

## **Impact of People's Participation in the Decentralized Participatory Planning Process: A Case Study of West Bengal**

<sup>1</sup>Kunal Bandyopadhyay, <sup>2</sup>Sudipta Biswas

<sup>1</sup>Senior Research Fellow, Rural Extension Centre, Visva-Bharati (A Central University), Sriniketan, West Bengal, India

<sup>2</sup>Senior Professional in the development sector; presently working with Rural Development Institute (Landesa), Kolkata, West Bengal, India

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**Abstract:** *People's participation is usually seen as a vital aspect of democratic governance. Many experts claim that people's participation has a positive effect on the quality of local governance. This paper examines whether effective people's participation can bring about changes in the decentralized planning process in Gram Panchayats. The paper also focuses on the relationship between citizens and local government from a citizens' perspective. For the purpose of this study purposively two Gram Panchayats were selected from Birbhum district, West Bengal. The present study examined how far the steps followed during implementation of decentralized planning projects/process were successful in creating meaningful participation in decision making at the local level. Result shows that the role of citizens in the development projects is limited. Nevertheless, the study argues that citizen involvement has a number of positive effects on governance; not only do people consequently feel more responsible for public matters; it increases public engagement, encourages people to listen to a diversity of opinions, and contributes to a higher degree of legitimacy of decisions. One negative effect is that not all relevant groups and interests are represented. Patronage and clientelism is a cause of concern for certain areas. The article concludes that for a healthy democracy at the local level, aspects of democratic citizenship are more important than having a direct say in decision-making.*

**Keywords:** *Decentralized planning, Gram Panchayat, Local government, People's participation, PRIs.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION:**

India is predominantly a rural country. Almost seventy percent of the population lives in the rural areas (Census of India, 2011). Providing public services to this big proportion of population is quite an uphill task for any government. The country has a federal structure of government system since independence. Central Government is always involved in the policy formulations in the overall development of the country. But the states have the main responsibilities in implementing developmental programmes and delivering public services to the people at the ground level. Despite efforts from all corners, almost forty percent of India's population still lives below poverty line. Many argue that failing in delivery of key public services is one the core reason of India's poverty. In India, according to WDR (2004), the richest fifth receives three times the curative health care subsidy of the poorest fifth. Ineffective public service provision in rural areas is therefore a key concern for policy makers. Therefore an effective local government and its delivery of services key to achieve targeted goal of rural development all over the country.

From the end of twentieth century, dissatisfied with centralized approaches to delivering local public services, a large number of countries have been delegating responsibility for these services to lower- level, locally elected governments (Ahmed et al., 2005). The results have been mixed. Moving from a model of central provision to that of decentralization to local governments introduces a new relationship of accountability between national and local policymakers.

### **II. CONCEPT OF PARTICIPATION AND ITS ROLE IN THE FIELD OF DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE:**

In last two decades various Governments, International Donors, NGOs changed their modalities of running developmental programmes. Programmes (e.g. in health, water, irrigation, forestry, soil conservation) on development has been seeing shift diversion from top-down model to bottom-up participatory approach. This includes involvement of people at the grassroots, active involvement in participatory framing research and participating in the process of development in many countries. People in the villages became active facilitators in some cases. Few organizations like AKRSP and MYRADA in India, farmers in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Botswana started practicing these methodologies in early 1990s(Chambers, 1994).

Idea of “empowerment” and “local knowledge creation” has also come into the debate in establishing participation in the ground. It has been observed that by involvement of people at grassroots, sharing and gathering information about certain topic helps villagers to transfer their local ideas into it. Indigenous local knowledge helps to identify crucial problems on certain development problems (Blair, 2000). It helps them to identify and use it to their field. That brings certain amount of self- belief in them and in broader term this generated into an empowered group of people who started to believe as a part of the process. Participation in development agenda sometimes helped people to get into the real understanding of management of development schemes in the field too. As a part of the process they started taking position on key issues starting from environment to infrastructural projects. Participation also helps in other way around. Institutions and organization started to think reverse way around. Govt. and organization started preparing policies with consultation of stakeholders to an extent in certain cases which is an exceptional and remarkable in that context. Clearly to a certain extent it has been proved to be a revolutionary idea in the development sector.

### **III. LIMITATION OF PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE:**

Despite rapid success of participatory approaches in development arena, sharp criticism and limitations are always has been in the field side by side for certain times. It has been widely discussed that proponent of participatory mode of development ignored the power relation in order to describe local knowledge of the people. It has been assumed that outsider's agendas sometimes considered as local knowledge which is not always true (Moose, D. 2001). Role of facilitators are often not clear as they sometimes become the active stakeholder in the process. Moose, D. (2001) also criticized participatory methods become a tool for ‘planning knowledge’ rather than ‘people's knowledge’. People's planning has been hijacked and manipulated by bureaucratic planning exercises (Moose, 2001). There are arguments also rose that it has little evidence that participation can change the lives of vulnerable people in long term sustainable way (Cleaver, 2001). Cleaver also argues that while giving emphasis on individual's empowerment there has been no indication on the cost benefit analysis of individual opportunities and experience faced during the exercises. He criticized ‘romantic’ idealism on local culture as in real case there may not exist in similar manner. Some of the academicians argue that Chambers ignore the ‘power’ equations and it needs better theorizations (Kapoor, 2002)

Another key idea of practicing participatory models in the field is the role of facilitators. It has often been noticed that a similar structure of methodological framework has been promoted in different areas which is not alright as the situation is different. Therefore the core idea of people's participation sometimes has diverted with some critical technocratic processes.

In a way it can be argued that participation as a process has taken a significant place in the academic as well as practical field of development practices but in formulating the structure sometimes some key views are seemed to be overlooked. Critics of these methods do not reject the idea of participation but the way it has been carried out in certain places draws formidable amount of questions in certain section of the development practitioners.

### **IV. EVOLUTION OF DECENTRALIZED PLANNING PROCESS IN WEST BENGAL: A GLIMPSE**

The state was very open to ideas and innovation in the area of peoples' participation in governance and development after introduction of Panchayat system for the second time in the year 1978. Taking the learning from different global experiences, experimental action programmes for evolving a viable method for village based block and district planning were undertaken by the Zilla Parishad in collaboration with the Rural Development Centre of IIT Kharagpore in Midnapore district in West Bengal at the instance of Planning Commission almost at the same time (1979-80). The action programme continued throughout the district almost over a period of five years.

The growing need for developing the bottom-up planning coupled with the experiences from the action programme resulted in the formation of District Planning Committees and Block Planning Committees in 1985. However, no such institutional mechanism (in the form of acts, rules and even GO) was developed to make this new approach of district and sub-district planning a success. As a result the progress across the blocks and the districts were varied.

Leaders of the state were searching the way out. Govt. of West Bengal in the year 1992 invited experts to assess how the Panchayati raj institutions were functioning here, particularly in respect of local planning and implementation. The report, viz. ‘New Horizons for West Bengal Panchayats’ most popularly known as Mukarji-Bandyopadhyay report submitted in 1993, drew attention of the state leaders, academicians and bureaucracy and was an eye-opener and became a guiding force for strengthening the decentralisation process. In the year 1992, 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments were made and PRIs were assigned the responsibilities of preparation and implementation of plans and the same amendments made provision for constitution of State Finance Commission for guiding the devolution of powers, functions and finance.

District Planning Committee Act was enacted in 1994 in West Bengal. To achieve ownership of the people over the Panchayati raj institution and Panchayat planning in particular West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973 was amended in 1994. A new concept, viz. Gram Sansad (assembly of voters of a gram Panchayat electoral area) was formed which would guide and advise the Gram Panchayat in regard to the schemes for economic development of the village along with social justice. This act incorporates the provision that budget and plan of the Gram Panchayat must be placed at the meeting of the Gram Sansad. (Similar concepts of Block Sansad and Zilla Sansad came into effect through the amendment in 2003.)

First State Finance Commission was constituted in the month of May 1994 and submitted its report in 1995. The first SFC recommended a set of strong measures for enhancing the process of decentralisation through establishing PRIs as the local self-government institutions. All these measures for decentralisation taken so far led to the emergence of planning exercises at the district and sub-district levels.

In the year 1999, initiatives were also taken at the political level of the then ruling party at state level. The programme that emerged was Participatory Gram Panchayat Planning under Convergent Community Action popularly now known as CCA. A Govt. Circular dated 01.09.99 along with an appeal by the P&RD minister was sent to all the districts, blocks & GPs for immediate action. However, special attention was given in four blocks in four districts – Salboni at West Midnapore, Kashipur at Purulia, Haringhata at Nadia and Mal at Jalpaiguri. Active involvement of all the stakeholders at all the tiers in designing the CCA method generated a sense of ownership among these people over this method and it was accepted by the people as an approach for development. Taking the lesson from all these experiences Panchayat & Rural Development Department took some initiative by making amendments in Panchayat Act in the year 2003. Most important among them were – formation of Gram Unnayan Samity(GUS) or Village Development Council (not functional in the state at present) at Gram Sansad(GS) level and giving responsibility to them for planning and implementation, making the formation of Up-Samitis (Standing Committees) mandatory at Gram Panchayat(GP) level and giving them responsibility of thematic planning and implementation, following the same exercise at Panchayat Samiti(PS) and Zila Parishad(ZP) level etc.

The state government introduced Strengthening Rural Decentralized (SRD) Programme in partnership with DFID in the year 2005 aiming at institutional strengthening of PRI by installation of decentralized participatory planning process at each level by active involvement of people. The programme was implemented in three phases in selected Gram Panchayats in relatively backward districts.

The SRD Programme has installed participatory planning process at GS level in selected GPs through 4 stages. These stages are – (1) Campaign, Sensitization, Training and capacity building (2) Survey for data collection and compilation through PRA / PLA (3) Analysis of Problem, available resources and potentialities and identification of actions and (4) Preparation of draft Gram Sansad Plan. Gram Panchayats were entrusted to prepare their own plan on the basis of this GS based plans. Considering all plans at GS level and taking into account additional actions doable by GPs on the basis of the principle of subsidiarity GP plans were prepared. Effort was made towards preparing PS plan on the basis of the GP plan following same principle in selected Panchayat Samities (DPRDD, 2010). Before the SRD Programme came to an end the state government in partnership with the World Bank introduced another programme – Institutional Strengthening of Gram Panchayats (ISGP) in the year 2010. The objective of this programme is also similar to that of SRD. Unlike SRD Programme, ISGP programme is very much focused to the Gram Panchayat level only. The programme has been playing a positive role in improving institutional issues in the Gram Panchayats.

## **V. METHODOLOGY AND FIELD AREA OF THE STUDY:**

For this study, mixed methods were used where two Gram Panchayats (GPs) were selected purposively in the Birbhum District, West Bengal. The mixed method was required to yield data that could uncover the essential dynamics of different contexts. To study the effectiveness of participation, fieldwork was carried out in twenty Gram Sansads (GSs) in these two GPs between May and July, 2014 (3 months). Interviews and group discussions were conducted with Panchayat officials, elected representatives and villagers. In each of the twenty GSs there was one group discussion followed by individual interviews with various stakeholders. Fieldwork was not restricted to any defined sample of the number of people to be interacted with, because the aim of studying was to examine the nature of the issues at grassroots level that are related to their formation and functioning.

## **VI. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS OF THE STUDY:**

### **A. Role of people in the planning process in Gram Panchayats:**

The major initiative was taken by the Left Front Govt. to induct GUS in the Gram Sansad level in the year 2004 to encourage people's participation in the planning process more directly. Chattopadhyay et al. (2010) shows how this initiative was politicized to gain power at the local level. Nonetheless the initiative had an innovative idea to promote people's participation in the process.

In comparison to the direct involvement in planning process through the GUS, at present there is a very little scope for people to be involved in the process except meetings in Gram Sansads and Gram Sabhas. So, the frequency of meeting and the issues discussed in those Gram Sansads were analyzed to get some insight on the involvement part.

The Case of two Gram Panchayats in Birbhum District, West Bengal:

Gram Panchayat # 1: Bahiri-Panchsowa

Total Population: 23193 (Census, 2011)

Male: 11905, Female: 11288

Number of Households: 5558

Number of total Gram Sansads (wards): 17

Number of elected GP members: 20 (3 PS (Block Panchayat/ Panchayat Samity members)

Total Male members: 9

Total female members: 11

Gram Panchayat # 2: Illambazar

Total Population: 32142 (Census, 2011)

Male: 16501, Female: 15641

Number of Households: 9817

Number of total Gram Sansads (wards): 23

Number of elected GP members: 26 (3 PS (Block Panchayat/ Panchayat Samity members)

Total Male members: 10

Total female members: 13

Out of two meetings held during a financial year only one Gram Sansad meeting were held during 2013-14. We asked certain questions regarding participation in the GS meeting to GP employees and representatives. We also checked whether they keep record of the data in any registered format or not. Some of the questions asked are like:

**Table I: Participation in the GS meeting**

Some of the Questions regarding meeting in Gram Sansads and Gram Sabha	Bahiri- Panchsowa GP	Illambazar GP
How many Gram Sansads meetings were held in 2013-14?	1	6
What is the average percentage of attendance in Gram Sansad Meetings in the entire GP	Data not available in GP	7%
What is the percentage of attendance of women members in last two Gram Sansad meetings held in 2013-14 taking all the Gram Sansads together?	Data not available in GP	20%
What is the percentage of average attendance of SC population in the GS meetings? (Compare with % of SC voters in the GS area)	Data not available in GP	Data not available in GP
What is the percentage of average attendance of ST population in the GS meetings? (Compare with % of ST voters in the GS area)	Data not available in GP	Data not available in GP
What is the role of GS in beneficiary selection?	Not much as most of the schemes have fixed beneficiaries	Some institutional issues
How long the GS meeting goes on (average figure taking all GS meetings)	1-2 hours	2 hours
What are the major issues discussed in the last GS meeting?	No registered data	No visible documents
Any written structural format used for taking people's view in GS meeting?	NO	NO
Whether proceedings of all the Gram Sansad Meetings have been recorded?	Normally yes but Not available in GP office	

The result clearly shows that GP is reluctant to coordinate or organize meaningful GS meetings in the Gram Sansads. Even Gram Sabha meetings are not regular. It is being practiced just to fulfill the mandate as per law. But no seriousness is shown on the part of GP to conduct these meetings with stipulated process. Even higher authorities from district or blocks do not conduct any monitoring to regularize these meetings. In West Bengal it indicates very limited options of participation of people in the planning process exist in the GP.

But the reality as spoken by some GP officials is in West Bengal there is a difficulty in conducting useful Gram Sansad meeting by GP officials as the political situation in the villages are not often in favor of conducting such meetings. Gram Panchayats are often being viewed as an institution of a particular political party therefore other opponent party supporters try to raise some political questions in the meeting which leads to unwanted violence. It has been observed in the past that police was deployed to conduct such meetings. GP employees do not feel safe to conduct such meetings without proper security arrangements. The concept of an 'ideal village' is no longer visible regarding conducting Gram Sansad or Gram Sabha meetings.

### **B. Status of decentralized planning in the Gram Panchayats:**

Decentralized planning is a complex process and demands a high level of capacity and involvement from elected representatives, government functionaries, members of local community based organization as well as citizens of all socio-economic groups. During the implementation of SRD programme in West Bengal, each GUS used to draw up a development plan for the Gram Sansad (Sansad) area, which it had to get passed at the village assembly. The Gram Sansad plans are integrated into the Gram Panchayat plan, plans from Gram Panchayats are integrated into block-level plans, and block-level plans are to be integrated into a holistic district development plan by the District Planning Committee. The SRD programme sought to strengthen planning at the grassroots by facilitating deliberations at the GUSs and at the Gram Panchayats.

This chapter will assess with comparison to SRD programme, how in present time the process of decentralised planning is being conducted, particularly at the level of the Gram Sansad (GS) and the Gram Panchayat (GP) level. We have observed both the level of participation in planning, and integration of lower-level plan with higher-level plans in PRIs.

**Table II:** Process of decentralized planning at present

Sl. No.	Planning Steps	SRD Time	Present Time	Remarks
1	Sharing of experiences and report on previous year plan implementation and identification of the demand/ needs for the next financial year. This is done in May at the Annual Gram Sansad Meeting.	Regular	Mandatory	Less evident in present time
Preparation of the Gram Sansad Plan				
2	Mass Campaign at Community Level for participation in planning process	Mandatory	No Gram Sansad plan	In SRD GPs, individual invitation in the form of leaflets (informing the need and schedule of planning meeting) to each households was circulated. This was followed by public announcement made through mikes. But it is not followed anymore at present time.
3	Family based data collection at Para(hamlet) meeting and preparation of social and natural maps through Participatory Learning Approach	Mandatory	No Gram Sansad plan	In SRD GPs a major mobilisation happened in the first year for social and natural resource mapping. Though maps are referred but rarely updated. No social and natural resource maps prepared in present times. In some cases family data collected.
4	Collection and compilation of sector based data at Para meetings	Mandatory	No Gram Sansad plan	
5	Problem, Resources and Opportunity Analysis based on collected data and social and natural map	Mandatory	No Gram Sansad plan	
6	Analysis of the information collected; identification of sectorial issues, available resources and opportunities (by 27 <sup>th</sup> July)	Mandatory	No Gram Sansad plan	
7	GP's Artho-O-Parikalpana Upa-Samiti analyses the GUS information; prepares the financial priorities of the others sectors; accordingly allocates funds to the Gram Unnayan Samities and intimate all listed people in writing (by 30 <sup>th</sup> July)	Mandatory	Based on elected representatives' view	
8	Preparation of draft sector based Gram Sansad plan and Budget; Completion of Form 34 (by 14 <sup>th</sup> Aug)	Mandatory	No Gram Sansad plan	

Sl. No.	Planning Steps	SRD Time	Present Time	Remarks
Preparation of the Gram Panchayat Plan and Budget				
9	Preparation of Upa-Samiti Plan based on priorities enlisted in all the Gram Sansad Plans (by 27 <sup>th</sup> Aug)	Mandatory	Now it has been prepared with consultation of elected members only	In present times plans are prepared with much lesser details because it is mandated to get plan and budget approved, the present plans are not really based on community participation as opposed to the case in majority of SRD GPs
10	Preparation of Upa-Samiti Plan and Budget; Completion of Form 35 (by 15 <sup>th</sup> Sep)	Mandatory	Mandatory	
11	Preparation of Integrated GP Plan: A Draft - Gram Sansad Plan based Upa-Samiti Plan based Gram Panchayat Plan and Budget (Form 36) is prepared (by 1 <sup>st</sup> October).	Mandatory	Mandatory but not based on GS Plan	
12	Presentation of Draft GP plan and budget to Arth-O-Parikalpana Upa-Samiti for approval	Mandatory	Mandatory	
13	Presentation of Draft GP plan and budget to a specially convened general Body Meeting of the GP (by 30 <sup>th</sup> Oct)	Mandatory	Mandatory	
14	Presentation of Draft GP plan and budget at the Half Yearly Gram Sansad Meeting (in Nov.)	Mandatory	Mandatory	Mostly followed by SRD GPs
15	Presentation of Draft GP plan and budget at the Gram Sabha Meeting (in Dec.) for their suggestions and to be passed by the Gram Sabha	Mandatory	Mandatory	Mandatory to all GPs but not followed with due process in present time
16	It is sent to Panchayat Samiti for suggestions and sent back to the GP	Mandatory	Mandatory	
17	Incorporation of suggestions from Gram Sansad, Gram Sabha and Panchayat Samiti into the Draft plan and budget; Approval of the new plan and new Budget in the General Body meeting of the GP (by 31 <sup>st</sup> Jan)	Mandatory	Mandatory but not regular	
18	The Final Gram Sansad Plan and budget based on Upa-Samiti Plan sent to the Block.			

Source: DPRDD, 2011, and Discussion with GP employees and villagers

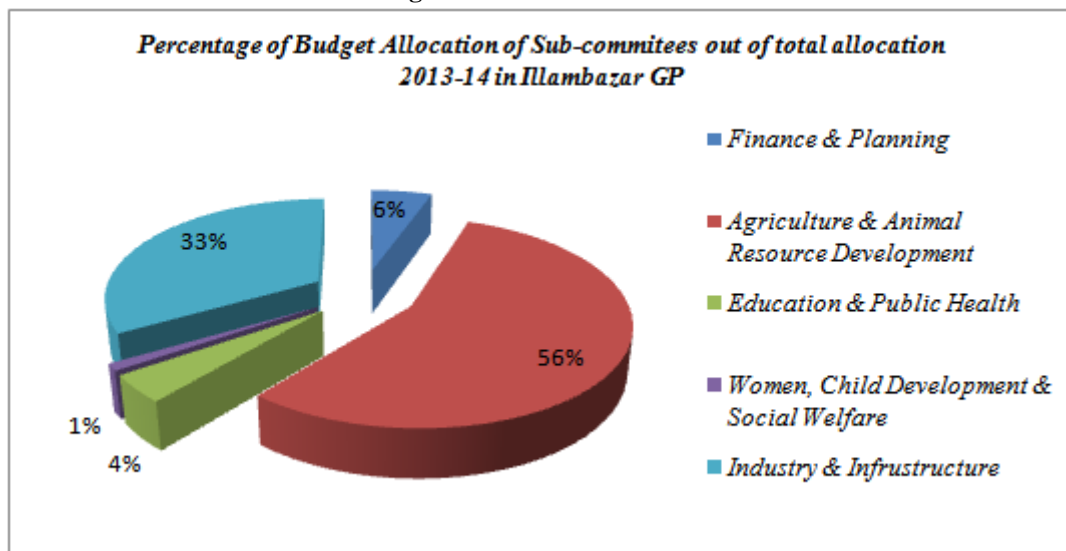
From the above table it is clear that the difference in following planning steps between of the SRD programme and the present time is enormous. The above table reflects that the inclusion of the community in the planning process, identification of their problems, issues and solutions to make the plans need based instead of being scheme based was largely seen in the SRD GPs where as in present time it has been practiced mostly on scheme based. Also the institution of GUS seems to have played an important role in the planning exercise at the village level compared to present period where GP plans are mostly based on consultation with elected members which is quasi-participatory in nature.

### **C. Meeting of Sub-Committees:**

Apart from direct participation of people, certain institutional arrangements are available for people's reflection in the planning and eventually in the budgeting part of decentralized planning process. One of them is meeting of Upa-Samities (Sub-Committees). There are five sub-committees exist in the Gram Panchayats. These are as follows: Education & Public Health, Finance & Planning, Agriculture & Animal Resource Development, Women, Child Development & Social Welfare and Industry & Infrastructure. As discussed earlier, each sub-committee has to pass the plan and Budget concerned to that particular committee before going for final approval. For example Education & Public Health Sub-committee has to discuss and pass their part of Plan Budget before final approval of the Gram Panchayat. Here elected representatives are member of different sub-committees. So in present situation indirectly these committees are to take final call on the preferences or choices of people through elected representatives. Given the seriousness of the functioning of these committees, we asked whether the meetings of these committees held regularly or not. We found normally meeting of Finance & Planning are quite regular but committees like Women, Child development & Social Welfare and Education & Public Health not held so regularly.

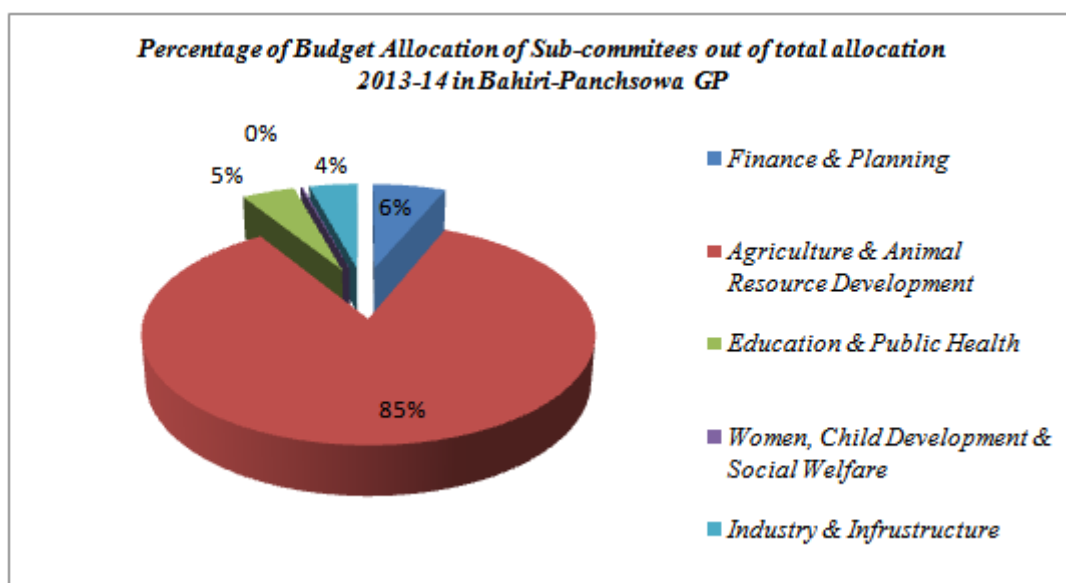
It has been observed that when people discuss and involve in the planning process, involvement and engagement on social issues gets more importance. Here we have also tried to get the picture on the budget allocation on different Upa-Samities (Sub-committees) during the year 2013-14 to get the preference of the GP on certain issues.

**D. Sub-Committee wise allocation of Budget:**



Source: Information collected from GP and compiled by authors

**Figure I:** Percentage of Budget Allocation at Illambazar GP



Source: Information collected from GP and compiled by authors

**Figure II:** Percentage of Budget Allocation at Bahiri-Panchsowa GP

Both the GPs are heavily dependent on the external budgetary allocation from the Govt. from Upper tier. Average allocation in the Sub-Committee wise budget shows that due to high demand in MGNREGS scheme, allocation in the Agricultural and allied sector is almost more than 50% in the Illambazar GP and almost 80% in the Bahiri-Panchsowa GP. Apart from that, it is also visible that in both the GPs, there is little scope for investing in the social sector such as education and health as there are no specific grants are allocated to these sectors. Even issues related to women, social welfare and child development does not get that much preference in the planning due the budget constraints. In West Bengal, issues related to Health and Education is not directly attached to Panchayats in the village level. So the important question may arise how one can fix accountability when the local government is not allowed to look after the essential services such as education and healthcare at the local level.

#### **E. Registration of complain and grievances:**

During the discussion with GP employees, we discovered despite institutional mechanisms to registrar complaint from the villagers, only few complaints have been registered in the last financial year of 2013-14 in both the GPs. In case of Bahiri-Panchsowa GP, only 10 complaints have been registered where in Illambazar GP, only one complaint has been registered. Regarding using RTI to seek information, only one application has been received by Illambazar GP which is processed in due time. It shows clearly that people are not that much connected with the GP where they can come for registering complaint and expect solution in return. During discussion with villagers, few mentioned about volatile political atmosphere as a cause of avoiding in registering dissent or giving written complaint to the GPs.

#### **F. Role of Women and marginalized section of people in the decision making:**

In every democratic society, role of women and marginalized groups are taken care by appropriate authorities. Local governments are also considered to be extra careful in keeping their interest properly. In India, reservation of women in three tier local governments as representatives has been recognized. Keeping this in mind there are several provisions are included in the rules to keep their interest safe in local decision making. But unfortunately despite women members having majority in the board, both GPs have failed to incorporate women issues in the planning process. The study reveals no significant achievement in both the GPs regarding empowerment of women or taking care of marginalized group's interests in the planning process.

### **VII. CONCLUSION:**

Participation in development affairs is certainly one measure of the quality of democracy at the local level. In case of our study, it is evident that the level of participation in the planning process is very low in the Gram Panchyats. However, effective local democracy requires not only participation, but also that people's suggestions are reflected in planning process. One of the dangers of decentralization is that it may create 'pseudo-participation' and actually further empower local elites (Chattopadhyay et al., 2010). For instance, during planning process, each interest group can become defensive in terms of its own short-run goals instead of focusing on what is best for all. But this study shows that there is little scope for people's involvement as the process does not allow people to give their views properly on the subject matter. Irregular & ineffective Gram Sansad and Gram Sabha meetings are adding woes to the problem. In the context of West Bengal, volatile competitive village politics hampering people to involve in planning process freely. This is a cause of concern. Political maturity as well as mutual agreement at the political level is very much important to tackle the situation.

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