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Democracy, Development and Participation : the Emerging Scenario

AMBARISH MUKHOPADHYAY

THE WORLD TODAY is more democratic than ever before. During the 1980s and 1990s the world made dramatic progress in opening up political systems and expanding political freedoms. The last two decades of the 20th century saw a historic shift in the global spread of democracy. Some 81 countries — 29 in Sub-Saharan Africa, 23 in Europe, 14 in Latin America, 10 in Asia and 5 in the Arab states — took steps towards democratisation.[1] Scores of authoritarian regimes have been replaced by democratic governments. This process has been called 'third wave' of democratisation.[2] Like history's other movements for liberation, these democratic revolutions were propelled by people. In the 1980s growing pressures against the excesses of military dictatorships in Latin America caused them to topple one after another. In Central and Eastern Europe and the present Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 became a major turning point. There were rising oppositions in Africa throughout the 1980s and 1990s against the long-standing dictatorships, ultimately causing their collapse. For some countries the transition has been less dramatic, as with the move to civilian rule in the Republic of Korea and Thailand and the introduction of elections in Nepal. As a result of long negotiations, South Africa graduated to democracy in 1994. Democratic reforms have been relatively modest in the Arab States, and the region has been slower to democratise itself than other parts of the world.

This apparently bright scenario of the march of democracy does not always capture the complexities of much political transitions. A deeper look beneath the mere number of democracies reveals other sides of the story.

I

Most attempts at democratisation seem fragmented. Many countries that embraced democracy have suffered reversals, while many others have limited political competition and continuing abuse of political and civil rights. Global progress on political freedoms has been uneven. The so-called 'third wave' of democratisation appears to have stalled with many countries failing to consolidate and strengthen the first steps towards democracy and several slipping back to authoritarianism. Many others have stalled between democracy and authoritarianism, with limited political freedoms and closed or dysfunctional politics. Still others have become vulnerable to extremism and violent conflict. Today some 73 countries, with 42 per cent of the world's population, still do not hold free and fair elections. Some 106 governments still restrict many civil and political freedoms.[3] Most of these 'limited' democracies suffer from shallow political participation. Citizens have little trust in their governments and are disaffected from politics. Often the countries are dominated by a single powerful party or group despite formal elections.

In recent times people around the world have fought for and won democracy with the hopes of gaining political freedom, and social and economic opportunities. But now many feel that democracy has not delivered; it has not produced dividends in the lives of ordinary people in many countries. Inequality in income and poverty continue to increase. Political instability and violence often mars democratic process. Developing countries pursued democratisation in the face of massive poverty and pervasive social and economic problems. Several countries that marched towards democracy since the 1980s have failed to tackle their basic socio-economic problems. At the UN Conference on Financing for Development held in March 2002 in Mexico, world leaders and policy makers assessed the progress towards development and poverty eradication goals set at the UN Millennium Summit in 2000. They also pledged an unprecedented global effort to achieve those goals by 2015. Some developing countries are making progress on several fronts. But for the rest the prospects are not bright at all. At current trends, 33 countries, with more than a quarter of the world's population, will achieve fewer than half the goals by 2015. And if global progress continues at such a pace, it will take more than 130 years to rid the world of hunger.[4]

Developments around the world reveal a paradox. The spread of democracy, the integration of national economies, revolutions in technology — all point to greater human freedom and greater potential for improving people's lives. But in many countries freedom seems to be under ever greater threat. Even where democratic institutions are firmly established, citizens often feel powerless to influence national policies. The national governments also feel more subject to international forces which they have little capacity to control. People around the world are gradually losing confidence in the effectiveness of their governments and faith in democracy. Gallup International's Millenium Survey asked more than 50,000 people in 60 countries if their country was governed by the will of the people. Less than a third of the respondents said, 'yes'. The survey also asked, "Does government respond to the will of the people?" Only 10 per cent said that it did.[5] When democratic governments do not respond to the needs of the common man, the public becomes more inclined to support authoritarian or populist leaders, who claim that limiting civil liberties and political freedoms will accelerate economic growth and promote social progress and stability. People in different countries of the world are gradually becoming alienated from the process of democratic governance. Their hostility is triggering a backlash against the existing regimes. In the most extreme cases, radical or fundamentalist groups are resorting to violent solutions to their grievances. It is evident that there is a growing crisis of democratic governance in many parts of the world.

II

The central question of the hour is how should we respond? The growing crisis has led to an increasing awareness about deepening democracy – about making it more effective in fulfilling the goals of development. It is now a generally accepted argument that democracy and development are closely interlinked. Around the world discussions on development are placing more emphasis on democratic institutions and governance. There is a broad agreement that in the more interdependent world of the present, politics and political institutions are more central to human development. Politics matters for human development because people everywhere want to be free to determine their destinies, express their views and participate in the decisions that shape their lives. Attempts are being made by academicians, policy-makers and others to explore the links between political institutions and economic and social outcomes. The *Human*

Development Report 2002, for example, is an exercise in such an exploration. The central message of the Report is that effective governance is central to human development. It argues that countries can promote human development for all only when they have governance systems that are fully accountable to all people, and when all people can participate in the debates and decisions that shape their lives – in short, when they have democracy in the true sense of the term. However, it is not a democracy as practised by any particular country or group of countries – but rather a set of principles and core values that allow the common man to gain power through participation, while protecting them from arbitrary and unaccountable actions in their lives by governments, multinationals and other forces. This means that we have to ensure that institutions and power are so structured and distributed that the common people have the real voice and space. And that mechanism can be created through which the powerful – whether political leaders, corporations or other influential actors – can be held accountable for their actions.

At the national level this requires a focus on strengthening the democratic state institutions that form the necessary foundation for achieving any broader objectives. At the global level it highlights the need of forging a much more democratic space in which international institutions and transnational coalitions operate with an increased degree of transparency. And the developing countries be given a scope of dialogue and a meaningful say in decisions that affect them.

In many countries of the world today a central challenge for deepening democracy is building the key institutions of democratic governance. This includes (i) a system of representation with well functioning political parties and interest associations, (ii) an electoral system based on universal adult suffrage guaranting true and fair elections, (iii) a system of checks and balances based on the separation of powers, (iv) an independent judiciary, (v) a free and independent media, (vi) a vibrant civil society, able to monitor government and private business and provide alternative forms of political participation, and (vii) effective civilian control over the military and other security forces. These institutions come in many shapes and forms. Depending on its history and circumstances, a country will necessarily be 'differently democratic'. But in all countries democracy will mean much more than a single decision or hastily organised election. It requires a deeper process of political development to embed democratic values and culture

in all parts of society. Promoting democratic politics means expanding capabilities to enable people to play a more effective role in such politics. It also means fostering the development of civil society groups and other informal institutions to help democratic institutions better represent the people.

Democratic governance is valuable in its own right. When it is linked with development, the argument goes that democracy can also advance human development. It does so in several ways. First, enjoying political freedom and participating in the decisions that shape one's life are fundamental human rights ; they are part of human development in their own rights. Secondly, democracy helps protect people from economic and political catastrophes such as famines and descents into chaos. This is no little achievement. Thirdly, democracies can contribute to political stability, providing open space for political opposition and handover of power. Finally, democratic governance can trigger a virtuous cycle of development. Political freedom empowers people to press for policies that expand social and economic opportunities, and open debates help communities shape their priorities.

III

Governance thus matters for development. There is a growing consensus around the world that institutions, rules and political processes play a significant role in the process of human development. Promoting human development is not just a socio-economic or technological challenge ; it is also an institutional and political challenge. Many persistent development problems reflect failures of governance. Studies in a range of countries and regions hold weak governance responsible for continuing poverty and lagging development. The crisis of governance is evident in widepread corruption, inefficient public services and a host of other failures.[6] So the thrust of the hour is on 'good governance'. As UN Secretary General Kofi Annan puts it, "good governence is perhaps the single most important factor in eradicating poverty and promoting development."

What would we mean by good governance ? There is no single answer. However, much of the recent debates have focused on what makes institutions and rules more effective, including transparency, participation, responsivenes, accountability and the rule of law. All are important for human development. For, ineffective institutions usually cause the most

harm to poor and vulnerable people. But just as human development is about much more than growth in national incomes, governance for human development is about much more than effective institutions and rules. It must also be concerned with whether institutions and rules are fair, and whether all people have a say in how they operate. From the human development perspective, good governance is basically democratic governance. To elaborate, it will essentially mean the following :— (i) people's human rights and fundamental freedom are to be respected, allowing them to live with dignity, (ii) people will have a say in the decisions that affect their lives, (iii) people should be able to hold decision-makers accountable, (iv) inclusive and fair rules, institutions and practices should govern social interactions, (v) women should be equal partners with men in private and public spheres of life and decision-making, (vi) there should be no discrimination based on race, ethnicity, class, gender or any other attributes, (vii) the needs of future generations should be reflected in current policies, (viii) economic and social policies should be responsive to people's needs and aspirations, and (ix) such policies should aim at eradicating poverty and expanding the choices that all people have in their lives.

Strategies for promoting human development have traditionally emphasised investing in education and health and promoting equitable economic growth. These have been regarded as two pillars of development because they mobilise individual agency by strengthening productive capacities. Today, a third pillar of a 21st century human development strategy is being highlighted : promoting participation through democratic governance. People's participation in the process of democratic governance is being highly valued. It has emerged as one of the essential and most significant elements of good governance. It is being argued that political freedom and participation are parts of human development, both as development goals in their own rights and as the means for advancing human development. In the decade since 1990 political freedom and participation have become much more prominent in public policy debates. The political shifts of the 1990s built greater consensus on the value of political freedom and human rights. Such consensus has been reflected in the recent inter-governmental declarations such as the Millenium Declaration of the UN General Assembly and the UN Conference on Financing for Development held in March 2002. Changes in the world have shifted from human development priorities to the priorities to political freedom, participation and collective action as

public policy issues. Alongside the economic entreprenuership that drives markets, social entreprenuership now drives policy debates on issues that matter for people. The growing consensus puts premium on collective action by people and civil society groups in shaping the course of human development.

IV

Democratic principles sum up well the human development approach to governance because those express the idea that people come first — governance must conform to the needs of people, not vice versa. Participation by people in the policy-making process is regarded the essential ingredient of democratic governance. Traditionally, participation in democracy has generally meant participation in the electoral process. Electoral participation is no doubt important. An electoral system based on universal adult suffrage performs a number of essential functions in a democratic polity. It is one of the main media of people's participation in the policy-making process. In a democracy, the function of political recruitment is performed through it. It reflects people's choices and options, help in political education, renews the legitimacy of the rulers periodically through public support. The democratic system of voting adds another crucial element of governance from a human development standpoint — elections are the paradigm of enforceable accountability. Election is also an egalitarian form of participation. The principle of 'one person, one vote', gives every individual an equal say in the choice of government — in theory if not in practice.

Still, it would be wrong to equate participation in democracy with electoral participation. Then we will fall into the fallacy of 'electoralism'. Taking part in the electoral process is not the one and only way of participating in the process of democratic governance. Election, after all, are not continuous and ongoing processes in political system. They are occasional in nature. It is also often found that taking part in the electoral process involves much less initiative and labour on the part of the individual actor than engaging in the process of policy making in other manners. Moreover, the electoral process has its own maladies. It can be subverted by corruptions at different levels. Even well functioning formal structures of participation and accountability can often appear to be at best only blunt instruments. Elections and other formal checks enable citizens only to end the tenure of rulers

who dishonour their mandates. Those have rarely been enough to safeguard the rights of women, minorities and the poor. The crisis of representative processes is not unique to the new democracies of the developing countries. It is found even in well-established democracies. In the USA, the turnout of registered voters in presidential elections fell from 96 per cent in 1960 to 51 per cent in 2000, and in the UK from 78 per cent in 1992 to 59 per cent in 2001. This trend can be noticed in other western countries also. In France, Italy and Norway party membership today is half (or less) of what it was twenty years ago.[7] Public trust in the electoral system and the representative structures is gradually eroding. One of the basic theoretical premises of political participation — that participation leads to people's empowerment — is being challenged. Whether and to what extent electoral participation really empowers the common man to decide his fate and get his dues has become one of the major points of debate. Effective participation needs other avenues and alternative forms. A vibrant civil society alone can offer such paths.

V

In such democratic societies people can participate in the public sphere in many ways, for example, debating issues with friends and neighbours, writing to newspapers on the rights and wrongs of government policies, organising and taking part in meetings and discussions, becoming members of different interest groups, marching in protests and so on. What is needed is an open space and the diverse ways in which people can express their views. That is the essence of democratic life. Expanding political and civic space for popular social engagement is critical for deepening democracy and building democratic governance. Responsibilities for such expansion lie both with the state, which must protect the civil and political freedoms, and with the members of society who engage in and invigorate this exercise. Over the past two decades there have been many new ways for people to participate in public debates and activities. Though membership in formal and traditional institutions of collective action, such as political parties, has fallen, there has been an explosion in support for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other new civil society groups. Grassroots movements embracing a wide variety of social issues are being organised at different corners of the world. In most cases these cross over the boundaries of formal political institutions. Dubbed as 'new social movements' such civil society activism address issues like gender justice, rights of

minorities, environmental protection and sustainable development, protection of human rights and many others. These hold enormous scope for broadening participation in governance and promoting more equitable outcomes for people. These new forms of people's participation have the potentiality of reinforcing democratic institutions as their activities range from influencing agendas through protests to increasing collaboration in decision-making.

In some countries, for example, significant steps have been taken for participatory and accountable budgeting. These are basically civil society initiatives to scrutinise public spending, and in some cases, participate in the development of official budgets. In most countries the budget process is almost exclusively the prerogative of the executive and the legislative branches of the government, particularly the bureaucracy. Ordinary people usually have little say in budget formulation. And much of the process is generally covered under secrecy. Recent initiatives by citizen groups to examine local and central budgets are helping to open up this process to the voices of ordinary people. Social audits and impact evaluations are two examples in this regard. Through these concern is elicited about spending priorities and misuse of funds. These efforts sometimes help reverse official decisions. In the State of Rajasthan in India, for example, a grassroots organisation called Mazdoor Kisan Shalati Sangathan (MKSS) launched a campaign in 1988 to secure minimum wages for government drought-relief workers. It soon became clear that corruption was at the root of low wages. The MKSS thoroughly analysed government accounts. Their investigations ultimately led the state agencies to monitor spending and require all village accounts to be scrutinised at village meetings open to all.

Gender-responsive budget initiatives are also increasingly becoming a popular tool for ensuring women empowerment at different corners of the globe. These attempt to hold public spending accountable to national and international commitments for promoting gender equality. In recent years such initiatives have spread to around forty countries. They are globally networked with the support of such agencies as the UN Development Fund for Women, Commonwealth Secretariat, and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Gender-responsive budgets are not separate budgets for women. Rather, they are analyses of public spending through the lens of gender. They are a way of ensuring consistency between social commitments to achieve goals of gender equality in the

fields of work or education for example, and the allocation of resources. These are still at an experimental stage. But if sustained effectively, hopefully these can bear fruit ushering in a new form of participatory politics.

Another dimension to people's participation in democratic politics has been added as result of the unprecedented revolution in information technology in recent times. E-governance is emerging as a new avenue for political praticipation, encouraging more direct citizen engagement with elected representatives. At different parts of the world, governments are adopting more innovative ways of interacting with citizens by using many practices of electronic communication. Though it started in the West, the process today is no longer limited within the bounds of the developed nations. The initiatives towards e-governance for public service delivery have begun in developing countries as well. In India also, such initiative are being taken as for example in the states of Maharashtra, Karnataka and very recently in West Bengal. The Internet has the potentiality to improve transparency and expose corruption in governmental works. With today's 0.5 billion Internet users expected to grow nearly 1.0 billion by 2005, there is a vast scope for further expansion of e-governance.

VI

Effective popular participation, in one way or the other, thus lies at the heart of democracy. It strengthens democracy which in turn can help in promoting human development. Empowering people to influence decisions that affect their lives and hold their rulers accountable is no longer just a national issue. In the integrated world of the present, these democratic principles also have a global dimension. For, global rules and actors often affect people's lives as much as national ones. So attempts for deepening democracy should be made at the international level also. Existing international institutions need reform. In most of such institutions the developing countries usually have to occupy the backseats having little or no say in their deliberations. Consider the World Trade Organisation (WTO) for example. In principle, every member country has a seat and a vote, which is apparently very democratic. But actual decision-making occurs by consensus, heavily influenced by the largest and richest countries. The power imbalance is quite evident. Developing countries should be given a stronger voice in the operation of such institutions. For, imbalance in power makes unrepresentative decision-making inevitable at the intergovernmental level. So the challenge of democratic governance in the present world has

to be combated both at the national and global levels. The task of deepening democracy in the present interdependent world is no easy one. The need to act is clear. To act we need the will to act. If we can act in proper ways, that would help promoting sustainable democracies.

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Modernity and Democracy in South Asia

ASOK MUKHOPADHYAY

Introduction

SOUTH ASIA IS unique in many respects. The absolute size as well as growth rate of population are high in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The level of economic development is low and per capita income is one of the lowest in the world. The socio-religious diversities are many and they often give rise to violence in public space. The effects of colonialism are varied but one common feature is the prevalence of 'soft' states. The South Asian countries have all made their experiments with the European model of democratic government : some have succeeded more than others but democracy has not been much of a success in an overall sense. The South Asian experience is unique as it combines democratisation with economic development and state consolidation. Democratisation has been generally looked upon as a process of compacts and bargains between the state and its parts, arrived at through electoral contests which, however, are not always free and fair. Democracy has experienced limited triumphs and constant tensions in these societies which are beset with the additional tasks of territorial or political integration and sustained economic development.

Democratisation Models

One way of looking at South Asian experiments with democratic governance can be in the "elite-bargain" perspectives. In all these countries political and economic powers have been transferred from the colonialists to the indigenous elites. The task of governance has, however, proved to be an uphill task because of the unpreparedness and underdevelopment of the civil society for translating the liberal-democratic state ideology of West Europe and the United States in the context of the popular ethos and culture in these countries. In none of these countries there was any sustained movement for universal adult suffrage and the people made little conscious efforts and underwent little sufferings for gaining a voice in the governance

of their countries. Universal adult franchise came as a gift from the elites to the common people as the elites had calculated that they would introduce full-fledged democracy in one stroke and satisfy their people. But their calculation went wrong as democratic strappings were introduced without adequate social, economic and cultural preparedness of the common people. Inevitably democratic experiments crumbled down in Pakistan and Bangladesh and had a limping progress in India and Sri Lanka for different reasons. Nepal and Bhutan could make little progress.

The South Asian experience has somewhat been neglected in the academic discourse on the ideology and theory of democracy, discourse that has been dominated by the superior claims of 'western' liberal democracy and also judged by standards set by the experience of West Europe and North America. As a result, South Asia's tryst with modernity and democracy has not been seen in its proper perspective.

In the South Asian countries the modes of governance of the colonial period were directly carried over into the postcolonial system. India's democratic Constitution of 1950, for example, was drafted substantially on the model of a colonial legislation, viz., of the Government of India Act 1935. In the constitutional system of free India the structure and the mode of functioning of the bureaucracy, the armed forces, the police and the judiciary were left undisturbed, as was the basis of civil and criminal law in these countries. The concepts of modernity, democracy and development were all patterned after the value system and mode of evaluation of the liberal democracies of the West. Governance has been judged on grounds of economy and efficiency as understood in the developed West rather than on the moral-cultural and political grounds of democratic participation and social justice. For example, Gandhi and Bose, the two top-most leaders in the crucial phase of India's freedom struggle, had little influence on constitutionalism and governance of India. The partition of the Indian subcontinent had its effect on state-building in India. The consensual model of the Nehru era would have been impossible had the Muslim League and the representatives of the princely states been in opposition in parliament of an undivided India. Even the constitutional framework would have perhaps been different.

The nationalist leadership of the South Asian countries took the project modernisation seriously but the instrument chosen was the legal and

administrative powers of the state. Modernisation and industrialisation, bureaucracy and technocracy were relied upon for removing the mass poverty in these countries. The developmental state had to resort to authoritarian tactics, more visibly in some states than in others. The net result everywhere was *widening* and *deepening* of the reach of the state into the society, and the penetration by the nation state into domain of social activity which however remained essentially untouched by the colonial state. In course of time it produced contradictions between "command polity" headed by the hegemonious state, bureaucracy and organised industry, on the one hand, and the "communitarian polity" dominated by organised interest groups and unorganised marginal sections of the society, on the other. The concept of "civil society" needs a revision in the context of the recent experiences of the South Asian countries, because the specifically 'liberal' definition of civil society is much too Eurocentric and restrictive.

Political Overview

A quick overview of the political and socio-economic developments in the major South Asian countries would be helpful in this context.

Pakistan, in the 55-year of its existence, has lived under military rule for about 26 years. The first decade of its existence saw a ceaseless and ruthless struggle for power. Hence, Ayub Khan's military rule came as a civil necessity and the polity soon was on the path of being a Praetorian state where military interventions have been only specific manifestations of the broader phenomenon of political and socio-economic underdevelopment. Personalities rather than ideologies or party institutionalisation count more as the Muslim League miserably failed to play its role of a nation-building force. What prevented democratic development in Pakistan was the absence of a Pakistani civil society at the time of birth of the sovereign state of Pakistan. The separation of the eastern wing and the birth of Bangladesh was the final rejection of Jinnah's two-nation theory. Pakistan experienced four military coups in 1958, 1969, 1977 and 1999. Every ruling clique of Pakistan, civil as well as military, made the art of government exclusively a matter of pursuit of power. Pakistan has never prepared herself as a democracy, and Pakistani 'nationalism' has all along been sought to be built exclusively on anti-India hysteria. The Islamic *jihad* is the most powerful force in Pakistani politics and is the

greatest stumbling block to modernity and democracy in Pakistan and to the growth of a democratic political culture there.

The three referendums in Pakistan in 1960, 1984 and 2002 were all held under military rėgimes to legitimise their military rule and get popular approval of constitutional changes. The policy of 'partyless' political system during Ayub Khan and Zia-ul-Haq regimes proved abortive. In recent time popular political leaders like Nawaz Shariff and Benazir Bhutto made no significant contribution to proper institutionalisation of politics. Almost all ruling regimes of Pakistan very much tried to de-institutionalise politics, on the one hand, and enhance the importance of Islamic elements at the cost of institutionalisation, on the other.

In Pakistan participatory democratic political culture *per se* is not strong enough. There is an in-built distrust towards the political class. The army and the bureaucracy have been the most notable beneficiaries of the country's polity almost since its inception. Lately General Musharraf has floated his own political outfit called Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid-e-Azam), but he blatantly refuses to hand over real governing power to the political parties. He desperately tries to neutralise democratic politics. During Zia-ul-Haq's regime anti-modern influences increased within the army's rank and file. However, the Pakistani army is the most westernised and 'modern' professional body with a strong institutional ethos. The religious parties single-handedly are not in a position to challenge the army rule.

The separation of East Pakistan and its new birth as Bangladesh resolved many of Pakistan's congenital disorders. But Pakistan still continues to be a predominantly feudal society. There has been some attempts to take the Pakistani civil society towards democratisation and liberalisation, although in a defective way. The remedy lies in the prescription of more democracy for curing the ills of democracy.

Among all the South Asian countries, Sri Lanka (earlier called Ceylon) was the first to experiment with universal adult suffrage since 1931. Currently there is a multi-party system in which the major participants include Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) leading the People's Alliance (PA), United National Party (UNP) leading the United National Front (UNF), Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) leading the People's Front of Liberation Tigers (PFLT), Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP), the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC) and Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF).

The age-old ethnic hostility between the Sinhalese and the Tamils in Sri Lanka erupted with the island's independence in February 1948. There was a steady erosion of rights for the Tamils. In 1956 Sinhalese was made the sole official language reflecting the emergence of a nationalist Sinhala educated middle-class. In 1988 Buddhism (followed by 69 per cent of the country's population) was proclaimed the state religion. There have been attempts to increase the settlement of the Sinhalese people in Tamil areas in the north and east of the island. The Tamils, who constitute about a fifth of the total population, have not been incorporated in any scheme of power-sharing. Hence they have not developed a sense of participation and identity in Sri Lanka's democratic polity. The success of the LTTE has been due to the myopic vision of the Sinhalese leadership reflected in the unwillingness of Solomon and Sirimavo Bandarnike, Jayawardhane, Premadasa and Kumartunga to share power with the Tamils. In 1995 the government's proposal to divide the island administratively into autonomous regions did not find acceptability among the Tamils because the proposed 'autonomy' of the regions was not genuine and adequate. The government troops in 1996 captured Jaffna, the stronghold northern city of the Tamils. The Tamil Tigers continued their guerrilla fighting, which they had began in 1983 with the demand of a separate Tamil state (*Tamil Eelam*) as the acceptable solution of the problem of political and economic discrimination against them. The Sinhala majority evinced no political foresight. The obstinacy of the Sinhala leadership, in fact, weakened the moderate and liberal Tamil leaders like Amritalingam of the Tamil United Liberation Front.

The political conflict between the UNF and PA, and the military strength of the LTTE proved to be the insurmountable obstacles to resolving the attritive competition of Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms. In the aftermath of 11 September 2001 the LTTE has been forced to adopt a moderate stance as external supply of funds and arms dried up and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe (UNP) has also taken a pro-peace posture for accommodating the LTTE through Norwegian facilitators for peaceful settlement of long-standing political disputes over power-sharing with the Tamil minority. The JVP, devoted to nationalism and marxism simultaneously, is not however very enthusiastic about any peaceful settlement with the LTTE. Sri Lanka has experienced for long inter-religious and inter-ethnic clashes. Adequate decentralisation and devolution of power is the need of the hour and the only way to strenghen democracy in the island-state.

LTTE has dropped its demand for the separate state of *Tamil Eelam* and expressed readiness to accept internal self-government and local autonomy. Any political accommodation of the LTTE, however, needs to be accompanied by establishing satisfactory relation between the Muslim community in the eastern province and the LTTE. It is also important to take care that human rights and democracy are not sacrificed for establishing tense peace in the north-eastern provinces. Competitive pluralism even among the Tamils needs to be ensured. After two decades of civil war and violent strifes, in which 64000 people have died so far, Sri Lankan polity is poised for peace, stability, democracy, decentralisation, development and participation. India correctly supports the peace initiative for putting an end to terrorism and civil war. Not only Norway but the European Union and the USA are also helping the process of economic modernity and democratisation in Sri Lanka.

Bangladesh was born in 1971 through a mass revolt against Pakistani high-handedness and was proclaimed a people's republic. But very soon democracy in Bangladesh was eclipsed and it fell a victim to politics of violence and assassination of public figures. Caught up in an all-out, zero-tolerance confrontation between the Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party in recent time, democracy in Bangladesh remains fragile and wobbling. The coalition of the Right-radical BNP and the communal outfit Jammat-e-Islam has ushered in the politics of intolerance, vengeance and vendetta. With sufferance and tacit support, if not outright collusion, of the state administration, the BNP-Jammat cadres follow the policy of killing both the Awami Leaguers and the Hindu minority and also subjecting them to loot, arson and gangrape. The other minorities – Buddhists, Christians and tribals – have also come under threat. Criminalisation of politics seems to have been the part and parcel of Bangladesh's political culture.

Intolerant of all dissent, the hate-propelled regimes here flagrantly ignore and violate all canons of democratic governance and the rule of law. Public criticism is silenced by arbitrary arrests, torture and detention. The human rights activists and media persons who dare expose the atrocities on minorities and political workers are made special targets of state terrorism.

The reality of Bangladesh is that the culture of modernity has taken a back seat. The winner of political power grabs it all leaving no space for others.

Political dissidence is hardly tolerated. The culture of political intolerance does irreparable damage to democratic ethos and institutions. Bangladesh is locked in a mortal combat against itself.

India has gained nothing in response to its good neighbourly relations with Bangladesh. In fact, India has gone a long way in appeasing Bangladesh in respect of her agreement on Ganga waters. But Bangladesh has denied India transit-facilities and supply of natural gas. The insurgents in India's north-east are known to be receiving regular help from Bangladesh for shelter, training and finances.

Nepal's journey from monarchy to democracy started in 1959 with the inauguration of a formally democratic constitution. But the Royal coup in 1961 put an early end to Nepal's experiment with democracy. King Mahendra usurped power by dissolving the country's first elected parliament, imprisoned Prime Minister B.P. Koirala, suspended the Constitution of 1959, arrested important political leaders, and banned all political parties. The King himself formed a government by intorducing the 'partyless' *panchayat* system of government which lasted from 1962 to 1990. His argument was that the people's representatives had failed to give political and administrative stability to the political system. Some misunderstanding was created between the Palace and the politicians; corruption multiplied and administrative machinery was weakened.

In 1990 King Birendra was forced by the Nepali Congress and the communists to accept a multiparty democratic system and the general election was held in 1991. But the Nepali Congress has never been a cohesive unit as its different leaders pulled it in different directions. G.P. Koirala was reluctant to hand over power to younger generation. The Maoist insurgency of the late 1990s was the outcome of the Nepali Congress's failure to keep its electoral promises. Currently the Nepali Maoists are in control of nearly 40 out of 75 districts. They are well-organised and equipped, and have considerable support-base among the poorer sections. It is found that it would be very difficult to have a military solution of the Maoist challenge and the explosive situation seems to be beyond the control of a lameduck Prime Minister chosen by King Gnanendra.

Nepal's elder statesmen are tired and the new generation of leaders displays a pomposity. The lack of any political consensus among the new generation of leaders makes it easy for the king to intervene, sacking the elected

ministry and installing an interim government. Nepal's land-locked geographical position, increased political violence and the consequent increasing insecurity have all conspired to damage its economy. The unemployment situation is becoming alarming. The per capita income of Nepal shows it as one of the poorest countries of the world inspite of substantial economic aid from international community. The Nepalese society has not gone through any cultural renaissance and the socio-political institutions have not experienced any modernist transformation. Democracy in Nepal is still in the stage of experimentation, and the Maoist challenge to Nepalese democracy has intensified its crisis. The weaknesses of the Nepalese democracy may endanger India's security and pose a challenge to the geopolitical balance of the region. Palace autocracy and Maoist triumph are equally unacceptable to India on political consideration.

Sandwiched between two powerful Asian states, viz., India and China, Bhutan has shown diplomatic skill in maintaining its sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity and in making social, political and economic advancement. A predominantly feudal society, Bhutan started changing slowly since the 1950s. It is the king who has been initiating social change and modernity so much so that the Bhutanese people look to him for leadership and enlightenment. In 1998 the king started renunciating much of his traditional powers, one after another, as he has been showing his growing trust in his people. The Maoists in Nepal have demanded abolition of monarchy but none of the dissenting groups among the Bhutanese has ever demanded the abolition of monarchy in Bhutan.

Bhutan, lately set on the path of political modernity, has recently started the experiment of electing ministers by parliament and rotating chairmanship of the council of ministers. The king of modern Bhutan keeps himself aloof from the affairs of the council of ministers, and he tries to ensure the practice of decentralisation of political and economic decision-making powers so that Bhutan can be prepared for democratic rule. The factor of ethnicity is playing an important role in Bhutanese politics.

Recently Bhutan has adopted the technique of planning for economic development but simultaneously stresses spiritual well-being and mental happiness of the people and also clean environment. Primary health care has reached 90 per cent of the population. Bhutan's democratised monarchy has so far been a success in initiating modernity and democracy in this land

of seven lakh people through development committees at the district level (since 1981) and the village level (since 1991). Bhutan's per capita income of $645 is the highest in South Asia. The king follows the philosophy of Gross National Happiness scoring over Gross National Product. There has yet been no election held on the principle of universal suffrage and party political organization, hence the future of democracy in Bhutan still remains a matter of conjecture.

Both Bhutan and India appear to be conscious of each other's needs. Bhutan is convinced of the beneficial economic ties with India. The hydroelectric projects at Chukha and Thala are the two shining examples of Indo-Bhutan co-operation; India has recently gifted a cement plant to Bhutan. The only point of concern is how Bhutan responds to the challenge thrown by the political ultra groups like the United Liberation Force of Asom and Kamtapuri Liberation Organisation, as these militant groups operate in India's north-east and maintain their camps in Bhutan.

Modernity Project

There is a clean trend in some South Asian countries – Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal – to use the device of referendum for bypassing general electoral verdict of the people. India and Bhutan have not used this device so far. Referendum weakens political party system since it enables voters to isolate their opinion on particular issue. Political parties become less important as mechanisms for developing policy options. All South Asian countries, more or less, need consensus politics for achieving political stability and economic development, as there is little possibility in any country of a single political party emerging with a working majority. India had fulfilled this condition till the mid-1980s but since the 1980s coalition politics has become the natural order of the day.

South Asia, in general, and India in particular, have registered a decline in human development index which is taken to be a reliable indicator of the quality of governance. India, by far the most advanced country in South Asia in terms of modernity and democracy, still suffers from such social ills as bonded labour, trafficking in girls, badly implemented land reforms, lowering of educational standard, vast illiteracy, rampant corruption in public and private life, and low respect for human rights.

The project of modernity undertaken by nationalist leadership in the South Asian countries was not to respond to the demands of the actually existing

social institutions but rather to transform them. The project was to try to create a civil society that did not exist in traditional social practices. The modernity project was taken up as a mission but it had no grassroots connections. The modernisation programme is undertaken by using the legal and administrative (and also judicial) powers of the state. Side by side, educational–cultural institutions and the media are used to inculcate the values of indigenous modernity. In the discourse of sovereignty and rights, the elite leadership of the South Asian countries formally used the moral language of modernity in terms of reason, science, autonomy, self–representation, equal rights, citizenship. In the discourse of governmentality and policy the South Asian leaders speak the economic language of modernity in terms of utility, well-being, efficiency, costs and benefits. There is therefore a contradiction between the aspiration of modernity and the commitment of the nation-state to democracy. The contradiction has been sought to be managed, so prominently in India, by political rhetoric of social justice, empowerment of women and marginalised people, and hesitant decentralization of governing powers. In the 1970s and 1980s there was in India a conscious tendency towards centralization of governance and dependence on politicized bureaucracy and a simultaneous mobilization of new social groups which began making demands upon the developmental state. The 1990s saw the confrontation between the demands of modernity and the compulsions of democracy in the context of growing economic pains and social unrest in the wake of the new policy of adjusting with globalisation and liberalisation.

The rising tide of social violence and political terrorism in the South Asian countries can be explained with the help of this perspective. Communal riots as collective action can be theoretically seen as conventional behaviour (Weber), anomic behaviour (Durkheim), and protest behaviour against injustice and exploitation (Marx). Again, communal riots have been explained as the outburst caused by communal ideology and economic deprivation. This is a case of pathology located in the nature of civil society. The Sinhala–Buddhist chauvinism in Sri Lanka, Hindu–Muslim riots in India, Sinhala–Tamil conflicts in Sri Lanka, anti-Hindu violence in Bangladesh are the cases in point. These can also be viewed as cultural repertoire between religious communities. Democracy as a method of governance based on the culture of toleration ill exists with these kinds of social violence. In Pakistan the relation between civil and military wings of the state has

always been a source of acute political tension and crisis which has caused a setback for Pakistan's journey towards democracy. Nepal, which aspired to graduate from an authoritarian monarchical state to a multiparty democratic state in the 1990s, has experienced political instability mainly owing to aggravation of economic hardship of the people. The expanding urban middle class and the emerging new rich sections of the peasantry have prevented the return of authoritarian monarchical power in Nepal.

India, a much more stable democracy, is recently passing through three significant socio-political transformations, viz., (a) caste revolution, (b) regional tensions, and (c) decline of one-party dominance and the emergence of coalition politics. Political participation of the people has been on an upward trend and political representatives maintain closer touch with the electorate than ever before. There is undoubtedly a tendency towards "deepening" of democracy in this major country of South Asia. Increasing politico-bureaucratic corruption and social violence indicate the failure of modernity and democracy in one part of the state and civil society but, in another sense, the increasing political participation by women, deprived and marginalised sections of the society indicate the "strengthening" of democracy. It seems important therefore that the parameters of modernity and democratic theory need to be redefined in the context of the experiences of the South Asian countries, where the states are moving closer to the definition of democracy as a rule of, and by, the oppressed majority.

Regional Co-operation

The South Asian region constitutes a sort of a political unit where developments in one country affect the developments in another. The South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) has existed for some 17 years with little to show except ceremonial events (e.g., SAARC Games), with occasional high-sounding rhetoric uttered in conferences of the Heads of Governments and a Secretariat that does not have a great deal of work to process and co-ordinate. The fact is that SAARC was never meant to be a political bloc and its thrust was on economic integration, enhanced internal trade and perhaps forming regional group able to resist commercial exploration of this region by the industrial West. But on both political and economic fronts the SAARC has not taken off. The member-states share the common plague of terrorism. India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka

and Nepal have it full-blown, and Bhutan, Bangladesh and Maldives to a lesser extent. But most of this terrorism is cross-border and allegedly 'sponsored'.

The prospect of sincere political and economic co-operation among the South Asian countries is non-existent. The proposal for transforming the SAARC into South Asia Free Trade Area (SAFTA) adopted at Male summit (1997) and reiterated at Kathmandu summit (2002) is being torpedoed by Pakistan dashing all hopes for advancing a flexible and liberal trade regime among the South Asian nations. Intra-regional economic relations cannot be depoliticised mainly because of attitudes and policies followed by Pakistan and Bangladesh *vis-a-vis* India. The unfinished agenda of political issues has always inhibited economic co-operation between India and Pakistan, leading to both foregoing economic opportunities and potentially huge gains from economic liberalisation. With economic and technological globalisation, several regional groups have been formed in different parts of the world to pursue a closer economic integration at regional level, increase market access, expand exports and strengthen political cohesion among the member-states. The impediment created by bad Indo-Pakistan relations, however, prevents the South Asian nations from strengthening and enriching one another in the global economy.

The South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement (SAPTA) was accepted at the SAARC conference at Dhaka (1994) but Pakistan has till date showed no interest in it. India has granted the "Most Favoured Nation" (MFN) status to Pakistan in 1995 but there is no Pakistani response. Pakistan is foregoing an annual loss of about 4 billion dollars by way of smuggling via a third country and not allowing Indian goods to enter directly into Pakistan market, all because of her obsession with Kashmir. Pakistan has refused to learn anything from the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). The smaller countries like Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have adopted inward-looking attitude because of their apprehension over India's maximum tariff rate *vis-a-vis* theirs. The South Asian nations have till now showed no genuine and concrete will to make progress in areas of common economic interest, although there are a few examples of bilatral co-operation for mutual benefit in political, diplomatic and economic fields.

Conclusion

In South Asia the religious fundamentalist forces have mounted a direct challenge to the state, but the ideology of authoritarian-exclusivist variety

of nationalism found here cannot be identified with fascism. Tolerance and democracy, with the existence of a tolerably free press and independent judiciary, have not been destroyed totally. As Rajni Kothari puts it, the on-going struggle here seems to be between hegemony and theocracy, on the one hand, and pluralism and democracy, on the other. Rejuvenation of the civil society by modernising the legal system and taking full advantage of science and technology will be the only way for realising the fruits of modernity and democracy. The palpable fact is that there is some ambiguity in the contemporary usage of the concept of nationalism which is being used as a cover for vested interests and misdirected passions ruining the lives of hapless millions in South Asia.

India's North-East : Movements for Autonomy and Statehood

DEBNARAYAN MODAK

THE NORTH-EAST INDIA, as it is known to us today, represents a vast stretch of territory consisting of the states of Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram popularly known as 'seven sisters' states. The region is connected to the rest of India through the narrow 'chicken neck' corridor, having an approximate width of 33 kilometer on the eastern side and 21 kilometer on the western side. The 'blue hills' comprised by the eastern Himalayas on the north, the Naga Hills on the east, the Mizo and Tripura Hills on the south and the 'Shillong Plateau' on the west form almost completely the natural boundaries of the region. It is also very much strategic in its location as it borders China, Bangladesh and Myanmar. The geographical diversity of the region as well as its plural character of the social order has always played a very important role in shaping its economy, politics and administration. Speaking very broadly, the region consists of the hills as well as the plains and is inhabited by three distinct groups of people – the hill tribes, the plains' tribes, and the non-tribes in the plains. Needless to say, all these three groups of people are very heterogenous in view of their ethnic origins, languages, religious beliefs and culture. Added to this was the confluence of diverse races, languages and cultures that took place along the great migration routes from the east to the west, particularly the influx of immigrants in the wake of the Partition of India in 1947 and the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971. Hence, the region was in the throes of tension and turmoil and the demands for statehood and/or autonomy were and are being raised every now and then by the different sections of the people living in the region.

Although the demands for statehood and even the urge for separation

were there in certain parts of the north-east region at the time of independence, the major parts of it were incorporated in the state of Assam while giving different degrees of autonomy to some areas. When the States Reorganisation Commission was formed in 1950s in view of the widespread demand for linguistic states, several memoranda were placed before the Commission, particularly by the hill peoples, for consideration of their demand for statehood. However, the Commission did not favour those, and as a result, the demand for separate statehood got intensified in certain areas which gradually paved the way for the emergence of 'seven sisters' in the region. Even after carving out of four states, viz., Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Mizoram, which formed parts of Assam at the time of independence, Assam still remained 'a museum of nationalities' and the demand for statehood and autonomy continued to rock the state over the years.

The present paper seeks to analyse the developments that led to the reorganisation of North-East India and formation of some small/hill states in the region. In this connection, it deals with the experiences relating to the implementation of the *Sixth Schedule* of the Constitution, which includes different kinds of institutional innovations like autonomous councils and the creation of a 'state within a state' for meeting half-way the aspirations for autonomy of different sections of people in the area. Besides the demand for statehood which were sanctioned over the years, the paper also summarises those that remained unfulfilled and particularly those which are vary prominent today, to understand the vary nature of the identity crisis being faced by the people of the region. Hence an overview of the movements for autonomy and statehood in the North-East region of the country may help one to go into the roots of the problem that rocks not only the North-East but the different parts of the country every now and then, and also to find out the clues towards its solution.

I

The consideration of the colonial rule in North-East India took a long time, especially since different areas came under British rule at different times. The Assam plains were acquired in 1826, Cachar plains in 1830, Khasi Hill in 1833, Jaintia plains in 1835, Karbi Anglong in1838, North Cachar in 1854, the Naga Hill during 1866-1904, Garo Hills in 1872-73, and the Lushai Hills in 1890. Assam itself had to go through a lengthy granulating

period before emerging as a nodal point in the administration of North-East India. However, the British always treated the area around Assam that were brought under their administration on a separate footing at different points of time. And for the purpose, one after another, legal and administrative decisions were taken between 1974 and 1935 recognising the separate and distinct identities of various areas in the North-East.[1]

Initially, the different areas of the North-East region, including Assam, which were annexed by the British authorities, formed parts of the Bengal Presidency and this was continued till 1874 when Assam was carved out of it. Assam was again merged with the newly created province of 'East Bengal' in 1905 after the 'partition' of Bengal to form the province of "East Bengal and Assam". The state of Assam as a separate province was, however, restored after the annulment of 'partition' in 1911. Although the tribal areas occupied by the British rulers in the region, formed parts of the province of Assam, those were accorded special administrative status by the British authorities.

The British efforts to isolate the hills from the plains was first made in the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulations 1873, (better known as *Inner Line Regulations*) which prohibited entry of all British subjects in the area within *Inner Line* without proper permits issued by a competent authority. The inhabitants of the areas living outside the *Inner Line* could not have property rights or business interests without the sanction of the government. The regulation was applicable to the districts of Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Garo Hills, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Naga Hills, Cachar and Chittagong Hills.[2] The policy was pursued with such rigidity that even the national independence movement could not reach into those areas. Subsequently, a considerable part of the North-East was declared backward area as per Government of India Act 1919. This was advised by Montague-Chelmsford Report of 1917. The Government of India Act of 1935 and the declaration of *Excluded* and *Partially Excluded Areas* were the result of the report of the Simon Commission. The *Excluded Areas* included Naga Hills, Lushai Hills, North Cachar Hills and North-East Frontier (Sadiya, Balipara and Lakhimpur) Tracts; and *Partially Excluded Areas* covered Garo Hills, Mikir Hills and British portion of Khasi Jaintia Hills.[3]

The attempts of isolating the hills from the plains of North-East was further made by certain British officials like Robert Neil Reid, the Governor of

Assam, to get a *Crown Colony* to be carved out of the hill areas including the North-East Frontier Tracts, Naga Hills, Mizo Hills, Chittagong Hill Tracts etc. J. H. Hutton, Deputy Commissioner of Naga Hill District, J. P. Mills, Advisor to the Governor, and others subscribed to the idea. The plan of separation was again revised in 1941 when some British officials wanted to carve out *North-East Frontier Province* comprising the hill areas of North-East India and Burma under British protection. Andrew Clow, Governor of Assam and Sri Reginald Coupland favoured the formation of *Crown Colony* comprising hills of North-East India and Burma. Coupland took pains to point out the similarities in race and culture of the hill peoples and emphasised their differences with the Indians.[4] In fact, the British authorities did their utmost to protect their interests in the region and to keep the nationalist influence out of the tribal areas by encouraging their isolation from the rest.

It was in the mid-1940s, when India was approaching her independence, the future of the region was debated afresh. The Cabinet Mission suggested the formation of an Advisory Committee on the rights of citizens, minorities and tribals and *Excluded Areas*. Accordingly, the Constituent Assembly formed a committee under the chairmanship of Vallabhbhai Patel on 24 January 1947 to look into the matter. The committee appointed a subcommittee known as *North East Frontier Tribal and Excluded Areas Committee* with Gopinath Bardoloi, the Chief Minister of Assam (then called the Prime Minister), as its chairman. It co-opted two members from each hill district except the Frontier Tracts.[5]

At the time of the transfer of power in 1947, the region consisted of : (1) the province of Assam comprising (a) Brahmaputra Valley districts : Goalpara, Kamrup, Nowgong, Darrang, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur; (b) Surma Valley districts : Cachar, Sylhet; (c) Hill districts : Garo Hills, United Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Naga Hills, Lushai Hills; (2) the North East Frontier Tracts comprising : (a) Balipara frontier tract later divided into Kameng Frontier Division and Subansiri Frontier Division; (b) Abhor Hills district later renamed Siang Frontier Division; (c) Mishmi Frontier District later renamed Lohit Frontier Division; (d) Tirap Frontier Division; (e) Tuensang Frontier Division, and (3) the Princely states of (a) Manipur; (b) Tripura, and (c) Khasi states.[6]

The Muslim-dominated areas of the Sylhet district were, however,

transferred to erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The remaining eight *thanas* of the district, which formed the Karimganj district now, were merged with the Cachar district. A portion of the Dooars area, which was taken away from Bhutan after the Bhutanese war by the British, was transferred back to that country as per decision of the Assam Legislative Assembly and Parliament.[7]

II

The issue of the administrative reorganisation of North-East India was debated in the Constituent Assembly particularly after the submission of the *Bardoloi Committee Report*. The Committee, after visiting the tribal areas, noted that, unlike other parts of India where tribals had assimilated themselves to a great extent with the life and culture of plainsmen, the process of assimilation was minimal in the interior of the Assam hills, particularly in the Naga and Lushai hills; that the tribesmen in North-East were very sensitive about their land, forests, system of judiciary and that they should be left free from any fear of exploitation or domination by the advanced sections of the people. The Committee recommended *Autonomous Districts* and *Regional Councils* providing adequate safeguards to the tribals in respect of their land, social customs and usages, language and culture.[8]

After much debates and discussions, however, special provisions were made under the *Sixth Schedule* of the Constitution for the administration of hill tribal areas. Accordingly, the tribal areas were no longer termed as *Excluded* and *Partially Excluded Areas*, but were specified in two parts, A and B, in the *Table* appended to the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. The United Khasi-Jaintia Hills district (which included 18 tiny Khasi states which acceded to India), the Garo Hills District, the Lushai Hills district, the Naga Hills district, the North Cachar Hills and the Mikir Hills were placed in *Part A* and the North-East Frontier Tracts including Balipara Frontier Tract, Tirap Frontier Tract, Abhor Hills district and Mishmi Hills district and Naga Tribal Area in *Part B*. While *Part A* areas formed the *Antonomous Districts* and their *District Councils* and were administered by the Government of Assam, the *Part B* areas were administered by the Governor of Assam acting at his discretion as an *agent* to the President. The *Autonomous districts* had representation in the Assam legislature and also in the Parliament.[9]

A closer study of the *Sixth Schedule* of the Constitution reveals that it virtually re-enacted the provisions of the Government of India Act 1935, as they applied to *Excluded* and *Partially Excluded Areas* and granted the latter even greater degree of autonomy. During the reading of the draft Constitution, the *Sixth Schedule* attracted stringent criticism. Some members complained that the hill areas of Assam were given "too much"; a few others, the Rev. J. J. M. Nichols Roy, a Khasi leader and a member of the Bordoloi panel being among them, thought that they were not given "enough". As the chairman of the subcommittee, Gopinath Bordoloi strongly justified the introduction of the *Sixth Schedule* in the hill areas. Two influential members of the Constituent Assembly from Assam, Rohini Kumar Chaudhuri and Kuladhar Chaliha, however, strongly opposed the *Schedule*. In Chandhmi's opinion, "the autonomous district was a weapon whereby steps were taken to keep the tribal people away from the non-tribals", while Chaliha saw "the British mind" behind the proposal to maintain the separatist tendency and warned that "you will be thus creating a *tribalsthan* as you have created a Pakistan."[10]

The debates thus reflected mutual distrust and suspicion among the tribal and non-tribal population, the seeds of which were sown by the British rulers through their policy of isolation that made interaction of the tribals and non-tribals impossible. This was compounded by the activities of foreign missionaries who have fuelled anti-Indian feelings among the tribes, though they have also contributed to the spread of education and health-care in those areas. The Constituent Assembly was aware of the special needs of the tribal people arising out of their relative isolation from the mainstream and provided for the *Sixth Schedule*, as mentioned above, to meet their urge for autonomy. But, it is to be remembered that the *Sixth Schedule* was framed at a time when politics in the tribal areas was still evolving and it was being manifested through the formation of Mizo Union (1946), Garo National Council (1946). All Party Hill Leaders' Conference (1946), Nagaland Nationalist Council (1946) etc. with varying demands from autonomous statehood to independence. Hence, the provisions of the *Sixth Schedule* could not satisfy their urge for *autonomy* and ominous signs were visible from the very day the *District Councils* were inaugurated. Although the *District Councils* were formed in all other hill districts, it could not be constituted for the Naga Hills as the Nagas boycotted the election to the Council. While a section of them demanded full statehood, several others stood for independence of Nagaland.

III

In 1947, the Naga National Council (NNC) leader, A. Z. Phizo, proclaimed an independent Nagaland and organised an insurgency which assumed menacing proportions in the late 1950s. Meanwhile, on 20 February 1950 the NNC decided to hold a plebiscite on the question of being independent or remaining in India. On 16 May 1951 it was ultimately held. The NNC showed a remarkable organising ability through a total boycott of the general elections of 1952 in which the Naga district was alloted three seats in the Assam Assembly. On 22 March 1956 the NNC founded the Naga Federal Government and proclaimed *inter alia* the 'Nagaland' as people's sovereign republic.[11]

Although the situation was not so grave in any other parts of the North-East, it was very much apparent that the scheme for autonomy as envisaged in the *Sixth Schedule* as well as the process of its implementation, was not acceptable to many of the hill tribes. The appointment of States Reorganisation Commission (SRC) in the wake of the growing demand for linguistic states in the other parts of the country in 1953, gave them an impetus to rise to the occasion and the regional aspirations in different areas of the North-East thus gathered momentum. In early 1954, a Cachar States Reorganisation Committee was formed, and in a strongly worded memorandum to the SRC, it declared :

> With the Cachar and Lushai Hills districts in despair under Assam, with the Nagas in revolt and effectively defying Assam's authority in every sphere, with Manipur and Tripura refusing to be the *Cinderallas in* a state...the only positive course left open to the Commission is, in our view, to suggest a separate administrative unit for these areas.[12]

The *Purbachal state* — as the proposed state was called — would also cover the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) and be 'a heterogenous one' with two divisions : (i) Cachar, Tripura, the Lushai Hills and Manipur in one, and (ii) NEFA and Nagaland in the other. However, the idea, smacking of a kind of Bengali dominance, could not appeal to the hill peoples. Tripura and Manipur also demanded full state-hood.[13]

Attempts were also made to work out a new proposal for a separate hill state for the 'Autonomous Districts of Assam' through negotiations among

the representatives of *Autonomous Districts* held in Shillong on 16-17 June 1954 and also in Assam Hill Tribal Leaders' Conference held at Tura in the Garo Hills on 6-8 October 1954.[14] SRC, however, rejected all those demands and was very categorical in its observation :

> ... we have come to the conclusion that the formation of a hill state in this region in neither feasible nor in the interest of the tribal peoples themselves. The hill districts, therefore, should continue to form part of Assam and no major changes should be made in their present constitutional pattern.[15]

As regards the demand for a *Purbachal State*, the SRC was of opinion that the formation of such a state could not be 'an appropriate remedy for the grievances of the minorities, if any, and it might mean only that 'one set of problem is exchanged for another'.[16] The Commission further suggested the merger of Tripura with Assam by providing adequate safeguards in respect of language and culture of the Bengalee living there.[17] It favoured Manipur to continue 'to be a centrally administered territory for the time being' and foresaw its merger with the adjoining State of Assam. The States Reorganisation Act 1956, which was adopted after detailed discussion in Parliament, made no change in the boundary of the State of Assam. It, however, accorded Manipur and Tripura the status of Union Territories.[18]

Being disappointed by the outcome of the exercises of the SRC, the movements for autonomy and statehood and even separation, were intensified in different parts of the region, of which Nagas remained in the forefront. They went ahead with their insurgent activities with their demand for independence. However, sober Naga voices started being heard very soon and a section of Naga population realized that the campaign by violence might prove futile for paving the path of independence. It facilitated negotiations at the political levels, and, as a result, a Union Territory, named *Naga Hills and Tuensung Area* (NHTA) was formed on 1 August 1957 by merging the Naga Hills district of Assam – Tuensung division of NEFA. The advancement of the Nagas emboldened the others who were aspirants for autonomy and separation, and the fuel was further added to the fire with the attempt to impose Assamese language on the non-Assamese-speaking peoples.

Indeed, the 1960 autumn session of the Assam Legislative Assembly provides a clue to understanding the dynamics of the North-East politics

in the 1960s and 1970s that ultimately led to the political amputations of Assam. On 10 October 1960 when the Assam Official language Bill was moved, there was an unprecedented polarisation of diverse non-Assamese communities both inside and outside the Assembly. Along with the MLAs from the Khasi-Jaintia-Garo-Mizo Hills and Cachar, the MLA from the North Cachar Hills too opposed the spirit and contents of the Bill.[19] Nowhere in India had the language been so contentious a political issue as was in Assam.In fact, the single-most notable feature of the entire history of twentieth century Assam has been the fear of the Assamese community of the Bengali domination. The attempt to make the Assamese as the sole official language reflected this sentiment. But such feelings caused not only the lingual riots in different parts of Assam, but also accounted for many other serious developments in this multi-ethnic state. Besides the protests of the Bengalis, it also alienated the already estranged hill people who had also apprehended the suppression of their languages and cultures in Assam. The Bodos and other plains-tribes also joined the protests and Assam became turbulent in early 1960s.

IV

While the Nagas were preparing themselves for complete statehood, Mizos were consolidating their strength through philanthropic activities among the victims of a great famine or *mautam* that engulfed the Mizo Hills during 1956-61. The Mizo National Famine Front, which was initially a voluntary organisation, having changed its name to the Mizo National Front (MNF) in 1961 after the famine was over, now came forward with the object of attaining independence for the Mizo Hills. Again, the formation of All Party Hill Leaders' Conference (APHLC) on 2 November 1960 to fight for a hill state by peaceful and constitutional means, added a new dimension to the history of Assam at that critical juncture. It demanded the creation of a *North East Frontier State* comprising the tribal areas of Assam, Manipur and Tripura. It rejected the *Scottish Plan* – a loose federation with some autonomy – offered by the Government of India on the basis of its discussion with the APHLC leaders during 1960-62. The proposed statutory council which was just like the earlier Advisory Council, could not satisfy them. A revised proposal, called the *Nehru Plan* was also mooted to dissuade the feelings of the tribal people. The Pataskar commission was appointed to work out the details in this regard. But when the demand for complete

statehood was granted to the Nagas and Nagaland became the sixteenth State of the Indian Union on 1 December 1963 the floodgates of the demands for formation of smaller states were opened wide and the Government at the centre had to come forward with its proposal for reorganisation of the North-East India. The development, again, led to the attempts by various groups to assert their socio-economic identities by demanding the formation of separate States not only in the hills but also in the Brahmaputra Valley.

The most striking reaction of the development was that of the *Ahoms* in upper Assam, who ruled Assam for nearly 600 years and accepted the Assamese language. On 28 May 1967 in a meeting of the representatives of the *Ahoms* held at Gargaon, the capital of the *Ahom* King, a resolution was adopted demanding 'a separate autonomous unit of upper Assam' ; and a year later the demand was converted into one of separate statehood. Besides such a demand for *Ahomland* or the like, there was also a demand for *Udayachal State* by the Bodo-Kachari tribes in Assam. Geographically it was expected to comprise the northern parts of the Lakhimpur, Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang districts of Assam. The leadership of the movement was in the hands of a tribal political organisation, called the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA).[20]

As regards the development of the APHLC, it can be said that it represented somewhat a pack of a loose movement for the creation of a hill state comprising most of the hill areas of Assam. However, the ethnic, religious and cultural differences even among the hill peoples proved too strong to keep the movement together and in a few years what was left of it, was a common platform of Khasi and Garo leadership. The Mizos were the first to leave the APHLC which also lost its following in the Mikir and North Cachar Hills.[21] Manipur and Tripura were very keen to get the status of a full-fudged state. While the APHLC opted for peaceful and constitutional means to achieve their goals, the Mizos preferred violent activities. On 28 February 1966, the MNF organised a revolt and attacked the government treasury and other establishments in the district. However, the disturbances were quelled with the help of security forces. Thus, the North-East was in a state of flux when the Government of India was going ahead with its plan for administrative reorganisation of the region.

V

Before accomplishing the task of reorganisation, the government at the centre, however, made an experiment with the idea of creation of sub-states to meet halfway the autonomy urges of the hill people without disintegrating the State of Assam. This idea of a "State within the State" envisaged the formation of *Federated States of Assam* including hill states, Manipur, Tripura and if possible, NEFA, guaranteeing equal status for the federating units. Although this plan was abandonned shortly, the Government of India went ahead with the idea to implement it in a limited sphere by constituting an autonomous State of Meghalaya within the State of Assam comprising the districts of Garo Hills and United Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Parliament enacted the Assam Reorganization (Meghalaya) Act 1969 following the 22nd Amendment of the Constitution of India and it was brought into force on 2 April 1970. The most important feature of the Meghalaya Act (Act 55 or 1969) was that it created a new tier in India's state structure — 'a State within a State' — similar to the autonomous republics of the former USSR.[22]

The formation of 'a State within the state' in Meghalaya, did not, however, settle the problems of the North-East, and the Government of India had undertaken a fresh scheme of the reorganisation of the entire region. Accordingly, the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act 1971, was adopted, which provided, for the establishment of the States of Manipur and Tripura and formation of the State of Meghalaya and of the Union Territories of Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh.[23] The formation of these States and Union Territories, was also followed by the creation of the *North Eastern Council* (NEC) to co-ordinate and expedite the developmental activities in the entire region. Subsequently, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh too attained statehood in 1986 and 1987 respectively. The fact of the promotion of Lushai Hill district to the State of Mizoram had elements common to the formation of Nagaland in the sense that in both the cases carving out of the States were followed by insurgent activities, demands for secession and complete independence. Contrarily, the transition of NEFA to the State of Arunachal Pradesh was peaceful and guided by, among other reasons, the strategic necessity as it borders with the sensitive boundary of China.

The administrative reorganisation of the North-East India along with the

formation of NEC as its regional planning and development organisation, is often regarded as an advance towards political settlement of the unrest in the hills and their integration with the polity although the NEC failed to bring about permanent peace thereby. Apart from the border disputes between different states in the region, the movements for autonomy and/or separate statehood or the assertions of different cultural-linguistic and tribal identity continued to rock the region even after its reconstitution. The Karbi-Dimasa movement for an autonomous statehood since 1973 and the renewal of the movement for Bodoland from 1980s onward are very pertinent examples in this regard. Again, the Assam movement of 1979-85, which primarily aimed at ensuring the cultural-linguistic identity of the Assamese people in the face of the massive influx of immigrants from neighbouring Indian states and Bangladesh as well as the fall-out effects of it in its aftermath, though not strictly fall within the scope of the present essay, may be cited as the other instance.

When the proposal for reorganisation of Assam and the granting of statehood to Meghalaya was in the process, four MLAs from the North Cachar and Mikir Hills jointly issued a statement demanding separate statehood for the people of the area. They refused the proposal for inclusion of the area in the proposed State of Meghalaya due to inter-ethnic differences. However, the people of the area could be persuaded at that time to accept the formation of a separate *Autonomous District* for them along with the assurance of providing proper facilities for development. But with the decision of the Guwahati and Dibrugarh Universities in 1972 to make the Assamese language as the sole medium of instruction at college education, the inhabitants of Mikir and North Cachar Hills gradually became estranged and felt that the separation from Assam was the only solution. They formed an Action Committee of the *Mikir and North Cachar Hill Leaders' Conference* and submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister on 9 June 1973, in which, besides the issue of language, they raised economic issues to establish the point that the assurances given to them earlier were not being implemented. Again, on 24 November 1980 the Action Committee of the newly formed *Karbi-Anglong and North Cachar Hills Separate State Demands Committee* submitted another memorandum to the Prime Minister reiterating their earlier stand. In January 1982 another memorandum was submitted by yet another *Karbi-Anglong and North Cachar Hill State Demands Committee* asking for a full

fledged separate state. But the emergence or the *Peoples' Democratic Front* which gave rise to the *Autonomous State Demand Committee*, (ASDC) in May 1986 was a turning point as it was for the first time that a mass-based prolonged movement was attempted to realise the demand for statehood. The massive victory of ASDC securing 22 out of 26 seats in the election to the *Autonomous District Council* held on 7 January 1989 reflected the victory of the movement.[24] This trend continued even in the 1991 elections to the Lok Sahba and Assam Legislative Assembly. Being strengthened with the popular mandate, the ASDC tried to exert more autonomy in the *Autonomous District Council* and the conflict between the State government and the Council became inevitable. Although in July 1992 greater autonomy was given to the Council, soon it was superseded on the charges of 'gross financial irregularities'. The ASDC, again, got involved into a prolonged movement till a Tripartite Agreement was made in April 1995. Subsequently, however, the movement was diffused with the growing inter-ethnic differences as well as the emergence of several organisations having different viewpoints, and the prospect of peace thus became remote in these two districts.[25]

As regards the movement of the Bodos, it can be said that the Plains Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA) since it inception in 1967, as already stated, has been demanding the state of *Udayachal* which was to be carved out of Assam to cover the area of the north of the Brahmaputra. The demand, however, was pushed under the carpet when the PTCA joined the Janata Government in Assam. Later on, the initiative was taken by the *All Bodo Students' Union* (ABSU) with the slogan of sharing Assam 50:50 and creation of a new state of Bodoland for them particularly during the tenure of the AGP government in the State (1986-90). The movement initially followed the moderate methods like *bandhs, dharnas* etc., but from 1989 onwards it took a violent turn and invited severe government repression. Very soon differences cropped up in its ranks and fatricidal strife took place in different areas. Added to this was the clashes between the Bodos and non-Bodos that arose during the course of the movement. The differences among various Bodo groups and those between Bodos and non-Bodos gave rise to different organisational set-ups highlighting some of the basic problems of the Bodo people.[26] However, the signing of the *Bodo Accord on* 20 February 1993, paved the way for the formation of Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC). But the future of the BAC

remained uncertain due to the controversy over its jurisdiction and consequent differences of opinion between and among the various Bodos and non-Bodos groups.

VI

A close serutiny of the movements foe autonomy/statehood in the North-East area under study would reveal that there are significant differences in their goals and strategies. While some of the movements like those of the Nagas and the Mizos demanded complete sovereignty, others were organised for attaining different degrees of autonomy up to the level of separate statehood within the Indian Union. Again, when sections of the Naga and the Mizo people resorted to violent strategies against the Indian state to achieve their goals, some others, particularly the movements in the hill state of Karbi-Anglong distinguished themselves by their exemplary use of peaceful means. Of course, there were other movements which were more or less peaceful at the initial stage but took violent turn afterwards. The common feature, however, in all these movements was the assertion of identity by different ethnic and cultural linguistic groups motivated by the fear of socio-economic and cultural domination and guided by the urge for security and development for themselves through carving out for autonomous structures and/or separation.

Although different socio-economic, political and cultural-linguistic reasons, specific to respective movements, may be attributed to the growing sense of mutual distrust and consequent expression of separatism, the 'development syndrome' has been proved to be the single-most important reason for the eruption of ethnic troubles in the region. Indeed, the region not only lags far behind some of the other Indian states both industrially and commercially, it also lacks the basic infrastructural facilities needed for the development of trade and commerce. Apart from continued economic stagnation which give rise to large scale unemployment in both urban and rural sectors, a continuous and massive influx of 'land-hungry' peasants from the erstwhile East Pakistan and, now Bangladesh, has resulted in serious pressure on the cultivable land in the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys. This has made the situation worse and provided a very fertile soil for assertions of ethnic identities.[27]

The 'quest for identity' particularly among the hill peoples and tribals may

be understood with reference to the emergence of middle class elements in the community, who acquired western education in greater numbers than many or their plains neighbours. They now came to put forward their claim of equality both in the sphere of economic opportunities in respect to employment and enterprise, and in that of political status. What is very much interesting to note in this connection is that, although this class has adopted a modern life-style and has often been at odds with the traditional power structure prevalent in tribal society, it assumes the leadership of the autonomy movements and has become the spokesperson for the protection of tribal culture. Such an attitude of the tribal middle class can be explained only in terms of their feeling that they are being exploited economically, culturally and linguistically over the years by the non-tribals. This prompted the middle class elements among different tribal groups to raise the banner of cultural identity leading to fatricidal strifes. '*Bhumiputra*-enigma' is also the natural outcome of it. Economic grievances against the government at the centre are often mixed with the feelings of being culturally exploited by the non-tribals. The lack of proper handling of their problems by the government and the bureaucracy both at the state and the central levels have made the situation only more complex.[28]

Apart from the reasons which are specific to the region, one may also find certain root causes common to all such movements in other parts of the country too. The very nature of the capitalist development in this country which has created unevenness both region-wise and community-wise has given rise to mutual suspicions and ethnic discontents in almost every part of the country today. As the very nature of capitalist development is uneven and the growth of democratic consciousness is equally so, the assertions of ethnic and national awareness also take place at different times and in different forms. The smaller ethnic groups and particularly the hill peoples and tribals suffered most from the uneven development and regional disparities fostered by capitalist development. They are being denied of their basic legitimate rights and suppressed by force or by doling out some concessions to the top layers. The 'over-centralisation' of the state-structure and the lack of any clear-cut language and cultural policy of the State have only added to the growing sense of deception. It is important to note that the problems of regional disparities and resultant backwardness are not new ; what is new is the perception of it and the generation of a new kind of awareness that has given birth to numerous ethnic conflicts throughout the country.

Unless the problems are tackled at their socio-economic and cultural roots, neither state repression nor the 'politics of accords' and nor even granting of statehood in extreme cases, can provide any lasting solution to the problems as we face today in the North-East and elsewhere in India. It is now very much apparent that the creation of several new states out of composite Assam has not solved the problem of the region. Of course, the carving out of some new autonomous structure along with proper guarantee for devolution of power and their effective implementation may prove helpful as interim solution to some of the problems of the North-East. What are, however, needed most are the balanced and speedy economic development, the removal of social disparities and overall democratisation of the polity through the empowerment of the people up to the grassroots level. It presupposes not simply the amendment of the *Sixth Schedule* of the Indian Constitution but also a new vision towards the restructuring of the power relations in this country.

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Social Capital, Politics and Local Democracy in India : Some Evidences from West Bengal

HARIHAR BHATTACHARYYA

Social Capital Theory

ANY SINCERE STUDENT of representative institutions is aware of the need for the congenial social, cultural and political atmosphere which ensures performance of democratic institutions, and within which the functioning of democratic institutions becomes meaningful. Such a context is the bedrock on which is built, if at all, the edifice of governance and democracy. A democracy which fails to build itself on the appropriate soil ultimately fails also to sustain itself and collapses. Long time ago, Alex de Tocqueville suggested that 'democratic government is strengthened, not weakened, when it faces a vigorous civil society.' (Putnam *et al*, 1993, p. 182).

Robert Putnam *et al* in their *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (1993) have provided a new civil societal argument for democracy and good governance. In the last two decades, this book has occupied the centre-stage in discussions of the conditions of democracy world over (Lowndes and Wilson, 2001, p. 629). In this now classic book, Putnam *et al* have taken social capital to be central to the working of democratic institutions, and economic development. Based on an in-depth study of local government in Italy (since 1970s), the book makes the following basic argument: social capital, or mutual trust among members of the community facilitates the better performance of democratic institutions. For Putnam, the reason why local government performed better in northern than southern Italy was because the former had a better stock of social capital than the south. According to Putnam and his collaborators, while southern Italy remained 'strictly autocratic, feudal, fragmented and isolated, the towns in the north central Italy, at the same time, became 'oases amidst the feudal forests', where an 'unprecedented form of self-government was emerging which could be called 'communal republicanism' (1999, p. 121). Since the eleventh century, the north and central Italy, they

said, remained 'steadfastly civic' when men took part in self-governing activities (1993, pp. 124-25). From the nineteenth century onwards, the same regions experienced an unusual ferment centring around the principle of associationalism which became the basis of Italy's unification (1993, p. 149). The Italian south, by contrast, presented all through a socio-historical scenario based on 'clientalism', a product of disorganic society tending towards fragmentation and disorganization maintaining an 'ancient culture of mistrust' giving birth to mafiosi power (1993, p. 149).

In further elaborating his concept in the context of the declining health of American democracy, Putnam (1997) refers to norms and networks of civic engagement as social capital :

> For a variety of reasons, life is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of social capital. In the first place networks of civic engagement foster sturdy norms of generalised reciprocity and encourage the emergence of social trust, Such networks facilitate co-ordination and communication, amplify reputations, and thus allow dilemmas of collective action to be resolved. (Putnam, 1997, p. 31).

In social capital theory, mutual trust then is central to building and sustaining democratic institutions. Putnam *et al* asserted that it is the key to making democracy work.

Neglect of the Political

As the very name of the theory suggests, the 'social' capital theory is too society- centric. It basically refers to a societal, or communitarian resource, historically built, but embedded in social relations. The importance of such a cultural resource can hardly be underestimated for society's betterment either through social measures, or representative governmental institutions. But the social capital theory neglects the political factors, which can play the most crucial role in the making, and the working out of social capital for the sake of democracy. If Putnam *et al* have paid any attention to political factors, it is regarding building trust, which though may be difficult, yet might be the result of political processes. Putnam *et al* admitted that a grassroots political movement could intensify social capital (1993, p. 121). Evidently, social capital refers to a community resource built historically, but erodes, as social relations, if not renewed properly. Social capital, as mutual trust among people, as relations, requires to be worked out in order

to be useful to political institutions. This calls for paying attention to the crucial role of political agencies in modern party-based democracies. It is not enough to say that we trust each other. This trust must be institutionalised so that it, as a cultural resource, can help work better democratic institutions. In their theory, various civil societal associations are, in the case of northern Italy, the embodiment of trust. But beyond the specific case of northern Italy, there are many cases where the political parties play the central role in renewing the trust, if any, working out and utilising it for democratic purpose, and creating, sometimes through governmental action, further ground for new trust. This may be particularly true for democracy in non-western countries where associational life may be very weak, and yet, democracy is functioning. Even in advanced democracy such as the United Kingdom, the political factors in shaping the 'development of social capital and its potential influence upon democratic performance' can hardly be undervalued (Lowndes and Wilson (2001, p.629). Citing the case of Sweden, Bo Rothstein argued that 'social capital may be caused by how governmental institutions operate and not by voluntary associations.' (Rothstein, 2001, p. 207).

Some Contrary Data

Since the inauguration of the republic in 1950 after centuries of British colonial rule, India has successfully conducted ever since 1952 thirteen parliamentary polls in which the world's largest electorate (602.3 million in 1998) have exercised their adult franchise. The voter-turn, though below 50 per cent for the first two polls (1952 and 1957), improved remarkably since the 1960s. In 1998, 62 per cent Indian voters exercised their franchise in the parliamentary polls (Bhattacharyya, 2001, p. 248). Going a bit down the federal level, the higher percentages of voters have exercised their franchise at the State Assembly elections to form government at the state level. A recent study (Yadav, 1998, p. 189) of political behaviour of voters at the state level elections shows that during 1993-95, the average voter-turn out of 16 states was as high as 70.34 per cent. Going another step further down the political system, the popular participation at the elections to form local self-governing institutions is much higher than the above two. For example, in West Bengal, more than 80 per cent voter- turn has been recorded in all the polls since 1978 to form Panchayats, i. e., rural local government bodies.

And yet, democracy in India, unlike the West, has not been backed by the appropriate associational life, commonly called 'civil society'. Even if Indians in urban areas belonged to various associations, to a limited extent, the rural society, which India still overwhelmingly is, is mostly devoid of civil societal attachments. Life in rural India is still mostly lived in villages, communities and tribes known as primary relations. But then the puzzling question is what explains India's democracy.

Chhiber's Counter Argument

The social capital theory apparently does not answer the question as to how democracy is sustained in India. As a sort of counter example to Putnam *et al*'s social capital theory of democracy, Pradeep K. Chhiber in his *Democracy Without Associations* (1999) has argued a case of democracy in India without associations. On the basis of data collected in the *World Values Survey* (1991), Chhiber shows that only 13 per cent of all Indians belonged to an association in 1991, a figure which was the lowest of 25 democracies (1999, p.17). While Putnam *et al* place social capital at the centre of analysis of political and economic development, political parties occupy the space for Chhiber (1999, p. 180). According to Chhiber, the weak associational life in India has meant that the political party and an activist state have come to dominate political life. (1999, p. 16). Chhiber's conclusion then is: India is a democracy without associations. This finding when placed in relation to India's records of democracy points to a theoretical dilemma about the conditions of democracy particularly in the so-called Third World.

Post-colonial Context

In the post-colonial context where civil society, if at all, has not developed in the same way as in the West (Kaviraj and Khilnani, 2001), the role of various political movements and groups assumes added significance in political democratisation. In the post-colonial societies, as I have argued elsewhere (Bhattacharyya, 1998), long-drawn and successful anti-colonial nationalist political mobilisations created the basis of some mutual trust united by a sense of 'liberation consciousness', and expressed in various forms of associationalism leaving often a residue in the popular psyche which when appropriately mobilised has facilitated collective action. As G. Ruiter (1996) has shown in the case of South Africa, social capital may be embedded in

discourse and historical movements such as 'nationalism', socialism, and ecology movements. (Bhattacharyya, 1998, p. 145). In India, various anti-colonial movements, parties and groups have acted as agents in the creation of a kind of 'post-colonial social capital' in different degrees in different regions of India since the colonial days. (Bhattacharyya, 1998). The anti-colonial liberation movements meant often extreme sacrifice for its participants, and inculcated the spirit of solidarity, fellow-feeling, mutual trust, collaboration and co-operation. In Putnam's sense of the term, these can be seen as democratic and civic. In post-independence India, the stock of social capital built in the colonial era was differently utilised in different regions of India giving birth to very different democratic effects. As a negative case, we may cite the case of Bihar, a state in India's east. The Sahabad district in Bihar was very active in the 1857 sepoy mutiny, became a stronghold of the peasant movements in the late 1930s, and played also a significant part in the 1942 anti-colonial nationalist upsurge. (Sarkar, 1983, p. 4). But the stock of social capital was not subsequently utilized for democratic purpose by the political forces in the state. Bihar has remained the by-word for India's lawlessness and disorder. Bengal, by contrast, has offered a positive case. The hotbed of various brands of social, cultural, nationalist, and radical left movements since pre-colonial days, Bengal has been known for its higher stock of liberation and democratic consciousness (Sarkar, 1970; Sarkar, 1983; Sen Gupta, 1972; Nossiter, 1988; Franda, 1971). The better stock of post-colonial social capital in West Bengal (in India) helped the state's transition of democratic rule and political stability despite the disastrous effects of the Partition of India (1947) that dislocated its economy and brought millions of refugees from across the border. Various brands of leftist parties and groups, many of them born in the nationalist era, have been in the forefront of harping on and utilising the nationalist past in their political mobilisation for democracy and social justice. Atul Kohli (1987) reported with regard to the success of radical land reform measures in West Bengal in post-1978 :

> In some areas of West Bengal, the party [CPI-M] and the government did not have to intervene significantly to facilitate implementation The southern tracks of Twenty-Four Parganas, for example, have had a long history of share-cropper activism, Starting from the days of the Tebhaga movement, the share-croppers have long held the view that they are paying an unfair proportion to the landowners, This local sense of justice, born

> of the memory of historical peasant movements, itself facilitated rapid implementation of the new laws. (Kohli, 1987, p. 131).

In the case mentioned above by Kohli, the accumulated sense of justice among the community was worked out by the institutions of the present day peasant associations under the leadership of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI-M], the dominant partner in the left coalition government in the state since 1978.

In the light of the above, we seek to emphasise the important role of political factors in working out and making social capital work in the better performance of democratic institutions. Our argument has three components. First, social capital is a necessary and facilitating factor for better democracy, but is not sufficient and needs to be appropriately utilised for democratic purpose. Second, political parties can make a lot of differences to how the democratic institutions work, but their ability to make democratic institutions work better is conditioned by the stock of social capital. Third, political parties and governmental action can be responsible for creating further grounds for social capital. The case of local government experiment in India that follows provides an important illustration of our modified social capital argument.

Local Government in India

The local government in the conventional Third World today is mostly discussed in the context of globalisation, as part of political 'conditionality' of global agencies such as the World Bank and the IMF. The issue of local government has figured in the above in terms of decentralisation and empowerment (Aziz and Arnold, 1996). But India stands apart in the sense that since 1950 when the new republican constitution was launched it has been experimenting with its own system of local self-government dictated by the factors and forces specific to the country. India has never lacked the designs of the institutional contours of local self-government, and also the appropriate legislation for the purpose. But what has centrally ailed local self-government in India is making it work. To begin with, the national institutional context was not always encouraging. Despite the continuing democratic structure which allows free multi-party political competition at various levels of the political system for over five decades since 1950 (except the eighteen-month Emergency rule in 1975- 77), the national political institutions, most notably Lok Sabha (popular house of Parliament),

show signs of decline. Arthur G. Rubinoff in his article "The Decline of India's Parliament" said that although Lok Sabha now has more graduates and farmers, and vernacular politicians from the states, it has declined: "Paradoxically, while parliament has become more representative, it has indisputably declined in status and effectiveness." (Rubinoff, 1999, p. 29; Kohli, 1991; Rudolph and Rudolph, 1987; Kothari, 1989) Somewhat corroborating the above, the survey data on public opinion in India show that of the three layers of Government (Central, State and Local), the popular trust in Central government is the lowest (Mitra, 2001, p.111). Institutional decay and predictions of the country's 'Balkanization' marked most often the tenor of the standard western accounts of Indian politics since independence (Harrison, 1960; Kohli, 1991; and Kohli (ed)., 2001). Large-scale concentration of power, and rampant disregard for laws and rules by the political leadership at various levels of the polity have added credence to the predictions about the collapse of the country's institutional edifice. At the state level politics where local government particularly matters, relative absence of political process due among others to the President's rule (Article 356 of the Indian Constitution), or some kind of army rule (e.g., in the Northeast), or simply the unwillingness to share power with local elites has often foreclosed any possibility of instituting democratic local government. Nonetheless, a cursory look at the history of local government experiments in India (meaning of course in various states) suggests that democratically formed rural local government known widely as *panchayats* in India have *sometimes worked* in states. Second, similar institutional designs of local self-government in states have produced dissimilar effects. Some states have done fairly well in institutionalising local democracy while in others local democracy has suffered severely.

Local Government in India's Federal Polity

With the passage of the 73rd Constitution (India) Amendment Act, 1992, the subject of rural local self-government has assumed added momentum in India. In India's federal political system, the local government falls under the competence of the states. Article 40 (Chapter IV of the Constitution of India, entitled "Directive Principles of State Policy provides for the institution of rural self-government as follows : "The state shall take steps to organise village *panchayats* and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government." Since local government is a state subject incorporated in the

State List, it suffered variously under various state governments in India since 1950. In many states, the institutions of local self-government were never created.

Figure.1 : **Governmental Structure in India**

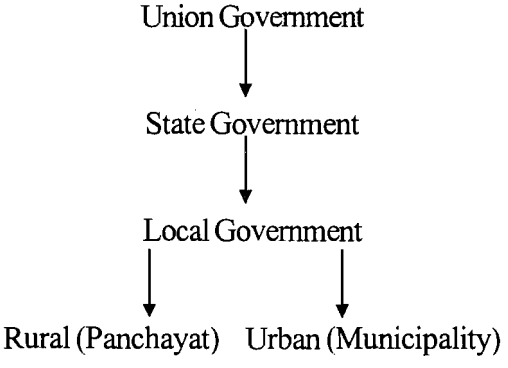
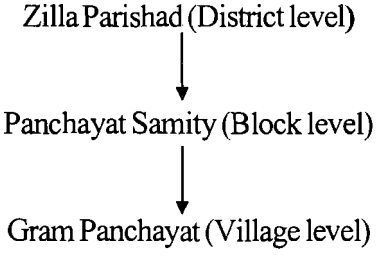


Figure.2 : **Three-Tier Panchayats (Rural Government) in India**



In many others, such institutions, once democratically constituted, were dismissed prematurely with the change of political regime. The 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 is the first federal legislation on rural self-government, and its special significance lies in the fact that the constitution of such local representative bodies now is mandatory on the part of the states, and that such bodies once constituted cannot be dismissed arbitrarily. Legislation, however pious and important, is one thing, but its implementation is a different story.

Institutional Steps prior to 1992

Prior to the arrival of British colonialism in the late eighteenth century,

India had had its own indigenous tradition of local government for centuries. The colonial, and the post-colonial state that grew in India before and after 1947, was not built in an empty space since it had to rework the indigenous structures and practices of government which often were very resilient (Bhattacharyya, 2001, chapters 4 & 5). Village *panchayats* (traditionally and literally means the assembly of five) was a nationalist pledge to the nation. Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation, wrote in *Harijan* (1942), the weekly he published :

> My idea of village swaraj i.e., that it is a complete republic independent of its neighbours for its own vital interests and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is a necessity. The government for the village will be conducted by panchayats. These will have the authority and jurisdiction required (Bhattacharyya, 2001, p. 146).

Various brands of Indian nationalist thought also reflected this concern. Village as a unit of governance was debated in the Constituent Assembly too. Ever since the inauguration of the Indian Constitution in 1950, the Union government of India made a series of institutional measures to make local government work. To begin with, the Indian Five-Year Plans involved provisions for decentralized development. The Community Development Programme (CDP) in the 1950s was an example when decentralized administrative structures of the *panchayats* in respective states were utilized. But such attempt did not work the *panchayats* as the officials responsible for implementation of development programmes were part of their own department in the regular state and district administrative structures, and hence not accountable to the villagers or their representatives. The *panchayats* as units of governance and development were yet to figure in institutional measures.

Beginning with the famous Balwantarai Mehta Committee Report (1957), a series of committees and commissions followed to make local rural government work in India. This Committee proposed the development of participatory democracy through local institutions i.e., *panchayats* for the improvement of Indian villages. After recommending for a three-tier local self-government such as village panchayat, panchayat samity and zilla parishad (respectively at village, block and district levels), the Mehta Report strongly emphasised on the simultaneous operation of all three of them for maximum benefit. Since different states had their own systems of local

self- government, the Report did not want to pin the states down to a certain pattern : "All that we would like to emphasise is the necessity of a real transfer of power to the people's representatives." (Bhattacharyya, 2001, p. 149). Mathew (1996) reported that by 1959, all states had passed *Panchayat* Acts, and by the mid-1960s *panchayats* had reached all parts of the country (Bhattacharyya, 2001, p. 149). There were reports from some states of satisfactory working of such institutions. Reporting from the experiment in Rajasthan, Mathew wrote :

> People felt that they had sufficient powers to enable them to mould their .future. They are .fully conscious of the fact that such privileges and .favours which were .formerly under the control of the Block Development Officers are now under their control. In this sense, full advantage of democratic decentralization has been secured. (Quoted in Bhattacharyya, 2001, p. 150).

In Rajasthan, the introduction of *panchayati raj* led to a number of positive developments such as improved attendance of primary school teachers, more responsive block development administration, decline in corruption among local politicians and so on. (Bhattacharyya, 2001, p. 150).

But during the 1960s and the mid-1970s, due to a growing political instability in the national political system that culminated in the imposition of an authoritarian Emergency Rule (1975-77) for eighteen months by Mrs Indira Gandhi, then Prime Minister of India, and the suspension of democracy and civil rights that followed, local democracy was nipped in the bud. Restoration of democracy that was the agenda of all opposition parties and groups against the Emergency Rule had as its sub-text decentralization of political power through *panchayats* for consolidation of democracy at the grassroots. The post-Emergency democratic India thus witnessed a series of institutional measures to make local government work. The Ashok Mehta Committee Report (1977) on *panchayats* was thus followed by Hanumanth Rao Working Group on District Planning (1983), G. V. K. Rao Committee (1985), and L. M. Singvi Committee (1986). The Sarkaria Commission (1983-86), a federal commission to review the centre-state relations for better working of Indian federalism, recommended, going beyond its terms of reference, for devolution of powers through institutions of popular participation :

The issue of devolution of powers and responsibilities between the top two tiers of government, Union and the States, needs to be considered in the context of the broader issue of decentralization between these and other tiers of government ... Decentralization of real power to these local institutions would thus help defuse the threat of centrifugal forces, increase popular involvement all along the line, broaden the base of our democratic polity, promote administrative efficiency, and improve the health and stability of inter-governmental relations. (Quoted in Bhattacharyya, 2001, pp. 51-2).

The 73rd Amendment (1992) conferred on *panchayats* wide range of powers and responsibilities :

> Subject to the provisions of the Constitution, the legislature of a state may, by law, endow the panchayats with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to .function as institutions of self-government and such law may contain provisions for the devolution of powers and responsibilities upon panchayats at the appropriate level subject to such conditions. (Bhattacharyya, 1998, pp. 106-07).

Although the legislature of a State makes the law for the *panchayat*, the 73rd Amendment Act (1992) inserted a new Schedule (11th) into the Constitution which contains as many as 29 items on which the panchayats are to be entrusted with the implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice, and which cover the entire gamut of life of the rural people. (Bhattacharyya, 2001, pp. 154-55).

The Case of West Bengal

The State of West Bengal, one of India's federal units in the east (population around 80 million in 2001) shot into global prominence not particularly for its democratically elected 'Marxist' Left Front coalition government headed by the CPI-M in 1977, but for its success in rural decentralization and popular empowerment through the election of *panchayats*. West Bengal remains the only State in India, and the only region in Asia, which has been persistently experimenting with rural decentralization and empowerment since 1978. The State's novel experiment with democratic rural decentralization has already attracted considerable academic attention. (Kohli, 1987 and 1991; Nossiter, 1988; Webster, 1992; Datta, 1992; Lieten, 1996; Bhattacharyya, 1998a; 1998b; and 1998c, 2001, and 2002).

The post-1978 West Bengal *panchayats* have been presented by most authors as successful agencies of rural development, and as institutions of grassroots democracy, operationally speaking, by some. (Datta, 1992; Lieten, 1996, and Webster, 1992). The limits and potentialities of *panchayats* as grassroots democracy have been discussed by a few (Mukarji and Bandopadhyay, 1993; and Bhattacharyya, 1998 ; 2002). The *panchayats* have been seen by many as synonymous with the political regime itself, and the key to better governance that the state has been enjoying since the late 1970s. Atul Kohli, one of the acute observers of political developments in West Bengal, wrote :

> West Bengal is something of an exception in India's contemporary political landscape. Whereas many states have experienced political instability over the past two decades, West Bengal has been relatively well-governed since 1977. That stability has been remarkable because it has not been the result of low level of political mobilisation. (Kohli, 1991, p. 267).

In a subsequent writing, Atul Kohli (1997) described the State as : "In spite of its many problems, West Bengal under the CPI-M is probably India's best governed state." (Kohli, 1997, p. 336). And yet, the state was known for much of the twentieth century until about 1977, as India's 'problem state' for its radical anti-British nationalism, and later political violence, and lawlessness. The Amnesty International estimated that over 25,000 persons, mostly belonging to the CPI-M and the CPI-ML were in jail in the State in the 1970s. (Kohli, 1987, p. 108). The cases of police firing to control riots in West Bengal in the late 1960s and the early 1970s were higher than other states (Government of India, 1972).

Table. 1 : **Riots in West Bengal, 1958-93**

Year	Numbers	% to all-India
1958	4,321	17.32
1969	13,137	23.54
1970	16,337	23.90
1971	11,799	14.42
1972	9,488	13.39
1974	10,790	16.24
1975	10,925	16.86
1977	11,702	14.54
1978	12,402	12.85
1981	13,190	11.48
1982	12,237	11.48
1983	10,952	10.13
1986	8,059	8.55
1987	7,229	7.96
1988	7,311	7.72
1989	7,498	7.57
1990	6,676	6.49
1993	6,642	7.07

Source: *Crime in India* (various volumes, Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, New Delhi).

In the Indian Penal Code, rioting has been defined as: "Whenever force or violence is used by an unlawful assembly, or by any member thereof, in prosecution of the common object of such assembly, every member of such assembly is guilty of the offence of rioting." (Ratanlal and Dhirajlal, 1992, p. 159). Rioting provide an important index of the level of governance. Atul Kohli (1991) has used it as an index of measurement of political violence. In West Bengal, a clear correlation can be seen between the introduction of rural local self-government in the shape of panchayats (post 1978) and the decrease in the level, and proportion of riots.

During the last decades of British rule in India, West Bengal, i.e., the western

part of undivided Bengal, was also the hotbed of Indian nationalism, and witnessed a series of Left political mobilisations for democracy and radical social changes. Partha Chatterjee, one of India's leading political theorists, informs us that from the 1930s, "the most overwhelming tendency" in Bengal's political life was democratization. (Chatterjee, 1997, Preface). In the 1930s Bengal witnessed a massive entry of the masses, the peasantry into politics which contained the potentials for future democratization: "The most significant elements in the recent history of Bengal are to be found in the attempts to devise more democratic forms of social action to secure sources of livelihood as well as a public culture of dignity for all sections of the people." (Chatterjee, 1997). Such democratic attempts took powerful and explicit forms in the rural localities where, he says, the urges for democracy sought out new forms of social practice across the boundaries between the state and the non-state, individual and collective, secular and religious. (Chatterjee, 1997). The various studies made of the peasant and nationalist mobilisation of Bengal from the 1930s to India's independence provide ample proofs of such collective forms of public engagement in social action, and alternative forms of self-government. (Rasul, 1971; Desai, 1979 ; Dhanagare, 1983; Majumdar, 1993).

But such alternative forms of self-government failed to institutionalize themselves in post-independence West Bengal. Multi-party electoral competition based on universal adult franchise returned party-led government in the State more or less since 1950. The State also enjoyed uninterrupted cabinet stability during 1947-67, and then again during 1972-77. (Franda, 1972). The period 1967-72 was an interregnum marked by high degree of cabinet instability, repeated impositions of President's rule (under Article 356 of the Indian Constitution), factionalism, group rivalry and political violence. But rural local government did not materialise properly in the State until 1978.

Institutionalisation of Local Government prior to 1978

During the last decades of British rule in India, some attempts were made to institutionalize rural local government. In accordance with Lord Ripon's Resolutions (1882), the Bengal Local Self-Government Act 1885 was passed which provided for the District Boards, Local Boards at the sub-divisional level, and Union Committees for groups of villages to be elected on limited franchise. The Bengal Self-Government Act 1919 institutionalised

the system further by amending the former legislation, and by providing for Union Boards on an average of 8 to 10 villages with a population of 10,000, to function under the District Boards. West Bengal entered post-independence India with these Union Boards. (Webster, 1992).

Following in the footsteps of the Balwantrai Mehta Committee Report (1957), the West Bengal Legislative Assembly passed the first ever local self-government Act called the *West Bengal Panchayat Act* of 1957, and elections to form such bodies were held in 1958. Webster (1992) reported that by 1962, 19,662 *gram panchayat* (village councils) and 2,926 *anchal panchayats* (block council) were formed in West Bengal. (Webster, 1992, p. 21). Appropriate district level bodies were also formed, but none of them was able to ensure popular participation. On the contrary, they became the institutions of rural vested interests, and a collusion of the bureaucrats, landed gentries, and local politicians saw to it that they did not represent popular participation. Webster commented on their performance as :

> Participation was minimal, powers and responsibilities devolved were few; financial support was lacking, departmental and administrative officials continued to function as before, and Panchayati raj remained little more than a distant idea given the absence of political will on the part of the state government. (Webster, 1992).

Such moribund institutions were never revived, and in the wake of the overall political instability in India since the 1970s that culminated in the suspension of democracy in the country by the Emergency Rule (June 1975 – March 1977), they died a natural death.

The post-Emergency Janata government (1977-80) made decentralization one of its central pursuits in politics, economics and administration in order to counter the ill-effects of centralization during the previous regime. Rudolph and Rudolph summed up the change as :

> The Janata government formulated and attempted to implement and institutionalise a neo-Gandhian alternative to the centralized state and industrially oriented growth strategy associated with Congress rule. It took seriously Mohandas Gandhi's concern to decentralize the state and the economy... The federal system, local and village administration were rejuvenated. (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1987, p .163).

The Janata government experiment was short-lived, but produced a considerable legacy. In West Bengal, it was the various brands of Left political parties and groups under the leadership of the CPI-M which carried on the mantle, and made restoration of democracy and decentralisation through *panchayats*, their electoral pledges.

Multi-Party Competition at Panchayat Elections since 1978

All credit must go to the CPI-M and its allies for introducing party-based competition in the elections to *panchayats* for the first time in India. Regularity of holding multi-party, and free and fair, elections to *panchayats* after every five years since 1978, has greatly helped to institutionalise rural local government in the State. Popular participation in *panchayat* elections in the State has been very high. In 1993, for example, the average district level turn out in 11 districts (out of 17) was as high as 86.68%. (Bhattacharyya, 2001, p. 230). The Left Front led by the CPI-M has swept all the *panchayat* polls since 1978 with comfortable majority at the higher two tiers (Panchayat Samity and Zilla Parishad). In the last elections held in May 1998, the Left Front secured about 58% of the Gram Panchayat seats (out of the total of 49,225), 69.3% of Panchayat Samity seats (out of the total of 8,520), and 87% of the Zilla Parishad seats (out of the total of 716). [*The Frontline*, 1998]. Of the above, the CPI- M's own share was 57% of the Gram Panahayat seats, 67% of the Panchayat Samity seats, and 85% of the Zilla parishad seats [*The Frontline, 1998*]. Commenting on the performance of the Left Front in the elections, *The Frontline* commented: " With its impressive performance in the May 28 elections to the local bodies in West Bengal, the ruling Left Front has demonstrated yet again that its support base in the rural areas remains *intact.*" [*ibid.*].

Table.2 Performance of Political Parties in West Bengal Panchayat elections in 1978 (seats obtained and percentage).

Parties	Gram Panchayats	Panchayat Samiti	Zilla Parishad
CPI-M	27886 (61.03%)	5555 (67.15%)	482 (76.75%)
CPI	816 (1.79%)	131 (1.58%)	05 (0.80%)
RSP	1665 (3.64%)	349 (4.22%)	30 (4.78%)
FB	1448 (3.17%)	320 (3.87%)	43 (6.85%)
Independents*	299 (0.65%)	11 (0.13%)	02 (0.32%)
Congress (I)	13435 (29.40%)	1883 (22.76%)	65 (10.35%)
Independents etc**	145 (0.32%)	24 (0.29%)	01 (0.16%)
Total	**45694**	**8273**	**628**

Source: *State Election Commission,* West Bengal, Calcutta.

[Note: * indicates that they are supported by the Left parties. CPI-M (Communist Party of India (Marxist), CPI (Communist Party of India), RSP (Revolutionary Socialist Party), and FB (Forward Bloc) are in the Left Front. ** The very poor performance of the Independents is an indication of an institutionalised political competition].

The successive *panchayat* elections in West Bengal have returned an overwhelming percentage of people with modest social background: poor peasants, share-croppers, agricultural labourers, socially disadvantaged sections such as scheduled castes and tribes, women (around 33% of the total seats).

Table.3 **Social Backgrounds of Members of Gram Panchayats in Nine Districts of West Bengal (1993) (average in number and %) (total no.32, 150)**

Social Background	Number of Persons	Percentage
Scheduled Caste	10,311	32.07
Scheduled Tribe	1662	05.17
Women	11,142	34.66
Agricultural Labour	10,587	32.93
Share-Cropper	857	02.66
Small farmer*	19,485	60.60
Graduate	3375	10.50
School Final	13,737	42.73
Below School Final	8692	27

Source: Surjya Kanta Mishra, *Shreni Dristite Panchayat* (Panchayats from class perspective) (NBA, Calcutta, 1999), p. 69.

[Note: * indicates persons having lands below 5 acres. Scheduled Castes and Tribes are socially depressed groups of people.]

Today, elected representatives from the above sections hold important positions in the *panchayats*, and can be seen involved in multifarious developmental and public activities in the rural areas under the auspices of the *panchayats* (Bhattacharyya, 1997). The landed gentries no longer are to be seen in the *panchayats*. This can be read as a major empowerment effect of decentralization at the grassroots, and is directly related to the CPI-M's *panchayat* strategy.

CPI-M's Strategy and Mechanisms for Running the Panchayats

The reasons why the CPI-M (born in 1964 by splitting from the CPI) decided to institute *panchayats* are to be found in a combination of strategic, institutional and political factors. First, related theoretically to its goal of a People's Democratic Revolution (PDR), the party sought to make maximum utilisation of the opportunities available within India's constitutional democracy for helping the underprivileged sections of society, and thus to build bases of support. Second, the party took part in short-lived united front governments in the State in the late 1960s, and realised

the need for governmental power to introduce effective changes in society for long-term political stability. Third, the party's *panchayat* strategy was married to land reforms (i.e., redistribution of illegally held lands by the landlords among the landless), which the party started as a movement in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, but which it wanted to continue with the backing of governmental power. To the party's understanding, popular empowerment through land reforms and the institution of *panchayats* were inseparably linked. (Kohli, 1987; Bhattacharyya, 1988). Fourth, the party's theory of marrying movement to government has another meaning. With the knowledge that the State government had largely failed to deliver goods to the people leading to near anarchy and political disorder, as in the late 1960s and the 1970s, the party sought to operate the same with the pressures from outside by its committees and mass associations.

The CPI-M calls its *panchayat* strategy the "political-organisational perspective." In the (inner party) "Directives of the West Bengal State Committee of the CPI-M on Running the Panchayats", the focus was on *parichalona*, (a Bengali word) which literally means 'direction', or 'guidance'. It has been spelt out in the following way :

> This does not mean acting at will. It means the activation of panchayats in accordance with the principles and ideals of the party. The basic issue involved here is giving party leadership to panchayats. This consists of (a) political leadership, and (b) organisational leadership. The political leadership of the party is established only when people in their own experience, accept the political leadership of the party as their own... Panchayat activities should be conducted in such a way that they conform to the basic goals of the party (CPI-M, 1994; Bhattacharyya, 1998, pp. 110- 14).

In order to put into effect the party's goals, the party forms "Panchayat Sub-Committee" (PSC) at each level of the *panchayat* composed of the leading members of the party and its mass associations in the area of the *panchayat* including the Chairman of the *Panchayat*, and which acts as the parallel structure of the party to the governmental structure. The task of this committee has been defined by the State Committee of the CPI-M as :

> All elected party members of Panchayat Samity and Zilla Parishad will act under the respective committees. Generally,

> the local and zonal committees of the party will look after the Gram Panchayat, and Panchayat Samities respectively. *The final decision at each level will be taken by the Parichalon Committee of the party, although the elected members may offer recommendations.* (CPI-M, 1994, p. 11). (Emphasis mine).

The state level party 'directives' on *panchayats* are carried down the party hierarchy: District, Zonal and Local Committees. In what follows we present some district level evidence on how the party strategy works, and the effects it produces on *panchayat* functioning:

> We have absolute control on the three-tier panchayats in the district [Burdwan]. The District Committee has definite directions which have been sent to each Zonal and Local Committee. The District Panchayat Sub-Committee regularly meets to direct the panchayats. It is the District Committee and the Secretariat which take all the important decisions regarding the panchayats. (CPI-M, 1992, pp. 21-22).

Regarding the effects of the application of the strategy, a Local Committee of the party noted :

> In running the Gram Panchayats, the decisions of the Sub-Committee are final. As a result, the ordinary members of the panchayats do not feel encouraged to attend the meetings. They lose all interest in attending any meetings. Their voice is not heard and reflected in the panchayats (CPI-M, 1991, pp. 13-14).

Another district committee of the CPI-M has defined the party's panchayat 'directives' as :

> *That the activities of the panchayat will be performed by elected members of panchayat alone is the outlook which is opposed to the long-term political objective of the party.* In order to transform the panchayats into weapons of struggle against vested interests, and to utilise them in further developing class struggles, *what is necessary is strong party control over panchayats,* collective discussion and leadership, and regular check up of panchayat activities in party committees (CPI-M, 1995, p. 3). (Emphasis mine).

The affairs of the panchayats thus are not left to the local level bureaucracy,

however small that may be, but subject to rigorous party scrutiny. Those elected to *panchayats* on party tickets, are not all members of the party, but of its various mass associations such as the youth, women, peasants and agricultural labours and so on. Membership in those associations is not as strict as in the party itself. But nonetheless attachment and loyalty do help in establishing party leadership and control in the *panchayats*. The pro-poor and pro-rural state government led by the CPI-M, spends 50% of its budget through *panchayats*, and the various party units below keep strict vigil on how the money is spent. Malpractice and corruption are not unheard of, but the various studies made so far on the *panchayats* in the state strongly suggest that goods have been delivered. Kumar and Ghosh (1996) showed in their study of four gram *panchayats* that as much as 83% respondents considered *panchayats* to be a very useful institution without which they would suffer, and about 84% said they were made aware of their rights by the *panchayats*. (Kumar and Ghosh, 1996, pp. 25-26).

Repeated popular mandate since 1978 with higher turn-out (above 80%) is an important index of popular trust in this local level representative institution. Putnam *et a!* (1993) have considered political participation (e.g., voting,) as an index of civicness in their concept of social capital. Considered thus, West Bengal's rural areas can be seen to possess social capital. Governmental effectiveness and visibility is also reflected in popular trust in government. The performance of different levels of governments in India in this respect varies in India. Survey data to measure "high trust in government" show that the West Bengal respondents recorded the highest percentage of "high trust" in local government compared to Maharashtra (40.7%), Bihar (29.9%), and all India (39.9%). (Mitra, 2001, p. 111). Kumar and Ghosh (1996) reported a classic situation regarding the abundance of popular trust in *panchayats* in the localities:

> What is interesting is the fact that even when situations arise that threaten peace in the locality, most people (around 80%) in all the study areas would like to depend on the panchayat and not on the police or magistracy who are traditional guardians of law and order. Neither settlement of village disputes nor maintenance of law and order are functions assigned to the panchayat bodies (Kumar and Ghosh, 1996, p. 78).

Conclusion: Democratic Deficit and half-Hearted Institutionalisation

The rural local government experiment in post -1978 West Bengal is made to suffer from two limitations which are paradigmatic, i.e., rooted in the CPI-M's approach to such institutions. First, there is in democratically elected panchayat what may be called a 'democratic deficit'. As a 'Marxist' party committed, at least theoretically, to revolution, the CPI-M takes the *panchayats* like other representative institutions (State Assembly, or Parliament) as short-term instruments, as means, (to be overcome), for the final goal of a socialist society by a revolution. Therefore, the so-called democracy as talked about in capitalism, is a sham to the party, and bourgeois in character (as perhaps Lenin said!). What the party believes instead is in a 'guided democracy' under the party leadership. So, what passes for democracy in the *panchayats* for the party is 'representation'. The fact that the majority of members of *panchayats* have poorer and humble backgrounds are paraded by the party as the proof enough of democracy. But what is overlooked in such understanding is the fact that representation devoid of participation has no value. One sympathetic account of West Bengal *panchayats* reported :

> In terms of the popular participation framework, it may be concluded that the poor are represented in the institutions of power, by and large. This representation has not resulted in any significant increase in their control over these institutions. (Bhattacharyya, 1998a, p. 134).

Long time ago, Max Weber used a term "plebiscitarian-leader democracy" in order to point out the limits of popular participation in the political process :

> This means that the people cease to have any real control over political decisions, which become the prerogative, on one side, of a bureaucratic administration, and on the other side, of the leaders of political parties (Bottomore, 1979, p. 26).

In West Bengal local government, bureaucracy's hold over decisions and implementations has been significantly curtailed. Local politicians are very active in policy making and implementations too. The new local governmental experiment in the state has thus served to increase the power of local elites, mostly not elected to local governmental structure, who

play the most determining role in matters of local governance. The role of ordinary elected members *vis-a-vis* such powerful local elites thus pales into insignificance. S. P. Huntington (1991) gave us an idea of 'what democracy is not' in the following: "If those democratically elected decision-makers become, however, simply a facade for the exercise of much greater power by a non- democratically chosen group, then clearly that political system is not democratic." (Huntington, 1991, p. 10). The West Bengal experiment seems to be a partial confirmation of Huntington.

Second, the above deficit in democratic participation by elected representatives adds to the absence of any long-term perspective on institution-building at the local level. For one thing, the CPI-M is not seriously interested in *panchayats* as institutions *par excellence*, and therefore takes no interest in developing this institution as a true democratic platform of the people. Since decisions are always taken beforehand at the PSC, members feel often dejected. To the CPI-M, what Perry Anderson would call a 'classical Marxist party' (Anderson 1979), it is the party which is the fundamental agency of social transformation; *panchayat* is secondary to the party. The party is most often self-critical of many blemishes of the *panchayats* including the lack of mass initiative, mass participation, centralisation and concentration of powers in a few hands, absence of grasssroots democracy and so on. The official report on *panchayats* by N. Mukerji and D. Bandopadhyaya (1993) recorded a level of popular identification with *panchayats* but pointed out the glaring absence of a notion of *panchayats* as self-governing institutions among the party and the government. Despite all the remarkable achievements of the *panchayats*, the CPI-M has yet to consider incorporating the *panchayats* into its Party Programme, and failed to reconcile democratic decentralisation that the *panchayat* demands, on the one hand with 'democratic' centralism that the party demands, on the other. Given the time and space, the successes of West Bengal *panchayats* however, have added new political resources into the operation of the Indian political system, and resilience to the Indian state by serving as an effective bridge between the traditional society, and modern democracy.

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The Agents of Social Change at the Grassroots : A Case Study of West Bengal in post-1977 Period

KUSAL CHATTOPADHYAY

I

THE INSTITUTION OF *panchayat raj* in post-independence India is not a new one. Its legacy is found in the past. The *panchayats* have been in existence in India since ancient times. The writings of Chanakya, Megasthenes and Fahien bear testimony to the existence such bodies. However, the *panchayats* of the past were rarely representatives of the village as a whole; they might be drawn from the members of the founding families or from the Brahmins and the high caste cultivators. The landless and downtrodden people, i.e., the common villagers had no say in the affairs of the village administration. The importance of the panchayati raj institution as the spokesman of the village-people and their problems was felt after independence. It is found from the debates of the Constituent Assembly that members were not unanimous regarding the important role of the *panchayati raj* and their attitude had been betrayed by the scant reference to the panchayats in only one Article (i.e., Article 40) of the Constitution incorporated in the unenforceable directive addressed to the central and state governments.

The concept of *panchayat raj* was seriously taken note of during the midfifties by the Balwantrai Mehta Committee. Its aim was to place power in the hands of the people to determine their own destiny and to build for themselves a self-sufficient society where there would be all-round development. India is a large country and programmes and schemes for rural development require more than the efforts by the government. Their successes require a joint co-operative and spontaneous endeavour by the masses. 'Panchayats and local bodies are institutions that are closest to the masses and they have a very important role to play in the task of development. They are the centre from which can stem the constructive

endeavours that are required in the great task of nation building'[1]. Democratic decentralization 'associates people with the local administration and recognises the right of people to initiate and execute the policy decision in an autonomous way.' In fact, it is 'a political ideal and the local self-government is the applied form of this ideal'.[2]

It is impossible to appreciate the social, political and economic significance of the changes that have been taking place in the West Bengal villages in the last twenty years without locating them in a larger context. According to Benoy Krishna Chaudhury, after independence, India's rural development policy depended on the plank of Community Development Project, launched on foreign advice, rather than on the basic principles of the grass-roots level democratic institutions. The report of the Programme Evaluation Organisation, however, indicated that the main drawback in the programme lay in the lack of popular participation. This led to the appointment of Balwant Rai Mehta Committee which recommended establishment of *panchayati raj* bodies based on universal adult suffrage. The Mehta Committee report was accepted and a plethora of state legislations followed. In West Bengal also, new enactments were passed and a four-tier *panchayat* structure was established by elections based on universal adult suffrage. But though there was a certain amount of enthusiasm initially, that soon petered out and the bodies became moribund and were ultimately superseded. The failure of the experiment has been attributed to dominating role of the landed gentry in the *panchayat* bodies, lack of political will and excessive reliance on governmental machinery for programme implementation. Within ten years, Balwant Rai Mehta's grand dreams were reduced to ashes.[3]

Like the other State governments the Government of West Bengal passed the West Bengal Panchayat Act of 1973 to introduce the three-tier system by amalgamating the erstwhile *Gram Panchayat* and *Anchal Panchayat* into one unit known as the *Gram Panchayat*. What is more, the system of direct elections was introduced at all levels of the structures of these bodies which was non-existent before. After 1977, the Left Front government has conducted five statewide *panchayat* elections in 1978, 1983, 1988, 1993 and 1998. Not only the structure of the *panchayati raj* bodies has undergone radical transformation since 1978 but *panchayat* bodies have also been vasted with more powers and responsibilities than those were before 1978. One might even say that the *panchayati raj*

bodies in West Bengal have not only been renamed and restructured but also reoriented and regalvanised since 1978 with a new set of goals and functions.

II

A mere theoretical discussion of different legislative enactments relating to *panchayati* bodies does not lead us to a correct understanding of the role of these grassroots bodies. Legislative enactments merely indicate the progress and retrogression in paper about the composition and functioning of *panchayati raj* bodies. They do not provide any insight into the dynamics of these bodies. Moreover, they fail to reflect upon the nature of emerging rural leadership. Understood thus, it is the purpose of this paper to make an empirical survey of one *Gram Panchayat* of West Bengal, namely, Barshal Gram Panchayat situated in Gangajalghati Block in the district of Bankura to indicate the emerging rural leadership pattern in the post 1978 period.

The subject of rural leadership or, to be more specific, leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions, has attracted attention of many a scholars in India as well as abroad. The issue has been discussed and analysed, either separately or as a part of the wider study, from various angles such as sociological, psychological, political etc.[4]

Anyhow, it has been recognised that socio-cultural and political change in modern states has been 'one of the most important areas of investigation in the social sciences.'

> Within the short period of a quarter of a century after independence, India has undergone a series of changes that have spread throughout the entire society. The pattern of rural Indian leadership, as it exists today, reflects a transition from the hereditary to the elective, and from the ascriptive to the functional type of leadership. West Bengal, as one of the states in India, is no exception in this regard.[5]

At the very outset it is necessary to make one point clear. By 'leaders' here is meant the elected and nominated leaders of the *panchayat* bodies. The fulfilment of much of the goals of the panchayati raj set by the government of West Bengal at present depends upon the pattern of leadership which has been entrusted to achieve them. "Leadership is thus the *sine qua non*

of success in all human activities but in a democratic system, particularly at the lower levels, it assumes greater significance and wider proportions."[6] The very success of *Panchayati Raj* Institutions depends largely on the quality of leadership available at the grass-root levels. Political development and democratic growth depend on the local leadership and its functioning in the *Panchayati Raj* Institutions.[7] The pattern of rural leadership of Barshal Gram Panchayat has been studied in the perspective of such socio-economic variables as age, education, occupation, religion, political affiliation, sex, caste, sub-caste of the *panchayat* leaders after the 1993 *panchayat* elections.

1. Age

Age is an important variable in the study of grassroots leadership because in the Indian village community leadership has been the monopoly of the elderly persons who, in the past, dominated rural life in all its aspects. Respect for the aged in rural society is a behavioural trait of a patriarchal family system, where the younger are supposed to obey their elders who enjoy unquestionable authority over the rest of the village. But since the inception of the Left Front government in West Bengal with its ideology to uphold the interests specially of the weaker sections of the people, the minimum age prescriptions for being elected to the local government institutions, have been exploding the myth of 'wisdom of the elders' in the rural areas of West Bengal. The change in the traditional pattern, with regard to age, is distinctively noticeable in our sample analysis (Table No. 1). However, in determining the categorisation of age-grouping the researcher has adopted the following rationale. In the present days the minium age for adult franchise is 18 years and it has been conceded by various political parties that the age-group identifying the persons as youth, is 35. That is why people falling within the age group of 35 is called 'youth group'. The age-group of 36 - 60 years is called middle age group because in many government, non-government and semi-government sectors the retirement age is running between 58 - 60 years. The people remain physically fit and mentally alert upto the age of 60. That's why the age of 60 has been fixed for the maximum limit of middle-age group. Beyond 60 years of age people lose energy and efficiency. They become physically and mentally retarded. That is why, the age-group 60 onwards is called old age group. Age-group composition of the Barshal Gram Panchayat members in the post - 1978 period is shown in Table I.

Table I

Age-Group Composition of Barshal Gram Panchayat Members (Gangajalghati Block, Bankura District (period 1993 - 1998).[8]

Age category (in years)	Number of members	Percentage of members
18-35 years	15	65.22%
36-60 years	7	30.43%
61 and above	1	4.35%
Total	**23**	**100.00%**

The Table I shows that the 'middle-aged' members (falling in the age-group of 36 - 60) are outnumbered by the 'younger members'. It also shows that the 'aged' members of 61 years and above are far outnumbered by the 'young' and 'middle-aged' members. It seems from the Table I that a unique blend of energy and experience is found in the composition of the Barshal Gram Panchayat formed during the 1993-1999 period. Thus, the rejection of much of the older leadership may well be taken to mean the disapproval of old and outdated ideas and the gradual reflection or acceptance of modern values.

2. Education

There is a positive correlation between education and grassroots leadership for, a leader suitably educated proves more capable of taking quick and correct decisions whenever situations call for, rather than one who has no education. Renowned scholars have pointed out that proper education facilitates the development of progressive ideas and attitudes in the people and with the help of the proper education they can better understand the objectives and justification behind the existence of local self-government. Educational composition of Barshal Gram Panchayat members is shown in Table II.

Table II

Educational Composition of Barshal Gram Panchayat Members (period 1993 - 1998).[9]

Educational level	Number of members	Percentage of members
Illiterate	-	
Literate - (up to Class x)	10	43.48%
Secondary	10	43.48%
Graduate	3	13.04%
Postgraduate	-	
Ph. D.	-	
Technical	-	
Vocational	-	
Total	**23**	**100.00%**

Table II indicates that as many as 43.48% belonged to literate (up to Class X) level. Equal number of members have come from the secondary level. Only 13.04% members have come from the Graduate Category. The reasons for the insignificantly low participation of both the purely illiterate and the highly educated people in the *panchayats* are : (a) the flight of the highly educated people from the village areas ; (b) the dominance of left politics in West Bengal with its consequent impact upon the middle class people attaining average educational standard ; (c) the ideological basis of the Left parties in India which prefers to hand over power to the common people and, (d) the literacy campaigns in West Bengal which have created a new environment in the villages. The *panchayats* in West Bengal have played a great role in the implementation of literacy programme for the performance of which the State has got the prestigious international award.[10] Apart from that, in recent times there has been considerable improvement at the level of education of the SC / ST youths due to availability of several concessions and provisions for reservations. In order to improve the lot of scheduled caste and scheduled tribes, the Government of India has floated a number of programmes for the socio-economic development of scheduled castes / scheduled tribes.[11] So, judging the entire scenario from the standpoint of spreading the education at the grassroots level, it may be

said that "the Left Front Government breathed a new life to the panchayati raj system in the state."[12]

3. Occupation

Occupation is yet another important determinant of grassroots leadership. Like all other districts, in Bankura, agriculture being the predominant occupation in rural areas, the peasants are obviously in majority. The obvious reason behind the dominance of agricultural class is that the *Gram Panchayat* being the rural institution and the district of Bankura being predominantly agricultural, marginal, middle and rich peasants dominate the *Gram Panchayat* membership. Table No. III shows the occupational distribution of the Barshal Gram Panchayat members in the 1993 - 1998 period.

Table III

Occupation-wise break-up of Barshal Gram Panchayat Members (period 1993-1998).[13]

Occupational category	No. of members	Percentage of members
1. Agriculture	21	91.30%
a) Landless Agricultural Labour	3	13.04%
b) Small and Marginal Peasants (Less than 7½ bighas of land)	9	39.13%
c) Middle Peasants	8	34.79%
(7½ -15 bighas of land)	1	4.34%
d) Rich Peasants (More than 15 bighas of land)	1	4.34%
2. Industry	...	...
3. Business	...	...
4. Service	2	8.70%
5. Unemployed	...	...
Total	**23**	**100.00%**

It is seen from Table III that 91.30% members of the Barshal Gram Panchayat have come from the agricultural sector. Among them 13.04% are more or less landless, 39.13% small and marginal peasants, 34.79% middle peasants, and 4.34% rich peasants. 8.70% of the members are from the 'Service' category. In this connection it is to be noted that because of their nature of job (post held, scale of pay etc.) the members of the 'Service' category may be included in the category of 'lower income group' and the researcher has done so. No member has come from the 'industry' category. It is seen from the aforesaid Table that a large number of *Gram Panchayat* members have come from the lowest occupation stratum comprising such occupational groups as landless agricultural labour, marginal peasants etc. It is often alleged that the land holding people in the rural areas generally try to suppress correct information about the total area of land they hold. But the researcher has collected relevant data not only from the Barshal Gram Panchayat office, but also from the local ordinary people belonging to different castes, professions, political parties and income groups. This has helped the researcher to draw correct, rational and logical conclusion about the leadership pattern of the concerned *Gram Panchayat* from the occupational point of view. It is also often alleged that when the marginal and small peasants are unable to bear the cost of cultivation, they often transfer the possession of their land to the middle and rich farmer in exchange of a petty amount of money. But the picture is diametrically opposite in the case of Barshal Gram Panchayat. The local government institutions and Government of West Bengal have provided loans through banks and other financial institutions for the sharecroppers and, small and marginal peasants under land redistribution and other development programmes to enable them to procure agricultural inputs and implements. Thus it may be said that implementation of land reform and different development programmes by the Left Front government through panchayati raj institutions have not only generated a sense of confidence among the landless agricultural labours and, small and marginal peasants but also brought a change in the structure of the rural power. Apart from that, the peasant wing of the CPI(M) is very strong and active in the village under study in protecting the interests of the weaker sections of the society, specially the poor sharecroppers. Atul Kohli has rightly observed, 'while the majority of new office holders are party-sympathisers rather than party members, a large majority are small landholders and

teachers and therefore from rural lower-middle income groups.'[14] This is an extremely significant shift from the past patterns. Never have the local governments in West Bengal, or, for that matter in other State governments of India, been so free of the domination of landlords and rich peasants. The Left Front government led by the CPI(M), along with the newly recreated local governments, thus represent two interlinked patterns of political change : an organisational penetration by the 'Centre' into the 'periphery', and a simultaneous shift in the class basis of institutional power.[15] The scenario is in sharp contrast with that of pre-1977 period, i.e., under the Congress regime. The findings of the present research also corroborate the views of perceptive a scholar in the field of *panchayati raj* in West Bengal, who observes,

> The first elections to the panchayati raj bodies in West Bengal were held in 1958-59. The representatives were elected to the lowest tier (the erstwhile gram panchayats). The subsequent elections to the other, tiers were all indirect. According to a research study the political parties were active for gaining ascendency in each tier. But the stranglehold of the land-owning class and big farmers continued repeating the history of the local boards and union boards.[16]

According to an IIPA Study Team Report, "The pre-eminence of well established local leaders in the union boards and district boards has diluted the impact of the panchayati raj as a force of political change, and the leadership structure has not undergone any appreciable change as a result of democratization of local administration."[17]

Thus, there is a discernible change in the pattern of grassroots leadedrship in the post-1978 period from the occupational standpoint. Grassroots leadership which was mainly controlled by the landowing class in the pre-1978 period has now been thrown open to the common masses, i.e., to the small and marginal peasants, landless agriculture labour, service holders in all the *Gram Panchayats* in the district. In other words, it may be said that the second generation *Gram Panchayats* in West Bengal have been out of the clutches of rich landowners and influential and wealthier villagers. After 1977 the *panchayats* have not only become the instruments of social change but also the vehicles of political mobilisation of the masses along class line. This is due to liberal attitude and sincere commitment of the Left Front government to rescue the ordinary village people from the stranglehold

of the zamindars and their nominees. Pramanick and Datta rightly observe that the leadership thrown up by the elections (*panchayat* elections after 1977) marked a definite departure from the past in terms of their class character.[17a]

4. Political affiliation

Political affiliation is another determinant to analyse the role of emerging rural leadership. In fact, in any attempt to understand the relationship between the local, and the State and national political system what is essential is to know the party loyalties of the local leaders. Commitment to political parties creates an atmosphere of stable and healthy political system. Moreover, a politically conscious person is well equipped to take the leadership role.[18] Bearing this in mind the researcher has tried to identify the political affiliation of the Barshal Gram Panchayat members. It should be noted that in the pre-1977 period political parties were not allowed to contest in the elections of *panchayati* bodies. In the post-1977 period the situation has changed and the *panchayat* members have been allowed to contest in the elections with party symbols. Political affiliation of the Barshal Gram Panchayat members is shown in Table IV.

Table IV

Political Affiliation of Barshal Gram Panchayat Members (period 1993-1998).[19]

Political Parties	No. of Members	Percentage of Members
Congress (I)	11	47.83%
CPI	–	–
CPI(M)	12	52.17%
Other Left Parties	–	–
B. J. P.	–	–
Muslim League	–	–
Other Parties	–	–
Independent	–	–
Total	**23**	**100.00%**

The above picture of the political affiliation of the Barshal Gram Panchayat members leads one to conclude that there has been a great change in the pattern of rural leadership and pattern of rural power structure. Previously (i.e., in the 50s and 60s) the grassroots democratic sector was controlled by the Congress party. Now the rural leadership has been captured by the left parties, mainly by the CPI(M). This is because of the gradual loss of people's faith upon the Congress Party for its collusion with the *nouveau riches* and also for the persistent pro-poor character of the Left Front government which is controlling the power-structure of the state including local administration. This change of position has been succinctly described by Atul Kohli in the following words :

> Underlying the CPM's electoral success in 1977 were not only its own deepening political base but also the failure of other parties. Once in power, however, the CPM sought to extend and consolidate its base further, especially in the rural areas. To incorporate the lower rural classes more effectively, the CPM restructured local government. The West Bengal CPM government was the first in India to allow political parties to compete for local government positions. Well aware of its new popularity, the CPM hoped that its own candidates would be successful. The strategy paid off. Eighty-seven per cent of seats at the district level, 74 per cent at the block level (the block is an administrative unit between the district and the village), and the 67 per cent at the village level were captured by those running on the CPM ticket. The results of the 1983 panchayat elections were of a similar order. These "red panchayats" (panchayat being the Indian term for local government) are very important in CPM's overall political and developmental strategy.[20]

The figures in the Table IV show that the success of CPI(M) seems to be due to the fact that its peasant wing was very active in the village under study, for raising the level of political awareness of the ordinary people, and to mobilize them into a class to challenge the landowners. Imbued with an ideology of egalitarianism, secured organizational support of the leftist political parties and the backing of the government the landless agricultural labourers and poor peasants became an organized force in the sample village with manifest economic and political interests. The observations of the researcher seem to be correct because the CPI(M)

had successfully completed their full term (1993-1998) in the concerned *Gram Panchayat* with overall dominance. Apart from that, the Left Front has secured more seats in 1998 *panchayat* elections than in 1993 because of the pro-poor character of the *panchayat* members and their strong ideological commitment.

5. Religion

Religion is a significant variable in the Indian political system. Therefore, it is essential to find out as to what extent religion plays its part in determining the character of the grassroots leadership at *gram panchayat* level. Table V shows the religion-wise break-up of the Barshal Gram Panchayat members.

Table V

Religion-wise Break-up of Barshal Gram Panchayat Members (period 1993-1998).[21]

Religion	No. of Members	Percentage of Members
Hindu	23	100.00%
Muslim	–	–
Others	–	–
Total	**23**	**100.00%**

Table V reveals that all the *gram panchayat* members have come from the Hindu community. No member of the Muslim, Sikh, Christian or the Buddhist or any other community had come to the *panchayat* either as the elected or ex-officio member. The reason is obvious. Since the Hindus are overwhelming in number in the *gram panchayat* and as well as in the district, their domination would but be natural. It does not mean, however, that because of their numerical superiority, the Hindus are dominating over the other communities, specially the Muslims. There was complete communal harmony among the religious communities in the concerned *gram panchayat* area, and also in the district too.

6. Sex

According to Hargian Singh, "It is a general feeling that women all over the world participate less in politics than men do. Even in this democratic age

of today in some countries women still are devoid of their political rights, but even in the countries in which they are granted these rights, comparatively they make less use of such rights, than men do."[22] Though in India equal rights are guaranted to both males and females (Art 14 to 18 of Indian Constitution), yet politics is still controlled by the male sex. From national to village level the picture is almost the same. Viewed thus, let us examine how many women were elected in the Barshal Gram Panchayat. Table VI shows their representation in it.

Table VI

Sexwise Break-up of Barshal Gram Panchayat Members in the 1993-98 period.[23]

Sex	Total No. of Members	Percentage of Members
Male	14	60.87%
Female	9	39.13%
Total	**23**	**100.00%**

From Table VI it is revealed that 60.87% belong to the male group, while the rest to females. But the most significant point to note here is that no Muslim female had come to this *panchayat* as an elected or ex-officio member. So in conclusion it may be said that the grassroots leadership is still controlled by the male sex.

7. Caste

Caste has been another important factor in the issue of rural leadership. There is a widespread feeling, though not unfounded, that in determining rural leadership caste plays an important role and it is generally found that persons belonging to traditionally known higher castes rise to leadership position. The renowned sociologist, M. N. Srinivas has pointed out that 'usually the leaders of the locally dominant castes are elected to panchayats'. But this is, however, an overall generalisation. For, since the inception of the Left Front government in West Bengal the scenario has changed. The change in the traditional patterns, with regard to caste, is distinctively noticeable in the Table VII.

Table VII

Castewise Break-up of Barshal Gram Panchayat Members (Period 1993-1998).[24]

Castes	No. of Members	Percentage of Members
1. Hindu		
(a) General	9	39.13%
(b) Scheduled Castes	9	39.13%
(c) Scheduled Tribes	9	–
(d) Other Backward classes	5	21.74%
2. Muslim	–	–
Total	**23**	**100.00%**

Table VII thus reveals that 39.13% of the total *panchayat* members belong to Hindu General Group, i.e., Caste Hindus, while 39.13% to the Scheduled Castes, and 21.74% to other backward classes. Reasonable representation of the SCs and STs, and minorities, that has been the major plank of Left Front's *panchayat* programmes, has been thus achieved at least in the *gram panchayat* under our study.

8. Subcastes

Analysis of the participation of various subcastes is also imperative in determining the nature and character of the rural leadership. The following Table shows the subcaste-wise break-up of Brshal Gram Panchayat members.

Table VIII

Subcaste-wise Break-up of Barshal Gram Panchayat Members (period 1993-1998).[25]

Subcastes	Total No. of Members	Percentage of Members
Bramhin	3	13.04%
Bauri	1	4.35%
Tili	5	21.74%
Suri	6	26.08%
Kayastha	1	4.35%
Mahisya	1	4.35%
Gowala	4	17.39%
Kaibortya (Keyot)	2	8.70%
Total	**23**	**100.00%**

From the above Table it is evident that the largest segment of come from the 'Suri' subcaste. However, other two affluent subcastes — 'Tili' and 'Gowala' of the concerned *gram panchayat* are also keeping hold over the leadership position, and achieved 21.74% and 17.39% of the total membership in our study area. In conclusion, however, it may be said that the factor of subcaste is losing its ground in determining the leadership in village politics. The reason behind this change is the Left Front government's 'aim at radicalization of politics through political mobilization of the masses in different ways. The ultimate objective being the destruction of the capitalist system, it has to work for it.'[26] For this reason 'the LF Government spelt out its intention to use Panchayati Raj system as a platform for fighting out rural vested interests and raised the hopes of the people thereby'. It has been further held that 'through panchayat election the power will be decentralized, and only with the organised force of the village poor and middle class the task of establishing the power of the people curbing that of the administrative officers could be carried out.'[27]

III

The present study of grassroots leadership of Barshal Gram Panchayat of the district of Bankura reveals certain interesting features. It clearly shows,

that the traditional supremacy of the aged people, is losing its grounds in the new situation. The Suri subcaste and caste Hindus are now playing the key roles in the concerned *Gram Panchayat*, and as well as the district of Bankura too. As regards the education, at the grassroots level more and more educated people are taking part in the local government, which is definitely a healthy sign for the participatory domocracy. From the occupational point of view, the study reveals that more and more weaker sections of the people are occupying important position at the grassroots level. As regards the occupational distribution it is to be noted that small marginal peasants, middle peasants and landless agricultural labourers are gaining grounds at the *gram panchayat* level. So far as the factor of political affiliation in concerned, polarization is evident. In this connection it is to be noted that our area of study is dominated by the CPI(M), though the strength of Congress (I) party cannot be ignored. However, the scenario has changed after 1997, i.e., instead of the Congress, the Left Front led by the CPI(M) has captured the power at the grassroots level – the CPI(M) being the party which is controlling the state power structure till 1977. In the sphere of religion, numerically the Hindu domination is evident. But as regards the gender factor the male people are still controlling with overwhelming majority in the concerned *gram panchayat*. G. K. Lieten's study also shows that "a new type of leadership has come to dominate the stage of lower levels in the system of political devolution. Poor peasants, agricultural labourers, and therefore also the scheduled castes and tribes have very much come to the forefront on account of composition of CPI(M) panels."[28]

Thus from different variables undertaken for examining the pattern of rural leadership in the district of Bankura in general and the Barshal Gram Panchayat in particular, it can be said unhesitatingly that a discernible change has taken place in the leadership pattern under the three tier system than the previous four tier system. And this change is undoubtedly a change for better because the onerous task of developmental works has been undertaken and performed ably by the present young, agile and effective leadership.

IV

However the *gram panchyat* under our study also suffers from certain drawnbacks. It has been found that some *panchayat* functionaries, though not all, are becoming bureaucratic in their attitude and day-to-day

functioning. As a result, there arises a communication gap between the *panchayat* functionaries and the common people which is unfortunate from the standpoint of the operation the *panchayati raj* institutions. For the functioning of *panchayat* as a democratic organization of the society depends upon the nature of the interactive relationship between the voters and the members of the panchayati raj bodies. Secondly, the poor participation of the females in the grassroots bodies is a matter of concern which is to be considered seriously for the healthy growth of participatory democracy. Happily, the Government has come out with the policy of reservation for women in the *panchayati raj* bodies. But mere reservation will not do much. What is needed is something more than reservation. The government should take steps to strengthen the social sector of the village life. Thirdly, the *modus operandi* of some *panchayat* leaders are at times found to be individualistic and thus it fails to tap the people's inititive in the rural development programmes. Fourthly, 'More recently the CPI(M) has been criticised for relying too much upon representatives whose objective class position in terms of economic and social criteria is not representative of the mass of poor peasants and labourers.'[29] Fifthly, many scholars have pointed out that in the decision making process of the *panchayat* the party sometimes imposes its decisions, which violates the democratic right of the members of elected bodies. As a result they feel discouraged from taking any active interest in the meeting and dicussion.[30(a)] Sixthly, "despite commendable achievements in matters of development, the creation of mass initiative has been neglected. This renders ordinary panchayat members discouraged and passive."[30(b)] Seventhly, indifference of the elected members to the *panchayat* meetings is one of the defects of the leadership. 'There is a great weakness in the creation of mass initiative in running the panchayats.'[30(c)] Lastly, from the standpoint of participatory democracy and popular participation, it may be said that the representation of the downtrodden has been increased in these institutions during the post-1977 period but by and large this representation has not resulted in any significant increase in their control over these institutions of power. This in future may spell disaster in the sense that people may lack faith in *panchayati raj*. Hence, these limitations of leadership are to be rectified for the sake of retaining popular faith in the efficiency of the *panchayati raj*.

V

On the whole, it may be said that the emergence of a new type of leadership with a new outlook and with a different set of goals has enabled the grassroots democratic bodies to operate more efficiently and vigorously than that of their counterparts in the pre-1978 period. Lieten thus aptly observes that the public space in West Bengal indeed has increasingly been occupied by poor peasants and agricultural labourers.[31] The significant presence of poor peasants, bargadars, agricultural labourers, school teachers etc. in *panchayats* has been appreciated in many reasearch studies by the eminent scholars like Atul Kohli, K. Westergaard, Neil Webster, and G. K. Lieten.[32] According to Nirmal Mukarjee, 'the Left Front Government has been recruiting new people into politics and given them on the job exposure to the art of self-governance from the grass-roots level upwards.'[33] The achievement during the Left Front regime after 1978 through *panchayats* on the whole prove the efficiency of the members of the *panchayati* bodies. This observation is also corroborated by Lieten, who holds :

> I have, moreover, argued that it is not correct to accuse the CPI(M) of having abandoned radical policies for the Cosy Chairs of Writers' Buildings. In terms of its ideological understanding of the more immediate policy measures, as laid down in the party programme of the dominant LFG partner, the LFG by and large has stuck to its promises and programmes, and has been highly successful in doing so. As the only state in India, West Bengal has registered more vesting and distribution of land than was originally predicted, and accounts for almost half of the land distribution bebeficiaries in the country. Likewise the barga registration programme has accorded to most of the sharecroppers a guaranteed and heritable access to their plots, and has largely done away with the interlocking structure of dependence. It has stopped the ongoing process of land alienation and the perennial indebtedness with its surplus appropriation mechanism. The access to small pieces of land for many pattadars and bargadars has turned out not to be sufficient to become viable but, in addition, the land augmentation effect of technological changes has enabled them to earn additional income as agricultural labourers at wages which have grown moderately in real terms. As a consequence, the three agrarian

> classes which earlier had to eke out an existence at destitution level, have attained a tolerable level of poverty, and have been able to ward off the power nexus of the jotdars, mohajons and moneylenders.[34]

VI

The importance of leadership in every walk of organized life can hardly be denied. More so, when we come to the functioning of the *panchayats* for, 'explicitly one of the significant objectives in instituting them was to develop proper leadership suited to development needs of the countryside'. As Bhargava observes, "It was natural, therefore, to expect from these institutions that they would throw leaders who could act as a catalytic agents of social change. It was assumed, not wrongly so, that the villagers can do much for improving their lot if only they have leaders who can bring dynamism in their lives. In the absence of such leadership nothing substantial can be achieved."[35]

From the perspective of this theoretical rationalization of the importance of the grassroots leadership, in conclusion, it may be said that it is however better not to be too much optimistic to the role performed by the members of the Barshal Gram Panchayat, in particular and West Bengal, in general; but there is also no room for pessimism. On the whole the emerging rural leadership of Barshal Gram Panchayat and West Bengal has proved its efficacy in the rural life of West Bengal and has been accepted as pro-people by the rural masses. It is evident from the above discussion that a sea change has taken place in the power structure in the West Bengal villages through the *panchayat* elections in the post-1978 period. A new group of people committed to the leftist politics have taken over the village leadership in place of old group of the different classes, namely, jotedar, zamindar and agricultural rich peasants. This is because of the class character of the party in State power, a party committed to the Marxist-Leninist philosophy, which has been trying sinec tried till 1978 to destroy the inequalitarian social structure and mould anew the traditional power base in the villages and to tilt the balance of power in favour of the downtrodden people of the society.

To sum up, the Left Front government has been attempting to change the correlation of class forces in favour of the poor and have-nots by involving them in an organised manner in the process of development, decentralization and decision making.

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Book Review

Politics India : The State-Society Interface **edited by Rakhahari Chatterjee (South Asia Publishers. New Delhi, 2001), pp. 463. Price Rs. 450.00 ISBN 81-7003-245-8**

Late W. H. Morris-jones, the doyen of Indian politics, wrote somewhere that after India's independence politics was introduced to Indian society. What he meant was that politics as modern activity as well as the modern idiom of politics was alien to India's traditional society until independence. While there was an important grain of truth in what Morris-Jones said, it is not entirely true that there was no interaction between politics and the Indian society prior to independence. Had it been so, then the country could not have achieved its independence through decades-long glorious liberation struggles against colonialism. The successes of India's liberation struggles consisted precisely in many levels of interaction between the modern forms of mobilization and the so-called traditional society. Indians' rise in revolt against colonialism in various forms and in different phases was the powerful indicator of the society's interface with politics, its own version of 'modernization' — a process, which, sadly enough, the later day modernization theorists grossly failed to understand. It was not, and could not be, the fact that a traditional society achieved independence, which was a modern phenomenon. Ironically, the modernization theories of many brands has taught us that the state-society, politics-society interface in India, was, as if, a post-colonial phenomenon.

The book under review, though broadly conceived within the modernization paradigm, is nonetheless different in its content and implications. The book contains as many seventeen chapters of sizeable length dealing with such important issues as federalism, party systems, urban and rural government, business and politics, peasant and working class movements, religious movements, language and politics, caste and politics, tribal politics, women

and politics, India's political culture, and ecology and politics. On the face of it, the spectrum is rather wide except perhaps two serious omissions, namely, human rights and politics, and students, youths and politics.

Rather than writing an editorial introduction on the basis of the rest of the chapters, as is usually done in the trade, Rakhahari Chatterjee has introduced the issues in a novel way by surveying critically the development of 'political development', as it were, in the last half century, the nodal concept in the studying politics in the modernization mode since the 1950s. According to Chatterjee, the concept of political development has surfaced again in the 1980s in a reformed fashion, and the reformed political development today is radical : it involves democracy, representative government, secularism, pluralism, stability, a judicious blend of open market and state regulation, a vibrant civil society and so on. However, he cautions us, the radicalization of the concept of political development does not mean that it is easier to achieve it today than before. With the help of a reformed notion of political development, and applying it to a critical survey of half-a-century of democracy in India, intellectually as well as empirically, he also delves himself into the most vexed issue of how democracy in India has been possible in the absence of the 'requisite' social and economic indices. Chatterjee's thesis finally is that if many 'faultlines' of Indian democracy are to be rectified, then we have to take into account the important role of culture, and therein lies the crucial role of civil society as a rejuvenator of democracy.

Bonita Aleaz's chapter on 'India's Federal Order' critically examines mostly the legal-institutional aspects of India's federation. She has discussed the historical background to the growth of federalism in India as well as the different approaches to the study of federalism, theoretically speaking. However, her survey of approaches is too quick, and excludes any discussion of the ongoing debates on Indian federalism, particularly since

the late 1980s, to differentiate her own approach from others. In conclusion, there is a small and inadequate discussion of the social and political forces at play in the federal game. Ultimately, she seems to support the case of 'co-operative federalism', but then it is not shown that way in the main discussion.

The two chapters on the party systems (chapters 3 and 4) by Aditi Dey Sharma and Amitava Ray are overlapping although both of them do provide good overviews of the parties in India, national and regional. For students introducing themselves to India's political parties, these two chapters are a good starting point. It would add a feature or two to their studies if references were made to the ongoing literature on India's parties since the 1970s because that would take the students to further serious study.

Chapter 5 on 'The Election Commission of India' by Panchanan Chattopadhyay is the weakest one in the volume. This is mostly a constitutional-legal discussion of what is said of the Commission and the Commissioners in the Constitution. One could get the materials easily from any text on the Indian Constitution.

Chapter 6, 'Urban Governance: Issues and Problems' by Ambarish Mukhopadhyay offers a detailed legal-constitutional discussion of urban government in India since pre-independence period with special emphasis on the Calcutta Municipal Corporation. Although the author has called his chapter 'Urban Governance', etc., the term 'governance' has nowhere been defined. Apparently, he used 'government' and 'governance' synonymously. Nonetheless, the chapter will be useful to students of public administration, particularly urban local government.

In Chapter 7 'Rural Local Government in India', Niladri Bhattacharya has discussed, in detail, the various legal-institutional as well as some political and electoral aspects of rural local government in India. His state-based surveys, though quick, of the panchayti raj experiments in India will be

useful. Attempting to discuss various state experiments in one chapter is daunting, but as an overview of institutional developments, he has done a commendable job.

The next three chapters are devoted to serious discussions on business and politics (Srikumar Mukhopadhyay), trade unions and politics (Rakhahari Chatterjee), and peasant movements in India (Debjani Sen Gupta). Mukhopadhyay has provided a detailed account of the historical and social factors shaping business in India, and the intricate ways of how business relates itself to politics in India. His highlights on India's recent liberalisation and globalisation policies add further strength to the study. On the other hand, Chatterjee's detailed account of the workers and their unions in India offers a brilliant discussion on the subject, which is expected from someone who is an authority on the subject. The special merits of his study consist in the fact that he used up-to-date empirical materials on the workers, registered unions and their membership, as well as the detailed profile of industrial disputes since 1982. Such data are immensely useful for further research on working class politics and the issues of governance. In conclusion, Chatterjee has considered the impact of liberalization on the working class. His contention that liberalization negatively affects the working class is not equivocally supported by facts. This may be provocative in further research. Debjani Sen Gupta in her study on the peasant movements in India which, she herself says, is 'synoptic and admittedly incomplete' (p. 223), has offered a broad overview of various phases and forms of peasant mobilization in India since pre-colonial times, and has rightly pointed out the diversity in the composition and character of the movements across India's regions. She believes that behind the successes of peasant movements in West Bengal lies the operation of a multi-class strategy which in fighting the common enemy of landlords, has been able to unite a wide section of the peasantry.

The next four chapters are devoted to the study of 'social forces' that have included religions, caste, language, tribes, women, and their interface with politics in recent years. Although much has been written on the themes in recent times the authors have done commendable job of putting the available literature, and further data together. The materials collected in the chapters by Partha Pratim Basu, Jayati Mukhopadhyay, Samir Das, and Bandana Chatterjee will be useful to students, as well as those who seek to formulate theoretical arguments about the larger issues of nation-building, state-formation, federation-building, and still the larger issue of how culture relates to politics in India. Chatterji's chapter, in particular, is an excellent detailed and critical account of women and politics in India discussed within the appropriate historical, legal and theoretical contexts, and backed by a wealth of empirical data on women's participation in different layers of Indian politics. Her conclusion though is a little too optimistic when she says that the nature of politics in India has changed with women's entry into politics.

The last two chapters under the section, "Culture and Environment", deal with the issues of political culture in India, and environment and politics in India. In an attempt to indigenise the concept of 'political culture', Amartya Mukhopadhyay has made a critical review of how Indian political culture has been seen before by the political scientists, and pointed out that power as a component of political culture has been neglected in the ongoing study. With the help of the idea of Asish Nandy, he came to the conclusion that banality is a major form of political culture in India in recent times which is created, he believes, by the political elites. This is a good summary, and an overview of the subject, and should be of much use to the students and general readers. The last chapter by Satyabrata Chakraborty has offered an account of the relation between environment and politics in India in terms of both the environment movements and, the political underpinnings of development. Much has been written on various environment movements

in India. His review of the leading environment movements in India should be useful to those not familiar with the political import of environment. Chakraborty has also identified various factors that have degraded environment. He has also commented on how environment becomes relevant to the students of political science (pp. 418-19), but the linkages he established between politics and environment, while important considerations, yet are weak on theory. The issue of environmental degradation is rooted in a certain perception of development, a certain conception of science (post-Enlightenment product), and a certain view of progress. The instrumental attitude to Nature, which is responsible for the devastation of environment is a by-product of this post-Enlightenment European science, progress and development. This is where the students of politics must grapple with the specific mode of interface between environment and politics in India.

Finally, the editor should be congratulated for bringing out the volume, which must be a standard reference in all undergraduate and postgraduate courses of study on Indian politics. Considering the size of the book, the price seems reasonable enough.

Harihar Bhattacharyya

B. K. Chandrasekhar (ed.), *Panchayati Raj in India : Status Report 1999*, Task Force on Panchayati Raj, Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, New Delhi, March 2000, pp. i-v and 1-277. Price not mentioned.

The Seventy-third Amendment to the Constitution of India, it is well known, aims at the empowerement of the *Panchayati Raj* Institutions (PRIs) and generated considerable hope that it would result in the fulfilment of Gandhiji's dream of *Gram Swaraj*. There can be no doubt that the Amendment has provided, among others enough scope for greater representation of women, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in running the affairs of PRIs. However, it has been experienced that the PRIs when engaged in operation face many a problems. But there has been little attempts to identify these operational problems being faced by these bodies as a sequel to the 73rd Amendment Act. It is gratifying to note that the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation which has been engaged since its inception in 1993, has come to the fore to identify those problems and to solve them. It has already organised about three national seminars, six regional workshops, forty-five subregional seminars, and four dialogical interactive workshops involving elected *panchayat* functionaries, members of bureaucracy, and MLAs and MPs. The *Status Report* under review is said to be 'a culmination of a series of publications' undertaken by the 'Task Force on Panchayati Raj' of the Foundation on various aspects of *panchayats*.

The editorial introduction to the *Status Report* (by Professor B K Chandrasekhar) attempts in the first place to trace the evolution of local government in India from the days of the British rule to the enactment of the 73rd Amendment Act (1993), with special reference to the recomendations of various committees appointed by the Government of India and consequent amendments to the Constitution. It then dwells on the post-73rd Amendment phase and the corresponding State legislations on the PRIs. Finally the editor highlights such issues which plague the operations of the PRIs, as of reservation, role of *Gram Sabha*, relationship between *panchayats* and bureaucracy, trends in the overall functionings of *panchayats*, methods of devolution of powers and functions to the

panchayat in various states, *Naya Panchayats*, finances, implementation of planning, and the extension of the PRIs to the Schedules Areas.

The next section, the major part of the *Status Report*, deals with the development and actual functioning of the PRIs in 17 major states of India, namely, Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharastra, Manipur, Orissa, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal.

In the end the report appends ten Annexures dealing with Conformity Acts of States, number of PRIs, status of the report of PRIs, status of District Planning Committees, the list of members of the 'Task Force on Panchayat Raj' of Rajiv Gandhi Foundation etc.

The most important part of the *Status Report* seems to the present reviwer to be the incorporation of the findings of a Workship organised by the Foundation on "Panchayat (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996," from 12 to 14 November 1995, at Jhabua, Madhya Pradesh. The Workshop was attended by the elected representative of the *panchayats*, the bureaucrats, the representatives of various NGOs, academicians, and representatives of the tribal people. Needless to say, there was a consenses among the participants, regarding the feasiblity of extending the provisions of the 73rd Amendment Act. to the Scheduled Area. Nevertheless, the present reviewer thinks that it would have been better if it was held in any one of the states of the North-East, where quite a good number of Scheduled Areas exist, and the people of which areas feel alienated from the mainstream development of the nation.

On the whole, the *Report* is objective and painstaking. It is most welcome as it would certainly benefit the undergraduate and postgraduate students, researchers, bureaucrats and the decision-makers who are interested in the study of PRIs in India.

Prithwiraj Ray