

## ***Embedding Poor People's Voices in Local Governance: participation and political empowerment in India – A Report to West Bengal Stakeholders***

### **Introduction**

*Embedding Poor People's Voices in Local Governance* is a collaborative research project between University of Sheffield (UK), Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum and Centre for Studies in Social Sciences Calcutta, funded by the UK Government.<sup>1</sup> The project will continue until March 2010, and further details of the findings will be available as a series of project working papers accessible via the project's website ([http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/trp/staff/glyn\\_williams/research.html](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/trp/staff/glyn_williams/research.html)). This report provides an overview of the project's activities, and a summary of its initial findings regarding the operation of *panchayati raj* institutions and poverty alleviation programmes in West Bengal. The purpose of reporting is to raise issues and get comments on the initial analysis of our field data and to indicate areas where there are scopes for the improvement of public policy.

The Sections 1 and 2 of this report outline the research approach and methodology, and then identify four principal areas of policy interest:

- People's participation within the PRIs
- State definitions and categorisations of 'the poor'
- The grassroots operation of the NREGP
- The grassroots operation of the SGSY

This is a preliminary report on the opportunities available to poor and marginalised households in West Bengal's present political conditions to participate within formal structures of local governance.

### **1: The Research Approach**

Though the present report focuses mainly on some instruments of welfare and the institutions of the panchayat the project's wider academic agenda is to examine the extent to which participatory initiatives within local governance can enhance poor people's opportunities for political empowerment. Local governance reform is receiving much attention within current international development debates, as it is seen as having the potential to develop positive feedback between people's

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participation in local government, the deepening of democratic practices, and the improved delivery of poverty alleviation programmes. Against this background, the project has looked at the operation of panchayati raj institutions and the poverty alleviation programmes running through them in Kerala and West Bengal, two Indian States internationally recognised for their innovations in local governance. Primarily using qualitative research methods, it investigates the impact of participatory governance initiatives on poor and marginalised groups, and addresses the following questions:

- Are initiatives in participatory local governance creating public arenas where the poor can voice their concerns?
- Are poor people better able to press their claims in these arenas and elsewhere?
- Is poor people's participation challenging underlying processes of political exclusion?
- How does West Bengal's political society accommodate partisanship and dissent?

Throughout the research, we have aimed to look at these questions from perspectives of poor people themselves, using detailed case-studies of state-sponsored mechanisms of participation, and placing these in the context of the formal and informal governance structures with which they interact.

## 2: Methodology

As the prime objective of our study is to investigate poor people's engagement with local government, fieldwork locations in West Bengal<sup>2</sup> were selected to ensure that a range of different forms of poverty and marginalisation could be represented within the study.<sup>3</sup> The fieldwork locations were two gram panchayat areas within Birbhum: this District was selected as it has proportions of SC, ST and Muslim households close to the state average, had been as part of the NREGP from the beginning of the programme and also had areas in which the DFID-sponsored Strengthening Rural Development (SRD) programme was initiated.<sup>4</sup> According to the West Bengal Census 2001 (*Chaal Chitra*), state level aggregate of the SC population stands at 24.17%; ST population at 5.85%. Concomitantly, percentage of SC population in Birbhum district is 29.51;

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<sup>2</sup> A parallel fieldwork structure has been followed in Kerala, with two case-study panchayats selected from Wayanad and Palakkad Districts.

<sup>3</sup> The state level aggregate for the percentage of BPL families in west Bengal is 36.68 %. However, Birbhum stands high among all the districts with a percentage of 44.02 (2001 Census), hence providing a potential case for our study.

<sup>4</sup> Within the Birbhum district, we adopted a comparative approach in selecting the Blocks by corresponding the SRD status with political composition at the Block level. The major reason behind coupling the SRD with Left Front is to minimise for the discrimination factor between the ZP and the Block levels. In Birbhum the Sabhadhipati (ZP) belongs to the Left Front and the SRD funds are under control of the ZP. Thus, we choose to select the sample Blocks and GPs on the following lines- SRD Blocks/GPs where both the Sabhapati and the Pradhan belong to Left Front and Partial-SRD where both Sabhapati and the Pradhan belong to the opposition.

percentage of ST population is 6.74 which are closer to the state averages. Accordingly, two Blocks- Dubrajpur with the left and Mayureswar-1 with the non-left political leadership at the Panchayat Samiti level were selected. Care was taken in selecting these Blocks by ensuring that they reflect the District level SC, ST averages along with that of agricultural labourers.<sup>5</sup>

In Mayureswar-1 Block and Dubrajpur Block of Birbhum district, two Panchayats were selected based on a multi-scale sampling criterion comprising of their proximity to the Block averages of SC, ST populations and on account of their political composition with reference to their respective Panchayat Samitis. For instance, Chinpai GP was sampled in Dubrajpur to reflect the larger political picture of the Block where CPI(M) got into power; where as, Jhikadda GP was selected to represent Mayureswar-1 Block's Non-left leadership. This mixed-method also enabled us to have an in-built mechanism for comparison across both locales vis-à-vis their performance in formal local governance institutions as well as the different character of informal political spaces at the grassroots level.

To work with the poor and marginalised communities of the sampled GPs, the study team evolved a methodology with multiple layers. As a first step, profile reports of the GP and the wards were prepared. Based on the qualitative interviews and focus group discussions conducted with GP members, SHG members, representatives of political parties and other resource persons, those *paras/villages* with high density of the poor and the marginalized were identified.

As a lead up for the selection of the potential households for the qualitative indepth interviews a house listing questionnaire survey was administered in all the sampled *paras/villages*. Through this survey a complete list of all the households in the selected locales (Table 1) was produced, which formed the basis for the preparation of a final list of households falling under different strata of political and economic marginalization for indepth interviewing.<sup>6</sup>

A mixed-method approach was then used to capture the operation of official mechanisms of participatory governance (and their interaction with local informal structures of power) at the panchayat level, and the impacts of these on particular groups of poor and marginalised households. Within each *para*, respondents were purposively selected from the house listing survey dataset to be representative of the different levels of participation/non-participation in key government projects and programmes within that community. On an average 10 households from each sampled *para* participated in the indepth qualitative interviews. 50 odd indepth

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<sup>5</sup> Dubrajpur Block has SRD being implemented in all its GPs including the sampled GP Chinpai. Both at the Panchayat Samiti and GP level CPI(M) is in power. The Block averages for the SC, ST, Muslim and agricultural labourers for Dubrajpur are- 34.8%; 5.1%; 31.57%; and 40.2 respectively. Whereas, Mayureswar-1 Block has some SRD and some Non-SRD GPs in it. Again both the Panchayat Samiti and the sampled Jhikadda GP are lead by the opposition alliance (AITC+ INC+ BJP). The Block averages for the SC, ST, Muslim and agricultural labourers for Mayureswar-1 are- 32.6%; 6.4%; 27.8% and 43.9% respectively.

<sup>6</sup> Marginalisation is defined here as a process which disables individuals/groups from accessing crucial economic, social, political and cultural resources and services necessary for their livelihoods as well as the improvement of their standard of life.

interviews, coupled with 20 odd resource person interviews in each GP formed the basis for a comprehensive set of qualitative findings. Our respondents included villagers; political leaders; GP members and workers; traditional/informal leaders; and officials at the Para, Sansad, GP, Block and district levels. After collating these findings, we went back to the same paras/villages and the resource persons to share our findings as well as to conduct group based workshops in the first two weeks of November 2009, where further debates took place leading to the consolidation of our findings which we have incorporated in the following sections of this state level dissemination report.

Table 1: Selected Paras/villages and the Rationale

Chinpai, Dubrajpur					
Paras/villages selected	Bishalpur Dangalpara	Kolora Daspara	Mandarhati Adibasipara (RSVY <sup>7</sup> village)	Monirampur Adibasipara (RSVY village)	Bandhershol Kumorpara (RSVY village) potters/ artisans
Key aspects considered for selection	Poor Muslim wage labourers & petty traders; politically well connected & networked	SC agricultural labourers & Livelihoods worsened due to lack of irrigation/canal water	ST- small and marginal farmers & agricultural labourers; daily wage labourers. Weak political networking	ST- landless wage labourers; Extremely Limited engagement with PRIs; very weak political ties/networking	OBC- Traditional occupation on decline; poor agricultural labourers & wage labourers; politically well-networked
Jhikkada, Mayureswar-I					
Paras/villages Selected	Aouda Dangapara	Gajipur Bayenpara	Gajipur Palpara	Sonj-2 Paschim Adibasipara	Jhikkada Purbapara & Paschimpara
Key aspects considered for selection	SC & OBC Agricultural Labourers Weak economic condition, and politically marginal	Muslim community : Agricultural labourers small scale marginal farmers; Improving economic	politically well networked; & Muslim, SC & OBC Small and Marginal Farmers	ST Agricultural Labourers Weak economic condition, Newly improving livelihoods and political networks	Bagdi (SC fishermen): politically well-networked; very weak asset base & declining traditional

<sup>7</sup> Rashtriya Sama Vikas Yojana

	communities	condition and politically well networked			occupation
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The fieldwork conducted in parallel in each panchayat focused on the following main elements:

1. *Interviews with resource persons.* Twenty+ resource persons, including local officials, elected representatives, leaders of political parties and caste associations were interviewed to provide detailed insights into the grassroots functioning of the state-sponsored arenas for people's participation, and the informal mechanisms which shaped these in practice.
2. *Participant observation.* Field assistants were present in the panchayats from August 2008 to April 2009, (with periodical visits to Kolkata) directly observing key events including the selection of Gram Unnayan Samiti members. These observations informed our understanding of actual operation of local government and poverty alleviation programmes within each panchayat.
3. *Sansad-level survey.* This was a complete enumeration of all households in the selected Sansads of each panchayat from which our groups of poor and marginalised households were selected – this provides base-line data on livelihoods, and levels of people's participation that puts our household-level qualitative work in a statistical context.
4. *Indepth household interviews.* For each group, 8-10 detailed individual interviews were held to understand households' engagement with participatory governance mechanisms and poverty alleviation programmes, and how this related to their livelihood strategies and particular experiences of poverty and marginalisation.
5. *Focus group discussions.* For each identified group of poor households, a focus group discussion was held to identify some of the main aspects of their marginalisation and their experiences of engaging with local government.

As a result of the methodological choices made within the project, we do not claim that our work is statistically representative of conditions across West Bengal. Rather we have undertaken a case study approach which allows us to:

- Highlight different forms of poverty and marginalisation. The eleven villages/paras studied here in Birbhum district cannot hope to capture the full range of conditions across the state– but they do provide important snapshots of the ways class, community, geographical location and political affiliation inform varying experiences of marginalisation.
- Look in detail at the actual operation of key poverty alleviation programmes and local governance institutions on the ground – and to be able to place these in the context of local power structures.

- Link the actual operation of these schemes to poor people's responses to them – and begin to uncover their strategies for engagement with local government.

It will be for workshop participants to judge the extent to which the experiences of our particular panchayats are indicative of conditions elsewhere in West Bengal, and whether the questions we are raising about people's participation within the PRIs, categorisations of 'the poor', and the grassroots operation of the NREGP and SGSY are of wider relevance.

### 3: GP Profiles in Brief:

#### *A: Chinpai GP, Dubrajpur Block, Birbhum District*

Chinpai is a politically active GP, historically a fortress for the CPI(M) in Dubrajpur Block. Bargadari movement was also carried out rigorously in this locality. This GP has been very significant for the CPI(M) in particular as it has consistently won several Panchayat elections here for past 20 odd years. However, lately things have been changing due to certain discontentment among the poor with a negative impact on the electoral support for the party. In the latest (2008) Panchayat Election- the margin between the winning party and the closest lead/opposition was less than 5%. An elderly resident of the GP explained that-

The main base of the 30 year long CPI(M) rule in Chinpai is the Left led peasants movements and land reform movements. However, these days people's faith in the party is tenuous. The leaders no longer visit the villages regularly or interact with the villagers. Earlier the CPI(M) leaders maintained close links with the local people and took care to visit the villages and were always on top of things. The present leaders do not feel the need to come and meet the local people, rather the common people are supposed to approach them for help. The party leaders are no longer interested to stand by the side of the people like in earlier times and often make false promises to the people. The common people are tired and fed up with the false promises and this lack of faith was evident in the 2008 Panchayat elections when the Left Front's vote-share got shrunk... . CPI(M) These days party leaders only visit the village before the elections (interview with WB 2038 on 26/03/09).

A popular CPI(M) leader from the GP (WB 2067 conducted on 09/04/09) explained, "Many democratic changes took place in society after CPI(M) came to power in Chinpai some 35 years ago. Before CPI(M) came to power, under Congress rule the *Zamindars* and *Jotdars* were very despotic. The poor, and women were routinely harassed by these landlords. After CPI(M) came to power, things started changing and the poor received protection from the CPI(M) leaders like Mohammed Salim who was incorruptible and led, like many other leaders of the party, a simple life. The main reason for the declining popularity of CPI(M) in our GP is the lack of popular appeal of the new generation of leaders". On the

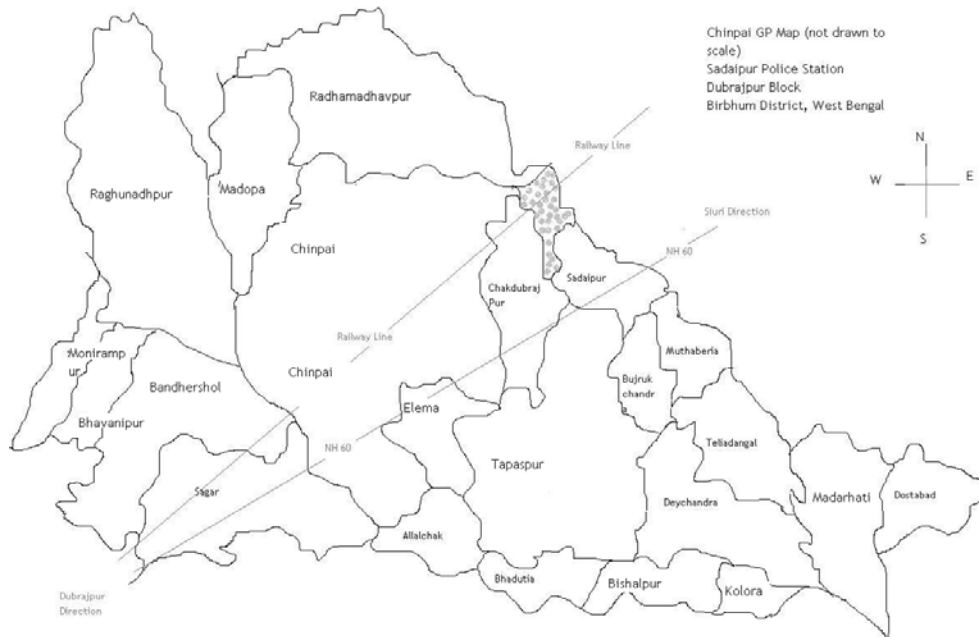
other hand, in the last 5 years parts of the GP have witnessed the growing popularity of the Trinamul Congress (AITC). AITC supporters have been campaigning for some time for adequate compensation for those poor people who had lost lands to the Bakreswar dam, and for other development issues such as employment security and flow of poverty alleviation benefits for the poor in the GP.

The Bakreswar dam and the aligned thermal power plant were constructed here in late 70s, which lead to the steady urbanisation of the village. Chinpai GP is spread across the NH 60, which bisects the GP and also connects it directly to the district and the block headquarters. Suri, the district headquarters is located 20 km. to the East from the GP and the block headquarters is located 18 km. to the West. Thus, Chinpai is also 'well-placed' in its geographical location within the Block.

Chinpai village (where the GP office is located) itself is semi-urbanised because of the presence of the Bakreswar Thermal Power Plant (to the East of the GP village) and the constant inflow of migrants from within the state and from neighbouring states. Chinpai has 34.2% SC population; 6% ST population and 41% of the total population working as agricultural labourers. Agriculture is the main occupation of the people. In total 60.77% people are dependant on agriculture. In slack seasons people also work as daily labourers in the brick factories, stone quarries, construction work, small-scale handicrafts industry such as pottery and carpentry - to earn money. There are some petty traders running tea stalls, vegetable and grocery shops. ST communities engage in collection of non-timber forest products as supplementary sources of income.

Over the years, there has been a steady growth of market through small-scale businesses, petty shops in Chinpai village. There is an ever increasing demand for rental accommodation for the migrant workers in the GP village and the surrounding areas. The Pradhan claimed "the political and economic conditions of this area have improved; nowadays roads are better and drinking water supply has been ensured, schools and colleges have been built. The economic condition of the people has improved due to the Bakreswar Thermal power plant." (Interview with the Pradhan on 29/09/08). The following physical map of Chinpai GP indicates the geographical location of the selected paras (neighbourhoods) within this GP.

Physical map of Chinpai GP (not drawn to scale)



Source: Chinpai Physical Map from the GP office painted by Dr. Sailaja Nandigama

We observed that the pattern of development within the GP has been skewed. For instance, parts of GP with the Chinpai village and the Thermal Power Plant have been semi-urbanised to a large extent, whereas the other parts such as Mandarhati, Monirampur and Kolora have remained under-developed due to their distance from the GP office, the Thermal Power Plant and also the national highway.

Several villages in Chinpai engage in cultivation of single-crop (paddy) in the monsoon season. Very few of the villages have supply of canal water to cultivate two crops in a year. In paras like Monirampur in the western end of the GP, where agricultural lands of the ST and the SC inhabitants have been submerged for the construction of Bakreswar dam, it was alleged that the affected families have not yet been compensated for the loss of their livelihood security. A senior community leader claimed that there are many people in Chinpai GP who have lost their land due to construction of the Thermal plant and those who depended on these lands as share croppers or agricultural labour have lost their employment opportunities to the dam and could not secure jobs at the plant as they did not have legal proof



establishing their association with the submerged lands (WB2038, interview conducted on 26/03/09).

In the Eastern part of the GP, there are flood prone areas like Mandarhati where there is dearth of basic infrastructural facilities disabling the local population from attempting any kind of entrepreneurial work (indepth interviews conducted with Mandarhati villagers during March 2009). However, abundance of small ponds in surrounding areas of Mandarhati has enabled the locals to engage in two-crops on an average. Nevertheless, the failure of monsoons this year has had a negative effect resulting in a massive crop failure (Interview with BDO Dubrajpur on 06/11/09 and villager interviews conducted during March 2009). A female agricultural labourer from Mandarhati village explained that they become helpless whenever the floods occur. She adds that even the elected members of the GP do not come to their rescue despite their repeated appeals (WB2011, interview conducted on 03/03/09). In her own words-

ha..amra boli..je osubidha hochchhe...Ha...arobare bolchilo nodi bandhabo.....ei....ei dharer ta ...bolche pathor kore bandhabo...edike jol aste dibo na...tai bolchilo...to sei..dakho dilenako....bolte to jane...

**yes. we tell them(the GP and the Sansad members) about our inconveniences. In the previous year they promised to construct embankments on the river with stones and restrict the water to come to this side. But see, they didn't do it. They just know how to say empty words ...**

amader, ....amader oi noditei besi voi lagche... jakhon ban ase na...tokhon ei jor hate kore thakte hoi...

**We are scared of the river. When flood comes then we have nothing to do but pray with folded hands...**

akdom nodi.math puro dube jai.....

**the whole field sinks under the river...**

ha..setai boli akhon..boli je amara vot dobo na...amader ke keu upokar korcho na..nodir majhkhane amara achi..jokhon nodir ban ase..tokhon amader ki obostha hoi apnara dekhen na? tai boli..

**We said that we will not vote anymore as nobody care about us. We live in the middle of the river and when the flood comes don't you see what happens to us?**

Kolora Daspara inhabitants alleged of the growing corruption of the ruling party leaders and the monopolised control of a powerful CPI(M) leader over the Bakreswar power plant jobs (Source: group discussions with the villagers and workshop conducted on 05/11/09). For instance, a senior CPI(M) leader explained that the Zonal Committee secretary of CPI(M) exercises his total control over the contracts issued by the Bakreswar Thermal power plant (WB2067 EX Pradhan Chinpai, interview conducted on 09/04/09).

We also observed a significant change in people's attitude towards the CPI(M) and its leadership at the local level within this GP from our first visit to the latest. For instance, there was one significant development observed in all our sampled locales- namely, the overt articulation of discontent by the people about growing corruption

among elected members and party leaders. Earlier, in 2008 and the beginning of 2009- the poor people who were our respondents were generally hopeful about benefiting from various employment generation schemes like the NREGA and SGSY and were more tolerant towards under-performing local political leaders and the GP members. Though there were occasional allegations of corruption against some local CPI(M) leaders, public discussion on such issues was rare. For instance, a poor Muslim woman from Bishalpur Dangapara (indepth interview WB 2003 conducted on 23/02/09) had said, “the party comrades (CPI(M) leaders) give us the news when NREGA work is available and when to collect the wages. Now we get payment through the bank. This is good because previously we were being cheated of our money...” “ekhon aar party r lokera taka khete parbe na” (now party people cannot eat up our money). However, people talked more candidly about corruption in schemes like NREGA and IAY, when we re-visited the GP as recently as November 2009. Many people also spoke openly against the corruption within the CPI(M) local leadership of the CPI(M) in Sansad-X. For instance, it was mentioned in the village level workshop in Bishalpur Dangalpara and Kolora Daspara that the sansad members from Sansad-X were collecting money from IAY beneficiaries and were also engaging in the manipulation of the NREGA funds at the Sansad level.

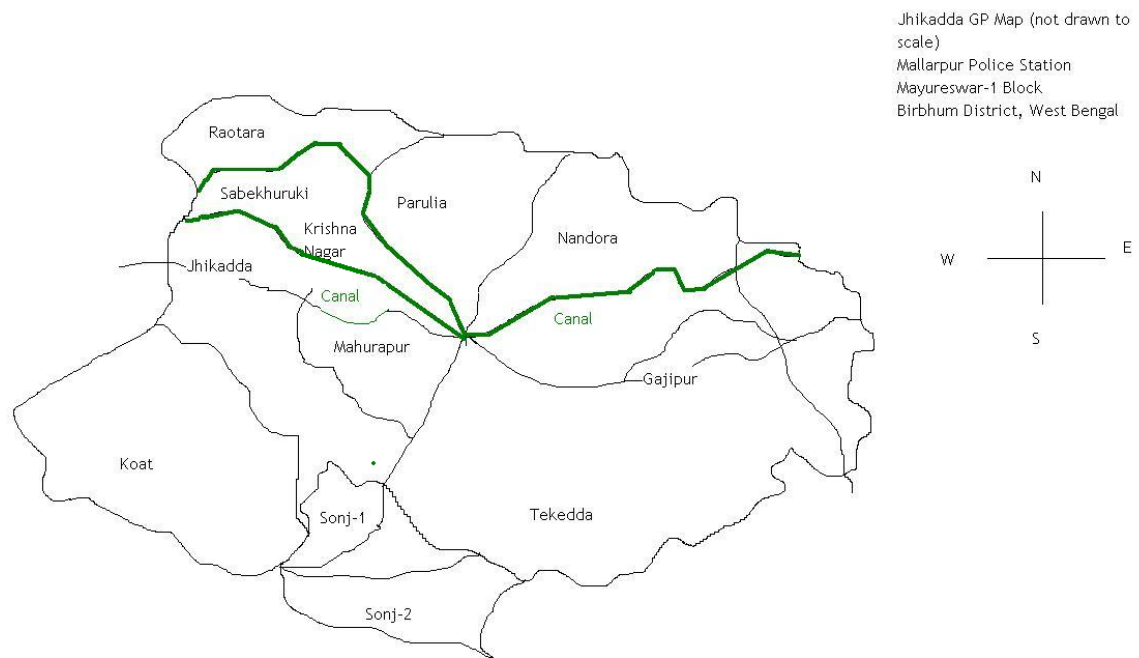
Both GP functionaries and other local people in Chinpai severely criticised West Bengal’s method of identification of the poor through the ‘Rural Household Survey’ of 2004-05 (FGDs conducted with villagers in 2008; and interview with the Pradhan on 04/11/09). Since BPL status is the pre-requisite for majority of the poverty alleviation programmes, the poor families excluded from the BPL list face various forms of marginalisation. Except for NREGP where the poverty status is not a criterion for participation, the poor feel further marginalised due to their exclusion from the list. For instance, the *Kumor* households were not included in the BPL due to their occupational background; whereas, the dwindling demand for their traditional products in the local market have pushed many such families into relative poverty in Bandhershoh Kumorpara. Their discontentment for being excluded from the social security and poverty alleviation benefits was conveniently taken up by the opposition party (AITC) in its political agenda in the latest Panchayat elections.

#### ***B: Jhikadda GP, Mayureswar-1 Block, Birbhum District***

Jhikadda is a politically significant GP within the Mayureswar-1 block . It is located about 65 km from Bolpur and about 20 km from Sainthia. Many block-level prominent political leaders (like the ex-Sabhapati, and some of the Panchayat Samiti Karmaddhokko) hail from this GP. The GP office itself is located at the centre of the GP area in Krishna Nagar village. As explained in the methodology section, Jhikadda GP was selected as it has the non-left alliance (AITC+INC+BJP) in power. And it also corresponds with the Panchayat Samiti as well in its political dynamism. The influential political parties in this GP are CPI(M), Congress, AITC, CPI and BJP.

Jhikadda GP has 34.57% SC population, 7.17% of ST population and 45.4% of the total population falling under the agricultural labour category. All the villages in Jhikadda GP have moderate to healthy access to the canal water for irrigation purposes, and hence they engage in two-crops of paddy. The major occupation in the GP is agriculture. There are other traditional occupations pursued by the fishermen communities of Jhikadda Purbapara and Paschimpara; the potters of the Gajipur palpara etc. However, we observed that due to the constant crisis in the market, these traditional occupations have been taking a heavy toll in this GP. As a result, poor landless people and small-scale farmers are generally dependent on agricultural labour, vegetable sales, and petty shops. Women of the SC and the ST communities engage in daily labour and agricultural labour. Though, Muslim women engage in *Kantha* stich, the meagre income from this activity is not enough to secure proper livelihoods.

Physical Map of Jhikadda GP (not drawn to scale)



Source: Sketch of map by the GP Secretary painted by Dr. Sailaja Nandigama

Historically Jhikadda GP has witnessed serious competition between INC and CPI(M). There have been few times when either of the parties could come into power continuously for a second term. Though CPI(M) was in power during 2003-08, during the latest Panchayat elections it lost the elections despite its efforts to secure its traditional constituency among the agricultural labourers and the fishermen communities. The local leaders attributed the failure of CPI(M) to the ever-widening internal factions, and the growing corruption among the party

leaders who came to power at the GP and the PS levels (in depth interviews with WB 1055 conducted on 11/04/09; WB 1064 & WB 1069 conducted on 14/04/09 and WB 1059 conducted on 11/04/09 and 12/04/09). AITC, Congress and BJP alliance posed constant challenge to the CPI(M) party and its allies not only at the GP level during this term, but also at the Panchayat Samiti level. In the latest Panchayat elections the non-left alliance got 16 out of 25 seats at Mayureswar- 1 panchayat samiti as well.

**Table 2: Leading Parties in Panchayat in different times**

Year	Leading Parties
1978-83	Indian National Congress [INC]
1983-88	Communist Party of India [CPI(M)]
1988-93	Communist Party of India (Marksbadi) [CPI(M)]
1993-98	Forward Block supported by INC
1998-2003	Indian National Congress [INC]
2003-2008	Communist Party of India [CPI(M)]
2008-	Indian National Congress [INC]+ Trinamul Congress [TMC]+ Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP]= [3+4+1]

(Source: interviews and group discussions with senior political leaders and GP members of Jhikadda GP)

A senior CPI(M) leader and activist explained, “our votes in the latest election dropped phenomenally...It has been reduced due to our organisation’s weakness. There must be some faults on our part also. The opposition used bird flu infections and government’s compensation as issues to tarnish the CPI(M)...they also alleged that we did not spend the NREGA money properly...in this way our seats reduced...actually they reduced a lot... (WB 1052, in depth interview conducted on 02/04/09).

There are also allegations on the current GP ruling alliance (AITC+ INC+BJP) engaging in false creation of NREGP work-days with the help of fake NREGA job cards, thus manipulating the institutionalised payment system. A villager from Jhikadda Purbapara (WB 1035 conducted on 27/03/09), complained that the current GUS Secretary and a local leader from the ruling alliance have created problems for him and his fellow villagers while giving NREGA work, and measuring their NREGA work for payment of wages. He explained, “For many of us (villagers) it is getting difficult to get 2 days work under NREGP...it is taking 2 to 3 months for getting paid...nothing can be said for sure if this is happening to us because of the fact that we are CPI(M) supporters”. A prominent CPI(M) leader (WB 1055 conducted on 11/04/09) explained, “NREGA work is not measured according to the

rules in our GP...there are families with more than one job card which is against the rules... much of the NREGA funds are under-spent and the money is lost somewhere... We have received complaints that in Jhikhadda the members cast their vote on NREGA gram Sansad at night...they will not allow the local people to even know about it...they are stealing money as the people have practically no say in planning the NREGA works...we did not approach the BDO about these irregularities yet but will do so very soon”.

A senior Congress leader explained how there is still a possibility for corruption to take place in the newly institutionalised payment system for NREGP wages. He explained, “the same people who earlier used to supervise the NREGP work and prepare the muster roll, do the same now as well...major problem in the old system was creation of false job-cards and recording of false work-days in the muster-rolls...hence, corruption is the same now and then...only now the common people are more actively colluding with the sansad and GUS, without whose co-operation there is no possibility of corruption in the new system (indepth interview with WB 1072 conducted on 08/11/09).

Lack of participatory space for the common people in platforms like the Gram Sansad and GUS were also seen as contributing factors for the growing corruption among the ruling non-left alliance. A senior CPI(M) leader of the GP (WB 1055 conducted on 11/04/09) explained, “We know that there was GUS formation happening in our GP...but have not heard of any open meetings...how will the people participate in local planning if the GUS and GS meetings happen under the cover of secrecy? When there is no gram sansad meeting then to whom will they (the people) talk to about their problems? ...No, the common people cannot go and lodge their complaints to the Panchayat openly. For example, in front of my house an IAY house has been built with a total sanction of Rs.35,000/- while only Rs20,000/- was given to the beneficiary. The...the bricks are all of bad quality...the GUS sachib (Secretary) pocketed the money and built the house with poor quality material...When the beneficiary went to the panchayat to express his unhappiness, they beat him up...” Though we could not verify the alleged corruption on part of the local GUS Secretary, we could see for ourselves that materials for building the floor, the bricks and covering sheets of the IAY house in question were of extremely poor quality (participant observation and field dairies). We also had a word with the beneficiary who was clearly upset with the panchayat leaders. On the other hand, the local Congress leader ((WB 1069 conducted on 14/04/09) put the blame of such shoddy work in the IAY scheme squarely on the beneficiary. He explained, “...Mr. X(beneficiary) is an old man without a family and a place to live...we (the ruling alliance) gave him the IAY money (Rs. 35,000/-) in installments despite him being a pro-left person. He has spent half-of his money on drinking. How can anybody help such an irresponsible man?”

Our participant observation indicated that most of the productive land in Jhikhadda GP is owned by the non-cultivating big land-owners. These families are Roys of Sonj who belong to the Kuyo community, the Brahmins of Parulia and the

Brahmins of Rautara. The large landowners among the Lets (SC) are in Parulia now.<sup>8</sup> Much of the land that traditionally belonged to these landed families was sharecropped, and after the left regime came to power, the bargadars obtained legal rights over the land they cultivated. Some agricultural workers also obtained bargadari rights.. However, at present the majority of the GP population are landless agricultural labourers. Some 50 years back *Santhali* tribes from Jharkhand (erstwhile Bihar) migrated from their homeland in search of livelihoods and settled in Jhikadda GP. It is also told by the STs that they were encouraged to migrate by one of the most influential Congress leaders' family (village level workshop with Sonj-2 tribes on 08/11/09) to work as agricultural workers on the family-owned land.

At present many of these ST communities (spread across the GP, and mainly inhabiting Sonj-2 Sansad) are supporters of the Congress party along with the Muslim voters (inhabitants of Gajipur Sansad) of the GP. CPI(M) has always depended on the Hindu small-scale peasants and the SC fishermen communities (of Jhikadda Sansad) for support. In Jhikadda GP various Hindu and Muslim festivals are celebrated with a good deal of enthusiasm. The major drawback of this GP, however, is the lack of proper public infrastructure. There are very few *pucca* roads connecting some parts of the GP. Majority of the villages in Jhikadda GP are connected by mud roads, and after every monsoon when the paddy needs to be taken to the markets, these roads prove to be a great difficulty for the small-scale peasants.

We observed that due to the constant competition between the ruling alliance and the opposition camp in this GP, there have been confrontations happening at various levels ranging from village neighbourhoods to the GP. These confrontations take place within and across caste/religious/ethnic groups rendering complexity to the political fabric of this GP.

Poor ST and SC communities of Jhikadda GP have made allegations against the Rural Household Survey (RHS) conducted in 2004-05, as faulty and misrepresenting on account of its exclusion of the real and deserving poor (in-depth interviews with the villagers). There were allegations that the landless poor were excluded from the BPL list while the owner of a two-storied building was classified as part of the BPL poor in Jhikadda Paschimpara (WB 1063 conducted on 14/04/09), participant observation & focus group discussions conducted in September 2008). Though CPI(M) is the opposition party, they are not taking it up as an issue at present, as the latest RHS was conducted when the CPI(M) was in power. In various group discussions we conducted in November 2009, the villagers (SC fishermen community) of Jhikadda Purbapara alleged that they were taken out of the BPL categorization by the ruling alliance (AITC+INC+BJP), on political

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<sup>8</sup> Though these large non-cultivating landowners were not a major part of our sample, during our stay in Jhikadda we could observe that there were some still living in the GP, with control (direct through legal ownership; and indirect through traditionally enjoyed control over certain lands and ponds) over majority of the productive assets. Some of them living in nearby towns and cities, occasionally come to visit the GP and to manage their properties.

grounds on the pretext of correction of RHS irregularities.<sup>9</sup> They complained that exclusion on political grounds is a common strategy for all the political parties in their GP.

A senior Block level officer from Mayureswar-1 commented on this phenomenon saying- "People are not innocent. They know how to get things done. They favour those who deliver for them from among the possible political alternatives...they are not happy to realize their duties, but are demanding for their rights...take the case of Jhikadda, last term another party (CPI(M)) favoured a part of the Jhikadda population who supported it for beneficiary lists, through active exclusion of non-supporters. This time around, the opposite is happening. The ruling alliance will take care of the other half that was excluded last time around from the beneficiary lists...all is well for everyone."(interview conducted on 10/11/09).

### *C: Comparative perspective on actual operation of local governance institutions and implementation of poverty alleviation schemes (NREGA & SGSY)*

A brief overview of both the GPs gives us a clear picture of the contrasting functioning of local societies in Jhikadda and Chinpai. Chinpai's political canvas shows a single-party domination and a weak but steadily growing opposition. Though this situation is changing as indicated earlier, this is a complete contrast to Jhikadda's case where there has been a historical bi-party and recently a multi-party alliance in control of the GP and the local society. In terms of economy both the GPs differ from each other considerably. One (Jhikadda) is completely dependent on agriculture and the other (Chinpai) is more diversified in its occupational spread.

However, our findings showed that despite these major differences, there were striking similarities in the strategies adopted by the political parties of these GPs. Political leaders take an active role in mediating between the people and the GP in both the places, paradoxically delimiting opportunities for the people to directly approach the GP. In both GPs the ruling parties adopt strategies of including supporters, and excluding the opponents from various beneficiary lists. In both GPs there were allegations made by the poor of the growing levels of corruption among the leaders of both left and non-left parties. Both the GPs have high levels of political activity at the grassroots level, with paradoxically low levels of public participation in planning in PRI bodies. And most importantly in both the GPs, levels of public awareness on functioning of various PRI bodies and rights of the people to participate in these platforms were extremely low. Not to mention the fact that there were high levels of misinformation regarding the implementation of various poverty alleviation schemes and the possibilities available for the poor to benefit in general in both the GPs. Some of the findings specific to each GP with regards to the participation of the poor in these schemes and platforms is enumerated below.

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<sup>9</sup> In 2008 a circular for correction of the irregularities in 2004-05 RHS was issued. As part of this all the GPs are given a chance to collect public opinion through Gram sansads and GUS meetings to update the RHS list.

#### 4: Intended & Actual functioning of PRI bodies like Gram Sansad and Gram Unnayan Samiti in sampled GPs

A: Gram Unnayan Samiti (GUS) : Gram Unnayan Samiti is a platform for establishment of closer linkage between the Gram Panchayat and the people for an all-round development of the village. GUS helps Gram Panchayat in preparation and implementation of the annual plan at the Sansad level, apart from helping in implementing various poverty alleviation schemes and in identifying the beneficiaries for the same. GUS also is responsible for inducing accountability into the PRI institutions like the Panchayat and the GS by enabling direct public participation. GUS is the representative body of the villagers at the village and Sansad level to continuously interact and maintain liaison with the GP. GUS meetings are supposed to be held at least once a month in a public place and a 7 days notice about the time, place and the agenda of the meeting is to be given prior to the conduct of the meeting by the GUS Secretary with the permission of the GUS chairperson.

GUS is responsible to help and assist the Gram Sansad to prepare its perspective plan for five years and the annual plan that is the basis of the Gram Panchayat plan. It identifies the needs of the Sansad and prepares the Sansad budget as well as the half yearly and annual reports on its activities, income and expenditure . It presents such report at the Gram Sansad meeting for approval and prioritizes the projects for implementation with the available resources in consultation with the villagers.

##### Actual functioning of GUS in Chinpai:

- Formation of GUS in Chinpai has been completely dominated by the CPI(M) workers. The opposition party supporters alleged that they were excluded from the special Gram Sansads held for the formation of GUS in several places in Chinpai (in-depth interviews with villagers). However, the account given to us by the GP members and officials showed that all the villagers were included without any exception and a free and fair election of GUS committee took place. There seems to be a gap between the claims of the GP members and those of the opposition.
- In Chinpai we observed that the GUS meetings were not regularly held in all the Sansads. In some paras, people reported that they were informed of the meetings through public announcements, but when they attended the meeting, the members who called for the meeting never turned up (evidence from FGDs with villagers in Kolora Daspara in 2009).
- In paras that are located at a distance from the GP (eg. Mandarhati, Kolora & Monirampur), some people alleged that they never get to hear any announcements, as the GP people scarcely visit their locality, or approach them to solve their problems.
- In our sampled paras, people explained that the GUS secretary and the Sansad members never informed them about the planning or the preparation of beneficiary lists for various poverty alleviation schemes.



They were told by the members that an open planning and preparation of the beneficiary list would result in violence and conflict between the poor, hence it is better to prepare the beneficiary lists in private.

Actual functioning of GUS in Jhikadda:

- Formation of GUS in Jhikadda GP was marked with conflict and violence. The ruling party alliance (AITC+INC+BJP) actively excluded the opposition (CPI(M)) party and its supporters from attending the Gram Sansads for GUS formation. CPI(M) leaders and supporters alleged that supporters of the ruling party alliance were mobilized in large numbers only to participate in open ballot. One villager explained that there was no other discussion held in these meetings (village level workshop conducted in November 2009). In one of the sansads non-locals (supporters from neighbouring sansads) were mobilized to support the locally dominant coalition (indepth interview with a senior CPI(M) leader).
- None of the respondents from the villagers could re-collect attending a general GUS meeting after the GUS Committee formation. There were no public announcements made regarding the GUS meeting in their Sansad, we were told (individual interviews and Focus group discussion conducted in 2008).
- There was no evidence to suggest that the GUS based planning for local development, or preparation of various beneficiary lists ever took place in public in our sampled sansads. Even some of the young GP members openly accepted the fact that all these meetings are promptly recorded on the paper, and never held in public (in-depth interview with Upa-pradhan on 11/04/09).

B: Gram Sansad and Gram Sabha: Gram Sansad and Gram Sabha are the platforms for local governance at the Sansad and GP levels, created at every ward or constituency for direct public participation and deliberation in preparation of annual planning for the GP's development. Gram Sansad has been given several powers, including identification of schemes as well as beneficiaries that are required to be taken on priority basis for economic development of a village and Sansad. Gram Panchayat cannot refuse to act upon any recommendation of a Gram Sansad relating to prioritization of any list of beneficiaries or schemes or programmes so far as they relate to the area of the Gram Sansad. Two meetings of the Gram Sansad in a year are mandatory – Annual meeting in the month of May and Half-yearly meeting in the month of November.

GS can also record its objection to any action of the Pradhan or any other member of the Gram Panchayat for failure to implement any development scheme properly or without active participation of the people. The recommendations of Gram Sansad are placed before Gram Sabha for consideration and approval. However, decisions of Gram Sansad on the priority lists of beneficiaries and development schemes within the Sansad area are final and cannot be called in

question even by the Gram Panchayat, unless they violate provisions of law or any specific government orders.

#### Actual functioning of Gram Sabhas (Gram Sansad and Gram Sabha) in Chinpai:

- In Chinpai the respondents reported that the Gram Sabha was held some 5 or 6 years back. And that Gram sansad was occasionally conducted in some sansads located near the GP. As in case of the GUS meetings, the ruling party members claimed here as well that the Gram Sansad meetings were held in all sansads twice a year (in-depth interviews with Pradhan and Sansad members).
- It is observed that the people approach the party when in trouble rather than going to the pradhan. Pradhan is a party member in the first place and thereafter an elected representative of the people. The GUS secretary of sansad I of Chinpai, explained-  
“ekhane Panchayat er niyontron ta party r hate, sodoshoder hater niyontron ta thakchhena. Ekhane kichhu korte gelei amader netritto ke age bolte hoy”.  
“Here the party controls the panchayat, the sansad members have little control. For any kind of work we have to take permission of the leadership.” (Source: WB2063 GUS Secretary Sansad I on 07/04/09).
- Poor people from the selected sansads complained that they were never informed or invited to attend the Gram Sansad meetings. In their own words, “they don’t call us to the GS meetings...all decisions are taken in secret by a handful of leaders, beneficiary lists are prepared without consulting us” (in-depth interviews conducted in early 2009 and village level workshops conducted in November 2009).
- One of the respondents of the village level workshops claimed that he was stopped by the member himself when he went to participate in the Gram Sansad meeting. He was told by the Sansad member - “this is a party meeting...outsiders are not allowed to sit in this” (village level workshop in November 2009).

#### Actual functioning of Gram Sabhas (gram Sansad and Gram Sabha) in Jhikadda:

- In Jhikadda villagers informed us that the last Gram Sabha happened some 7 years back (village level workshops conducted in November 2009 and villagers interviews conducted during January & February 2009).
- Gram Sansad was not conducted in any of the sansads in the GP. Many people were unaware of the fact that Gram Sansad is a platform for public participation and collective planning (village level workshops conducted in November 2009).
- Some senior political leaders explained that there was lack of political will to encourage people’s participation in these platforms within their GP (in-depth interviews with political leaders: WB 1055 conducted on 11/04/09;

WB 1064 & WB 1069 conducted on 14/04/09 and WB 1059 conducted on 11/04/09 and 12/04/09).

C: NREGA: Eksho diner kaaj: NREGP aims at generating short-term employment to the rural poor through organizing the locally available resources leading to the local infrastructural development as well as meeting the livelihoods of the rural poor irrespective of their BPL status. The objectives include generating productive assets, protecting the environment, empowering rural women, reducing rural urban migration and fostering social equity, among others.

NREGP works are identified by all the villagers according to the local needs in a special NREGP Gram Sabha held within the GP. Planning for NREGP work and related issues is done by villagers belonging to the GP. All the people belonging to the GP have a right to participate in this meeting.

Actual functioning of NREGP in Chinpai:

- Many people from our study sites could not recall attending a special Gram Sansad for planning NREGP works. They also informed us that they never applied for NREGP work on their own. They were under the impression that the local political leader/Sansad member/GUS Secretary would inform them when the work was available and when to go to the bank to collect the wages.
- Most of our respondents were unaware of their rights with respect to their participation in NREGP work, and their right to avail unemployment benefit should there be a need for it. They also were unaware of their rights to plan for the NREGP work according to their local developmental and employment needs (villager interviews and workshops conducted in November 2009).
- During the first part of our field study in 2008, NREGP was one of the most popular poverty alleviation schemes among the poor in Chinpai. However, as we re-visited the sampled paras in November 2009 we observed that there was a significant change in people's attitude towards NREGP work. Many respondents who expressed enthusiasm over the possibility of gaining employment through NREGP now expressed their disillusionment with the whole scheme as useless for the poor (participant observation & field notes).
- Though most of the GP people worked for NREGP during sometime or the other, they complained that there was never enough work within the scheme to significantly contribute to their earnings. Many households reported getting only 4 or 5 days of work in a year. Whereas, the Pradhan reported an average of 18 NREGP working days per year per household within the GP during 2008.
- The most important factor that seems to be causing the disillusionment among the poor vis-à-vis NREGP work is the unusual delay in getting the

payment through the Paschim Banga Gramin Bank (PBGB) located near Chinpai GP office. Many respondents in our sample paras reported that they had to wait for 3 to 4 months to get paid for their 3 or 4 days work and that NREGP does not help poor families to gain extra employment in non-agricultural season (village level workshops conducted in November 2009).

- There were also allegations from the poor, that though the old system of paying through muster roll records in person was corrupt- poor people did get some money in time. In this institutionalized system people were unable to see the money even after 4 months.
- In Mandarhati ST community members explained that the PBG Bank deducted money from their NREGP wages, in order to compensate for other benefits they accrued through DRDC. Similar incidents were reported to us by one of the Bank employees of PBGB (in-depth interview with PBG Bank official on 04/04/09).

#### Actual functioning of NREGP in Jhikadda:

- In Jhikadda NREGP works are going on in large scale in paras where supporters of the locally dominant coalition reside. For instance, Sonj-2 and Gajipur were among the most active paras in terms of carrying out NREGP work. Cleaning ponds and laying roads with mud were some of the popular activities taken up in these areas.
- However, in Jhikadda Purbapara (where the CPI(M) has strong hold) is left out of focus vis-à-vis NREGP works. Even people of this para alleged that they were not informed when NREGP work is available, and were declined work when they approached the local political leaders (village level workshops and FGDs).
- There were allegations of corruption and delayed payments in the old system as well as in the new institutionalized payment system. Since, the payments for NREGP wages are made through the local Post Office located in Parulia - there has been complaints of enormous delays in wage payments by the poor. In one of our village level workshops conducted on 09/11/09, one of the villagers mocked the rules of NREGA, saying “the government forgot mentioning one important rule...that the payment for NREGP work will be given only after 5 months of completing the work” (ibid.).
- Corruption in the old payment system was made possible as the wages were paid by people. However, in the institutionalized system as well, there have been allegations of corruption made. One senior Congress leader, who is part of the ruling alliance, explained to us (WB 1072 interview conducted on 08/11/09) that even in the new system muster rolls were prepared by the same corrupt local leaders in collusion with the GUS secretary or supervisor and hence, the same corrupt practices are continuing in Jhikadda GP.

D: SGSY/Swanirbhar DoI: SGSY is primarily oriented towards eliminating poverty in the rural areas by way of providing long-term self-employment to the poor by organizing them into Self Help Groups (SHGs). The group efforts also help them to participate in various social and economic development programmes of the government and to receive benefits of various public goods and services targeted towards the poor. GP is given significant role in promoting these SGSY groups at the Panchayat level with the help of two Resource Persons appointed specially for the purpose of capacity building.

SGSY is a long-term employment generation scheme aimed at enhancing the capacity of poorer households through hand-holding and skill-based training. The GP based Resource Persons are responsible for the formation and nurturing of these groups and for identifying their needs for skill based training. There is an inbuilt organic structure within the SGSY organization feeding from bottom-up. There is a possibility for the SGSY groups at the Sansad level to organize themselves into *Upa-sanghas*, and all the *upa-sanghas* can group together as *Sanghas* at the GP level. There is also a provision for all the *sanghas* to form into *mahasanghas* at the Block level to self-organise, self-sustain, to build their capacity and ensure their development.

Actual operation of SGSY in Chinpai:

- There are 35 SGSY groups within Chinpai. Out of which six groups have passed second gradation, while the remaining have passed the first gradation test. Some of these groups have been working in co-ordination with the GP resource persons, and have been engaging in small-businesses through goat rearing, making of Popped-rice (*muri*) etc.
- In villages/paras which are distantly located from the GP office, people have complained that the RPs have never visited their village, and that when they approached them personally, they were not giving them proper information (village level workshop in Kolora Daspara on 05/11/09).
- Some respondents from Bishalpur Dangapara (during the village level workshop conducted on 05/11/09) explained to us that they were unable to form new SGSY groups as the resource persons do not come to their village; and that without local political leaders help they cannot do anything of this sort. When we explained them that they do not need to wait for the local political leaders' permission to start an SGSY group, they were clearly surprised. This kind of ignorance among the poor people was also found in other sampled paras.
- In Monirampur (village level workshop conducted on 04/11/09) the ST participants explained to us that some of the SGSY group members were excluded from the benefits and were left out of group loan sharing. They complained that the group leaders were not interested in taking new loans for the other members as it involved spending a lot of time in managing their group.
- There was in general a wide-spread discontentment among many *swarojgaris* on the lack of benefits even after spending 2 years as a

- member of the SGSY group. We also observed that due to lack of encouragement and growing disillusionment, many SGSY groups have gone dormant after taking a first loan.
- We observed that there were lots of promises made by the RPs while new SGSY groups were made, and there was less attention given on the aspect of “self-help”. As a result, BPL poor who formed the SGSY in anticipation of many benefits (free benefits), have gone sour on the realization that they will have to pay back the loans given by the bank.
  - In many cases, the SGSY groups have taken loan from the bank and did not re-pay the loan, thereby, defeating the whole purpose of self-employment and entrepreneurship.
  - There was a lot of stress on creating new SGSY groups among the Block and GP level functionaries, as opposed to the strengthening of the existing SGSY groups.
  - There was lack of consultation between the groups and the RPs, and between the RPs and the Block level functionaries who impart the skill-based training to the *swarojgaris*. Consequently, skill-based trainings imparted to the groups also were not corresponding to the real capabilities and needs of the group members.

Actual operation of SGSY in Jhikadda:

- There are around 103 SGSY groups in Jhikadda Panchayat, out of which 83 groups have got first gradation and 11 groups have got second gradation.
- There are two resource persons appointed by the GP in Jhikadda. However, we observed that both the RPs were quite ignorant and in-experienced in conducting their business. As a result, we observed that in Jhikadda the SGSY groups were not performing healthily.
- There were allegations from the APL poor in some paras of the GP of being excluded from the SGSY scheme, as they were unable to gather the required number of BPL members to form new groups.
- Unlike in Chinpai people were aware of the possibility of forming an SGSY group without the permission of a local political leader.
- In Jhikadda Purbapara (village level workshop conducted on 09/11/09) some male respondents claimed that they were declined help from the RPs and the Block level functionaries when they tried to register an SGSY group. BDO of Mayureswar-1 has confirmed through enquiring with the Block level SGSY functionaries (eg. Gram Sevika) that there was a verbal instruction coming from the DRDC that since there were enough male SGSY groups in the Block, there should be an added emphasis on forming women’s groups- an done of the ways of doing this was to discourage male groups from formation.
- However, the poor fishermen communities of Jhikadda Purbapara, there were limited livelihood opportunities as they were excluded from other forms of employment through NREGP by the ruling party, and the declining traditional occupation (fishery) in face of lack of required tools and access

to ponds, and SGSY could have been helpful to them in these times of crisis.

## 5: Findings and conclusions

The implications for participation of the poor in both our sample GPs, in Panchayati Raj Institutions as well as various state-sponsored poverty alleviation schemes are multi-faceted as enumerated in the previous section. Despite the significant differences in the political society (as explained earlier), both the GPs have pointed towards a dynamic picture of people's engagement with the GP and the local political parties. People prefer to approach the local political leader, who controls their access to various poverty alleviation benefits. In both the study locales, most people approached the local political leader first, even before they thought of approaching the Pradhan of the GP. Political leaders have been the gatekeepers of both the knowledge and the right to access services through the GP and the related PRI platforms such as the GUS.

Conduct of both Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad have been to a large extent co-opted by the ruling parties/alliances in both the GPs. The same is the case with the implementation of major poverty alleviation schemes such as NREGP and the SGSY through the GP. Ever increasing corruption is another reality affecting people's capabilities to access poverty alleviation benefits- there have been allegations in both the GPs of the poor being forced to share their benefits under IAY and various pension schemes with the local political leader who controls and facilitates these benefits (indepth interviews and FGDs). The same political party leaders who act as the gatekeepers, also grant the poor access to the services- albeit, through partisan favouritism. The poor tap into these opportunities opened up through their informal political ties to gain access to various services and welfare benefits. This strategy reflects the complex trajectory of the poor who ensure that their voices are heard and their aspirations are incorporated within the limited scope they have at the grassroots level.

In case of the poorest of the poor who are left out of the beneficiary lists owing to their limited political connections- it is observed that the informal networks such as, neighbourhood networks, kin-based networks; caste and religion based networks provide temporary relief through thrift loans and charity. Contrary to the widespread propaganda generally taken-up by all the political parties in both GPs of possible benefits to be accrued by supporting their party/alliance- majority of the poor still depended on agriculture labour and other primary occupations such as fishery and cattle and goat rearing, and not on benefits to be accrued from the GP. Some of the observations, trends and findings that stand out as common to both the study locales are given below.

## 5a. State definition and categorisation of 'the poor'

### The process of categorising the poor:

- In contrast to Kerala, where there has been an active public debate about the definitions of poverty and the appropriateness of BPL criteria, in West Bengal, there appears only to be a debate about the application (complaints around inclusion and exclusion) of the criteria.
- Latest Rural Household Survey conducted during 2004-05, was done by the Block-level representatives with minimum interference from the GP. As a result there were complaints from all sections of the GP functionaries and villagers on the irregularities of inclusion and exclusion in both Jhikadda and Chinpai GPs.
- In 2008, a circular intended to compensate for any irregularities in the BPL categorisation to be undertaken at the GP level was issued. This was conducted in both the GPs during our field visit period.

### Impact:

- It appears that in Chinpai this has been used as an opportunity to increase number of people included in the BPL category (from 35-46% quoted by the Pradhan in in-depth interview on 04/11/09).
- In Jhikadda, there were claims from CPI(M) supporting paras that the adjustment had been used to actively exclude them from the BPL category, and from various benefits as a result.<sup>10</sup>

## 5b. Ground level operation of SGSY

- In general, we saw high numbers of groups (35 in Chinpai, 103 in Jhikadda), but relatively poor performance of these groups in practice.

### The reasons for this are:

1. The role of the RPs – They have incentives for each stage of group activity such as group formation, gradation, and on group's performance – but they appear in practice to be focusing only on the formation of new groups rather than the sustenance of existing ones.
2. SGSY group members in both the GPs said that the RPs were very rarely seen except at GP and block-level meetings.
3. Expectations on part of the group members have also been raised inappropriately by the RPs at entry level – there is an expectation that group membership will trigger benefits, rather than this being primarily about self-help. Many groups are taking their first bank loan, defaulting on this and then becoming dormant.
4. Within the groups, it appears that the poorer members (particularly of SC/ST) are not gaining access to the revolving credit funds, and so don't see the benefit of saving. As a result they are losing interest.

### SHG & Links to gram panchayat

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<sup>10</sup> In Jhikadda CPI(M) party is in opposition- there were allegations from its supporters that they loose out in gaining benefits through the INC+AITC+BJP alliance led GP.



SHGs could play an active role in liaising with the GP over implementation and monitoring of NREGP, but this is not happening at all in practice in either GP.

- In Chinpai – Resource Persons were being supplanted by some GP members who were acting as gatekeepers for group formation within their own sansads.
- In Jhikadda – there has been less political engagement with the programme. Even the RPs themselves were unaware of the official requirements of group formation and other such rules and regulations.

## **5c. Ground level operation of the NREGP**

*Right to work in practice:*

- The right to work is not being exercised independently in either GP– people are not coming forwards to independently exercise their right to work which is one of the core intentions of the NREGP.
- Instead, people are dependent on the local political parties for both the distribution of their job cards, and their access to NREGP projects (including work planning and work availability). Instead, and as in earlier schemes such as JRY, villagers talked about waiting to be ‘called’ for work.
- There were also allegations made by the villagers on not being invited to the Gram Sansad intended for NREGP work planning in both GPs.

*Level and distribution of work:*

- Overall, the levels of work received were not high. GP officials claimed 30 days on average in Jhikadda, and 18 in Chinpai – but households reported only gaining around 4/5 days’ work and payment.
- NREGP work was distributed more or less equally among all households in Chinpai, where as in Jhikadda there were allegations of exclusion from NREGP work.

*Delayed payment:*

- Long delays in payment through the banking system were universally reported in either GP – 3-4 months delay has been reported resulting in lessened enthusiasm in people towards NREGP.

*Continued corruption:*

- Control of the muster role is still in the hands of three people - Gram Sansad member, GUS secretary, and the GP’s Nirman Sahayak. Although payment now is made through the bank accounts, there is still the possibility for this group to place extra names on the muster role, and additional payments being given across to some individuals.

## **5d. People’s participation and engagement with the PRIs**

- For GUS and gram sansad as participatory platforms, there is a general pattern of an intention to facilitate people’s engagement with panchayat

work, but that this is not being realised in practice as the bodies are often not functioning in the manner intended.

- There are allegations of the GS and GUS meetings happening in secret (Goponno meeting)- in closed doors without the consultation of villagers. In both the GPs villagers reported being mis-informed or un-informed about these meetings.
- For both the GUS and the sansads, there is a clear 'capture' of these institutions by all political parties concerned in both the GPs.

**Conclusion:**

The evolution of the PRIs seems to have searched for multiplying the institutional solutions for ensuring people's participation – through GS, and GUS – but in both cases, the underlying questions of political culture have not been sufficiently addressed. If there is a more general message here, it is perhaps that multiplying the avenues for people's participation is not adequate in itself- it needs to be linked to a wider discussion of the role of political parties at the grassroots level.