

AFTER THE EUPHORIA

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The peasants and other segments of the rural people of West Bengal fought the votaries of big capital to a standstill. The CPI(M) and its allies lost in 1635 out of 3220 gram panchayets. It was a bloody affair and blood continues to flow as, in village after village, the up and coming fascists take revenge for their discomfiture. It is being said by some that they have seen a peaceful transfer of power. These people cannot see the blood, and so underestimate the force which has been used to attack and resist. (It is like saying that the CPN(M) have won peacefully. It is because they have one hand on the gun that a Nepali Suharto has not managed to butcher them.)

All those who participated in any way in the protests following the onslaught in Singur and the inhuman repression in Nandigram were euphoric once the results started to pour in.

But it is time, now, to take stock of the situation.

The CPI(M) and its allies have retained hold of 49% of the gram panchayets, admittedly using muscle power, but, then, the naked use of force is the name of the game in rural India.

The CPI(M) is unrepentant and has declared that 'industrialisation' will go on, underlining its commitment to big capital. There has been criticism inside the party, on methodology, not about basics.

So, rising fascism is far from being defeated.

The Trinamul Congress (TMC), immediately after its emergence as the number one challenger to the CPI(M) in rural south Bengal, has found it necessary to declare that it is not against 'industrialisation', only against acquisition of fertile land from unwilling owners. Thereby, it has underlined its basic agreement with the aims of big capital in this state.

Because it remains an opposition party, it is still worth a debate, and its economic policy (or the lack of it!) should be squarely criticised.

The Left has not been able to distinguish itself. The maoists' routine call for boycott showed an unwillingness to respect the real time aspirations of the people as opposed to the timeless programme of armed struggle. Other Left groups are increasingly showing the effects of parliamentary ambitions, without an alternative programme which can capture the minds of the people, in particular, of its very poor and marginalised sections. Being a 'good' CPI(M) is hardly a revolutionary alternative.

The basic problem is political. The panchayets are dominated by the rural elite.

As per government survey (Human Development Report, HDR, 2004), in 1978, of 100 gram panchayets, 6.5% of the elected members were landless (agricultural workers or bargadars). Agricultural households holding less than 3 acres were represented by 22% of the gram panchayet members whereas land owning households were represented by 51% of the members. Non-agricultural households were represented by 43% of the gram panchayet members. [According to Sri Debabrata Bandyopadhyay, Dr Satyabrata Sen, one of the then advisors to the government of West Bengal, estimated that in 1979, only 7% of panchayet members belonged to the landless strata].

After the 1983 elections, in a survey (HDR) done over 200 gram panchayets, it was seen that 5.5% of the elected members were from landless households and 52% members were from land owning households. 43% members were from non-agriculturist households.

Before the 1988 panchayet elections, a survey was done on the occupational background of 127 CPI(M) candidates, and this is exhibited in the HDR. Not all of them were successful in winning the election (77% won) and so the result of the survey is not discussed here.

Post-1993 panchayet elections, a survey (HDR) over 8 districts, done by the government, found that the joint proportion of agricultural labourers and bargadars in Gram Panchayet (GP), Panchayat Samity (PS) and Zilla Parishad (ZP) was 17.0%, 10.5% and 5.5% respectively. The joint representation of agriculturists, fishermen and craftsmen was 28.0%, 23.5% and 9.0% respectively.

Representatives belonging to other occupations or the unemployed jointly accounted for 54.0%, 66.5% and 86.5% respectively. Teachers constituted 6.5%, 15.5% and 32.5% respectively of the elected bodies (in 1978, teachers constituted 14.0%, and, in 1983, they constituted 15.5% of the panchayet members).

It is thus observed that during 1978-88, a span of ten years, the representation of landless agriculturists in the panchayets was a negligible 5%, and this climbed up merely to 15% in 1993-98. During 1978-88, half of the elected panchayet members were agriculturists but this figure decreased to 20% in 1993.

The proportion of non-agriculturists amongst elected panchayet members increased from 30% during 1978-88 to 60% in 1993.

It can be concluded that the voice of the landless in the panchayet bodies is indeed weak. Moreover, till 1993, landed agriculturists constituted a fair proportion of the elected panchayet members. However, post- 1993, the majority of the members belonged to sections which did not include agriculturists or handicrafts-men or those in the occupation of animal husbandry.

A glance at the occupational status of the panchayet members reveals that the panchayets are run by rich agriculturists, service holders, shopkeepers, businessmen, teachers and sections which have been classified as 'unemployed' or under 'others/social service'. 30-40% of the panchayet membership is constituted by persons classified under 'unemployed' / 'others' / 'social service'....who are they? It will not be incorrect to conclude that they are all political party workers. Rural poor have been well and truly excluded from the panchayet decision making process.

The ideal of a panchayet being a place for rural folks to sit and discuss common issues to come to a decision among themselves and implement that decision has remained a pipe dream. In effect, panchayets are run under the diktat of the rural elite, the administration and local political functionaries. That the faith of the common people in panchayets has vanished is revealed by the rate of absenteeism in the gram sabha and gram sansad sessions.

CORRUPTION

The Comptroller and Auditor General's office in West Bengal surveyed 207 out of 341 Panchayet Samitis and found in 2001 that, between 1983-2000, accounts for 10-17 years had not been prepared. The amount handled in this

period was Rs 1700 crores. Defalcation of cash was detected in 13 PSs, amounting to Rs 61.2 lakhs. Misappropriation of Rs 27 lakhs was detected. How much had been covered up? Nobody knows.

Money targeted to poor, small and marginal farmers was diverted to private use. The CAG report mentions the excavation of private tanks at an expense of Rs 3 crores lifted bodily from the Employment Assurance Scheme.

This is the tip of an iceberg, because a Zilla Parishad (17 ZPs in the state in 2001) handles government grants, amounting annually to Rs 24 crores, in cases. A Gram Panchayet (3325 of these in 2001) handles directly around Rs 10 lakhs. The scale of possible corruption can well be imagined.

(Source : Indrani Dutta in
The Hindu, Dec 20, 2001)

PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

The 73rd (and 74th) amendment to the Constitution (1993-94) goes some of the way towards participatory governance by awarding constitutional sanction to locally self-governing bodies, like panchayets, as a third political rung after the Centre and the states, with fiscal and executive powers. The West Bengal Panchayet Act was amended 26 times, before and after 1994. 29 subjects in the Eleventh Schedule like agriculture and extension, land and land reforms, food and supplies, including PDS, small scale and cottage industries, health, school and mass education, poverty alleviation, as well as traditional public works have been brought formally under the purview of panchayati raj. Since 2006, the funds under state and centrally sponsored schemes are electronically transferred to accounts created in the names of the different panchayet bodies at State Bank of India branches.

The aim of the 73rd amendment was that people should directly control the subjects in the Eleventh schedule and directly allocate and spend the funds as necessary. The elected representatives should act literally as their representatives, acting under their orders. Now, for direct participation direct assembly is necessary.

The constituency of a Gram Panchayet was divided into wards and the entire electorate of a ward designated the Gram Sansad (created by an amendment in 1992), about 700 persons on an average, to meet twice a year to identify schemes and beneficiaries and monitor the working of the Panchayet, but, note, without any powers to direct or execute schemes, much less spend monies. In 1994, came the Gram Sabha, covering the electorate of the Gram Panchayet, with an average strength of 17,000, to meet once a year. However, the elected Gram Panchayet was responsible for preparation of the annual plan and the final implementation and expenditure. This was unlike the case of Kerala, where the CPI(M) in 1996 launched the People's Plan movement, in which the village voted for the village development plan. The Kerala experiment included devolution of 40% of state controlled funds and funds for centrally sponsored schemes to village development councils. A similar experiment was undertaken in 1986 by the Medinipur District Development Council and ZP, together with the Rural Development Centre of Kharagpur IIT. These initiatives fizzled out. In Kerala, in fact, the CPI(M) lost the next State elections. "The elected panchayet representatives felt threatened ...by the direct empowerment of the people and their involvement in the planning process..... a large part of the elected panchayet representatives as well as leaders and functionaries of the political parties were employers of wage labour and they

felt threatened by the prospect of empowerment of the working people. (Maitreesh Ghatak, Maitreya Ghatak, *EPW*, Jan 5, 2002)."

The working people quickly understood that they were not to have any direct powers and did not like to waste their time over meetings. The Human Development Report has commented that the attendance in Gram Sansad sessions in 1997 was 16% and fell to 12% in 2001. In the case of Gram Sabhas, the attendance in 1997 was 30% but fell drastically in later years. However, the report noted that the average attendance of bargadar and pattadar members was a high 63%. Those who had actually benefited from the recording of barga or the distribution of pattas of vested land have taken interest in the functioning of panchayets. However, since their numbers are not too many, their record of attendance did not have a substantial impact on the statistics of overall attendance in panchayet sessions. [from *Krishaker Swartha Jalanjali* (in Bengali) by, DRC, tr:SB]

In practice, the Gram Sansad has been superseded by the Gram Unnayan Samity (2003), which is its executive committee. This small body can exercise all the powers of the Sansad, and prepares village level plans for approval at a higher level.

The power to approve these plans and prepare the district level plan lies with the District Planning Committee (1994), 20% of whose members are nominated by the state government, the District Magistrate being an ex-officio member.

In this way, the state government has effectively scuttled the possibility of real devolution of financial and administrative powers to the people through a mechanism by which everybody could participate in local governance. The government has, in fact, prepared a by-pass route for the actual execution behind the back of the PRI.

BUREAUCRATISATION

Instead of evolving methods of ensuring popular participation, the West Bengal government is progressively making the panchayets appendages of the Department and Directorate of Panchayets and Rural Development.

Right from the start, the BDO was the executive officer of the PS. A PS now has sanctioned posts of eight government employees, namely Junior Engineer, Block Informatics Officer, Data Entry Operator, Cashier-Cum-Storekeeper, Accounts Clerk, Upper Division Assistant, Clerk-cum-Typist and peon. A PS which administers WB rural employment guarantee scheme has a Deputy Secretary also. There is a Joint Executive Officer to monitor Poverty Alleviation Programmes for a bigger PS than usual.

Each GP has sanctioned posts of six employees, namely Executive Assistant, Secretary, Job Assistant or Nirman Sahayak, Sahayak and two GP Karmees. A GP within the ambit of WBREGS may have an additional Sahayak and Nirman Sahayak, depending on the volume of work.

Each ZP has, on an average, sanctioned posts of eighty-five employees in its establishment. More over, the State Government deposes twelve senior officials of the State Cadre, including WB Civil Services (Executive) officer, Accounts Officer, Engineers and Doctors to each ZP. The Executive Officer of the ZP has been made the appointing authority of the employees of all the GPs, PSs and the ZP of the district, apart from the karmees who can be appointed by the BDO. These employees have been categorised to form a Block Panchayet cadre, a District Panchayet cadre and a State Panchayet cadre (2006-07).

One should not quarrel with any scheme which employs people, but the magnitude of the bureaucracy and red tape created can be gauged from the following data from Bardhaman Zilla. The administrative structure is given below.

Name of Post	Sanctioned strength
DP & RDO	1
Dy DP & RDO	1
SA & AO	6
EOP	32
PAAO	32
Panchayet clerk	34
Panchayet peon	39
Panchayet Samiti clerk	62
Panchayet Samiti peon	31
Typist	1
Gram Panchayet secretary	277
Job assistant	277
Executive assistant	277
Nirman sahayak	277
Panchayet karmee	831
Gram Panchayet sahayak	277
Parishad audit & accounts officer	1

The allotment received from the state government on account of pay and allowances in 2003-04 amounted to Rupees 14.58 crores.

The enormity of this expenditure on a bureaucracy can be appreciated if one learns that

(i) funds received under the National Social Assistance Programme in 2003-04 amounted to Rupees 3.51 crores (the expenditure in 2003-04 from the cumulative balance being Rupees 4.01 crores.),

(ii) funds received for infrastructure development and remunerative assets in the 3 years between 7.2.1997 and 15.2. 2000 of the 10th Finance Commission period amounted to Rupees 27.80 crores (of which Rupees 26.92 crores were spent), and total funds received in the 4 years of the 11th Finance Commission till March 2004 were Rupees 20.45 crores (of which Rupees 14.65 cores were spent).

Having looked in detail at one district, it is better to take a bird's eye view of the entire state.

The state grant for salaries in 2006-07 for all panchayati raj institutions (PRI) was Rs 210.79 crores, which was 40% of all state grants, and 30% of all grants, state and central (considering targeted allocation for centrally sponsored schemes, the total allocation was Rs 2023.81 crores for all PRI in that time span).

So, the government gives grants, but ensures that much of these grants cannot be directly put to productive use by creating an expanding bureaucracy which not only acts in favour of the status quo like all bureaucracies, but straight away, legally, eats up 30-40% of untied funds. Then there is corruption!.

The idea of community development has long been present in Indian political thought, but the idealistic approach of its earlier proponents was seized by the political followers of domestic and foreign big capital to categorise it as *impractical* and *utopian*. Those were the days when it was thought that capital-intensive industrialisation directed by a central bureaucracy was the only path to be followed. Amit Bhaduri, in a series of closely argued articles (see his book *Development with Dignity*), has shown how the failure of bureaucratic control and the unbridled rise of international finance capital, with a piratical penchant for short-term investment and speculation, allowed big capital, operating through the IMF, the World Bank, and financial marketeers, to force the country to adopt a high growth strategy characterised by

- (a) neglect of the domestic market vis a vis external markets,
- (b) boost of profitability and international competitiveness by decreasing labour costs,
- (c) increase in labour productivity by downsizing the labour force, increasing hours of work, and cutting wages,
- (d) transfer of resources to "high growth" sectors producing goods and services (including infrastructure) like malls, flyovers, hotels and 'state of the art' air services for the rich, away from sectors producing essential goods and services mainly for the poor.

The net result is a fierce onslaught on the poor, characterised by increasing unemployment and loss of bargaining power, and forcible transfer of resources, like land and budgetary allocations, to big capital and its rich hangers-on.

The poor retaliate and the government advances to the Salwa Judum/Nandigram/Kalinganagar mode.

As an alternative to what he calls "predatory growth" and "developmental terrorism", Amit Bhaduri revives the idea of decentralised planning and participatory democracy, in a modern, practical form of action. The panchayets are his units. He is proposing :

- (a) full employment for all as a precursor and cause of growth, as opposed to growth "trickling down" through the effect of restricted and uncertain employment,
- (b) a start from a National Rural Employment Guarantee-like scheme linked to productive asset building, leading on to decentralised industry, especially based on agriculture,
- (c) planning, execution, and financial and administrative control of this economic process by panchayets, (actually Gram Sansads, in line with Bhaduri's commitment to participatory democracy),
- (d) disbursement of funds directly by the local branches of nationalised banks to the panchayets, the function of watchdog being played by the bank (in turn watched by the panchayet)—no second instalment if the first is not properly spent and accounted for, and
- (d) use of the right to information (the present RTI act must be made much more effective) to keep a check on how the "People's Plan" is progressing and enforce total transparency..

If the idea is timely and logical, the people will catch it. Singur, Nandigram, the punishment of dishonest ration dealers, and, finally, the determined fight in the panchayet elections, in spite of the disunity among the opposition

parties, shows that the people of West Bengal are learning to think for themselves.

What does this mean in practice?

First, the Gram Sansad must be given powers to formulate village level plans, direct and monitor their execution, and co-ordinate among themselves to formulate a co-ordinated plan for the anchal. After the Gram Sabha approves the co-ordinated plan, the Sansads will monitor and direct execution of the anchal-level plan, separately and in co-ordination with each other. The GP must have the power to draw monies from the bank for such execution and to direct its own staff in day to day work.

Second, the Gram Sansad, collectively and, in follow-up of individual queries, must inspect accounts kept by the GP and monitor project implementation by the GP.

Third, the block-level plan and the district level plan must build on the village level plans, and the final formulation in both cases must be approved at the Gram Sabha and the Gram Sansad, not the other way round.

Fourth, the role of the state government employees and especially the officers will be advisory and consultative. They will have no financial and administrative powers with respect to panchayet work. They will work as directed by the panchayets. Through them, the PRI will know the state planning process, so that this can be taken into account when drawing up PRI plans, and the execution of PRI projects will be facilitated when an interface arises with state government work and channels.

Can such ambitious programmes find men and women to initiate and lead them? The people of West Bengal look hopefully at the peasants of Singur and Nandigram and the factory workers who expressed solidarity with them.

The time will find the men and women. □□□