

Local Self Government and the Peasant Question in Bengal Today

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In an earlier essay I had argued that one of the most enduring and remarkable features of the Bengal peasant movement has been the organised middle class leadership over it.¹) While historians rightly concentrated on peasant-landlord relations, peasant-landlord-state triad, and the dynamics of peasant movement and organisation in their study of agrarian relations, they often neglected the relations between peasantry and the middle class in both colonial and post-colonial times in their study of the peasant question. I wish to argue that point a little further in the context of the music of decentralisation and show how the middle class performs the assigned role of a conduit pipe in the background of a decentralising strategy of metropolitan capital in West Bengal today. In conquering the vast countryside and turning it into its hinterland, the metropolitan capital needs the middle class. So the middle class and the peasantry remain in a historically continuing bound relationship.

The emergence of local self government in Bengal during the colonial times is the starting point of the story of the remarkable connection between the decentralising strategy of modern state and the peasant question of the land it rules over. It can be shown how the mobilisational needs of the state, of both political and functional types, dictate a certain strategy of decentralisation, with the middle class playing a crucial role in such a strategy. The great issue of land reform and land consolidation cannot be viewed apart from the decentralising strategy of capital and the modern state. The continuing domination of the commissar over the peasant stems from that strategy. It implies a study of the specificity of such strategy too.

The specific form of the peasant question in Bengal today dictates the specificity of the decentralising strategy. I shall argue that two

aspects need attention in that context. If, instead of an increasing differentiation within the peasantry as should be the expected consequence of agrarian capitalism, the entire peasantry is more and more subjected to the rule of capital, it will signify a certain kind of particularity of local political power appropriate to the form of the peasant question. Our enquiry has to show if that is indeed the case, and if so, the structure of it. Second, we have to enquire if the peasant movement, born of an earlier age, is able to adapt itself to the evolving reality or is getting increasingly marginalised in face of the decentralising strategy of modern state. This double enquiry will show how the relations between state and peasants are structured along the pillars of local political power, land reforms and finally, peasant movement. The middle class plays the assigned task of a conveyor belt of politics, mobilisation, development and consolidation because of the structured relations. In short, we talk here of the politics of agrarian capitalism; and the story of the remarkable connection between the local self government, known as the panchayati raj and the peasant question is a story of that politics.

II.

The Bengal Chowkidari Act had been promulgated in 1870. The district magistrate would supervise the task of village guards. The expenditure would be borne through local taxes imposed by the Chowkidari panchayats. Social rebellions, primitive rebellions like banditry were to be curbed through this agency. Following this act came the Bengal Local Self Government Act of 1885. This Act of Lord Ripon provided for district and sub divisional boards. Some criteria of eligibility for voters electing members of boards were fixed, such as age, education, residence, tax paying status etc. Moreover, there were union committees comprising several villages. The board would look after primary education, drinking water, irrigation, food, digging of ponds, maintenance of roads, etc. Lord Ripon's Act went one step further with the proposal of a Royal Commission for further decentralisation. Village was now made the basic unit of local self government. From 1914 union boards started functioning. The contemporary reform of tenancy acts, administrative reforms and decentralisation took place at the same time. In

brief, collection of revenues, civic programme, limited democracy, control over peasantry, and legitimising the colonial rule were the various elements of a liberal strategy of introducing local self government by the British administration. It was a strategy of hastening capital construction work in the countryside, constructing a trojan horse for facilitating colonial capital's entry into the villages of Bengal and prepare the land for the revenue base of the colonial Raj.

But the peasantry started resisting the establishment of union boards in 1921 in Midnapur district. It quickly saw through the facade. The sham nature of the self government was only too apparent. The rich peasantry, in particular, though sometimes participating in union boards, knew that this was not real political power. Yet these very same union boards provided the leadership of the peasantry an opportunity to flex its muscles. Nationalist political mobilisation was helped. However, we need further research for a deeper understanding of the role of colonial local self government in provoking and hastening nationalism, particularly in the Bengal countryside.

III.

Our constitution advises the state to introduce panchayati raj i.e. local self government throughout the country and has directed it to empower the village panchayats. We had panchayats in the pre-colonial times, a sort of community control over the community with all kinds of hierarchical censorship and authority residing within the community, which the colonial antropologist Risley had described as a process of censure and 'vocal' election. But that panchyat had died a natural death with the development of an overarching political power. The British resurrected it then. The third resurrection comes after Independence - more astonishing, more repeating than the resurrection of Christ. One must remember, each of these rebirths has been occasioned by a discontinuity in the tradition following massive changes in the agrarian set up. But at each critical juncture, the Authority has been forced to revive the

panchyat system to impose authority on the countryside, to refashion the agrarian factor after its own interests.

The third life of panchayats begins with abolition landlordism, imposition of land ceilings, and limited land reforms. The Babwant Rai Mehta Committee strongly recommended strengthening of the panchyati system. The planners thus suggested a multi pronged strategy: land reform, local self government, extension services in the village and community development programmes. But as we know, this too failed. Though district councils were formed in 1963, yet the situation was not fundamentally ripe for a revival of panchayats. Land reforms remained extremely limited. Rural surplus could be generated and redirected to the agrarian sector to a little extent only. The rich peasants, as opposed to the landlords or the zamindars had not yet become so strong as to carry on the panchayati tasks on their own. Finally, state investment to prop up local authority, local taxing power, local public works, local extension services etc. also remained extremely inadequate.

The latest phase in the life of the panchayats, its latest revival, follows after that. We must remember, the period of mid sixties to mid seventies is characterised by succession of dramatic events: widespread agrarian unrest, devaluation of rupee, green revolution and new agricultural strategy, anti poverty programmes of the State, World Bank aid, measures to stabilise the condition of small peasantry or the marginal farmers in the countryside and finally what has been called the effort to change the colour of the revolution in the villages from 'red' to 'steel grey'. The revival of panchayati raj follows this decade.

The panchayats in West Bengal, following the elections of 1978, are functioning, to some observers vigorously. Land reforms have been continued somewhat; sharecropper's rights more secure; anti poverty programmes with 'target approach' carried on with regularity.2) Servicing of rural work, the strategy of intensive rural development as well as integral rural development are being followed enthusiastically. Party leadership and political leadership are being entrusted with such tasks. Bengal does not need NGOs. We have panchayats for that.

I wish to contest in the above mentioned context the view of panchayats as pillars of rural democracy and I shall argue that the paradigmatic explanation of viewing panchayats or local governments as gatekeepers of metropolitan capital still remains valid. I shall place my points very briefly.

Land reforms have stopped obviously at giving land to owner peasants. The landless peasants and rural labour remain predominantly pauperised. The entire economy remains fundamentally a middle peasant economy and instead of peasant differentiation, we find the entire mass of peasantry being subjected to control of market. There is the terms of trade crisis. The peasantry has so much to demand, but it has to demand all that of the state. Ironically, it is the local state now that asks of the peasantry to try to improve its lot with whatever assistance is coming from the top in form of loans, grants, subsidies, assistance and employment programmes, which is why the agenda of political mobilisation of peasantry in form of panchayats becomes so crucial to metropolitan political and economic power.

But this mobilisation, as I have already indicated, would not have been possible without a parallel functional mobilisation. The earlier attempts at spreading tentacles over rural life had been defeated because of the absence of such a parallel functional mobilisation. Now green revolution, the existence of a new middle class in the countryside, the extension of service sector, the rise of a mass of middle peasantry and a stratum of rich peasantry, rural surplus to be extracted and reinvested and finally World Bank aid - all these factors have made functional mobilisation possible and a reality. The clerks of banks in villages and towns, government functionaries, local development officers, junior land reform officials, district planners, school teachers - all have become the representatives of the functional elite, which coupled with the mobilisational elite, like party leaders and elected panchayat representatives, have made local self government a thriving project in the countryside. It is this convergence of political and functional mobilisations of the political and functional elites that marks the latest life in panchayat's chequered history, so different from the earlier ones. The middle class, particularly today's middle class, has made that convergence possible. If the middle class recorded the peasant question so eloquently during nationalist epoch, it remains true of

even today. Peasant mobilisation remains historically destined to be performed through the agency of middle class in Bengal.

One result has been the eclipse of the earlier peasant association, the Krishak Sabha, though it still exists formally. Peasants have to flock to panchayats for loans, have to seek or appeal to their certifying authority for all and sundry reasons, and they find in most cases it is a case of 'one but double identity'. Peasant association leaders are today's panchayat functionaries. The Krishak Sabha is today approached by none. And more significantly, the Krishak Sabha itself does not know whither it has to go. It struggled for land reforms. But with the phase of land reforms over, in howsoever a limited manner, it has to redefine its target, its agenda. This is, as yet, not done. Cooperativisation, that fundamental step of land consolidation after reforms, is not on the agenda. So whether by the logic of increase of state extension services, or of the domination of middle peasantry and the middle class, or of the convergence of the dual mobilisational imperatives - all of which throw the countryside more open to market, the Peasant Association or the Krishak Shabha remains destined to live under the shadows of the local self government which has been able to incorporate it into the panoply of state.4)

Impoverisation of rural labour, the near crisis condition ever present among the small peasants, absence of cooperatives, establishment of a rural bureaucracy, the imperatives and consequences of target approach, absence of an awareness regarding 'quality of life', the proclivity of the panchayats only to service its constituency with the help of grants from above and its disinclination to bring rural assets like cold storages, godowns, markets, wholesale trade in the countryside under its control and disinclination to acquire taking power over the industrial goods sold in the countryside and agricultural goods sold to the cities and take the wealth of the kulaks - these and many such characteristics inform the nature of local self government in Bengal today. If it is a successful decentralisation strategy, it has been successful on the basis of the political economy of middle peasantry. It has been a success of the middle peasant politics as well. We have to keep in mind that capitalism has not brought about a differentiation within peasantry to a great extent in Bengal. Its specific characteristic has been to subordinate the entire peasant economy under its grip - the power of industrial capital, the

clutches of money capital, the tentacles of multinational producing agricultural machines, equipments, fertilisers etc. It is a victory of the specific politics of agrarian capitalism in Bengal.

Empirical investigations reveal the relative absence of rural poor, particularly rural labour, among panchayat leadership just as they reveal the domination of self cultivating landholdings among the landholdings in general, the extent of an early rent crisis which had led to the decline of panchayats during colonial times and the very significant presence of educated gentry among elected panchayat members at district and subdivisional levels.⁵⁾

IV

Now a few words on the dilemma and irony of the situation. Is the convergence of the two processes, earlier spoken of, likely to be durable? An agrarian crisis of renewed nature, a rent crisis, an investment crisis, a surplus - creation and appropriation process crisis - anything may happen given the overall retarded nature of Bengal's agriculture in particular and Indian agriculture in general.⁶⁾ The middle peasants may become more and more vocal against the State, as they have been elsewhere. Or, the rural poor may strike out their own path. In any case, the convergence will break down and that will mean a serious crisis in the strategy of making panchayats viable on the basis of a successful combination of two mobilisations - political and functional.

At a more fundamental level, political mobilisation faces an uncertain future. A successful mobilisation strategy has to be a cleavage based strategy. But without identifying a particular section of rural populace as the target against which to mobilise the rural population, how long can political mobilisation of peasantry in form of panchayats continue? It cannot identify the real target - the State, for the State has to prop up the panchayats and the panchayats have to prop up the State.

This remains a secular dilemma, for notwithstanding a Left government in Bengal with communist leadership, the incorpora-

tion of countryside into the empire of capital through the political agency of decentralisation just cannot be escaped. It remains a very remote possibility that panchayats can be used as 'the second of the dual power' or can be used as subverting the power structure, though troubles erupting within panchayats and forcing them to go against State power may become possible in future.

V.

Bengal peasants need today a large scale agro industrial expansion. It needs cooperatives for producing, marketing, borrowing. It needs irrigation, soil erosion control, fuel and fertiliser. It needs the removal of middlemen. Above all and precisely to achieve these, it needs power to form cooperatives, own cold storages, start schools and hospitals, tax incoming and outgoing goods and above all it has to attain political power to pursue its objectives, to obtain 'quality of life'. Panchayats do not empower the peasants for any of the objectives, though compared to the earlier situation they represent an improvement. But precisely through granting of loans, assistance and a limited scope of participation in a liberal democratic polity, the logic of metropolitan capital in India is operating - irrespective of what the provincial government and the peasant leaders - now turned local self government functionaries - think about it.

All it means, briefly, is that we cannot ignore the question of interpenetration of capitalism and the agrarian situation in a discussion on rural self government institutions. Nor can we afford to forget the impersonal face of capital formation, being deceived by the grassroots nature of these institutions. The agenda of rescuing productive labour in villages still remains the reference point in such a discussion or in a critique of the decentralisation strategy of modern liberal state. Our theory of State has to have a theory of the extension - counting of the power apparatus too. These local self government institutions do rarely reflect traditional community entities, or parallel popular power organs, rather they reflex the mode of establishing authority under changing conditions. Participation, mobilisation, contribution and satisfaction - all these words convey a certain reality of 'guided empowerment'. The ghost

of liberal developmental school employing public interventionist strategy still remains to be exorcised.

Notes.

1. Ranabir Samaddar, "Peasant and the Commissar - A Study in Agrarian Relations" in S.P. Sen & M. Roy (eds.), *Modern Bengal - A Socio Economic Survey*, Calcutta 1990.

2. A fair amount of literature exists on anti poverty programmes: M.J. Kurian, "IRDP - How Relevant is it?", *Economic and Political Weekly* (hereafter *EPW*) 26 December, 1987; Nilkantha Rath, "Garibi Hatao, Can IRDP Do It?" *EPW* 9 February 1985; Rizwanul Islam (ed.), *Strategies for Alleviation Poverty in Rural Asia*, Bangkok, ILO, 1985; D. Bandyopadhyay, "Direct Intervention Programmes for Poverty Alleviation - An Appraisal", *EPW* 25 June 1988; A.R. Desai, "Rural Development and Human Rights in Independent Asia", *EPW* 1 August, 1987.

3. On the dynamics of such mobilisation, see David E. Apter, *Rethinking Development - Modernization, Dependency and Post Modern Politics*, California, 1987.

4. For the official view, *The Working of Panchayat Systemss in West Bengal* by Govt. of West Bengal, Dept. of Panchayats, Calcutta 1984; for a sympathetic view, Kirsten Westergaard, *People's Participation, Local Government and Rural Development, The Case of West Bengal, India*, Copenhagen 1985.

5. On rent crisis, B.B. Chaudhuri, "Movement of Rent in Eastern India, 1773-1930" in *The Indian Historical Review*, Vol 3, No 2, 1977; B.B. Chaudhuri, "The Process of Depeasantization in Bengal and Bihar 1889-1947", *Ibid.*, Vol 2 No 1, 1975; on interest of education among panchayat members, "The Working of Panchayat System", *op. cit.* appendix 8.

6. See, for example, James K. Boyce, *Agrarian Impasse in Bengal: institutional constraints to technological change*, Oxford, 1987.

