real anti-incumbency wave for the first time in two decades, Buddhadev Bhattacharjee took over from Jyoti Basu as Chief Minister in the year 2000. The agricultural scenario looked grim, institutions like panchayats were perceived as corrupt, inefficient and partisan, and the industrial sphere was suffering from a weak investment management mechanism as well as intra-party and party-union disputes. Unemployment figures continued to be disturbingly high and even urban civic services deteriorated resulting in a decline in the urban political support for the party. However, the LF managed to retain its seat of power after the 2001 Assembly elections, with a tally of 199 seats out of 294, its all-time low in the West Bengal State Assembly elections after 1977. At this crucial juncture, Bhattacharjee launched a “new economic policy”, that seemed to have been rewarded by the electorate in the 2006 State Assembly elections, when the LF captured 235 out of 294 seats and secured more than 50% of the votes in comparison to its previous tally of 48% in 2001. The 2006 State Assembly Elections had three distinctive features. Firstly, the ruling LF returned to power for a record seventh consecutive time, with a decisive margin of victory. Secondly, elaborate measures

were adopted by the Election Commission of India to ensure free and fair elections, adding increased legitimacy to the LF victory. Thirdly, the two main opposition parties in West Bengal, the Congress (INC) and the Trinomool Congress (TMC) performed dismally, securing only 29 and 21 seats respectively. This election was seen as the “reincarnation” of the Left under the stewardship of the new Chief Minister, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee. (Basu, 2007)

In formulating his new policy, more popularly known as “Brand Buddha”, the Chief Minister emphasized that the need of the hour was to reframe the ideological templates of a leftist government operating within a capitalist national and international framework in the era of globalisation. In some of the interviews following the victory of 2006, he maintained that –

[w]e are surrounded on all sides by capitalism. You cannot practice socialism by insulating yourself from this environment.

(Anandabazar Patrika, May 2006, quoted in Basu, 2007)

Some of the leading industrialists of India like Ratan Tata, Azim Premji and Sanjiv Goenka praised the ‘confidence building measures’ initiated by the new CM, who in turn, increased his proximity to the commercial interests, who, he thought, could be beneficial for the economy of West Bengal. The new economic policy of his government formulated plans to let business houses acquire agricultural lands for industrial and infrastructural purposes. After returning to power in 2006, proposals were passed by his administration to acquire 32000 acres of farmland for industrial construction. The principal argument of the LF now was that, the small-landholder economy of the State should be transformed into an industrialized economy, in order to sustain the benefits of the land reforms carried out in the first two decades of the left regime. The industries minister, Nirupam Sen argued that since the investor’s choice had to be accorded top priority in a market economy, his government would not insist on assurance of jobs as part of the compensation packages for displaced farmers. Moreover, this ‘new look’ left government resolved to restrain militant trade union activism, much to the satisfaction of the industrialists, and restructured non-viable public-sector units in West Bengal with funding support of the Department for International Development (DFID), UK. In the process, the CM had several face-offs with the party’s trade union wing, but the latter was never able to secure full support of the party in any of these occasions. The party-support enjoyed by Bhattacharjee can either be seen as a recognition on the part of the CPI(M) of the Chief Minister’s growing stature as a popular leader, and / or the party’s

standpoint and responses to the facets of globalisation had undergone a sea-change over the last decade, in order to make the inevitable compromises required to accommodate the new economic policies of “Brand Buddha”(Basu, 2007).

With the first flush of economic liberalisation making a visible impact on urban India at the turn of the millennium, the urban landscape of Kolkata was changing swiftly with flyovers, multiplexes, housing plazas and shopping malls cropping up. Land situated in areas around greater Kolkata or next to the highways were attracting attention from the potential investors for development of real estate or industrial infrastructure. The dilemma of the left now was how to reconcile the opposing aspirations of its newfound support base in the urban middle classes with its traditional constituents in rural Bengal. Even in the 2006 elections, the majority of the LF's votes came from its rural and predominantly agricultural constituencies, and hence the transfer of fertile land for non-agricultural purposes was not destined to be a smooth process – as the subsequent events will testify (Basu, 2007, Bhattacharya, 2009).

In late 2006, just a few months after the huge electoral victory of the CPI(M), massive waves of protest were visible on the streets of Kolkata and different pockets of West Bengal to protest against acquisition of fertile agricultural land by the State Government, which were to be transferred to Tata Motors for their car manufacturing unit in Singur. In March 2007, violence erupted in Nandigram in protest against State plans for land acquisition for a chemical hub. Between July and September 2007, popular unrest broke out across rural areas of West Bengal in protest against the corrupt ration shop dealers and the malfunctioning public distribution system. Kolkata became an epicentre of such agitations both by the principal opposition party, the TMC, as well as independent, left-minded activists, intelligentsia and members of the civil society. A massive protest rally against the State government's violent actions in Nandigram was witnessed in the streets of Kolkata in November 2007. Thus, in a State where the left had traditionally enjoyed the support of the civil society and intelligentsia, 2007 was a turning point. These incidents indicated a period of transition, when the left was losing political control, while the opposition was yet to consolidate, leading to a period of confusion, anxiety and uncertainty (Ramaswamy, 2011, Bhattacharyya, 2016).

That this was only the beginning of the end became increasingly evident with every election that followed. Vote share of the LF fell to 52.98% for the first time since 1978 in the Panchayat

elections of 2008, declined to 43.3% in the Parliamentary elections held in 2009 and plummeted to 41% in the Assembly Elections of 2011 (see Table 5.2). The LF lost control of the State Government winning only 62 out of 294 seats of the West Bengal State Assembly in 2011, in stark contrast to 235 seats held in 2006 Assembly Elections (Mallick, 2013).

**Table 5.2: Vote Share of the Left Front in different elections (2008 – 2011)**

Year of Election	Election Tier	% of Left Seat
2008	Panchayat (local)	52.98
2009	Parliament (central)	43.3
2011	Assembly (State)	41

Source: Bhattacharya (2013), Mallick (2013)

The larger ailment suffered by the leftist regime was that of erosion of an ideology that was originally aimed at ensuring ‘real’ empowerment of the oppressed and deprived masses. The aggressive pursuit of a neo-liberal agenda of corporate industrialization could not have been done without approval of the party leadership and was carried out by securing cooperation of the party machinery which is used for effective communication purposes to minimize oppositional forces (Masty, 2008). That such centralisation of decision-making powers and refusal to involve the community in the process proved disastrous for the LF in the long run, was evident by the results of the Assembly Elections in 2011 which uprooted the LF from the seat of power after 34 years (Social Watch, 2010; Mallick, 2013).

However, in order to fully comprehend the shifts in policies of the LF that led to such centralising trends over the years, it is important to repeatedly reflect on the significance of the milestones that marked such shifts in the ideological stances of the LF for almost over a period of three-decades and a half. The following section therefore, moves back in time in search of the origins of the *Gram Unnayan Samity* (GUS), while tracking the motivations of the LF to constitute participatory spaces at the grassroots through the GUS.

## 5.3 Ideas

### 5.3.1 Motivations for creating participatory spaces through the *Gram Unnayan Samity*

Ideas that led to the Midnapore village-based planning experiments (in 1980s) in West Bengal have already been discussed in detail in chapter 4. The Midnapore planning experiment was the first of such participatory experiments conducted by the reformist faction of the Left Front, that had a long-lasting impact on shaping the future course of the participatory agenda in the State. We have also mentioned that the *ex-Sabhadhipati* (Chairperson), Midnapore ZP and the District Magistrate, Midnapore were both brought together as the Minister-in-charge and the Principal Secretary of the Panchayat and Rural Development Department (PRDD), Govt. Of West Bengal in 1991. Since both of them were convinced about the positive outcomes of people's participation, they wanted to replicate and upscale this participatory planning experience through PRDD. Most other officials of the PRDD also had exposure to this participatory planning process through their involvement in one or more of the three projects – the Midnapore planning experiment, the People's Plan Campaign in Kerala, or the Community Convergent Action (CCA) project (see section 4.4).

Meanwhile, the issue of people's participation in the PRI system made a comeback in the development discourse with the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment (1992) of the Indian Constitution. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the concept of the *Gram Sansad* was introduced by the West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act (1994) as the main forum of accountability for the *Gram Panchayat*. The *Gram Sansad* had been assigned the same powers and responsibilities, which have been assigned to the *Gram Sabha* by the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment of the Constitution of India (1992). However, over the next few years, officials in the PRDD realised that the forum of the *Gram Sansad* was not adequate to ensure people's participation, as the *Gram Sansad* meetings were becoming stereotyped and the proceedings increasingly being captured by local elites (interview with ex-Panchayat Commissioner, PRDD).

In the early years of the new century, the State Institute of Panchayat and Rural Development (SIPRD) commissioned ethnographic surveys in selected GPs across the State to gauge the nature of people's perception about the participatory forums (*viz. Gram Sansad, Beneficiary*

Committee) created by the State Government. The results of the survey<sup>36</sup> pointed towards administrative failure on the part of the State Government to popularise the concept of *Gram Sansad*, as well as organisational failure at the grassroots leading to low attendance of people in the *Gram Sansad* meetings. The Beneficiary Committees (see section 4.3 in chapter 4) were perceived to be totally partisan in nature, detaching the common people further from the process of decision-making. Moreover, in spite of heavy polling during the Panchayat elections every 5 years, the elected GP member hardly developed any relationship with his/her constituencies in the intervening years. The majority of the participants in the survey came through as being unheard and powerless with regards to the PRI forums at the grassroots (SIPRD, 2012) indicating a capture of the political space at the local level by the political elites. The *Gram Sansad* emerged as an amorphous concept requiring a task force to activate itself and address this problem partially, and thus, the provision for *Gram Unnayan Samity* (GUS) or the Village Development Committee as an executive wing of the *Gram Sansad* was made through the Amendments to the Panchayat Act in 2003 (interview with ex-Panchayat Commissioner and ex-Joint Secretary-1, PRDD).

Varied motivations for constitution of the GUS were also revealed by bureaucrats in the PRDD. According to one version, when the policy-makers in the PRDD were thinking of implementing the concepts of participatory panchayat through participatory planning in the State (after the CCA and the Kerala experiences), the bureaucrats in the PRDD acutely felt the absence of a definite decentralised power structure in the *Gram Panchayat* (GP) to facilitate these exercises:

GP Prodhan was the head of people's representatives, and also the Executive Officer of the GP ... entire power was consolidated in the hands of the Prodhan at that time ... participatory democracy was non-existent, because other elected representatives were not coming to the GP. The Prodhan was becoming an autocrat, and the department was receiving numerous complaints against the Prodhans ... From this experience, we learnt that we have to activate all elected members. In order to activate them, they should be given power as well as responsibility.

(ex-Joint Secretary-2; interview conducted on 02.02.2017)

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<sup>36</sup> The papers based on these survey results were finally published as compilations by the SIPRD in 2012 in 2 volumes as *Gram Panchayats in West Bengal: Institutional Capabilities and Developmental Interventions*.

Thus, the PRDD felt the need not only for horizontal distribution of power by activating the Standing Committees at the GP level, but also for 'deepening democracy' by devolution of more authority to the *Gram Sansad* (polling area for each elected member), since the planning and the implementation of schemes is done at the *sansad* level (SMR interview). Other bureaucratic considerations came up during the course of the elite interviews, which revealed distinctly instrumentalist motivations for constituting the GUS, mostly related to the smooth implementation of schemes or conflict management at the village level, which have been discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

There was considerable debate on the devolution of financial power to the GUS. However, because of the experiences gained from the Midnapore planning experiment, the state-level policy-makers were convinced that the villagers involved in this experiment are able to utilise the money given to them optimally in innovative ways to cater to the needs of the poor that were never possible through a top-down approach. The necessity to constitute the GUS and devolve financial power to it was also felt keenly by the officials of the PRDD for smooth implementation of schemes at the village level and consequently, the GUS was authorised to open bank accounts and given limited financial powers (SSKM, SMNR interviews).

However, enforcing the constitution of the GUS at the field-level was not an easy affair for the PRDD. At the state level, a difference of opinion arose over this decision between practitioners and academicians like Buddhadev Ghosh (interview on 26.10.2016) or D. Bandopadhyay (2003) who considered the GUS as unconstitutional. This is because they viewed the GUS as the 4<sup>th</sup> tier of the PRI system whereas the Indian Constitution provides for a 3-tier Panchayati Raj Institution. According to the then Commissioner of Panchayats, the decision to constitute the GUS also elicited resistance from the political system, as well as the district level administrative machinery -

After the amendment ... there was some resistance from the same political party, that is CPI(M). A section of this party thought if people do everything, then what will the Members of Legislative Assembly and Prodhans do? ... Then all the District Panchayat Rural Development Officers said constitution of the GUS will lead to widespread violence and chaos and expressed their inability to do this job ... the District Magistrates vocally protested against the procedure for constitution of the GUS. But the Minister did not relent. He asserted that whether there was chaos or not, the GUS has to be formed.

(Ex-Panchayat Commissioner, interview conducted on 25.10.2016)

It is evident from this statement that in spite of the political will of the Minister and the efforts of the top-level bureaucrats of the PRDD, the very concept of a participatory forum at the grassroots like the GUS did not go down well with the district and sub-district level administrative machinery and also a large part of the political system since its inception stage. However, possibly due to lack of any form of organised resistance by their ilk, the local bureaucrats were forced to comply with the orders imposed by the reformist faction of the CPI(M) for the time-being. The resistance by the local bureaucrats reflect a simmering discontent within the bureaucracy against the new model of governance introduced by the LF in which the bureaucrats were compelled to share power with the politicians representing mass organisations (see section 4.3). This also resonates Sudipta Kaviraj's (1991) claim about the existence of a gap between the 'modernist discourse' of the bureaucratic elite, and the 'vernacular everyday discourses' of the personnel placed at the lower rungs of the state (see section 2.9). That these oppositional forces at various levels and different interest groups became crucial in deciding its fate in the long run, will be obvious gradually, as the narrative unfolds in the following section.

### 5.3.2 Withdrawal of participatory spaces by the left regime

As mentioned earlier, after winning six consecutive Panchayat elections since 1978 that almost eliminated any opposition, the Left Front (LF) in West Bengal was in for a shock when its vote share fell for the first time in 2008, (Majumdar, 2009; Rana, 2013). Table 5.3 depicts the decline in vote share of the LF in local government elections over three decades:

**Table 5.3: Vote Share of the Left Front in Gram Panchayat Elections**

Year	GP level Vote Share of the Left Front
1978	70.28
1983	61.20
1988	72.32
1993	64.35
1998	56.09
2003	65.75
2008	52.98
2013	32.01

Source: CPI(M) (2013), Bhattacharya (2013)

Though the vote-share of the Left Front at the local government level dropped substantially, the LF retained control of the State Government for three more years after the Panchayat elections of 2008. It was expected that some of the commitments made in the Panchayat Election Manifesto 2008 - on upscaling and institutionalising decentralised planning - could have been fulfilled by the LF during this period which did not seem to materialize. Instead, other internal changes occurred within the party that had long term implications.

In the Statistical Analysis of the West Bengal 7<sup>th</sup> Panchayat Elections 2008 by the party, it was admitted that the results of the Panchayat elections were far below the expectations of the party (CPI(M), 2013). This report primarily attributed this setback to the collusion between the opposition parties and the coalition partners of the CPI(M). Other reasons listed later include declining organizational discipline of the party, factionalism and lack of ideological commitment of the party-workers, and lack of acceptance of the party workers among the masses (ibid.). A report of the CPI(M) Central Committee notes:

The image of the party amongst the people has been dented by manifestations of highhandedness, bureaucratism and *refusal to hear the views of the people*.

(CPI(M), 2011: 4; emphasis added)

It may very well be inferred that the 'refusal to hear the views of the people' stems from a long party culture of believing that 'party knows best'. Corbridge et.al in their study observed a belief among CPI(M) party-activists that the poor needed protection not just against other classes, but also 'against some of their own dispositions and desires' (Corbridge, et al., 2005: 254) and the researchers deemed this attitude to be quite reasonable in the given context (ibid). However, viewed from the perspective of 'effective participation', this attitude betrays lack of confidence in the inherent capabilities of the people.

In the days following the Panchayat elections in 2008, District Magistrates and Block Development Officers from different districts, as well as people affiliated to different political parties sent written reports to the PRDD about the conflicts and violent clashes occurring during the constitution of the GUS in 2008. One of the senior bureaucrats posted in the PRDD during those days revealed –

Cutting across party lines, even the political leaders at the higher level did not want the GUS to be there anymore. Specially the members of the Legislative Assembly at the State level complained to the department that formation of the GUS has led to conflicts in their

respective areas ... The MLAs<sup>37</sup> raised this issue repeatedly in the Legislative Assembly, and placed our honourable MIC<sup>38</sup> in an uncomfortable position. They used to embarrass him regularly, and the officials who were involved in the constitution of the GUS were also being made answerable.

(ex-Joint Secretary-2; interview conducted on 02.02.2017)

Three more senior bureaucrats interviewed during the course of this research were witnesses to the abovementioned incidents unfolding in the State Legislative Assembly, in which ironically, the CPI(M) enjoyed an absolute majority. It is clear that the entire state-level political system in West Bengal was uncomfortable with the existence of the GUS, including a large section within the CPI(M), the party to which the then MIC-PRDD, Suryakanta Mishra was affiliated to. As stated earlier, Mishra had been instrumental in carrying forward the decentralisation initiatives in the State. The final blow came after the all-party meeting of MLAs in the Legislative Assembly (SMNR, SDG, SMR interviews). In a rapid turn of events, Surjya Kanta Mishra, the Minister-in-Charge of PRDD for over 18 years, was unceremoniously removed by the Left Front from the Ministry in August 2009, and replaced by Anisur Rahman (Dasgupta, 2009).

Within months of assuming office, Rahman issued a departmental order that had the potential to stall participatory planning initiatives to a great extent. This Government Order (GO) (Order no. 1284/PN/O/1/1A-1/04 (Part 2) dated 08.03.2010) superseded all earlier orders in this respect and rendered the GUS an ineffective body in effect (GoWB, 2010). The crucial juncture of course, had been the all-party meeting at the Legislative Assembly, after which, even the Principal Secretary (topmost bureaucrat of PRDD), by his own admission, was personally convinced that the powers of the GUS should be withdrawn (SMNR). The sporadic incidents of violence that might have occurred during the formation of the GUS have been cited by the concerned government department as justification for issuance of the revised GO on the GUS (GoWB, 2010).

This revised GO suspended all 5 Rules pertaining to the GUS<sup>39</sup> (ibid; GoWB, 2010). It specified six functions for the GUS, most of which are concerned with assisting the GP in implementing

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<sup>37</sup> Members of Legislative Assembly, highest level of decision-makers in the State

<sup>38</sup> Minister-in-Charge

<sup>39</sup> The exception was Rule 73(2).

various projects and mobilization of taxes. The revised order authorized the GUS to prepare a need-based development plan and budget, but omitted the aspect of 'people's participation' from the provision. The GUS was only authorized to ensure people's participation during the official Gram Sansad meetings. Provisions related to account maintenance and fund utilization by the GUS, nurturing of neighbourhood groups or promotion of awareness campaigns were all suspended in this new order (GoWB, 2010). In effect, the GUS was reduced merely to an implementing agency of the GP by this revised order.

During the course of interviews conducted for this research there seemed to be a broad-based consensus among the state-level bureaucrats interviewed on the distinct development of certain antagonistic attitudes within the political system against the forum of the GUS after the Panchayat elections of 2008. The ruling Left Front had lost considerable number of seats in the 2008 Panchayat elections and seemed to be much more concerned about losing power in the State (SAG, SDP interviews). The reaction of these political elites was very much similar to that of the rural elites who felt threatened during the Midnapore planning experiment and brought these experiments to a sudden halt three decades earlier (see section 4.4). We will examine the effects of the abovementioned sequence of events in detail in section 5.5 of this chapter.

## **5.4 Experiments Undertaken**

### **5.4.1 Upscaling village level participatory planning through the Strengthening Rural Decentralisation (SRD) project (2005 – 2011) funded by DFID-UK**

As mentioned in chapter 4, decentralised planning initiatives were launched initially in West Bengal as a pioneering pro-people movement in the 1980s in nine villages of Midnapore district of the State. During the late 1990s, another pilot project in the same model, now called the Convergent Community Action (CCA) was attempted in four other districts of the State in 1999 (Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002). The policy makers desired participatory planning to be at the centre of the CCA, which was focused on the issues pertaining to women and children. UNICEF commissioned an action-research between 1999 and 2001 to look at prospects for enhanced community participation in the CCA programme. Dept. For International

Development, UK (DFID-UK) commissioned the evaluation study of the CCA, which recommended up-scaling the CCA initiative, resulting in the Strengthening Rural Decentralisation (SRD) programme with an initial proposed budget of GBP 130 million, across 18 districts in West Bengal over a 7-year time period upto March 2011. Participatory planning and improving livelihoods were central themes of the proposed programme, which was initially proposed to be launched in the 6 poorest districts that would benefit for 7 years from the programme. Thereafter the SRD programme was proposed to be initiated 3 and 5 years later respectively in West Bengal's 12 remaining districts in two more phases of 6 districts each.

However, in February 2005, the SRD programme funding was finally sanctioned for a period of 2 years with a truncated budget of GBP 9 million and it was formally launched in September 2005. Phase II of the programme intensively dealing with 12 districts started in September 2007, while other activities covering the entire State- started in April 2008 with a budget of GBP 27 million. SRD worked intensively in 858 Gram Panchayats (GPs) in 12 districts from September 2007, but then 63 more GPs were brought into its fold in 2 more districts taking the coverage of the programme 921 GPs in 14 districts of West Bengal in two phases between 2005 and 2011 (GoWB, 2004b; GoWB, 2007b, GoWB 2009a; GoWB, 2009b).

The objective of the SRD programme - brought in to complement GoWB's ongoing initiative on rural decentralisation – was to achieve 'more effective, accountable, pro-poor rural decentralisation leading to sustainable reduction in poverty in the rural areas of the state' at the end of the project (GoWB, n.d.). The Programme Memorandum of the SRD Programme (2004) mentions the following four specific outputs of the programme:

Output 1: Effective preparation and implementation of a roadmap and linked policy actions to deepen rural decentralisation.

Output 2: Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs), line departments and support institutions have the institutional framework and capacities to operate more effectively in their decentralised roles.

Output 3: Pro-poor, participatory planning, implementation and monitoring systems established across PRIs.

Output 4: Resources enhanced and utilised for pro-poor local development in a cost-effective and environmentally sustainable manner.

In order to achieve the stated outputs, various interventions were undertaken through the SRD programme which included support to PRIs and support institutions for strengthening institutional infrastructure, capacity building of PRIs functionaries and stakeholders, state-wide campaign and communication for awareness generation, research, studies, assessment and evaluation related to functioning of PRIs for further need-based reforms, developing and strengthening information management systems at all 3 PRI levels, installation and institutionalisation of pro-poor participatory planning, implementation, monitoring and accountability systems across PRIs, support to PRIs with united funds mainly for strengthening livelihoods of the poorest and most marginalized through participatory plans (GoWB, 2004b). The focus of this thesis is principally on output 3, which will be explored in greater detail in the section 5.5 of this chapter.

#### **5.4.2 Institutional changes within the Gram Panchayat during the SRD project period**

The formal purpose of SRD has been stated as to help secure over time more effective, accountable, pro-poor rural decentralisation leading to sustainable reduction in poverty in the rural areas of the State. This purpose was to be achieved by adopting two major approaches: a) Capacity Building and b) the Untied Poverty Fund. The capacity building approach was further sub-divided into i) Training and ii) Non-training activities, that can be described as a part of 'institution building'. Non-training activities would involve support for planning and policy formulation (e.g. preparation of the Roadmap for Panchayats), production of electronic and printed campaign materials, installation of a satellite-based communication system and building of better infrastructure for the Panchayati Raj Institutions (GoWB, 2004b). The Training component included –

- i) Institution or class-based training programmes, delivered mainly through established institutional training set-up of the Department of Panchayat and Rural Development Department (PRDD) like the State Institute of Panchayat and Rural Development (SIPRD), the 5 Extension Training Centres (ETC) and 30 District Training Centres

established under the SRD programme, including a number of temporary training centres

- ii) Satellite communication system-based training for various target groups concerned with the PRI.
- iii) Mentoring or hand-holding support of the Gram Panchayat (GP) officials and other GP functionaries by mobile trainers, who were mostly retired government officials. They were supposed to cover a wide range of subjects (including Panchayat Act, Rules, Government orders and guidelines, financial management, office management, resource mobilisation, planning, social development, social justice as well as the rules and regulations of the various national programmes). But in practice, they appear to have mainly focussed on financial management, administrative issues and book keeping (according to the 'old' manual system)
- iv) Hands-on training for Gram-Sansad participatory planning teams, which involved a combination of intensive facilitation and hand-holding support at GP level by district level SRD personnel, satellite-based distance learning using Receive Only Terminal (ROT) to disseminate key information required for planning; and exposure visits of GPs to good practices.

(GoWB, 2004b; GoWB, 2008a)

A balance between institution building and participatory inputs at the local level is evident from the components mentioned above. However, we will explore the fourth component in further detail for the purpose of this research.

Capacity building for this component began with the creation of a decentralised planning facilitation Cell at the district level in all the concerned Zilla Parishads followed by the formation and training of GP level facilitation teams. Next, messages highlighting the importance and process of participating in the planning process were circulated among the people in the concerned villages through wall-writings and leaflets. This was followed by the formation and intensive training of the Gram Panchayat Facilitating Team (GPFT) at the GP level comprising of the Chairman, Secretary and selected general members of the GUS from all Gram Sansads of the concerned GP, all GP functionaries, representatives of SHG federations, selected school-teachers, government employees and civil-society

representatives either residing or working within the jurisdiction of the GP. The GPFT members were trained intensively on the process of collection and compilation of family-wise and sector wise data through neighbourhood meetings, rural household surveys, baselines, census, line departments etc.

In the process, frequent neighbourhood level meetings were supposed to be conducted facilitated by the Gram Unnayan Samiti (GUS), who had been given hands-on training on usage of participatory strategies like the preparation of social and resource maps for every Gram Sansad using PRA / PLA methodologies. On completion of these steps, analysis of the data collected, identification of critical gaps as well as possible interventions using the available resources was to be done by the GUS. Finally, a Gram Sansad level plan and budget was to be prepared by the GPFT based on seven sectors namely education, health, women and child development, agriculture and allied, industry, infrastructure and other miscellaneous sector in adherence to the Government guidelines. Activities planned were mostly of 'no cost, low cost' nature, while high cost and high technology schemes were forwarded to the respective upper tiers. A planning guideline and need-based planning sub-guidelines had been issued by the PRDD to facilitate this planning process to be used at the district, GP and GUS levels (GoWB, 2008a; GoWB, 2009a).

The modalities of these participatory planning exercises resemble the basic principles of Fung and Wright's (2003) 'empowered participatory governance' to a large extent (see section 2.4 in chapter 2) that focuses on joint-planning, problem-solving and strategizing sessions based on participatory and deliberative solutions to practical problems by people who are directly affected. Moreover, it was a form a new form of coordinated decentralisation whereby the GUS was connected to a superordinate body like the GP by vertical linkages of communication and accountability similar to a design feature suggested by Fung and Wright (2003). How this new institutional arrangement shaped the participatory agenda at the local level will be explored in the following sections.

### 5.4.3 **Shaping of the participatory agenda in West Bengal as facilitated by the SRD project**

Output 3 of the SRD programme, which is installation of Pro-poor, participatory planning, implementation and monitoring systems across PRIs, was explained in the SRD Programme Brochure as a mechanism for empowerment of the poorest and marginalised sections of the community, who would be able to articulate their voices and reflect their needs through the participatory planning, implementation and monitoring of the Gram Sansad plan based Gram Panchayat Plans. This intervention was later named as SRD's "most radical Capacity Building intervention" and a novel experiment within the Government sector by independent studies by external agencies (IPE-ISS, 2009: 20).

The Annual Progress report of the SRD (2007-08) claims that maximum emphasis was placed on the installation of participatory planning process since inception of the SRD programme (GoWB, 2008a). As mentioned earlier, the members of the GUS led the lengthy process of preparing the plans at village levels initiated through neighbourhood meetings, collection of household and community level data and preparation of village level social and natural resource maps. The community members used the data and maps to 'identify, quantify, analyse and prioritise their own problems, resources and potentials' (Vestheim, et al., 2007:15). Involvement of the members of women's Self-Help Groups (SHG) of the localities have also been highlighted as another predominant feature of the planning process (GoWB, 2008a). The Annual Administrative Report of the PRDD (2008-09) states that 4462 GUS under 462 GPs could prepare the Gram Sansad Plan based Gram Panchayat Plan by the end of the financial year 2008-09 (GoWB, 2009b).

This was a unique juncture in the history of decentralisation initiatives of the State of West Bengal. It has already been argued in chapter 4 that participatory planning initiatives in West Bengal had been conceived of as an indigenous project within the framework of the Leftist ideology. However, the project was being upscaled with fund support from a western funding agency like the DFID, which also promotes the concept of people's participation as part of its development discourse through the 'good governance' agenda. However, as has been pointed out in chapter 2, the influence of UN institutions that emphasize on the political dimension of governance, like meaningful participation of citizens in decision-making

processes of public-institutions, can be observed in the development discourse of a bilateral agency like the DFID. DFID refers to 'good governance' in terms of national ownership of the developing countries, and this discourse is as much about the government, as it is about political parties, parliament, judiciary, media, civil society, and their inter-relationships. It is the way countries and societies manage their affairs politically and the way power and authority are exercised (DFID 2010, see also section 2.7). Possibly because of this flexibility in the way this discourse played out on the field, a minister subscribing to the leftist ideology did not hesitate to accept fund support from DFID to materialise his vision, in spite of vehement opposition from more dogmatic leftists in the same regime, which will be taken up later in this thesis. How much of these 'participatory inputs' were actually institutionalised to yield meaningful results in the long-run (see section 2.3.2), is an important question that would be discussed in the following sections.

## **5.5 Effects: GUS as potential forums for developing vibrant citizenship and consequently a threat to the entrenched party-society**

### **5.5.1 Empowerment through participatory planning: political commitment by the Left**

An evaluation by Sambodhi (2009) acknowledged that the participatory planning approach under SRD, based on exhaustive capacity building exercises had been an empowering experience both for the communities and the local government units or GPs. It notes that the SRD GPs were better informed, displayed better reach and effect of voice and also show signs of adopting the decentralised principles more systematically than those not covered by SRD (ibid). The IPE-ISS report (2009) noted that there was a substantial attempt to establish genuinely participatory processes in the GPs covered by SRD programme. Moreover, the sustained discussion on people's participation in decentralised planning, the issue of strengthening institutional processes in the GPs through the GUS and the social awareness campaigns had a positive impact on the community consciousness (ibid, Vestrheim, et al., 2007). However, the IPE-ISS report (2009) also expresses serious concern about the lack of institutionalising the planning mechanism within and by the Standing Committees of the GP.

For Surjya Kanta Mishra, the longest serving Minister in the Panchayat and Rural Development Department (PRDD), the primary yardstick for measuring success of political panchayats should be its capacity to 'mobilize the entire people irrespective of their political affiliation, class, caste, gender, religion, etc. in the process of planning, implementing and monitoring development of their locality' (Mishra, 2002:72). As mentioned earlier, Mishra was instrumental in scaling up the participatory planning initiatives through the SRD programme. The seventh Panchayat election was held in 2008 when the SRD programme was already in its third year of implementation with coverage of 304 GPs across 6 districts (GoWB, 2008a). The issue of further decentralisation of the Panchayats through upscaling of the participatory planning initiative was accorded first priority in the Left Front (LF) Election Manifesto for the Panchayat Elections 2008, outlining the immediate tasks ahead:

There should be further decentralisation ... More power should be devolved to the Panchayats for more empowerment of the masses. In the last 5 years, 40965 Gram Unnayan Samities have been constituted in 45154 Gram Sansads. 12056 out of them have their own savings bank accounts. Our fight is to build this system in all the Gram Sansads over the next 5 years. Preparing Gram Sansad plan based Gram Panchayat plans based on which the block plans and district plans will be made and then implemented. Within this year, we will extend this fight from 300 GPs in 6 districts to 800 GPs in 11 districts. Within the next 5 years, this will be extended to every part of the state by involving the villagers in each village in an effort to rebuild their own villages.

(LF, 2008:10)

In a visible affirmation of 'political commitment', it is further asserted that since the ultimate end of all these initiatives was to empower the most deprived sections of the society, the LF would provide necessary political support to achieve these aims (ibid:11). It might be interesting to note that the phrasing of the first three priorities outlined in the LF manifesto are strikingly similar to another document authored by Mishra, 'Prasanga: Panchayat Nirbachan 2008' (Context : Panchayat Elections 2008) (Mishra, 2008:15) indicating the importance accorded to Mishra's vision of development by the CPI(M) prior to the Panchayat elections of 2008.

Five years later, the LF Election Manifesto for the Panchayat elections 2013 claimed that the participatory planning exercise could not be upscaled beyond 300 GPs due to the change of government in 2011 (LF, 2013). This claim totally contradicts the figures quoted in the Annual Administrative Report (2008-09) (GoWB, 2009b) of the PRDD mentioned in section 4 of this

chapter. Another study by Bhattacharya (n.d.) discloses that the SRD initiative gradually became alienated from the mainstream administrative as well as the political system. In its later stages, it was largely driven by the project staff and the officials directly involved in the project (ibid). This reveals a widening communication gap between different wings of the government and the party leadership at the later stages, which would be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7. The occurrences after 2008 elections related earlier in this chapter are telling evidences of such contradictions.

During the field-work for this thesis, we have come across district level leaders of the LF, who had a genuine desire to oversee successful implementation of the 'participatory planning' component, somewhere feeling a resonance with the original ideology of the Left in its 'empowerment' approach through effective participation of the people. But apparently, they were frustrated with the local political elites down the line, who, realising that this process implied handing over decision-making power to the people, felt threatened of losing their grip over his concerned locality, rendering the party powerless in the area -

The political leaders themselves created a bottleneck in the implementation of this programme (SRD). I wanted it to run successfully in the entire district, but due to hindrances posed by the local leaders, it was limited to specific pockets (like Hirbandh and Simlapal) of the district. Local leaders kind of sabotaged it, not protesting vocally, but by silent non-cooperation.

(DPM, ex-Sabhadhipati, Bankura ZP, interview conducted on 12.01.2017)

This statement coming from a political leader himself shows that the CPI(M) is not an undifferentiated entity validating our claim in chapter 4. This statement reflects a deep divide in the ideological basis of the LF mired in factionalism at the time. The section within the LF with the conviction on the power of the people, was gradually being outnumbered by party workers to whom common people were only voters to be viewed through the lens of a patronage network. People belonging to the former category were being increasingly marginalised in the party, and were fast losing control over their own grassroots level party workers, who apparently began ignoring party dictats or sabotaging them through non-cooperation due to vested self-interests (GPBMP, local leader of CPI(M), Brahmandiha GP, Interview on 06.01.2017).

### **“Offering Steroids when Homeopathy is needed”**

In mid-2007, most of the *Gram Unnayan Samities* (GUS) in Birbhum district which had successfully completed the participatory village planning exercise, had received some untied funds from the PRDD under the SRD programme. These GUS were now expected to implement several small scale and ‘low-tech’ activities that they had planned for, with the help of the said untied fund. All field-personnel of the SRD project, as mentors and facilitators of the GUS, were now making extensive visits from one GP to another for facilitating the implementation of these planned activities. They were sensitising GUS members about adopting certain pre-implementation measures to maintain transparency in their functioning. Mobile Trainers (mostly retired personnel of the PRDD) were training the GUS Chairperson and GUS Secretary on the basic principles of maintaining books of accounts. Other members of the GUS were being sensitised on the need and modalities of conducting neighbourhood meetings, to apprise the villagers about the receipt and utilisation of untied funds by the GUS. Some GUS members were writing this information on a permanent structure located centrally (like the wall of a primary school or a primary health centre in the village), for all villagers to see for themselves and be informed about the functions of the GUS. In other words, the GUS members, under the guidance of the facilitators from SRD, were undertaking a range of activities for pro-active dissemination of information among the villagers.

One such afternoon during this phase, with most of the SRD field-facilitators doing field visits, I, as the District Coordinator of the SRD programme in Birbhum, was busy monitoring these activities from my office. I was making and receiving numerous phone calls to coordinate and monitor the training and sensitisation programmes taking place in several Gram Panchayats across the district simultaneously. One such call took me by surprise. The call was from a *Sabhapati* of a *Panchayat Samity* (Chairperson of block level panchayat). “Madam”, he said, “I would like to give you some feedback on the activities of this SRD programme.” “Please go ahead”, I told him excitedly. “Don’t you think you are offering steroids to people whereas what they need is homeopathic medicine?” came the reply. I did not understand what he meant and told him so. He explained, “You are giving too much information to people, you know. This is just not needed.” I was taken aback and fell silent as he hung up the phone. My excitement died down, and set me thinking on why this information disseminating exercise was undesirable to a mid-level political person affiliated to a party, which is currently the ruling party in the State government.

### 5.5.2 Narrative of the GUS: View from the top

Once again in a parallel with the Midnapore planning experiment, it was evident from the discussions in the earlier sections that the GUS did not go down well with the 3-tier PRI system. Some of the state-level bureaucrats interviewed observed that the GUS emerged as a threat to the opaque manner of institutional functioning of the PRI. That there was leakage of funds at the GP level earlier was clearly proved, since the GUS, now possessing financial power, was able to do the same job more cost-effectively. The GUS, thus, was a threat to the Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samity and the Zilla Parishad, so all three tiers of the PRI had a role to play in undoing the GUS. Secondly, the MLAs were angered since they are ex-officio members in all tiers of the PRI except for the Gram Unnayan Samities (Joint Secretary-2, PRDD, interview). This view was also validated with the evidence cited earlier in section 5.3.2.

Most of the bureaucrats were of the opinion that the opposition to the GUS came from the top-level decision-makers. One of them strongly believed that after the Left Front (LF) suffered a major setback in the 2008 Panchayat elections, the party became jittery about the fact that the common villagers are having too much access to information:

The CPI(M) did not do well at all in the Gram Panchayat elections of 2008 ... The CPI(M) party identified two main causes for this. One is empowerment of the people through Gram Sansad, and the second is empowerment of women through Self Help Groups ... I was told about this by an Ex ZP Sabhadhipati (of CPI(M)) ... when they lost 40% of the seats in 2008, her party felt that the people came to know too much. Too much information was being disseminated downwards. And this had occurred due to these two movements.

(ex-Panchayat Commissioner, PRDD; interview conducted on 25.10.2016)

The claim made in the above statement partly explains the reasons for the discrepancy noted by this research between the 2008 and 2013 election manifestos of the CPI(M) (see section 5.5.1). It is quite possible that the political system that operates in a camouflaged manner was being exposed, and the GUS, having deep connections with the people, was one of the reasons for this exposure. The right to question the people's representatives were given to the people, which was definitely an uncomfortable proposition for the ruling regime.

These systems created an obstacle in the vote-catching mechanisms set up by the party because there was nothing that the party could 'hand out' to the people as a favour. Rather, an active GUS would generate an additional layer in between the conventional patron-client

relationship that had prevailed earlier between the CPI(M) and the rural masses. A vibrantly functioning GUS had the potential to act as a representative forum for the clients, armed with the requisite information and political capability to negotiate directly with the local governance structures for their rights and a greater share of the public goods. This research agrees with the hint dropped by the ex-Commissioner of Panchayats, that this could have been a primary reason why a major section of the ruling party (CPI(M)) was not comfortable with the idea of a functional GUS, and decided to roll back the wheels of decentralisation that it was committed to prior to the Panchayat elections of 2008. Interviews with the bureaucratic elites revealed that no consultation was held with the people (members of the GUS or the villagers) who would be really affected by this step; not even the Gram Panchayat of which the GUS is a part. The fate of the GUS was sealed off in an Assembly meeting itself, attended mainly by the Members of Legislative Assembly (MLA) (SMNR, SDG, SDP and SAG interviews).

A significant finding that emerged from the interviews of the senior bureaucrats placed in the PRDD was a firm belief among the bureaucratic elites that the larger section of the LF was responsible for distorting the founding principles of the GUS as a tool to 'capture' the Gram Panchayats during its implementation at the grassroots. One of the reasons for this was attributed to the failure of the PRDD to communicate the purpose behind formation of the GUS to the political parties in an appropriate manner. Political support definitely came through the Minister in Charge, but a greater degree of political mobilization and a common understanding with all political parties in the State was required in order to ensure success of the reform. This view found validation in a research-study conducted in 2008-09 by Chattopadhyay, et.al (2010), which has been referred to in further detail later in this chapter. An extensive consultation with the opposition at the inception of the GUS was essential for deeper penetration of the message, but there appeared to be an absence of any dialogue between the top leadership of the ruling and the opposition parties at the time. However, it may also be pertinent to point out that non-involvement of the local bureaucracy in training and activating the GUS was not made much of an issue by the bureaucratic elites, though it was touched upon by some on second thoughts. The Principal Secretary, PRDD, seemed to be convinced that given the time and right kind of hand-holding support, the GUS had the potential to emerge as an effective forum for participation and conflict resolution at the grassroots -

At the cutting-edge level, we wanted everyone to come together under one forum with the aim to work together. It is one society, but strong political state is dividing the society. It's creating rift in the society. Everything is decided politically ... that identity becomes more prominent than other aspects ... there should be both conflict and cooperation and dialogue. Conflict can be resolved through dialogue, so that you can have cooperation ... If this does not function at the lower level, there cannot be people's involvement in the real sense. It becomes a partisan involvement.

(Ex-Principal Secretary, PRDD; interview conducted on 11.09.2016)

Along with a deep-rooted conviction in the power of people's participation, an affirmation of the theory of 'party-society' (see section 5.2) comes through in this statement. It also reflects an underlying desire to see things from a 'neutral' perspective, considering politics to be somewhat of an undesirable element. This perspective corroborates a hint dropped by another senior bureaucrat of the PRDD to some extent, that the bureaucrats within the PRDD are not homogenous entities, as they too are divided into the 'participatory' and the 'institutionalist' camps (see section 2.3.2), which was also somewhat responsible for the fate of the GUS. According to this version, the former was deeply convinced about the eagerness and capability of the villagers for participating in different state-processes, but the 'institutionalists' perceived the GUS as a parallel force apprehending that it had the potential to challenge the GP as an institution. For the 'institutionalists', people's participation is limited to consultation with the people twice a year in the *Gram Sansad* meetings and the GP is viewed only as an office with its infrastructure, accounts, rules and regulations (SDP interview). Significantly, this same set of bureaucrats designed the World Bank funded 'Institutional Strengthening of Gram Panchayats' (ISGP) project which is more about institution building and will be discussed in detail in the following chapter. However, that institutional designing devoid of ideological motivations cannot yield meaningful results has been discussed at length earlier in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

It might be pertinent to refer to the Kerala experience once again in this context. The People's Plan Campaign in Kerala did not have political support either from the Congress party, or the CPI(M) as a whole, which was more interested in exercising direct party control over the local governance structures. However, a reformist faction within the party that had the support of a pioneer like E.M.S. Namboodiripad, championed the case of People's Plan Campaign, and moved forward with the project by securing the active support of the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP), a powerful mass-based organization with a long history of working through

grassroots initiatives (Heller, 2009). Hence, it is was this crucial strategic move of building broad-based coalitions with the civil-society actors driven by specific ideological motivations that facilitated the success of this institutional reform in Kerala but was absent in West Bengal.

Since Dr. Surya Kanta Mishra was in chair as the Minister-in-Charge (MIC) of PRDD in West Bengal when the GUS was constituted through amendments to the Panchayat Act in 2003, his perspective, an entirely political framing of the GUS narrative, was absolutely crucial in this debate. Striking parallels between the Midnapore planning experiment (of which he was a pioneer) and the GUS experience emerged repeatedly in his interview specially with reference to the hindrances thrown up by the existing power structures to the devolution of financial power and decision-making authority to the community at the local level. In Midnapore, the first line of objection came from local elites like comparatively rich villagers, landlords or money-lenders etc. whose vested interests were hurt. The second line of resistance came from elected representatives who were insecure of losing their decision-making power to the people through the decentralised planning process. Thirdly, rather than owning the perspective of people-centric development as the overarching vision of the 'left' in general, other parties in the LF alliance apprehended that one party (CPI(M)) is trying to dominate. It is these second and third lines of conflicts between the elements of elite-capture and the devolution of power, that bear prominent resemblances to the circumstances leading to the withdrawal of the GUS (see section 5.3.2). However, while the MIC referred to the 'other parties in the LF alliance', what he did not spell out clearly was the non-cooperation from the members of a larger faction of his own party, the CPI(M), in closing down the participatory spaces created for democratic experiments at the grassroots (SSKM, MIC-PRDD; interviewed on 14.02.2017).

Apart from these micro-level issues, the Minister also gave a different interpretation of the entire narrative from the macro-perspective -

As a summary of my experiences, I can say that translating and implementing this entire concept on the field is not a matter of 2 to 5 years. It's a continuous process ... In the current structure, it is bound to face hindrances. It's even more difficult for a state government to do it, if the country runs on a different mode. Globally, and nation-wide, the trend is towards centralisation. Trying to do decentralisation amidst this means swimming against the current.

(Ex-Minister in Charge, PRDD; interview conducted on 14.02.2017)

This was a possible reference to the global economic meltdown since 2008, leading to a consolidation of the neo-liberal structure at the Centre (Govt. of India) and the constraints on the State Government, challenges faced by the industrialisation policy of the LF regime – all these created an atmosphere in which the LF faced a major setback in the 2008 Panchayat elections. At that critical juncture, the LF was encountering many basic policy debates involving its swing towards industrialisation, move on land-acquisition, etc. and was being criticised from the left for not being radical enough, and also by the right for its existing policies. It might be deduced that during such crisis periods, the reformist faction of the CPI(M) (of which he was an integral part), seemed to be at cross-roads as far as loyalty to party-discipline through the principle of ‘democratic centralism’ was concerned (see section 2.9.3). During such critical times, said the Minister -

It’s not enough to be occupied only with the village-plan, one has to provide an overall alternative to the state government at the macro-level. Those were more challenging issues.

(Ex-Minister in Charge, PRDD; interview conducted on 14.02.2017)

This statement partly goes against the discourses of S.B. Sen, the Minister’s ideological ‘guru’, who was acutely aware of the need for party-workers to be aware of the limitations of operating within a capitalist framework and formulate their strategies accordingly (see chapter 4). While the truth about the macro-level happenings cannot be brushed off, this statement on the part of the MIC seemed to have an element of contradiction. If the GUS had been so insignificant an issue, why then did the LF feel the pressing need to do away with it, if not for the fear of its failings being exposed to the people at large? These questions take us back to the works of scholars like Moitree Bhattacharya (2002) and Ghosh and Kumar (2003) who expressed concern on the over-emphasis of the CPI(M) on party-discipline, and observed that the principles of ‘democratic centralism’ of the party (see section 2.9.3 in chapter 2) is working to the detriment of grassroots participation and ignoring the aspect of spontaneous decision-making by the people and their representatives. Both these observations were made in the context of Gram Panchayats before the GUS came into existence. Ghosh and Kumar held the LF regime responsible for not allowing the panchayats to grow into autonomous and empowered institutions of self-government since it might promote ‘the growth of grassroot leaders who may not give unqualified support to the central directives of the party’ and even those ‘captured by the ruling party’ may be ‘emboldened to

articulate the will of the local community challenging the rationale of the policies and programmes of the government' (2003: 183). Hence, the CPI(M) preferred 'controlled' local government institutions for pursuing their political objectives. This thesis sees the same principle being applied to the GUS, which was withdrawn as soon as the ruling party sensed that 'empowered' masses and even 'empowered' party-cadres may throw up challenges to party hegemony. To this political agenda was added the bureaucratic agenda of a lack of support to the GUS by the local bureaucrats who felt that the responsibility of activating the GUS had been imposed upon them by the top-level policy-makers (see section 5.3.1). The next section of this chapter will explore and analyse these narratives in further detail from the people's point of view at the micro-level.

### **5.5.3 Narrative of the GUS: Voices from the field**

Constitution of The Gram Sansad Sabha and the Gram Unnayan Samity – this was a significant decision. ... One can preserve the assets created only when people also participate in implementing the decisions taken by them ... But it's not only about assets. Immense changes occur in the mentality of the people themselves. This process links the individual to the social processes as opposed to the self-centred way of thinking. This was a significant aspect. ... But an important decision like the GUS came at a time when the party was already on its wane and infected by that 'bureaucratic attitude'. ... This resulted in a lack of understanding about the true spirit of the GUS among the masses. This in turn led to the partisan mode of constituting the GUS from its very inception. The reason was not money, but the lust for power. No party wants to lose control over the area – across party lines. This is a reflection of an overall degeneration rather than party diktat.

(DPM, ex-Sabhadhipati, ZP Bankura; Interview conducted on 12.01.2017)

#### **5.5.3.1 What worked for the GUS: Enhanced consciousness and ownership towards institutional processes.**

During the focus group discussions with the GUS members during the fieldwork, the participants in two of the village councils (one affiliated to the ruling TMC, and the other affiliated to the CPI(M)) explained the process of preparing social and natural resource maps and the process of data collection with remarkable clarity. They also recalled the mode of training imparted to them by the SRD Coordinator on participatory planning exercises, quite accurately. It seemed that the social and natural resource mapping exercises specially fascinated them since some of them also brought the old and worn out maps with them and

tried to interpret the maps enthusiastically and with total ownership. They recalled how smaller maps were first drawn in individual neighbourhoods and then added up to draw the map of the entire Gram Sansad, how this exercise attracted the curiosity of the villagers, and facilitated a discussion on their needs and priorities. There were also interesting reflections on how these neighbourhood meetings helped to dilute the power-play of the local political elites, and consequently to involve more people in the decision-making processes about local development -

People often feel too intimidated to approach the GP directly, because they are afraid that there might be political power at play. But during the neighbourhood meetings, the GUS could assure the villagers that no such power would be at play here, and therefore they could articulate their needs freely at the neighbourhood meetings.

(DGUS 3, ex-GUS member at Dhaban GP; FGD held on 10.01.2017)

The participants articulated clearly how the social and natural resource maps together reflect these needs, and interestingly, sometimes also helped in conflict resolution. For instance, previously there used to be disputes among people of two adjacent sansads / villages over ownership of assets or natural resources (e.g. trees, schools, etc.) situated on the border. People in each *sansad* used to claim ownership of disputed assets. But apparently, the facts regarding the claims of ownership became self-evident with the drawing of these maps. In a study conducted in 2010 in 78 Gram Sansads of 40 Gram Panchayats across 5 districts of West Bengal, a mapping exercise was done to track the GUS involvement in conflict resolution at the local level. The nature of issues discussed in GUS meetings was studied from the meeting registers of the GUS over 2007-08, 2008-09, and 2009-10. The study found the GUS to be frequently involved in conflict resolution on family problems, local conflicts related to land or water distribution for the purposes of cultivation and irrigation, conflicts related to the payment of NREGS<sup>40</sup>, conflicts related to distribution of benefits received from the GP, etc. (Dey and Bhattacharjee, n.d.)

One of the interview respondents, an active member of the CPI(M) and a Local Committee Secretary thought that the main benefit of the platform of the GUS was that the villagers got the opportunity to voice their needs and opinions. This was also a platform for information

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<sup>40</sup> National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme

dissemination on different social schemes of the government, and the villagers were gradually having a sense about how a panchayat functions:

This was kind of a campaign on what Panchayat can do, what they can't, what powers they have. Earlier, they voted for the panchayat members and had the idea that the panchayat can solve all their problems. But through these discussions they too realised the limits within which the panchayat has to operate.

(GPMOPRP, Local Committee Secretary, Matgoda GP, interview conducted on 11.01.2017)

This information dissemination in turn was paving the way for an ownership by the villagers towards institutional processes of the GP, as they felt that the data collected by them would facilitate in fixing priorities and better implementation of schemes by 'their' Gram Panchayats. This, in turn, was indirectly enhancing their engagement with the state and facilitating greater participation of the villagers in the decision-making processes of the local governments (GP in this case) as informed citizens, paving the way for more collaborative state-society relations.

The CPI(M) Local Committee Secretary, Matgoda GP, and a member of opposition in the same GP, affiliated to the TMC, both in their sixties, recalled the planning process a decade earlier, when demands were raised in the Gram Sansad, but the GP was solely dependent on the elected GP member (from the concerned Gram Sansad) along with his team to prioritise the schemes suggested in the sansad. When the GUS was created, GUS members noted down the demands during the neighbourhood meetings, or the people contacted them with their demands as and when required. The GUS tried to meet some of the requirements through the funds at their disposal and sent the rest to the Gram Panchayat. This is how, they both agreed, the GP established a linkage with the masses, in a similar modality to the suggestion by Tornquist (2009) about creating a new layer of institutions to forge a strategic connection between representation and governance (see section 2.4 in chapter 2). Now that this space has been closed by making the GUS non-functional, the GP has once again become dependent on only the elected GP members:

So many schemes come up from the Gram Sansad Sabha, say, schemes worth 25 lakh. But we know each sansad will be allotted schemes worth only 4-5 lakhs. In that case, priority of schemes must be fixed. Now this is done at the General Body meeting of the Gram Panchayat only by the elected GP members. This process now has become dependent on the brain of one person. Had the GUS been there, he would have had 15 more people along with him to thrash it out along with him.

(GPMOPRP, Local Committee Secretary, Matgoda GP, interview conducted on 11.01.2017)

The Prodhan of Aanchuri GP, affiliated to the TMC, and a Prodhan for two consecutive terms (since 2008) was of the opinion that the GUS was also useful to the GP since decisions to implement schemes could be taken in this platform much faster than the GP and the job was also done in a much more cost-effective manner. Moreover, it was easier for the GP to forge and maintain a link with the villagers through the GUS. From his statements it seemed quite possible that this transparency was one of the reasons why the GUS did not go down well with insiders of the PRI system. Firstly, the extent of fund leakage occurring at the higher tiers stood the risk of being exposed, and secondly, the politics that occur in a camouflaged manner during all these transactions also stood the risk of being exposed. These observations, once again, were reminiscent of similar observations made by Dr. A.N. Bose, about the discomfiture of the political elites at the local level, leading to the sudden suspension of the Midnapore planning experiment more than three decades back (see section 4.4.1).

On the other hand, some mid-level politicians implied that authorizing the GUS with financial powers had been an incorrect decision since this had encouraged decentralisation of financial corruption. The interview respondent who asserted this most emphatically was an ex-Prodhan affiliated to the CPI(M), but whose GP had not come under the purview of the SRD project. Apparently, when the GUS was first constituted immediately after the Amendment of the Panchayat Act in 2003, the State government transferred an amount of Rs.10,000 to all the GUS Bank Accounts as an incentive for activating the GUS. However, no capacity building exercises for the GUS were undertaken on the part of the GoWB until the SRD programme was launched in 2005. Consequently, the funds in GUS Bank accounts not covered by SRD either lay unspent in the respective bank accounts, or were not spent in adherence with strict financial guidelines, leading to opinions like this –

I think it would have been better if the Gram Unnayan Samity was not given any financial power. ... Even this meagre amount often lay unspent in their bank accounts. Yet, it was because of this money that all the unrest and the clashes took place. Hence, the main enemy is money. Villagers do not try to understand the intricacies of different rules and regulations that are applicable.

(GPBBP, Ex-Prodhan, Brahmandiha GP, interview conducted on 6.01.2017)

Now let us juxtapose the above statement with another quote from the interview of a Local Committee Secretary affiliated to the CPI(M) who was the opposition leader in a GP led by a TMC board, and covered by the SRD project:

If one doesn't have financial power, how can one function? ... What corruption can 15 people do with that meagre amount of money? If there had been lapses or misuse, it's because of ignorance. Not all people who come to the party are politically conscious, nor do they know about the administrative procedures.

(GPMOPRP, Local Committee Secretary, Matgoda GP, interview conducted on 11.01.2017)

The contradiction among these two statements coming from local political elites both affiliated to the same party, viz. CPI(M), reflects the difference in the necessary exposure and experience that enhances one's conviction in the power of the people. GUS members covered by the SRD project along with their GP members had been exposed to extensive capacity building exercises in the processes of making participatory village-plans and implementing them. During the process of implementation, they had received training on fund management, maintenance of accounts, and maintaining transparency in the decision-making processes at the village level. The GUS members in the non-SRD GPs as well as their elected members did not have this exposure, which gave rise to this suspicion and scepticism regarding utilization of funds by the GUS.

During the focus group discussions with the ex-GUS members and secretaries in the SRD GPs, all the participants *cutting across party-lines* were of the opinion that devolution of financial power to the GUS was an absolutely correct decision on the part of the Left government. These activists at the grassroots had the requisite exposure and training, and were very aware of the fact that devolving power to implement without back-up financial authority is meaningless. Hence, the GUS without financial power would have lost credibility among the villagers. The participants also underlined the procedural checks and balances, which did not allow funds to be transferred directly to the GUS Bank Account. The GP received funds from the GoWB, which then transferred funds to the GUS account as an advance, so that the GUS remained accountable to the GP for its financial transactions. One caustic remark by an erstwhile GUS Secretary, affiliated to the TMC in reaction to the charges of corruption against the GUS is worth quoting in this context:

If you think that the elected GP member or the GP Pradhan cannot do any corruption, only the GUS Secretary can, who has been elected by only 300 people in an open meeting - then this is utter folly. One cannot say anything against the GP for the fear of not getting any relief material in future. But there is no such fear from the GUS because the GUS did not enjoy that kind of power. If the people sitting in Kolkata, who come here only for conducting audit of our work found that we could not follow all the rules mentioned in the books, it is because it is not possible for us to do so in this remote area. Where do we get pucca vouchers for the livestock we bought? So many times, we had only temporary, hand-written receipts in those days. We couldn't help it. ...

... If the govt. feels that it wants to make the GUS corruption-free – let it form the GUS with govt. officials who will conduct neighbourhood meetings. That way, at least our tribals and poor brothers and sisters would be benefitted in some way. None of the political parties, whether TMC, or Congress or CPI(M) need to be there. Let the BDO be there along with his supporting staff, and the GP officials. Supposedly govt. officials never indulge in corruption, only the political people do. My personal suggestion is let there be an amendment to bring in the govt. officials within the fold of the GUS, but at least the govt. should give a chance to the people at the grassroots to voice their thoughts and opinions somewhere.

(DGUS 1, Ex-GUS Secretary, Dhaban GP; FGD conducted on 10.01.2017)

The speaker of the above statement is a grassroots activist of the TMC, the current ruling party of the State. Dhaban GP is also governed by a board comprising of elected members the majority of whom are affiliated to the TMC. While pointing out the practical constraints faced by the villagers that external auditors with an urban bias are totally unaware of, the above statement therefore reflects extreme resentment for the top-down, bureaucratic mode of institutional functioning, irrespective of the colour of the political party controlling it. DGUS 1 expresses suppressed anger at the sudden closing down of the participatory spaces, that deprived the rural community the space to voice their opinions and the scope to be heard. Very similar sentiments have been expressed by the GUS members in a GP like Motgoda, that has a majority of elected members affiliated to the CPI(M) on its board. This similarity in the chain of thoughts between grassroots workers affiliated to two rival parties, signal that this dichotomy between the 'top-down' versus 'bottom up', opening or closing of spaces for participation, is much more a matter of 'scale' rather than a horizontal division based on party-lines.

This debate on financial authority for the GUS calls for a discussion on the kind of activities undertaken with the money placed by the GP in GUS bank accounts. The GUS undertook several small activities like book distribution to poor and meritorious students, awareness

camps on social issues (health, education, gender parity, agriculture, etc.), buying medicines for the sick and destitute, construction / repair of basic village infrastructure requiring 'low cost, no cost' technology (e.g. making temporary bridges over water bodies during monsoons, repairing houses for the destitute damaged by natural calamities, etc.). As revealed by the GUS members in the FGD, some such activities had even saved lives of the really poor and destitute. However meagre, having some funds at their disposal also gave the GUS members a confidence to meet the small, emergency needs of the villagers. Now that the GUS is non-functional, such activities are not undertaken any more, since the GP does not have any contingency fund to cater to emergency purposes apart from using its Own Source Revenue (OSR). However, seeking funds from the GP is a long drawn bureaucratic process which might prove too costly in cases of emergency. Besides, the OSR for most GPs are not yet adequate to meet such demands from the villagers. All these factors seem to have a dampening effect resulting in total halting of such small activities at the sansad level, though the requirement still exists. Once again, it was interesting to note, that grassroots activists from both the parties actively participated in the FGDs, that were organised in the selected GPs controlled by either the ruling TMC (Aanchuri GP or Dhaban GP), or the party in opposition, the CPI(M) (Motgoda GP or Brahmandiha GP); but the arguments in all the FGDs followed very similar lines irrespective of their party-lines. This factor reinforced my observation about the shaping of the participatory agenda being a matter of scale rather than a party-divide.

### **Developing negotiating skills**

#### **Case of MGUS 5, GUS member in Motgoda GP (interviewed on 18.01.2017)**

In the GUS, At least we all could sit together and discuss among ourselves, and then approach the Panchayat. Our experiences were expanding as well. We were hoping to learn many more things through this programme. Is a child admitted to the school with the idea that he will become a teacher one day? Similarly, when we started attending the trainings, we only came with the hope to learn something new. That would enrich us mentally. We have education but have not got jobs. But here we came with the hope to learn something new and do something good.

....we could understand many things. Would it be possible for me to speak to you today if I had not attended that training? I would not have learnt to talk if I remained confined to my sansad. ... I can feel now that I can talk. When I first came to the Panchayat, I couldn't even sit in front of the Prodhana. I felt he has a position, I had to respect that chair. But then I got to know so many other people from other villages. I became friends with them. I felt very happy. There was a healthy competition among us. Everybody wanted to come first. It was like going back to school ... because everyone was working very hard. ... We villagers can give a lot of our time if it brings about any good to our village. We can do a lot for free if we receive respect or get an opportunity to mix with others and do something that is beneficial to others.

#### **5.5.3.2 Withdrawal of the GUS: Violence or cross-party alliance?**

As mentioned earlier, the sporadic incidents of violence that might have occurred during the formation of the GUS have been cited by the concerned government department as justification for issuance of the revised Government Order undermining the role of the GUS (GoWB, 2010). Complaints written by District Magistrates, District Panchayat and Rural Development Officers and Block Development Officers, and even some MLAs poured into the Panchayat and Rural Development Department (PRDD). Scrutiny of these reports resulted in a meeting of all political parties in the State Legislative Assembly, in which the fate of the GUS

was sealed without any reference to those actually involved with the process at the grassroots. A question about the debatable role of the local bureaucracy in withdrawal of the GUS also emerges at this juncture since the local bureaucrats were not happy about the constitution and activation of the GUS in the first place (see section 5.3.1). Chapter 7 of this thesis will deal with this question in greater detail.

A team of researchers conducted a field-study on the constitution of the GUS in the district of East Midnapore in 2008-09 (after the 2008 panchayat elections were held) in which 81 GUS members were interviewed. This study found 'panel placements' by the political parties during formation of the GUS. In this process, when the presiding officer (e.g. a GP official) called for nominees to be selected as GUS members, the ruling and the opposition parties in the concerned Gram Sansad put forward their own respective panels, turning the GUS into another political entity. There has also been evidence of political conflicts between supporters of ruling and opposition parties around this process, during which, a major factor was people's apprehension of their political affiliations being noted within the open voting system. Hence, the researchers have interpreted as the GUS being 'used as a tool to appropriate political interests.'

These situations have divided villagers into two groups as their political allegiance becomes evident. Many strong local, friendship and kinship ties have broken down after the formation of a GUS. Sadly, this has created a new hierarchical division in village society and a tension-filled environment.

(Chattopadhyay, et.al, 2010:80)

As mentioned earlier, the abovementioned study was undertaken in 2008, which was the second round of GUS formation in West Bengal, the first round being held in 2004-05, after the West Bengal Panchayat Act was amended in 2003 to provide for the GUS as a space for people's participation. Since the LF had suffered an unexpected setback in the Panchayat elections of 2008, the atmosphere was politically volatile, which could have been aggravated by the political 'tagging' of the villagers during constitution of the GUS.

Another team of researchers from the State Institute of Panchayat and Rural Development (SIPRD), Govt. of West Bengal conducted a field-work in mid-2005, to observe the progress of GUS formation across the State, and documented the case of GUS constitution in Binnaguri GP in Jalpaiguri district in the northern part of the State. The study notes that at least in two

of the Gram Sansads, the names of the prospective GUS members were proposed by the members in opposition in those particular sansads, and the meetings concluded peacefully since a perfect adjustment had been reached by the political parties. In another sansad, three panels were put up and the GP official had to go for an election, but the meeting was absolutely peaceful. In fact, there had been unanimous selection of GUS members for 15 out of 19 Sansads in Binnaguri GP in 2005 (SIPRD, 2012).

During the field-work for this thesis, both such situations came up in the course of discussion during the focus group discussions with the ex-GUS members as well as interviews with local political figures from both the parties. It was reported by the respondents that such political conflicts during the constitution of GUS took place in around 10% of the sample *Gram Sansads* covered in this field-work. In Brahmandiha GP, clashes over the formation of the GUS occurred only in one sansad out of fifteen. The reason being, in most *sansads*, local leaders could make the people / villagers understand and appreciate the requirements of democracy. Problems occurred only in pockets where the local political elites (mostly affiliated to the ruling party) did not want to yield any space to the opposition. The statement of a long-term CPI(M) cadre (well into his sixties), was significant in this respect:

There were clashes in places where we (CPI(M)) said the last word and did not allow others to voice their opinions. But in places where we accorded due respect to the opposition, and due importance to the voice of the common people, and welcomingly accepted all good suggestions – there were no clashes. ... The existence of the Gram Unnayan Samity was essential for democracy, but none of us truly respect democracy. There have been instances when our party-workers did not want to include any supporter of the opposition party in the GUS. We advised them not to be so rigid, but our own people did not listen to us and wanted to form a committee only with their own supporters. This attitude led to fights, pelting of stones and clashes ....

(GPBMP, local leader of CPI(M), Brahmandiha GP; Interview conducted on 06.01.2017)

This statement by a local leader of the CPI(M) demonstrates an awareness about arriving at solutions based on democratic strategies in which the voice of opposition is recognised as well. Once again, this indicates the existence of an element within the CPI(M), however marginalised, that does not operate with the sole aim of establishing party hegemony. It is this democratic spirit that resulted in the emergence of a different picture in Motgoda GP of the adjacent Raipur block. In independent interviews given on different dates, political

leaders of two rival parties in Motgoda GP, one affiliated to the CPI(M) and the other TMC, recounted how the constitution of the GUS had been done peacefully in all *sansads* of this GP by arriving at a 'formula' or 'unofficial understanding' among the different political parties operating in the concerned locality. According to this formula, the representative of the winning party in a particular *sansad* would propose the names of 60% of the GUS members, and the opposition candidate from the same *sansad* would propose names of 40% of the names. This idea was explained to the people beforehand in *Gram Sansad* meetings and the acceptance of the people was reflected in peaceful constitution of the GUS following this 60-40 ratio.

When we heard about such problems in other panchayats, we sat together and devised this formula. ... If the GUS only consists of members from the ruling party, there is a possibility that the GUS will function in an autocratic mode. But that is not the case if the opposition members are included ... Our experience is that this arrangement really works. There may be differences of opinion, but not to an extent where the activities of the panchayat have to be stalled. ... sometimes political parties oppose each other just for the sake of opposing. What the GUS did was to bring everybody on the same platform. People from different parties came together, on the issue of development.

(GPMOPRP, Local Committee Secretary, Motgoda GP; interview conducted on 11.01.2017)

The field findings of this study highlight three issues in this context. First, it seems that the reports of the violence during GUS formation were much more exaggerated and amplified at the upper levels than they were in reality. Certain other facts might also be cited to counter allegations that widespread disruption of law and order was uniquely linked to the GUS. The Panchayat elections of 2003 were not stalled even after it was marred by 76 political murders (Corbridge, et.al, 2005): moreover, it is unlikely that no incidents of violence occurred in the 7000 seats that were won uncontested in the 2003 Panchayat elections (Rana, 2013). This indicates that political representatives representing the higher tiers of the PRI have much more authority as well as negotiating skills to deal with the administrative machinery within the existing power-structure. It is not easy for the government to stall the 3 tier Panchayat elections due to allegations of violence because of the Constitutional back-up of the PRI system. Since Panchayats are considered to be the lowest unit through which all poverty-alleviation schemes of the government (both Centre and State) are implemented at the grassroots, much more would be at stake if these institutions for service-delivery become

non-functional. On the other hand, doing away with the 7-year old GUS, still at a nascent stage, was much more straightforward. Neither the district level administrative machinery, nor the higher-level political elites had any stake in building active citizens through a functional GUS. Rather, silencing the vocal GUS members and cutting short all capacity building exercises for the GUS would go a long way to serve their interests and maintain status quo.

The second issue somewhat resonates with the claim by Chattopadhyay et. Al. (2010) that the real purpose of the GUS was never properly communicated to the people by the higher authorities. This was validated by the ex-GUS members who repeatedly asserted that there was no campaign to this effect from the higher authorities or the government. Third, cutting across party lines, the community representatives agreed that a forum like the GUS should have been there at village level with a modification in the election process. This was also indicative of a cross-party alliance in some pockets at the grassroots on the issue of 'local development' through the GUS. In an article published in the editorial page of the *Anandabazar Patrika* (leading vernacular daily in West Bengal) on February 9, 2010, the author claims having witnessed such cross-party alliances at the GUS level in the villages of rural Bengal. The article is based on interviews of elected members of the GP and GUS in few GPs of Birbhum district, where developmental schemes were being implemented smoothly at the village level. The author claims that in these panchayats, one could witness cross-party alliances among both GP and the concerned GUS members, when it came to building a consensus for certain tangible benefits in their respective areas. These same members were also firmly entrenched in rival political parties who campaigned against each other during elections. These evidences bear resemblance to the trends witnessed in Motgoda GP of Bankura district in the course of this research. The conclusion drawn in the said article by the author is very similar to the findings of this research –

Everybody is frightened of terror, but the politics of terror is frightened of positive alliances ... the brokers of politics in this State claim terror as the only truth. This is why all political parties alike, whether CPI(M), Congress or TMC, have opposed the GUS. The only difference is between the leader at the top with the party-worker at the grassroots.

(Anandabazar Patrika, February 9, 2010)

This specific conclusion makes the narrative of the GUS an issue of scale (macro vs micro, top vs bottom) rather than a narrative emerging out of a 'party-society' deeply divided horizontally by political identities. While the existence of the 'party-society' in West Bengal cannot be entirely denied, the potential for developing cross-party alliances at the grassroots where all the stakeholders could rise above politics on the issues of local development, also provides an alternative reality for the state.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has recounted the narrative of the last few years of the Left Front rule in West Bengal when it attempted to retain power in the State with multiple strategies. While a majority section of the LF agreed to cast the party into a neo-liberal mode to meet the requirements of the federal framework in which it had to operate, a marginalised section of the LF made an attempt to deepen the democratic processes of the state within a leftist-framework, by devolving more power to the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) in West Bengal. The political context in Section 5.2 had been laid out as the backdrop to the main narrative, that of the creation and withdrawal of participatory spaces at the lowest tier of the PRI in Sections 5.3, 5.4 and 5.5. These sections have dealt at length with the constitution of the *Gram Unnayan Samity* (GUS) as a representative forum for the people at the grassroots by an amendment in the Panchayat Act in 2003 and then the suspension of its powers within a span of 7 years. Section 5.3 has explained the political as well as bureaucratic motivations for this move as well as the reasons for suspending the powers of the GUS. The debates surrounding state-ownership of this project for people's participation and the necessity of foreign funding support for the same have also been discussed in the same section. Since the PRDD launched this rural decentralisation project with monetary support from DFID-UK, the Strengthening Rural Decentralisation (SRD) project has been examined in detail in Section 5.4 of this chapter, focusing on the experiments undertaken under SRD and the role this project played in shaping the participatory agenda in West Bengal. Section 5.5 analysed and demonstrated how the GUS as a representative forum had the potential to develop political capabilities and awareness on citizenship rights among the rural masses and in turn could have emerged as a threat to the deeply entrenched 'party-society' in West Bengal. This argument has been supported with evidence in the forms of political documents, and data collected during

interviews with a large cross-section of stakeholders, with the top-level policy makers on one end of the spectrum and the community representatives on the other. The following conclusions have been arrived at in this chapter.

First, in an extension of the preceding chapter, while tracking the motivations for constitution of the Gram Unnayan Samity (GUS) we see the continuation of two contrasting political purposes within the CPI(M) in West Bengal. One of these originated from an ideological conviction to bring about structural change through empowerment of the masses, while the second was an instrumentalist purpose of strengthening party-control over the local government institutions in the State. While both these purposes have their origins in political discourses, a top-down bureaucratic agenda aimed at more effective scheme-implementation and better service delivery at the local level through institution driven participation, also makes its presence strongly felt at the same time.

Reflections of parallel debates doing the rounds in the development discourses towards the close of the twentieth century are evident in these trends. One indigenous stream of thinking on the 'empowerment approach' pre-dates or runs parallel to the discourses on participation advocated by Robert Chambers (2006a), in which the oppressed are equipped with the 'weapons' of the powerful with the help of appropriate participatory strategies to enhance knowledge, skills and political capabilities, so that they can begin to question power using the participatory space as an opportunity (see section 2.3). This reform-minded element in West Bengal took a position that to a large extent echoed the basic principles of empowered participatory governance of the 1990s. with its focus on solving practical problems through joint-planning and strategizing sessions by people directly affected by the problems (see section 2.4). This discourse of 'effective participation' sits comfortably with the discourse on 'democratic deepening' by forging closer state-society linkage advanced by the reformed Left parties. However, the more instrumental discourse on institution driven participation with a more top-down, bureaucratic approach, where the GUS is viewed as an extended arm of the GP and a tool for better 'development management' was also one of the parallel motivations driving the formation of the GUS.

Second, the fund support and hand-holding capacity-building support from the DFID funded SRD project helped in institution-building at local level, but was also gradually developing the GUS as a participatory forum with the potential to provide the villagers with appropriate tools

to emerge as informed, active citizens. The imagery of active and organized citizens articulating demands for their rights, and monitoring performance of the local government institutions, is a major feature of the 'good governance' agenda within the DFID discourse (see section 2.7 in chapter 2). The capacity-building interventions of the SRD project introduced the GUS to these democratic values and participatory methods (Connelly, 2015) that could easily be adapted to the Leftist framework of empowering the masses through shared experiences and their involvement in local socio-economic affairs. In due course, the capacitated GUS began to show evidence of emerging as a platform for conflict resolution through debate, discussion, and information dissemination, thus offering a space for development of the political capacity of the villagers in certain pockets of the State. Interpreted in spatial terms, though the GUS started out as an 'invited' space structured from above, it was also emerging as a potential site of contestation by creating new 'claimed' spaces by less powerful actors, posing challenges to dominant discourses (see section 2.3).

Information dissemination was also paving the way for an ownership by the villagers towards institutional processes of the GP, thus indirectly facilitating enhanced participation of the villagers in the decision-making processes of the local governments as informed citizens. It was also easier for the GP to forge and maintain a link with the masses through the GUS and implement schemes in a more cost-effective manner. This feature depicts the GUS as the new layer of institutional arrangement conceptualised by Tornquist (2009), that forges a strategic link between the two approaches of electoral representation and direct participation at the grassroots. Viewed through an instrumental lens, this layer enhances the channel for active engagement of the citizens with the local state, to negotiate for implementation of their demands and exercise their citizenship rights (see section 2.4).

This intermediate institutional layer of the GUS could also be seen in the light of the basic design features advocated by Fung and Wright (2003) for 'empowered participatory governance' discussed in section 2.4. The small fund-support at its disposal for implementation and monitoring of its own planned activities at the village-level allowed the GUS some administrative and political autonomy, though there was an element of centralised supervision via its vertical linkages of communication and accountability to a superordinate body like the GP. Moreover, the dependence of the GP functionaries on the GUS members for different instrumental reasons seemed to have created a scope for reconstitution of

decision-making processes within these local governance structures, the implications of which could be far reaching. For instance, once the GUS could efficiently implement schemes at the village-level in a more cost-effective manner, the extent of fund leakage occurring at the higher tiers during scheme implementation, and the questionable practices that occur in a camouflaged manner during all these transactions stood the risk of being exposed, accompanied by enhanced negotiating skills of the GUS members. This implies that with sustained capability enhancing support over a longer period of time, such growing capacity of the GUS could have had knock-on effects for existing political structures by challenging the organized power of the traditional authorities on behalf of the disadvantaged sections, and bringing about transformational governance change in the long run. This was possibly one of the reasons why the GUS did not go down well with higher-level participants in the PRI system in the State.

The powers of the GUS were curbed on the pretext of largescale violence and chaos in rural Bengal: as noted above the findings of this research suggest that the reports of the violence during GUS formation were enhanced by the wider crisis of the Left Front, was likely exaggerated, and was also no greater than that routinely experienced in panchayat elections. In contrast to the Panchayats themselves, the GUS's lack of statutory authority and Constitutional protection allowed it to become a convenient scapegoat. Added to this was the non-cooperative role of the local bureaucracy, who were hostile to the notion of constituting the GUS from the very beginning. Hence, neither the local level administrative machinery, nor the higher-level political elites had any stake in making the GUS functional, and all of them had a role to play in undoing this participatory forum.

Possibly the functional GUS generated an additional layer in between the conventional patron-client relationship that had prevailed earlier between the CPI(M) and the rural people through their elected representatives and the panchayats as extension of CPI(M) party offices. An actively functioning GUS had the potential to act as a representative forum for the clients, armed with the requisite information and political capability to negotiate directly with these local governance structures for their rights and a greater share of the public goods. Hence, silencing the vocal GUS members and cutting short all capacity building exercises for them would go a long way to serve the interests of the party in the form of restoring this patronage network. A deep divide in the ideological basis of the LF mired in factionalism came to the

fore at the time. The section within the LF with a deep-rooted conviction on the power of the people, was gradually being outnumbered by party workers for whom common people were only clients cum voters to be viewed through the lens of a patronage network.

Hence, an intense antagonistic attitude against the forum of the GUS became obvious after the Panchayat elections of 2008. After losing a considerable number of seats in the 2008 Panchayat elections the ruling Left Front's concern about losing power in the State was manifested by going back on the political commitments made in the Election Manifesto for 2008, and replacing its own minister responsible for introducing decentralisation initiatives in the State. These developments take us back to observations by scholars like Ghosh and Kumar (2003), who found CPI(M)'s organising principle of 'democratic centralism' (see section 2.9) and the enforcement of extreme party discipline to be the cause of its limited application of democratic strategies. The orthodox communist ideology believed the party to be supreme and the only agent for social change, while 'democratic decentralisation' is a principle of governance with the potential to empower the masses or even the party-cadres to challenge the central directives of the party (ibid). Following this line of argument, this chapter contends that the forum of the GUS, which, a majority of the CPI(M) perceived as a tool to consolidate political control at the grassroots, turned out to be a 'double-edged sword' for the party leading to the sudden withdrawal of these participatory spaces by the ruling regime. This is the third major finding of this chapter, that also upholds Fung and Wright's (2003) warning that the dominant classes and elites might seek to dismantle these participatory bodies, if these throw up genuine challenges to the power and privileges of the existing power structures.

The reasons for withdrawal of the GUS also points towards a scenario, where, in spite of the political will of the reformist section of the CPI(M) and the efforts of the top-level bureaucrats of the PRDD, the very concept of a participatory forum like the GUS had to face hostility from various quarters since its inception stage. A principal reason for this was a lack of consultation and common understanding on the part of the LF Government with the opposition about the requirement of such a forum at the grassroots. Such a lack of communication and mobilisation of the oppositional forces and other interest groups by the State government undermined substantive engagement and potential of the GUS and became a crucial factor in deciding its fate in the long run. The need for building new political settlements for gaining legitimacy of

state reforms had been underscored earlier by the People's Plan Campaign in Kerala, where too, neither the party in opposition, nor the entire CPI(M) party was in favour of the reform. The project was championed only by a reformist faction within the CPI(M) led by EMS Namboodiripad, but was still implemented successfully because of the strategic move of building broad-based coalitions with civil-society actors led by a powerful mass-organisation. This reinforces the necessity of enlightened state elites as key agents to envisage a vision and formulate appropriate strategies for facilitating transformative change in governance, through establishing closer links between the state organisation and the social forces. In fact, Ghosh and Kumar (2003) asserted that Namboodiripad's stand was a departure from the 'democratic centralist' principles (see section 2.9) of the party in believing that the party should encourage creating a political space for common people to interact directly with the state institutions without mediation of the party. The political will of the state actors and ongoing commitment on the part of everyone concerned for pushing through state-reforms becomes evident in Kerala in the process of building such political alliances, with patience and sensitivity to deal with the temporary uncertainties involved. The fourth concluding point of this chapter, that the instrumentalist faction of the CPI(M) finally won in stalling the decentralisation reforms in West Bengal, thus, raises a question on the motivation and strategies of the CPI(M) for undertaking state-reform. This drives us to question the theory of 'political will' in West Bengal's 'successful' case of participatory governance as claimed in the works of Kohli (1987), Lieten (1994) or Crook and Sverrisson (2001), and argue against this theory in the lines of Webster (1992) and Williams (2001) (discussed in section 2.9).

Finally, cutting across party lines, the community representatives agreed on the necessity of a forum like the GUS at village level with slight modifications in its election process, which was also indicative of a cross-party alliance at the village level in some pockets on the issue of 'local development' through the GUS. On the other hand, GUS members expressed extreme resentment for the top-down, bureaucratic mode of functioning and the bureaucratic attitude towards the political parties, irrespective of their colours. This makes the narrative of the GUS an issue of scale (macro vs micro, top vs bottom) rather than a narrative emerging out of a 'party-society' deeply divided by political identities. While the existence of the 'party-society' in West Bengal cannot be entirely denied, such a strategy initiated proactively by the citizens themselves at the local level – even if in some isolated

pockets of the State – proves that nothing is fixed about political culture of any place, and that the concepts of ‘political society’ / ‘party society’ are not absolute. This potential for developing cross-party alliances at the grassroots and a broad-based desire on the part of citizens for a different way of ‘doing politics’ on the issues of local development, also provides a potential for an alternative reality of the State. This also demonstrates the increasing alienation of the CPI(M), including the reform-minded individuals with this changing desires and political conditions at the grassroots, that accounts for their failure to embed the decentralisation reforms by building more broad-based alliances and sustain their view of transformational change in governance.

## **6 Chapter Six: Institutional Strengthening of Gram Panchayats (ISGP) project (2011 - 2018).**

### **6.1 Introduction**

In the political context of the previous chapter, we saw how the aggressive neo-liberal agenda pursued by an ideologically degenerated Left Front in West Bengal finally led to its downfall in 2011. In the opening section of this chapter, we will depict the political trajectory of the State post 2011, when the rule of the Trinamool Congress (TMC) was being consolidated through successive elections at different levels. As we will see, this new populist regime ruled through creation of new political symbols and discourses that have set in motion several systemic changes in relation to the PRI system in West Bengal. In this chapter, we will track some such changes in the light of a World Bank funded project 'Institutional Strengthening of Gram Panchayats' (ISGP), that was implemented through the Panchayat and Rural Development Department (PRDD), Govt. of West Bengal. Some of these changes have direct resonance with the 'good governance' agenda of the World Bank, which will be touched upon briefly in Section 6.3 of this chapter. Details of systemic changes in the planning processes and other institutional aspects of the *Gram Panchayat* (Village Council) will be explored in the section 6.4. In section 6.5, we will record our observations on the trend of shifting balance of power between the bureaucracy and the elected representatives, as a result of such institutional changes introduced through the local governance structures or the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI). The findings of this empirical chapter will be summarized in conclusion.

### **6.2 Political Context: Consolidation of the rightist populist regime of TMC**

#### **6.2.1 The Change of Power in Assembly Elections 2011**

Ranabir Samaddar, a political observer and analyst compared the atmosphere of 'eagerness, anticipation, and expectation with tremor' (Samaddar, 2013:169) just before the West Bengal State Assembly elections in 2011 to the transition in 1977, when the people had massively voted for change, bringing the Left Front (LF) to power for the next thirty-four years. In 2011,

with an air loaded with the smell of revenge, it was the LF's turn to taste defeat. Apprehending largescale violence, citizens in West Bengal hoped that the new government would learn to rule without vengeance and bloodshed while giving the people 'a clearer sense of the politics of alternative' (ibid:170). 85% of the 56.2 million voters on the rolls turned out to vote for 294 assembly seats, making it the highest turnout in the history of assembly elections in West Bengal. Since the Left Front had faced significant reversals in different elections conducted in the preceding years (Panchayat election in 2008, Parliamentary election in 2009 and Municipal election in 2010), the Assembly election in 2011 were widely expected to be game-changing.

In this election, once again an alliance came to power that was led by the Trinamool Congress (TMC), and also included the Indian National Congress (INC), Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and Socialist Unity Centre of India-backed by TMC (SUCI). The LF was outperformed by this alliance that won 227 out of 294 seats, reducing the LF to only 62 seats. However, the LF still managed to secure 41% of the vote-share, which was 7.4% less than the TMC alliance (EPW, 2011). After this election, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi conducted a post-poll survey in West Bengal, which highlighted many interesting trends. For instance, the survey results showed an erosion in the support base of the LF all across the State, but less in rural areas than in urban areas. The LF also performed better in Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe reserved constituencies as well as in constituencies with higher concentration of Dalits and Adivasis. The marginal farmers and the share croppers continued to back the LF, while its support base among upper class voters declined.

The CSDS study also showed that the people now showed their dissatisfaction with the work done by the LF government, which was specially rated badly on law and order issues on account of its mishandling of various recent incidents. With a large majority of the respondents agreeing with the charges of widespread corruption within the CPI(M), the credibility of the party was clearly at stake. Several people also claimed that the party workers of the CPI(M) intruded into their private spheres. While this survey result showed the LF Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee's popularity rating waned from 45% (2006) to 30% (2011), the popularity graph of Mamata Banerjee, leader of the TMC alliance, indicated a rising trend. (EPW, 2011).

Scholars working on the politics of the State often explain Mamata Banerjee's rise to power in terms of the political vacuum created by the degeneration of the LF in West Bengal. This is only part of the story. The narrative of this political transition can only be comprehended in its entirety by also engaging with the political messaging and leadership style of Mamata Banerjee, the Chief Minister of West Bengal since May 2011, and founder of the TMC (Nielsen, 2016). Starting her career as a student leader, she became an instant celebrity when she defeated CPI(M) stalwart Somnath Chatterjee at the 1984 Lok Sabha elections as a candidate for the Congress party. Between 1984 – 1989, Mamata rose to prominence as a leader by taking up various populist issues and mobilising public demonstrations against the LF government. By 1997, she seemed to be extremely frustrated with the West Bengal unit of the Congress party which, she believed to be corrupt and bribed by the CPI(M). Hence, she decided to form her own party, and the Trinamool Congress was formed on January 1, 1998, as the result of a break up in the West Bengal unit of the Congress. The party contested in 29 out of 42 parliamentary constituencies in the Lok Sabha elections in 1998, and managed to win 7 seats securing over 24% votes (Bhattacharyya, 2004; Nielsen, 2016).

Since TMC as a party and Mamata Banerjee as its leader had only been focused on unseating the Left Front in West Bengal, scholars like Dwaipayan Bhattacharya (2004) think that the 'TMC's rise in West Bengal has exposed the lacunae of a Left increasingly bereft of its radical protestations' (ibid:1537.) It is true that in her political messaging to the electorate, Mamata consistently portrayed the CPI(M) as a party responsible for destroying all democratic structures through its authoritarian rule based on violence and terror. However, along with the political degeneration of the Left, her single-minded political agenda, this anti-CPI(M) stance of Mamata Banerjee also catalysed the escalation of the public discontent against the CPI(M) during the last few years of the left-regime, that culminated in the overthrow of the LF in 2011.

### **6.2.2 Mamata Banerjee: Return of the personality cult**

It has been mentioned above that the TMC was a breakaway faction of the Indian National Congress, which had a very different political culture compared to the leftist parties. While the political culture of the LF was based on collective responsibility, the organisational

structure of the Congress party was based features like personality cult and centralised leadership which was known as the 'high command' culture (Rai and Kumar, 2017). Since the foundations of Mamata Banerjee's political career had been laid within the folds of the Congress party, the TMC regime was also marked by all these features, some of which had been carefully cultivated by her.

Hailing from a humble lower-middle class background, Mamata lacked the sophistication, the academic background and the cultural capital usually associated with Leftist politicians in Bengal (the likes of Jyoti Basu and Buddhadeb Bhattacharya<sup>41</sup>), but she has strategically used these shortcomings to establish an alternative model for political leadership, in which her simplicity and emotions are perceived as assets that connect her with the masses:

Her unique ways of carrying herself as the most ordinary woman on the Calcutta streets, her lower middle class lifestyle, added to her aggressive anti-establishment spirit found her a good number of loyal supporters from the ranks of street hawkers and slum dwellers, illegal settlers and informal toilers who enjoy not many contractual rights as citizens, as well as from the well to do sections of the urban and rural population who reckon her as the only effective weapon against the LF.

(Bhattacharya, 2004: 1536)

Another important factor that connected her to the masses was her active use of religious symbolism and her appeals to religious identities, like celebrating both Durga Puja and Eid or going to the church to join the Christmas prayer - all as part of her campaign and consciously rejecting the politics of the Left. Her style has often been branded as an 'activist style of leadership' grounded on a pro-people, grass-roots based approach. Strategically portraying herself as a woman with little regard for power or material comforts, she was able to build an honest and incorruptible image of herself in the minds of a large section of the electorate (Nielson, 2016).

When Mamata Banerjee assumed power as the Chief Minister of West Bengal in May 2011, people were struck by a new style of governance that was characterised by focusing on emerging trouble spots and quick decision-making. The CM herself travelled widely, often

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<sup>41</sup> Jyoti Basu and Buddhadeb Bhattacharya were previous Chief Ministers of West Bengal, both hailing from eminent Bengali family backgrounds and attended premier educational institutes in Kolkata. Basu studied Law in England, while Bhattacharya contributed to the world of theatre and poetry in Bengal (Nielson, 2016)

visited the districts, took decisions on the spot and also advised her ministers and officials to follow suit. But within a few months, she was also criticised for being impatient and tough with radical elements like the Maoists, but at the same time encouraging those criminal elements, who had oppressed people at the grassroots before she assumed power, to join her party in huge numbers (Samaddar, 2013). Samaddar, interpreted these criticisms in terms of middle-class sensibilities being hurt by a 'government of the low brow', which is represented by the CM herself (ibid:202). When the middle-classes found that –

The structure of petty governance, local centres of power and oppression, party-centric way of getting things done etc. had gone too deep in society and the style of rule at the lower levels had not changed ...

they were dissatisfied and disillusioned with the new regime (Samaddar, 2013: 201). There was scepticism in the air when a part of civil society was dismayed and confused by her actions like giving sizable donations to thousands of neighbourhood clubs, which the local media reported as a quick and easy way to recruit party cadres (Scroll.in, May 01, 2016). Since the TMC came to power in 2011, around INR 6Bn had been distributed among 15,000 clubs all across the State, as claimed by the CM herself in a public announcement (Hindustan Times, January 24, 2018). The leading vernacular daily of the State, the *Anandabazar Patrika*, began to publish articles by different political observers criticising this style of governance by Mamata, and comparing it with the previous left regime. One such observer commented, that in spite of several signs of degeneration among the Left, they could still claim a place in history for governing the State on the basis of a definite ideology. Since the one-point programme of the TMC was opposing the CPI(M), an ideological vacuum has been created in the political sphere, which is being filled up at an incredible speed by all kinds of lumpen elements. These elements are running the State as political leaders at different levels on whom the state-leaders have no control whatsoever, and that this is the main difference between the TMC as an organisation and the CPI (M) as an organisation. The entire structure of the TMC as a party can break down at any point of time due to intense factional conflicts within the party. Mamata Banerjee, as the leader of the party is very well aware of this weakness of her party, and hence, has no other option but to engage in dole-politics at the micro-level in order to capture her vote-bank (Anandabazar Patrika, March 30, 2016a).

### 6.2.3 West Bengal Panchayat Elections 2013 and Lok Sabha Elections 2014

The troubled political scenario of the state came to the fore with certain unfortunate events in the run-up to the Panchayat elections in 2013, that led to a conflict between the State Government and the State Election Commission (SEC). The SEC viewed proposal by the State Government of advancing the election dates arbitrarily by two to three months as illegal, and the State Government vehemently opposed the SEC's demand for deployment of Central Armed Forces during the Panchayat Elections anticipating widespread violence during the elections (Chakrabarti, 2013).

That the fears of the SEC were not unfounded were proved by the reports of widespread political violence leading to partisan clashes and bloodshed that claimed at least two dozen lives, in spite of deploying Central Armed Security Forces along with a large army of state police personnel. Not only did these clashes take place between the ruling party (TMC) and the opposition (LF and Congress), but also between different rival factions of the TMC itself. The ruling party won uncontested in 14% of the constituencies where the opposition could not even nominate its candidate. The CPI(M) had been reduced to a weak organisation that could not even protest when voters in several constituencies were either not allowed to vote or were forced to vote for the ruling party (Rana, 2013). According to scholars like Bhattacharya (2009) and Rana (2013), such anti-democratic trends had much deeper roots that had only assumed a more vulgar form at present. They linked it to the collapse of the decentralisation initiatives carried out during the left-regime, that were aimed at empowering the people at the grassroots. Since the findings of this thesis too points towards the GUS as a grassroots level platform with potential for conflict resolution (see section 5.5) the finding of this thesis also endorses this claim to a certain extent.

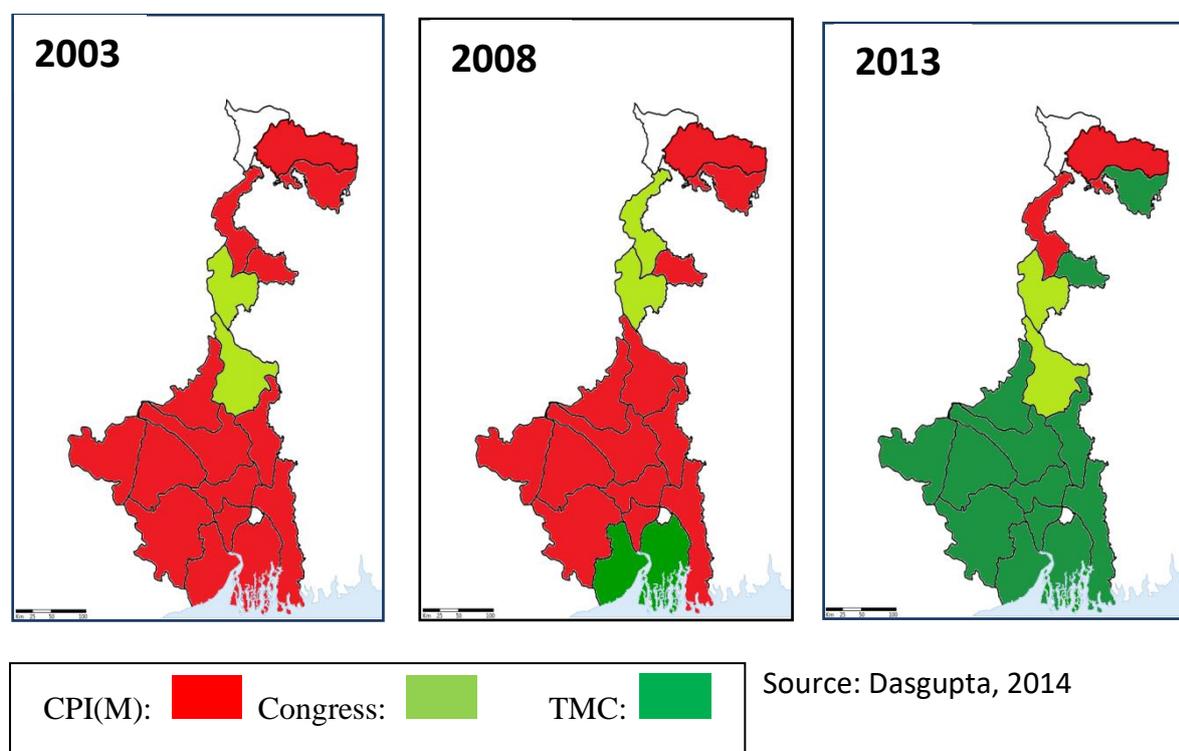
In the Panchayat elections in 2003, the LF won 7000 seats uncontested, and with its henchmen switching loyalties swiftly as soon as it fell from power, the LF was paid back in its own coin in terms of the area-based domination that it had imposed during its rule. The TMC won an absolute majority in the Panchayat elections for 2013 in which the LF and the Congress could only form Zilla Parishad boards in 2 districts each out of 17 Zilla Parishads, while the TMC formed boards in the remaining thirteen districts.

**Table 6.1: Percentage of seats won by major political parties in 2008 and 2013 Panchayat Elections**

PRI Body	2008			2013		
	Left Front	Congress	TMC	Left Front	Congress	TMC
Gram Panchayat	52.47	16.47	22.59	31.99	11.26	51.58
Panchayat Samity	55.61	16.43	22.94	30.61	9.93	57.42
Zilla Parishad	68.62	13.21	16.02	25.81	9.33	64.36

(Source: Bhattacharya, 2013)

**Fig. 6.1 Post Panchayat Election Scenario: Party status in the District Panchayat (ZP)**



It is evident from Table 6.1 that the position of the LF and the TMC are almost mirror images of each other in terms of seats, with tallies for TMC in 2013 are very similar to the percentage of seats won by the LF in 2008. The *en masse* exodus of political workers from the LF to the TMC laid bare the weak organisational strength of the LF, which was unable to retaliate even when their cadres were murdered or their party offices demolished. In early 2014, the TMC government institutionalised such defections by modifying the Panchayat Act, allowing elected Panchayat members to retain their seats even after defecting *en masse* from their

parent political party. It is also possible that in the aftermath of the Singur and Nandigram incidents (see section 5.2), the TMC government's policy decision not to acquire land forcibly from the poor peasants gave out a positive signal to the voters in the rural areas (Bhattacharya, 2013; Ray, 2018).

In April 2013, a major financial scam and alleged political scandal came to light caused by the collapse of a Ponzi scheme, commonly referred to as the Saradha chit fund scam that earned a lot of negative publicity for the TMC government (Oneindia, September 14, 2014). In spite of this, the TMC recorded its best ever performance in the Lok Sabha (Parliamentary) elections of 2014, when it won 34 of the 42 parliamentary seats with 39% votes, completely decimating the Left which was reduced to 2 seats with 29% vote share. The Congress managed to win 4 seats with 9% vote share, while the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) did unexpectedly well in the State with 16% votes and 2 seats (The Economic Times, May 16, 2014; Anandabazar Patrika, March 30, 2016b).

Thus, the vote share of the opposition parties (LF and Congress) taken together was 38%, which was just 1% less than the ruling TMC. On the other hand, BJP is a party with a much more pan-Indian presence which reaped the benefit of a BJP-wave across India during the 2014 Parliamentary elections and assumed power at the Centre in 2014. Hence, political observers predicted that the vote-share of the BJP would decline in the forthcoming State Assembly elections in the State in 2016, the benefit of which could go to the opposition parties (Anandabazar Patrika, March 30, 2016b). This arithmetic led to the formation of a strange alliance between the Left and the Congress in the run-up to the *Bidhan Sabha* (State Assembly) elections of 2016, considering that the Congress and the CPI(M) had been political adversaries throughout the history of the State. Apparently, the demand for such an alliance was raised by the grassroots level workers and supporters of both the opposition parties, since the ruling TMC regime had consistently denied any political space to all opposition party workers, to the extent of even threatening their lives (Ghosh, 2016).

#### **6.2.4 Assembly elections 2016 and consolidation of the TMC regime**

It appeared that the Assembly election for 2016 was going to be a closely contested election between the ruling TMC and the opposition alliance, due to certain developments in the State

prior to the elections. A sting operation by a news channel called 'Narada' showed 11 senior TMC leaders accepting cash from a fake company in exchange for favours to the company. Then an under-construction flyover collapsed in the heart of Kolkata killing 26 people, reinforcing the speculation on the corruption indulged in by the TMC government in such infrastructure development (The Indian Express, May 6, 2016).

Defeating all speculations, the ruling TMC regime returned to power in the 2016 State Assembly elections, with 45% of the vote-share and an enhanced tally of 211 seats in the 294 seat Assembly, as against 184 seats in 2011. The vote share of the LF was down to 24% (from 41% in 2011) while the TMC single-handedly penetrated successfully in all the traditional Left bastions. The CPI(M), left with only 26 seats even lost its position of the principal opposition party in the Assembly to the Congress, which finished as the second largest party with 44 seats. The mainstream Indian media ascribed this huge win mainly to the strategic expansion of Mamata's support base with several welfare schemes like the *Kanyashree* (monthly scholarship to girl students from financially weak families), *Sabuj Sathi* (distribution of cycles to high-school students), *Yuvashree* (monthly dole to unemployed students) or *Khadya Sathi* (offering rice or wheat at Rs.2 per kg to 70 million people). The Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee countered the corruption charges by using her clean image and personal charisma by projecting herself ahead of the party with quotes like "I am the candidate in all 294 seats, cast vote for me". The opposition alliance did not quite work out as the Congress was not able to transfer its votes to the Left Front constituencies (The Times of India, May 19, 2016; News18, May 20, 2016; Firstpost, May 20, 2016).

The urban middle-class, who viewed the Mamata regime as a corrupt autocracy that squandered public funds in dole-politics, fairs and festivals to further narrow political objectives (Firstpost, May 18, 2016) was obviously baffled by the results of the 2016 Assembly election. Samaddar (2016), on the other hand hailed this victory as the 'subaltern response' to the rule of the political classes -

If the TMC has won despite middle-class disenchantment and upper-class opposition, we can say that a model based on a strong government, marginalised opposition, and a stable, populist, benevolent, autocratic leadership, is generally succeeding.

(Samaddar in The Indian Express, May 20, 2016)

In a study based on ethnographic experiences in four districts of West Bengal, Nath (2017) has argued that the TMC has strategically installed a new and effective model for public service delivery in a deliberate attempt to free people from the party control and make them dependent on one or two local leaders often through corrupt exchanges. However, a large majority of people approve of this mechanism because of the quick and assured delivery of services, in contrast to the party-based delivery system promoted by the LF, which possibly was not corrupt, but not efficient either. Nath's argument on how corruption is increasingly being 'accepted as a "necessary evil" within the everyday political practices of the state' in the TMC regime explains how the TMC pulled out such a huge victory in the Assembly elections in the face of such financial scams and corruption charges (Nath, 2017:22)

In another study conducted in the Maoist-affected, conflict ridden districts in the western part of the State known as *Jangal Mahal*, Ray and Dutta (2017) notice how the TMC regime was shifting responsibility of delivering public services from the elected public officials to the bureaucrats who were being mobilised on a war footing to promote development, and were made directly responsible to the Chief Minister's Office. With developmental inputs being flown into the region at a hectic pace, the authors also noted how the elected panchayat officials were being sidelined vis-à-vis the local bureaucracy in the management of these inputs. This entire process was being justified on the grounds that public services should be 'depoliticised' for increased efficiency, and was possibly also used as a pretext to deprive the CPI(M)-controlled *Panchayats*. The authors of this article have drawn attention to the resemblance between this counter-insurgency model of West Bengal with the recommendations of World Bank's World Development Report 2011 : Conflict, Security, and Development, that proposes according priority to reconstruction of the state-institutions in conflict situations, over other goals such as decentralisation or democratisation (Ray and Dutta, 2017).

Nath's (2017) claim that debates on policy and corruption issues seemed to be disappearing fast from the public domain in West Bengal was reinforced once again by the results of the most recent Panchayat elections held in 2018, in which the TMC won uncontested in 34% of the seats, and secured 76% of the contested seats across three levels of the PRI, almost the proportion of seats that the LF had won in the 2003 Panchayat elections. The people of the State witnessed an unprecedented scale of violence in the run-up to the elections in which

around 50 people were killed, hundreds of opposition candidates were injured and their documents snatched away while the police remained mute spectators. After the election results were declared, it came to light that 9 out of 20 Zilla Parishads and hundreds of Panchayat Samities and Gram Panchayats will remain opposition-less, which may create a legal crisis in near future. This is because the Panchayat Act provides for compulsory inclusion of the opposition members in all the decision-making committees across the 3-tier PRI system. However, the current TMC Minister-In-Charge of the Panchayat and Rural Development Department, Subrata Mukherjee, did not consider this to be a major issue and went on record saying that the law regarding inclusion of opposition members in various committees might be changed, if necessary. Statements like this on the part of top-level policy makers of the State clearly shows that the basic tenets of the democratic set up is in danger in the State of West Bengal (Anandabazar Patrika, May 20, 2018; The Hindu, May 22, 2018; Daily O, April 14, 2018).

### **6.3 Ideas: External funding agencies and the ‘good governance’ agenda**

Along with this changing political scenario, major changes were simultaneously occurring in the development discourses of the State due to the entry of external funding agencies. The involvement of these agencies along with their policy prescriptions in various development sectors seemed to have intricate and complex connections with the politics being played out on a larger scale, a part of which will be examined within the course of this study. In the preceding chapters, the circumstances that facilitated the entry of DFID-UK in the State were discussed along with details of the DFID-funded project, ‘Strengthening Rural Decentralisation’ (SRD) that operated in the State from 2005 to 2011. The timing of the World Bank funded project ‘Institutional Strengthening of the Gram Panchayats’ (ISGP) launched in September 2010 and implemented through the Panchayat and Rural Development Department (PRDD) more or less coincided with the change in political regime in the State. The different thrust areas of these two projects launched successively to ‘strengthen’ the process of decentralisation in West Bengal, raises certain pertinent questions about the intentions of all concerned, which will be addressed in the following sections of this chapter.

After the DFID funded SRD project came to an end, the World Bank increasingly expressed an interest in different public sectors in the State, and funded projects in the departments of rural development, agriculture and minor irrigation. The Bank had also invited the Mamata Banerjee-led West Bengal government to attend a seven-day seminar on rural development and rural water supply in Stockholm in Europe in 2014, that was attended by the Minister-in-Charge of Panchayat and Rural Development, Subrata Mukherjee (The Indian Express, August 14, 2014).

There were also media reports that the World Bank has been approached by a cash-strapped West Bengal government for a soft loan of Rs 4,000 crore which would be used to clear unpaid wages under the Employment Guarantee Scheme, rural-road networking, rural housing scheme, etc. At the time, the West Bengal Government was reeling under the burden of huge debts, and the new Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee had been criticized for blatantly violating all fiscal discipline and diverting funds allocated for development projects to make room for populist politics (Hindustan Times, Nov.5, 2015; The Telegraph, January 12, 2013; Mail Online India, September 19, 2013). During this period, the Government of West Bengal was already receiving a credit support (for ISGPP Phase I) from the International Development Association (IDA), World Bank worth USD 200 million. This was a 'soft credit' with a moratorium of 10 years from the project initiation date and a repayment period of 25 years (GoWB, 2017). It should be pointed out though, that the project design for ISGP had been done towards the end of the Left-regime, based on the vision of the topmost state-level policy makers of the times, that clearly articulated the need for developing the Panchayats into stronger institutions to follow the processes for 'good governance' –

The major achievable components will be the goals in terms of specific outcomes, the institution that has to be developed to own and work upon the goals, strengthening the institutions *to follow the processes for good governance*, the capacities to be developed for the institutions to take up the journey and the services that are to be delivered to the citizen. The course charted undoubtedly requires strengthening and in some cases re-engineering of the processes, augmentation of fund, personnel and the infrastructure which will be required to accomplish the task.

(GoWB, 2009a:77, emphasis added)

The *Roadmap for Panchayats in West Bengal* is a vision document published by PRDD in 2009, that also points out the need for the State 'to let the Panchayat functionaries internalize the

institutional aspects of good governance as process of development and work out their own goals including the timeframe and measurable parameters for assessing the progress' (GoWB, 2009a:79). Possibly, this was the guiding vision for the people who designed the ISGP project launched in September 2010, in 1,000 selected Gram Panchayats across nine districts of West Bengal. It is interesting to note that this vision document was prepared during the SRD project, as part of component 1 of SRD, and almost the same 3-4 top bureaucrats along with local experts designed both SRD and ISGP projects on behalf of the PRDD. This also implies that the way for entry of the World Bank had been prepared by the left-regime towards the last few years of its rule.

The rationale provided in the official project information document of the World Bank for the ISGP project was that, the foundation laid by the DFID funded SRD programme (2005 – 2011) made West Bengal a suitable ground for launching another project with World Bank support, which would advance the positive outcomes of SRD to the next level (World Bank, 2010). According to a senior bureaucrat of PRDD, entry of the World Bank in West Bengal and withdrawal of DFID from the scenario occurred almost simultaneously. SRD commenced in 2005, and since 2006 the World Bank kept a watch on its development, commissioning several studies before giving a final shape to the Project Implementation Manual (PIM) of the World Bank project:

Since securing funding from the World Bank would have been very time-consuming, all these studies were actually funded by DFID before SRD came to a close. Possibly DFID wanted to prove that theirs was a project worth doing, if the World Bank takes over.

(Ex-Special Secretary, PRDD; interview conducted on 21.09.2016)

Both the districts and the GPs covered by the ISGP project in West Bengal were selected on the basis of being relatively 'high performers', in order to mitigate implementation risk. The main objective is stated to be providing GPs with a sizable amount of additional untied resources for strengthening their institutional capacity and in turn facilitate improvement in the performance of the GPs in local public service delivery (4<sup>th</sup> SFC, 2016:218).

The major theme of the ISGP project (the first phase of which ended on 30th June, 2016) was ensuring effectiveness of public service delivery mechanism at the local level by ensuring enhanced accountability of the public sector and institutional strengthening of local self-governments in India. The project outline proposes to help the Government of West Bengal

in 'expanding and deepening' the process of decentralisation by providing financial resources, incentives and support for capacity-building and performance monitoring. The transfer of resources would be performance based, measured by key performance indicators (World Bank, 2010).

This project document is very much reminiscent of the 'good governance' agenda of the World Bank of the 1990s that was conceptualized as 'sound development management', and qualified in terms like transparency, accountability, etc. The 'good governance' discourse also emphasised accountable, transparent and capacitated 'institution building' through training and resources, and then replication of successful models in other contexts, assuming that the economic processes are the same everywhere. This depoliticized discourse had no reference whatsoever to discourses of authority and structural power relations in specific contexts. Alongside such universal, technocratic and apolitical prescriptions, there were also disciplining techniques for the state as well as the society in the form of specific conditions in return for financial support from the World Bank. The notion of decentralisation was advanced by this agenda as a mechanism to ensure accountability, by enhancing the economic efficiency of the state. Here, the poor are viewed only as 'users' of services in a competitive market, and hardly have any scope to exercise their agency in the concerned processes. This was typical of the neo-liberal rhetoric that emphasized the power of the free market as a means of poverty reduction, treating people merely as economic agents (World Bank, 1992; Leftwich, 1994; Potter, 2000).

The project information document of the ISGP Project displays all these abovementioned traits. The issue of participatory planning processes (a major component of the SRD Programme) has only been touched upon cursorily. Use of terms like 'community' or 'poor' or 'poverty-reduction' are hardly noticeable in the entire document. The same is true of grassroots level platforms like the *Gram Unnayan Samity* (GUS) that spearheaded the participatory planning process under the SRD programme.

The lowest unit for the institutional capacity building exercises under ISGP Project is the *Gram Panchayat* (GP), with focus on the areas of administration, planning and project execution. The reference to minimum mandatory conditions for receiving the financial grants implies that the financial grants would be conditional (World Bank, 2010). These are very similar to the issue of disciplining techniques mentioned earlier which would be applied to one and all

without any reference to specific contexts. The entire approach reflects a view of ‘managing’ positive developmental outcomes through technocratic and economic interventions, with no overt political strategy involved, and is thus perfectly compatible with the wider neo-liberal approach of the World Bank.

The Fourth State Finance Commission (for West Bengal) praised the initiatives undertaken by this project extensively in its report submitted to the Government of West Bengal in 2016, stating that the ISGP project initiatives have resulted in visible improvement in the functioning of the Gram Panchayats in the State in key institutional indicators like ‘Annual Plan and Budget preparation in prescribed and timely manner; fund utilization, compliance with prescribed procurement, accounting and reporting systems and rules, and clean external audit reports.’ Other improvements include ‘creation of more durable infrastructure’ ‘movement towards completion of projects’ and also ‘an effective hand holding support of the elected and official functionaries’ (4<sup>th</sup> SFC Report, 2016: 91-92).

In the following sections, we will try to track the changes that these policy prescriptions of external funding agencies (viz. DFID and World Bank) had on the participatory governance structures or the PRI system in West Bengal, resulting in a change in the institutional processes and internal dynamics of the GP between 2011 – 2016.

## **6.4 Experiments undertaken**

### **6.4.1 SRD to ISGP: Change in the planning process**

The debate in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly among the state-level political decision-makers to curb the powers of the *Gram Unnayan Samity* (GUS) was discussed in detail in the preceding chapter. Since the GUS led and facilitated the participatory planning process at the grassroots, this debate seemed to have far-reaching consequences on effecting a change in the planning process at the GP level in the State of West Bengal. An outline of this change could be clearly traced from the responses of two specific categories of our interviewees, - the project personnel who have served in both the SRD and ISGP projects, and second, the Gram Panchayat employees who have been in service for more than ten years now to have witnessed the change first hand.

The revised GO curbing the powers of the GUS was issued by the PRDD in 2010, when the SRD project was drawing to a close, and the ISGP project was about to be launched. During this transitional phase, in adherence with the West Bengal Panchayat Act (that makes it mandatory for the GP to make an annual plan), the PRDD took the decision of instructing the GPs to prepare *Upa-Samiti*<sup>42</sup> (Standing Committee) based plans, rather than Gram Sansad based plans. It may be recalled that under the SRD project, the GP plans used to be both Gram Sansad based and *Upa-Samiti* based. This was a major change in the planning process of the GP, tracking the course of which has to begin in pre-SRD days (pre-2005), when most of the panchayats incurred expenditure without an approved plan or budget. As the GP officials say-

There was no planning beforehand, activities were identified only when the GP received a grant, as and when required.

(GP Assistant, Dhaban GP, interview conducted on 10.01.2017)

This implies that the GP plan was a vague concept prior to 2005 and there was only some scheme-based planning on ad-hoc basis. When SRD was launched in 2005, this was considered a fundamental issue of institutional strengthening, since the GP as an institution was dealing with public money without a proper plan and budget. Thus, the SRD project mainly focused on installing a decentralised planning process through people's participation, using the GUS as the main vehicle to facilitate this process:

Earlier, the GP members decided everything in the General Body meeting ... then came the GUS. Either they conducted neighbourhood meetings, or sat and discussed themselves, but they submitted a plan to the GP every year ... This organised form came through the trainings by the SRD programme.

(GP Assistant, Dhaban GP, interview conducted on 10.01.2017)

Some of the GP officials acknowledge the positive contribution of these training sessions on their own capacity development as well:

We (GP officials) also learnt the proper planning process along with the Gram Unnayan Samity members. We understood what schemes would be useful for the localities and noted them

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<sup>42</sup> To promote horizontal decentralisation of power among the elected members of the PRI, each tier of the PRI has been divided into *Upa-Samiti* or Standing Committees. There are 5 *Upa-Samities* at the GP level, viz. Finance and Planning Standing Committee, Agriculture and Animal Husbandry Standing Committee, Education and Public Health Standing Committee, Women and Child Development Standing Committee and Industry and Infrastructure Standing Committee (<http://siprd.org.in>)

down accordingly. As the Executive Assistant of the GP, I developed a rough but holistic idea about the needs and requirements of the GP through these exercises.

(Executive Assistant, Motgoda GP, interview conducted on 11.01.2017)

This was also echoed by the Engineering Assistant of Motgoda GP, who said his visits to monitor activities at the sansad level helped him to gain a better understanding of the entire GP area. The GP officials also trusted the information collected first-hand by the GUS to be more authentic for planning purposes than secondary sources. The participatory planning process led by the GUS was detailed in section 5.4, in which, every stage was closely monitored and reviewed by the field-personnel of the SRD programme. The entire process was quite time-intensive, taking 6 – 12 months to be completed which even stretched upto 15 months in some cases. A huge amount of information was collected in the process, which, the SRD project personnel noted, were not required in the final plan document, though the GP could use the data later for different purposes. The purpose of engaging in such a lengthy planning process was more related to a vision of planning as an empowering tool for the masses, rather than planning as a tool for more efficient management of the GP as an institution:

...The PRDD authorities explained to us that enhancing the consciousness of people was the ultimate goal rather than planning ... but because of this lengthy process the planning could not be completed within the stipulated time-frame as stated by the Act.

(DSM, Ex-Assistant Coordinator, SRD, interview conducted on 12.01.2017)

The village-level plans prepared by the GUSs were holistic in nature, based on seven sectors (viz. education, health, women & child development, agriculture & allied industry, infrastructure and other miscellaneous sector) and covering areas related to both infrastructure and human development with special emphasis on social development issues pertaining to quality of life. The Fourth Finance Commission Report notes that the GUS emerged as a people's institution during this planning process. Along with the GUS, participation of women through members of the Self-Help Groups were also encouraged. At the GP level, the plans were both seven-sector-based and *Upa-Samiti* based in adherence to the planning guidelines of the State Government (4<sup>th</sup> SFC, 2016).

The participatory planning component of the SRD project was instrumental in establishing the importance of the planning process to the Gram Panchayat and making the mainstream

administration aware that every GP must have a plan. According to state level project personnel, the positive effects of this awareness was visible in the districts that were common to both SRD and ISGP projects (Capacity Building Manager, ISGP and Monitoring and Evaluation Manager, ISGP; interviews conducted on 20.09.2016).

In 2010, the Institutional Strengthening of Gram Panchayats (ISGP) project was launched by the PRDD, in which preparing the Annual Plan and Budget within the stipulated time-frame (as stated in the West Bengal Panchayat Act) was made one of the Minimum Mandatory Conditions (MMC), in order to qualify for the ISGP Block Grant. It is evident from the field-findings of this research, that the planning process was tightened to maintain the stipulated time-frame, but the aspect of people's participation was done away with. The latter was a predictable development that came with curbing the powers of the GUS, as discussed earlier in this section. Instead of hand-written plan documents and resource maps (that were produced subject to the capacity and availability of the villagers), the GP officials were now expected to produce computerised plan documents through a planning software provided by the PRDD:

Previously, all plan documents were hand-written, which was time-intensive and there was also scope for error since the calculation was done manually. But now the plan is computerised through a planning entry module, so there is hardly any scope for error. We only enter the activity in the software, and it automatically fits itself into the relevant sector and Upa-Samity. The process is much faster now.

(GP Assistant, Dhaban GP, interview conducted on 10.01.2017)

While the abovementioned statement mostly highlights the positive aspect of how much faster, easier and 'efficient' the planning process has become under ISGP, it misses the point about such a mechanical planning process increasingly losing out on the human touch. On probing deeper, it was understood from the GP officials as well as the ISGP State officials that the planning module for ISGP has been prepared on the theoretical assumption that the GP plan and budget would be based on demands raised by the villagers at the *Gram Sansad* meetings. Subsequently, with the purpose of analysing how realistic the budget is, this planning module has been tagged with the Monitoring and Information Systems (MIS) module of the GP, so that the actual implementation of every planned activity can be monitored from the higher levels. In this combined module, 3 kinds of values are tracked for each planned activity – the notional budget at the inception stage, the estimated cost during initiation of

the procurement process and the actual expenditure after the completion of the activity. Moreover, the mitigation measures required for the environmental and social compliance of the particular activity are also incorporated in the system, that helps to generate an Environmental and Social Management Framework (ESMF) compliance report for each scheme along with tracking its financial progress. This ESMF compliance report is also a requirement in order to access the ISGP Block Grant (Interviews with State Capacity Building Coordinator and GP officials of Dhaban and Motgoda GPs). All these measures reinforce the argument that through the ISGP project, planning and implementation of schemes have been converted into mechanical exercises requiring smart and efficient financial management through official procedures, where the common people are being visualised merely as users of services, and have been reduced to nameless, faceless, homogenous entities instead of informed citizens capable of participating effectively in the decision-making processes of the state.

This claim necessitates further examination of how the 'planning' component has been viewed within the ISGP project design. The report published by the Panchayat and Rural Development Department (PRDD) named *Institutional Strengthening of Gram Panchayats Project II: Achievements and Innovations* states –

The ISGPP aimed at strengthening the institutional processes related to functioning of the GP and planning for development of the area through a *bottom-up participatory planning process* and its implementation with transparency and accountability. It specifically focuses on building capacity at all levels through systemic improvement, continuous mentoring of the GP functionaries and better oversight in functioning of the GP.

(GoWB: 2017: 28, emphasis added)

In the same report, the second major component of the project has been stated as 'Capacity Building for Gram Panchayats' which is expanded as 'Training on institutional strengthening aspects and mentoring support to GP functionaries on Participatory Planning and Governance, Financial Management and Procurement and rural and public infrastructure' (GoWB, 2017:4). Since this stated assertion of 'bottom-up participatory planning' processes seemed to be in contradiction with the field-findings, it was imperative to probe further into the report to examine the mechanisms through which this 'participatory planning' component was implemented at field level.

The brief note on the Planning module for ISGP project records the planning process under ISGP in the following manner:

The process starts with getting the demands from the people in the Gram Sansad meeting held during May and November. The demands are compiled and placed before the respective Standing Committees (SCs) for their considerations and the SC is also given an idea of the amount of funds likely to be available by the GP so that they can identify the more important works, which can be accommodated within the budget. The SC-wise draft plan prepared by each SC is then compiled in to a draft plan, which is placed before the Gram Sabha by December for approval. The draft plan is ultimately placed before the General Body for approval by January.

(GoWB, 2017:30)

This report only reflects the exact manner in which the planning process for the GP has been stated in the West Bengal Panchayat Act 1973, where the statutory Gram Sabha and the Gram Sansad meetings held twice a year are the only forums below the GP level, for the villagers to raise their demands. The weaknesses of these forums in providing space to the villagers for discussion, deliberation and effective participation was discussed in Chapter 5.3. For the time being, let us examine the claim that the assessment of the ISGP project ‘determines whether the GP plan and Budget are appropriately formulated’ (GoWB, 2017: Pg.16), and how the performance of ‘Participation, transparency and accountability’ is assessed as per the official report of ISGP:

Assessment of this key area determines whether GP makes decisions and practice in an *inclusive* and *consultative* manner, to ensure that services are planned for and delivered in line with local needs and priorities including the priorities of women and children.

(GoWB, 2017: Pg.17, emphasis added)

Now let us examine how it is determined if the GP actually makes decisions in an ‘inclusive’ and ‘consultative’ manner. During the Annual Performance Assessment (APA) exercise of the ISGP project, the component of Planning & Budgeting is checked through i) Compliance with prescribed formal planning procedures, including the requirements of the Environmental and Social Management Framework (ESMF) and its specific safeguards and preparation of the five-year plan, and ii) Approval of the GP plan and budget (in form 36) by the General Body and concerned sub committees of the GP within the stipulated deadline of 31<sup>st</sup> January every year (GoWB, 2017:17). Similarly, for the areas of participation, transparency and accountability, it is checked if the statutory *Gram Sansad* meetings and the *Gram Sabha* have been held with

adequate attendance of women participants. Other parameters include evidence of the distribution of GP annual report handouts to community members and disclosure of information and posting of information by the GP on its public notice board (GoWB, 2017). From the information given so far, it is understood that the components of participation and accountability are restricted to the formal procedures and official paperwork made mandatory by the West Bengal Panchayat Act. No other platform for consultation with the stakeholders exists apart from the statutory *Gram Sansad* meetings (usually held twice a year) that do not provide much scope for any meaningful discussion.

In addition to the above, a 'Vulnerable Group Development Index' has been incorporated within the ISGP project design, as a 'tool for inclusive development' and a proxy for people's participation (GoWB, 2017:25). The report states -

The main objective of the Vulnerable Group Development Index (VGDI) is to identify the backward areas and disadvantaged rural citizens and ensure their *active participation in planning process* and understand the areas of disparity in the local context in order to provide better services for the development of vulnerable groups and to minimize the gaps for ensuring holistic, inclusive and sustainable development.

(GoWB, 2017:25, emphasis added)

However, the report does not elaborate much on the initiatives that have been adopted by the GPs to ensure 'active participation' of the vulnerable groups, apart from 'sending invitation letters along with the annual budget summary to each and every household along with a request for participation' in the *Gram Sansad Sabha* and *Gram Sabha* meetings. 'Special initiatives for awareness generation and capacity building of the vulnerable groups about various schemes / programmes / support available for these groups' by some GPs have been mentioned without giving any further details about how such exercises are being translated into practice at the grassroots (ibid). It is also specified that GPs are using this Vulnerability Index, 'to prioritize the areas / activities for ensuring equitable and sustainable development by comparing with the existing infrastructure and appropriately getting reflected in the Integrated Action Plan, thus ensuring social inclusion in development process in true sense' (GoWB, 2017:26).

All the abovementioned initiatives seem to be top-down approaches that are being handed down by the GP to the 'vulnerable community', without yielding any space to the community

for deliberation and negotiation, which is essentially a two-way process. As mentioned earlier, there have been studies carried out by the SIPRD (2012) that have proved the *Gram Sabha* and *Gram Sansad* meetings to be inadequate platforms for 'effective participation' by the villagers. It is because of this shortcoming that the need for a body like the GUS was acutely felt in the first place, resulting in the Amendment to the Panchayat Act in 2003. As will be detailed below, this issue was raised repeatedly by several respondents during the course of the field-work for this study as well.

The Fourth Finance Commission in its report has observed that the pattern of expenditure incurred through the ISGP Block Grant shows that the GP incurs a major share of expenditure on infrastructural facilities like Roads (44%), Drinking Water (19%), Drainage (9%) and other Community Buildings (14%) (4<sup>th</sup> SFC, 2016: 277). This major thrust on infrastructural planning is distinctly different from the plans developed through the participatory planning process through SRD, which equally emphasized the human development and social development indicators, as stated earlier. The infrastructural planning under ISGP has been taken to the next level through a planning and MIS software, which in turn has been tagged with a Geographic Information System (GIS.)

For the purpose of this technologically advanced planning and monitoring mechanism, every GP covered by the ISGP project was provided with a mobile device with some ISGP apps installed in it. The GP officials were trained in its use, which enabled the device to take photographs of any planned activity in three stages of implementation. First is the picture of the planned location before the start of actual implementation, second is the photograph of the mid-implementation stage, and the last one at the end of the scheme (GoWB, 2017, interview with Capacity Building Manager, ISGP). This geo-tracking in scheme implementation is mainly used for the purpose of infrastructural planning, in which the MIS application tracks the physical and financial progress of the schemes, which are shown on a map by the GIS application:

This geo-tracking is also acting as an asset-depository. Now the GP can see its own geo-tagged map and decide for itself which sansad areas are more in need of roads or tube-wells or street-lights. The analysis of gaps can be done from the GIS itself. It's not only enhancing accountability and fixing responsibility of the GP, we are also using this as a planning tool. The beauty of the tool is that the GP officials can operate this by themselves after being trained by us. Thus, they have an ownership over the tool.

(Project Manager, ISGPP; interview conducted on 03.03.2017)

Evidently, every stage of this top-down, technologically advanced planning process is controlled by the GP officials who have been given hands-on training in all these aspects by the ISGP project personnel. In the words of one state-level project personnel from ISGP –

Every stage of the activities implemented is very well documented now, there is no scope for accommodating individual whims.

(Capacity Building Coordinator, ISGP; interview conducted on 20.09.2016)

This offhand manner of referring to ‘individual whims’ had a hint of derision towards the involvement of stakeholders at the lowest level of decision-making, bringing back the issue of where the people or their representatives at the grassroots are placed in this changing scenario. This gives rise to several questions: can the GP as the local government ensure that the GP plan actually reflects the needs and priorities of the local people? What role do the GP members play in formulating the GP plan at present? If these schemes are raised from the *Gram Sansad Sabha* (supposing that the *Gram Sansad Sabha* takes place on a regular basis in every *Gram Sansad* under each GP), how and by whom are the priorities fixed from the innumerable demands that are raised in a *Gram Sansad Sabha*? The GP officials seem somewhat uncomfortable when faced with questions like this -

Now the planning process is entirely dependent upon the GP member ... But it’s difficult to plan based on the *Gram Sansad* since we have limited fund. If a *Gram Sansad Sabha* attended by 200 – 250 people, around 400 demands are raised there, and sorting these out is an impossible task for us. So, that fixing of priorities is done by the GP member, in the General Body meeting of the panchayat. This has increased our workload ... earlier, we got a readymade plan from the GUS, which was more realistic.

(GP Assistant, Dhaban GP, interview conducted on 10.01.2017)

This implies that even though the tightened and mechanical planning process has lessened the work-load of the GP employees to a large extent, they cannot be too sure of the advantages of this process when it comes to identification of schemes at the village level. The statement also suggests that in the absence of the GUS, the GP is now entirely dependent on the GP member for identification of schemes for a specific *Gram Sansad* from which he/she is elected. But is there adequate scope in the present system to provide hand-holding support to the GP members on the planning process, in the way the GUS members were trained

extensively by the SRD programme? This is what the ISGP field-personnel had to say about the issue –

Under ISGP, the GP member is supposed to submit a list of schemes to the GP within a definite deadline, schemes that he wants to be implemented in his sansad. How he prepares that list of activities is his lookout. ... Hence, we discuss the planning process in the GB meetings with the GP members present, but cannot go beyond that ...There is no scope for people's participation whatsoever.

(DSM, Planning and Governance Coordinator, ISGP; interview conducted on 12.01.2017)

This clearly answers the questions posed above in a negative. The elected GP member does not have enough scope of gaining in capacity for planning on behalf of the entire community of his own *Gram Sansad*, since the main beneficiaries of the handholding support provided by the ISGP mentors are the GP employees. This has in effect brought about a change in the decision-making power of the elected representatives at the grassroots and changed the internal dynamics of the GP as an institution. This changing role of the people's representatives and the consequent shift in the balance of power in the PRI system is a theme that demands further exploration in greater detail which would be taken up in the 'effects' section. For the time-being, let us briefly return to the thread of changing institutional processes of the Gram Panchayat in the following section.

#### **6.4.2 Tracking changes in the institutional processes of the Gram Panchayat**

We were learning many new things ... earlier, in the pre-computer days, we had to collect hard-copies of government orders or forms from the block. ... SRD mentors provided us with handholding support with these rules, guidelines, GOs and forms and taught us the significance and usage of each ... We (GP officials) became much more organised and aware about the time-lines in which different activities were required to be completed. Single-entry to double-entry system in cashbook maintenance, how Upa-Samity meetings will be conducted. The GP infrastructure was also upgraded ... Post SRD, the atmosphere of the GP changed for the better, it started to emerge as an institution. The human resources that developed through the capacity building of the GUS members during SRD, are still being utilised by the GP for different purposes.

(GP Secretary, Brahmandiha GP; interview conducted on 19.01.2017)

In the abovementioned statement, the 'human resources' referred to by the GP official were mostly the GUS members. On the other hand, when the state level bureaucrats or the state project personnel refer to the 'pool of human resources' created by the SRD project, they refer to the capacitated project team at both state and district levels, all functionaries in GPs covered by the SRD project, in addition to the GUS members. Several of our respondents believed that this legacy of a 'capacitated resource pool' created by the SRD programme made the transition from SRD to ISGP a smoother process. In this section we will explore how far this legacy of human development has been carried forward by the ISGP project, and what are the strategies deployed by ISGP for strengthening the institutional processes of the GP.

The Project Development Objective of the ISGP project mentions the following two major outcomes -

1. 80% of selected GPs will have well-functioning fiduciary and planning systems.
2. A performance-based grant transfer system will be established to roll out to other GPs.

(GoWB, 2017:4)

Moreover, there are four stated components of the ISGP project:

1. Untied performance based fiscal transfer – Performance based Block Grants provided in a timely and predictable manner
2. Capacity Building for Gram Panchayats – with mentoring and formal training to strengthen the institutional capacity of GP functionaries on Participatory Planning and Governance, Financial Management and Procurement and development of rural and public infrastructure
3. State Government Oversight and Monitoring of Gram Panchayats – Regular monitoring by the project on planning, budgeting, procurement and overall institutional functioning
4. Program Management and Implementation – Managerial support by state and district teams along with comprehensive IEC campaign for project and citizen communication (GoWB, 2017:4,6)

### 6.4.2.1 Block Grant

While examining the individual components in greater detail, the first component of providing Block Grant to the project GPs comes through as a major factor that has accorded a strategic advantage to the ISGP project compared to SRD. The first advantage is the timely and predictable nature of the grant, that allows the GP ample time to prepare a realistic action plan and budget within the time-frame stipulated by the Panchayat Act. The allocation of other Untied Funds received by the GP is unpredictable in nature since these are dependent on the utilisation performance of the previous instalments of these funds for all GPs in the district (Interview with Capacity Building Manager, ISGP). Moreover, these funds often arrive later in the financial year, not allowing the GP adequate time for realistic planning. This point has also been raised by the 4<sup>th</sup> SFC report -

Most of the funds, arrive at the last quarter of a financial year and most of the spending takes place in the last quarter. This clearly indicates non-uniform fund flow and use across various quarters ... A significant portion of fund remains unused (parking of funds) with the GPs.

(4th SFC, 2016: 179)

Such unpredictability hampers scheme execution with other funds of untied nature, whereas with the ISGP Block Grant, the GP gets to know the quantum of funds it will receive by the month of September in the previous financial year<sup>43</sup>. In this case, the communication channel and the information dissemination were amply clear. Secondly, the GP receives the entire amount by the beginning of the next financial year in a single instalment so that it can execute all the schemes as per the approved plan. Thirdly, the grant is a quite sizable amount. Although the grant amount for a GP is formulated on the basis of per capita calculation, a minimum grant of INR 1.2 million is ensured for each GP (GoWB, 2017).

The final report published by the PRDD after ISGP Phase I ended in 2016, claimed that since the ISGP Block Grant has been linked to an Annual Performance Assessment of the GPs, this conditional nature of the grant has incentivized a healthy competition among the GPs, leading to their enhanced institutional performance. There has been enhancement in the fund utilisation capacity of the GPs e.g. 85% of all untied grants were utilised in the financial year

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<sup>43</sup> Financial year in India is from 1<sup>st</sup> April to succeeding 31<sup>st</sup> March

2014-15, as compared to 55% during the base year of 2010-11. The report also claims that the larger quantum of funds is enabling the GPs to undertake activities that correspond to the aspirations of the local community and are sustainable in nature. –

The performance linked block grant has acted as the key driver of change in bringing about significant improvement in institutional performance indicators resulting in improved planning and fiduciary systems of GPs with enhanced community participation and creation of sustainable infrastructure for community benefit.

(GoWB, 2017:13)

Thus, according to the government sources, the Block Grant has emerged as a major factor to facilitate institutional changes in the Gram Panchayats.

#### **6.4.2.2 Capacity Building through Mentoring Support**

The first component of the ISGP project viz. the Block Grant is very much dependent for its proper utilisation on the second component, which is Capacity Building. The sustained mentoring support under ISGP has effected a change in the process of planning and implementation of schemes by the GP. Our interviews with the project personnel and the GP officials reveal that the mentoring support has successfully checked the pre-project practice of fragmentation of funds. This was a prevalent practice from the earlier regime of equal distribution of funds among all the *Gram Sansads* under the GP that served a political purpose. The official report of the PRDD (GoWB, 2017) claims that the ending fragmentation has led to creation of assets that are larger in scale and sustainable in nature, thus maximising the benefits to the community. A state project personnel points out that in the SRD project, the fund flow to a GP of average size (say, 10 sansads) was INR 600,000 (@50,000 to 10 GUS, plus 100,000 to GP), in which the larger share was transferred by the GP to the bank accounts held by the *Gram Unnayan Samity*, for undertaking small scale activities. For ISGP on the other hand, the entire fund flowed into the GP account, the minimum amount being INR 1.2 million. The rationale for such a large amount was that, if the fund is not sizable enough, the GP will not give the effort to capacitate itself -

In SRD project, the performance was measured only on the basis of preparation of the plan document, the process of which was not transparent enough to everybody concerned. Moreover, the small assets created, or the activities undertaken by the villagers at the

grassroots were not visible to everyone ... There was a shift in the nature of activities under ISGP, which in fact, discouraged the GP to undertake smaller schemes. Rather, the GP was asked to take up larger schemes in order to create sustainable assets that are 'visible'.

(Monitoring & Evaluation Manager, ISGP; interview conducted on 20.09.2016)

According to this view from the top, undertaking small scale activities at the village level was no longer considered to be of any consequence when compared to creation of large and tangible community assets. However, the reasons why the small-scale activities were perceived to be useful by the villagers themselves, and why they think those are still relevant has been discussed in detail in chapter 5.

At present, GPs are also leveraging funds from all untied sources to undertake large scale infrastructural projects like 'RCC village road, ICDS centres, safe drinking water facilities, community toilets, solar street lights, proper drainage system etc.' (GoWB, 2017:15). Evidently, this infrastructure development is a direct result of the intensive facilitation the GP functionaries receive from the ISGP mentors to build tangible assets -

We discuss the converging of different funds and building community assets instead of fragmentation ... I have to see the list of schemes submitted and then facilitate on fixing of priorities. Otherwise they do not understand how to implement the bigger schemes.

(DSM, Planning and Governance Coordinator, ISGP; interview conducted on 12.01.2017)

This 'visibility' of sustainable assets as proof of 'developmental' work being done by the present government is also a significant part of the 'political discourse' of the current TMC regime. The spokespersons of the ruling dispensation have often claimed to have won successive elections on the basis of 'development' that is 'visible' to the people of the State (Anandabazar Patrika, April 3, 2018). It is possible that the ISGP project also served as one of the vehicles to construct this 'pro-development' image of the current regime.

How do the GP officials perceive these changes in the day-to-day functioning of the GP as an institution? Their responses are mostly in line with the claims made by the PRDD –

Planning process tightened. Entire accounting system became computerised. Our workload decreased a lot, and we became rulebook oriented ... Because this grant is of sizable amount, we have been able to fulfil a long-standing demand of our area. All the rural roads have been converted to motorable, concrete roads with the ISGP fund. This kind of infrastructure

development would not be possible without this fund. ISGP has encouraged building bigger community assets.

(GP Secretary, Brahmandiha GP; interview conducted on 19.01.2017)

The report by PRDD also claims that the sustained mentoring support by the capacity building teams under ISGP have brought about the following systemic improvements:

(a) Planning: Developing and introducing systems for the physical mapping of facilities and investments within the GP planning and reporting process (GoWB, 2017:10).

(b) Accounting systems: Development of an approach and implementation strategy for the gradual implementation of accrual accounting practices, including the alignment of GP accounting practices with the national public accounting classification system, and the development of a foundation for improving GP asset management (GoWB, 2017:10).

(c) GPMS development: Support for the introduction of modules in the GP Management System ... for contract management and service delivery viz. internal expenditure control, budgeting & planning, demand & collection registers, the development of web-based database access tools, etc. (GoWB, 2017:11.)

GP officials recollect that in the pre-SRD days, there was no electricity, no computer, planning and accounts maintenance for the GP had to be done manually, and the practice of handholding mentoring support had just started with the launching of SRD –

Another group of (SRD) mentors used to visit the GP office who facilitated the institutional issues, ... These hands-on sessions were very useful to us. I learnt a lot. The computer was just making an entry to the Gram Panchayat.... Previously, we used to maintain our cashbooks manually through single-entry system. SRD mentors taught us about the double-entry system. Then came a software called Gram Panchayat Management System (GPMS), through which the entire accounting system became computerised.

(Executive Assistant, Motgoda GP; interview conducted on 11.01.2017)

Hence, support on the institutional issues of the GP seems to be a legacy of the SRD programme as well, which has been given an immense boost by the technologically advanced tools and devices used in the ISGP project. GP officials have undergone intensive capacity building on these tools, and they candidly reveal their satisfaction at the advantageous position that these tools have accorded to them -

We don't have to maintain so many registers any longer. I can also print out any page that I need at any given point of time. Previously, I had to do the Monthly Reconciliation Statement of accounts manually. For that I had to rummage through the cash-book, ledger and subsidiary cash-books. We no longer need to do that. With this software, it comes out in a compiled report format, which saves us a lot of time earlier taken up by manual calculation ... things have become much faster now. There are many advantages of this new system.

(Executive Assistant, Motgoda GP; interview conducted on 11.01.2017)

Reduction of the workload is a common feedback from the GP officials about the impact of the ISGP project, apart from a new-found feeling of self-confidence:

ISGP has modernised the panchayat. They give us a calendar of events beforehand, so that we know what the time-frame for each activity is. We (GP officials) are now much more knowledgeable about stages of implementation. Computerisation has increased the pace of work by 200%. Moreover, reporting to the block has become so much easier.

(GP Assistant, Dhaban GP; interview conducted on 10.01.2017)

### **6.4.2.3 State Government Oversight and Monitoring of Gram Panchayats**

The third component of the ISGP project, viz. developing 'State Government Oversight and Monitoring of Gram Panchayats' has gone a long way in the mainstreaming of this project, since this component has provision for providing technical support to PRDD for improving the state oversight in PRI monitoring system. A specific model of monitoring mechanism has been designed and developed to be 'utilized to build a "single window" based monitoring system to be implemented state-wide in the long run' (GoWB, 2017: 35). The system started out in 2010-11 with paper-based monitoring formats that were filled up manually by the GP staff, and the web-based monitoring software for ISGPP was finally launched in February 2013. Besides entering, editing and submitting the data, the GPs can also generate various reports from the submitted data.

Apart from monitoring different institutional processes related to the implementation of different schemes, this monitoring mechanism also wanted to capture how the planning process is being followed, as well as the different phases of implementation on real-time basis. Capturing and analysing spatial information and displaying the same on the website led to the development of 'Geographic Information System (GIS) and appropriate application of Information and Communication Technology (ICT)' (GoWB, 2017:28). This GIS Based

Monitoring System also has the scope to record participation of stakeholders in *Upa-Samiti* meetings, *Gram Sansad* meetings and *Gram Sabha* meetings. Another unique feature of this system is the insertion of disaggregated demographic data of *Gram Sansads* of the Project GPs. This feature provides information related to ‘public amenities, social strata distribution and vulnerability’. The PRDD report claims that –

This now acts as a data bank for reference for mapping social and infrastructural development among the Sansads of the GPs. It also acts as a platform for seeking insight on the gaps and scopes of intervention to be made by the project personnel.

(GoWB, 2017:38)

From our field-experiences, it is evident that such innovative technical tools have indeed caught the imagination of the officials placed at different levels of the administrative machinery. A large cross section of the officials interviewed in the course of this research have found these concepts to be really useful from the institutional perspective for Identifying gaps and interventions. However, the PRDD report makes it clear that these technical tools are meant to be used by people with expertise like the bureaucrats and project personnel and not the common man. While acknowledging that building and strengthening institutions is a necessary pre-requisite of a capacitated state, one also needs to probe deeper to find out who are the actual beneficiaries of such technical innovations.

The PRDD report claims that at the GP level, the GP employees and elected representatives are benefitting from this system not only for monitoring purposes, but their burden of reporting has also reduced significantly. Moreover, the higher level (Block, Sub-Division, District and State) administrators also benefit from the system because of availability of GP-wise disaggregated data and various reports (ibid). This claim was validated by the District Panchayat and Rural Development Officer (DPRDO) for Bankura district:

Monitoring the GP has become so easy these days. I can see how each GP is doing from my office through these websites. Now that the GPs are even uploading photographs of the schemes they are implementing, shortly we will be able to see even the map of the completed assets within the GP area. This mechanism also has a potential for planning in future. We can easily identify the infrastructural gaps. This will check duplication of schemes and also facilitate the planning process at the district and the block level.

(DPRDO, Bankura; interview conducted on 08.02.2017)

There are various modules under the GIS Based Monitoring System like –

- i) The Map Module which is a geo-referenced base map showing the habitations within the villages, important service delivery institutions (e.g. school, health centre, bank, post-office, etc.), and also natural resources like river, forests etc., as captured from the satellite.
- ii) Work Module for capturing the progress of entire work-execution processes and the final output after completion of schemes
- iii) Module for capturing Drinking Water Sources through which the requirement of installing new drinking water sources proportionate to the population residing in different habitations can be assessed
- iv) The Mentor Reporting System to record and monitor the visit of the ISGPP Mentor team to their assigned GPs under the project
- v) Various graphical and tabular reports on a wide range of themes can be generated with the MIS module, while with the GIS module, queries and analysis of the plan along with spatial features can be seen on thematic maps.

(GoWB, 2017)

With all of the abovementioned developments, the Gram Panchayat is passing through a transitional phase, when the earlier culture of manual report preparation is transforming into the online data entry system, from which apparently, reports can be generated and viewed both by the administrators as well as the common citizens alike. The higher-level administrators and the GP officials are of the opinion that this has brought in the element of transparency into the system.

Other initiatives undertaken within the scope of the ISGP project for strengthening institutional capacities of the GPs include: development of a Grievance Redressal Management Application, development of Information, Education and Communication (IEC) activities (folk campaigns, usage of electronic and print media, hoardings, newsletters, etc.), and formation of the Society for Training & Research on Panchayats & Rural Development (STARPARD) to impart formal training to the elected representatives and other functionaries of Gram Panchayats (GoWB, 2017).

The different components of the ISGP project mentioned above have been designed to make distinctive contributions to build the institutional capacity of the panchayats in West Bengal. The impact of these interventions was evaluated through an annual assessment exercise, the details of which will be examined in the following section.

#### **6.4.2.4 Annual Performance Assessment (APA)**

A distinct feature of the ISGP project that has come up time and again in the discussions held with the project personnel and the officials at different levels is the Annual Performance Assessment (APA) that is conducted every financial year to assess the eligibility of the GP for accessing the ISGP Block Grant. The APA is conducted through an independent and impartial mechanism on four key performance areas, the assessment criteria for which are as follows:

**A. Planning & Budgeting:** ✓ Compliance with prescribed planning procedures, including the requirements of the Environmental and Social Management Framework (ESMF) and its specific safeguards and preparation of the five-year plan. ✓ Approval of the plan by the General Body and concerned sub committees of the GP

**B. Project Execution and Service Delivery:** ✓ Timely utilization of untied funds namely CFC, SFC, GP own fund and ISGP Block Grant ✓ Transparent and appropriate methods of procurement are followed and properly documented ✓ Compliance with ESMF safeguards ✓ Geo tagging of projects

**C. Accounting, financial reporting & audit:** ✓ The availability of annual unaudited financial statements (Form 27) by a given timeline. ✓ The receipt of an unqualified external audit opinion from the CAG for the previous financial year. ✓ The timely submission of each monthly report (Form 26) in the year under assessment. ✓ The timely submission of semi-annual Physical Progress Reports, etc.

**D. Participation, transparency and accountability:** The meetings of all Gram Sansads (Ward level meetings) held in the GP twice in a year and the meeting of Gram Sabha held in the GP once in a year with adequate attendance of women participants ✓ Evidence of the distribution of GP annual report handouts to community members. ✓ The

extent of compliance by the GP in disclosure of information and posting of information on its public notice board.

(GoWB, 2017: 16 - 18)

All assessments are done through formal and official procedures with tangible evidences that are visible and verifiable. The APA, which was known as the Minimum Mandatory Conditions (MMC) when ISGP was launched is very much reminiscent of the conditionalities, an integral part of the 'good governance' agenda of the World Bank, and used as disciplining techniques for the recipient countries. However, our field findings suggest that these conditionalities have been well accepted by the GP employees, who are in charge of all the tasks to be executed during the APA - from preparing the documents to dealing with the assessors. This also means dealing with more paperwork and increase in workload to some extent, but the GP officials do not seem to mind -

The APA is advantageous for us, because repeated reviews help to improve our performance ... The papers are in order. We are maintaining separate registers, which is very convenient during the (annual) audit, and this also gives us satisfaction.

(GP Assistant, Dhaban GP; interview conducted on 10.01.2017)

The APA exercise has also made it easier for the GP officials to explain to the elected members why it is essential to adhere to the rules, using the ISGP Block Grant as the carrot -

Because of the APA, we have to keep all registers in order, and can also convince the GP members, that the GP will miss out on the fund, if all these are not in order and maintained appropriately.

(GP Secretary, Brahmandiha GP; interview conducted on 19.01.2017)

Evidently, this has resulted in the GP officials taking more control of the decision-making processes within the GP, an emerging trend that will be explored in further detail in the 'Effect' section of this chapter. A significant message that seems to have percolated well to the GP employees through all these intensive capacity building initiatives is that, ISGP does not have any separate agenda of its own. Rather, the project is here only to facilitate efficient and timely execution of the duties assigned to the GP employees by the Panchayat Act and rules so that the panchayats can function appropriately as local government. Hence, the GP officials have accepted the APA exercises in a positive light -

All these are the basic systems of a Gram Panchayat, everything in the rule-book, there wasn't anything additional in it. The criteria were imposed because we were not following the rule-book. Now, since the release of the fund has been made conditional on the fulfilment of these conditions, there is a competition among the GP staff not to lose out on this fund, and the political members are also more aware about these rules and timelines. Now all these conditions have become internalised in the normal functioning of the GP.

(Executive Assistant, Motgoda GP; interview conducted on 11.01.2017)

This theme of 'normalisation' and 'institutionalisation' of the project practices will be taken up in further detail in chapter 7. To summarise the discussions of this section, it can be inferred that the panchayats have definitely made gains in terms of efficiency, financial management, controls on corruption, etc. which are valuable achievements as observed by the Fourth Finance Commission Report. However, how these gains have impacted other institutional dynamics at the local level will be explored in the following section of this chapter.

## **6.5 Effects: Shift in the Balance of Power**

### **6.5.1 Rising trend of Bureaucratisation**

One of the major trends emerging from this research is how the transition from Left Front to TMC rule in 2011 also changed the political dynamics within the PRI system of West Bengal. That the left regime considered the PRI institution as an extension of the party through which it could advance its agenda was discussed in chapter 4. In this section, we take up that thread once again by discussing how the Communist Party of India (CPI(M)) exercised control over the Gram Panchayats (GP) in the State, and what brought about a shift in this practice.

In their interviews, the GP officials candidly admit that during the erstwhile left-regime, the GP officials had prior directives to maintain regular contact with the Local Committee Secretary (LCS) or the Local Committee Member (LCM) of the CPI(M), 'since those were party directed panchayats'. The practice of the LCS or LCM regularly visiting the GPs, and giving recommendations to the GP officials regarding payments for different schemes, was also accepted by the GP officials. However, the officials also acknowledged that these party

workers were well-informed about the functioning of the Panchayats because of the political education they received within their party organisation -

In fact, we maintained a separate file for recommendations from the party ... but we could also discuss with those people, since they were well aware about the purpose of the panchayats. The party conducted trainings for the party workers on panchayat related issues. So, these people were quite capacitated.

(GP Secretary, Brahmandiha GP; interview conducted on 19.01.2017)

Evidently, even if the GP plan was based on demands raised in the *Gram Sansads* at the time, it was a well-known fact that the priorities were fixed in the CPI(M) party offices, which made the GP officials less accountable for the decisions taken at the GP level. However, this trend began to change with the launching of the Strengthening Rural Decentralisation (SRD) programme. The local leaders of the CPI(M) made it a point to be present during the initial sensitisation and motivational programmes conducted by the field-facilitators of the SRD project. As these trainings and meetings increased in frequency making the GP a hub of activity, the LCS / LCM gradually loosened his grip over the GP. However, the LCS continued to operate through a forum called the '*Samannay Committee*' (Coordination Committee) (Interview, GP officials in Dhaban, Motgoda, Brahmandiha GPs). The field-facilitators of the SRD project were aware that the key decisions for the GP were actually taken in this forum, and then conveyed to the GP officials through the GP Prodhan or the GP member. They too, maintained a careful liaison with the LCS, so that the party in power was well aware of what is happening in the training sessions or on the ground –

They said it was 'assistance', but we called this 'control' ... we felt their covert presence, though the LF party members never divulged their political identity explicitly. They maintained separate identities for the party and the panchayat, and the party prepared them for these respective roles. They never discussed publicly whatever was discussed in their party office.

(DSM, ex-Assistant Coordinator, SRD; interview conducted on 12.01.2017)

Such covert participation of political parties could be felt by the field-facilitators at the village level too through the *Gram Unnayan Samities* (GUS). At times, the Branch Committee Secretary and the GUS Secretary turned out to be the same person. The field-facilitators felt that the GUS functioned smoothly in such cases, since mass mobilisation was easier due to political cooperation. In fact, in some areas, the party had delegated their power to the GUS,

possibly with the electoral agenda of gaining acceptability to the voters of the locality (Interview, SRD field facilitators).

The district and sub-district level bureaucrats affiliated to the mainstream administration also agree that the regimented nature of the erstwhile left-regime was advantageous in some respects, though they emphasize the highly clientelistic nature of the left parties as problematic –

In the earlier regime, if there was a problem, and we could convince any one political person wielding political power about the nature of the problem, 50% of the job was done then and there. The solution came out easily because of their network, and mostly the job got done successfully. But on the other hand, he expected some favour in return, e.g. in case of beneficiary selection for certain schemes.

(Block Development Officer, Chhatna; Interview conducted on 06.02.2017)

These bureaucrats also state categorically that the Prodhan or the GP members did not enjoy real power in the earlier regime, since the list of beneficiaries were actually prepared by the Zonal Committee or the Local Committee of the CPI(M) which seem to have been highly partisan in nature. As per the bureaucrats, often the representatives of the ruling party did not allow implementation of any scheme in localities that had elected members from the opposition parties –

The CPI(M) leaders said openly that we want the benefits to go only to our own party supporters; we don't want to give any to the opposition; and as BDO I used to say in that case I'll take out a portion from your share and implement it in the areas of the opposition ... this partisanship was the main reason behind the increasing resentment against the CPI(M). I think that this (partisan) trend is lesser in this regime.

(DPRDO, Hoogly; Interview conducted on 22.02.2017)

That beneficiary selection is somewhat less partisan under the current TMC regime is another point that was repeatedly underlined by the bureaucrats at the district and sub-district levels in their interviews. They cited the examples of universal schemes like Sabuj Sathi (providing cycles to all students from classes IX – XII), or Khadya Sathi (providing 5 kilogram (kg) of rice or wheat per family member per month at Rs 2 per kg) to prove their point (AITC, 2018).

Not surprisingly, the elected representatives affiliated to the ruling TMC party at the Panchayat Samity (block) level also expressed a similar opinion -

Now that everybody (irrespective of APL or BPL) is receiving a cycle or rice at Rs.2 per kg, or benefits for the Kanyasree scheme, this has made things easier for us to work with. Previously, we witnessed several incidents of resentments regarding the BPL list and led several movements against that as the opposition party. When we assumed power, everything was universalised, that helped the CM to earn the trust of the people ... we have tried to get over the partisanship that was the typical feature of the previous regime.

(Karmadhyaksha, Indpur Panchayat Samity; interview conducted on 07.02.2017)

The Chairperson of the Fourth Finance Commission, who is also a member of the West Bengal State Planning Board under the present TMC regime, candidly admitted in his interview that breaking the party hegemony of the previous Left regime has been a *conscious policy decision* on the part of the TMC government -

There has been a massive change in the current regime compared to the previous regime. Bureaucrats have been tremendously empowered now. This wasn't there in the previous regime. A Zilla Parishad *Sabhadhipati* was like a minister, who was very difficult to access. Even the District Magistrate (DM) had to seek an appointment to meet the *Sabhadhipati*. But in this regime, the equation has changed entirely. It's a huge administrative change. The control has become much more centralised. This is entirely a policy decision ... the decision-making power of the bureaucrats has increased manifold.

(Chairperson, 4<sup>th</sup> State Finance Commission; Interview conducted on 13.02.2017)

Coming from a person serving in advisory capacity to the government in power, this is validation of the argument in this thesis that increasing bureaucratisation of the system and curbing the power of people's representatives was a conscious policy decision by this political regime. A senior officer of the West Bengal Civil Service cadre deputed as a Special Officer with the 4<sup>th</sup> State Finance Commission, further elaborated on the issue. He explained that while being aware of the standard logic of empowering the people's representatives and raising demands from below, the Commission considers the office-bearers in the Panchayats as local elites whose only aim is to achieve power and control. Thus, transfer of power from the local leaders to the bureaucrats might actually benefit the common people since a bureaucrat does not have any local interest and can work neutrally. The Commission, in an advisory capacity to the government, fully endorsed this policy decision of empowering the bureaucracy rather than the people's representatives (Interview, Special Officer, 4<sup>th</sup> SFC). That this task of bureaucratising the system was accomplished down the line in due course

was validated by a series of interviews and group discussions at various levels during our field-work, but how this was done can be explained through certain documentary evidences.

Within 6 months of the TMC government assuming power in the State in May 2011, the Office of the Chief Secretary and Cabinet Secretary, Government of West Bengal issued an order proposing to set up “Development Monitoring Committees at District, Sub-Division and Block Levels in each district (except Kolkata), for ensuring co-ordination among field level functionaries of respective departments and speedy execution of various projects, proper delivery of public services and quality of implementation of projects and programs” (GoWB, 2011). According to this order, the Development Monitoring Committee at each level comprises of only government officials and none of the elected representatives has been included within any committee at any level. This is a clear reversal of the governance model introduced by the earlier Left Front regime (see section 4.3 in chapter 4), making the bureaucracy share power with the elected representatives. In this model, the ZP Chairperson was made to head all the district-level coordination committees in which both the ZP Chairperson and the District Magistrate were members (Ghosh and Kumar, 2003).

The 2011 order on the formation of the Development Monitoring Committee designates the District Magistrate, the Sub Divisional Officer and the Block Development Officer as the Chairperson of the Committee at the District level, Sub Division level and Block levels respectively. There is no mention of the *Sabhadhipati*, ZP or the *Sabhapati*, Panchayat Samity (PS) in this Government Order (GO). In his interview, the *ex-Sabhadhipati* of Bankura ZP recounts how all on a sudden he found himself out of all monitoring committees shortly after the TMC assumed power in the State Assembly, though most of the Panchayati Raj Institutions still had a board dominated by the Left Front –

People’s representatives are losing their position. Before 2011, the ZP *Sabhadhipati* used to be the Chairman for all the district-level committees. The first thing that they (the TMC regime) did after assuming power in 2011 was to throw out the *Sabhadhipati*.

(DPM, *ex-Sabhadhipati*, Bankura ZP; interview conducted on 12.01.2017)

The explanation for this might be found in the results of the Panchayat elections of 2008. In this election, though the LF suffered an unexpected setback at the lower levels of the PRI system, they were able to retain most of their seats at the *Zilla Parishad* (ZP) or the District

panchayats. Out of 17 ZPs in which elections were held, 13 were retained by the LF, while TMC and the Congress party captured 2 each (LF, 2013). 3 years later, when the TMC assumed power at the state-level, most of the District Panchayats still had LF boards, which were in the midst of their 5-year term (2008-2013). The said order issued by the TMC immediately after it came to power in 2011 was possibly an attempt to cripple the LF headed institutions by stripping their elected representatives of all executive powers and de-activating these institutions in effect for the remaining length of the term.

As discussed in chapter 4, the LF after assuming power in 1977 introduced a new model of governance in an attempt to clip the wings of bureaucracy, where the government employees at all levels – from the State to the Village Council, would be required to share their power with the elected representatives. Since assuming power in 2011, TMC has been making an attempt to roll back this wheel as a conscious policy decision:

Elected members down the line have no power at all under the current regime ... deep inside, this is exactly what the bureaucrats had wanted all along. They have earned their position by virtue of education, ... they have their own vision on development, which they want to implement with a free-hand. But in the previous system, he was merely one of the opinion-makers, not the sole decision-maker. Now they are enjoying this new-found status of the 'decision-maker'.

(DPM, ex-Sabhadhipati, Bankura ZP; interview conducted on 12.01.2017)

The truth in the abovementioned statement becomes obvious when this is juxtaposed with certain comments made by district and block level bureaucrats in the course of their interviews, admitting that it is easier to negotiate with and bring round the political representatives of the current regime that the previous one –

Earlier, I had to understand. Now, I can make them understand. For instance, (earlier) whatever the guidelines of a particular scheme may say, the BDO had to understand what the demands of the particular political party are, even if that meant going beyond the guideline. But now, the BDO can convince them (political persons) that this is what the GO says, and we have to act accordingly.

(Block Development Officer, Chhatna; Interview conducted on 06.02.2017)

The District Panchayat and Rural Development Officer (DPRDO), Hoogly too admitted that even in the capacity of a BDO, he found it far easier to work with the TMC regime. The Ex-

Sabhadhipati, Bankura ascribes this re-emergence of the 'bureaucratic trend' to the lack of political education among the leaders of the current regime –

When I go to visit the Panchayat Samity, I see that they (elected representatives of the current regime) are totally ignorant about the rules and regulations. And hence, the BDO can order them around and make them do whatever he wishes. ... BDOs now wield much more power than before.

(DPM, ex-Sabhadhipati, Bankura ZP; interview conducted on 12.01.2017)

The BDOs on the other hand, did not seem comfortable with the idea of dealing with very capacitated people's representatives, who would be in a position to ably negotiate with the bureaucrat-

When the political person knows too much, he / she may point out the loopholes in the rules, and dares to flout the GO. Such things happen. But these people (TMC) still have that mentality to follow the rules to a large extent.

(Block Development Officer, Chhatna; Interview conducted on 06.02.2017)

This comment almost echoed the attitude expressed in the interview of the senior state level bureaucrat deputed with the 4<sup>th</sup> State Finance Commission -

Earlier, the Prodhan did not pay any heed to the BDO since s/he had direct access to the Sabhadhipati. Now s/he cannot do that. The BDO coordinates the entire thing with help from the DM. This has consolidated the system to a large extent ... Now there's a holistic approach.

(Special Officer, 4<sup>th</sup> Finance Commission; interview conducted on 25.10.2016)

An elected representative of the Panchayat Samity affiliated to the current ruling party (TMC) completely endorsed this decision by the ruling dispensation. He did not seem to be uncomfortable with the idea of a shift in the balance in power in favour of the bureaucracy –

Earlier all decisions used to take place within the (CPI(M)) party office. It is due to fair instructions by the Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, that the institutions can work neutrally today. People can live freely under the open sky now.

(Karmadhyaksha, Indpur Panchayat Samity; interview conducted on 07.02.2017)

However, the elected representatives affiliated to the Left Front who served as post-holders of PRI institutions (*Sabhadhipati, Sabhapati, Prodhan*) during the earlier regime were obviously critical of the present trend of centralisation of power in the bureaucratic

machinery, which, they pointed out, will undermine the status of the political representatives in the long run (Interviews, *ex-Sabhadhipati* and *ex-Prodhan*).

**Observations of an Ex-Prodhan affiliated to the CPI(M) on the changing power dynamics between the elected representatives and the bureaucracy:**

When we were serving as Prodhans, we did not address the BDO as 'Sir'. Now the BDOs have become 'Sir'. We addressed the BDO, or even the DM as 'BDO Saheb' or 'DM Saheb'. Because I had the notion that being an elected representative, I AM THE GOVT., they are only Govt. servants. He can address me as 'Sir' if he wishes, not the other way round. I am working for the people, not for myself. And I don't take any remuneration for what I'm doing. I could strongly negotiate with the BDO to claim my dues, but if the Prodhan today wants to do that, she would land up in jail. Bureaucracy has immense power now. If they want, they can consider giving us our dues as an act of charity, we cannot 'claim' it. ... There was an incident around 2011-12, when I was negotiating with the BDO in his office, and he told me to keep my voice down, since 'only the BDO is allowed to speak in a loud voice in that office.' Then I told him, "You have not read the Constitution properly, which says Panchayat is an autonomous body, it is self-governed. And being people's representatives, we have every right to speak in a louder voice than you, because you are just a public servant. We do not accept any remuneration, whereas you are working for your salary". Now this has changed, and the bureaucrats have emerged more powerful in the tussle between bureaucracy and democracy.

(Ex-Prodhan, Brahmandiha GP (affiliated to CPI(M)); interview conducted on 06.01.2017)

*Note:* By local convention, addressing one as 'Sir' is more reverential than addressing as 'Saheb'

In the next section, we will look at how this shift in the balance of power in favour of the officials vis-à-vis the political representatives has changed the internal dynamics of the Gram Panchayat as an institution under the present political regime.

### 6.5.2 Changing Role of GP officials: Are the GP staff are more in control now?

The time-period 2005-06 can be seen as a period of transition in the PRI system of West Bengal. Until that period, distribution of individual benefits (Housing scheme for the poor, Old Age Pension, etc.) was the prerogative of the *Gram Panchayat*, and much depended on the discretion and recommendations of the elected members of the GP. *The Rural Household*

*Survey (RHS)*<sup>44</sup> in which, a definite process was followed to allot a score to each family in order to define the eligibility of the family (to receive individual benefits on the basis of these scores), was not yet applicable. A paradigm shift was brought about by the RHS-2005 in terms of the discretionary power exercised by the elected GP members in West Bengal -

Earlier, the GP member had total freedom to decide who will get the benefit of IAY (housing benefit) from his Sansad ... Now they don't have that option, first with the Rural Household Survey (RHS) and then with the SEBA Software that generated the names of the deserving beneficiaries, and even fixed the priority.

(Engineering Assistant, Motgoda GP; interview conducted on 11.01.2017)

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) was also launched in 2005 and was implemented through the Gram Panchayat at the lowest level. The GP officials recount that in the initial days of NREGS, there used to be a column in the Muster Roll for the signature of the GP member, against which the Prodhan used to issue the payment for the wage-labourers. With the introduction of advanced software systems in the implementation of this scheme, this system of authentication by the elected member was no longer required for releasing labour payment. At present, this payment is directly transferred by the block to the bank accounts of the individual beneficiaries. GP members have no role in this at all, though they are 'informed' about the list of beneficiaries:

The advantage of the earlier system was that the members had some involvement, and some accountability as a result. The disadvantage of this system was that they had their own whims and interest.

(GP Assistant, Dhaban GP; interview conducted on 10.01.2017)

In what way the GP employees recognise both the pros and cons of this system would be discussed in greater detail later in this section. Let us now track the systematic procedures that made the elected representatives at the GP level lose their grip over this institution at the grassroots.

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<sup>44</sup> The Rural Household Survey (RHS) was launched by the Govt. of India in the mid-90s, conducted through the State governments with the purpose of identifying households below the official income poverty line for identification of beneficiaries for various poverty alleviation schemes. This survey, also known as the Below Poverty Line (BPL) census, was launched in West Bengal in 2005, and it sought to grade the relative deprivation of rural households on 12 indicators in a scale of 1 – 5 (Bakshi and Okabe, 2008)

In August 2006, through an amendment to the West Bengal *Panchayat (Gram Panchayat Administration) Rules, 2004 (GoWB, 2006)*, the Executive Assistant of the GP was made the joint signatory along with the GP Prodhan, for any financial transaction made by the GP. Earlier, the GP Prodhan had the sole authority to make monetary transactions on behalf of the GP. Some of the GP officials perceive this to be a major step towards strengthening the position of the GP officials who now had increased accountability towards the institution, and 'cannot afford to yield to pressure' (interview, GP Assistant, Dhaban GP, 10.01.2017).

2005 was also the year in which the SRD programme was launched, and it has been stated earlier in this chapter that the SRD project led to an increased activity in the GP, and the GP officials (by their own admission) gradually gained awareness about the different rules and regulations regarding the functioning of the GP as an institution. However, the maximum thrust of the SRD project was on the installation of the participatory planning process, led by the *Gram Unnayan Samiti (GUS)* members drawn from different *gram sansads* under the jurisdiction of the GP. Hence, the field-facilitators of the SRD project were mainly dealing with elected representatives of the area, GUS members, and other members of the local community, who would facilitate the participatory planning process at the grassroots. For the GP officials, getting involved in this process was optional -

(During SRD phase) GP officials were officially part of the GP Facilitating Team, but due to their work pressure, it was not possible for them always to attend our time-intensive training, meeting and review sessions. Therefore, they were not fully aware or motivated about the entire process. But some of them were attracted to it, and got involved on their own.

(DSM, Ex-Assistant Coordinator, SRD; Interview conducted on 12.01.2017)

But this scenario has evidently undergone a sea-change since the launching of the ISGP project, which is much more technically oriented, and concentrates on strengthening the functioning of the Gram Panchayat as a formal institution. The state-level Capacity Building Manager of the ISGP project categorically states that the technical operations are designated responsibility of GP employees, since the elected representatives 'do not always have the capacity to understand these technical issues' (Interview on 20.09.2016), though the Prodhan is briefed about it. Have these technical innovations transformed the internal dynamics and the daily practices of the GP in any way? The GP officials mention that sometimes a

communication gap is created since most elected GP members do not have hands-on experience with these technical issues -

Earlier, first they planned for a specific road or a pond to be excavated at a particular location. But during actual implementation of the schemes, often the location was changed ... But now under the new satellite-based, web-based system, even the location of the completed schemes would be tracked by uploading its image. So, the scheme cannot be changed later.

(Executive Assistant, Motgoda GP; interview conducted on 11.01.2017)

One can discern a veiled tone of satisfaction in the responses of the GP officials as they eagerly articulate the 'advantages' of the new technical innovations; a satisfaction of finally gaining control over the functioning of the GP as an institution that was entirely controlled by the political opinion makers during the earlier regime -

Earlier, if the political masters wanted to divert funds and carry out activities in violation of the prescribed guidelines of specific funds ... we used to comply, but kept a resolution as our safeguard. For them, only the activities to be done was a priority, even if that meant non-adherence to the scheme guideline. So, these technical solutions somewhat work to our advantage by providing us a safeguard. Since ISGP was launched, our reporting system has been web-based, and there is less scope of fund diversion due to pressure from political masters. We convinced them that one cannot report wrongly in these web-based reports, and thus the tendency to violate the scheme guidelines has reduced considerably.

(Engineering Assistant, Motgoda GP, Interview conducted on 11.01.2017)

The ISGP project personnel facilitating at the GP level agree with the statement that the GP officials are now enjoying more autonomy in the internal affairs of the GP as an institution and they are in a position to influence the political persons and not the other way round. Equipped with the knowledge on the rules and regulations controlling the functioning of the GP, as well as the expertise on the technological knowhow, an expert GP staff can emerge as a decisive factor in the concerned GP under the present system. The project personnel also observe that the level of political capture is comparatively less than the earlier regime -

(Now) if the GP official has the expertise and the will to work, he/she can do his / her work in a neutral manner. There is no systematic political interference, nor is there any positive contribution by the political opinion makers ... In this regime and for this project we as facilitators are not required to have any interaction with the political leaders. We convey the necessary instructions to the GP officials who in turn speak to the political leaders ...

(DSM, Planning and Governance Coordinator, ISGP; interview conducted on 12.01.2017)

This de-politicised and mechanical approach to 'institution building' that in effect excludes people for whom institutions have been built, stands in direct contrast to the participatory SRD approach that involved collaborations with local political leaders, elected representatives, GUS members and the community members in general. Moreover, the previous LF regime had its own Panchayat Cell through which it conducted training camps on panchayats for its members at various levels, even though the practice declined in the later stages. Hence, the political workers of the earlier regime had much more scope and exposure to political education as well as capacity building exercises at various formal and informal spaces. Such a system is totally non-existent under the current regime resulting in ignorance among the current members about the day-to-day institutional functioning of the panchayat, reducing their negotiating skills to claim their rights and making them more and more dependent on the GP officials for implementation of schemes or allocation of resources -

The law remains the same. It provides for considerable power for the Prodhan and the elected members. But they cannot assert that since the new party that has come to power still does not have the capacity to grasp the law in its entirety. They have not yet realised how much power they have. As soon as they realise that, they will not be controlled by the administrative machinery anymore. ... For that they need a definite discipline, and there's no capacity building or political education for the people's representatives on the part of the party (in power) ... Now when a Prodhan is admonished in a nasty way in an administrative review meeting, s/he cannot articulate properly his constraints due to which he was unable to implement any scheme, even though there is enough evidence to substantiate his case.

(DSM, Planning and Governance Coordinator, ISGP; interview conducted on 12.01.2017)

### **The Case of Mashiara Gram Panchayat, Hirbandh block, Bankura**

Mashiara Gram Panchayat is located in the remote and backward Hirbandh block, covering huge tracts of barren, unirrigated land, where almost 50% families lie below the official poverty line. Most of the elected GP members of Mashiara hail from extremely poor households, mostly tribals and daily wage labourers who cultivate their own land for six months in a year, and then migrate elsewhere in search of livelihood (Bankura, 2007). Mashiara is the only GP to retain a CPI(M) Board after 2013 panchayat elections. The Prodhan revealed having received offers as well as threats to lead a conversion of the entire board of the GP to TMC, but he stood his ground ready to face the consequence (Prodhan, Mashiara GP, interviewed on 20.01.2017).

Mashiara GP has been facing acute staff shortage ever since the new (CPI(M)) board came to power in 2013. Out of the 4 core staff positions required for smooth functioning of a GP, Mashiara only has one full-time GP Assistant, and is compelled to manage with part-time staff in spite of repeated assurances from the BDO about solving this problem. Often the block office deposes casual staff on contract basis to perform the requisite duties, but negligence in scheme implementation cannot be avoided due to the commuting distance between the GP and the block. Sometimes, the temporary staff do not have the requisite experience and capacity to do public dealings, and cannot play a decisive role in case of any dispute in the absence of any decision-making power.

The ISGP coordinator explained some of the gaps encountered in the case of Mashiara GP due to staff-shortage, e.g. delays in daily transactions, delays in doing measurement for the scheme implemented, online entry of data and then labour payment, difficulty in making a realistic budget within the scheduled time-frame, improper documentation for procurement process, irregular general body meetings, absence of meeting resolutions, inability to send timely and appropriate replies to audit queries, and so on. These gaps impact negatively on the institutional capacity of the GP which is unable to discharge its functions efficiently, causing the poverty-stricken rural masses to suffer in the long run (Financial Management Coordinator, ISGP; interviewed on 06.02.2017). The case of Mashiara GP, thus, demonstrates how technical tools can also be used by the bureaucratic machinery as political weapons to arm-twist the political adversaries of the ruling dispensation.

Due to this lack of political education and the ensuing discipline, a change in the political culture at the grassroots has been perceived by the project personnel at the field-level –

Previously, there was a political system running parallel to the 3-tier PRI structure that capacitated the elected representative, and there was a discipline involved. Now, since that system is absent, any person from a particular sansad who has money power, or can articulate his thoughts well, can call the shots now ... moreover, there is absence of a body at the village level to listen to the grievances of the people, and so they are coming to the GP directly with their demands and creating mayhem sometimes. This could not be imagined in the previous regime.

(DSM, Planning and Governance Coordinator, ISGP; interview conducted on 12.01.2017)

This imagery was strikingly similar to the pre-1977 situation depicted in Chapter 4.3, when the ruling Congress party lacking any regimented organisational structure ruled the countryside through the rural elites who were defined by money power and muscle power as opposed to the political elites of the regimented Left regime. The dependence of the *Gram Panchayat* solely on the elected GP member and his team for reaching out to the masses is reminiscent of the 'Gram Committee' that was constituted on party lines, comprising of party cadres and supporters before the GUS came into being. As stated by a bureaucrat posted at the 4<sup>th</sup> Finance Commission, curbing the power of the people's representatives and re-bureaucratisation of the system was a conscious political decision of the TMC for breaking the hegemony of the rural political elites.

Even though the GP staff are pleased about their growing sense of authority over the GP, there are times when they too miss the role of the GUS and GP members and rather awkwardly refer to this vacuum that adversely affects the smooth and efficient functioning of the GP occasionally -

(Earlier), if the GP wanted to disseminate any information, it was very easy to do so through the GUS. Now we have to depend only on the elected member. Now if this member is inactive, then that creates a problem. With the GUS, even if the elected member was weak, it was compensated by a competent GUS Secretary or other active general GUS members. The communication channel between the GP and the sansads was very strong.

(Engineering Assistant, Motgoda GP, Interview conducted on 11.01.2017)

Often, the GP officials seem to be in two minds about the actual effect of the absence of a strong people's forum like the GUS. On one hand, they view this absence as beneficial from

the point of view of fast implementation of schemes. On the other hand, the GP staff are also aware that lack of vigilance on the part of the community might compromise the quality of the work done -

When the GUS was there, there were always 20-25 people giving their opinion on the quality of the work or materials. That created chaos and the completion got delayed. Now, I get the job done with the help of the GP member as there's nobody else involved. Whatever the technical person says is final, so we can do it faster whether the materials are good or not. But on the other hand, the quality of the work has declined, since the GUS members were always vigilant about the quality of the work done, because they were the users. They always wanted to ensure good quality of work.

(Engineering Assistant, Motgoda GP, Interview conducted on 11.01.2017)

Both the project personnel and the GP officials mention the rising trend of open factionalism among the current political regime led by the TMC that could also be seen as an offshoot of a vacuum at the village level, engendering an atmosphere of distrust at the grassroots. Existence of a forum like the GUS could provide the villagers with a space to resolve their conflicts through debate, discussion and deliberation. Concerns along the same lines were voiced by the erstwhile GUS members during their focus group discussions:

Now there's no forum where we can sit together with the opposition members or with the people and discuss these problems. There is no communication between people, and this lack of communication is increasing the distrust day by day.

(MGUS 1, ex-GUS Secretary, Motgoda GP; FGD conducted on 18.01.2017)

The lack of scope for any political education and discipline among the members of the current ruling party have also exacerbated the situation -

The ruling party (TMC) is ridden with immense factional strife, which is why the elected representatives also do not have that grasp on the developmental issues any more. This in turn has strengthened the hands of the bureaucrats. We also receive several phone calls every day from different factions of the ruling party that confuses us. This was not there in the previous regime, which spoke in one voice.

(GP Secretary, Brahmandiha GP; Interview conducted on 19.01.2017)

Even an elected representative of the TMC (*Karmadhyaksha* or Sub-Committee Chair of the Block-level Panchayat), conceded that this intense factional-strife within the TMC was a reality, which sometimes hamper 'developmental work' and helps to strengthen hands of the

bureaucracy (interview on 07.02.2017). However, for obvious reasons, the Block Development Officer seemed much more confident at handling this issue:

Now we have to sit together with the entire team. We have to convince leaders of the different factions of the same party. But so far as my experience goes in the blocks where I've been posted, these people (TMC) still accept whatever the BDO says, they can be convinced still.

(Block Development Officer, Chhatna; interview conducted on 06.02.2017)

This response clearly validates the observations made by Bankura's ex-*Sabhadhipati* (Chair of District Panchayat) and even some of the GP officials that the problem of factionalism and the lack of political education among the elected representatives of the TMC are also major factors pushing the shift in the balance of power in favour of the bureaucracy. Even if this political regime is aware of this situation, there is no signal from the top level of the TMC about any intention to address these issues. This apathy sends out a message down the line that the current rulers intend to govern the State through the administrative machinery and not through the party.

## **6.6 Conclusion**

This chapter opened with the narrative of the political journey of West Bengal after the regime change in 2011, and the consolidation of the Trinamool Congress (TMC) as the ruling party. A new style of governance focused on quick decision-making emerged, accompanied by an ideological political vacuum. With the Communist Party of India (CPI(M)) reduced to a powerless organisation, debates on policy and corruption issues were fast receding from public domain in the State. The new populist regime ruled through creation of certain political symbols and discourses that have set in motion several systemic changes in the development sectors in West Bengal. Some of these changes have been tracked in this chapter, in the light of a World Bank funded project 'Institutional Strengthening of Gram Panchayats' (ISGP), implemented through the Panchayat and Rural Development Department (PRDD), Govt. of West Bengal since September 2010. The timing of the ISGP project more or less coincided with the change in political regime, and the credit support from the World Bank was welcomed by a State government reeling under debt. The policy-prescriptions of this project

aimed to ensure effectiveness of the public service delivery mechanism by institutional strengthening of local self-governments, reflecting the wider 'good governance' agenda of the World Bank. But this agenda also resonated with the vision document prepared by the PRDD towards the end of the earlier regime, that clearly articulated the need for developing the Panchayats into stronger institutions to follow the processes for 'good governance'. With such ownership of the agenda on the part of the policy-makers of the domestic government, these policy prescriptions triggered a series of changes in the institutional processes and internal dynamics of the local governance structures in the State of West Bengal. This has been discussed briefly in section 6.3 of this chapter, while the details of systemic changes in the planning processes and other institutional aspects of the *Gram Panchayat* (Village Council) have been explored in the section 6.4. One major change could be witnessed in the planning process of the *Gram Panchayats* that transformed a participatory grassroots-based, people-centred approach to a more technically advanced, software-based planning process controlled by the *Gram Panchayat* employees. Changes were also noted in other institutional processes of the GP like development of monitoring mechanisms, financial management, procurement procedures, development of public infrastructure in rural areas, etc., as a result of the ISGP project. In section 6.5, observations have been recorded on i) the effects of the political transition in the State on the balance of power between the bureaucrats and the elected representatives and ii) the effects of the policy prescriptions of external funding agencies on the internal dynamics of the *Gram Panchayats*. There has been clear evidence of a shift in the balance of power in favour of the bureaucrats during the current political regime, which, according to the state-level policy makers, is a 'conscious political decision' by the current rulers to break the party-hegemony enjoyed by the previous Left-regime. Since the newly elected representatives have not yet acquired the requisite knowledge and skill of negotiation and assertion of their rights, nor do they have much scope for attaining political education in an organised manner within the current political structure, the bureaucrats are emerging as the sole power-centres and decision-makers at all levels of the administration. The major analytical conclusions drawn from this chapter are as follows:

### **a) Building the institution, excluding the people**

Preparing a proper plan for the local government unit at the lowest level was considered a fundamental component of institutional strengthening in both the SRD and ISGP projects, but the planning process underwent major changes from SRD to ISGP. During ISGP, the PRDD instructed the GPs to prepare *Upa-Samiti* (Standing Committee) based GP plans rather than *Gram Sansad* based GP plans. *Upa-Samities* promote horizontal decentralisation of power among the elected members of the GP, while the GUS led *Gram Sansad* based plans had the potential for 'deepening democracy' by creating vertical linkages and scope for more direct participation of the common people in the planning process through the GUS. Though the participatory space for the community had been withdrawn earlier by making the GUS non-functional, the omission of the *Gram Sansad* as the tier of the planning process was the *first node* where the direct stakeholders were denied access to the decision-making processes of the state by altering the planning guideline for the panchayati raj institution at the local level.

*The second node* was the tightening of the planning process under ISGP in adherence to the time-frame stipulated by the West Bengal Panchayat Act. The GUS led planning under SRD was a lengthy process with a vision to use the participatory planning exercise as an empowering tool for the masses, rather than a tool to ensure enhanced institutional efficiency of the GP as an institution. Under ISGP, the aspect of people's participation was totally done away with in practice, though this was a predictable consequence of curbing the powers of the GUS. Instead of the time-intensive resource maps and handwritten plan documents prepared by involving the local community, the GP officials were expected to produce a computerised plan-document aided by a planning software under the ISGP project. Though this was a faster, easier and efficient process that eased the work-load of the GP employees to a large extent, by their (GP employees) own admission, its accuracy could be called into question when it came to identification of schemes at the village level. In the absence of the GUS, the GP was entirely dependent on the statutory *Gram Sansad* meetings twice a year for scheme identification and on the lone elected GP member from the concerned area for prioritisation of scheme implementation. Irregularity and frequent adjournment of the *Gram Sansad* meetings resulted in increased dependence of the GP on the sole elected representative of the area, the fallout of which is concentration of political power in the local elites once again. This process has effectively served to push-out the direct

stakeholders from the decision-making process altogether by reducing the points of contact between the state and the citizens, and backtracking from the strategy of fixing priorities through democratic strategies.

The ISGP project report asserts that 'bottom-up participatory planning' is an integral component of the project, with in-built project mechanisms to assess the elements of 'participation, transparency and accountability' in scheme implementation. Development of the 'Vulnerable Group Development Index' within the ISGP project design as a 'tool for inclusive development' and a proxy for people's participation can be cited as an instance. However, further examination of this initiative suggested that this tool does not yield any space to the 'vulnerable community' for participation and negotiation in practice, which is essentially a two-way process, and that all such components are measured only through formal procedures and paperwork stipulated by the West Bengal Panchayat Act.

All these changes sit perfectly well with the narrower view of 'good governance' of the World Bank, in which planning processes and implementation of schemes by the local government institutions are appreciated only when instrumental values like 'efficiency' and 'sound development management' are ascribed to it. In this view, planning exercises have been converted merely into mechanical exercises requiring smart and efficient financial management through official procedures, where the common people are being visualised merely as passive users of services being handed down to them by the institution in a top-down approach. Such de-politicising exercises remove the democratic spaces for genuine bottom up deliberation and discussion, and exclude the people from the decision-making processes of the state by reducing them to nameless, faceless, homogenous entities instead of converting them into informed, active citizens with political capabilities.

#### **b) Impact of technical tools and the shift in the balance of power**

Armed with technical knowhow introduced under the aegis of the ISGP project, institutional mechanisms within the *Gram Panchayat* (GP) were passing through a transitional phase. For instance, the earlier culture of manual reporting or maintenance of accounts by the GP were being converted into online versions, that could apparently generate reports for the public domain. The higher-level administrators and the GP officials were of the opinion that this has

brought in the element of transparency into the system and many seemed to find such innovative technical tools useful from the institutional perspective of Identifying gaps and interventions in the developmental processes. However, the PRDD report makes it amply clear that these technical tools are meant to be used only by experts (bureaucrats and project personnel) and not the masses. State level senior bureaucrats in charge of overseeing the World Bank project categorically stated that the technical operations were designated responsibility of the GP employees, since the elected representatives at the local level were not expected to be capacitated enough to grasp 'technical issues'. In other words, policy prescriptions of the World Bank for the ISGP project were being used by the state actors placed at the different rungs of the bureaucratic hierarchy to deny institutional access to the capacity enhancing tools of new knowledge, experience and expertise to the political class at the grassroots, in order to regain and retain control of the decision-making processes in the formal institutions, thus posing a hindrance to forge closer state-society linkage.

Consequently, this transition changed the political dynamics within the PRI system of the state. The earlier Left regime seemed to treat the PRI institution as an extension of the party-office through which it could advance its own agenda of spreading the party-hegemony. Priorities for different schemes were fixed in the CPI(M) party offices, making the GP officials less accountable for the GP level decisions on scheme implementation. The officials were compelled to be subservient to the party though a large section of the officials also acknowledged that the party-cadres of the Left were well-informed and politically educated because of internal organizational mechanisms of the party. This trend began to shift slightly with the launching of the SRD programme, and the GP becoming a hub of trainings, meetings and other activities. Being regularly informed of the SRD project activities, the local political elites gradually loosened their grip over the GP, possibly voluntarily to an extent. The technical innovations and official procedures introduced under the aegis of the ISGP project further loosened their grip over the GP as an institution at the local level. The new processes allowed the GP officials more autonomy in the internal institutional dynamics of the GP, who were then in a position to call the shots and influence the local political classes. Equipped with in-depth knowledge on the rules and regulations governing the GP administration, as well as the technological knowhow, an expert GP staff could emerge as a decisive factor in the concerned GP under the present system. For some observers, the current system appeared

to be less partisan with no systematic political interference or comparatively less political capture, but also with no element of positive contribution by the political classes either.

This de-politicised and mechanical approach to 'institution building' under the ISGP project stands in direct contrast to the participatory approach of SRD that involved collaborations with local political leaders, elected representatives, GUS members and the community members in general. This also provided the political workers of the earlier regime with more scope and exposure to capacity building exercises at various formal and informal spaces resulting in development of their political capabilities. Such a system is totally non-existent within the party-organisation of the current TMC regime resulting in ignorance among the current political classes about the day-to-day institutional functioning of the PRI system. This lack of exposure, reinforced by the shrinking democratic spaces and the present technocratic modus operandi at the local level, are making the political classes increasingly dependent on the administrative machinery for implementation of schemes or allocation of resources. Good governance measures that are instrumentally strong can thus push back political capacities of the masses.

### **c) Rising trend of bureaucratisation in the State**

Mid-level bureaucrats were of the opinion that the regimented nature of the erstwhile Left parties was advantageous in some respects, in spite of their clientelist mode of operation, which was problematic. Citing examples of the universal schemes introduced by the TMC regime, the officials assert that beneficiary selection under the current TMC regime is somewhat less partisan. At the state level, the Chairperson of the Fourth State Finance Commission authenticated the proposition that *breaking the party hegemony of the previous Left regime had been a conscious policy decision on the part of the TMC government by increasing the decision-making power of the bureaucrats at various tiers of administration, and making power more centralised*. The rationale of the Commission was that transfer of power from the local leaders to the bureaucrats might actually benefit the common people since a bureaucrat, in the absence of any local interest, can work neutrally. The Commission, therefore, in an advisory capacity to the government, fully endorsed this policy decision of empowering the bureaucracy rather than the people's representatives. This was absolute

validation of the argument put forward in this chapter that increasing bureaucratisation of the system and curbing the power of people's representatives was a conscious policy decision by the current political regime, that had been rolled out through certain concrete steps since it assumed power in 2011. The GOs issued to constitute Development and Monitoring Committees at various levels of administration only with bureaucrats was such an attempt to cripple the LF controlled PRI institutions by stripping their elected representatives of all executive powers and de-activating these institutions in effect for the remaining length of their terms. This inference also endorses Ray and Datta's (2017) observation about the marginalisation of the elected representatives vis-à-vis the state bureaucracy during the current political regime as discussed in Section 6.2.4 earlier in this Chapter.

The admission of the mid-level bureaucrats that they find it easier to negotiate with and convince political representatives of the current regime than the previous one, is telling evidence of the idea that dealing with capacitated people's representatives, with appropriate negotiating skills did not sit well with them. On the other hand, higher level political leaders of the Left regime ascribed this re-emergence of the 'bureaucratic trend' to the lack of political education and ensuing discipline among the current rulers, making them incapable of speaking in one voice while negotiating with their bureaucratic counterparts.

Possibly, this had an effect on the political culture at the grassroots. The absence of a forum like the GUS at the village-level that connected the *Gram Panchayat* with the rural masses, has created a vacuum making the GP solely dependent on the elected GP member and his team to serve as this crucial link. This situation is reminiscent of the 'Gram Committee' (see section 4.3.1) that was constituted on party lines, comprising of party cadres and supporters before the GUS came into being. In effect, this has really meant rolling back the wheels to the pre-1977 era. There is also a rising trend of open factionalism among the current political regime led by the TMC, that might also be seen as an offshoot of a vacuum at the village level, engendering an atmosphere of distrust at the grassroots. Factionalism and the lack of political education among the elected representatives of the ruling TMC are also seen by the local political class as a factor helping this tilt in the in favour of bureaucracy. Till date, the top brass of TMC seem to be indifferent to these issues, thus sending out a signal that the current rulers intend to prioritise the administrative machinery as a governance mechanism rather than the political organisation.

The major three findings of this chapter point towards a rolling back the wheels of decentralisation initiatives achieved in the State of West Bengal in the earlier Left regime, and reverting back to the pre-1977 centralised governance model with a limited vision of state capacity in technocratic terms. This vision of a centralised state is merely that of a framework for making and imposing authoritative rules to establish domination over the citizens through the use of disciplining techniques enforced by state institutions like the bureaucracy. This idea is in total contrast to the vision of a strong state possessing transformative capacity, aiming to bring a structural change in the long run by forging a closer state-society linkage through democratic deepening. Such an alternative model was promoted by the pioneers of the earlier Left Front regime, in keeping with the spirit of the Indian Constitution (discussed in chapter 2 and chapter 4). The political support and legitimacy for this governance model was to be built on the basis of an enlightened state embarking on a developmental mission of providing capability-enhancement mechanisms for the disadvantaged sections of the society and confronting the organized power of the traditional authorities or the capitalist elites on their behalf.

The TMC governance model on the other hand, opted for enhancement of technological expertise and enforcement of authoritative rules with the use of bureaucracy at the cost of engaging with the social forces and designing interventions to break the hegemonies of existing power-holders. The World Bank funded ISGP project reinforced this centralised model of technocratic governance by the application of its policy prescriptions reflecting its 'good governance' agenda within the local governance structures in West Bengal. This in effect, is serving to gradually transform the normative values like democracy and participation that these institutions were meant to stand for, and converting them into vehicles for propagating the neo-liberal vision of 'sound development management'.

## **7 Chapter Seven: Comparative Strategies for Institutionalisation of Policy Prescriptions by External Funding Agencies**

### **7.1 Introduction**

The Strengthening Rural Decentralisation (SRD) project implemented in West Bengal by the PRDD with monetary support from DFID-UK, has been explored in detail in Chapter Five of this thesis. The empirical analysis clearly reveals that the experiments undertaken under the aegis of SRD project played a major role in shaping the participatory agenda in the local governance units of the State. Chapter Six discussed the effects of the World Bank funded ISGP project that was aimed at ensuring effectiveness of public service delivery mechanism by institutional strengthening of local self-governments. The analysis revealed that the policy-prescriptions of this project triggered a series of changes in the institutional processes and internal dynamics of the local governance structures in West Bengal. However, it is difficult for the external funding agencies to push through their agenda effectively merely by introducing developmental interventions on a short-term project mode, if these practices are not sustained in the long run. It is only when the domestic governments develop an ownership towards the interventions introduced by the external funding agencies, that these practices are mainstreamed and institutionalised. Sections 7.2 and 7.3 of this chapter will bring forth a comparison between the DFID-UK funded SRD project and the World Bank funded ISGP project to examine the factors that hinder the institutionalisation of certain interventions, and also the strategies adopted by the State Government as well as the external funding agencies, so that certain changes may be deeply entrenched and sustained by the system in the long run.

### **7.2 Factors impeding the institutionalisation of SRD interventions**

One of the main critiques against the DFID funded project Strengthening Rural Decentralisation (SRD) is that it had not been institutionalised, 'either structurally, or in terms of mainstreaming its good practices' (IPE-ISS, 2009:6). This independent assessment of the project carried out on the 4<sup>th</sup> year of its implementation observed that the institutional

backdrop of SRD is somewhat ‘fractured and confusing’ and there is a lack of clarity on the roles and responsibilities and accountability mechanisms (ibid). The report also observed an over-emphasis on the Gram Panchayat (GP) level in terms of capacity building, with the higher tiers of Panchayat Samiti (PS) or Zilla Parishad (ZP) receiving much less attention from the project (IPE-ISS, 2009:6).

The report also criticised the non-integration of the mainstream local bureaucrats<sup>45</sup> at the district level (e.g. the District Panchayat and Rural Development Officer) or the block level (e.g. Panchayat Development Officer and Panchayat Account and Audit Officer) with the project; and non-engagement of the PRI level employees with the institutional capacity building (CB) initiatives of SRD (ibid: 16). This observation, in effect, validates the claims made by this thesis (in Chapter 5) about the gap in vision between the state-level bureaucratic elites and the local bureaucrats in making a participatory forum like the GUS functional at the grassroots. This same report though, praised the CB initiatives undertaken by SRD at the lower levels for installing the participatory planning exercises led by the *Gram Unnayan Samity*, and the empowering impact these exercises had at the GP level (mentioned in section 5.5.1). Seven years later, the Report of the Fourth State Finance Commission observed -

The initiative of SRD has not been institutionalised. With the termination of DFID funding support in 2011 this GUS based decentralised planning effort became routinised and mechanical. However, in course of its visit to the field, the Commission had an impression that this initiative of the State Government caused a revitalised momentum and enthusiasm amongst the local people. Several Village Level Plans were prepared and documented wherein availability of local resources, be it natural or financial or human, were captured. These documented plans still exist but could not be utilised subsequently for want of clear vision and support.

(4<sup>th</sup> SFC, 2016:217)

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<sup>45</sup> Programme Management Unit (PMU) of SRD project at state level consisted of both senior officials on deputation from the Panchayat and Rural Development Department, GoWB and also external technical experts. Personnel posted at the District level PMUs were contractual staff engaged on a fixed term contract by PRDD as field-facilitators. Mobile trainers’ Teams were also formed at district level with retired civil administration officials with long-standing experience with Panchayats (GoWB, 2007b; GoWB, 2008a). This structure was supposed to work in tandem with the Civil Servants (Indian Administrative Service or West Bengal Civil Service) who have been referred as mainstream bureaucrats in this study.

The State Finance Commission<sup>46</sup> is a vital institution in every State in India that has the constitutional authority to review the financial position of the Panchayats and to make recommendations to the Governor so that the State government may adopt appropriate measures to improve financial position of the Panchayats ([fincomindia.nic.in](http://fincomindia.nic.in)). Because of this authority enjoyed by this institution, the recommendations or suggestions of the State Finance Commissions are crucial in replicating and 'mainstreaming' different developmental experiments in the PRI system.

A senior retired bureaucrat of the Government of West Bengal, (ex-Special Secretary and ex-Programme Director for SRD, at present a member of the State Finance Commission) countered these critiques of SRD, pointing out that the programme in the name of SRD that was ultimately implemented was not the one that was conceived in the original project design. The original design of the SRD programme contained a holistic concept encompassing all the three tiers of the PRI (SDG interview). Examination of the first Programme Memorandum of SRD, prepared in 2004, validated his claims.

The project design contained in the said document proposed to work intensively with the PRI system and line Departments at all levels, and in all districts in a phased manner. The report also emphasized the need for 'stronger integration of planning processes from village, district and state levels' (GoWB, 2004b:11). This original project design sought the approval of DFID support of up to £130 million from year 2004 to 2011 (a period of 7 years) for implementing the Strengthening Rural Decentralisation programme in West Bengal. (ibid:5). The project was conceived on a much larger scale across the State covering 17 district-level bodies, over 300 block-level bodies, and over 3,300 village-level bodies (ibid:33). It was proposed that at the district level, the programme would be monitored at regular intervals by the *Sabhadhipati* (Chairperson) of the Zilla Parishad and the District Magistrate, at the sub-division level by the Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO) and at the block level the *Sabhapati* (PS) and the Block Development Officer (BDO) will monitor the programme (ibid:25). However, the reality was somewhat different.

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<sup>46</sup> The "4th State Finance Commission, West Bengal" has been constituted by the Government of West Bengal vide notification no. 121-FB dated 30.4.2013 (<http://www.fincomwb.nic.in>).

One of the present District Panchayat and Rural Development Officers (DPRDO) interviewed for this research was earlier posted as a Block Development Officer (BDO) in Bankura district when SRD was being implemented. In his interview, he denied having much awareness about what SRD project was all about. This is because he never received any instruction to this effect from the District Magistrate (to whom he is answerable), nor was the project reviewed and discussed in the District Development meeting, implying it was not a priority for the District Magistrate:

We heard from the GP functionaries that they are receiving some kind of support from SRD, but I never felt the need or urge to go and see what exactly the nature of their work is. This is because we did not have any directive to this effect from the mainstream administration.

(DPRDO Hoogly, Interview conducted on 22.02.2017)

This statement validates the critiques of the SRD project by the IPE-ISS (2009) report, that the project was not well integrated with the mainstream administration at the block or the district levels. The ex-Programme Director, SRD, attributed this gap to the back-tracking of the committed funding amount by the DFID. He pointed out that instead of the initial commitments of £130 million over seven years, DFID-UK agreed to provide support to the Government of West Bengal for the Rural Decentralisation Programme, 'initially to the extent of £9 million over two years ... At the end of this period, subject to a satisfactory review of outputs and an assessment of proposed outputs of the next 5-year programme period, DFID will consider further support for this programme' (GoWB, 2004b:11, 43-44). The Programme Director was visibly perturbed on this issue -

How can we show any result in two years when ideally it should take 7 years to complete the entire project? One cannot do it in piecemeals ... We had to downsize our entire project to this – that the entire thing will now have to be done by the facilitators on the field. Involving all the three tiers directly to strengthen the system could not be done within a span of two years.

(ex-Special Secretary and ex- Programme Director for SRD, interview held on 21.09.2016)

Whatever might be the reason for this decision by the DFID, this drastic reduction of fund resulted in the implementation of a truncated project in which the mainstream administration was sometimes bypassed. Communication channels were set up directly between the State and the GP, causing a sense of resentment among the mainstream local bureaucrats:

During the SRD project, many of us representing the mainstream administration felt that we were not being given our due importance, we were feeling ignored ... The administration is a regimented institution, whereas SRD functioned in an NGO mode. It was very difficult to match these two styles of functioning.

(DPRDO Hoogly, Interview conducted on 22.02.2017)

The ex-Joint Secretary-1 PRDD and the State Coordinator for SRD admitted that the state authorities instructed the field-facilitators of the SRD project to use their motivational skills and win the support of the local bureaucrats and the local political decision-makers so that the project can be implemented smoothly at the grassroots –

I told the facilitators to go to the BDOs or *Sabhapatis*<sup>47</sup> and make them understand the process so that they can participate. Some have been convinced and supported this on an ideological plane and participated in the process, but others didn't. ... As for the political system, there was an inhibition and insecurity about the power percolating downwards ... We didn't have the courage to involve them apprehending further impediments. Rather, we asked our coordinators to win them over through their skills.

(State Coordinator SRD and Jt. Secretary-1, PRDD; Interview conducted on 24.02.2017)

Realising that the bureaucrats at the local level lacked ownership of this project, the field-facilitators tried to follow the instructions issued by the state level authorities -

During SRD, everything depended on the personal motivation and pro-activeness of a particular bureaucrat. The system did not direct him / her to do it ... we had to maintain regular liaison with the Block Development Officer and the Panchayat Samity *Sabhapati*, but their ownership was completely absent in SRD.

(DSM, Ex-Assistant Coordinator, SRD, field-facilitator; interview conducted on 12.01.2017)

This statement links back to the claims made by a study by Bhattacharya (n.d.) (mentioned in section 5.5.1), about the SRD programme in its later stages being largely driven by the project staff and project officials resulting in a gradual alienation from the mainstream administrative and political system. The State Coordinator SRD asserted that at that particular juncture the PRDD had no other option but to leave out the mainstream functionaries because of the time-constraint of having to show some concrete results within two years to the funding agency -

They did not understand and felt neglected. This also reflected a lack of trust and patience on our part. But getting the job done through the mainstream dilutes the quality. We need people

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<sup>47</sup> Chairman of the Block Panchayat or Panchayat Samity

from outside the mainstream if we want to ensure quality. Mainstream has other priorities – election, census, report-return ... they would have used the facilitators for those other purposes and see this only as a scheme ... now I think that I could have trusted them and taken a bit more risk. But since it was a time-bound project .... we had a target of preparing and establishing a model first.

(State Coordinator SRD and Jt. Secretary-1, PRDD; Interview conducted on 24.02.2017)

The above statement betrays a sense of helplessness arising out of being trapped in a difficult predicament on the part of the bureaucrats and policy-makers in PRDD who designed the SRD project. They were aware of the complexity of the process and the need to engage with the entire PRI system more intensively, in a holistic manner and over a longer time-frame, which was practically impossible because of the pressing target set by the funding agency in order to secure funding for a longer term in future. Emergence of these issues pushed this research to probe deeper into necessity of foreign funding for upscaling the participatory planning experiments, as well as the dynamics of a situation where a Leftist regime encouraged entry of global funding agencies in the state and the possible reactions from the other elements in the party about this development. The enquiry led us into a fascinating set of debates as delineated below.

When the provision for the *Gram Unnayan Samity* (GUS) was made through an amendment to the West Bengal Panchayat Act (2003), it was conceived as a home-grown project, and the policy-makers at the PRDD did not yet consider the idea of activating the GUS with the help of foreign aid. In an article published in 'The Marxist' in 2002, the then Minister-in-Charge (MIC) of PRDD, Surya Kanta Mishra declared a plan to initiate a movement on people's planning exercises as a move towards further decentralisation of power –

The basic direction has been a conscious shift from asking people to participate in Panchayat's plan towards Panchayats participating in people's planning exercise. In these microplanning exercises, the Gram Sansad has been adopted as a level at which people can interact in an effective forum for meaningful discussion in order to articulate their needs in the shape of a people's plan. This movement has started in around 50 blocks in 2002 and is expected to spread all over the State by 2003. Decentralisation, after all, as many people would like to believe, is not supposed to stop at their level and not percolate beyond them. We on the Left must reach the people so as to empower them for social change.

(Mishra, 2002:68-69)

From this statement it appears that the Left regime was prepared to launch and then upscale the village level participatory planning exercises as an indigenous project. However, as was evident in chapter 5, finally this project was implemented at the ground level with funding support from DFID-UK. A pertinent question that came up was whether foreign funding was necessary at all for translating the concept of participatory planning into a reality. Some of the pioneers of this concept in the State of West Bengal, especially those with leftist leanings like Dr. A.N. Bose opposed the concept of external funding. In the words of one of the key officials of PRDD:

Hardcore Communists viewed such funding as imperialist intervention, and viewed us as people who sell the country to serve their own interests. (But) Dr. Mishra used to say when a country is fighting for freedom, it is not important to see where the guns are coming from, the important thing is the fight, the struggle. While fighting against America, if Vietnam uses guns made in America, that is not a sin.

(Ex-Joint Secretary-1, interview conducted on 24.02.2017)

There are diverging views on this issue. The ex-Panchayat Commissioner, PRDD said in his interview that in order to convert the *Gram Unnayan Samity* (GUS) into a functional organisation, some financial resource was required for the GUS, and this gap was filled up by the DFID. The ex-Prin. Secy. was of the opinion that it would have been impossible for the PRDD to carry out the participatory planning experiments on a large scale without this critical input from the DFID:

DFID wanted to do this in 300 GPs, but we brought 1077 GPs into our fold ... the money was an incentive, and it was not wasted.

(Ex-Joint Secretary-1, PRDD, interview conducted on 24.02.2017)

Moreover, the capacity of the PRDD team was enhanced considerably, and the department developed the expertise to do the job of institutional strengthening by modifying the administrative rules, financial rules, election guidelines, which were indeed long-term changes. In fact, both the Prin. Secy. and the Minister (Suryakanta Mishra) were of the opinion that there is no harm if funds can be procured from funding agencies to do some development work for the rural poor. The purpose would be served if the rural poor can be inspired to take up the weapons for development themselves (interview with Ex-Joint Secretary-1, PRDD).

However, the contrasting voice is that of the ex-Special Secretary to the PRDD who thought that it would have been better if the funding agency had not been there. In that case, the PRDD might not have been able to show tangible benefits of decentralisation immediately, but “decentralisation would have had a definite root, like it had in Kerala” (interview with ex-Special Secretary, PRDD). With this statement, we move to the question of state ownership of this programme.

As discussed earlier, most of the PRDD top officials felt that the continuity of the decentralisation process would not have been possible without this grant from DFID unless the State took it up. Foreign funds cannot be accepted entirely without State ownership, because in a country like India with a federal structure, there has to be a joint agreement between the State Government, the Central Government and the donor agency before accepting funding from the donor agency. At that time, most of the government funds flowing into the GP were meant for specific schemes or programmes, effectively rendering the GP a mere implementing agency for the higher tiers of government. Even for the untied funds<sup>48</sup> there were specific guidelines. Therefore, the DFID funds gave the PRDD some scope for manoeuvring as untied funds and experimentation was possible with these funds. It was not very difficult for the State to arrange funds to make modifications to the rules and regulations of the PRI system if there was the will to do so. Processes leading to such institutional changes would have required less funding, but could have brought about sustainable changes with far reaching effects. A section of the officials felt that PRDD had this will and ownership, but not the State Government as a whole, which is why, devolution of funds up to the Panchayat level by other departments did not take place (interview with ex-Principal Secretary and Panchayat Commissioner, PRDD).

At this point, a brief reference to the scale of financial devolution in the decentralisation process in Kerala might be useful to depict the contrast on state ownership between the two States. 40 percent of all developmental expenditures of the State-government had been allocated directly to the Local Self-Governing Institutions in Kerala, which saw an increase in the discretionary portion of village panchayat budgets from Rs. 1,000 million in 1996–97 (the year before the campaign) to 4,204 million in 1997-98, and over 5,000 million in the following

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<sup>48</sup> Funds devolved to the GP by the Central Finance Commission or the State Finance Commission

three years (Isaac and Heller, 2003; Heller, 2009). The ex-Special Secretary, PRDD, who was part of the team from West Bengal that gained insights from its direct exposure to the planning campaign in Kerala, on hindsight, felt that mobilisation in the government circles would have been far better and stronger if the funding agency did not enter the scenario:

There could have been problems, but the government would have tried to correct it. But now this was again a kind of domestication. We were able to mobilize the people to a small extent...but that effect was diffused by the DFID programme. But the real issue is if the State Government really believes in devolution, why can't it assume the financial responsibility? Maybe they would have given the push, had DFID not been there. We got so embroiled in DFID, ...perhaps it led to political diffusion to an extent.

(ex-Special Secretary, PRDD; interview conducted on 21.09.2016)

Dr. A.N. Bose was a member of the State Planning Board, and at the same time was a member of the Communist Party of India (CPI), the old school of Leftists who had reservations about accepting foreign aid. Though at one point the State Planning Board expressed a desire to give leadership to the entire initiative, it withdrew from the scene with the entry of DFID. However, according to ex-Joint Secretary-1, who was also the State Coordinator for the SRD programme, the State Planning Board did not have the expertise to create the appropriate institutional mechanisms to implement this programme on a large scale.

With the withdrawal of the State Planning Board from the scenario, SRD programme lost the possibility of developing a larger alliance within the party and the government, and became a departmental project of the PRDD in collaboration with DFID-UK. Suryakanta Mishra was the only state-level political representative backing the project which was now largely a bureaucratic agenda. Moreover, the unexpected and drastic funds cut by the DFID resulted in implementing a truncated project that is different from the original vision document. There were practical constraints resulting in inadequate sensitisation of the mainstream bureaucrats and political persons on the project objectives and the philosophical foundations of the SRD project –

I think the mainstream functionaries found the theories backing the SRD project to be incomprehensible, hence unacceptable. There was a major gap in sensitizing and training the mainstream functionaries on these theories.

(SSC, Ex-State Monitoring and Evaluation Coordinator, SRD; interview held on 20.09.2016)

This partly explained the over-emphasis on the Gram Panchayat (GP) level in terms of capacity building, and inadequate sensitisation of the bureaucrats at the block and the district levels, as observed in the IPE-ISS (2009) Report. According to the SRD project personnel, apart from the insufficient sensitisation factor, it was even more difficult to convince the mainstream local bureaucrats about the project objectives of SRD, since the main component of SRD viz. participatory planning, was never a target for the mainstream. On the other hand, several focal areas of the World Bank funded ISGP project are also targets for the mainstream administration, which is why it was easier to convince and involve them in the implementation of the ISGP project (Interview, SSC). Possibly because of lessons learnt from the non-institutionalisation of the SRD project, several strategies were adopted by the authorities in PRDD to ensure mainstreaming of the ISGP project, which will be discussed in detail in the next sub-section.

### **7.3 Strategies through which ISGP interventions were institutionalised**

After the first phase of the ISGP project (2011 – 2016) came to a close, the Fourth State Finance Commission appointed by the Govt. of West Bengal expressly stated in its report that the Commission was impressed by the work done under the ISGP project and recommended for universalisation of these practices across the State, for strengthening the ‘base of PRIs in West Bengal’ (4<sup>th</sup> SFC, 2016:186). As stated earlier, the State Finance Commissions have been endowed with the constitutional authority required to recommend the State Governments to replicate and institutionalise experimental endeavours undertaken within the PRI system. The Commission in its report noted considerable improvement in indicators like -

Annual Plan and Budget preparation in prescribed and timely manner; fund utilization, compliance with prescribed procurement, accounting and reporting systems and rules, and clean external audit reports ... The Project finally appears to have set an example of basic service delivery by the Gram Panchayats.

(4<sup>th</sup> SFC, 2016:90-91)

The 4<sup>th</sup> State Finance Commission lauded and specifically upheld some of the ‘management innovations’ emerging out of ISGP project which are needed to be ‘formally institutionalised for strengthening decentralisation’ (ibid:276). This list of innovations included the Annual

Performance Assessment (APA) of GPs, Web based Monitoring and Reporting, Computerised Accounting system through the Gram Panchayat Management System (GPMS), development of the Vulnerable Group Development Index (VGDI), compliance with Environmental and Social Management Framework (ESMF) and the Social Audit and Grievance Redress mechanism models. (ibid). The Commission felt that the emphasis on the close monitoring mechanism within ISGP was one of the main reasons for the better performance of the Gram Panchayats covered by ISGP –

Because of the intensive monitoring of the ISGP personnel, procurement policies have changed and transparency has been ensured to a large extent. The rate of fund utilisation has also been expedited.

(Chairperson, 4th Finance Commission, GoWB; interview conducted on 13.02.2017)

The Commission spoke highly of the APA, the improvement of the timeliness of GP external audit mechanisms, and the rolling out of the 'Geographic Information System (GIS) based real time monitoring to track physical progress of planned and approved activities' (ibid: 238). Expressing satisfaction on the approval of ISGP Phase II, the Commission also noted that -

The State government has successfully negotiated the matter with the Funding Agency and Government of India, and all concerned have agreed to implement the programme in the remaining GPs of the State with effect from 2016-17.

(4<sup>th</sup> SFC, 2016:289)

In its second phase therefore, the ISGP project will cover all the Gram Panchayats in the State thus replicating and mainstreaming its initiatives like regular monitoring of adherence to formal procedures, fund utilisation, usage of technical innovations in GP functioning, maintaining transparency in official transactions, regular assessment on the basis of conditionalities, and such management issues. Noticeably, ensuring participation of the masses does not feature prominently in this list of replicable activities.

Along with the institutional changes brought about by the ISGP project, the Commission has also taken serious note of the strategic advantage that the GPs covered by ISGP enjoy because of the increased amount of fund-flow into these GPs -

We are taking the increased amount of funds the GPs have received under ISGP as a benchmark, that at least this amount of money is required by the GP ... It's the funds, as well as the

monitoring mechanism. It's the entire package. We think that it should be guaranteed that all Gram Panchayats have the advantage of the same package.

(Chairperson, 4th Finance Commission, GoWB; interview conducted on 13.02.2017)

As mentioned in section 6.4 of chapter 6, the sizable amount of the ISGP Block Grant accorded a strategic advantage to the project as far as the mainstreaming issue is concerned. In their interviews, the ISGP State personnel acknowledged that prior to the launch of the ISGP project, some vibes spread among the authorities in the ISGP districts that a huge amount of money would be pumped in these districts shortly subject to certain mandatory conditions. Following this, accessing that huge amount of funds became a challenge for the GPs as well as the districts giving rise to a competitive attitude among them (Interview, State M & E Coordinator, ISGP). This point was validated by the bureaucrats in the districts -

The districts eagerly welcomed the ISGP project, since they knew there is considerable amount of money involved, accompanied by computerisation and technological advancements.

(DPRDO Hoogly, Interview conducted on 22.02.2017)

Field-facilitators who were part of both the projects pointed out the major differences in the fund-flow mechanism of SRD and ISGP, that proved to be a decisive factor in mainstreaming or institutionalisation of the projects. In SRD, the bulk of the funds went to the *Gram Sansads*, and only a very minor portion to the GP. The GUS used these funds for small scale activities at the village level, which were not visible to the bureaucrats in the block or district levels. In ISGP, on the other hand, a huge amount of fund flowed directly to the GP account which were mostly used to build large infrastructure, large enough to be visible to the district administration -

Data management in ISGP is very strong, and so are the monitoring mechanisms. Hence, we are always prepared with the report of fund utilisation, and the list of tangible assets created with the fund utilised. This is exactly the mode in which the mainstream administration has been habituated to measure development so long. So, the system can understand and monitor the progress of the project at the same time. On the other hand, the SRD process was never comprehensible to them. They never understood what exactly is being done in the project.

(DSM, Ex-Assistant Coordinator, SRD, field-facilitator; interview conducted on 12.01.2017)

The project objective of SRD was reduction of rural poverty, measuring which was problematic because of the complexities involved. Determining the level of people's empowerment, which was the one of the political objectives of the long-drawn participatory exercises was also a daunting task. On the other hand, project development objective of ISGP was institutional strengthening, with well-defined and achievable indicators, that was easy for all concerned to comprehend.

To the Fourth State Finance Commission, the adequacy and the predictability of the ISGP funds flowing into the GPs have been the two main features that helped to facilitate a realistic planning process at the GP level, hence the Commission recommended that all GPs should have the advantage of the same amount of funds (4<sup>th</sup> SFC, 2016). Accordingly, a policy decision was taken by the PRDD (with the concurrence of the Finance Department, GoWB) regarding central blending of the Performance Grant quantum of the Central Finance Commission Grant (10% of total CFC), the State Finance Commission Grant (100%) and the Performance Based Grant under the ISGP Phase II. This centrally blended grants 'shall be routed, centrally operated and managed by the ISGPP Cell' and will be allocated to the 'qualifying Gram Panchayats as per result of the uniform Annual Performance Assessment (APA) to be conducted by the ISGPP Cell across the State through an independent agency' (GO. No. 1129/SS/RD/CCA/W/2C-02/2015/Part-I, Dated 20.06.2016). Through this landmark order, the Annual Performance Assessment (APA) was made mandatory for all 3342 GPs in the State, thus conveying a message to the GPs that grant is no longer an entitlement, and that, performing well in the APA becomes essential in order to receive grant. APA, thus, no longer remains merely a project issue, but has been adopted as a policy by the Govt. of West Bengal. As per this policy, henceforth, all *Gram Panchayats* across the State will have to fulfil the following conditions in order to access the aforesaid funds:

1. The Gram Panchayat shall have to prepare and approve plan and budget for the following financial year not later than 31<sup>st</sup> January or as may be decided by the State Government;
2. The Gram Panchayat shall have to achieve at least 60% expenditure of the Performance Grant and untied grants (received within the third quarter of the financial year) at the end of the financial year;

3. There shall be an increase in the Own Source Revenue of the Gram Panchayat over the preceding year's figure;
4. The Gram Panchayat shall have audited accounts as recommended by the 14<sup>th</sup> Finance Commission and have clean external audit report;
5. The Gram Panchayat shall have to maintain computerised accounting system regularly as per norms of the State Government.

(GO. No. 527/SS/RD/CCA/W/2C-02/2015/Part-1, Dated 20.06.2016)

This order was partially modified later in the year with the view that the GPs that had remained outside the coverage of ISGP Phase I initiatives may not have been capacitated to that level achieved by the ISGP Phase I GPs. The modified order (GO No.1100/SS/RD/CCA/W/2C-02/2015/Part-1, Dated 09/12/2016) stated that the ISGP Phase I GPs will have to fulfil 'all the five conditions, hereinafter called Expanded Minimum Conditions', while the remaining GPs will have to fulfil conditions No. (1), (3) and (4) called Basic Minimum Conditions in order to access the said grant. On one hand these formula-based allocations are projected as providing incentives to the local government institutions for adherence to basic principles of 'good governance,' on the other hand, these can also be viewed as institutionalisation of conditionalities as disciplining techniques of local government units. It might be noted, that all these conditionalities are allied with adherence to formal procedures related to office management, accounting system and fund utilisation, with elements of people's participation and accountability conspicuously missing, and is perfectly aligned with the features of the 'good governance' agenda of the World Bank, as discussed in section 2.7 in Chapter 2.

Besides providing monetary support in the form of the Block Grant, the ISGP project also provided human resources to support the State Government, e.g. providing fund support for recruiting personnel in the Computerisation Cell of the PRDD, as an agreed intervention under ISGP project with the purpose of strengthening financial management. Moreover, for the second phase of the ISGP project, the World Bank agreed to finance the recruitment process for filling up the core staff positions of the GP across the State (Interview, Project Manager, ISGP). These two moves were significant strategies to ensure mainstreaming of the project in the State of West Bengal by building broad-based alliances within the bureaucratic system.

Another major area of for mainstreaming the ISGP initiatives was supporting the PRDD 'Strengthening the State Oversight System', or developing the monitoring mechanism not only as a part of the project, but for the entire State as a whole. While designing the 'State Oversight System', representatives from the State ISGP Cell consulted all other wings of the PRDD that have an interface with the GP. This was done to comprehend what are their specific mandates, so that the newly developed monitoring mechanism can act as the single window solution for the PRDD in its entirety. Thus, the project tried to cater to the requirements of the mainstream administration as a conscious strategy to institutionalise the changes brought about by the project (Interview, CB Manager and M&E Manager, ISGP project). That this mechanism was really appreciated by the district and sub-district level bureaucrats is evident from the statement below -

A positive aspect of ISGP is transparency. The schemes implemented are being photographed before and after work execution. This reduces the scope of corruption, ... It prevents duplication of schemes ... It is far easier for us to monitor things now, which we failed to do earlier.

(DPRDO Hoogly, Interview conducted on 22.02.2017)

These bureaucrats were also highly appreciative about the technological advancements and innovations effected by ISGP in different areas, a major one being the area of planning -

Just imagine, instead of the hand-drawn resource maps of SRD, if the map was GIS based as in google maps, wouldn't it be better? In that case we will be able to see everything located there. That will be far more accurate than the conceptual map drawn by the people from their memory. Moreover, it would save time and would be far more attractive.

(DPRDO Hoogly, Interview conducted on 22.02.2017)

It was obvious that the prospect of efficiency, accuracy and transparency provided by these technical innovations held much more attraction for these bureaucrats than the philosophical basis driving the concept of participatory planning in the SRD project. ISGP project personnel at the districts too admit that they find the ISGP style easier to work with -

In ISGP, the targets and indicators are very clear ... we find this easier to work with. The ownership for ISGP has been assumed by the mainstream administration.

(DRI, District Coordinator, ISGP, Bankura; interview conducted on 17.01.2017)

In their interviews, most of the project personnel of ISGP could explain the project design in simple steps, viz. a) Institutional capacity of the GP has to be enhanced through mentoring support, b) Increase of GP capacity will be evaluated through Annual Performance Assessment (APA), c) In case of increase the GP will receive Performance Based Grant and d) the progress will be tracked through the MIS.

Moreover, as mentioned in chapter 6, most of the GP officials interviewed evidently internalised and articulated one simple message received from the project authorities - that ISGP does not have a separate agenda, it only enforces implementation of the provisions in the Panchayat Act and rule so that the panchayats can function as local government. This message played a crucial role in institutionalising the ISGP initiatives at the GP level, the lowest and the most vital unit of the PRI system in West Bengal, as articulated by a GP official:

Earlier, we treated these programmes (SRD / ISGP) as something separate, but now we apply all rules that we've learnt from them in day-to-day GP functioning.

(Engineering Assistant, Motgoda GP; interview conducted on 11.01.2017)

While the SRD project had lacunae in developing a common understanding with all political stakeholders at its inception stage, the ISGP project maintained constant dialogue with the concerned policy-makers in the State since its inception, as well as disseminating relevant data through the project website or the print and electronic media thus making people aware of what is happening in the project. Documentation and information dissemination on the good practices of the SRD project were really inadequate, when compared to the communication strategies of the ISGP project (interview with Capacity Building Manager and Monitoring and Evaluation Manager, ISGP project). Last but not the least, the ISGP project tried to cater to the requirements of the mainstream administration as a conscious strategy to institutionalise the changes brought about by the project. Thus, with specific strategies in place on a long-term basis, the ISGP project has been able to respond much better over time, and consequently is in the process of being institutionalised and sustained in future.

## 7.4 Conclusion

The project objectives of an externally funded project can be considered to be fulfilled, only when the changes it has brought about are deeply embedded within the institutions of the recipient country and sustained on a long-term basis. Institutionalisation, therefore, is a continuous process requiring constant adjustment to the challenges thrown up by external actors, who come into the institution with a new set of aims and value-systems that are represented by policy-instruments. Representing the policy-frames of external agencies, these devices act as a form of power to produce specific effects, and hence considered key to governance mechanisms (see section 2.8). This thesis observed that the World Bank has deployed multiple strategies for sustenance of project goals for ISGP, most of which were missing in the way the DFID funded SRD project was operationalised earlier. This research has focused on two such key policy instruments applied under ISGP, that have resulted in a shift in the normative values that the local government institutions in West Bengal stood for since its inception.

The first one is the ISGP Block Grant, which, using the dual strategies of (i) cash-flow, and (ii) spending priorities, comes through as a major factor that has accorded a strategic advantage to the ISGP project compared to the SRD, as a mechanism for building popular support / legitimacy for the changes to the panchayats' operation. There were major differences in the fund-flow mechanism of SRD and ISGP, that proved to be a decisive factor in the institutionalisation of the projects. In SRD, the bulk of the funds were transferred by the PRDD at state level to the bank-accounts of the GUS at the village-level, with only a minor portion flowing into the GP account. The status of village-level planning by the GUS under the jurisdiction of the GP was the only performance indicator considered by the PRDD as eligibility criterion for transferring untied funds to the GUS. Moreover, the fund-flow was irregular and not of much use to the GP, which never developed much ownership over this project fund. On the other hand, unlike all other untied funds flowing into the GP account, GP had total ownership of the ISGP Block Grant. Additionally, the *timely and predictable nature* of the ISGP Block Grant allowed the GP sufficient time to prepare a realistic action plan and budget within the time-frame stipulated by the Panchayat Act. Moreover, the GP received the entire allocation for planned activities by the beginning of the next financial year in a single instalment, that enabled the GP to execute all the schemes as per the approved plan.

The ISGP project had a *major thrust on building large community assets* with the Block Grant. This sort of infrastructural planning is distinctly different from the plans developed through the participatory planning process through SRD, which equally emphasized human development and social development indicators and undertook small scale activities at the village level related to health, education, gender parity or livelihood development, but not quite 'visible' to the local bureaucrats at the district and block levels. Under the ISGP project, GPs were also leveraging funds from all untied sources along with the Block Grant to create durable like RCC village roads, ICDS centres, safe drinking water facilities, community toilets, solar street lights, proper drainage system etc. The 'visibility' of such sustainable assets as proof of 'developmental' work being done by the present government is also a significant part of the political discourse of the current TMC regime whose spokespersons have often claimed to have won successive elections on the basis of visibility of tangible 'development'. It is possible that the ISGP project also served as one of the vehicles to construct this 'pro-development' image of the current political regime. With endorsements from higher authorities to accord an overwhelming priority to the infrastructural planning, it is difficult to comprehend if the local needs and priorities are indeed being reflected in these GP plans.

The second policy instrument is the Annual Performance Assessment (APA) exercise, initially known as the Minimum Mandatory Conditions (MMC), a mechanism that portrays the ISGP as a 'politically neutral' and results-based project. These MMCs were very much reminiscent of the *conditionalities*, an integral part of the 'good governance' agenda of the World Bank, and used as disciplining techniques for the recipient countries. This study reveals that this specific technical exercise, well accepted by the GP employees, has also been a crucial factor in enabling the GP employees to resume control over the decision-making processes within the GP, as opposed to the party-controlled panchayats of the previous Left regime.

A significant message that seems to have percolated well to the GP employees through the APA and helped in the institutionalisation of the ISGP initiatives is that, the World Bank, as the funders of ISGP, does not have any separate agenda of its own. Rather, the ISGP project is here only to facilitate efficient and timely execution of the duties assigned to the GP employees by the West Bengal Panchayat Act and rules so that the panchayats can function appropriately as the local government. The strategy of APA thus, seems to have acted as an intellectual technique used by the global funding agency as part of their 'good governance'

model, that has facilitated to embed and institutionalise specific values like regular audit of accounts and sound financial management, ensuring transparent procurement processes, ensuring accountability through tighter monitoring mechanisms, and enforcement of the legal framework for development within the Gram Panchayats, by using the GP officials (state-actors at the lowest level of the Indian bureaucracy) as their agents.

Inability to secure confidence and cooperation of the mainstream administrative machinery and non-involvement of the local bureaucrats in the oversight of the SRD project seem to be one of the main causes why the policy-prescriptions of this project could not be institutionalised. Project objectives of SRD like reduction of rural poverty, or indirect political objectives like enhancing people's empowerment were difficult to measure because of the complexities involved. On the other hand, project development objective of ISGP was institutional strengthening, with well-defined and achievable indicators and targets that were aligned with the development targets of the local bureaucracy. Participatory planning was never a focal area of development for the local bureaucrats, who found the philosophical foundations of the SRD project to be complex and incomprehensible, hence unacceptable. Though this could be seen in terms of a lack of ongoing commitment and an extended part of the inference on the absence of building broad-based alliances by policy-makers (see section 5.6), another practical constraint that added to this omission was the drastic reduction of funds initially committed by DFID-UK. Such reduction in promised funds along with the pressing target set by the funding agency of having to show concrete results within two years to secure funding for a longer term, led to inadequate sensitisation of the mainstream bureaucrats and political activists on the project objectives and resulted in the implementation of a truncated project in which a large part of the key social actors at the local level were bypassed.

However, this strategy of normalisation and institutionalisation of specific values by application of policy instruments through daily practices in local government institutions would not work effectively without the active involvement of the state-elites who share the same set of values with the external agents. This directs us to the critical factor of country ownership, viewed by scholars like Fowler (2000), Mercer (2003), Abrahamsen (2004) or Cammack (2004), (see Section 2.7) as a more insidious and subtle form of power, that conceal explicit conditionalities. Such power work through systems of knowledge and discursive

practices to shape perceptions and preferences of citizens, and thus shape political agendas in the public domain in countries receiving development assistance. In the instance of West Bengal, the newly introduced conditionalities that recognise the element of people's participation only through paperwork and some routinised formal procedures, may well serve to reduce the participatory agenda to a ritualistic performance over the years, devoid of the politically empowering concept of active citizenship.

As Cammack (2004) has observed, the chances of the strategies and policies formulated by the external funding agency being sustained in the long run enhances if the state actors in the recipient countries assume the driver's seat. The guiding vision document for the World Bank funded ISGP project substantiates this argument. This 'Roadmap for Panchayats' that emphasizes the need for the state 'to let the Panchayat functionaries internalize the institutional aspects of good governance as process of development' (GoWB, 2009a:79), was prepared during the SRD project in 2009. Almost the same team of state-level bureaucrats and experts designed both the SRD and ISGP projects on behalf of the PRDD implying that the way for entry of the World Bank had been prepared by the Left-regime itself towards the last few years of its rule, though it was more of a bureaucratic agenda than a political one. However, while implementation mode of the DFID funded SRD project encouraged more involvement of political persons at the local level, rather than allowing much scope to the mainstream administrative machinery to exercise direct bureaucratic control, the approach of the World Bank funded ISGP project was very different.

The case of SRD points towards a lack of commitment on the part of the donor agency, as well as strategic errors on the part of the state-elites to forge larger alliances with the civil society, political system, and the administrative machinery at the local level to ensure sustenance of project objective of pro-poor governance, which demanded far more political ownership to ensure closer state-society relations. As discussed in Chapter 5, the factional struggles within the ruling left-regime and their apprehension of losing power and political control also played a major role in non-sustenance of the participatory and democratic values of the SRD project. The World Bank too, did not build any alliance with the political actors and the civil society actors for implementing the ISGP project, but it thoroughly understood the character of the ruling political regime, that preferred to function through its bureaucratic apparatus (see Chapter 6), and designed strategies accordingly. The World Bank's approach to 'country

ownership' took cognizance of its inability to enforce these strategies all by itself, unless the state-elites adopt and endorse these policies as intermediaries, to provide legitimization to this project and have impact on a wider scale at the grassroots. Therefore, since the inception stage of the project, the Bank engaged in dialogues with multiple wings of the PRDD, in order to cater to the requirements of the mainstream administration. Thus, sometimes by funding the recruitment process or by sponsoring the 'State Oversight Mechanisms' across the State in addition to the project cost of ISGP, the Bank attempted to build broad-based alliances with the mainstream machinery with an eye to gain legitimacy for project sustainability.

Endorsement by a statutory body like the Fourth State Finance Commission, for universalisation of the practices introduced by ISGP across the State is the proof of legitimacy and validation of these strategies deployed by the Bank. Such legitimacy based on the consent of state-actors at various levels, could easily trigger a process of dissemination of the hegemonic neo-liberal discourse of the Bank, shaped by the in-built incentive pattern of the ISGP project and reinforced by the centralised governance model of the current political regime (see section 6.5.1).that is gradually being embedded within the ethos of the *Gram Panchayats* of West Bengal.

These developments partially substantiate Jonathan Parry's (2000) claim that the impersonal norms and values of the modern state have gradually been internalised by ordinary Indians like local-level bureaucrats, though this research does not see these values being internalised by local politicians and the masses as yet. On the other hand, the non-institutionalisation of the participatory practices introduced by the SRD project lead us to the claims made by Sudipta Kaviraj (1991) about the gap in vision and purpose of the top-level elites and the population at the local level (see section 2.9). This research finds some truth in both the positions, but at the same time identifies several other factors delineated above that provide crucial missing links in this narrative of institutionalisation and sustenance of project objectives.

## **8 Chapter Eight: Overall Conclusion**

This research study adopted the vision articulated by Evans (2008) that for successful implementation of development goals as envisaged by the MDGs or SDGs, the twenty-first century state must facilitate creation of more effective state-society linkages, that highlight the importance of creating or re-structuring governance structures at the grassroots through which citizens may participate effectively in the developmental processes of the state. Based on this theoretical location, this research intended to understand the factors which shape the opportunities for 'effective' people's participation in local governance structures under different political regimes, and also identify the conditions, possibilities and limitations for forging more effective state-society linkages. Detailed analyses of the investigations have been delineated in the empirical chapters of this thesis, the key findings of which are summarised in the following section.

### **8.1 Key Findings**

The nascent stage of participatory local institutions in West Bengal mostly emanated from an indigenous set of debates among the enlightened state-elites in post-independence India, and later from a Leftist framework, rather than any latter day western 'development' discourse on 'decentralisation'. This debate paved the way for the Indian Constitution to provide a larger vision of transformative change and project local government institutions as the site for enlightened intervention by the state, to confront the dominant social forces on behalf of the disadvantaged sections of society, as well as provide a countervailing power to the political hegemony of the existing power-holders. However, this constitutional provision was implemented only when a Leftist alliance led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) assumed power in West Bengal in 1977 and advocated more collaborative state-society linkage by establishing decentralised governance structures, known in India as the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI), and facilitating experiments in participatory governance at the local level through the PRI.

Two specific motivations drove these decentralisation initiatives in West Bengal. One of these is part of a bigger political process, as a means of conscientization of the masses who will then act as agents of social change. This concept is integral to the leftist ideology, and indicates the

existence of a reformist element within the CPI(M) that was genuinely inspired by the inherent abilities of the people. The second was an instrumental approach that viewed these decentralisation initiatives as strategies to forge broad-based political alliances, and build an organisational base to retain political control of the party over rural Bengal. This was accompanied by a new model of governance imposed by the LF regime involving mass organisations, resulting in de-bureaucratisation of the system to a certain extent. These themes establish that the participatory agenda both at the national level (India) and the local level (West Bengal) were set by the political elites of the times, thus answering part of the first research question of this thesis.

Both the abovementioned political motivations played out simultaneously within the policy-making circles of the Left-regime, and continued to exist over the next three decades of the Left rule, manifested once more during the constitution of the *Gram Unnayan Samity* (GUS.) This was effected through an amendment in the West Bengal Panchayat Act in 2003, and meant to be an 'invited space' providing a participatory forum for the people at the grassroots. The GUS, thus, was intended to be the interface through which the ideological stances of the reformed Left regime could be translated into concrete institutions at the local level. However, at the same time, an instrumentalist, bureaucratic agenda, aimed at more effective scheme-implementation and better service delivery at the local level through institution driven participation, made its presence strongly felt in addition to the political motives driving formation of the GUS in West Bengal.

By 2010, a section of the GUS in the State was showing signs of evolving as a mature participatory forum at the local level. These GUS had received funds and capacity-building support from the DFID-UK funded 'Strengthening Rural Development' project (2005 - 2011) and were introduced to the concepts of active and organized citizenship as integral components of the 'good governance' agenda of the DFID. Through the GUS, this discourse of 'effective participation' sat comfortably with the discourse on 'democratic deepening' by forging closer state-society linkages advanced by the reformed Left parties. This research has observed that though structured from above as an 'invited space', some of the GUS in scattered pockets of the State were giving out signals of emerging as potential 'claimed spaces', or sites of contestation to challenge and reframe dominant discourses.

Further evidence shows, that on a more instrumental plane, the GUS as an intermediate institutional arrangement established a critical link between the *Gram Panchayat* as the lowest layer of electoral representation, and the community at the village-level, thus indirectly enhancing the channel for active engagement of the citizens with the local state. Scholars (e.g. Heller, 2009; Williams and Thampi, 2013) have identified institution building at the local level as an essential component for sustaining the meaningful outcomes of 'effective participation' in the long run. The evidence cited in this thesis too, endorses this view and reiterates the necessity of local state-building through a strategic institutional layer like the GUS. The dependence of the GP on the GUS created the scope for re-shaping the decision-making mechanisms within the local government institutions, that could have far-reaching implications in the long run. Growing proximity with the GUS in its day-to-day functioning possibly made the GP increasingly vulnerable to being exposed to the people's forum for its questionable practices conducted in a camouflaged manner, that in turn could have knock-on effects on the existing power structures.

Therefore, though the limited power of the GUS as a participatory forum was curbed on the pretext of violence and chaos during GUS formation, an examination of the deeper causal processes points towards three different directions. Upholding Fung and Wright's (2003) warning that the dominant classes and elites might seek to dismantle participatory bodies, if these throw up genuine challenges to the power and privileges of the existing power structures, this thesis argues that a vibrant and functional GUS could have posed a hindrance in the conventional patron-client relationship operating between the CPI(M) and the rural folks. Moreover, just as the Gram Panchayat as an autonomous and empowered institution could emerge as a threat to the CPI(M)'s organising principle of 'democratic centralism' that enforced party-discipline (Ghosh and Kumar, 2003); a functional GUS with its potential to empower the community members as well as the party-cadres to challenge the central directives of the party, was possibly being perceived as a threat to the party-hegemony established by the CPI(M). Thus, the real political purposes for silencing the vocal GUS-members through abrupt withdrawal of their participatory spaces could very well have been i) the interests of the party in restoring their patronage network, and ii) closing the democratic spaces that could potentially challenge party-hegemony. The reformist faction of the party thus became increasingly marginalised and outnumbered by party workers to whom people

were only clients cum voters, needed to ensure electoral victory and political control of the CPI(M).

This instrumentalist faction of the CPI(M) finally won in stalling the participatory initiatives in West Bengal, due to a lack of communication and mobilisation of the oppositional forces and other interest groups on the part of this reformist faction, about the need for a participatory forum like the GUS. This lacunae in building broad-based coalitions with other political actors and the civil-society undermined substantive engagement and potential of the GUS and became a crucial factor in deciding its fate in the long run. Such an omission has led this thesis to question the theory of 'political will' in West Bengal's 'successful' case of participatory governance as claimed in the works of Kohli (1987), Lieten (1994) and Crook and Sverrisson (2001), and argue against this theory along the lines of Webster (1992) and Williams (2001).

Local bureaucrats, who interact with communities on a daily basis, have a major role to play in the process of converting the local government structures into more inclusive and participatory institutions. This thesis observes that this aspect of local state-building and institutionalising of participatory inputs was inadvertently neglected by all concerned, which in turn was a contributing factor in closing down the democratic spaces at the local level in West Bengal. The local bureaucrats were not receptive to the notion of the GUS from its inception stage, nor were they involved in the oversight of capacity-building and activating the GUS in the later stages. Some of the state-level bureaucratic elites attribute this non-integration to the back-tracking of the committed fund by DFID (sponsors of the SRD programme), while some others ruefully admitted to a conscious decision of by-passing the local bureaucrats, apprehending their involvement would compromise the quality of programme implementation at the local level. This betrays a gap in vision and an element of distrust among the state-actors placed at various rungs of the administrative machinery, which emerged as a major factor driving the withdrawal of the GUS as a participatory forum.

Our final observation on the GUS as a participatory forum is that it depicted the potential for an alternative reality of the State, and proved that the theories of 'political society' (Chatterjee, 2004) or 'party society' (Bhattacharya, 2016) in West Bengal are not absolute. The innovative adaptations of the GUS initiated proactively by the citizens at the local level in some pockets of the State, demonstrated a potential for developing cross-party alliances at the grassroots, and a broad-based desire on the part of the citizens for a different way of

'doing politics' on the issues of local development. That the party in power was unaware of such changing desires and political conditions at the grassroots, betrays their growing alienation from the masses that partially accounts for their failure to embed and institutionalise the decentralisation reforms in the long run.

The transition of the Left Front into the populist Trinamool Congress (TMC) regime in 2011 almost overlapped with the launch of the World Bank sponsored 'Institutional Strengthening of Gram Panchayats' (ISGP) project in West Bengal in September 2010, that brought about several changes in the institutional processes governing the local government institutions in the State. This thesis argues that these changes effected by the policy prescriptions of the ISGP project served to convert the Panchayati Raj Institutions from 'people's organisations' into mere local governance structures instituted for 'efficient' delivery of public services to the people, who were expected to be users of services rather than active citizens participating substantively with the state through the local government institutions. Such conversions in institutional values were brought about by a series of changes in the institutional practices.

The first such node of change observed in the planning process of the *Gram Panchayat* (GP) was the omission of the *Gram Sansad* as the tier of the planning process, thus denying access to the direct stakeholders in the decision-making processes of the state. The second node was the tightening of the planning process under ISGP, in which, the earlier flexible and time-intensive planning process that created spaces for community involvement, was substituted by a quicker but mechanical planning exercise controlled entirely by GP officials aided by a planning software. The only points of contact with the rural community were the irregularly conducted but statutory bi-annual *Gram Sansad* meetings, making the GP officials solely dependent on the elected representative from the concerned area for identification and prioritisation of schemes. The integral component of the 'bottom-up participatory planning' stated in the ISGP project report thus turn out to be formal, routinised procedures resting on sheer paperwork. This thesis claims that these changes in effect served to exclude direct stakeholders from the decision-making process altogether by reducing the points of contact between the state and the citizens, while the state backtracked from the strategy of fixing priorities through democratic strategies. Such changes sit perfectly well with the narrower view of 'good governance' of the World Bank that promote the values of 'efficiency' and

‘sound development management’ more than the long-winded and complex process of people’s empowerment through participatory strategies.

A key finding of this thesis is about a transformation in the institutional values and a shift in the balance of power in the internal dynamics of the GP, that was caused by a thrust on technical expertise introduced under the aegis of the ISGP project. With all systems from financial management to monitoring and reporting of the GP undergoing transition from a manual process to their online versions, there was a distinct tilt in favour of technicalities backed by policy prescriptions from the World Bank. This thesis clearly shows how this shift can be strategically used by sections of the administrative machinery as devices to retain power over the formal institutions, and deny institutional access to capacity enhancing tools of new knowledge and expertise to the political class at the local level.

Consequently, as this thesis reveals, this transition brought about a change in the political dynamics of the local government institutions of the State across the two political regimes. While the GP officials during the Left regime were largely compelled to be subservient to the CPI(M) party cadres, the technocratic mode of operation under the ISGP project helped the officials regain control of the local government institutions during the TMC regime. This thesis claims that the lack of in-depth knowledge about the complex legal and administrative regulatory frameworks governing the GP administration, as well as the technocratic mode of operation of the GP under the ISGP project, have placed the political class in West Bengal in a disadvantageous position under the TMC regime, resulting in a clear shift in balance in favour of the bureaucracy at the local level. This case thus clearly reveals that ‘good governance’ measures that are instrumentally strong can push back political capacities of the common people.

This thesis also claims that increasing bureaucratisation of the system and curbing the power of people’s representatives was a conscious policy decision by the current ruling TMC regime in West Bengal, that had been rolled out through concrete administrative practices since it assumed power in 2011. This inference endorses Ray and Datta’s (2017) observation about growing marginalisation of the elected representatives vis-à-vis the state bureaucracy during the current political regime. This argument found validation in an assertion by the Chairperson of the Fourth State Finance Commission (in advisory capacity to the current ruling dispensation), to the effect that breaking party hegemony of the previous Left regime had

been a conscious policy decision on the part of the TMC government by enhancing authority of the bureaucrats at various tiers of the administrative machinery, and making power more centralised. The Commission even reasoned that a bureaucrat, in the absence of any local interest, is expected to take neutral decisions and act in a non-partisan manner. Such a depoliticised notion of the developmental processes clearly ignores ideas about empowerment and political citizenship being constitutive parts of the ends of development in themselves (see section 2.2 in chapter 2). Secondly, this tilt towards increasing bureaucratisation can also be seen as pushing back of the governance model imposed by the left-regime with an aim to 'clip the wings of the bureaucracy', where the bureaucracy was forced to share power with representatives from mass organisations (see Chapter 4).

The discussions up to this point indicates rolling back of the wheels of decentralisation initiatives achieved in West Bengal during the earlier Left regime, and reverting back to the pre-1977 centralised governance model with a limited vision of state capacity in technocratic terms. Such a vision projects the state merely as a framework for making and imposing authoritative rules, to establish domination over the citizens, through the use of disciplining techniques enforced by state institutions like the bureaucracy. This idea is in total contrast to the concept of a strong state possessing transformative capacity, aiming to bring a structural change in the long run by forging a closer state-society linkage through democratic deepening. This thesis claims that the TMC regime that adopted the conventional governance model of a centralised and authoritative state, was aided in achieving its mission by the World Bank funded ISGP project, that reinforced this centralised model of technocratic governance by the application of its policy prescriptions within the local governance structures in West Bengal. This in effect, is in the process of gradually transforming the normative values like democracy and participation that these institutions were meant to stand for, and converting them into vehicles for propagating the neo-liberal vision of 'good governance' in terms of 'efficiency' and 'sound development management'.

The final key finding of this thesis relates to modalities and strategies for sustenance of project objectives in the long run. The project objectives of an externally funded project can be considered to be fulfilled, only when the changes it has brought about are deeply embedded within the institutions of the recipient country and sustained on a long-term basis. This thesis has observed that the World Bank, through its policy prescriptions, has deployed

multiple strategies for sustenance of project goals for ISGP, most of which were missing in the way the DFID funded SRD project was operationalised earlier. The ISGP Block Grant, the Annual Performance Assessment or developing the State Oversight Mechanisms under ISGP are the examples of such policy instruments that facilitated the institutionalisation of ISGP project practices by catering to the requirements of the mainstream administrative machinery of the State at different levels. The local bureaucrats easily identified with the measuring indicators, targets or the project objectives of the ISGP project, which, for them, seemed immeasurable, complex and incomprehensible in case of SRD. Also, as a consequence of inadequate sensitisation on the project objectives, they did not identify with SRD's stated target of poverty-reduction, and the indirect political objective of community empowerment, resulting in non-institutionalisation of the project outcomes. The World Bank on the other hand continued with its efforts to build broad-based alliances with different wings of the bureaucracy in a sustained manner, with the aim of achieving 'country ownership', so that the state-elites adopt and endorse the policies of the Bank as intermediaries.

Scholars like Fowler (2000), Mercer (2003), Abrahamsen (2004) or Cammack (2004) have viewed 'country ownership' as a more insidious and subtle form of power, that conceal explicit conditionalities, but work through systems of knowledge and discursive practices to shape perceptions and preferences of citizens, and thus shape political agendas in the public domain in countries receiving development assistance. In West Bengal, almost the same team of bureaucratic elites and local experts designed both the SRD and ISGP projects on behalf of the PRDD, the vision document for which emphasized the need for the state 'to let the Panchayat functionaries internalize the institutional aspects of good governance as process of development', (GoWB, 2009a:79) demonstrating that at least a section of the state-elites shared the same set of values with the external agencies. Final proof of validation of the Bank's policy-prescriptions came in the form of endorsement by a statutory body like the Fourth State Finance Commission, that recommended universalisation of the practices introduced by ISGP across the State for long term sustainability of the project objectives. Such legitimacy based on the consent of state-actors at various levels, could easily trigger a process of dissemination of the hegemonic neo-liberal discourse of the World Bank, shaped by the in-

built incentive pattern of the ISGP project and reinforced by the centralised governance model of the current political regime.

All these power structures operating simultaneously at global, national and local levels are gradually leading to a situation, where the instrumentalist neo-liberal values are being entrenched within the ethos of the PRI institutions in West Bengal, converting them from 'people's institutions' to 'institutions for service delivery', thus transforming the normative values of democracy, deliberation and participation that these institutions were meant to represent as per the spirit of the Indian Constitution. With conversions in the key institutional values of the recipient countries, possibilities might exist that the vision for state-led transformational governance change might be reduced to a mere enhancement of technocratic and organisational state-capacity. This in turn, might be used to extend state authority by domination instead of forging closer state-society relations based on the values of democracy and substantive participation. Therefore, the motivation, vision and commitment of the state-elites responsible for formulating strategies for state-reform emerge as a crucial pre-requisite for building transformative state capacity in this research. Echoing Gaventa (2002), this thesis, therefore, upholds the need to work at both ends of spectrum in order to enhance state capacity, and work towards developing a coherent vision to be shared by the state and the social forces. This will necessitate institution building at different levels of the state hierarchy, at the local level, as well as the policy-making bodies at the top. Finally, this thesis sees the outcome of intentional programmes to deliver governance reform as dependent upon power relationships that operate at a number of different scales and drawing on Gaventa (2006), this research also claims that causal processes in specific contexts are not entirely divorced from the structural power relations in force at multiple levels.

## **8.2 To Summarise**

The first research question of this thesis asked - who has set the agendas for the successive waves of 'people's participation' in West Bengal at global, national and local levels? What were the motives behind setting these agendas? To answer this question in brief: the participatory agenda in West Bengal mostly emanated from an indigenous set of debates

among the enlightened state-elites in post-independence India, and later from a Leftist framework, rather than any later day western 'development' discourse on 'decentralisation'. At the national level, the participatory agenda in its nascent stage was set by the political elites of post-independence India, with a vision of bringing about a structural change in governance by forging closer state-society relations. At the local level in West Bengal, a two-way political agenda played out within the LF – an ideological approach aimed at empowering the masses and an instrumentalist approach of consolidating political control over rural Bengal through decentralised local governance structures – in setting the participatory agenda in the State.

The second research question asked how (in turn) is the 'participatory agenda' shaped by the changing political conditions in West Bengal? To summarise: during the three decades of the Left regime, the participatory agenda was completely set and controlled by state-level political and bureaucratic elites, where the global players had very little role to play. A reformist faction within the LF State Government proactively created a participatory forum like the GUS at the grassroots with the two-fold motive of democratic deepening and consolidating political control. At this point, capability-enhancing mechanisms introduced by a DFID funded project introduced the notions of organised and active citizenship as part of its 'good governance' agenda, that fitted comfortably with the participatory agenda of the leftist State. But with changing political conditions, as the Left Front apprehended losing power in the State, it withdrew these participatory forums due to the pressure of the 'instrumentalist' faction of the party. This is because, in spite of being structured from above, these spaces emanated signals of emerging as sites of resistance and challenging existing power structures rather than fulfilling their political agenda of the Left. Non-cooperation of the bureaucracy at the local level was another factor that contributed to the closing of these participatory spaces, due to a vast gap in vision between the field-level functionaries and the state level policy-makers, about the need for constituting the GUS. After the LF regime came to an end, a conventional governance model of a centralised and authoritative state had been adopted by the new ruling TMC regime, that preferred to operate through its administrative machinery rather than its political representatives. This resulted in increased bureaucratisation at all tiers of the government, resulting in further shrinkage of spaces for the political class.

The third research question asked: what were the effects of the 'participatory agenda' and the accompanying policy prescriptions on the decentralised governance structures in West Bengal? To sum up, the concept of 'empowerment through effective participation of active citizens' as integral component of the DFID agenda for 'good governance', sat comfortably with the discourse on 'democratic deepening' advanced by the reformed Left parties. As the effect of the policy prescriptions representing this policy frame of the DFID, the participatory forum of the GUS in some scattered pockets of the State were giving out signals of enhanced engagement with the state at the local level, and also emerging as potential sites of contestation on behalf of the community members. Apprehending knock-on effects on the existing patronage networks and party-hegemony, the LF government closed these democratic spaces to preserve existing power structures, thus shutting down the possibilities for forging closer state-society relations.

The new populist TMC regime that adopted the governance model of a centralised and authoritative state, was aided in achieving its mission by the policy prescriptions representing the policy-frames of the World Bank. As integral components of the 'good governance' agenda of the World Bank applied through the ISGP project, the values pertaining to 'efficiency' and 'sound development management' caused a transformation in the institutional values like 'democracy' and 'participation' in the Panchayati Raj Institutions. This served to convert panchayats from 'people's organisations' into mere local governance structures instituted for 'efficient' delivery of public services to the people, who were expected to be users of services rather than active citizens demanding their civil and political rights. The effects of the policy prescriptions of the World Bank also served to exclude the marginalised sections of the community from the decision-making process altogether by reducing the points of contact between the state and the citizens, while the state backtracked from the policy of fixing priorities through democratic strategies.

### **8.3 Contribution of this Thesis**

The narrative constructed in this research is important not only because of its outcome, but because of its analysis of when and where spaces for more collaborative state-society linkage through 'effective participation' open up for the masses, how temporary they might be, and

the reasons why they are closed down. Supporting Heller (2009) and Williams and Thampi (2013), this research too claims that participatory experiments are not only about improving institutional design, and cannot be expected to yield meaningful results unless driven by specific ideological stances driving state-reforms. It has underlined that 'invited spaces' too can be of lasting value when it is shaped by a wider political agenda, and this calls for the ability of all concerned to look across time and look for longer term changes in terms of loss or gain. This research has emphasised the importance of factors like impact of state-reform on spaces for popular participation, the need for local state-building to translate ideology driven participatory inputs into meaningful redistributive outcomes, the need for building institutional capacity at various nodes of the state hierarchy across the spectrum, motivations and ideologies driving the political leadership and different interest groups in the society as well as their interface with the global discourses, and the value of establishing priorities through both technocratic capacities combined with democratic strategies. As stated in the research aim, this research has thus examined the factors affecting opportunities for 'effective participation' across political regimes and identified the conditions, possibilities and limitations for forging effective state-society linkages, contributing to the academic literature on building state-society relations.

The uniqueness of this study is also marked by the positionality of the researcher as an insider to the decentralisation initiatives undertaken in West Bengal, that facilitated her access to rare documents bearing political and policy-level significance and informed access to participants of all levels – a large cross-section of state-elites, mid-level bureaucrats, politicians, project personnel, local government functionaries and community representatives. Moreover, enabling close reading and interpretation of rare documents discovered through archival research, like the henceforth unexplored works of Dr. Satyabrata Sen in Bengali, or critical readings of government orders necessitates a situated bi-lingual competence, that has contributed to the originality of this study from a methodological perspective. Finally, there seems to be dearth of a detailed empirical study on the new decentralisation initiatives in West Bengal in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, specially after the change in political regime, which might have affected the participatory agenda in the State. This study is expected to fill this gap in the existing academic literature on decentralisation.

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## *Appendices*

APPENDIX ONE: Tables of Interviewees

**State level interviewees**

Sl. No.	Interviewee (Code Name)	Category / Type of Work	Designation	Date of Interview	Place of Interview
1.	SMNR	Bureaucrat, Retd. IAS Officer	Ex-Principal Secretary, PRDD	11.09.2016	Interviewee's residence
2.	SDG	- do -	Ex-Special Secretary, PRDD	21.09.2016	- do -
3.	SAG	- do -	Ex-Panchayat Commissioner, PRDD	25.10.2016	Office of an NGO he is currently attached to
4.	SRM	Bureaucrat, Retd. WBCS Officer	Important Official PRDD	22.09.2016	- do -
5.	SMR	Bureaucrat, WBCS Officer	Ex-Joint Secretary, PRDD, now Secy. Higher Education	02.02.2017	Interviewee's office
6.	SDP	- do -	Ex-Joint Secretary, PRDD	24.02.2017	Interviewee's residence
7.	SSP	- do -	Project Manager, ISGP	03.03.2017	Interviewee's office
8.	SSD	- do -	Addl. District Magistrate, Birbhum Zilla Parishad	31.10.2016	- do -
9.	SUC	- do -	Special Officer, 4 <sup>th</sup> Finance Commission, EX-BDO in Birbhum	25.10.2016	- do -
10.	SAB	Project Personnel (State)	Capacity Building Coordinator, SRD & ISGP	20.09.2016	- do -
11.	SSC	- do -	Monitoring and Evaluation Coordinator, SRD & ISGP	20.09.2016	- do -
12.	SSAC	- do -	Capacity Building Coordinator, SRD & ISGP	04.02.2017	Interviewer's residence
13.	SSKM	Political Person (CPI(M))	Ex Minister in-Charge, PRDD, now State Secretary, CPI(M)	14.02.2017	CPI(M) Head Quarters, in Kolkata
14.	SBG	Academician	Advisor to the Left Front Govt.	26.10.2016	Office of an NGO he is currently attached to
15.	SMS	Social Activist	- Do -	26.10.2016	Interviewee's residence
16.	AS	Economist / Academician	Chairman, 4 <sup>th</sup> Finance Commission	13.02.2017	Interviewee's office
17.	SB	Senior Journalist	Senior Assistant Editor	18.10.2016	Interviewee's office

APPENDIX ONE: Tables of Interviewees

**District level interviewees**

Sl. No.	Interviewee (Code Name)	Category	Designation	Date of Interview	Place of Interview
1.	DSB	Bureaucrat, WBCS Officer	District Panchayat and Rural Development Officer (DPRDO) Bankura	08.02.2017	Interviewee's office
2.	DRB	- do -	DPRDO, Hoogly, Ex-BDO, Bankura	22.02.2017	- do -
3.	DSS	Project Personnel	District Coordinator, SRD & ISGP, Paschim Midnapore	15.11.2016	Interviewee's residence
4.	DRI	- do -	District Coordinator, SRD & ISGP, Bankura	17.01.2017	Interviewee's office
5.	DSM	- do -	Ex-Assistant Coordinator, SRD; now Planning and Governance Coordinator, ISGP	12.01.2017	Interviewee's residence
6.	DPS	- do -	Ex-Assistant Coordinator, SRD; now Financial Management Coordinator, ISGP	06.02.2017	Mashiara GP office
7.	DPM	Political Person (CPI(M))	Ex-Sabhadhipati, Bankura ZP	12.01.2017	Interviewee's residence

**Block level interviewees**

Sl. No.	Interviewee (Code Name)	Category	Designation	Date of Interview	Place of Interview
1.	BMSC	Bureaucrat, WBCS Officer	BDO, Chhatna Block, Bankura	06.02.2017	Office of BDO, Chhatna
2.	BSSD	- do -	BDO, Hirbandh Block, Bankura	07.02.2017	Office of BDO, Hirbandh
3.	BSCM	- do -	Jt.BDO, Indpur Block	07.02.2017	Brahmandiha GP Office
4.	BAP	Political Person (TMC)	Karmadhyaksha, Indpur PS	07.02.2017	- do -
5.	BSM	- do -	Sahakari Sabhapati, Raipur PS	08.02.2017	Motgoda GP Office

APPENDIX ONE: Tables of Interviewees

**Interviewees at Gram Panchayat & Gram Sansad levels**

Sl. No.	Name of Gram Panchayat	Interviewee (Code Name)	Category	Designation	Date of Interview	Place of Interview
1.	Aanchuri	GPARK	Political (TMC)	Prodhan (GP Chairperson 2 terms)	10.01.2017	Aanchuri GP office
2.		GPAAM	- do -	GP member	17.01.2017	- do -
3.		GPARS	- do -	GP member	17.01.2017	- do -
4.		AGUS 1	- do -	Block President, TMC, Ex-member of GUS	17.01.2017	- do -
5.		AGUS 2	GUS Member	GP Tax Collector and Ex-GUS Secretary	17.01.2017	- do -
6.	Dhaban	GPDSM	Political (TMC)	Prodhan (GP Chairperson 3 terms)	03.01.2017	Dhaban GP office
7.		GPDSK	GP Official	GP Assistant (11 years) and GP-Secretary in-charge	10.01.2017	- do -
8.		GPDMS	Political (JDP)	GP member	09.01.2017	- do -
9.		GPDAM	Political (TMC)	GP member	09.01.2017	- do -
10.		GPDP5	Political (TMC)	Upa-Prodhan (GP Vice-Chairperson)	09.01.2017	- do -
11.		GPDDB	Political (CPI(M))	GP member; Oppn. Leader, Block President of Agricultural labourer committee	09.01.2017	- do -
12.		GPDCG	Political (TMC)	Ex-member & GP Upa-Prodhan, currently TMC block president	10.01.2017	- do -
13.		GPDPM	Political (TMC)	Leader of SHG Cluster	10.01.2017	- do -
14.	DGUS 1	GUS member	Ex-GUS Secretary (TMC)	10.01.2017	- do -	
15.	DGUS 2	- do -	Ex-GUS Secretary (CPI(M))	10.01.2017	- do -	
16.	DGUS 3	- do -	Ex-GUS member (TMC)	10.01.2017	- do -	
17.	Brahmandiha	GPBBP	Political (CPI(M))	Ex-GP Prodhan (Chairperson)	06.01.2017	Brahmandiha GP office
18.		GPBMP	- do -	Social and political activist	06.01.2017	- do -
19.		GPBPR	GP Official	GP Secretary	19.01.2017	- do -

APPENDIX ONE: Tables of Interviewees

20.	Mashiara	GPM AAB	Political (CPI(M))	GP Prodhan (Chairperson)	20.01.2017	Mashiara GP office
21.		GPM ABB	- do -	Ex- GP Prodhan (Chairperson)	20.01.2017	- do -
22.		GPM ASS	- do -	GP Upa-Prodhan (Vice-Chairperson)	04.01.2017	- do -
23.		GPM AKD	- do -	GP member	04.01.2017	- do -
24.		GPM AGB	- do -	GP member	04.01.2017	- do -
25.		GPM ARB	- do -	GP member	04.01.2017	- do -
26.	Motgoda	GPM OCK	Political (Independent)	GP Prodhan (Chairperson)	05.01.2017	Motgoda GP office
27.		GPM OTK	Political (TMC)	GP member; Ex-Prodhan (Chairperson) and ex-Upa-Prodhan (Vice-Chairperson)	05.01.2017	- do -
28.		GPM OPRP	Political (CPI(M))	Ex- GP member and opposition leader at GP; current Local Committee Secretary	11.01.2017	- do -
29.		GPM OSK	GP Official	Executive Assistant	11.01.2017	- do -
30.		GPM OSP	- do -	Engineering Assistant	11.01.2017	- do -
31.		GPM ORDU	- do -	GP Assistant	11.01.2017	- do -
32.		GPM OCP	Ex-GP Official	Ex-Job Assistant and Ex-Secretary	18.01.2017	- do -
33.		MGUS 1	GUS member	Ex-GUS Secretary (CPI(M))	18.01.2017	- do -
34.		MGUS 2	- do -	Ex-GUS Secretary (TMC)	18.01.2017	- do -
35.		MGUS 3	- do -	Ex-GUS Secretary (TMC)	18.01.2017	- do -
36.		MGUS 4	- do -	Ex-GUS Secretary (CPI(M))	18.01.2017	- do -
37.	MGUS 5	- do -	Ex-GUS member (TMC)	18.01.2017	- do -	

**Total 66 respondents**

APPENDIX TWO: Photographs from field interventions under SRD project



- 1) Group reading sessions with members of Self-Help Groups conducted under SRD project in West Bengal
- 2) Group discussion with community members and GP functionaries during PhD field-work at Bankura
- 3) Making of the natural resource map and social resource map through neighbourhood meetings in SRD project, as part of the participatory village planning exercises



- 4) Proactive disclosure of information in the form of maps and data prepared by the community through participatory planning exercises, displayed on a permanent structure within the Gram Sansad
- 5) *Gram Unnayan Samity* members repairing houses of the poor and the destitute out of the funds at the disposal of the GUS.

# APPENDIX THREE: Planning and Monitoring of Schemes Through Monitoring Software Under ISGP

02/10/2019

:: Physical Progress ::



## Institutional Strengthening of Gram Panchayats (ISGP) Programme - II

Panchayats & Rural Development Department, Government of West Bengal

Planning & Monitoring through GIS



Home | GIS Map | Picture Gallery | Reports | **Dashboard** | Log In | Mentor Reporting
⚙️

**Physical Progress of planned activities**

Completed ■

Work in Progress ■

Not Implemented / Planned ■

Location

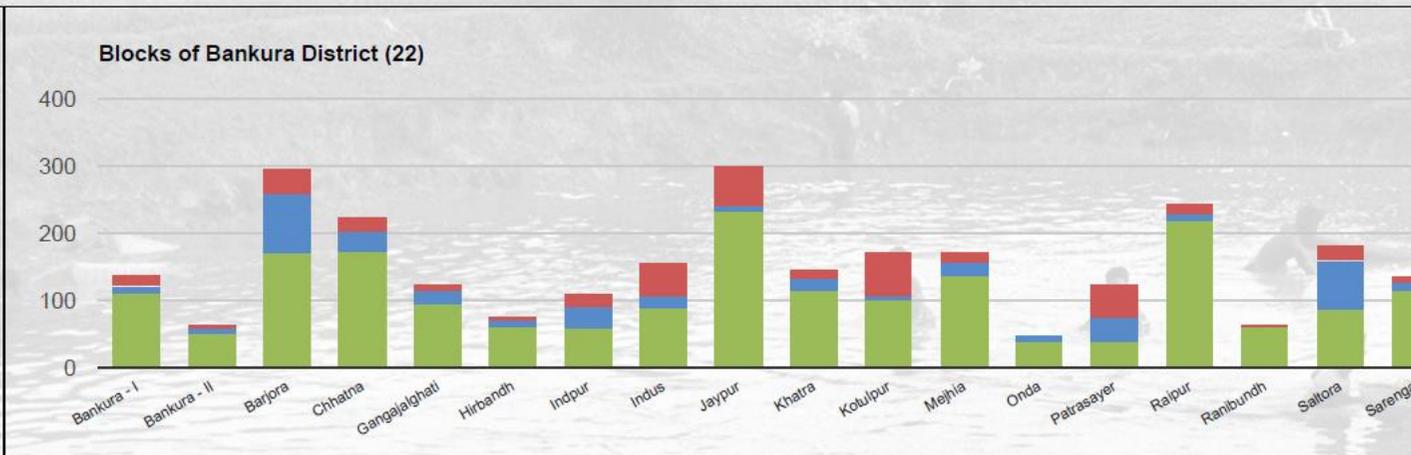
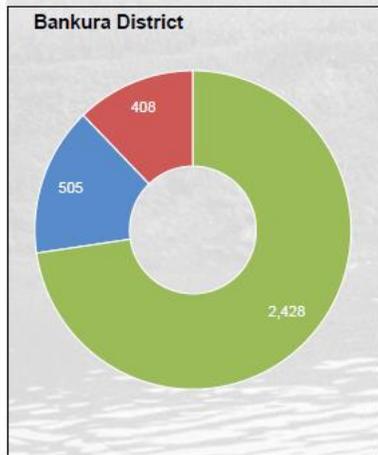
District

Bankura ▼

Select Financial Year

2015 - 2016 ▼

[Proceed](#)



# APPENDIX FOUR: Specimen of Computerised Financial Management By Gram Panchayat Under ISGP Project

02/10/2019

Form 26 Of MOTGODA Gram Panchayat For The Month Of April

**Form 26**  
[See Rule 27(1)]  
**Monthly Statement Of Fund Position**

Gram Panchayat -MOTGODA  
Panchayat Samiti -RAIPUR  
Zilla Parishad -BANKURA  
Fund Position -April ' 2017-2018



Sl No	Classification of Fund	Balance Of Fund At The Beginning Of The Month	Fund Received During The Month	Total Fund Available	Payment Made During The Month	Balance Fund Available	Payment Commitment	Net Balance	Remarks
				[Col. 3 + Col. 4]		[Col. 5 + Col. 6]		[Total Pending Payment]	
[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]	[5]	[6]	[7]	[8]	[9]	[10]
<b>1</b>	<b><i>GIA Programme</i></b>								
	CONSTRUCTION/RENOVATION OF HEALTH SUB CENTER - ASSIGNED	10,409.50	0.00	10,409.50	0.00	10,409.50	0.00	10,409.50	
	SOLID WASTE MANAGEMENT - ASSIGNED	220,838.00	18,482.00	239,320.00	231,820.00	7,500.00	0.00	7,500.00	
	COMMUNITY HEALTH CARE MANAGEMENT INITIATIVE - SPONSORED	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	
	INDIRA AWAS YOJANA - SPONSORED	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	
	MG NATIONAL RURAL EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE SCHEME - SPONSORED	15,780.00	0.00	15,780.00	0.00	15,780.00	0.00	15,780.00	
	NREGS-EFMS - SPONSORED	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	
	RURAL WATER SUPPLY - SPONSORED	15,916.00	0.00	15,916.00	0.00	15,916.00	0.00	15,916.00	
	SAHAY - SPONSORED	25,907.00	0.00	25,907.00	0.00	25,907.00	0.00	25,907.00	
	TOTAL SANITATION CAMPAIGN - SPONSORED	265.00	0.00	265.00	0.00	265.00	0.00	265.00	
	TRIBAL SUB PLAN - SPONSORED	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	
	VWSC-VILLAGE WATER SANITATION COMMITTEE - SPONSORED	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	
	12TH FINANCE COMMISSION - UNTIED	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	
	13TH FINANCE COMMISSION - UNTIED	1,807.00	0.00	1,807.00	0.00	1,807.00	0.00	1,807.00	
	14TH FINANCE COMMISSION - UNTIED	2,714,620.00	0.00	2,714,620.00	1,531,048.00	1,183,572.00	0.00	1,183,572.00	
	2ND STATE FINANCE COMMISSION - UNTIED	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	
	3RD STATE FINANCE COMMISSION - UNTIED	979,635.00	0.00	979,635.00	18,473.00	961,162.00	0.00	961,162.00	
	4TH STATE FINANCE COMMISSION - UNTIED	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	
	BACKWARD REGION GRANT FUNDS - UNTIED	2,204.00	0.00	2,204.00	0.00	2,204.00	0.00	2,204.00	
	PBG_CENTRAL FINANCE COMMISSION - UNTIED	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	
	PBG_STATE FINANCE COMMISSION - UNTIED	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	
	<b>Group Total -</b>	<b>3,987,381.50</b>	<b>18,482.00</b>	<b>4,005,863.50</b>	<b>1,781,341.00</b>	<b>2,224,522.50</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>2,224,522.50</b>	
<b>2</b>	<b><i>GIA Establishment</i></b>								
	CONTINGENCY - ALLOWANCE	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	

**Government of West Bengal**  
**Office of the Chief Secretary & Cabinet Secretary**  
**Writers' Buildings**  
**Kolkata – 700001**

No. 221-CS/2011

Dated, Kolkata, the 9<sup>th</sup> November, 2011

**ORDER**

The State Government proposes to set up Development Monitoring Committees at District, Sub-Division and Block Levels in each district (except Kolkata), for ensuring co-ordination among field level functionaries of respective departments and speedy execution of various projects, proper delivery of public services and quality of implementation of projects and programs.

The Committees at District, Sub-Division and Block Levels will comprise the following members:-

A. At the District:

- District Magistrate – Chairperson
- Additional District Magistrate (Development) – Member Secretary
- Additional Executive Officer (Zilla Parisad) – Member
- Additional District Magistrate (LR) – Member
- Chief Medical Officer of Health – Member
- Deputy Director Agriculture (Administration) – Member
- Deputy Director (ARD) – Member
- Deputy Director (Fisheries) – Member
- Executive Engineer (PWD) – Member
- Executive Engineer (PWD - Roads) – Member
- Executive Engineer (PWD - Construction) – Member
- Executive Engineer (PHE) – Member
- Executive Engineer (Agri Irrigation) – Member
- Executive Engineer (Agri Mechanical) – Member
- Executive Engineer (Irrigation & Waterways) – Member
- D. I. of Schools (Primary) – Member
- D. I. of Schools (Secondary) – Member
- District Program Officer (ICDS) – Member
- District Controller (Food & Supplies) – Member
- Sub-Divisional Officer – Member
- Any other District Level Officer as the Chairperson deem fit – Member

B. At the Sub-Divisional Level:

- Sub-Divisional Officer – Chairperson

## APPENDIX FIVE: Government Order on Monitoring Committee

- Deputy Magistrate & Deputy Collector (in charge of development matters) – Member Secretary
- Sub-Divisional Land & Land Reforms Officer – Member
- Additional Chief Medical Officer of Health – Member
- Deputy Director, Agriculture – Member
- Assistant Engineer (S) (PWD) – Member
- Assistant Engineer (PWD - Roads) – Member
- Assistant Engineer (Agri Irrigation) – Member
- Assistant Engineer (Agri Mechanical) – Member
- Assistant Engineer (Irrigation & Waterways) – Member
- A. I. of Schools (Primary) – Member
- A. I. of Schools (Secondary) – Member
- Sub-Divisional Controller (Food & Supplies) – Member
- All Block Development Officers – Member
- Any other Sub-Division Level Officer as the Chairperson deem fit – Member

### C. At the Block Level:

- Block Development Officers – Chairperson
- Joint Block Development Officers – Member
- SAE (BPC)/(RWP) – Member Secretary
- Block Medical Officer of Health – Member
- Block Land & Land Reforms Officer – Member
- Assistant Director (Agriculture) – Member
- Block Live Stock Development Officer – Member
- Child Development Project Officer – Member
- S. I. of Schools (Primary) – Member
- Inspector (Food & Supplies) – Member
- All Executive Assistants of Gram Panchayat – Member
- Any other Block / Extension Level Officer as the Chairperson deem fit – Member

The functions of the Committee will be as follows:

- (i) To ensure necessary coordination among different departments at field level, monitor implementation of schemes/projects/service delivery and quality of implementation.
- (ii) The Block level Committee will hold meeting by the 5<sup>th</sup> day of each month, the Sub-Divisional Level Committee by the 10<sup>th</sup> day and District Level Committee by the 15<sup>th</sup> day of each month. The Block level and Sub-Divisional Level Committees will submit comprehensive reports to the next higher tier and the District Level Committee will send such reports to the Government in the Development & Planning Department.
- (iii) The Committee will monitor the progress of implementation of various projects, schemes, service delivery mechanism undertaken by different departments / district administration under State Plan including centrally sponsored & Central sector plan

## APPENDIX FIVE: Government Order on Monitoring Committee

- (iv) The Committee will guide concerned officials in addressing critical issues which may arise in course of implementation of schemes, projects and service delivery.
- (v) The Committee will give necessary guidance and instructions to the concerned officials in ensuring coordination among various authorities / agencies in the matter of implementation subject to general direction of the Government
- (vi) The Committee will define the areas of the responsibility of line departments and implementing agencies in implementation of projects and delivery where field level problems arisen in course of implementation.
- (vii) The Committee will set up an inspecting team comprising Government officials. The inspecting team will supervise the projects at field level to ensure quality of implementation and service delivery and report to the Chairperson of the concerned Committee. The Chairperson of Sub-Division and Block level Committees will bring deficiencies in quality of implementation to the attention of the District Magistrate with suggestion if any, if the matter is not sorted out at his level. The District Magistrate may bring the matter into the notice of the Government, if it is not sorted out at his level.

Sd/-

(Samar Ghosh)  
Chief Secretary  
Government of West Bengal