

## TRACING PARTICIPATION FROM THE GLOBAL TO LOCAL ROOTS: THE INTERNATIONAL, INDIAN AND THE 'BENGALI' POLITICS OF PARTICIPATION

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### **ABSTRACT**

The notion of 'participation' and its association with the concept planning and governance has got the spotlight in recent times. There has been a broad consensus among the major international donors and agencies on the effectiveness of this approach. The paper attempts to trace the root of participation both at a temporal level as well as a spatial level from the global map to the state of West Bengal, India which has been widely acclaimed for its decentralization initiatives and all its experiments of participatory planning. Treating the topic of participation through the prism of space and time brings forth a set of issues which focuses on the sustainability of the global mantra of participation allowing the discussion to be conclusive and evidence based rather than one set on a hypothetical scenario.

### List of Key Words

Gaa Village

KMDA Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority

KMPC Kolkata Metropolitan Planning Commission

WSSD World Summit on Sustainable Development

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Participation, since mid 1980s have become increasingly common term in the world of development. It became so popular that by early 1990s every major bilateral development agency emphasized participatory policies (Henkel and Stirrart; 2001). This new orthodoxy of development has primarily evolved out of the dissatisfaction of the older orthodoxy stressing on externally oriented and expert driven approach (Henkel and Stirrart, 2001; Giles and Mohan, 2001; Fung and Wright ). With no universal definition, it suggests involvement of stakeholders in designing the programme that can affect their lives and is based on the basic philosophy that power imbalances can be corrected and citizens can be trusted (Jennings, 2000).

This paper is an unwinding and enervating experience putting together the vast research of the published and unpublished works on participatory planning and governance with the few crucial objectives in mind. However, the basic objective is to trace the nature of ‘participation’, its temporal and spatial aspect; its relevance in context of planning and governance and examine its potential to revitalize the basic democratic fabric of West Bengal. Infact West Bengal has made a global presence in terms of participatory exercise and it is mentioned with some high profile participatory governance example like that in Port Allegre, Brazil and Kerala (Osmani, 2007). The experiences of West Bengal particularly of Panchayati Raj stand in sharp contrast to the rest of the country. It endeavours to chart the historical development of the contemporary notion of participation with the objective to explore the factors which has contributed to its growth. To understand the process systematically a spatial hierarchy from the global scale to national and local level (which here is India and West Bengal) is resorted to. Such approach is sought to avoid overlooking any time-tested qualities in this methodology which may affect its sustainability.

### **Participatory Development in The International Playground**

In the history of participation in the international arena, the radicals of the seventies advocated Participatory Action Research for creating appropriate learning environment for people while World Bank advocated it for marginalized groups. This was given a concrete shape by involving the rural sector by academician Robert Chambers (Giles and Mohan, 2001). But there are a number of underlying processes influencing this apparent structural development of participation.

The first factor responsible for evolution of participation was that the participatory ideals are intrinsically related to the idea of development. As it received a makeover with time so did the concept of participation. From the colonial times to the aftermath of World war till the present day, the notion of development has constantly been modified according to the need of the time. With its shadow in the community development models with paternalistic trend of the colonial times to the self-sustaining one in recent time, participation too has been reshaped with time. An example of this traditional idea of development was pointed by Sachs (1999) in the British Development Act of 1929. This idea was based on the principle that only resources and not people or society could be developed. Also the mandate of the then colonial countries was to 'civilize' the natives for their own interest. However this notion changed after the Second World War when people came to be included in the realm of development. Development received a wider purview as the UNDP Publication titled UNDP and Governance: Experience and Lesson Learned portrays the historical and political scenario and the resultant reaction on the developmental approach. In the aftermath of Second World War, there was an effort to rebuild and increase economic potential through transfer of aids, technology and so on. The thinking of 1950s and 1960s equated development with economic growth. The emphasis was on investment and growth but the whole issue of distribution was absent. But in any system, change occurs as a corrective mechanism to remove the disadvantages of the previous system. In mid 1960s the modernization view was challenged for it was realized that ills of developing society were the result of colonialism and economic exploitation. With the spread of cold war, changing social and economic structure to help the poor was seen as an alternative development model. In 1973, Robert McNamara, the World Bank President summed up the affairs of the state "Despite a decade of unprecedented increase in gross national product...the poorest segment of the population have received relatively little benefit"(cited in Sachs, 1999). The whole practice of paternalistic model and doing things from the top with too much bias on the economic issues changed the whole growth trajectory as the idea dawned that there exists a complex pattern of interaction with myriad factors which controlled the process of development. This form of thinking was thus proven unsustainable as the missing link here was the people. This was also asserted by the South commission<sup>1</sup> which was established in 1987. People being the central concern of the process of development called for a further change in the use of the tools for development. Another event which triggered the growth of this concept was its association with

the concept of Sustainable Development<sup>ii</sup>. According to Papadakis (2006), the concept of sustainable development is a vague and ill defined notion unless backed by concrete procedural elements. This gap was filled by the concept of participation which emerged as a mean for disempowered people to have a voice into the decision-making by which they can be affected. This new association of the concept of participation with Sustainable Development elevated it into a new height where arbitrary and unresponsive decisions at the top could be checked while the people at the bottom would have a voice in it. In fact public participation expressed itself as an instrument to achieve sustainable development. A series of international summits in the post 1990 like the UNCED (1992); WSSD (1995); UNHRC (2001) helped in the passage of transition of Sustainable Development from economic to the social realm and with this graduated the concept of participation (Papadakis,2006).

But can participation of people who are at a grassroot level and without any supporting power structure have any transformative capacity? The answer is yes. Here comes the next factor which reinforced the trust on grassroot level society and 'local knowledge'. This factor was the global interest of the international agencies in making the aid more meaningful by involving the receivers in it. It was observed that western countries and international agencies are busy in asking democratic decentralization and civil society involvement in the development agenda of the developing countries. Avoiding transfer of model and its associated ill from the developed to the developing countries, participatory exercise in developing countries became the favourite principle (United Nations,2007). Further no single model can be applied in all countries and communities, the major international bodies like United Nations started seeking ways to improve participation and transparency which are compatible to particular country (United Nations, 2007). Thus 'modernity' as equated with the western development model was challenged as local knowledge and local model found its place. Participatory belief was even more firmly grounded with the development of participatory techniques which could be applied in the field. Robert Chambers, an icon of the development era in his book *Whose reality Counts? Putting the First Last* speaks of this new form of professionalism and step down from traditional form of valuing things over people and measurement over judgment. Chambers quotes

‘We lectured holding sticks and wagging fingers ... Treated as incapable, poor people behaved incapable.....Nor did many outsider professionals know how to enable local people to express, share or extend their knowledge-Chambers,1997.

He argued that personal, professional and institutional change is essential if the realities of the poor are to receive greater recognition and posits PRA<sup>iii</sup> (Participatory Rural Appraisal) as the key instrument in challenging the institutionally produced ignorance of development professionals. Even the West Bengal Panchayat and Rural development publication, Gram Sansad Porikolpona Bithik Gram Panchayat Porikolpona stresses on similar points where M.N Roy gives an example that if a sluice gate is to be constructed by the gram Panchayat on a dam’s drainage channel ,only local people can give relevant information like the flow of water in the channel over the last few years, its height, velocity etc .Their knowledge and experience has to be included for planning the project.

Also supporting this argument, David Brown in the paper Participation in Poverty Reduction Strategies cites a quotation of World Bank which justifies banks view on Participation over representative democracy

‘Many governments argue that because they are democratically elected , they do not need to institute participatory processes for PRSP formation...Traditional democracy only allows citizens to make one input in four or five years .Participatory processes allow citizens to actively participate in the governance of their country and their resources between the electoral cycles. This not only empowers the public but also increases the overall ownership for development policies (World Bank, 2000 cited in Brown, 2004).

If observed closely this declaration in 2000 marks another elevation of the status of participation from public participation by involving people at developmental decision making level to using this as tool for improving democratic institution. Its application thus marks an escalation from project based methodologies to institutional governance system.

Here comes the third factor in the development of the principle of participation - the current disillusionment of the working of democracy. This is best stated by Fung and Wright (2001) in the paper Deepening Democracy: Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance,

Democracy as a way of organizing a state has come to be narrowly organized with territorially based competitive election for political leadership for legislative and executive office.

If things are ridden with disadvantages in the existing system, there is always a search for a new system to mitigate the problems. It is too early to predict that wider spaces of participation of the people in the governance system can replace the existing representative democratic set up but certain features of participatory techniques like empowerment and higher citizen engagement, greater responsiveness of the governance system may be used as tools to solve some of the problems.

Parallel to the dissatisfaction with the conventional models of development there has been an instance of 'Degenerating Democracy' as pointed Pillai (2006). He observed that in late 80s and 90s, there was a dramatic change in the political scenario of many countries with two unfortunate developments. Firstly several countries that wooed democracy have reverted back to some authoritarian rule as in Pakistan, Zimbabwe, Afganisthan while several well established democracies showed signs of weakness. In India, he pointed the phenomenon as 'convenient adjustment' of different political parties who propel the parliamentary democracy of India. As people become more and more disillusioned of the present running of the democracy there comes the need of an alternative model of democracy. Humphrey Hawksley, acclaimed BBC Foreign correspondent in his book Democracy Kills made the following observation on a similar issue

India's policies are corrupt and infiltrated by crime. In the 2004 general election one in five politicians elected to parliament had criminal cases pending against them...About half were for murder, violent robbery or rape. –Hawksley(pp-160)

The parliamentary system has been used effectively by politicians, bureaucrats explaining the current cynicism of common people towards democracy at large .It also pushes the argument towards an urgency to widen and rejuvenate democracy to safeguard the freedom and dignity of all people. The illusion created by the fact that economic growth can lead to benefit had been lost with the increasing global inequity (Chambers, 1997). Beginning from the colonial times to the present day, there has been a step by step change in the role that public participation has taken up. While it was almost negligible at the colonial times, there was a gradual increase in the proliferation of the participatory programme as the ideals of liberal democracy started getting

importance to the extent that several participatory tools and techniques have been developed to ensure full proof results. Thus it is not that idea has just been reshaped but there have been shift in thinking from top-downism to bottom-up, from Euro-centricism to local knowledge and so on. This has not only happened in the 'developed world'. Community participation principles are primary expression of populist ideals, in the third world countries (Chambers, 1997). Thus it's a worldwide phenomenon as the paradigm has shifted. Participation is no more a addition to the conventional development model but a precondition to many development programmes (Jennings,2000).

This historical narrative marking the development of participation from a simple paternalistic approach to advanced local collective action has been rejuvenated constantly as participatory spaces have opened further enabling more citizen engagement. But there remains a doubt still if these participatory events have been authentic and meaningful rather than rubber stamp ones to prove the credential of the authority who is opening up the participatory space (Cornwall,2002:Papadoski,2006).

### **From Global To Local: The Case of India and West Bengal**

Just as a historical record of global development of participation is essential to explore the level of sustainability of participation, it is equally important to look into its history in India and West Bengal in particular. This spatial hierarchy from the global to local will avoid overlooking those factors which were of immense importance in shaping the boundaries of participatory spaces at a lower level. These local factors with a lower scale of operation have historically enlarged or diminished the participatory space and made it more sustainable or transient but they cannot be ignored in answering the crucial question on the future of participation.

### **Second Level: Participatory Development in India**

To explore the future of participatory practice in India, a peep into the history of participation is resorted. Any practice to be firmly grounded must stand the test of time. The country has long history of participatory development though this term was not used strictly and the concept was contextually used over the years. If one follows the course of participatory thinking in India, a few observations can be made.

Firstly, the participation of civil society was not alien to India. Participation of civil society as an instrument to put organized pressure on unresponsive state has been hailed in recent time in various development discourse .It existed in the ancient time and reshaped its form under different political regimes till the final dawn of democracy in 1947.The history of civil society goes back into the term 'Gaa' referred in the Vedas, which was responsible for conducting a cluster of people (Pillai, 2006). Pathak (2001) observed four models or cultural groups of traditional civil society namely the Vedic, Buddhist, Jain and Tantric model which originated out of consciousness of the people. With the coming of Islamic and Christian cultures more socio-cultural groups became created. However, Pillai (2006) observed that this pluralism became complex with the development of democratic political system in independent India leading to development of 'political clientalism'. During the independence movement and even after that there was debate among the leaders as to which path the development should the country follow. Tagore tried to foster self sustenance by experimenting with institutions that would serve as the foundation of civil society and Gandhi emphasized on decentralization and revival of village societies. But Nehru preferred a centralized system of governance and thus after independence India followed a centralized form of governance (Pillai,2006).

Secondly, participatory thinking, as we know it today and the ideas of local collective action from bottom up had already pervaded the minds of a number of Indian thinkers at the pre independence period. Ramchandra Guha in Makers of Modern India cited a reflection on ideal village of Gandhi in 1937 as follows. He discusses his vision of a model village with perfect sanitation, clean street, accessible wells, houses of worship, common meeting place and so on .He observed,

Given a good Zamindar ,where there is one or cooperation among people almost whole of the programme other than the model cottages can be worked out an expenditure within the means of the villagers including zamindars, without Government assistance....But my task is to discover what the villagers can do to help themselves if they have mutual cooperation and contribute voluntary labour for common good .There are in our villages inexhaustible resources not for commercial purpose in every case but certainly for local purposes in almost every case. The greatest tragedy is the hopeless unwillingness of the villagers to better their lot. Gandhi, 1937(quoted in Guha, pp303)



Gandhi thus believed in grassroot level participation and the potential of the villages to function as self sufficient units. It is based on the premise of self-sustaining unit capable of reconciling without outside interference (Bhattacharya, 1996). The level to which participation at the village level can be achieved has also been meditated by Socialist Jayprakash Narayan. It would be interesting to quote from the book Makers of Modern India by Ramchandra Guha. In this book he mentions of the 'Grass root Socialist' Jayprakash Narayan. In 1959, Jayprakash Narayan published a tract advocating an alternative political system for India based on revival and renewal of village council or Panchayat. His quotation here is the most interesting one

“The only solution to the problem of both of corruption and bureaucracy is direct self government of the people..... In the larger communities however the civil servant would be directly under the control and supervision of community body concerned. Further it would be obviously be in the interest of the community to keep the cost of administration as low as possible. So there will be a natural check on the proliferation of the bureaucracy. .... There may be however one danger. If the communal representative bodies become corrupt, there would be little check on corruption in the scheme of things..... If the real responsibility is thrown on people so that they clearly see that their suffering was due to the fact that they had chosen wrong type of people to manage their affairs ,their representatives and civil servants would be so intimate and direct that it should not take long for people to remedy the situation’

- Jayprakash Narayan(quoted in Guha,pp 412-13)

Evidence shows that just as participatory thoughts, its potential efficiency and its capacity to produce responsive government were observed by a few enlightened Indians, but this could not be put into action at a national level for a long time. However crisis in Indian politics culminated during the Emergency in 1975 when all the democratic rights have been curtailed. In the election following the Emergency in 1977, Janata Party came into power; decentralization became one of the agendas with a heightened concern of liberal democracy (Thorlind, 2000). But it was the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Bill passed in 1992 which allowed grass root level participation of urban and rural citizens in India.

Thirdly, Indian approach to participatory development and planning is mostly independent one born out of the need of the day. It has found various expression in the hands of various

authoritative figures, politicians or social thinkers and powerful international organizations. The growing interest in decentralized planning and administration can be contributed to the disillusionment with the result of centralized planning system along with the shift in emphasis to growth with equity policies (Jain,2003).There was a realization that development is a complex process that cannot be easily planned ,executed and controlled from the centre. In this backdrop interest have oscilitated in search of the new administrative mechanism and legal instruments.

Participation which has now hit the global scenario has been woven long time back within the functioning of the system of the country. But is the stage is already set to welcome this concept again in India? Participatory development in India is a not mere outcome of the dissatisfaction with the top down models. It has roots deeper than that as the country time and again trusted its citizens and probably assures the success of participatory programmes higher, if pursued seriously.

Humphrey Huxley, acclaimed BBC Foreign correspondent in his book Democracy Kills had analysed the democratic set up of a few countries spread across the globe where apparent contradiction exists in the meaning of democracy. He had concluded the strong groundedness of India's democratic set up through the following comments

‘A country with such strongly build institutes can seldom fail to carry out deeper democratic innovations and hence there exists much scope in using the participatory techniques and bring about ‘good governance’.Hawksley (pp-162)

To make a statement pertaining to the whole country is beyond the scope of this study but the state of West Bengal in India has always shown a sustained interest in decentralization. West Bengal is the cradle of a number of decentralization programme ranging from the unique experiment of the Panchayat system in late seventies to the social forestry ones calling for partnership forest fringe dwellers and the Forest Authority. In fact the Panchayati raj system is based on the political philosophy of the Left front government though the act was framed by Congress government (Datta,2006).But is West Bengal's interest towards decentralization synonymous to the international principle of ‘good governance ‘that participation can bring about? Using the examples of decentralization initiative in West Bengal, the study seeks to answer it.

### Third Level: Participatory Development in West Bengal

While at a global level factors leading to the growth of participatory development has been attempted to be identified, at a lower level how strongly the practice has grounded itself over the years have been explored. What needs to be understood now is if at all the new waves of participation produce any change in the way it is practiced in West Bengal?

It has widely acknowledged that West Bengal has spread its hand towards grass root participation planning both at the urban and rural areas (Ghatak and Ghatak,2002;Majumdar ,2004). However the process of decentralization in West Bengal started not by design but by process starting with its practice in rural areas (Pal, 2008).The pursuit of the decentralized approach in planning and governance in West Bengal has been credited by to the emergence of Left Front Government in West Bengal (Chattopadhyay,2005). Chattopadhyay (2005) discusses how rural development activities in West Bengal used to be controlled by bureaucracy and the Front made a departure from this approach in not showing any faith in the trickle down effect of the conventional growth oriented top down strategy of development. But as observed by Majumdar et al (2004) the revival of Panchayati Raj maybe seen as a political strategy or “protective mechanism” to increase its power base in rural areas at the crucial time of Emergency. So decentralized policy in urban areas was not a design but a consequence of those in rural areas. However, West Bengal is the only state where Municipal election has been held regularly since the 1980 amendment. After 74th Amendment Act was passed, and later the passing of West Bengal Municipal Act in 1993, West Bengal became the first state to constitute the Kolkata Metropolitan Planning Committee<sup>iv</sup> (Datta,2006) and hold election on October 7, 2001.

Thus with the impetus from the Central Government, decentralization functioned more vigorously. It is quite evident that West Bengal has made arrangement where citizens need are met through rules ,institutions, elected government ,regular election .But if the attributes of participatory democracy are met or not remains a question as the finer provisions of participatory arrangement when the citizens can directly participate in the decision making is yet to pervade the system .However attempts of preparing participatory plan at the rural level under Strengthening Rural Decentralization Programme<sup>v</sup> or at the urban level through the Draft Development Plan<sup>vi</sup> programme covering the municipalities of West Bengal have been using

participatory techniques. However both are at a first generation level so much speculation still remains.

### **The Context of Participatory development: From Here to Where?**

As participation has moved from projects to policies and institutionalization, there has been greater recognition of the difference and power and also assessing the quality and impact of participation. Paradigms sometimes peacefully and sometimes not so peacefully transfer their preeminence. It is generally observed that newer paradigms often manage those defects which the older paradigm could not. Participation like any other paradigm reflects the spontaneity of the historical moment. The study, while at a global level identified the general factors responsible for participatory development; from a national or local level gets streamlined and identifies those specific factors which may or may not have been congenial for its growth. But global interests in participation have surely prompted some organized initiatives at the national level and at the state level in West Bengal. Globally participation may be an outcome of the problems of the existing development theories; for our country in general it is a step forward in the decentralization agenda which is already in operation. In West Bengal, it strongly grounds the much trusted decentralization policy. The global faith on participation has added a new impetus to the pursue this policy more seriously in India and particularly in West Bengal , where it has existed in not so organized manner in the past. It is thus not difficult to conclude that participatory methodology has a potential which will not be fully realized unless the conventional models or institutions restructure it totally or proactive citizenship is developed. It is matter of synergy by the state and the society and it has a long way to go both at the central or the state level.

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NOTES

<sup>i</sup> South Commission produced a report in 1990, under the chairmanship of Nyere the former President of Tanzania and Dr. Manmohan Singh as the Secretary General. In the Report, the Commission assessed the South's achievements and failings in the development field and suggested directions for action .

<sup>ii</sup> Originally the idea of Sustainable Development was to equate environmental thinking with economic decision making but with a holistic approach it has slowly emerged from the environmental field to the social sphere (Dresner,1992).

<sup>iii</sup> PRA is 'the growing family of method and approaches to enable local people to share ,enhance and analyze their knowledge of life and conditions and to plan act, monitor and evaluate'.

<sup>iv</sup> Metropolitan Planning Committee is a product of 74 th CAA.It is body where Central and State Government are represented.. The Kolkata Metropolitan Planning Act passed within two years of the amendment of the constitution with the objective to prepare the Draft Development Plan For Kolkata Metropolitan Area and perform functions related to planning and coordination for the Metropolitan area as the state government may assign .The committee consists of 60 members of whom 40 members are elected through general election by means of single transferable vote and 20 members including Chairman and Vice Chairman are nominated by the Govt . of West Bengal(Change Management Unit,2004)

<sup>v</sup> Widening up of participatory space in rural West Bengal occurred due to the Strengthening Rural Decentralization Programme. To have more local planning and decision making made in Gram Panchayat, the main difficulty so far had been local resource mobilization and scarcity of local resource evaluation. However in recent times ,the activities of Strengthening Rural decentralization programme which is in operation since October 2005 and has now spread to almost 14 districts of West Bengal, this problem has been addressed as they use resource map and PRA techniques

<sup>vi</sup> West Bengal Municipal Act (1993) requires the municipalities and municipal corporation to produce the five yearly Draft Development Plan which covers a range of municipal functions as laid down in the Act.