

CHAPTER - VI

PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION

6.1 Introduction :

The concept of panchayats in post-colonial India as reflected in the Constitution and in the reports of the committees and commissions and the experiences of their working, tend to suggest that there can be three perspectives on panchayats as instruments of development (the instrumentalist perspective), panchayats as institutions of self-government (institutional perspectives). The first perspective popularised by the Balvantrai Mehta Committee to which the birth of panchayats is traced, puts emphasis on non-political panchayats, putting rural development as the first and foremost agenda for the first generation non-political panchayats. The participation of the people was considered necessary for better implementation of rural development programmes.

The Ashok Mehta Committee which reviewed the working of panchayats in 1978, seemed to have largely been influenced by the instrumentalist idea of panchayats. Although it had pleaded for political panchayats it wanted panchayats to have two tiers rather than three as suggested by the first Mehta. It was argued that as there was no government machinery below the block the third tier would not be able to serve any fruitful purpose in terms of implementation of rural development programmes. The second generation political panchayats as recommended by the second Mehta thus upheld the instrumentalist brand of panchayats.

Interestingly the idea of panchayats as units of self-government which was embodied in Article 40 of the Constitution, escaped the notice of both the Mehtas. The statesmen had not also mentioned it in their discussions. This aspect remained beyond the purview of decentralisation discourse.

It was the L.M. Singhvi Committee constituted by the Rajiv Gandhi government in 1989 which was the first to stress the constitutional institutional perspective. The seventy third amendment of the Constitution sought to make a blend of both these perspectives. The third generation panchayats.

6.2 People's Participation through Panchayats :

The installation of the government in 1977 brought about a remarkable change in the attitude of the government to panchayats. The Left Front had initially three tasks on the rural front :

- (a) revitalisation of panchayats.
- (b) regeneration of stagnant rural economy
- (c) changing the correlation of class forces in favour of the poor.

The government spelt out its intention (a) to make panchayats political institutions, (b) to utilise them not only as instruments of development but also as platforms for fighting against rural vested interests and raising the hopes of the people thereby (c) to establish the powers of the people curbing that of the administrative officers and (d) to make the people realise through the experience of their participation about the limitations inherent in the existing socio-economic structure and then to unleash the struggles for implementation of an alternative development strategy.

Clearly this approach is different from the mainstream approach where the emphasis is on developing panchayats as institutions of self-government and instruments of rural development. One may say the roots of this approach can be traced to the character and constraints on the regime. The second generation panchayats born out of elections held in June, 1978 are marked by certain remarkable features unprecedented in Indian tradition.

- 1) West Bengal is the first State in country to go in for political panchayats even before the Ashok Mehta Committee had recommended it. At the moment there are two kinds of situations in matters of party participation in panchayat election. In States like Andhra and Karnataka the parties participate but not at all levels. West Bengal is the only State where parties participate in elections to all tiers of panchayats.
- 2) West Bengal is the first State in the country to represent a break from the past political patterns in India in terms of social background of rural leadership. The

Ashok Mehta Committee remarked, "the panchayat institutions are dominated by economically and socially privileged sections of society"

- 3) West Bengal is the first State in India to hold panchayat elections at regular intervals since 1978 i.e. more than a decade before the 73rd amendment of the Constitution was made. One of the main purpose of this amendment is to compel the State governments to hold elections at regular intervals. Interestingly even after this amendment the people had to move to the court in states like Karnataka, Madras, Bihar, Orissa to compel the state government to hold elections to panchayat bodies.
- 4) West Bengal was the first State during the phase of the second generation panchayat to perceive panchayats as platforms for fighting against the rural vested interest.

The second generation panchayats had made their presence effectively felt in 1978 when devastating floods had overtaken the large areas of the countryside in West Bengal. Panchayats rose up to the occasion and met the challenge effectively. Unlike the earlier occasions there was not much migration from the rural to urban areas which spoke of the successful performance of panchayats.

6.3 Implementation of Development Programmes through Panchayats :

Then came the participation of panchayats in the implementation of rural development programmes, the core of which is land reforms. Land reform programme has three aspects, namely, registration of names of share-croppers popularly known as operation barga, redistribution of ceiling surplus lands among the landless and extension of institutional credit over to the land reform beneficiaries.

Panchayats played very active role in operation barga programme which was undertaken through holding of evening camps. Panchayats had played the role of motivators in the evening camps by promising the prospective bargadars their help and support.

The panchayats directly participate in the land redistribution programme. At the Zilla Parishad and Panchayat Samiti levels there are standing committees to look after this work. The standing committee at the Samiti level clears the list of persons to whom the vested lands would be redistributed. West Bengal's record in this regard is the best in the country. By the end of 1991 West Bengal whose share of cropped area was around 3 percent accounted for nearly a fifth of all cultivable land redistributed under agrarian reform programme. Over 40 percent of the land redistribution beneficiaries in India were to be found in the State.

The relatively successful implementation of the development programmes in West Bengal has been possible because of greater popular participation. Local participation has the great advantage of making local information available to the decision makers.

Before 1992, participation in West Bengal has not taken the form of gram sabha meetings where allocations of IRDP or JRY funds have been discussed in detailed consultation has largely been informal. A survey of perceptions of the villagers about the working of panchayats in their villages conducted as a part of the World Institute for Development Economics Research showed that in general the panchayat leaders reflected the opinion of their constituents.

6.4 The East Bengal Panchayat Act 1994 :

The East Bengal Panchayat Act as amended in 1994 provides for gram sansad for each electoral constituency. It is required to meet twice a year to guide and advise the gram panchayat in regard to scheme of development and social justice undertaken or proposed to be undertaken in its area and in all matters pertaining to identification or laying down principles of identification of beneficiaries for various anti-poverty programmes. The gram sabha is to meet once in a year. The panchayat is required to place before the meetings the decisions of the panchayats on proposals submitted at the gram sansad meetings. These two bodies have started functioning, though not to our full satisfaction. The effective working of these grassroots formations will

increase transparency and act as a check on corruption. The third generation panchayats introduced through the seventy third constitutional amendment provides for reservation of seats for women and other weaker sections including the posts of chairpersons. West Bengal's record in respect of representation of the weaker sections, like SC, ST as for example.

6.5 Powers to the West Bengal Panchayats :

West Bengal went ahead of the 73rd Constitutional amendment act by reserving one-third seats for women to the panchayat bodies before the last elections held in 1993. At present West Bengal has 24,799 women elected to the different tiers of the panchayat system. Of them 8 are office bearers of the Zilla Parishad, 82 of the panchayat samitis and 196 of the gram panchayats. In terms of percentage women constitute more than 36% of all the representatives. There is no detailed study on their social background. One micro study conducted by State Institute of Panchayats in Burdwan shows that a good number of women have either the experience of participating in movements or in the literacy campaigns. Given the social background of the members in general it may be presumed that many of them come from poor families.

It cannot however be denied that the performance of panchayat in respect of mobilisation of resources in terms of tax collection has not been every commendable. As an incentive to tax collection the State government introduced in the eleventh plan period a scheme of matching its to the amount of total tax collection by the gram panchayats subject to be maximum limit of Rs. 5000.00. In respect of resource mobilization by panchayats in West Bengal it has to be kept in mind that panchayats are playing a very useful catalyst role in raising local contribution and unleashing mass initiative for of mall bridges, and digging small canals for extending irrigation facilities etc. This can be regarded as an effort on the part of the panchayats for mobilization of resources in the panchayats for mobilization of resources in the sense that resource mobilisation is not an end in itself.

The State government has also transferred all has lands or government tanks

to the GPs. Many of the panchayats have done very good job by covering waste land to social forestry plantations which yield some revenue. Some of the panchayats have built huts, constructed small buildings to raise their revenue by letting out the space.

The government has also launched a scheme of decentralised resource mobilization in the district with effect from November 1, 1992. If the collection in a district in any of the items viz. registration fee, amusement tax, motor vehicles tax, royalty/cess from major and minor minerals exceeds the stipulated target 50% of the additional collections is ploughed back to the district for the purpose of incurring development expenditure to be decided at the district planning committee.

It is recognised that the goals of poverty alleviation are difficult of achievement without the full and active participation of women who constitute a large section of the workforce in the country. Peoples empowerment is critical to the process of development of the community and, therefore, bringing them into the mainstream of development has been a major concern of the Government.

Towards this end and in order to power people an enabling environment, with requisite policies and programmes, institutional mechanisms at various levels and adequate financial resources has been created. The Ministry of Rural Development has special components for women in its programmes and funds are earmarked as 'Women's Component' to ensure flow of adequate resources for their development.

The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 provides for reservation of women at all three tiers of Panchayati Raj Institutions i.e. Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad. It is envisaged that one third of members and chairpersons of Panchayati Raj Institutions should be women. This is for the first time in our history that an opportunity has been provided for such substantial entry of women in public life and large numbers have come forward to tackle the challenge of leadership at all levels of Panchayats. There 6,55,629 women in Gram Panchayats, 37,523 women in Panchayat Samitis and 3161 women in Zilla Parishads.

6.6 Public Participation in Gram Sabhas :

In some cases, it has been observed that the public participation in Gram Sabha meetings conducted by women is higher than in the meetings conducted by men. Women members have also successfully mobilised the support of the Mahila Mandals active in their areas and in the process, are succeeding in getting them to actively participate in the decision making.

The focus of the Sub-programme "Women's Empowerment for Sustainable Natural Resource Management" is on developing the capacity of economically and socially disadvantaged groups, particularly the women's groups to build capacities to identify and address issues of sustainable resource management, including water, forest and land resources.

The Sub-programme "Strengthening Livelihood for Women's Empowerment" aims at initiating and strengthening community organisations, particularly women's organisations, which will spearhead community action on critical issues and, building a pool of knowledge and Collective Strength for Poverty Alleviation" aims at strengthening women's groups for livelihood security and economic empowerment of SC/ST population. The empowerment of women is to be achieved through education, leadership building, legal literacy, livelihood security and ensuring access to information.

Under the Sub-programme "Capacity Building of Women for Effective Governance", community women's groups would be supported to carry out development planning at the village level and trained to carry out the gender audit of the development programmes as also basic services in their villages. Women's groups will be trained to monitor the planning and implementation of anti-poverty programmes.

The Jawahar Gram Samrudhi Yojana (JGSY) has been launched with effect from April 1, 1999 with the twin objectives of creation of demand driven community village infrastructure and the generation of supplementary employment for unemployed poor in the rural areas. Wage employment under the JGSY is extended to below

poverty line families. It is stipulated that 30 percent of the employment opportunities should be reserved for women.

The Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) aims at providing assistance for the construction of houses for people below poverty line living in rural areas. Under the scheme, priority is given to widows and unmarried women. It has been laid down that IAY houses are to be allotted in the name of the women members of the household or, alternatively, in the joint names of husband and wife. During 1999-2000, 69,170 houses had been constructed for women upto December, 1999.

The National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP), which came into effect from August 15, 1995 represents a significant step towards introducing a national policy for social assistance benefits to households below poverty line, with a major focus on women.

The NSAP has three components, namely, the National Old Age Pension Scheme, the National Family Benefit Scheme and the National Maternity Benefit Scheme. The National Maternity Benefit Scheme is exclusively aimed at assisting expectant mothers by providing them Rs. 500 each for the first two live births. Under the National Old Age Pension Scheme, central assistance of Rs. 75 per month is provided to women and men who are 65 years of age and above and have little or no regular means subsistence from their own sources of income or through financial support from the family members. Under the National Family Benefit Scheme, central assistance of Rs. 10,000 is extended to the bereaved family in the case of death of the primary breadwinner due to natural or accidental causes. Women are also beneficiaries under this scheme.

The Restructured Centrally Sponsored Rural Sanitation Programme (RCRSP), which has been launched with effect from April 1, 1999, provides for the construction of sanitary latrines for the rural households. Where individual household latrines are not feasible, provision exists for construction of village sanitary complexes exclusively for women which ensures privacy and dignity to them. Upto 10 percent of the allocated fund can be utilised for construction and maintenance of the public latrines for women.

Under the Rural Water Supply Programme, training is being given to women to enable them to play an active role in using and maintaining hand pumps for the supply of drinking water. They are also represented in village level committees and are actively involved in the selection of sites for hand pumps and other sources.

The Council for Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology (CAPART) provides funds to voluntary agencies working for rural women's welfare and promotes rural technology which makes work easier and quicker for women in their households and in the outdoor activities. The CAPART provides assistance to non-governmental organisations, with proven track records, for conducting training and awareness generation and dissemination of information for the benefit of rural women.

Guidelines have been issued to allot Government wasteland/Bhoodan land and ceiling surplus land in the joint names of husband and wife or provide single title of ownership to the women head of households which significantly improves women's access to land.

The necessity of having an institutional mechanism for reviewing the content and scope of the ongoing programmes, meant for enhancing the level and quality of participation of women, has been recognised. This Committee would help in monitoring the implementation of the Women's Component and also identify areas/schemes for special interventions so as to increase the flow of benefits to women in rural development. A Women's Cell in each District Rural Development Agency will be created to handle Women's Components under various schemes. Women are also members of Watershed Committees which plan and implement Watershed Development Projects. Women are active participants in the self-held and user.

6.7 People's Participation through Information, Education and Communication :

Information, Education and Communication (IEC) activities are essential ingredients of a developments programme and play a crucial role in opening the

gateways to social transformation. It is now increasingly realised that the willing participation of the people in the development process is a pre-requisite for attaining the objectives of various development programme. Lack of awareness has been a major difficulty in securing peoples' participation in the development process, in view of which the IEC activities assume particular significance since they make systematic, co-ordinated and effective use of information for the education of the people and communicate such information in a manner that makes it "empowering knowledge"

The IEC activities has played a meaningful role in bridging the communication gap, which was somewhat overlooked hitherto and has provided adequate communication support to various programmes of rural development through an integrated IEC strategy aimed at awareness generation. During the year 1999-2000, the IEC Division made effective use of available modes of communication such as the Print Media, Electronic Media, Outdoor Media, Field level Communication Campaigns, Interpersonal Communication and Traditional Media for mobilising the people, especially the beneficiaries for their active participation in the development programmes. Efforts were made to disseminate information regarding development programmes not only to beneficiaries and intended beneficiaries but also to opinion makers, planners as well as general public. While the IEC Division has the overall responsibility of planning major IEC activities and media campaigns, the implementation of these has been largely carried out by the media units.

In view of the vast magnitude of the task of reaching out to nearly one third of the population living below the poverty line in rural areas, their geographical spread and diversities, it was felt that the objective of well-formed target groups could only be achieved through concerted efforts at different levels, with maximum involvement of people at the grassroots. Being the implementing agencies for various rural development programmes in the field, the DRDAs were asked to assess the communication needs of different programmes in their areas and take necessary steps to meet the same. A Standing Committee on Media constituted and oversees the implementation of the Action Plan for IEC activities; it periodically monitors various IEC activities and gives policy directions for mid course corrections.

6.7.1 Print Media

Despite the fast growth of electronic media, the newspapers and periodicals continue to be an important motivating force to influence the public mind. As such, several steps have been taken by the IEC Division to sensitize the print media in regards to rural development issues during the year.

For the purpose of creating awareness in respect of rural development programme among the general public and opinion makers and for disseminating information about the new initiatives and restructured programmes, issued advertisements in the National and Regional press through the Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity (DAVP). Similarly, in order to reach out to target group in the rural areas, with information and developmental messages through the print media, considerable print materials such as posters/leaflets/brochures/booklets in regional languages were got printed through the DAVP and distributed, upto the Panchayat level, in various parts. Besides guidelines on various schemes such as the Swarnjayanti Gram Swarojgar Yojana, the National Social Assistance Programme, the Samagra Awas Yojana, Innovative Stream for Rural Housing and Habitat Development, Rural Building Centres, Credit-cum-Subsidy scheme for Rural Housing and DRDA guidelines were brought out.

The Ministry prepared a wall calendar for the year 2000 with each sheet depicting its major schemes, for distribution upto the Panchayat level all over the country. Desk Calendars were also brought out during the year and conscious efforts made to improve the quality of communication through "Kurukshehra", a monthly Journal devoted to rural development issues, which is brought out by the Publications Division of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

6.7.2 Electronics Media :

Amongst the established modes of mass communication, the Radio is an especially effective medium to reach out to the target groups in rural areas. Considering the reach and potential of the Radio amongst the target groups in the rural areas, the radio programmes that were being sponsored by the Ministry over

the Commercial Broadcasting Stations of the AIR.

The broadcast of 15-minute sponsored programme in revised format, namely, 'Jaga Jan Jan Jage Gaon' commenced in December, 1999 and is being carried by 30 Commercial Broadcasting Stations of the AIR (in Hindi and regional languages) on every Friday between 7.45 PM and 8 PM.

Suitable formats, based on folk music and idioms, for broadcast over Primary Channels and Local Radio Stations have been involved in consultation with the AIR and the DAVP and the broadcast of the programme. In addition to the sponsored radio programmes, audio sports on various programmes, have also been produced through the DAVP and have been broadcast, over Primary Channels of the DAVP during prime time.

The target beneficiaries of various programmes of rural development large comprise illiterates or neo literates and Television has an integrating audio-visual element, it automatically becomes an effective medium for reaching out to this segment. In view of the efficacy of Television for mobilising participation of the people in the developmental process, it has been decided, in consultation with Doordarshan, to produce and telecast a weekly rural magazine programme.

Opinion makers and the Non-Governmental sector play a vital role in effecting

necessary social mobilization, in recognition of which towards making development sustainable and participatory. It has been decided to produce and telecast programmes on rural development themes over the News and Current Affairs Channel of Doordarshan.

6.7.3 Outdoor Publicity :

Various channels of outdoor publicity, such as bus back panels, hoardings, wall paintings, kiosks and cinema slides are being extensively employed to propagate messages on rural development themes and different parts.

6.7.4 Field level Communication Campaigns :

Since a large part of the rural population constituting the target group of the programmes still do not have adequate access to the means of mass communication, the extensive network of the Directorate of Field Publicity and units of the Song and Drama Division have been a useful means to disseminate information to this segment of society in the rural areas. During the year the Directorate of Field Publicity organised intensive campaigns in the rural areas, throughout the country, from April to June, 1999 to create awareness regarding the themes of Panchayati Raj, Rural Housing, National Social Assistance Programme and Self Employment Programmes.

The Song and Drama Division disseminates information on development issues, among target groups, through the medium of the performing arts, traditional arts, puppet shows, folk media, mythological recitals and the like. As the medium of transmission is rooted in the local ethos and traditions, the developmental messages are more easily grasped by target groups. During the year, from the financial assistance provided by the Ministry the Song programmes on the themes of Panchayati Raj, National Social Assistance Programme. Rural Housing and Self Employment Programmes.

To reach out to people in the remote/interior areas of the more backward districts, the endeavours to employ the mode of publicity through the medium of Video Vans.

6.7.5 Interpersonal Contact and Traditional Media :

People in the rural areas still tend to rely considerably on interpersonal contact and traditional media as a source of information. Owing to geographical spread and diversity, it is not always feasible to tap these media for awareness generation activities from the Centre. The District Rural Development Agencies (being the implementing agencies for various rural development schemes in the field) are ideally placed to assess the communication needs in respect of different programmes at the local level and to take appropriate steps to fulfil the same through locally available resources.