Changing Local Politics in Rural West Bengal, India: A Case Study of One Gram Panchayat

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INTRODUCTION

In West Bengal, India, the Left Front (LF) Government, a coalition of left parties, had been in power for over three decades until it was finally defeated in the assembly elections of 2011. Along with land reform, the revitalization of *panchayats*, or local councils, which the LF government had driven forward since the beginning of its administration, brought about significant changes in rural society. While domination by the rural elite in local politics has considerably declined, participation in local politics by the poor has increased. Rural people have become better informed and more conscious of their rights. During the 1980s, West Bengal also witnessed a rapid growth in agricultural production due to the expansion of irrigation and dry season rice (*boro*) cultivation. Thus, with broad support from the rural poor, LF parties, especially the dominant Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)), strengthened their support base in rural areas. At the same time, the left parties came to control panchayat administration as well as to greatly influence every aspect of the social lives of rural people.

However, stagnation of industry continued during the long rule of the LF government. Political conflict and party factionalism also intensified, resulting in nepotism and corruption. And dissatisfaction among the rural people, many of whom feel they have hardly benefited from the government-sponsored programmes, gradually increased. People became more and more discontented with the LF government, which seemed to have lost the political will to reform society that it had in the beginning. Against the backdrop of increasing dissatisfaction among their rural constituents, the government's coercive policy concerning land acquisition for industrial purposes stoked the people's resentment further. As a result, the LF parties lost a considerable number of seats in panchayat elections in 2008 and were eventually thrown out of office in the Assembly elections of 2011.

Using the concept of 'party-society', this paper, based on village level

data, examines how local rural politics is transforming in the face of such a big political change.

'PARTY-SOCIETY' IN RURAL WEST BENGAL

Bhattacharyya (2009; 2010) pointed out that under the rule of the left parties, especially the CPI(M), a unique form of society had been created in rural West Bengal, and he called it 'party-society'. According to him, party-society is a specific form of 'political society', a concept which Chatterjee (2001; 2004; 2008) has developed in his unique way.

Chatterjee, inspired by Foucault, pointed out that the emergence of modern mass democracy produced a distinction between 'citizen' and 'population'. While the concept of citizen implies participation in the sovereignty of the state, that of population connotes targets of the policies of the government which secures its legitimacy by providing large sections of the people with well-being. From this distinction, he described two domains of society or politics: One is 'civil society' which is characterized by the relation between the state and rights-bearing citizens as envisaged in the constitution. The other is 'political society' which emerges from the relationship between populations and governmental agencies (Chatterjee 2004: 34-8). Civil society in India, which can be said to have been created by the nationalist elite under colonial rule, has long continued to be a sphere limited to the elite, such as the present-day urban upper and middle classes. On the other hand, the postcolonial state, which succeeded the governmental technologies in the colonial era, has driven various development policies promising economic growth, poverty reduction and social welfare improvement, and strengthened the governance over its populations who are supposed to be the targets of the policies. This has created the sphere of political society where the values and norms expected in civil society do not dominate the society. The agencies of the government or NGOs treat the people not as citizens but as population groups deserving particular welfare programmes. And the people claim their rights not as individual citizens but on behalf of a community, and in turn are governed 'not within the framework of stable constitutionally defined rights and laws, but rather through temporary, contextual and unstable arrangements arrived at through direct political negotiations' (Chatterjee 2008: 57). In the rural context, development institutions or programmes designed by the elite have often been interpreted or implemented at the village level in a different way from what was originally intended, deviating from the rules or rendering the development plans ineffective.

Then, what are the characteristics of party-society, a specific form of political society? In comparing it with political society, Bhattacharyya (2009; 2010) pointed to some unique aspects of party-society. In West

Bengal, the left parties, particularly the CPI(M), have had a strong influence on the society and intervened not only in the public life of the people but also their private affairs. This domination by the parties has weakened the role of other agencies such as NGOs and the like, which operate as channels of public transactions in political society. Also, political parties in West Bengal generally do not appeal to any particular community based on caste, religion, and so on, but to entire populations in rural areas, undermining the role of communities as social and political agents. While, in political society, demands of the poor and marginal are likely to be made based on interests of communities strategically and contingently formed, party-society tends to make communities less visible and important. In party-society, therefore, we can see a deep division between groups along party lines, with intra-group bonding being more salient than inter-group bridging. Monopolization of social space by political parties also makes public action election-centric (Bhattacharyya 2010).

Now we will see how party society has evolved in rural West Bengal. According to Bhattacharyya (2010), party-society stemmed from the class-based movements of the rural poor mobilized by the left parties. To drive radical reforms that were strongly opposed by the traditional rural elite, the left parties needed to have a strong and coherent organization, resulting in the parties' monopolization of social life. Although party-society largely contributed to reduction of inequality among villagers and democratisation in rural politics, the enthusiasm for mobilizing people and equitably distributing resources in the early years of the LF regime was superseded by interest in bureaucratic management of the developmental administration and electoral renewal once its power base had been expanded and stabilized. As a result, the ethical charge and transformative agenda was lost in the LF's politics (Bhattacharyya 2009: 69), and the CPI(M), with its flexibility in adapting to changes of setting, became more pragmatic or calculative (Dasgupta 2009).

In monopolizing social space, the left parties, particularly the CPI(M), have intervened in every aspect of social life, ranging from job searching to settlement of family disputes. In particular, the influence of the parties over panchayat administration is likely to have turned *panchayati rāj* (governance by panchayat) into *pārṭi rāj* (governance by party) (Kundu 2003). It was through panchayat administration that the left parties had played a role of intermediary between government and the poor who were supposed to be the target of development programmes and expanded their power base among villagers. This brought political parties and panchayat (members) close to local people and made villagers, the poor in particular, more dependent on parties as well as panchayats.[1]

The strong support base of the CPI(M) and other left parties in rural areas did not necessarily mean irrelevance for the opposition parties in

rural politics. However, in the course of competing with the ruling parties, opposition parties have also, willingly or unwillingly, conformed to party-society or its political ethos (Bhattacharyya 2009; Majumdar 2009: 91). Consequently, competition among political parties that became main actors in society created deep rifts among the villagers along party lines as noted above, making it difficult for them to have a common vision or common values as members of any community.

The party-society, however, has faced a major political change since 2008 when the CPI(M) first lost several of its seats in panchayat elections.[2] During the long LF regime, many rural people had gradually become discontented with such things as the stagnation of industry followed by very limited employment opportunities, increasing input cost in agriculture, nepotism/clientelism or corruption in distribution of the promised benefits of poverty reduction programmes, oppressive party-controlled society, and so on. Nevertheless, the CPI(M) could remain in power, retaining the support from the rural poor with its strong organization and, at least during the early 2000s, with the people's expectation of economic growth by industrialization under the policies of Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya. However, the simmering discontent of the people eventually boiled over when the government failed to properly handle issues concerning land acquisition for the purpose of industry in Singur and Nandigram. In particular, criticism against the LF government came to a head over an incident in Nandigram in 2007 in which villagers protesting government land acquisition were shot and killed by police. The anger of the people seemed to be beyond the control of the LF government, and the All India Trinamool Congress (TMC), the main opposition party in West Bengal, led by Mamata Banerjee, successfully mobilized angry citizens and spearheaded the campaign against the government. This brought about a sizable political gain for the TMC. Consequently, following the panchayat election in 2008, the CPI(M) was put to rout in the 2009 parliamentary elections, the 2010 municipality elections, and the 2011 Assembly election consecutively, bringing about a TMC-led government in West Bengal.[3]

How is party-society transforming under this circumstance of major political change? In the following sections, after showing the panchayat system in West Bengal and the villages where I conducted my fieldwork, we will focus on some main actors or institutions in panchayat politics, i.e. panchayat members, Gram Unnayan Samitis (Village Development Committees) and its secretaries, and Gram Sansads (village assemblies), all of which seem to be vital agencies in transforming party-society.

PANCHAYAT INSTITUTION IN WEST BENGAL

Replacing previous law, the West Bengal Panchayat Act (1973) came into being before the LF took power in 1977. However, it was under the LF
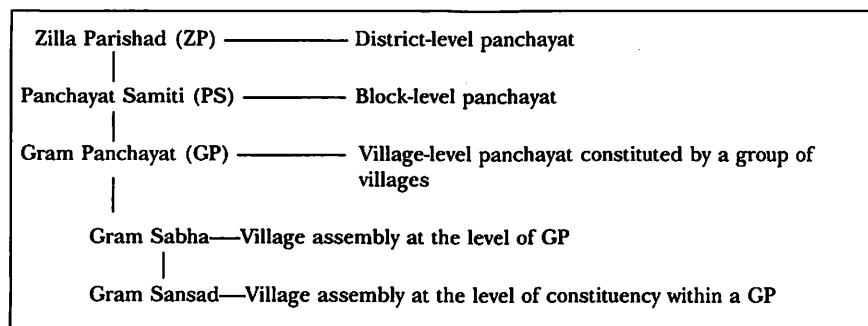
regime that the first panchayat election was held in 1978 according to the new Act. West Bengal has experienced panchayat elections every five years uninterruptedly since then, and the act of 1973 has been amended several times thus far.

After the passing in 1992 of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Bill, which recognized panchayat as an institution of local self-government and prescribed a uniform panchayat system throughout the country, state governments started to revise or create their Panchayat Acts. The following are the key points of the Constitutional Amendment Act:

1. Constitution of three-tier panchayats at village, intermediate, and district levels. (The intermediate level may not be constituted in states with a population under 2 million).
2. Direct election to all the seats in panchayats.
3. One-third of the seats should be reserved for women.
4. Reserved seats for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) according to their population.
5. Five-year terms in all panchayats.
6. Establishment of Gram Sabha (village assembly) in all village level panchayats.

Even before the constitutional amendment, West Bengal already had three-tier panchayats, i.e. Gram Panchayat (GP) at the village level comprising several villages/constituencies, Panchayat Samiti at Block (intermediate) level, and Zilla Parishad at the district level, all of which are formed by direct elections every five years. The state government quickly revised its Panchayat Act in 1992, newly providing reserved seats for women and SC/ST. The term of Gram Sabha was also inserted into the Act in 1992, and with the Amendment in 1994, two sorts of village assemblies, namely Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad, were introduced. Whereas a Gram Sabha consists of all electors of a GP area, a Gram Sansad consists of all electors from a constituency within a GP. So the jurisdiction of a Gram Sabha is the entire area of a GP, and that of Gram

FIG. 1. THE STRUCTURE OF PANCHAYAT IN WEST BENGAL

Zilla Parishad (ZP) ————— District-level panchayat
     |
Panchayat Samiti (PS) ————— Block-level panchayat
     |
Gram Panchayat (GP) ————— Village-level panchayat constituted by a group of
                                          villages
     |
     Gram Sabha——Village assembly at the level of GP
          |
     Gram Sansad—Village assembly at the level of constituency within a GP

Sansad one constituency in a GP. The chart of three-tier panchayats and the two types of village assemblies is shown in the Figure 1.

According to the Act, Gram Sabha should be convened at least once a year (in December), and Gram Sansad twice a year (in May and November). The quorum of a Gram Sabha and a Gram Sansad is 5 per cent and 10 per cent respectively. The West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act (2003) has made it obligatory for a GP to act upon any recommendations of a Gram Sansad relating to the list of beneficiaries, schemes or programmes. If the GP decides in a meeting that such recommendations are not acceptable or implementable under the law, the decision shall be taken up in the next meeting of the Gram Sansad. This provision has made Gram Sansad more powerful.

The same Amendment Act of 2003 has also introduced the Gram Unnayan Samiti (GUS), or Village Development Committee, which a Gram Sansad should form officially through elections. The GUS should be responsible for ensuring active participation of the people in the equitable distribution of benefits and the implementation of rural development programmes in its jurisdiction. The members of a GUS are elected from the members of a Gram Sansad at a Gram Sansad meeting specially held for constituting a GUS. A GUS, however, should include the following members:

1. The member(s) of the Gram Panchayat elected from the Gram Sansad/Constituency.
2. The opposition candidate(s) securing the second highest votes in the last Gram Panchayat election. .
3. One member from each NGO or community based organization in the Gram Sansad area. (Not more than three organizations.)
4. One member from each self-help group (SHG) functioning in the Gram Sansad area. (Not more than three SHGs, of which at least two should be women-led SHGs.)
5. One serving or retired government employee.
6. One serving or retired teacher.
7. Another 10 members or 1 per cent of the total members of Gram Sansad, whichever is higher. Also, not less than one-third of the members of a GUS should be women.

The GP member from the Gram Sansad acts as the chairperson of the GUS, and the secretary (*sacib*) is elected by the GUS from among its members. As we will see later, the secretary of the GUS plays an important role in the decision-making process in village-level politics.

BACKGROUND OF THE
## GRAM PANCHAYAT IN THIS CASE STUDY

The village-level data discussed in this study were collected from one GP, here called 'B.GP', located in the East Medinipur district. The fieldwork

focusing on the main topics of this paper was conducted in August and November 2008, although I have intermittently carried out my fieldwork in B.GP since the mid-1990s.

B.GP is situated approximately 60 km from Kolkata and is adjacent to the Hoogly River (Figure 2). It consists of 12 villages with a population of 24,053 (2001 census). Mahishya, a cultivator caste, is numerically dominant in B.GP. 25.4 per cent of the total population is SC, and there are a considerable number of Muslims in some villages in B.GP. There are no STs in B.GP.

As in many parts of West Bengal, the main crop in B.GP is rice. Along with *āman* rice which grows in the rainy season, *boro* rice, which is planted in the dry season, has also been cultivated since the mid-1980s due to the

FIG. 2. LOCATION OF B.GP

West
Bengal

India

West Bengal

B.GP   Kolkata

East Medinipur

0   100 km
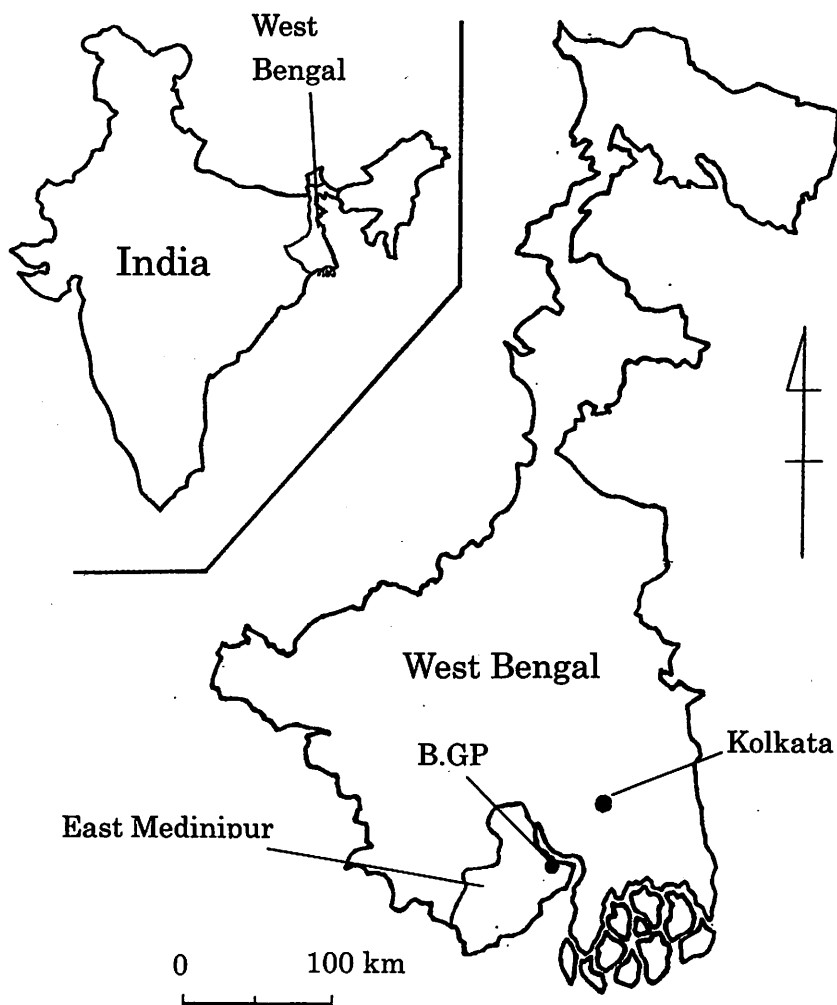
expansion of irrigated areas. Villagers, particularly small land-holding or landless households, have started to lease small plots of land in the dry season for *boro* rice cultivation. There are some brick kilns in B.GP, providing manual labourers with non-agricultural employment opportunities. Haldia, which has been developed as an industrial town in East Medinipur, is also located near B.GP, and quite a few villagers are employed as temporary workers there.

In 2008, I conducted a sample survey concerning the Gram Sansad and the Gram Sabha in B.GP which included 165 persons across 11 villages, including 41 SCs (24.8 per cent) and 39 Muslims (23.6 per cent). The numbers of male and female respondents were 88 and 77 respectively. Some findings regarding socio-economic conditions of the respondents are shown in the Tables 1, 2, and 3.

It can be said that pattern of party rivalry in B.GP is typical of West Bengal's rural political scene, so one can see the same kind of political competition in many other rural areas of the state. Since 1978, when the first panchayat elections under the LF government were held, the CPI(M) had ruled the GP for 30 years in B.GP. The main opposition party was the Indian National Congress (INC) until the panchayat election in 1993, and after the election in 1998, the TMC took over as the main rivals to CPI(M)

TABLE 1. DISTRIBUTION OF THE SURVEY RESPONDENTS'
HOUSEHOLDS IN B.GP BY LAND OWNERSHIP

Agricultural Land (acres)	No. of Households
0	73 (45.6%)
0.01-0.50	39 (24.4%)
0.51-1.00	24 (15.0%)
1.01-2.50	14 (8.8%)
2.51-5.00	7 (4.4%)
5.01 and above	3 (1.9%)
Total	160 (100%)

Source: Field survey by the author and his assistants.
Note: Out of 165 respondents, 5 gave no answer.

TABLE 2: DISTRIBUTION OF THE SURVEY RESPONDENTS'
HOUSEHOLDS IN B.GP BY ANNUAL INCOME

Income (₹)	No.of Households
Under 12,000	33 (21.6%)
12,001-24,000	52 (34.0%)
24,001-48,000	47 (30.7%)
48,001 and above	21 (13.7%)
Total	153 (100%)

Source: Field survey by the author and his assistants.
Note: Out of 165 respondents, 12 gave no answer.

TABLE 3. DISTRIBUTION OF THE SURVEY RESPONDENTS IN B.GP BY EDUCATION

School education (years)	No. of Respondents
0 or Illiterate	29 (17.9%)
1-4	38 (23.5%)
5-9	70 (43.2%)
10-12	17 (10.5%)
College	8 (4.9%)
Total	162 (100%)

Source: Field survey by the author and his assistants.
Note: Out of 165 respondents, 3 gave no answer.

dominance. In 2008, however, the ruling and opposition parties reversed positions. Among the total of 15 GP members elected in 2008, 11 were from the TMC and three were from the CPI(M). The remaining one was an independent. (B.GP consisted of 14 constituencies in the 2008 panchayat election. One GP member was elected from all constituencies but one, which was large enough to warrant the election of two members).

As mentioned before, the CPI(M) suffered the loss of seats in panchayats all over West Bengal in 2008 due to its failure to handle the land acquisition issue. Since Nandigram, where police action took the lives of several protestors, is located in the East Medinipur district, the TMC attracted broader support there resulting in the electoral triumph in the Zilla Parishad of East Medinipur. In B.GP, too, a land appropriation plan was announced in 2007, and this became a major issue in the panchayat elections of 2008. The CPI(M) supporters were generally in favour of the plan, while the TMC supporters were against it. Predictably, the TMC managed to gain an advantage over the CPI(M) during the election campaign by vocally opposing the unpopular industrial policy of the LF throughout West Bengal. It should also be noted that there has been growing disaffection with panchayat politics among the people, particularly those who regard the poverty reduction programme as ineffectual or feel otherwise neglected under the CPI(M)-led panchayat. Indeed, criticism against the local leaders of the CPI(M) could be heard even among some party supporters.

GP MEMBERS OF B.GP

Socio-economic characteristics of the GP members and election candidates of the 2003 and 2008 elections in B.GP are shown in Tables 4, 5, 6, and 7. As I have already pointed out in my previous papers (Mori 1997; 2006), the landholding pattern of the GP members or candidates in B.GP considerably changed in the 1983 election, with large landholders above five acres almost disappearing. This trend has continued in the

2003 and 2008 elections (Table 4). As for non-agricultural occupations, the number of temporary labourers, artisans and small-scale businessmen were salient (Table 5). Their educational backgrounds were generally better than those of the general local population (Table 7, see also Table 3). Therefore, we can say that people from lower and middle classes in rural society with some higher degree of schooling have entered panchayat politics in B.GP.

With the introduction of reserved seats, people from less powerful sections of society, including women, have started to enter local politics in India. On the other hand, this has led to rapid changes of panchayat

TABLE 4. LAND OWNERSHIP PATTERNS OF THE ELECTED MEMBERS AND
CANDIDATES IN THE 2003 AND 2008 GP ELECTIONS

Agricultural Land (acres)	2003		2008	
	Elected members	Candidates	Elected members	Candidates
0	3	4	3	6
0.01-0.50	7	16	5	14
0.51-1.00	3	6	4	5
1.01-2.50	6	11	3	4
2.51-5.00	0	2	0	1
5.01 and above	0	0	0	0
Total	19	39	15	30

Source: Field survey by the author.

TABLE 5. NON-AGRICUTURAL OCCUPATIONS OF THE
ELECTED MEMBERS AND CANDIDATES IN THE 2003 AND 2008 GP ELECTIONS

Non-Agicultural Occupation	2003		2008	
	Elected members	Candidates	Elected member	Candidates
Temporary labourer	3	3	2	5
Artisan/Relatively small business	4	8	2	3
Relatively large business	1	2	1	2
Teacher	2	2	1	1
Specialist (pharmacist, etc.)	1	3	1	2
Clerk	1	2	2	5
Others	1	2	0	2
None	6	17	6	10
Total	19	39	15	30

Source: Field survey by the author.
Note: In the case of women elected members /candidates who did not have any non-agricultural occupation, their husbands' occupations were given in the table.

TABLE 6. ANNUAL INCOME OF THE ELECTED MEMBERS AND
CANDIDATES IN THE 2003 AND 2008 GP ELECTIONS

Annual Income (₹)	2008	
	Elected members	Candidates
Under 12,000	4	7
12,001-24,000	5	11
24,001-48,000	3	7
48,001-60,000	0	0
60,001 and above	2	2
Total	14	27

Source: Field survey by the author

Note: Three candidates including one elected member gave no answer.

TABLE 7. EDUCATION OF THE ELECTED MEMBERS AND
CANDIDATES IN THE 2003 AND 2008 GP ELECTIONS

School education	2003		2008	
	Elected members	Candidates	Elected members	Candidates
0	0	0	0	0
1-4	2	5	4	5
5-9	6	14	4	10
10-12	6	11	6	11
College	5	9	1	4
Total	19	39	15	30

Source: Field survey by the author.

representatives because the seats or constituencies reserved for women and SC/ST are changed in every election by rotation. In B.GP, too, among the total of 15 GP members, there were only four who had been GP members before. As for the 19 members elected in 2003 when the CPI(M) held power, only five were ex-members.

It has been pointed out that husbands of female members often do the work in place of their wives in Indian panchayats. It is also the case in B.GP that the husbands of female GP members sometimes substitute for their wives in fulfilling panchayat duties. It should be added, however, that as far as the GP members elected in 2008 are concerned, the female members were not necessarily passive in their attitude toward their panchayat work. The position of president, or *pradhān*, of B.GP was reserved for a woman by rotation in 2008, and the GP was presided over by a woman president who was elected from the TMC. Certainly, her husband sometimes helped, but she was willing to do her work mostly by herself.[4] She actively performed her duties in the community and also listened to villagers who visited her residence. Another female member

elected from the TMC told me that during the election campaign she had
walked around her village by herself to appeal to the villagers because
they had not wanted to take part in a procession or gather in a meeting
due to fear of harassment from CPI(M) supporters. Even the female
members elected due to the reservation system, thus, can be favourably
compared with any other members in their will to do something good for
the villagers as well as in their commitment to the panchayat
administration.[5]

On the other hand, it is also true that the rather highly-motivated attitude
of the GP members, both men and women, stemmed largely from their
harsh criticism of the CPI(M), which had ruled the GP for over 30 years.
The above-mentioned woman member from the TMC, who was born in a
poor family and had supported the CPI(M) for a long time, expressed
her disappointment and anger toward the party since, according to her,
it had become a party for the rich, not for the poor. She also commented
that during the CPI(M) rule, the Gram Sansad had been held tightly
among a limited number of party supporters and many villagers were
unaware of what kind of development work was going on in the GP.

Also, a male GP member from the TMC said with anger, 'I stood as a
candidate for the GP election to fight against the injustice (*anyāy*) and
tyranny (*atyācār*) of the CPI(M) regime'. He went on to say that there had
been no (socio-economic) improvement in the village during the rule of
the CPI(M). Although his comment is certainly an extreme case, these
kinds of criticisms against the CPI(M) are more or less likely to be shared
among the TMC supporters.

This same male GP member who spoke with open hostility against the
CPI(M) and expressed party factionalism in a straightforward manner,
however, strongly felt that irrespective of his/her political party (*rājnaitik
dal nirbiśeṣe*), everyone should cooperate to do development work for the
village. To some extent, this feeling seems to be shared among some GP
members and villagers who are fed up with the factional conflict in the
'party-society' created by the CPI(M).

It was not only the TMC supporters who criticized the CPI(M); even
the CPI(M) candidates at the panchayat election and CPI(M) party
members confessed their disappointment with the local leadership of
the CPI(M). A CPI(M) member who had once been vice-president of the
GP commented that fairness/transparency (*svacchatā*) was absent in the
local leadership these days. Another person, who was also an ex-vice-
president of the GP, said that the poor had been deceived (*bañcit*) under
the CPI(M) regime. Furthermore, another election candidate from the
CPM expressed his criticism that local (block level) leaders of the party
had become very selfish like businessmen (*businessman-er mato*), and that
they only provided those close to them with benefits and didn't take care
of the villagers who needed help. These comments reveal that there was
a conflict within the party at the local level, and this weakened the party

unity, resulting in the defeat of the CPI(M) in the election of the local bodies in this area.[6] Nevertheless, we can see from their criticism that they retain a keen sense of justice and an ideal vision of what they think politics or politicians should be.

Even though strong party factionalism, characteristic of the 'party-society', was shared among the politicians in B.GP, they were well aware of the necessity of cooperating across the party lines to ensure fairness in implementing the development work. Distrust or discontent with local politics had spread among the villagers, especially the TMC supporters, who felt exclusivity and favouritism in the CPI(M)-led panchayat politics. This brought about the radical political change in 2008, and the politicians and party members in B.GP seem to have become more sensitive to the voice of the villagers since, more or less enhancing their political profile.

However, for a GP member, particularly a fresh politician who has newly entered the GP as an elected member, it is not easy to take leadership and ensure fairness in handling the various demands or grievances of the residents in his/her constituency. Under such circumstances, the role of the secretary of the GUS is very important.

THE SECRETARIES OF THE GRAM UNNAYAN SAMITI

Table 8 shows the profiles of the secretaries of the GUSs constituted after the 2008 election in B.GP. All the secretaries were male, and 5 of the 14 were serving or retired teachers. Nine had completed no less than 10 years of formal education and four were college graduates. Compared with the GP members elected in 2008 (see Tables 4, 5 and 7), we can say that the secretaries of the GUSs were generally somewhat advantaged in socio-economic status, especially with respect to (ex-)occupations and education. Furthermore, most of them held executive posts in the local organization of the party they were affiliated with, or were ex-GP members who could be seen as veteran politicians. It also should be noted that No. 8 and No. 14 in the table were (ex-)school-teachers and had also not been involved in previous political activities, so they seemed to enjoy the confidence of villagers across the parties.

These GUS secretaries who were rich in experience in local politics or thought to be reliable could have more influence in the panchayat politics than the less-experienced GP members. One may say that the strong role of the secretary is one way the GUS makes up for the defect of the reservation system. However, the members of the GUS were not always elected in a democratic procedure.

Members of the GUS should include persons from the various categories mentioned earlier in order to ensure active participation of the local people and fairness in implementation of rural development programmes. And a special Gram Sansad meeting for the purpose of forming the GUS,

TABLE 8. PROFILE OF THE SECRETARIES OF GRAM UNNAYAN SAMITIS IN B.GP

No.	Sex	Age	Caste	Non-agricultural occupation	Agricultural land (acres)	Education (years)	Political party	Position in local party organization	Experience in the GP
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	Male	45	OBC	Teacher	2.3	Graduate	CPI(M)	Member of local committee	Ex-GP vice-president (1998-2003)
2	Male	51	Muslim	Mason	0.23	4	CPI(M)	Party member	Ex-GP member (1993-8, 2003-8)
3	Male	46	SC	Temporary labourer	0.69	8	TMC	President of consituency committee	
4	Male	64	General	Retired teacher, Manager of Agricultural Cooperative	3.68	12	TMC	(Ex-executive member of local organisation)	Ex-GP member (1983-8, 1988-93)
5	Male	37	General	None	0.23	5	CPI(M)	Party member	
6	Male	61	SC	Retired teacher	1	Graduate	TMC	Secretary of constituency committee	
7	Male	42	General	Clerk in a company	0	Graduate	TMC	Secretary of local youth committee	
8	Male	60	General	Retired teacher	0.92	Graduate	TMC		
9	Male	38	Muslim	Temporary labourer	0	8	CPI(M)	Party member	

10	Male	32	SC	Pharmacist	0.81	12	TMC	Treasurer of constituency committee	
11	Male	33	SC	None	0.92	10	TMC		
12	Male	38	Muslim	Tea stall owner	0	10	TMC	(President of local high school committee)	GP election candidate in 2003 (defeated)
13	Male	48	Muslim	None	0	0	TMC.		Ex-GP member (1993-8, 1998-2003)
14	Male	56	General	Teacher	0.46	12	No answer		

Source: Field survey by the author.

Note: 'OBC' means Other Backward Classes, "General" means any other caste than SC, OBC or Muslim.

requiring a quorum of 20 per cent of the total voters of the constituency, should be held. After the panchayat election in May 2008, a special Gram Sansad was held in every constituency of B.GP in August 2008.

Here is a description of one Gram Sansad meeting I observed. The elected GP member of the constituency, here called 'BW constituency', was from the TMC. The time and place of the meeting was widely publicized locally, and a considerable number of villagers – approximately 150, including about 30 women – gathered in the primary school serving as the venue for the meeting. Since all the participants could not fit in one schoolroom, the meeting was held in the schoolyard. Members/ supporters of each party tried as hard as they could to mobilize their fellow partisans for the meeting so that they could gain an advantage in number over the opposition party.

The president of B.GP, the elected GP member from the constituency, and the secretary of the GP office sat in front of the participants. The meeting began, with the GP office secretary moderating. First, the secretary of the GP office asked the participants to recommend candidate(s) for each category, and the names of the candidates were given by the participants who were party members/supporters of either the TMC or the CPI(M). Actually, before the meeting, each party had already decided who should be nominated. After the names of candidates for a particular category were given from both sides, the moderator asked the participants to raise their hands in support of each candidate in turn, and he counted and announced the number of hands raised. This process was repeated until all the categories were filled.

In the case of a Gram Sansad in another constituency, here called 'SK constituency', a list of candidates that the GP member from the constituency and his close associates had made in advance was announced and immediately approved with no counter-candidates being fielded. Almost all of participants in the meeting were supporters of the GP member, and the meeting was over within a short time without any substantial discussion. At yet another Gram Sansad meeting in 'JG constituency', according to its GP member from the CPI(M), the supporters of the TMC declined to participate in the decision-making process, and eventually the GUS consisted exclusively of CPI(M) supporters.

Both the absence of significant numbers of opposition party members (through boycott or otherwise), and decision by hand raising, in which peer pressure may be a factor, are problematic from the democratic point of view. Given such questionable election methods, it should not be surprising that majority of the positions of a GUS would be occupied by supporters of the same party as the elected GP member of its constituency. The secretary, who is elected from among them, would also be a supporter of the same party.

Members of a GUS should regularly hold meetings in order to discuss issues concerning rural development programmes in the constituency. The meeting of the GUS in BW constituency that I observed in November 2008 went as follows.

The meeting was held to make a draft plan to be discussed at the Gram Sansad meeting that was scheduled for three days later. Out of the total 17 members, only nine appeared in the member's house where the meeting was held. The president of the GUS, the woman GP member, was absent and her husband attended the meeting in her place. In fact, no women members attended, although two of their husbands were there. Since the meeting started at around 19:00, it was difficult for women to come. In rural Bengal, a married woman is usually busy preparing a night meal for her family during that time, and there also seems to be some social restrictions on women going out at night. The meeting time, thus, was convenient only for the male members, who could spare the time for activities after finishing their daytime work. The GUS should also include the opposition candidate defeated in the last election, but she did not attend the meeting. One of the nine participants was not a member of the GUS but an active supporter of the TMC. All of the participants were, in fact, TMC supporters. The GUS meeting, thus, was not satisfactory from the perspective of inclusion of opposition party members or women. The agenda of the meeting concerned village roads, electricity, tube wells, and so on, in the constituency. The secretary of the GUS presided over the meeting.

While the GUS was intended to set the party-controlled panchayat to right, it seems that the GUS itself has fallen into a similar pattern in being controlled by a single political party. It can be said that the panchayat in West Bengal has been controlled by the parties, especially by the ruling left parties, due to its weak institutionalization, or limited capacities of the elected members and bureaucracy. The left parties, especially the CPI(M), with their organizational and managerial capacities, used these advantages to take over the panchayat. And it is true that the capture of panchayat by the left parties has, for better or for worse, made up for the weakness of panchayat (Majumdar 2009). In the course of time, the opposition parties have also gained more or less the same capacities in the context of party-society.

Influential party members/supporters had informally helped and sometimes controlled GP members until the time when the GUSs were set up in the panchayat system. However, a secretary of GUS who works with or influences a GP member holds a formal position within the panchayat institution. The GUS, therefore, could institutionalize or legitimize the party-control of panchayat if it is under the control of a political party.

Nevertheless, the open elections of GUS members would, to some

extent, guarantee the qualifications of elected members. This could be seen in some constituencies where some secretaries/members of the GUSs had remained unaffiliated with political parties. To my question about the reason why he was elected as a secretary of the GUS, the secretary at No. 14 in Table 8 answered that it was because villagers wanted development for all, leaving out party factionalism. Also, some members of a GUS in one constituency, here called 'DN constituency', clearly stated that they supported no political party.

In the following section, we will examine some regular Gram Sansad meetings from the perspective of participation of the local people and with reference to the role of GUS and its secretary.

GRAM SANSADS IN B.GP

Both Gram Sansad and Gram Sabha are village assemblies in which the voters can participate, but there is a significant difference between the two in perception and participation of the local people. As Table 9 shows, the people in B.GP, even women, were well aware of Gram Sansad, while Gram Sabha was less known to them. It follows from this that they tend to participate in Gram Sansad meetings more than Gram Sabha ones. In addition, villagers seem to be more interested in Gram Sansad because it deals with issues in their constituency which they are familiar with, and also because it is more powerful than Gram Sabha by law. On the whole, the villagers seem to regard Gram Sabha, where the recommendations from every Gram Sansad are said to be repeated, as less important.

Interestingly, this higher degree of recognition and participation in Gram Sansad also holds true among the people from the SCs, the landless and low-income households and the less educated. The reason for this is that the main agenda items discussed in the meetings relate to the government sponsored programmes targeting the poor.

Now let us consider some regular Gram Sansad meetings held in B.GP in November 2008. I observed six Gram Sansad meetings. Table 10 shows the abbreviated names of each constituency and some basic information about the meetings.

To meet the quorum of 10 per cent of the total voters in a constituency, each Gram Sansad shown in the table needed about 75 to 100 participants. If it failed to meet the quorum, the meeting was to be adjourned, so GUS members, including the GP members, made every effort to gather villagers to meet the quorum. Villagers who came to the primary school where the meeting was held were first requested to sign their names in the record book of the Gram Sansad. (If they were illiterate, they could put their thumbprints.) The meetings started only when the number of signatures was enough to meet the quorum. Some people, however, went back home soon after the meetings started, or stayed outside the meeting room during

TABLE 9. AWARENESS AND ATTENDANCE OF GRAM SANSAD AND GRAM SABHA IN B.GP

	Gram Sansad			Gram Sabha		
	Aware	Not aware	Attended in the last 3 years	Aware	Not aware	Attended in the last 3 years
Total respondents (n = 165)	141 (85.5%)	24 (14.5%)	103 (62.8%) (n = 164)	54 (32.7%)	111 (67.3%)	12 (7.3%)
Women (n = 77)	55 (71.4%)	22 (28.6%)	35 (45.5%)	18 (23.4%)	59 (76.6%)	2 (2.6%)
SC (n = 41)	38 (92.7%)	3 (7.3%)	30 (75.0%) (n = 40)	13 (31.7%)	28 (68.3%)	3 (7.3%)
Landless (n = 73)	60 (82.2%)	13 (17.8%)	51 (70.8%) (n = 72)	20 (27.4%)	53 (72.6%)	5 (6.8%)
Low income earners of ₹12,000 or below (n = 33)	31 (93.9%)	2 (6.1%)	25 (75.8%)	10 (30.3%)	23 (69.7%)	2 (6.1%)
No school education or illiterate (n = 29)	26 (89.7%)	3 (10.3%)	20 (69.0%)	8 (27.6%)	21 (72.4%)	0 (0%)

Source: Field survey by the author and his asssitants.

TABLE 10. BASIC INFORMATION ABOUT THE GRAM SANSADS IN B.GP IN NOVEMBER, 2008

Constituency	Political party the GP member supported	Date	Approximate Time	Approximate number of total participants	Approximate number of women participants	Approximate Number of signatures collected	Persons who presided over or led the meeting	Remarks
JP	CPI(M)	15/11/2008	16:05-17:00 pm	70	20	not less than 110	GP vice-president, GP office secretary	GP member in this constituency did not attend the meeting
BE	TMC	17/11/2008	15:50-16:50 pm	40	5-6 (several women were outside the meeting room)	nearly 100	GP vice-president, GP office secretary, GUS secretary	GP member in this constituency was GP vice-president
DN	TMC	18/11/2008	15:30-17:00 pm	90	30	not less than 100	GP president, GP office secretary, GUS secretary	GP member in this constituency was GP president

SK	Independent (previously supported CPI(M))	19/11/2008	15:20-16:00 pm	100	50	nearly 140	GP member, GP vice-president, GP office staff
DL	TMC	21/11/2008	15:20-16:40 pm	60	15	ND	GP member, GP office staff, GUS secretary
BW	TMC	26/11/2008	15:10-1600 pm	80	20	ND	GP member, GP vice-president, GP office staff, GUS secretary

Source: Field survey by the author.

the meetings. This often resulted in meetings falling short of the quorum in the middle. Although the number of participants in each meeting shown in the table is just a rough estimate made by the author, it can be assumed that the meetings had actual participants slightly above or below the quorum.

The main objectives of the meetings were to report accounts of the GP and to make a list of development projects that should be started in each constituency. To demonstrate how things happen at the meetings, we will select two meetings in the DN and BW constituencies and follow the progress of each below:

(a) Gram Sansad in DN constituency
   • The secretary of the GP office explained the development programmes to the participants.
   • Some participants asked questions about the GUS, an employment generation programme, and some development projects that had already taken place.
   • The secretary of the GP office reported the accounts of the GP.
   • Some participants questioned or complained about the list of Below Poverty Line (BPL) households that had been made recently. The meeting then became very noisy for some time with other participants voicing comments informally.
   • The secretary of the GP office restarted the report of the accounts, and some further questions were asked.
   • The meeting site became very noisy again.
   • Some participants asked more questions about the accounts.
   • Participants expressed various opinions or made demands concerning where tube wells should be set, where electricity facilities were needed, or the like, and then the site became very noisy again.
   • The secretary of the GUS asked the participants to report the details of the situation of every hamlet in the constituency to him and the GP president later so that they could consider the issues and their demands fairly.
   • The secretary of the GUS presented a draft development plan concerning electricity, canals, and so on.
(b) Gram Sansad in BW constituency
   • The staff of the GP office reported the accounts of the GP.
   • The secretary of the GUS presented a draft development plan.
   • The meeting room became very noisy with various opinions/ demands being simultaneously raised from every corner.
   (The room remained very noisy throughout the meeting, and no one in authority could fully restore order. However, the members of the GUS and the staff of the GP office did manage to make a draft development plan under such conditions.)

- The staff of the GP office read out the draft plan.
(The room remained noisy and the meeting broke up soon thereafter.)

Like the two Gram Sansad meetings described above, every meeting I attended became more or less noisy soon after it started, though some were worse than others and became truly chaotic. Participants often expressed opinions, comments, or demands simultaneously or talked to each other about the issues under discussion. The Gram Sansads in SK and BW constituencies were especially noisy during the entire duration of the meetings. At their worst, the Gram Sansad sessions in B.GP were far from the ideal of a well-organized and orderly meeting where participants express their opinions one by one and everyone listens to the speaker politely. The GP member, GUS secretary, and GP office secretary were at a loss to control the participants and restore order once a Gram Sansad meeting was thrown into an uproar. Moreover, under these conditions, some participants tried to personally approach the GP member, GUS members or GP office secretary in order to state their demands to them face to face, which made the meetings even more unruly. Once a meeting became like that, the meeting room was no longer a place where open discussion and exchange of opinions among the participants could happen. Rather, it became a site where several personal consultations or negotiations would take place.

Again, the abovementioned atmosphere was particularly prevalent in the cases of the SK and BW constituencies. On the other hand, at the Gram Sansads in the DN and DL constituencies many questions or opinions from the participants could be heard one by one in a relatively calm manner, although the meetings also became noisy at several points.

Now we will look at the socio-economic characteristics of the participants of the Gram Sansads. I asked participants to fill in a questionnaire at four of the six Gram Sansads. The respondents did not include the GP members or GUS members. Although the number of respondents varied widely between the Gram Sansads, and some respondents might have underreported their income, the findings suggest some general characteristics of meeting participants. Table 11 shows the proportion of SCs, the landless, low-income family members, and the less educated to the total number of respondents in each Gram Sansad. As we have already indicated that the poor tend to be more interested in Gram Sansads (see Table 9), we can see here, too, that they were well represented at each meeting, considering the proportion of the landless and low-income people shown in Tables 1 and 2. The meeting of the SK constituency showed a particularly high percentage of both the landless and low-income earners among the attendees. The responses from the DL constituency, where relatively well-off households are located, reflected

this characteristic of its residents. As to the education level of the respondents, the less educated could be seen in greater numbers in the meetings of the SK and BW constituencies and were less present at Gram Sansads in the DN and DL constituencies.

It can be pointed out from these findings that a meeting seems more likely to become disorderly and noisy when it has more low-income and less-educated participants. Given that low-income villagers are more

TABLE 11. PROPORTION OF POORER OR DISADVANTAGD
PEOPLE AMONG GRAM SANSAD PARTICIPANTS IN B.GP

	DN Constituency	SK Constituency	DL Constituency	BW Constituency
SC	4 (19.0%) (n = 21)	27 (38.6%) (n = 70)	21 (41.2%) (n = 51)	21 (42.9%) (n = 49)
Landless	13 (59.1%) (n = 22)	53 (89.8%) (n = 59)	17 (35.4%) (n = 48)	24 (55.8%) (n = 43)
Annual Income ₹ 12,000 or below	18 (85.7%) (n = 21)	53 (89.8%) (n = 59)	28 (54.9%) (n = 51)	37 (86.0%) (n = 43)
School education 0-4 years	4 (20.0%) (n = 20)	41 (55.4%) (n = 74)	19 (35.8%) (n = 53)	27 (58.7%) (n = 46)

Source: Field survey by the author

dependent upon the government-sponsored poverty alleviation programmes which are the main issues discussed in the Gram Sansad meetings, and that beneficiaries of the programmes have always been limited in number, it is unsurprising that they become very passionate and that their behaviour often seems to deviate from the rules of public meetings, especially so if they are less-educated.[7]

On the other hand, although the meeting in the DL constituency was not as noisy as those in the SK and BW constituencies, many participants left the room during the meeting and the number of participants shrank to around 25 by the end. It should also be noted that the Gram Sansad in the DL constituency that was originally scheduled was adjourned because it did not meet the quorum, so the meeting described here was one held later.

Now, let us consider the question of political party allegiance among the participants. As shown in Table 12, to the question about which political party they supported, many in the DN and SK constituencies left the answer blank. In the case of the DN constituency, some members of the GUS stressed that they did not support any political party, and quite a few respondents seemed to follow them, even though it was clear they actually supported the TMC. In the SK constituency, the GP member was independent, and many participants were his followers or women

mobilized for the meeting, and they offered no answer to the question about party affiliation. But most of the residents in the SK constituency, including the GP member, had been CPI(M) supporters previously. In both cases, thus, the majority of the participants were supporters of the GP member or the political party he/she supported.

Be that as it may, it should be stressed that the number of attendees who were supporters of the opposition party was not negligible. This was particularly evident in the DL and BW constituencies where several

TABLE 12. DISTRIBUTION OF GRAM SANSAD PARTICIPANTS BY PARTY ALLEGIANCE

Party Allegiance	DN Constituency (n = 22)	SK Constituency (n = 74)	DL Constituency (n = 53)	BW Constituency (n = 50)
TMC	9 (40.9%)	10 (13.5%)	26 (49.1%)	27 (54.0%)
CPI(M)	1 (4.5%)	17 (23.0%)	20 (37.7%)	12 (24.0%)
None in particular	1 (4.5%)	4 (5.4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
No answer	11 (50.0%)	43 (58.1%)	7 (13.2%)	11 (22.0%)

Source: Field survey by the author.

supporters of the CPI(M), the opposition to the GP members, were present. Also, the Gram Sansad in the DL constituency was the only meeting where the opposition candidate defeated in the last election attended. It was observed that the Gram Sansad meetings tend to be thrown into disorder irrespective of the significant presence of opposition party members. The GP member, however, would be more severely attacked by the opposition in a meeting if he/she were elected from the CPI(M), the ousted long-time rulers of the GP. For example, in the Gram Sansad of JP constituency where the GP member was elected from the CPI(M), some active supporters of the TMC were present and harshly criticized the panchayat administration during the rule of the CPI(M) at some length.[8]

The main issues discussed in every Gram Sansad concerned village infrastructure: village roads, electrical supply facilities, tube wells for drinking water, the sites designated for afforestation and crematories, and so on. Some participants put forward their opinions about where these facilities were needed or which should be repaired. Several asked, sometimes angrily, how the programmes which had already started were progressing, or why they were delayed. Other members even made suggestions promoting information disclosure or public interest-oriented allocation of the budget.[9]

In addition, the participants in the Gram Sansads often voiced their doubts about the list of BPL households, complaining that the number of households that had been listed as BPL by the recent survey was too small. It is very important for the poor to be recognized as BPL households because otherwise they cannot receive the benefits of government-

sponsored poverty alleviation programmes. So once the question about the BPL was raised, meeting rooms often became loud and unruly as participants struggled to be heard. In some Gram Sansads, to the doubts/questions about the BPL list, the GP office staff or GP members answered that they had been trying hard to meet the demands from the villagers, had already taken the necessary steps, and were now waiting for a response from the upper office.

Thus, in every Gram Sansad, the participants asked questions, put forward their opinions/suggestions, or expressed their discontent. Some spoke individually in turn when the meeting room quieted down, and some interrupted or spoke over the comments of others making the room noisy. Even women sometimes joined in with comments at such moments.

Previous studies on village assemblies in India, including West Bengal, often revealed that meetings were not well attended and those who did come were not very likely to participate in discussions. Villagers often attend meetings to demand something from panchayat representatives, not to discuss public issues, and meetings tend to be only for the poor who stand to benefit from poverty reduction programmes and for close associates of panchayat representatives (Ghatak and Ghatak 2002; Kumar 2006; World Bank 2000). Particularly in West Bengal, some studies indicated that many villagers did not seem to actively participate in meetings, but rather attended meetings because they were told to do so by party activists. Moreover, meetings were carefully orchestrated by party members and important decisions were already made in advance (Corbridge et al. 2005; Mullen 2012: 110).

In B.GP, too, attendance, especially by women, was not high, and the majority of attendees were supporters of their GP member. It was also clear that GUS members had prepared draft proposals for meetings ahead of time. From what I observed in B.GP, however, many participants were not quiet or passive. On the contrary, it was very impressive that they spoke out so actively and passionately, even though this was often a divergence from the rules or manners generally expected at a meeting of this kind, and the GP members, GUS members and GP office staff had to struggle to maintain order in many instances.

Some villagers looked down upon participants of Gram Sansads, saying that poorer and less-educated people used the meetings only to selfishly express their personal demands. This attitude seems to be, by and large, shared among members of the GUS. One secretary of a GUS told me that if the GUS would let the villagers discuss something without a draft proposal, they would quarrel with each other and no decisions would be made.

On the other hand, we did witness a more inclusive way of decision-making in the Gram Sansad of the DN constituency. After the participants put forward their own demands at the meeting, the secretary of the GUS

(No.8 in Table 8) requested that the participants investigate every *para*, or hamlet, by themselves and make a detailed report on how the situation is and how it should be improved. He also told them that he and the president of the GP could spare the time to meet with them after the survey of the hamlets. He instructed the participants to decide for themselves when the date for the meeting would be. Finally, he explained to them that he and the GUS would put together the reports from every hamlet and make recommendations to the GP.

Here was a case in which the participants were involved in collecting facts from which decisions would be made; and in doing so, they themselves would play a responsible role in the decision-making process. Gram Sansad meetings in B.GP sometimes erupted into chaos, seemingly accomplishing very little but the stirring up of passionate discontent, such as the case in the BW constituency. However, the secretary of the GUS of the DN constituency, a retired teacher, wisely quelled the passions on display by respecting and encouraging the initiative of the participants.

CONCLUSION

In order to investigate the 'party-society' and its transformation in rural West Bengal after the 2008 panchayat elections, we have examined the characteristics of GP members, the GUS and its secretaries, and Gram Sansad meetings in B.GP. We can certainly recognize some features of 'party-society' in B.GP, namely some GP members/candidates who entered the panchayat politics with strong party partisanship, the GUSs dominated by political parties, personal negotiations taking place at the chaotic public meetings, and so on.

However, we can also see a possibility that the 'party-society' will be transformed. The GP members, as well as the local people, felt the need to work together across party lines. Criticism against the CPI(M) could be heard even from within the party itself by party members/supporters. We observed some secretaries/members of GUS who had avoided aligning with political parties and a Gram Sansad where the participants were now involved in making development plans. Supporters of the opposition also attended the meetings and spoke out. These new developments seem to be indicators of the potential to change the politics of the.'party-society'. Popular discontent with the local politics controlled by the CPI(M) over 30 years, which led to their electoral defeat in B.GP, was, of course, the backdrop against which some changes in the attitude of local politicians and the approach to the procedure of Gram Sansad meetings occurred. If the TMC would come to administer the GP in a similar atmosphere of party factionalism, it would likely share the same fate as that of the CPI(M) in the near future.

Then what kind of political framework could be expected to transcend

party-society? According to Khilnani, civil society presupposes a conception of 'politics' held in common, or a common sense of its purpose, which 'can encourage potential antagonists to become participants in a common game' (Khilnani 2001: 26). In this context, 'politics can function not simply to entrench social division, but it can act as a cohesive practice' (ibid.).

Within political society or party-society, self-interest, individually or collectively, tended to be sought in development politics, and relationships between political leaders and the villagers often took the form of patron-client based on reciprocity.[10] It was, therefore, not easy for the rural population to imagine or pursue a common political purpose across social divisions or party lines. But it would be naive to think that to create such a concept of politics, the values of political society or party-society should be replaced by those of civil society in its narrow sense, which came originally from modern institutions in Western society and, in the Indian context, are shared only among the elite. Rather, it would be more feasible that these two sets of values be negotiated and transformed to mould a conception of politics commonly held among the rural people.

In this connection, the argument of Corbridge et al. (2005) is suggestive. In their discussion of political society, they emphasized 'the possibility of political society serving as a medium within which aspects of civil society can grow and gain support' (Corbridge et al. 2005: 191), departing from Chatterjee's distinction between political society and civil society. As they showed, where a 'thick' political society (we may call it party-society) could be seen, people tended to feel that political participation was social obligation,[11] and corruption was more likely to be effectively managed by a well-organized party (Corbridge et al. 2005). In this sense, political society and civil society can 'be thought of as a set of interlocking political practices that are arranged along a continuum' (Corbridge et al., 2005: 214).

In B.GP, like in many other parts of West Bengal, it was the CPI(M), or its party-society, that had fostered a democratic sense among the local people through political mobilization and various kinds of political meetings. With the passage of time, however, the democratic practice initiated by the CPI(M) seems to have been stripped of its substance, with many people being excluded rather than included. A strong feeling of alienation among the poor, particularly those who supported the opposition party, was evident when they complained that they had never been asked to attend Gram Sansad, and that meetings had always been held only among GP members and their close allies under the CPI(M)-controlled GP.

Thus, some values found in party-society, which, though in a somewhat different way, could also be seen in civil society, do not seem to have developed or transformed enough to be widely accepted among the

villagers. This was largely due to the lack of effective mediators between the values of party-society (or political society) and those of civil society. For example, in rural West Bengal, as Bhattacharyya (2004) pointed out, educated school teachers had been trusted by the public and played an important role as intermediaries between civil society and political society,[12] and the CPI(M) utilized them to spread its power in the rural areas. In this process, according to him, schoolteachers had turned into managers of organized politics and gradually lost the confidence of villagers as they gained more power in party organization (Bhattacharyya 2004). In B.GP also, we could find some schoolteachers among party leaders and heard strong criticism of them by the opposition. As described above, however, among the current secretaries of GUS, there were a few (retired) teachers who had avoided party activities and retained the trust of the villagers. Such individuals could be expected to perform as effective mediators between the two sets of values to create a common conception of politics.

This process of producing a common conception of politics, or a new set of values for society, requires more inclusive democratic practices because such a conceptualization cannot be achieved without guaranteeing open discussion.[13] The political change brought about in the 2008 GP election could open the door to more inclusive democracy at the grassroots level. We, however, should keep in mind here that inclusion does not mean mere participation in the process of discussion. If the comments and opinions of attendees are not taken seriously, it can be said that they are excluded even though they may be physically present at meetings and involved in the process of discussion. Young called such a situation 'internal exclusion' as against 'external exclusion' where people are kept outside the process (Young 2000: 53-5). In the case of Gram Sansads in B.GP, as shown above, participants did not speak in an orderly manner and the meeting rooms often became very noisy. But if those more advanced in social and political position, say, the GP members or GUS secretaries/members, do not take passionate or disruptive statements of attendees seriously and do not treat them with equal respect, or if decisions are made only among the GP and GUS members during Gram Sansad meetings, it would amount to internal exclusion and make it difficult to conceive of a legitimate common sense of politics. As in the case of the DN constituency, some method or mechanism is needed to ensure that even the most passionate voices are taken seriously and channeled into the proper process of participatory democracy. This suggests that space for passion or emotion should be made in democratic discussion. In this sense, Gram Sansad meetings could be seen as a test case for increasing the possibilities of democracy, questioning the dominant mode of orderly and polite argument based on reason in democratic discussion.[14]

In this paper, I have highlighted several factors that have the potential to bring about the transformation of party-society in rural West Bengal. It remains to be investigated whether a common conception of politics has truly emerged through effective mediators between party-society and civil society, and to what extent the process of grassroots democracy has changed during the term of the TMC-dominated panchayat.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

NOTES

1. In her study on panchayat, Mullen found that villagers in West Bengal showed a high level of interaction with panchayat members and that panchayat members were usually their first contact persons when they needed help, although the terms 'panchayat' and 'the party', or CPI(M), were used interchangeably by many informants (Mullen 2012: 111-13). Mori (2009) also pointed out the high frequency of approach to panchayat members by villagers in West Bengal.
2. In the 2008 panchayat elections, LF parties secured a majority in 13 Zilla Parishads (district level panchayats), a decrease of two from the previous elections in 2003. They won about 57 per cent of the Panchayat Samitis (intermediate level panchayats) and about 50 per cent of the Gram Panchayats (village level panchayats), falling from 85 per cent and 72 per cent respectively in the 2003 elections (*Frontline* vol. 25, issue 12, 2008).
3. In the parliamentary elections in 2009, the LF parties won only 15 of the total 42 seats as against 35 in the previous elections. Also, in the municipal elections in 2010, they managed to win only 18 of the 81 civic bodies where elections were held (*Frontline* vol.27, issue 13, 2010).
4. Her husband recognized the reason for the reservation policy, and told me that he only planned to help her during the first year or two until she becomes experienced at her work. Actually, he usually didn't live in his village since his workplace was very far away. He came back to the village and helped his wife only at weekends.
5. A study in West Bengal revealed that if the GP presidents were women, political participation of women was likely to increase and public investment tended to be relevant to the needs of women (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004). Also, people seem to regard women presidents of GP as more empathetic and less corrupt (Mullen 2012: 115).
6. One nonaffiliated member in B.GP who had long been a supporter of the CPI(M) stood as an independent candidate in the 2008 panchayat election because he had been in conflict with the local leadership.
7. In both the BW and SK constituencies, the participants of Gram Sansads were more vocal and many complained that they had not benefited from the poverty

alleviation programmes. This made the meetings noisier and more chaotic than the Gram Sansads in DN and DL constituencies.

8. For example, they complained angrily that it was not clear how the earnings from the selling of wood under the control of the GP had been spent, that the poor people who really needed help had not benefited from the development programmes over the previous 30 years, and the like.

9. As to information disclosure, it was suggested that the accounts of the GP should be printed out and distributed among the participants, or that the details of discussion at the meetings – not only the results – should be written down in the record book, etc. Also, regarding the allocation of the budget, for example, there was a suggestion that part of the money allocated for village doctors' allowance should be used to purchase medicines because medicines had been in short supply in the GP for several months.

10. In his ethnographic study on rural politics in West Bengal, Ruud (2003) described a reciprocal relationship between political leaders and villagers, in which village leaders were strongly expected to assist their villagers in everyday affairs. Village leaders involved themselves in villagers' everyday affairs as middlemen, and in turn gained political support from the villagers. This kind of informal politics, he argued, correlated with formal politics and made it effective (Ruud 2003: Chapter 6).

11. Obligation and reciprocity would be central concepts characterizing relationships between local political leaders and villagers in political society (see also Corbridge et al., 2005: 198-9).

12. Since schoolteachers were educated and familiar with complex legal or administrative matters, and generally, by their class, closer to the rural poor than the landed elite, they were able to communicate with various sections of people and solve disputes among villagers in an acceptable way. Consequently, they were perceived as reliable persons by villagers, acting as mediators between the values of civil society and political society (Bhattacharyya 2004).

13. In his argument on the significance of political freedom or democracy, Sen pointed to its constructive role in the creation of values and norms. Conceptualization of values, say, of what constitutes needs, itself requires open discussion and exchange and the exercise of basic political rights (Sen 2000: 153).

14. Recent criticism of deliberative democracy questioned the predominance of rational argument. Limiting deliberation to reasonable discussion only serves to maintain the power relation between those who are from dominant classes and good at rational speech on the one hand, and those who are from disadvantaged or marginalized groups and not familiar with rational argument on the other. It, therefore, is argued that disruptive or emotional forms of expression should also be included in the process of democratic communication (Young 2000), or that passion is already inherently involved in deliberation (Hall 2007).

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