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The Creation and Withdrawal of Spaces for Participatory Governance: The Case of Village Development Committees in West Bengal, India

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Abstract

This paper examines how more democratic forms of state-citizen engagement can be engineered under less than favourable political conditions. We look at a participatory reform enacted by the Communist-led Left Front Government in West Bengal, India, the development of Village Development Committees. Our research shows that these Committees embodied empowered participatory governance ideals, and made meaningful contributions to citizens' participation within the local state, confirming the potential for well-designed institutions to deepen democratic engagement. However, this reform's abrupt reversal indicates the importance of a wider political analysis in understanding (or implementing) 'experiments' in institutional reform, and that leftist parties are not automatic supporters of empowered participatory governance. As well as being driven forward by a committed core team, reform also needed to be connected to a wider and more public set of claims about the Left Front's participatory successes, in order to build its legitimacy and face down resistance from local administrators and politicians. Our wider argument is that research on empowered participatory governance should examine not only the quality of participatory spaces themselves, but also their political contexts, if we are to understand how experiments in participatory reform can 'scale up' and become durable.

This means not only looking at the design of institutions, but also understanding impact of reform on local administrators and politicians. Our argument here is that a crucial task was omitted in West Bengal: the actions of the team driving the reform needed to be connected to a wider and more public set of claims about the Left Front's participatory successes, and without this 'below the radar' reforms were met with local resistance.

Keywords

Empowered participatory governance, Participatory planning, West Bengal, Left Front

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This paper examines the rise and fall of an experiment in empowered participatory governance, the establishment of Village Development Committees (*Gram Unnayan Samities)*[1], in West Bengal, India. These Committees, launched in 2003, were the final step in a series of decentralisation initiatives undertaken by West Bengal's Communist-led Left Front Governments (1978-2011), and were innovative institutions that promised to deliver broader and inclusive popular engagement with local government. However, in an abrupt policy reversal, the Left Front suspended their powers in 2010, shortly before it was finally voted out of office in 2011. Our central puzzle is to understand how a reform with the potential to drive forwards participatory democracy could get overturned.

In addressing this puzzle, we raise two questions that engage critically with debates on strengthening popular sovereignty through institutional reform. The first is evaluative: can participatory institutions deliver meaningful opportunities for citizen engagement? The second is directed at the politics of their creation: how can the building of such institutions be pushed forward, and by whom? Our fieldwork demonstrates that the Village Development Committees were making practical changes to the interface between rural local governments (*panchayats*) and their constituents that were highly valued by many participants. Given this strong affirmative answer to our first question, our second question becomes even more important in learning from West Bengal's experience. We argue that research on empowered participatory governance needs to shift its focus from the quality of participatory spaces themselves to the

analysis of their political context if we are to understand how alliances for reform might be created and, crucially, sustained. This means not only looking at the design of participatory institutions, but also understanding their impact on local administrators and politicians. Our argument here is that the team driving the reforms needed to connect them to a wider and more public set of claims about the Left Front's participatory successes: without this, a set of 'below the radar' reforms were undermined when faced with local resistance.

The literature on empowered participatory governance is clear in its principles for institutional change. For Fung and Wright,[2] reform should address specific, practical problems; involve people and officials directly affected by these problems; and seek solutions through deliberation. Actualizing these principles means devolving administrative and political power to local bodies, but also ensuring linkages of communication and accountability between these and superordinate units of government. Local bodies should also be state-centred, rather than voluntaristic, a design feature seen as crucial in transforming 'mechanisms of state power into permanently mobilized deliberative-democratic, grassroots forms'.[3] Echoing the value Heller[4] places on 'democratic stateness', or the embodiment of democratic accountability within the state's everyday behaviour, this embedding of empowered participatory governance practices within the state's normal operation seeks to make reform more enduring and widely accessible. Fung and Wright anticipate that deliberative and participatory bodies constructed in this way can present genuine challenges to existing power structures, and that in doing so, they will also face push-back from dominant classes and elites.

Critical assessments of empowered participatory governance in practice have often focused on our first question of whether participatory institutions create meaningful opportunities for citizen engagement. Participatory budgeting, an institutional innovation that informed Fung and Wright's principles for reform, is therefore seen as empowering only when it builds institutionalised links between citizens' decisions and the state apparatus.[5] More broadly,

'invited' spaces of participation are deemed successful if they expand previously marginalised groups' political capabilities to question and challenge existing patterns of power,[6] and projects of democratic decentralisation effective if they re-invigorate the linkages between people and the formal political institutions that claim to represent them.[7] In common with these perspectives, we see participatory reforms as 'meaningful' only if they enable individuals to exercise their agency as *citizens* (rather than clients or supplicants) in their relationships with the state. Importantly, this sets a high bar when assessing participatory institutions: it is not sufficient to create inclusive spaces in which good-quality deliberation happens, these spaces must also expand participants' capacity to shape governance practices. Evaluating this in practice suggests a research methodology that is qualitative, and which looks at what happens *within* the expanded 'institutional surface area of the state'[8] that participatory reform aims to deliver. Participants' understandings of how this space has developed, their own efficacy as actors within it, and how this has changed over time, all provide important insights into the significance of institutional change. Capturing this empirically means working with those who have been active within participatory institutions, using their experience to reflect on their situated understandings both of personal change, and of these spaces' wider value and limitations.

Our second question, how can the creation of such institutions be pushed forward and by whom, deliberately broadens our evaluation of empowered participatory governance beyond this local level. Proponents of democratic deepening have often seen leftist parties as key drivers of reform,[9] arguing that they have the internal discipline to deliver change, alongside an ideological commitment to the empowerment of working class and marginalised groups. The presence of a leftist political party is not, however, a necessary and sufficient condition for successful participatory reform, and we build on earlier work here by emphasising two points. The first is generic, and almost self-evident: parties are not singular entities, but always contain

a range of political actors and agendas. Some leftist parties' culture of democratic centralism may make it more empirically difficult to see these differences, but we should still expect internal debate (however hidden) and resistance (passive or active) between reformers and those elements that have vested interests in the status quo. The second is more specific to programmatic leftist parties: practices of 'democratic stateness', as expressed directly through an empowered citizenry, might be inimical to those seeking rule through tight party control. Heller's comparative analysis of Brazil, India and South Africa argues that democratic deepening is dependent on building a balanced relationship between political and civil society, and that this is disrupted when "political parties not only monopolize the channels of influence but also exert considerable power in setting the agenda, that is determining which issues, claims, and even identities enter the political domain".[10] Leftist parties can become powerful obstacles to democratic deepening if, like South Africa's ANC, they have strong self-interests in crowding out state-citizen relationships.

These insights shape the empirical investigation of our second question. Research must unpack the different interests present within political *and* bureaucratic elites engaged in shaping policy for participatory reform at the 'commanding heights' of the state,[11] but also those of their subordinates 'in the trenches' who directly face these policies' consequences. Within this, developing an understanding of intra-party debates, and of the interests and capacities of those promoting and resisting change, is central to providing a contextual understanding of what are inevitably limited windows of opportunity to pursue programmes of reform.

To examine the strategic case of West Bengal, we therefore drew on extensive field research comprising a range of sources. For our first question on the quality of citizen engagement, interviews and participant observation in five *Gram Panchayats* (Village Councils) allowed in-depth understanding of their changing day-to-day institutional practices, and focus group discussions with (former) members of Village Development Committees in these Councils

explored people's perceptions of state responsiveness and their scope for participation. The Councils were purposively selected to represent different dominant political parties (the CPI(M) and the Trinamool Congress[12]), and the presence/absence of the Strengthening Rural Decentralisation Programme, a governance-enhancement initiative explained further below. Investigating our second question on the politics of institutional change additionally drew on two further sources. Semi-structured interviews with State, District and sub-district level bureaucrats (in-service and retired) as well as politicians (affiliated to both the ruling and opposition parties) elicited their understandings of how and why participation through Village Development Committees was promoted, but ultimately withdrawn. Finally, we examined an extensive collection of documentary sources including official documents (Government Orders, reports from National and State governments, and the UK's Department for International Development), but also local newspapers archives, election manifestos and internal documents of political parties in West Bengal, along with secondary data from government websites (including the State Election Commission). Dasgupta's doubly 'insider' status greatly aided access to, and interpretation of, these sources, enabling first-language engagement with participants and documentary materials, but crucially also insights from her previous role as a development practitioner supporting implementation of West Bengal's participatory reforms. This experience allowed focused and probing questions to be asked, and as the fieldwork (conducted in 2016-17) looked retrospectively at West Bengal's experimentation with Village Development Committees (2003-10), this allowed full, frank and distanced reflection from all participants.

In what follows, we first situate West Bengal's experience of rural decentralisation in the context of India's somewhat ambivalent national commitment to local-self governance, before tracing the Village Development Committees' emergence from debates and experiments within the CPI(M). We then examine the quality of participatory spaces through village-level accounts

of the VDCs' operation, before charting why changes West Bengal's political scenario resulted in the VDCs' abrupt demise in 2010. Finally, our conclusions reflect on the wider implications of this case for building empowered participatory governance and sustaining institutional change.

Panchayats and Popular Representation: West Bengal in a comparative Indian context

Rural India's inheritance from British was an administration structured around revenue collection, alongside social control exercised through traditional *panchayats*: unelected and informal village-level bodies dominated by local landowners. On gaining Independence in 1947, the future of rural governance was contested between India's founding fathers,[13] resulting in a somewhat dysfunctional compromise. The Constitution of India mandated State governments "to organize village Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government",[14] but did not specify how they should create modernised and democratic *panchayats* connected to the rural development administration. Interpretations of this requirement were uneven and limited for four decades, until the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 required all States to create democratically-elected *panchayats* at the District and sub-District levels,[15] part of a push from New Delhi to revitalise local government and to promote community participation in India's rural developmental efforts.

The Left Front, a coalition of left-of-centre political parties led by the Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPI(M)), won the State Assembly elections of West Bengal in 1977 and became an early innovator of *panchayat*-based governance. The Front had a commitment to

'decentralisation of power, protecting the interests of the poor, [and] public participation in administration',[16] and promptly established elections for three tiers of local government.[17] This brought the existing administrative machinery at the District and Block levels under the control of directly-elected councillors, and strengthened *gram panchayats* as the lowest and public-facing tier of rural government. The political motivation for decentralisation was to transform the support the Front won through militant agitations for agrarian reform in the late 1960s into a sustainable rural constituency.[18] Accordingly, following widespread success in the 1978 *panchayat* elections, the Front used these local councils to implement land and tenancy reform, and to break the social control exercised by powerful landlords. Scholarship on this period identified the CPI(M)'s capacity and political will as a 'disciplined' left of centre party as the central driver of these redistributive reforms, and the *panchayats* as transformative institutions of rural governance.[19]

By the 1980s, the compulsions of electoral politics meant the CPI(M) did not 'pursue a more aggressive strategy of class mobilisation',[20] and the *panchayats* largely became implementing agencies for centrally-funded programmes for rural development.[21] They nevertheless remained central to maintaining the Left Front's support, with small and marginal farmers, sharecroppers and agricultural workers becoming increasingly dependent on resources distributed through them.[22] This established a pattern of rule in which the *panchayats* provided a tangible expression of the CPI(M)'s commitment to agrarian reform and the rural poor, and the party's base continued to build in rural areas.

West Bengal's *panchayats* therefore provided representative rural government, and when the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act came into force the Front passed further legislation (the West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 1994) creating two additional fora for direct popular participation. The *Gram Sabha* is an annual public meeting for all inhabitants of a *gram panchayat*, with the authority to authenticate its proposed plan and budget, sanction and

disburse benefits, select schemes and decide on the location of various community assets. Because the large scale of West Bengal's *gram panchayats* made these meetings cumbersome, a parallel system of biannual *Gram Sansad* meetings at the level of the electoral ward[23] was introduced to discuss local needs and priorities, choose beneficiaries of existing programmes, review past expenditure and validate future development plans. In theory, this gave the *Gram Sabha* and the *Gram Sansad* significant power, but in reality, these meetings were often poorly attended or dominated by the local party in power, acting more to validate elected village council members' decisions than to hold them to account.[24]

Thus, by the late-1990s, West Bengal had a very particular form of what Baiocchi and Heller[25] describe as 'instituted participatory democracy' (Figure 1). The *gram panchayats* were firmly established as the lowest tier of the rural administration, implementing core local development and social security measures. Elected members controlled their day-to-day work, a form of representative democracy theoretically given further legitimation through people's direct participation in the *Gram Sansad* or *Gram Sabha* meetings. However, the CPI(M)'s ideological commitment to democratic centralism subjected its elected *panchayat* members to close party discipline: thus, while a CPI(M) *panchayat* chair was the elected council leader, the Secretary of local party office was often the real 'power behind the throne'.[26] As the CPI(M)'s hold on power continued into the new millennium, the ideological commitment to the poor and the disciplined political training that had characterised its early activists was eroded by new entrants for whom the party provided a convenient cover for patronage and corruption.[27] West Bengal's *panchayats* were also subject to intense party-political competition, because in contrast to most other States, political parties openly participate within them. Violent conflict during *panchayat* elections has been one frequent result, but more broadly this made party affiliation a key source of social identity and cleavage, and partisan implementation of government work on the basis of party loyalty the norm.[28]

Figure 1: Public Engagement in Gram Panchayats (1994-2003)

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Examining this local governance structure through empowered participatory governance goals highlights West Bengal's uneven performance. The essential element of popular capacity building was limited, with the CPI(M) often tightly controlling the political development of both elected *panchayat* members and the wider population. *Panchayat* rule had made local government more visible and physically closer to people, but *Gram Sansads* remained performances of public engagement rather than popular organisations with true autonomy. Commitment to 'democratic stateness' within West Bengal's CPI(M) was also partial: *panchayats* provided an important public justification for the Left Front's ongoing rule and demonstrated its engagement with the everyday lives of the rural poor, but this was restricted by its own instincts towards democratic centralism. The Left Front had been an innovator in the 1970s, but ended the millennium in control of an ossifying system of rural governance that was producing its own challenges of institutionalised patronage and party-political polarization.

By contrast, the CPI(M) in Kerala[29] had shown a fuller commitment to governance reform by launching the People's Planning Campaign in 1996. This saw significant financial devolution to the panchayats, backed up with an intensive planning process that actively engaged ordinary people in deliberative exercises and decision-making processes of the state, and quickly became an internationally celebrated case of empowered participatory governance.[30] Support from high-level figures within the party in Kerala, including veteran leader EMS Namboodiripad, cemented these reforms and demonstrated that the CPI(M) *could* step away from attempts to monopolize state-citizen relationships whilst still gaining political capital.[31] For reform-minded CPI(M) activists in West Bengal, this indicated that the potential existed to

revitalise the *panchayat* structure, if only they could convince others that this was in their party's enlightened self-interest.

Revivifying West Bengal's Panchayats: Ideas, Origins and Alliances

Political parties, even avowedly Leninist ones, are not monolithic blocks, and the push for reform of West Bengal's panchayat system had deep roots inside the CPI(M) itself. Dr Satyabrata Sen, Economic Advisor to Kerala's first Left government in 1957, was the Planning Advisor to West Bengal's Left Front Government and architect of its panchayat innovation in the 1970s. An important party advocate of participatory, decentralised government, he argued that this was not only instrumental in delivering effective government, but was also vital in raising people's political consciousness and was therefore essential in creating "an appropriate political ambience… for the people's democratic revolution".[32] As our interviews with senior West Bengal bureaucrats and politicians indicated, Sen's ideas had lasting influence within the party there and in Kerala, and sparked a series of participatory institutional innovations that boomeranged between both States in the decades before the launch of Village Development Committees in 2003.

These began in the 1980s, when the CPI(M) Chair of Midnapore District Council, Dr Surjya Kanta Mishra, launched a decentralised planning initiative in which villagers collected data through community-based meetings, assessed and prioritised their needs, and made collective plans based on unused but available local resources. In the late 1990s Mishra, by then West Bengal's Minister for Panchayati Raj[33] and Rural Development had continued this commitment to Sen's vision, establishing a related pilot project called Convergent Community Action.[34] In developing this project, senior Bengali bureaucrats visited Kerala to view the People's Planning Campaign first-hand, and were impressed:

> *Kerala fascinated us. … From Kerala we got ideas that what had been tried in Midnapore was not a wrong method. That was the method which can be tried.*[35]

Positive outcomes of the pilot project encouraged Mishra to seek support within the CPI(M) for its wider institutionalisation, taking the unusual step of publishing his case in one of the party's journals. He argued that the *panchayats'* success should be measured by their capacity to 'mobilize the entire people irrespective of their political affiliation, class, caste, gender, religion, etc. in the process of planning implementing and monitoring development of their locality'.[36]

This challenge to rise above narrow party-political competition and strengthen people's participation within the *panchayats* was institutionalised through further amendments to the West Bengal Panchayat Act in 2003.[37] This established Village Development Committees (*Gram Unnayan Samitis*) for each ward within a *panchayat*, with membership comprising the ward's elected panchayat member(s), opposition candidate(s), representatives from local NGOs/CBOs, members of Self-Help Groups, Teachers, Government Employees and ten other ward residents. Mixed membership aimed to make the Village Development Committees non-partisan bodies, constituted through consensus between the elected and opposition members of the concerned ward.[38] The Committees' duties were to engage their ward's population with the Gram Sansad's planning activities, and to maintain constant liaison between the common people and the *gram panchayat*.[39] Accordingly, West Bengal's Panchayat Rules authorized the Committees to identify ward-level needs and prepare budgets with participation of the villagers, to receive and utilize development funds, to support neighbourhood groups of the poor, and lead awareness campaigns on issues like health, education, livelihoods, and gender disparity.[40] The Committees were also given a small discretionary budget of INR 10,000 (US$140) for activities that would benefit their communities.

The Village Development Committees therefore provided an institutional structure to promote effective participation and active citizenship below the level of the Gram Panchayat (Fig 2). With cross-party membership drawn from a single ward, the Committees were a relay point

between their wider communities and the panchayats, potentially connecting West Bengal's existing mechanisms for direct participation (the *Gram Sansad* meetings) and elected representation (Village Councils) in a new and dynamic hybrid.

Figure 2: Public Engagement in Gram Panchayats (2003-2010)

[Insert Figure 2 Here]

Those authoring these changes from within the Panchayati Raj and Rural Development Department knew from Kerala's experience that these institutional rearrangements would be insufficient in themselves without capacity-building for their participants. Kerala's People's Planning Campaign had drawn on an independent local organisation, the KSSP, to provide mobilisation, training and support for plan-making, and with no equivalent being present in West Bengal, an alternative had to be found.[41] Mishra was committed to a micro-planning movement that made "a conscious shift from asking people to participate in the Panchayat's plan towards Panchayats participating in the people's planning exercise",[42] but our interviews with key participants showed that realising this in practice involved a difficult choice. Working with the State Planning Board would have been slow, and their capacity to provide mass training was not certain, but this would have driven collective ownership of reform across the Left Front Government. Instead, the decision was made to work from within the Panchayat and Rural Development Department itself, supporting their design with funding and additional technical input from the UK's Department for International Development (DFID).

The result was the Strengthening Rural Decentralisation programme (2005-2011),[43] designed to build capacity for participatory planning in West Bengal's poorest *panchayats.*[44] This began with the formation and intensive training of the Gram Panchayat Facilitating Team, which comprised of officials posted within the Gram Panchayat, and Village Development Committee members from each of its wards.[45] Committee members then led village-level development

planning, initiated through frequent neighbourhood meetings, collection of household and community level data, and preparation of social and natural resource maps using participatory appraisal methodologies. The data and maps were used by the community to 'identify, quantify, analyse and prioritise their own problems, resources and potentials',[46] activities that embodied the deliberative problem-solving central to Fung and Wright's definition of empowered participatory governance.

Working with UK aid money risked alienating more orthodox elements of the Bengali Left, but this decision was defended by Mishra:

> *Hardcore Communists viewed such funding as imperialist intervention, and viewed us as people who sell the country to serve their own interests. (But) Dr. Mishra used to say when a country is fighting for freedom, it is not important to see where the guns are coming from, the important thing is the fight, the struggle. While fighting against America, if Vietnam uses guns made in America, that is not a sin.*[47]

Temporarily at least, it appeared that this decision had worked: Mishra's vision had gained sufficient support within West Bengal's CPI(M) for participatory planning initiatives to be accorded first priority in the Left Front Manifesto for the 2008 Panchayat Elections.[48] The Strengthening Rural Decentralisation programme was then in its third year of implementation, and the Manifesto pledged to expand its operation across eleven Districts over the next five years. In a visible affirmation of political commitment, it was further asserted that since the aim of these initiatives was to empower the most deprived sections of the society, the Front would provide necessary political support to achieve this.[49] The phrasing of these pledges was strikingly similar to another document authored by Mishra,[50] suggesting that at this point in time he was able to set the agenda for his department.

The Village Development Committees Experiment: Participatory Planning and Empowerment?

The combination of institutional change (empowered Village Development Committees) and intensive training and awareness building (through the launching of the Strengthening Rural Decentralisation programme) sought to ensure that the day-to-day operation of the panchayats, their elected *panchayat* representatives and officials embodied practices akin to Heller's 'democratic statehood'. Initial evaluation studies of the Strengthening Rural Decentralisation programme did note change: most Village Development Committees shared a summary of the *Gram Sansad* budgets with all households, compiled information about their wards' developmental needs, and publicly displayed their social and natural resource maps on permanent structures (e.g. walls of school buildings, or health sub-centres). These innovations laid the foundation for transparency, accountability and community audit of activities prioritised within community-level plans.[51] The planning exercises involved sustained people's participation, described as the programme's 'most radical capacity building intervention',[52] while its wider activities brought *Gram Panchayat* operation under the scrutiny of the Village Development Committees. Together, these were described as an empowering experience for both the communities and the *Gram Panchayats* themselves, with a positive impact on community consciousness.[53]

This positive appraisal was also confirmed through our own fieldwork, where former Committee members emphasised the significance of the participatory processes:

> *People often feel too intimidated to approach the Gram Panchayat directly, because they are afraid of the political power at play. But during neighbourhood meetings, the Committee could assure the villagers that no such*

power-play would be involved, and so they could articulate their needs freely in these meetings.[54]

They claimed that the social and natural resource maps reflected these needs, and also helped in conflict resolution. For instance, ownership claims over disputed assets lying on the border of two adjacent villages were resolved after the drawing of these maps. The Village Development Committees also effectively disseminated information on different government schemes, raising villagers' awareness of the institutional functions of the panchayat:

This was kind of a campaign on what Panchayat can do, what they can't, what powers they have. Earlier, they voted for the panchayat members and had the idea that the panchayat can solve all their problems. But through these discussions they too realised the limits within which the panchayat has to operate. This was not possible through the Gram Sansad alone.[55]

This also led to a sense of enhanced ownership of local government, driven by a sense that the data collected by villagers themselves would guide priorities and better implementation of schemes.

Two elderly political workers affiliated to rival parties, the CPI(M) and TMC, recalled that while planning had earlier been solely dependent on their elected Gram Panchayat representative, after the Village Development Committee was activated, people could also approach its members with their demands. The Committee met some of these requirements through the funds at their disposal, and referred the rest to their Gram Panchayat. They both agreed this established stronger links with villagers and the panchayats, a view that was corroborated by a TMC Gram Panchayat Chair:

The Village Development Committee could take decisions to implement (schemes) faster than the Gram Panchayat and do the job in a much more cost-

> *effective manner … when the Village Council delegated work to the Committee, the work got done much more quickly … It was easier for the panchayat to forge and maintain a link with the masses through the Village Development Committee."*[56]

The Village Development Committees' activities were undoubtedly small-scale, but had the potential to have the far-reaching changes on local governance practices hoped for by proponents of empowered participatory governance. For instance, their transparent implementation of government schemes at the village-level highlighted the extent of fund 'leakage' occurring at higher tiers of the panchayats, meaning that with sustained capability enhancing support over a longer period of time, capacitated Village Development Committees could have had knock-on effects for existing political structures.

Asked why members from weaker economic backgrounds agreed to support the time-intensive work of Village Development Committees, one Scheduled Caste member stated that the Committee's participatory exercises had effectively increased his negotiating skills and political consciousness, but more fundamentally his sense of self-worth:

> *In the Committee, at least we all could sit together and discuss among ourselves, and then approach the Panchayat. … we could understand many things. … I would not have learnt to talk if I remained confined to my ward. … I can feel now that I can talk. When I first came to the Panchayat, I couldn't even sit in front of the Chairperson. I felt he has a position, I had to respect that chair. But then I got to know so many other people from other villages. I became friends with them. I felt very happy.*[57]

A prevalent perception among the political elites and mid-level bureaucracy was that endowing the Village Development Committees with financial powers encouraged grassroot-level

corruption. In many cases, the INR 10,000 (US$140) deposited by government in the Committee's bank accounts immediately after they were established in 2004-05 lay unspent, or were not spent in adherence with strict financial guidelines. This was unsurprising, as capacity building exercises for the Committees were only launched in 2005, but led to harsh criticism:

> *It would have been better if the Committees were not given any financial power. ... Even this meagre amount often lay unspent in their bank accounts. Yet, it was because of this money that all the unrest and the clashes took place. Hence, the main enemy is money. Villagers do not try to understand the intricacies of different rules and regulations that are applicable.*[58]

This statement contrasts strongly with the view of a CPI(M) Local Committee Secretary who was the opposition leader in a *panchayat* when the SRD programme undertook its capacity building exercises:

> *If one doesn't have financial power, how can one function? ... What corruption can 15 people do with that meagre amount of money? If there had been lapses or misuse, it's because of ignorance. Not all people who come to the party are politically conscious, nor do they know about the administrative procedures.*[59]

There was unanimity across party lines among the Committee members participating in our research that if financial power had been withheld from the Village Development Committees, they would have lost credibility among villagers, since devolution of functional authority without back-up financial power was meaningless. They emphasised that they remained accountable to local government for their expenditure through procedural checks, and a former Committee Secretary politically affiliated to the Trinamool Congress responded caustically to charges that the Committees were corrupt:

> *If you think that the elected panchayat member or the Chairperson cannot do any corruption, only the [VDC] Committee Secretary can, who has been elected by only 300 people in an open meeting - then this is utter folly. One cannot say anything against the panchayat for the fear of not getting any relief material in future. But there is no such fear of the Village Development Committee because it did not enjoy that kind of power…*[60]

Focus group discussions revealed that the Committees had used these funds to undertake a range of activities, including book distribution to poor and meritorious students, awareness camps on social issues (health, education, gender parity, agriculture, etc.), buying medicines for the sick and destitute, and low-cost construction and repair of basic village infrastructure. They reported that in some cases, this had saved the lives of destitute individuals, and that the funds at their disposal, however meagre, boosted their confidence in catering to villagers' needs. This autonomy to address local problems, whilst being vertically linked to wider government structures again echoed empowered participatory governance design principles. Now that the Village Development Committees are non-functional, such activities have been suspended, leaving a substantial gap in small-scale, but essential, social support: *panchayats* lack significant contingency funding,[61] and the process of seeking funds from them is too time-intensive and bureaucratic for emergency cases.

Our field evidence therefore suggests that the Committees, especially when supported by the Strengthening Rural Decentralisation programme, built people's capacities and responsive organisational structures. Given the intense party-political competition in which the Committees were working, the more difficult challenge was to gain local political commitment for their intended consensus-based mode of operation. A particular flashpoint identified in earlier research was choosing the Committees' membership, with selection via public meetings further exacerbating these rivalries. A field-study undertaken in East Midnapore district in

2008-9 found that political parties manoeuvred to select their own panels of candidates, turning the Committees into another partisan entity, with the added disadvantage that people had their political support 'tagged' through a public vote. Hence, the researchers interpreted the VDC as being 'used as a tool to appropriate political interests', and as creating 'a new hierarchical division in village society and a tension-filled environment'.[62] Elsewhere, a study of the meetings to constitute the Village Development Committees in Jalpaiguri District in 2005 noted that these had concluded peacefully as an agreement had been reached by the political parties beforehand.[63]

We discussed the findings of this research with ex-Committee members and local political figures from different parties in our fieldwork area. Their reports suggest that political conflicts over constituting the Committees took place in around 10% of wards. In one *panchayat*, local leaders had communicated ideas of participatory democracy to villagers in all wards except one, an outcome which an established CPI(M) leader explained as follows:

> *There were clashes in places where we (the CPI(M)) said the last word and did not allow others to voice their opinions. … Where we accorded due respect to the opposition, and due importance to the voice of the common people, and welcomingly accepted all good suggestions, there were no clashes.*[64] …

In another of our Councils, leaders of the two main rival political parties independently recounted how they had removed the threat of unrest altogether by arriving at a 'formula' or 'unofficial understanding' among the different parties operating there. The representative of the winning party in a particular ward was allowed to propose the names of 60% of the VDC members, and the opposition candidate from the same ward would propose the remaining 40%. This idea was explained to the people beforehand in Gram Sansad meetings, and the Committees were peacefully constituted following this 60-40 ratio:

> *When we heard about such problems in other panchayats, we sat together and devised this formula … Our experience is that this arrangement really works. There may be differences of opinion, but not to an extent where the activities of the panchayat have to be stalled. … the VDC brought everybody on the same platform … on the issue of development.*[65]

These findings suggest that media reporting may have exaggerated the prevalence of violence in Committee formation, but they also resonate with claims that higher tiers of government never properly communicated the Committee's role to the people.[66] This was validated by our ex-Committee members, where representatives of all parties agreed that the Committees provided a forum that was required at village level, albeit with a modified selection process. The cross-party alliances that emerged in some instances showed the desire and potential to build grassroots consensus on the issue of 'local development'. Our respondents repeatedly asserted that there was no campaign to support this from the government, and that consensus had occurred through local initiative alone, in the absence of explicit support from senior figures in parties or the bureaucracy.

This retrospective review of the VDCs' practical impact shows that they were both valued by participants and important in reshaping local governance practices from below, especially where they were supported through the Strengthening Rural Decentralisation initiative. These changes were, however, threatening to existing power-holders at the panchayat level, and we turn now to the growing resistance to the VDCs to understand how these participatory spaces were subsequently closed down.

Withdrawing participatory space: the decline of the Village Development Committees

Inclusion of participatory planning through the Village Development Committees in the 2008 Panchayat election manifesto marked the highpoint of the Left Front Government's commitment to rural governance reform, but came at a moment of a wider political threat to its rule. Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee had earlier embarked on a "new economic policy" to boost the State's economic growth, working with the private sector for industrial and infrastructural projects and restraining militant trade union activism. Although successful in the 2001 and 2006 elections, acquisition of fertile agricultural land by the state government, for a car manufacturing unit in Singur and a chemical hub in Nandigram, led to violent clashes and massive waves of public protest. In mid-2007, there was also widespread popular unrest across rural West Bengal triggered by its malfunctioning public distribution system.[67]

In retrospect, it can be seen that these incidents were indicative of a wider collapse of the Left Front, which continued to lose vote share in subsequent elections (Table 1) before finally being comprehensively defeated by the Trinamool Congress (TMC) in the 2011 State Assembly elections. The TMC's founder and firebrand leader, Mamata Banerjee, had consistently portrayed the CPI(M) as a party responsible for authoritarian rule based on violence and terror, seeking the party's overthrow by taking up various populist issues and mobilising public demonstrations. Her single-minded political agenda to oust the CPI(M), which she had pursued since the 1990s, gained traction with the escalation of public discontent under Bhattacharjee's divisive economic agenda and high-handed rule.[68]

The CPI(M)'s response to this threat was to reverse its commitments to institutionalise decentralised planning, attempting instead to re-assert control over its critical rural base. Immediately after the Panchayat elections in 2008, District Magistrates and Block Development Officers from across the State reported on the conflicts and violent clashes

occurring during the constitution of the Village Development Committees, and this issue was raised repeatedly in West Bengal's Legislative Assembly (provincial parliament). Consequently, in August 2009 Dr Surjya Kanta Mishra was unceremoniously removed by the Left Front from the Ministerial position he had held for 13 years.[69] Within a few months of assuming office, Anisur Rahman, Mishra's successor, had issued a Government Order that critically undermined the Village Development Committees, citing these incidents of violence as justification.[70]

Table 1: Vote Share of the Left Front in different elections (2003 – 2011)

Year of election	Election Tier	Left Vote share
2003	Panchayat (local)	65.8
2004	Parliament (National)	50.81
2006	Assembly (State)	50.20
2008	Panchayat (local)	52.98
2009	Parliament (National)	43.3
2011	Assembly (State)	41

Sources: Chakrabarty, 2006; Chatterjee and Basu, 2009; Bhattacharya, 2013; Mallick, 2013[71]

This revised Government Order limited the VDCs to six functions, most of which were concerned with assisting local government in implementing projects and tax collection. It authorized the Committees to prepare a need-based development plan and budget, but ended their role as independently mobilising people's participation, restricting them instead to encouraging attendance at official Gram Sansad meetings. The Committees' use of development funds, nurturing of neighbourhood groups, and awareness campaigns were also all suspended.[72] As the VDCs had been established through an amendment to West Bengal's Panchayat Act, they could not be disbanded altogether without further legislation: what the

Order did instead was simply to circumscribe their role, reducing them to mere implementing agencies of the Gram Panchayats.

The violence surrounding the 2008 Committee selection process cannot fully explain why the Village Development Committees' powers were so drastically reduced. As noted above, local leaders' estimations of violence in our study's four *gram panchayats* suggests that this was lower than reported in the media, and did not amount to the widespread breakdown in law and order claimed in the Legislative Assembly. Furthermore, violence in rural elections is hardly unprecedented in West Bengal: for example, *panchayat* elections in 2003 were marred by a reported 76 political murders,[73] and yet this has never stalled or suspended the normal election process. Instead, this appears to have been a convenient pretext for a swift and unceremonious reversal of policy that was in turn indicative of a failure to build a consensus for the idea of grassroots participatory governance among higher tiers of West Bengal's political leadership and bureaucracy. To understand this failure, we need to look in turn at the contrasting interests surrounding the VDCs among these groups, and the factors that enabled those wanting to restrict the Committees' role to dominate.

Although drawing on a longer tradition within the Indian Communist movement, reform for participatory governance had largely been driven by Surjya Kantra Mishra, who had taken the decision to support legislative reform through the DFID-funded Strengthening Rural Decentralisation programme. This was backed by his core team of civil servants within the Panchayat and Rural Development Department, and allowed them to engage dedicated field-level staff who were able to work intensively within the focus *panchayats* of the programme. However, this also exposed the reform to a number of key risks: dependency on a foreign partner, centring its implementation on a single department, and finally risks associated with the political representation of this relationship.

This first risk was quickly exposed when DFID reduced its financial support: although originally planned to encompass intensive grassroots capacity building *and* work across the whole panchayat system over a seven-year period, this had been heavily cut back. The Strengthening Rural Decentralisation programme's budget was reduced from a proposed GBP 130 million to GBP 34 million (US$ 180 to 47 million), and it was required to show significant results within its first two years of funding. In response, the programme team focused only on grassroots mobilisation, curbing the work with upper tiers of the *panchayat* system[74] that had been present in the programme's original design.[75]

This change curtailed an aspect crucial to building empowered participatory governance: work with elected representatives or local bureaucrats able to mediate between the state and the community at the local level.[76] With this element of institutionalising participatory inputs being inadvertently neglected, local bureaucrats were not receptive to Village Development Committees at their inception, and not engaged in the oversight of capacity-building and activating the VDCs in the later stages. Some of the senior bureaucrats we interviewed[77] attributed this non-integration to DFID back-tracking on its committed funding, while others ruefully admitted to consciously by-pass local officials, anticipating that their involvement would compromise the quality of programme implementation at the local level. This betrays a gap in vision and an element of distrust among the state-actors placed at various rungs of the administrative machinery that contrasts sharply with the tenancy reform programme in the Left Front's early days, where rural civil servants played a pro-active role encouraged by strong mobilisation and support from the CPI(M).[78]

The second risk of driving implementation from within a single Department was important in narrowing the political support for reform, and opening it to opposition from other CPI(M) leaders. For many in the party, the bi-partisan working and consensus building written into the Committees' structure were neither understood nor desired. Senior civil servants we

interviewed argued that the majority of the Left Front viewed the VDCs far more instrumentally, as a tool to politically 'capture' the Gram Panchayats, rather than a forum for deliberation and conflict resolution. Possibly, following their setback in the 2008 Panchayat elections, political elites felt that the rural masses were gaining too much access to information, exposing elements of patronage and corruption in the political system that otherwise operated in a camouflaged manner. Participatory planning exercises and the micro-scale development work undertaken by the VDCs were a particular risk here, as they provided concrete experiences of information sharing, and of development being undertaken under close public scrutiny. A District-level CPI(M) politician we interviewed indicated that local political elites, realising the potential of this process, felt threatened that they would lose control over their constituents and responded by undermining the Committees:

> *The local political leaders themselves created a bottleneck in the implementation of this process … limiting it to specific pockets … they kind-of sabotaged it, not protesting vocally, but by silent non-cooperation.*[79]

Actively functioning Village Development Committees had the potential to negotiate directly with the Gram Panchayats for its share of government resources, disrupting existing patron-client relationships between the CPI(M) and the rural people. Silencing vocal Committee members, and cutting short all capacity building exercises for them, would serve the interests of any party member wanting to restore this patronage network.

Had reform extended at the outset from a broader base within government than the Panchayat and Rural Development Department itself, this significant blocking group within the party could have been challenged. Dr. A.N. Bose, a pioneer of the Midnapore planning experiment and Chairman of the State Planning Board, was potentially a natural ally for the reforms, but stepped away from engagement with them when partnership with DFID was followed. More

broadly, working in 'programme mode' with DFID's support absolved the Left Front Government from making a stronger collective (and financial) commitment to these reforms:

> *There could have been problems, but the government would have tried to correct it. But now this was again a kind of domestication. We were able to mobilize the people to a small extent... but that effect was diffused by the DFID programme. But the real issue is if the State Government really believes in devolution, why can't it assume the finanical responsibility? Maybe they would have given the push, had DFID not been there.*[80]

This passive resistance turned into a direct attack after the Left Front's sharp reversal in the 2008 panchayat elections, where the third risk of representing the Strengthening Rural Decentralisation programme's relationship to DFID was exploited to devastating effect. Because Mishra had been instrumental in setting up DFID funding, it was easy for critical voices within the CPI(M) to scapegoat him for 'anti-left' behaviour and working with agents of neoliberalism.[81] With Mishra's position so politically exposed, the violence around Village Development Committee formation in 2008 provided a useful pretext to remove him and fundamentally disarm an institutional innovation that was powerful enough to threaten all sitting *panchayat* politicians, regardless of their political party. For our respondents at the grassroots level, the sudden withdrawal of these spaces was unexplained and unjustified, and a cause of considerable resentment years later:

> *If the government feels that it wants to make the Village Development Committees corruption-free, let there be an amendment to bring in the government officials within the fold of the Committee, <u>but at least the government should give a chance to the people at the grassroots to voice their thoughts and opinions somewhere</u>… Let us at least be witnesses to the scene in*

this state where the Block Development Officer is sitting with the tribals in a tribal village.[82]

The Trinamool Congress (TMC) government that replaced the Left Front in 2011 was not interested in restoring the participatory spaces the CPI(M) had closed down. Mamata Banerjee's political career had started as a student leader of the Indian National Congress: she had founded the TMC herself, and her party was also marked by the personality cult and centralised leadership that were written into the organisational structure of the Congress party.[83] She therefore had no qualms as Chief Minister in taking up a World Bank programme providing far more extensive funding than that offered by DFID to improve the technological capacity of the panchayats.[84] Within this programme's vision, cleaning up corruption did not occur through local government officials sitting in public meetings alongside the most marginalised people in their areas and debating their needs and priorities. Rather, it was to be achieved through their oversight of computerised records: government spending mapped to geo-referenced and date-tagged images of the infrastructure and public works it delivered. Its motivating vision of 'good governance' was far more attenuated than the critical consciousness-raising present in Satyabrata Sen's writings, and aspired to by Mishra and his supporters. But, perhaps unsurprisingly, it matched Mamata Banerjee's populist ideology well, and was supported by many rank-and-file officers in West Bengal's rural administration too: they preferred the re-assertion of their autonomy it offered to the complexities of democratic deepening.

Conclusions

West Bengal's experience with the creation and withdrawal of the Village Development Committees as spaces for participatory governance has some important lessons for those aiming to deepen democracy. Our first question asked whether the creation of new participatory

institutions could deliver meaningful opportunities for citizen engagement. Here, our research would suggest that the Village Development Committees embodied many of the principles and properties of empowered participatory governance and were, temporarily at least, able to meet some of the transformative expectations placed upon such 'experiments' in reshaping institutions for democratic engagement. Looking first at their design, they were undoubtedly focused around practical orientation, bottom-up participation and deliberation, and were inherently devolutionary and state-centred in their intention of re-animating public engagement below the large village clusters that make up West Bengal's *gram panchayats*. Whether these also succeeded in meeting ideals of *coordinated* decentralisation, and building 'linkages of accountability and communication' back upwards through rural governance institutions, is perhaps more open to debate. The truncated spending, timeframe and scope of the Strengthening Rural Decentralisation programme focused attention on building capacities of individual committees, neither horizontally linking them to their counterparts elsewhere, nor vertically integrating them through wider change within the existing rural administration.

Although created 'from above' with this relative isolation written into their operation, the Village Development Committees were nonetheless valued by the vast majority of those who had engaged with them. The social support they provided was more significant than their meagre budgets would have suggested, but they had also clearly enhanced the political capabilities of their members. Greater coordination and learning *across* committees could have enhanced their impact, but particularly where the support of the Strengthening Rural Decentralisation programme was present, individual committees were making important contributions to people's political awareness and engagement with government. The testimony of committee members we have cited suggests a degree of ownership of and commitment to the Village Development Committees, which was further evidenced by their local adaptation of the institutions. The formula local party leaders had devised to recruit members was an

innovation that helped to ensure their peaceful, bi-partisan operation within a context characterised by deep party divisions. Our answer to this first question is thus that the design of participatory institutions does not have to be perfect for citizen's experiences to be meaningful, valued or individually empowering.

Our second question, how can the creation of participatory institutions be pushed forward, and by whom, moves beyond the institutions themselves to look at the complex political dynamics within which these experiments are located. Here, the rise and the later fall of the Village Development Committees are both instructive in thinking about the possibilities of building 'real utopias' in far-from-ideal conditions. The setting up of the committees grew from a deep-rooted but minority tradition within the CPI(M) committed to making local councils more participatory, drawing on past indigenous experiments to deal with a specific problem: re-vivifying citizen engagement in a context where *panchayats* had ossified, and party-political identities had become polarising and all-pervasive. The solutions sought echoed experiences of the most transformative examples of empowered participatory governance in the literature, in that they were grounded in practical experiences of experimentation in the Bengali countryside (along with learning from Kerala), and there was an attempt to embed transformative change through legislative amendments mandating the Village Development Committees' presence and operation. When the chance came to boost these initiatives through support from DFID, the resulting Strengthening Rural Decentralisation programme did not represent the sudden imposition of an external agency's agenda, but rather maintained local design and ownership. A hand-picked project team was able to work in 'mission mode' to intensively support and communicate the importance of the new institutions to those at the grassroots.

This strategy was making a 'below the radar' shift in the day-to-day operation of rural governance valued by members of Village Development Committees and those they served.

These changes were, however, also building growing resentment from local politicians that eventually highlighted the strategy's shortcomings in trying to embed reform. Unlike the public endorsement by unassailable figures within the CPI(M) leadership the People's Planning Campaign had enjoyed in Kerala, West Bengal's reforms were not as strongly connected to a wider-party strategy of building its own legitimacy through discourse of empowering people. The Strengthening Rural Decentralisation team's focus on grassroots change left many rank-and-file rural administrators divorced from and distrustful of its actions. When the electoral tide turned against the CPI(M), this political and administrative isolation made it easier to disband the team behind the changes, and the legislation that had apparently locked-in the Village Development Committees as institutions of rural governance was neatly unpicked through a Government Order, an executive tool that totally eviscerated them.

West Bengal's experience thus provides valuable lessons for those seeking to analyse or practice empowered participatory governance. Our central point is that unpacking the political context in which reform is happening is at least as important as looking at the details of the participatory spaces it creates. Work on empowered participatory governance and the wider literature on citizen participation has often centred on the latter, and our research would concur that the inclusivity, high-quality deliberation and practical effectiveness of these spaces can be vital to citizens' education and democratic deepening 'from below'. Where earlier work has addressed questions of how change can be embedded, however, it often retains a focus on the institutional protection of these spaces themselves (are they able to resist capture or, more positively, retain autonomy over their rules and scope) while 'enabling conditions', often in the form of political commitment from a left-of-centre party or regime, are too quickly glossed over. Our research would suggest instead that these analytical priorities should be reversed so that the actors *around* these spaces are brought into focus, and this, in turn, means two changes.

The first is to stretch the spatial scale of analysis to encompass different tiers of the state. The strength of political coalitions at its 'commanding heights' matters here, of course, for support at this level is undoubtedly vital in the legislative and other changes that can empower participatory arenas, especially where these are 'invited spaces' created in the first instance from above. But equally important are the interests and actions of those working in the 'trenches' of local government offices or the local political leadership, for if transformative change is achieved, it will undoubtedly affect them first. Understanding what is at stake for these actors matters: in our example Village Development Committees threatened to create additional administrative work, shine a spotlight on local corruption, and (at their most effective) challenge local politicians to engage with an electorate in ways that moved beyond a blunt stoking-up of party-political rivalries. These changes are uncomfortable for those directly involved, and while it is relatively easy for researchers to analyse the problems here, the far more difficult challenge for those seeking to embed participatory experiments is to find allies for this change within these groups too. The VDC experiment arguably did too little work here in connecting up those local political leaders who had – or could be convinced to develop – some sort of a stake within this process of change.

The second, and related point, is to consider the timeframes of reform, and how interests might shift across them. The development of people's capacities envisaged within empowered participatory governance involves time, and this requires a degree of *systemic* durability of the institutions created to deliver this, even though individual actors' responses to these institutions might vary over time. This in turn means analysing the actions and agendas of external funding agencies, but even more importantly the shifting stakes and commitments of local political and bureaucratic institutions. Reforms that genuinely redistribute power or alter patterns of democratic representation can be launched through the actions of a close-knit group of change agents, but they are unlikely to endure without building wider coalitions of support. It is almost

inevitable that as they proceed, they will go through periods of uncertainty and conflict, and the noise and friction this creates can be used as a pretext to close down spaces for democratic deepening by actors (political or administrative) opposed to them. Finding a narrative that transformed 'below the radar' reform into a wider and more public set of claims about the Left Front's participatory successes could have been an important part of this alliance-building, but in contrast to Kerala's People's Planning Campaign, these links were only weakly developed. As well as these dynamics of the reform process itself, analysts and proponents of empowered participatory governance also need to keep a careful eye on the wider political environment. The political windows that open up for these experiments will also be shaped by actors' responses to other threats and opportunities far removed from arena of reform itself. In this instance, declining popularity quickly moved a left-of-centre government's position on rural democratic deepening from permissive ambivalence to outright rejection in a short-term, and unsuccessful, bid to hold on to power. The uncomfortable truth that this suggests for those seeking to drive forward empowered participatory governance is that good luck – in terms of surrounding political events – may be as important as good institutional design.

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Notes

[1] To aid readability, we use English translations of Bengali terms throughout, with the exception of *Gram Panchayat* (literally 'village council'), because of a contextual ambiguity explained further below.

[2] Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance*, London: Verso, 2003.

[3] Ibid*,* 22

[4] Patrick Heller, "Trajectories of democratic deepening: Brazil, India and South Africa compared", *Theory and Society,* 48(3) (2019), 351–382.

[5] Gianpaolo Baiocchi, Ernesto Ganuza**,** "Participatory Budgeting as if Emancipation Mattered", *Politics and Society*, Vol. 42, Issue 1 (2014), 29 – 50; Yves Cabannes, Barbara Lipietz, "Revisiting the democratic promise of participatory budgeting in light of competing political, good governance and technocratic logics", *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol.30(1), (2018), 67 – 84.

[6] John Gaventa, "Finding the Spaces for Change: A Power Analysis", *IDS Bulletin*, Vol. 37, Number 6, (2006), 23 – 33; Glyn Williams, Binitha V. Thampi, "Decentralisation and the changing geographies of political marginalisation in Kerala", *Environment and Planning A*, Vol. 45(2013), 1337 – 1357.

[7] Patrick Heller, "Moving the State: The Politics of Democratic Decentralization in Kerala, South Africa, and Porto Alegre", *Politics and Society*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (2001), 131 – 163; Neil Webster, Kristian Stokke, Olle Törnquist, "From Research to Practice: Towards the Democratic Institutionalisation of Nodes for Improved Representation" in *Rethinking Popular Representation*, Ed. By Olle Tornquist, Neil Webster and Kristian Stokke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 223 – 234.

[8] Heller, "Trajectories of democratic deepening", 359

[9] Atul Kohli, *The state and poverty in India: The politics of reform*, South Asian Studies, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1987); Richard C. Crook and Alan Sturla Sverrisson, "Decentralisation and poverty-alleviation in developing countries. a comparative analysis, or is West Bengal unique?", IDS Working Paper 130, (2001), 1-60, Institute of Development Studies, UK; Neil Webster, "School Provision, the Capacity to Aspire, and the State of Popular Representation in West Bengal" in *Rethinking Popular Representation*, Eds. Olle Tornquist, Neil Webster and Kristian Stokke, Palgrave Macmillan, New York (2009), 79 – 98; Gianpaolo Baiocchi and Patrick Heller, "Representation by Design? Variations on Participatory Reforms in Brazilian Municipios", in *Rethinking Popular Representation*, Eds. Olle Tornquist, Neil Webster and Kristian Stokke, Palgrave Macmillan, New York (2009) 119 – 139; Patrick Heller, "Moving the State", 2001; Patrick Heller, "Towards a sociological perspective on democratization in the global south: lessons from Brazil, India and South Africa", Paper prepared for the Comparative Research Workshop, Yale University, (2011); Steven Levitsky and Kenneth M. Roberts, *The resurgence of the Latin American Left*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, (2011).

[10] Ibid, 362

[11] Joel S. Migdal, "The state in society: an approach to struggles for domination" in *State power and social forces: Domination and transformation in the Third World* Eds. J. Migdal, A. Kohli and V. Shue, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, (1994), 7-34.

[12]The CPI(M) is the Communist Party of India, Marxist – the dominant partner in West Bengal's Left Front Governments from 1978-2011. The Trinamool Congress (known colloquially as the TMC) broke away from the (national) Congress party in the 1998, becoming first the main opposition and then the ruling party since 2011.

[13] While MK Gandhi advocated village-level autonomy, BR Ambedkar (who drafted the Indian Constitution) and Jawaharlal Nehru (as India's first Prime Minister) saw the need for modernisation from above.

[14] The Constitution of India, Part IV, Article 40

[15] Districts are India's second-level administrative division below States (provincial government).

[16] Prabhat Datta, *Panchayats, Rural Development and Local Autonomy: The West Bengal Experience*, SIPRD, Kalyani, West Bengal, (2001), 32.

[17] District councils (*Zilla Parishads*) cover a population of several million; Block councils (*Panchayat Samities*) around 150,000; with *gram panchayats* covering a population of 10-20,000. West Bengal's *gram panchayats* (literally 'village councils') are larger than those in many other parts of India, containing a cluster of villages: they are divided into around a dozen electoral wards, each containing one or more hamlets that would directly elect a single *gram panchayat* member.

[18] Kohli, *The state and poverty in India*; John Echeverri-Gent, "Public Participation and Poverty Alleviation: The Experience of Reform Communists in India's West Bengal", *World Development*, Vol. 20, No. 10. (1992), 1401-1422; Buddhadeb Ghosh and Girish Kumar, "Empowering People or the Party? Panchayati Raj in West Bengal" in *State Politics and Panchayats in India*, Manohar Publishers, New Delhi, (2003), 147 – 188.

[19] G. K. Lieten, "For a New Debate on West Bengal", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 29, No. 29, (July 1994) 1835-1838; Kohli, *The state and poverty in India*; Crook and Sverrisson, "Is West Bengal unique?"

[20] Kohli, *The state and poverty in India,* 142

[21] Much of West Bengal is intensively farmed, with highly fragmented ownership and widespread sharecropping, meaning that many employers of agricultural labourers are themselves poor farmers. As a result, the Left Front emphasised 'all peasant unity' to hold this constituency together on gaining office, with struggles over wage rates often being largely symbolic and highly managed by the CPI(M) (Williams, 2001).

[22] See Neil Webster, "Panchayati Raj in West Bengal: Popular Participation for the People or the Party?" *Development and Change* (SAGE, London), Vol. 23, Issue 4, (October 1992), 129 -163; Echeverri-Gent, "Experience of Reform Communists in India's West Bengal", Glyn Williams, "Understanding 'political stability': party action and political discourse in West Bengal", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No 4, (Aug. 2001), 603-622; Kheya Bag, "'Red Bengal's Rise and Fall'", *New Left Review*, Vol.70, (2011), 69-98; Dwaipayan Bhattacharya, *Government as Practice : Democratic Left in a Transforming India*, Cambridge University Press, Delhi, 2016.

[23] The 1994 Act defines the Gram Sansad as "a body consisting of persons registered at any time in the electoral rolls pertaining to a constituency of a gram panchayat" – it therefore includes *all* adults within the electoral ward, usually around 700 people.

[24] M.N. Roy, "Rural Local Governance in India", Administrative Training Institute, Government of West Bengal (n.d.); Maitreesh Ghatak and Maitreya Ghatak, "Recent Reforms in the Panchayat System in West Bengal: Toward Greater Participatory Governance?" *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 37, No. 1, (Jan. 2002), 45-47+49-58; Moitree Bhattacharya, *Panchayati Raj in West Bengal. Democratic Decentralisation or Democratic Centralism*, MANAK Publications, 2002, New Delhi.; GoWB, *Roadmap for the Panchayats in West Bengal: A Vision Document*, Panchayat and Rural Development Department, Government of West Bengal, (2009).

[25] Baiocchi and Heller, "Representation by Design?"

[26] Bhattacharya, *Panchayati Raj in West Bengal*

[27] Echeverri-Gent, "Experience of Reform Communists in India's West Bengal"; Bag, "'Red Bengal's Rise and Fall'"; Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice.*

[28] See, among others, T. Harrison, "Clubbing together: Village clubs, local NGOs and the mediations of political society" in Ajay Gudavarthy (ed.) *Reframing Democracy and Agency in India: Interrogating Political Society*, London: Anthem Press. (2012), 235-251; Glyn Williams and Sailaja Nandigama, "Managing political space: authority, marginalised people's agency and governance in West Bengal", *International Development Planning Review*, Vol. 40 Issue 1, 2018, 1-26.

[29] Although formally bound by the decisions of its Central Committee and Politburo, State-level units of the CPI(M) have considerable regional autonomy. This is particularly true for West Bengal and Kerala, the only two major States where the party has formed a Government (along with the micro-State of Tripura, in NE India).

[30] See, among others, T. M. Thomas Isaac, Richard W. Franke, *Local Democracy and Development: The Kerala People's Campaign for Decentralized Planning* (Leftword, New Delhi, 2000); T.M. Thomas Isaac, P. Heller, "Democracy and development: decentralised planning in Kerala", in *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance* Eds A Fung, E O Wright (Verso, New York, 2003), 77–110.

[31] Michelle Williams, "Reimagining Socialist Futures in South Africa and Kerala, India", in *South Africa & India: Shaping the Global South,* Eds. Isabel Hofmeyr and Michelle Williams, Johannesburg, Wits University

Press, (2011, pp. 197-218); but also see the caveats raised in Williams and Thampi, "Political marginalisation in Kerala".

[32] Satyabrata Sen, "Porikolponar Ak Drishtibhongi", 1977: 83, reprinted in *Comrade Satyabrata Sen Lal Selam*, 1997, (pp. 83 – 87), *Desh Hitaishi*, Kolkata.

[33] Panchayati Raj means 'rule by panchayats'

[34] Ghatak and Ghatak, "Recent Reforms in the Panchayat System in West Bengal"; Arnab Chatterjee, "Old Wine, New Bottles: Panchayat Planning in West Bengal", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 38, No. 39, (Sept. – Oct. 2003) pp. 4090-4091.

[35] Author's interview with Special Secretary, Panchayat and Rural Development Department, 21.09.2016

[36] S.K. Mishra, "West Bengal Panchayats: An Overview", *The Marxist*, Vol 18, No. 2, (2002:72), pp. 54 – 73.

[37] Roy, *Rural Local Governance in India*; Ghatak and Ghatak, "Recent Reforms in the Panchayat System in West Bengal"; Bhattacharya, *Democratic Centralism*; GoWB, *Roadmap for the Panchayats.*

[38] Roy, "Rural Local Governance in India"; GoWB, "Upa-Samitis and Gram Unnayan Samitis of a Gram Panchayat", Chapter XI, Gram Panchayat Administration, *The West Bengal Panchayat (Gram Panchayat Administration) Rules 2004*, Part II, Department of Panchayat & Rural Development, GoWB, *Roadmap for the Panchayats.*

[39] D. Bandyopadhyay, "The Caucus and the Masses: West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 2003", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 38, No. 46, (Nov. 2003) pp. 4825-4827; Dilip Kumar Ghosh, "Planning at Local Level: Reflection on Local Governments in West Bengal, India", *Universitas Forum*, Vol.2, No.1, (2010).

[40] GoWB, Chapter XI, Gram Panchayat Administration.

41 The KSSP ("Keralan People's Science Movement") was an important asset to the People's Planning Campaign – a mass organisation with many skilled (former) public sector workers, it was independent of the CPI(M) yet sympathetic to its reform programme.

[42] Mishra, "West Bengal Panchayats"

[43] The programme was rolled out in two phases, and eventually covered slightly less than a third (921) of West Bengal's *gram panchayats*, which were selected for inclusion on the basis of them being the poorest *panchayats* within Districts that had the lowest human development index as measured in the West Bengal Human Development Report 2004.

[44] GoWB, *Strengthening Rural Decentralisation Programme (SRD) Programme Memorandum*, Government of India, Government of West Bengal, Department for International Development, UK, 19 September 2004;

GoWB, *Progress Report, 2007-08: Progress of Implementation of the Programme for Strengthening Rural Decentralisation (SRD) for the Year Ending 31st March 2008 (2007-08)*, Department of Panchayat & Rural Development, GoWB; GoWB, *Annual Administrative Report 2008-09,* Department of Panchayat & Rural Development, Government of West Bengal, 2009.

[45] K. Vestrheim, M. K. Nielsen, N. Sen, S. Saurabh, *Decentralised Planning Process: Awareness and Actions for Improving Key Social Indicators*, Knowledge Community for Children in India (KCCI) In collaboration with Centre for Studies in Social Sciences Calcutta (CSSSC), Kolkata and UNICEF, 2007.

[46] ibid, p.15

[47] Ex-Joint Secretary PRDD, interview conducted on 24.02.2017

[48] Left Front. *Paschimbanga Saptam Panchayat Nirbachan 2008 : Nirbachani Ishtehar* (West Bengal Seventh Panchayat Elections 2008 : Election Manifesto), Left Front Committee, West Bengal, Ganashakti, Calcutta, 2008

[49] Ibid.

[50] S.K. Mishra, *Prasanga: Panchayat Nirbachan 2008* (Context : Panchayat Elections 2008), leaflet on Seventh Panchayat Election, 2008.

[51] GoWB, *Progress Report, 2007-08;* Vestrheim, et al., *Decentralised Planning Process*

[52] IPE-ISS, *Independent Assessment of the SRD Capacity Building Initiative*, Infrastructure Professionals Enterprise Ltd (IPE Ltd) In association with the Institute of Social Science (ISS), 2009: 20, available at http://www.wbprd.gov.in/HtmlPage/srd_homepage.aspx

[53] IPE-ISS, *Independent Assessment*, Vestrheim, et al., *Decentralised Planning Process*

[54] Focus Group Participant, Dhaban SRD Panchayat, FGD held on 10/01/2017

[55] Author's interview with Local Committee Secretary, Matgoda SRD Panchayat, 11/01/2017

[56] Author's interview with Chair, Aanchuri SRD Panchayat, 10/01/2017

[57] Author's interview with VDC member, Motgoda SRD Panchayat, 18/01/2017

[58] Author's interview with CPI(M) Ex-Panchayat Chair, Brahmandiha non-SRD panchayat, 06/01/2017

[59] Author's interview with CPI(M) Local Committee Secretary, Motgoda SRD panchayat, 11/01/2017

[60] Author's interview with former Committee Secretary, Dhaban SRD Panchayat, 10/01/2017

[61] In theory, Gram Panchayats have freedom over spending 'Own Source Funding', resources gained through their own revenue-raising powers. In practice, these powers are underused across most *panchayats* in West Bengal.

[62] Raghabendra Chattopadhyay, Bhaskar Chakrabarti, Suman Nath, "Village forums or development councils: People's participation in decision-making in rural West Bengal, India", *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance*, Special Issue, 2010, pp. 66 – 85, p80.

[63] SIPRD, *Gram Panchayats in West Bengal: Institutional Capabilities and Developmental Interventions*, Vol – 1, Ed. By A.K. Mukhopadhyay, S. Chakraborty and A.K. Mukhopadyay, State Institute of Panchayats and Rural Development (SIPRD), Kalyani, Nadia, West Bengal, 2012.

[64] Author's interview with local CPI(M) leader, Brahmandiha non-SRD Panchayat, 06/01/2017

[65] Author's interview with CPI(M) Local Committee Secretary, Motgoda SRD Panchayat, 11/01/2017

[66] Chattopadhyay et. al., "Village forums or development councils"

[67] Bag, "Red Bengal's Rise and Fall", Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice.*

[68] For an account of the political messaging of the Mamata Banerjee, see Kenneth Bo Nielsen, "Mamata Banerjee: Redefining Female Leadership" in *India's democracies: diversity, co-optation, resistance*. Eds. Arild Engelsen Ruud, & Geir Heierstad, Universitetsforlaget, (2016, p. 101–134).

[69] Abhijit Dasgupta, "Damage Control," *India Today*, (August 6, 2009), Available at http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/Damage+control/1/55425.html.

[70] This was Government Order number 1284/PN/O/1/1A-1/04 (Part 2), dated 08.03.2010.

[71] Bidyut Chakrabarty, "Left Front's 2006 Victory in West Bengal: Continuity or a Trendsetter?" *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 41, No. 32, (Aug. 2006), pp. 3521-3527; Jyotiprasad Chatterjee and Suprio Basu, "West Bengal: Mandate for Change", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 44, No. 39, (Sept.2009) pp. 152-156; Debraj Bhattacharya, "End of Left Era in West Bengal Panchayats, but what next?" *Panchayati Raj Update*, Volume 20, No.8, pp. 1 & 7, (2013), Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi; Md. Ayub Mallick, "Kohli-Williams Debate And The Decline Of The Left In West Bengal", *International Journal of Innovative Research & Development*, Vol 2 Issue 8, (2013), pp. 305 – 313.

[72] Government Order 1284/PN/O/1/1A-1/04 (Part 2), dated 08.03.2010.

[73] Stuart Corbridge, Glyn Williams, Manoj Kumar Srivastava, and René Véron, *Seeing the State: Governance and Governmentality in India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, (2005).

[74] Department for International Development (DFID), *Capacity Building and Performance Monitoring Systems for Panchayat Raj Institutions in the State of West Bengal: Assessment and Recommendations*; Draft report of Study funded by DFID under its programme of Technical Assistance to the Government of West Bengal, Panchayats and Rural Development Department (PRDD) (2009); GoWB, *SRD Programme Memorandum*, 2004.

[75] Debjani Dasgupta was working within the SRD programme in 2006, and saw first-hand its wider initial work with higher levels of the panchayat administration, providing advice on rural development more widely, and building 'expert groups' to mirror the KSSP's role in Kerala. As the programme's scope was narrowed, these groups quickly fell apart, and the District administration treated it as a discrete programme of grassroots capacity building.

[76] Claire Bénit-Gbaffou and Stéphanie Tawa Lama-Rewal, "Local Democracy in Indian and South African Cities: A Comparative Literature Review" in *South Africa & India : shaping the global South,* edited by Isabel Hofmeyr and Michelle Williams, Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2011; Ghazala Mansuri and Vijayendra Rao, *Localizing Development : Does Participation Work?* Policy Research Report, Washington, DC, World Bank, 2013.

[77] These included Ex-Principal Secretary, PRDD (interviewed on 11.09.2016), Ex- Special Secretary, PRDD (interviewed on 21.09.2016), Ex-Commissioner of Panchayats, (interviewed on 25.10.2016), Ex-Joint Secretary PRDD (interviewed on 02.02.2017), Joint Secretary, PRDD (interviewed on 24.02.2017).

[78] Kohli, *The state and poverty in India*

[79] Author's interview with Ex-District Council Chair, Bankura District, 12/01/2017

[80] Author's interview with Ex-Special Secretary, PRDD, 21.09.2016

[81] Although the SRD programme was far from unique in receiving development aid from a western country, the violence in Nandigram and Singur over land acquisition made it easier to criticise any policy that could be caricatured as pandering to 'neoliberal' interests.

[82] Focus Group Participant, Dhaban SRD Panchayat, FGD held on 10/01/2017

[83] Praveen Rai, and Sanjay Kumar, "The Decline of the Congress Party in Indian Politics", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 52, Issue No. 12, March 2017.

[84] For an account of the politics of this follow-on programme, Institutional Strengthening of Gram Panchayats, see Debjani Dasgupta, *Participatory Governance Reform in West Bengal: Policy Agendas and Local Responses*; Doctoral Dissertation, University of Sheffield, UK, 2020.