

DECENTRALIZED PLANNING IN AN INDIAN STATE: AN EXPLORATORY EXERCISE

Prabhat Kumar Datta¹, Inderjeet Singh Sodhi²

¹ Honorary Adjunct Professor, Institute of China Rural Studies, Central China Normal University, Wuhan, China And Former Centenary Professor of Public Administration, University of Calcutta, West Bengal, India.

² Professor (Public Administration) & Head, Department of Local Governance, Rajiv Gandhi National Institute of Youth Development, Sriperumbudur, Tamil Nadu, India

* Corresponding author: dattaprabhat@gmail.com

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Abstract: In India, the idea of decentralized planning gained momentum after the country became independent in 1947 but its rudimentary practice was not completely unknown before 1947. In post-independent India a number of government committees and commissions had recommended for introduction of decentralized planning at different points of time. The most remarkable event in this regard were twin Constitutional amendments which clarified the role of local bodies and institutionalized participation of the people which signaled what is often called a paradigmatic change. The amendments gave decentralized planning constitutional sanction and sanctity, and provided a model of planning for the whole country. In this paper, an attempt has been made to capture the different phases in the evolution of the decentralized planning processes in India as a backdrop and to assess and analyze the experiences of introduction of decentralized planning in one state of the Union of Indian states called West Bengal. It is one of the states where the exercise was done through active participation of people sought to be achieved through institutional structures created in the villages. This paper tries to make use of the available secondary data to arrive at some of the major conclusions and to justify the contentions made. Reference has also been made to some limited field work which was done through village survey. The authors have also highlighted some of the key emerging issues which call for further research. It also seeks to explore what could be the probable lessons the developing countries in general, and India, in particular.

Keywords: Decentralised Planning; District Planning; Block Planning; India; West Bengal; Gram Sansad; Gram Unnayan Samiti

1. Introduction

If a country has well developed planning machinery, then there may be chances of smooth functioning of programs and schemes as every country including India has adopted planning as an instrument for development. Planning as a tool of socio-economic transformation and development is an organized intelligent attempt to select possible alternatives for the achievement of specific goals. It may be recalled that starting with Soviet experiment in 1928 where the focus was on centralized top down planning, planning gradually swept over fairly large part of the globe. And currently it

is decentralized planning which has created a new wave and is seeping across the developing countries of the globe. Conceptually, decentralized planning or bottom up planning stands on two interlinked pillars, namely decentralization and democracy. The former is a mode and the latter are the essence where the spotlight is on participation. And the locus of decentralized planning is local self-government which can institutionalize participation of the target groups.

Planning helps in allocating the duties and ensuring the responsibilities of every organization, institute, entity, individual or group. In this concept of planning, individuals and groups are assigned the role of key actors in defining the goals, controlling the resources and directing the processes affecting his/her life. Robert Chambers is of the view that “although the freedom and power of the individuals vary enormously, all can do something” (Chambers,1983). This approach highlights that people's participation has to be regarded as “a means of re-interpretation and re-enforcement of the democratic ethos” (Michael, 1977). Inbuilt in this approach is a strong belief in the latent human potential to decide for themselves what is best suited for them. Interestingly, for Amartya Sen participation of the common people may be regarded as one of the elementary human freedoms (Dreeze and Sen, 1977).

In this paper, an attempt has been made to capture the different phases in the development of the decentralized planning processes in West Bengal during the Left Front regime against the backdrop of the national situation in this regard and to assess and analyze the experiences of introduction of decentralized planning in West Bengal. To help the readers understand the backdrop, care has been taken to present a brief review of the different phases leading to the introduction of participatory planning during the last phase of the Left Front rule in the state. We would rely on field data based on a small study in a block to discuss critically what had happened on the ground. Another objective is to identify the lessons from this experiment which might be useful for the country as a whole.

2. Development of Decentralized Planning in India

The development of decentralized planning actually started after the independence of India, i.e. after 1947, before that few efforts were made. In India the roots of decentralized planning can be traced back to the ideas of Sir Vishveshwaraya who in his *District Development Scheme: Economic Progress by the Forced Marches* (1942) conceived of a four-tier planning structures for Mysore. Incidentally, the Gandhians had always pleaded for local level planning as the basis of the planning process for the

country as whole. Decentralization of planning has been seen as a method to ensure a transparent and participatory development process (Charvak, 2000, p.5).

In 1957, Balwantray Mehta Committee was appointed by the Government of India which recommended three tiers of Panchayati Raj Institutions, having constitution of elected statutory local bodies with resources, authority and power along with a decentralized administrative system operating under its control. Since then, the process of decentralization in the planning and developmental activities was continued.

The Second Plan document recognised the necessity for speeding up the development of democratic institutions and concluded that "unless there is a comprehensive village planning, which takes into account the needs of the entire community, weaker sections like tenant-cultivators, landless workers and artisans may not benefit sufficiently from assistance provided by the Government." In 1969, the Planning Commission of India issued some guidelines on the introduction of district planning. The Planning Commission advised the states to adopt district as the unit of planning below the state level and to put emphasis on the integration of the plans of local self-government bodies, Panchayati Raj Institutions, cooperative organizations and government departments (Misra, 1969, p.166).

The Report of the Dantwala Committee on Block Planning (Dantwala, 1978) stressed the need for block level planning and suggested methods for preparing block plans to be implemented in some select blocks in the country. In view of infrastructural difficulties at the block level, the committee assigned the responsibility of block planning to the district-level organization and suggested slow, movement towards introduction of effective block planning. The committee proposed the integration of block plans with the district plan and thus the committee viewed the preparation of both block and district plans to be a part of the same exercise. However, the progress was not very satisfactory.

The recommendations of the Asoka Mehta Committee (1978) opened a new era in local-government and decentralized planning in India. Besides identifying the district as the first point of decentralization below the state-level under popular supervision, it recommended the formulation of plans at the district level on the lines suggested by the Dantwala Committee. In 1983, the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister presented its report on Decentralization of Development Planning and Implementation in the states. In 1984 the focus was shifted back to the district following the recommendations of the Working Group on District Planning headed by C.H. Hanumantha Rao (Rao, 1984).

G.V.K. Rao Committee (1985) recommended that some of the planning functions at the state level may have to be transferred to the district level for effective decentralised district planning (p.3). It further expressed that the lack of integration between rural development planning and anti-poverty programmes, as well as among various anti-poverty programmes themselves is a serious problem as it has created a good amount of confusion in our planning (p.8). The Zilla Parishad should be the apex body for the overall planning at the district level. It should be assisted by a District Planning Board (DPB), which should be an advisory expert body with a planning cell. The plan should be prepared by the DPB and sent to the Zilla Parishad for review and authentication. In this model all the rural development activities pertaining to the district should be covered under the district body. For the states where the Zilla Parishads are not in existence the alternative is to set up a District Planning Council at the district level. The Collector should be the Chairman of the Council (and should be redesigned as District Development and Administrative Commission) and be given a higher status and he should coordinate all the developmental activities mentioned in the first alternative. In order to reduce the other burden of the Collector, a senior Deputy Commissioner or a junior Deputy Commissioner should be appointed to perform the routine tasks as well as protocol, etc. (p.8).

L.M. Singvi Committee (1986) was of the view that the extent and tempo of the involvement of Panchayati Raj institutions in basic planning and implementation of development projects is also subject to wide variations from State to State and even within the States (p.5). It further expressed that the Panchayati Raj institutions have to be viewed as institutions of self-government which would naturally facilitate the participation of the people in the process of planning and development flowing from and as a part of the concept of self-government.

This led to the rise of the first generation decentralized planning in the form of district level planning in many states although the states differed widely in their experiences "along a centralization-decentralization continuum." Only a few states, namely, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Jammu and Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka could make some headway in this regard (Datta and Bandyopadhaya, 2003).

3. Issues for the First Generation Decentralised Planning

The first generation decentralized planning had not been satisfactory as per the objectives/expectations due to a number of issues. For example, the local bodies were kept at a distance from the planning process which gave a wrong signal. It stood in the

way of the participation of the target groups which constitute the core of this kind of planning process. Second, adequate governmental support to this initiative was lacking ever since the journey had started off presumably because the political leaders and the members of the bureaucracy were not used to this new mode of planning and they had developed misgivings and fears about the immediate political and administrative implications of this kind of exercise. Decentralisation as a development process was something about which some apprehensions might have worked in their minds. The states where this idea had gathered some ground included West Bengal, Kerala and Karnataka.

4. Decentralised Planning in the Constitutional Amendment

Planning in India underwent a paradigmatic change following the 73rd and 74th Amendment of the Constitution which came into effect in April, 1993. This amendment had also clarified the role of these bodies and sought to breath fresh air into the body of the local government institutions in India by mandating, *inter alia*, holding of elections at regular intervals and institutionalizing participation of the citizens. It was laid down in Article 243ZD (1) "There shall be constituted in every state at the District level a District Planning Committee to consolidate the plans prepared by the panchayats and municipalities in the district and to prepare a draft development plan for the district as a whole." It gave decentralized planning constitutional sanction and provided a model of planning for the whole country. It was also an acceptance of the participatory mode of planning by the Indian states.

5. First Phase of Decentralised Planning in West Bengal

The first phase of decentralized planning in West Bengal initiated in 1985-86 was preceded by three important developments, namely, the holding of panchayat elections in 1978 and 1983 on party lines, the introduction of land reforms through the active participation of party-based panchayats and finally, the implementation of rural development programmes like Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), National Rural Employment Programme (NREP), Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP) through panchayats. These rural development programmes were conceived and developed by the central government of India. The Union Government of India gave financial assistance to respective states for implementation of these programmes. 'The impact of both the politicization of the panchayat elections and the implementation of land reform with the help of panchayats

has been the buildup of a degree of political awareness and participation by the masses of rural people in panchayat activities'(Ghosh, 1988).

The grassroots planning organization in West Bengal of this phase had three tiers— District Planning and Co-ordination council (DPCC), District Planning Committee (DPC) and Block Planning Committee (BPC). At the district level, there were two committees: DPCC and DPC. The government laid down detailed methodology of formulation of the decentralized plan and all these bodies included elected representatives of the people including the members of the appropriate line departments (Datta, 2001).

6. Village-based Planning in Midnapore District—Alternative Experiment

Interestingly, while the state of West Bengal was experimenting with decentralized planning at the block level, one of the districts in the state, Midnapore was implementing another model - the village level planning in 1985 (Bose, 2005). It was felt that decentralization of planning down the line up to the block level could not ensure people's participation. The main emphasis of the new model was to change the present socio-economic structure to organize a new society and to ensure that the down-and-out do not get domesticated and demoralized. The central core of this alternative exercise was to develop conscious organization of the toiling poor of the rural and urban areas, the purpose being to bring about a fundamental change in the present socio-economic structure.

The experiment revealed that the full implementation of the poverty alleviation programme could not solve the problems of the wage-dependent rural poor. What was necessary was to develop their self-reliant conscious organizations capable of claiming whatever could be obtained from the present government without forgetting that their basic task was to change the present socio-economic structure. Thus, the village level planning emphasized not only on creating objective conditions but also on subjective conditions in the sense of conscientisation of the rural poor. Evidently, this was an ideological push in this venture.

It was observed that this kind of planning process based on the Midnapore experiment led to some issues and challenges. The main issues and challenges were: wrong understanding of the political principle, duality in the character of panchayats (panchayat as a people's organization and as an arm of the government), resistance arising from newly developed vested interests, resistance growing out of class interests, and resistance from inertia. The experiment had shown that group meetings, prior to the meetings for the finalization of plans were more effective in generating awareness and

interest of the people to work together for a common cause. Incidentally, Neil Webster's study had also indicated the significant role of group meetings (*parameeting*) in this regard (Webster, 1992).

7. Second Phase of Decentralised Planning in West Bengal

After the promulgation of 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, the West Bengal District Planning Committee Bill was passed in 1994. It provided for the constitution of District Planning Committees (DPC) at the district level for consolidation of plans prepared by the panchayats and municipalities in the district and preparation of the draft development plan for the district as a whole. The West Bengal Panchayat Act was amended in 1994 to empower Gram Panchayats (GPs) (Section 19(1)), Panchayat Samitis (Section 109 (1) and Zilla Parishads (Section 153 (1) to prepare plans for five years and one year keeping in mind the objectives of economic development and social justice.

The Gram Sabhas and the Gram Sansads have been given specific powers and responsibilities in terms of Sections 16A and 16B of the WB Panchayat Act 1973 with regard to preparation and implementation of plans. Incidentally, while Gram Sabha was a product of the constitutional mandate, Gram Sansad was an innovative institutional structure created at the electoral booth level to institutionalize more effective participation of the villagers. The Gram Panchayat plan will include the plans of the Gram Sansad, Gram Panchayat's own plan and also proposal for inter-Gram Panchayat schemes.

8. New Initiatives in Decentralised Planning

The UNICEF supported Community Convergence Action (CCA) project, initiated during 2000-2001, based on participatory planning model, was tried out in four blocks in West Bengal. The experiences tended to show that the methodology developed was sound. The *para* meetings in particular became very effective. Attendance in Sansad meetings had improved remarkably. Second, it was also found that the rivalries between the political parties posed no problem. On the contrary, the holding of meetings at regular intervals led to the reduction of political tension in some blocks. Third, the quality of data collected was found to be rich and useful. Presentation of the reports in the Sansad meetings on the basis of data made the meetings lively and the collected data helped in identifying and prioritizing the development schemes. Fourth, the pilot studies indicated that the Gram Panchayats were capable of preparing holistic area plan through participatory process. All the plans reflected convergence of services and a balance

between sectoral plans. Fifth, non-government organizations (NGOs), wherever available, were of great help in ensuring community convergence (Datta, 2001).

9. Role of the Gram Unnayan Samiti (GUS) (Village Development Committee) in the Planning Process

In the rural local government of India, Gram Sabha has much relevance, if adhered to its meeting agendas. The Gram Sabhas and the Gram Sansads have been given specific powers and responsibilities in terms of Sections 16A and 16B of the West Bengal Panchayat Act 1973 with regard to preparation and implementation of plans. The WB Panchayat Act was amended in 2003 to empower the Gram Sansads to set up Gram Unnayan Samiti (Village Development Committee) (GUS). The primary objective of the GUS is to ensure *inter alia* participation of the local villagers in the processes of planning, implementation and monitoring of development activities at the lowest rung of the panchayat ladder, namely, Gram Sansad. The duties and responsibilities of the GUS have also been spelt out as follows:

- a) Preparation of development plan and labour budget of MGNREGA as per need and priority of the Gram Sansad;
- b) Assisting Gram Panchayat (GP) in preparing its plan;
- c) Assisting Gram Panchayat in convening the meetings of Gram Sansad and ensuring active participation of the people;
- d) Enabling citizens to have information on the important programmes taken up by the Gram Panchayat
- e) Publishing defaulting tax payers' list in Sansad area and to assist GP in realizing arrear tax
- f) To be accountable to Gram Sansad for the works of the GUS

The GP member elected from a Gram Sansad shall be the chairperson of the GUS and in the event of there being two elected members from any constituency the member senior in age shall be the chairperson.

The entire process faced a setback after the 6th Panchayat General Election held in 2008 when the unquestionable majority of the Left Front parties since 1978 and the consequential political domination of the left parties in rural Bengal suffered a jolt. The newly elected panchayats did not give adequate priority to it. The highly competitive nature of village politics added fuel to the fire. In this situation, the GUSs in most of the districts started working slowly and in course of time went out of steam.

10. Strengthening Rural Decentralisation (SRD) Programme

West Bengal government tried to strengthen rural decentralization through the Department for International Development (DFID), an international organization working for development. The GUS received attention in the DFID-supported programme called Strengthening Rural Decentralisation (SRD) launched in 2005. This DFID funded SRD programme, among other things, aimed at ‘Capacity Building’ of PRI functionaries and stakeholders along with awareness generation campaign and communication. One of the major outcomes expected of this programme was to strengthen and activate the Gram Sansads and the participatory planning process by empowering the powerless. Under the SRD Programme, Government of West Bengal (GoWB) initiated a participatory planning process in 304 GPs of 6 districts in West Bengal in the first phase. Here GUS was expected to prepare sector based gram sansad plans with a voluntary approach, mobilizing all the villagers and ensuring their participation in the entire planning process.

At the gram panchayat level another voluntary team was formed. It was known as the - Gram Panchayat Facilitating Team (GPFT) for providing facilitation and capacity building support to the GUS. The villagers were required to provide contributions in terms of cash/kind/labour for effective implementation of different schemes and optimal utilization of government resources. This entire planning process was based on the voluntary services of GPFT and GUSs. GUS was supposed to play an important role in preparation of plans for NREGS and its implementation. They were given the responsibility of supervising the activities under MGNREGA on one hand and on the other hand conducting awareness camp for making the villagers conscious of their rights.

Under the initiative of the SRD GUSs had facilitated the formation of “social capital” (Putnam, 1993). Social capital here refers to features of social organizations such as trust, norms, and networks that facilitate spontaneous social cooperation and coordinated action. One World Bank study has also acknowledged the key role played by the Gram Unnayan Samitis in building up social networks of trust in the countryside (Islam, 2005).

Though much remained to be done, yet the training initiatives and capacity building measures together with the awareness generation campaigns undertaken by the SRD team placed in the districts did pave the way for small “community initiatives” for development independent of any financial assistance of the government or the Panchayats in many areas within the state. For instance, in the Sukhdevpur Gram

Panchayat in Dakshin Dinajpur women SHG members have been very active in campaigning for primary education of the local children (Datta and Sinha, 2008). With the initiatives of the women- led SHGs in five gram sansads in the said area the local residents were found to be collectively engaging themselves in renovating the village road in some of the villages. Such success stories of “spontaneous participation” have nevertheless been very few and are largely confined to small pockets. To the individual these may seem insignificant, but the sum total of small actions makes great movements (Chambers, 1983).

11. Phases in the Preparation of Sansad-Based Participatory Planning

There were five phases in the preparation of the Sansad-based plans. The first phase focused on the campaign, training and empowerment. The second phase related to conducting surveys for the collection of data and information. The data and information were required to be collected for the preparation of plans. In this phase the members of the GUS were given the task of preparing the village register containing wide ranging useful data about the village. The third phase in the process related to analysis of problems, resources and potentialities and determination of programmes. Some of the major activities of this phase included examination and understanding of the overall situation of the Gram Sansad, analysis of the resources and exploration of the possibilities of how they can be fruitfully utilized and to prepare the sectoral plans accordingly. While making prioritisation of plans and programmes the villagers have to be consulted.

The fourth phase was a phase of preparation of draft plans and their primary approval. This work was preceded through the formation of small team which was entrusted with job of preparation of the draft plans. The draft development plans were to be placed in the special general meeting of the Sansad which was authorized to approve it. After this exercise is done the draft plan was put up in public places. A copy of such was sent to the GP concerned.

This was followed by a meeting of the Task Force and development seminars which can be considered as the fifth phase in the planning process. The seminar was required to be attended by all the Gram Panchayat members, representatives (10 to 12) from each Gram Sansad area, local and block officials, Task Force members, locally available experts, representatives of the NGOs working in the area and the representatives of all the political parties.

The development seminar was followed by the attempts to finalise the Gram Panchayat plan in the light of the documents prepared by the Task Force and the recommendations of the seminar. There were two plans - one for the five years and the other, for one year. The plan became final after the gram panchayat approved it.

12. Results from the Field Study

The field study was planned, conceived and conducted in well planned manner. The field study indicates that there had been significant erosion in the political support to the GUS after the panchayat elections held in 2008 which brought about a remarkable change in the political scenario of the villages in the state. The information was collected from the office bearers which indicated that most of the office bearers of the GUS were replaced by a new set of office bearers. The whole process has led to some issues and challenges. First, the old office bearers were trained and they learnt through handholding support how to make the GUS work. The new ones were fresher without training and motivation. The field investigations brought out that it was done primarily to break the system which emerged as a sort of centres of vested interest made use of by the earlier ruling parties for political mobilization and distribution of small economic favouritism and nepotism.

Second, the field study brought out that the idea of village based planning through Village Development Society did not trickle down to the lower level of the party as a political agenda although the ruling Left Front had created this new institutional set up and there was almost overwhelming domination of the left parties in all panchayats. The fall out was lack of discussion about proritisation in the Gram Sansad meetings at the other end, people did not have clear understanding about it. Added to it was the continuation of the tradition of sectoral planning which the official functionaries found convenient. The local political leaders with whom interaction was made, were found to be ill-equipped to talk about the holistic village based planning.

The support of the DFID sponsored Strengthening Rural Decentralisation programme was expected to change perception of the villagers at large but our findings are that most of the SRD members preferred to interact with the members of the Gram Panchayat leaving aside their primary target group. While talking to them, we gathered that it was easier for them to work with them. Second, they felt that they were the influential people to carry forward the message down the line.

Third, the size of the Village Development Society was very unwieldy as attempt was made to ensure representation of not only all sections of the rural society but also to ensure the representation of the school teachers retired and serving government

employees. Apparently, this was an innovative meaningful initiative because their services are of immense importance in the preparation of the village development plan development. In course of discussions with office bearers, it came out that the school teachers including retired and serving government functionaries did not attend meetings. We cross-checked with a section of them and found that they were reportedly preoccupied with ever-increasing work load in their respective offices. Some of them argued that the meetings hardly took place with proper notice. In fact, they were not duly motivated and there was also a lack of mutual respect for each other (Datta and Sen, 2011).

Fourth, there are subject wise standing committees at the level of the GP but they did not take any active interest in the GUS based planning. There is no functional linkage established through rules etc. between these two bodies although they work for a common purpose. More importantly, the standing committees themselves were in disarray and were found to be out of steam after some time. In fact, our deep probe showed that they had worked well during the initial years. Later on, the party leaders overpowered them and gradually they went into oblivion.

Fifth, line department officials did not take adequate interest in the planning process as is evident from the absence of their representatives in the meetings of the GUS which have been deprived not only about their contribution but of also necessary information about the expected allocation of funds from these departments. In fact coordination of development activities at the village level has become a big challenge. There is an inherent undercurrent in the relationship between the panchayats and government representatives. The local government demands horizontal coordination with line department and vertical coordination among their organs. In another study done by Bhaskar Chakrabarty and others have brought how it has not happened in West Bengal (Chakrabarty, 2011).

Sixth, Gram Sansads were supposed to emerge as the real centres of discussion and deliberation about the decentralized planning but the meetings of the Gram Sansads were not held regularly and even when meetings were held the discussions became more a ritual rather than real. Even when meetings used to take place attendance was far from satisfactory. It was reported that in some Gram Sansad meetings signatures were collected from house to house after the meetings were over to ensure quorum. Things were different during the heyday of the Left Front as our study indicated (Datta and Pranmanik, 1994). The Gram Sansads as participatory institutions of democracy lost political momentum after about a decade of its as soon as political parties started played

key roles in the meetings (Datta, 2013). During the initial years as our studies and studies by other scholars indicated the frontal organizations of the party namely the youth, students and women's wings were galvanized into action to ensure attendance of the Sansad meetings. But subsequently partisan attitude of the principal players of the meetings discouraged a good number of the villagers to attend meetings. The villagers lost their interest as the critics were not allowed free play as indicated by the study done by Maitryesh Ghatak and others (Ghatak, 2002).

A study of the sex-wise breakup of the members of the GUS showed that representation of women was highly disproportional. West Bengal passed law for fifty per cent reservation of women in the panchayat institutions but their representation in the GUS was less than one third. Women have higher stakes in village planning. Their inadequate representation meant their voices were not properly heard. The rise of the self-help groups in 1990s did bring about some change in terms of increasing presence of women in the meetings but it was short-lived because later on they were co-opted into the political fold for doing the work of political mobilization.

Seventh, the study indicated that the members of the GUS lacked adequate knowledge about the methodology and significance of the decentralized planning in which individuals and groups, as the conceptual basis indicates, would be playing the roles of key actors. Huge material was prepared under the SRD programme to sensitize them about their roles and responsibilities but our findings showed that they were not used properly. And the SRD team did not care to check it or motivate them to increase their knowledge by reading the literature prepared in local languages. Although inadequate literacy can partly explain this phenomenon, their lack of motivation contributed to the situation.

Eighth, our field interactions revealed that SRD interventions had resulted in myopic planning as the focus was on utilization of funds. The SRD staff was under pressure to spend money and unfortunately it became a major driving factor. The output aspect became secondary. The respondents also drew our attention to another weakness. They confided that that shortsighted plans prepared under the SRD funds without intensive discussion with stakeholders, could not be integrated into the comprehensive village plan (Datta and Sen, 2011).

Some degree of political consensus on village issues is a sine quo non for in any kind of participatory exercise in matters of development and or planning. The party symbol based panchayat elections politicizes the village society which was tied together by multiple bonds dividing the villagers along the line of political party. It has both

positive and negative sides. It was this politicization which was very helpful to implement land reforms programme effectively but it caused a sharp rupture in the social relations in the villages.

The GUS was conceived at a time when the rural society in West Bengal was undergoing a process of change. There is a view that it was politically motivated legislative action to create another body in the villages for political mobilization of the villagers. But it did not happen. Politics became extremely confrontational because neither the ruling party nor the emerging opposition party had agreed to leave any political space to their opponents. In this kind of a situation building consensus of the village became more a fiction than a fact.

13. Conclusion

The study on the experiments of decentralised planning in West Bengal has definitely led to good experiences as well as lessons for India and developing nations. It is very difficult to implement decentralized participatory planning in village India in a state with highly politicized society without spontaneous and sustained bottom up political initiative and support. And it is possible only when the ruling political party or coalition of parties realize that there is electoral dividend in this kind of programme. Political initiative and interest can hardly be isolated from political incentive.

It was observed that proper planning could lead to better results. As planning is not simply socio-economic exercise, it has a technical dimension in the sense it calls for some knowledge about how to weave all the components identified through participation of the stakeholders in the form of a document. In most of our villages this expertise is not easily available. And that is why the Gram Panchayat Facilitating Team created under the DFID sponsored SRD programme and it was to ensure this that provision was made to enlist the support of the school teachers and serving and retired government employees. They have to be motivated for which some incentives need to be provided more particularly when consumerism has slowly crept into rural political life.

The study finds that the villagers need to be sensitized about their roles and responsibilities. This is a very difficult task for which informal *para* meetings or meetings of a section of the villagers who might be considered useful, needs to be organized before the formal meetings are held. There are no established tested methods of doing it. Attempt has to be made to adopt innovative methodologies for this purpose in keeping with local situations.

A well-developed programme always requires meticulous planning and its implementation. As this kind of planning has to be inclusive, adequate care has to be taken to include the voices of the down and out and women. In the traditional village society their voices are not always given due importance and there is also a tendency on their part to shy away from this kind of programme. It has happened in West Bengal which has a long tradition of leftism and where caste system is relatively weak. Their physical presence in the meetings will not necessarily ensure this. They have to be motivated to raise their voices. Care has to be taken to make them understand how and why their voices are important in the processes of village development planning.

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