Drawing upon a micro-study of two villages in two non-Left gram panchayats in West Bengal, this paper puts one issue in the foreground, namely, the idea and practice of local politics. Using two counter examples to prove a general point about contemporary West Bengal’s dominant political tendencies, it argues that the elaborate organisational structure of the (Left) party system, that once proved to be the ruling Left Front’s political strength, has now turned out to be a part of its problems. The LF’s electoral compulsions have come in the way of its original social mobilisational impulses and programmes. Only recently some signals of mass mobilisation politics have begun looming on the political horizon of the state. It would require a thorough reconfiguring of the relationship between political parties and society – a shift from a party-society to a dynamic and reciprocal link between party and society – in order to transform the existing nature of particularistic politics and build instead an encompassing participatory politics.

1 Introduction

To be sure, social relations and economic currents within which panchayat politics is embedded certainly inform our study, but our primary objective is to subject the local political institutions and political processes to ethnographic analysis. Such exploration, we feel, is particularly germane to contemporary West Bengal – a state in which politics has deeply penetrated the rural hinterland, due largely to the land reforms and rural decentralisation initiatives of the left parties since the late 1970s. Indeed, the panchayat institutions and the well-entrenched party networks surrounding them have become an enduring feature of rural life and society in West Bengal. Panchayat politics and panchayat functionings have become all the more prominent in the everyday lives of the villagers, with increasing responsibilities being given to GPs in various developmental and welfare programmes and with the consequent increase in the quantum of funds under their disposal.

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Intriguingly, this is also a time when the state is witnessing a new sense of urgency about (re)industrialisation and an urge to compete with other states, in order to attract investment and promote economic growth. It is well to recall that during the heydays of land reforms, the impetus for redistribution of land came primarily from the state-level political leaders and somewhat radical urban middle classes (Chatterjee 1997; Ruud 2003) with the panchayat institutions acting as junior partners in this collaboration. In more recent times in contrast, the panchayat bodies seem to be shouldering – though more as an implementing agency than as an autonomous local government – an increased burden of the welfarist and redistributive responsibilities of the government, while the state government appears to be pushing, rather enthusiastically, the agenda of growth. It is as though the “developmental” state will be operating through the panchayats, while market boosting will be the priority of the state government.3

**Growth and Redistribution**

In a market-oriented democracy, any government will have to pay concurrent attention to the goals of both growth and redistribution – goals that are not necessarily in zero-sum opposition to each other but are in constant tension nonetheless. How these competing priorities get reconciled in contemporary West Bengal will depend on how the panchayat institutions steer the “politics of redistribution” at the grass roots level, while the state-level politicians manage the “politics of growth” at supra-local levels. This apparent schism between the growth-promoting and welfare-enhancing functions of representative institutions at different levels of governance (more broadly, between the neoliberal versus rights-based discourse on development) will have, we suggest, wider ramifications for rural politics. In our view, therefore, there are no signs of panchayat politics losing its importance, only indications of its taking on new complexities.4

Admittedly, for long the panchayat bodies have been treated as mere extension agencies for dispensing various centrally designed and sponsored poverty alleviation programmes and service delivery schemes. Furthermore, in this designated role, the panchayat bodies have acted under the aegis of centralised party directives and more as bureaucratic agencies than as autonomous representative institutions, internalising a style of bureaucratic governance. However, with the proliferation of welfarist programmes and the shifting responsibility for the delivery of the same from administration to elected local governments, the so-called “street-level” politicians will have to deal more directly with the new economic and political exigencies arising out of everyday demand for redistribution. The local bodies are increasingly being viewed as all-purpose centres, expected to weather the storm of growing local discontent.5

Implicit in the discussion on the role and importance of developmental panchayats in West Bengal there remain the larger, at times controversial, theoretical currents on the linkage between democracy and development, or more concretely on the enduring presence of the LF and its effect on economic development and poverty alleviation in the state. In our micro-study we take only an indirect look at this question. Our primary concern is not so much about Bengal’s economic achievement or its lack as about its democratic deficits and the lack of substantive citizenship. This is by no means to underestimate the political energy and involvement of the masses in this state. Nor can we ignore how poor peasants came out of a state of utter political marginality, with the decline of the so-called “landlord party” (read Congress) in the late 1970s and the corresponding advent of the LF. It is the gradual eclipse over the years of that mass mobilisational spirit that we wish to interrogate here.

**Democratic Stability**

A related issue that we wish to address, albeit in a limited manner, is whether the strong party system – more precisely a party-state or even a party-society in Bengal’s context – is conducive to democratic stability. The highly organised left parties have contributed in no small measure to the continuous presence of the LF in power. However, in the process political competition has declined considerably, resulting in some kind of political stagnation. The positive impact of the political organisation of left parties, of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) – CPI(M) – in particular, is well known (Bardhan and Mookherjee 2005; Harriss 1993; Kohli 1987, Lieten 1990; Ruud 2003; Veron et al 2003). Arguably, however, its elaborate organisational structure spread over the entire countryside of Bengal and its manifold political and social activities, that have once proved to be its major political strength, now turn out to be a part of its problems. In more recent times the organisational energy of the CPI(M) seems to be mostly consumed by its compulsion to win elections, at the cost of its initial mobilisational impulses and programmes that sought to rally people around larger issues of social inequality and injustice and their redress. As we try to argue below, this has worked to entrench a particularistic notion of politics, at the expense of grammatical, and encompassing politics. What is more, this has constrained the vision and agenda of not only the established left but also of the mainstream opposition, producing a general climate of political ossification (Webster 1996).

In this political environment dominated by a “ballot-box” view of democracy, do we see any signs of political oscillation or change in our study villages, that are presently within the fold of opposition GPS? Or do opposition GPS mimic the mainstream political practice? It is as though we draw upon two counter examples to prove a general point. Of course, it is not easy, and rather risky, to generalise and claim too much from findings from a micro-level enquiry. Also, local spaces are increasingly being appropriated by supra-local, even global corporate, power in some parts of the state just like in many other states in the country. Hence, there is a clear possibility of our micro-level village narrative getting overshadowed by the meta-narrative of sweeping policy turnarounds in the neoliberal direction. Still we are hopeful that some generalisable arguments about the prevalent idea and practice of democratic politics and its effect on poor rural people can be teased out of our political narrative.

A number of scholars have written about “…the effect of CPI(M) mobilisation in bringing about changes which have been of benefit to poor rural people…”, especially in the 1970s and 1980s (Harriss 1993). The land reforms, decentralisation reforms, and agricultural productivity improvements under the aegis of the LF...
government have proved to be of particular importance in this respect. In his analysis in the late 1980s of the LF and its reform policies, Kohli (1987) argues that even though the ruling front accommodates the interests of the dominant rural classes, “the regime is organised by a well-organised ideological party. Because this party rests its power on classes other than the propertied, it generates a degree of political autonomy from the dominant classes” (1987: 143, as quoted in Harriss 1993). Kohli then highlights the “redistributive possibilities” within Bengal’s democracy and capitalism. Dreze and Sen (1989, as cited in Harriss 1993) indicate the change in the balance of power in the rural society of West Bengal in favour of the poorer sections of the population, largely as a result of left-wing activist movements. Similarly, Gazdar (1992) argues that agrarian reforms have strengthened the bargaining power of the poor in labour markets, leading to improvements in their living conditions (see also Rogaly et al. 1999). In her recent study, Harriss-White (2008) however argues about the continued domination of the agro-commercial capitalist class (dominated by the ex-landlords and the Marwari diaspora) in agricultural markets in West Bengal, and indirectly over the agricultural production process.

Since the 1990s, both the pro-poor ideological stance of the LF and its mobilisational impulse have somewhat recoiled. It is against this backdrop of the initial relative autonomy and redistributive potential of the left parties vis-à-vis dominant classes and its recent eclipse that we take up our study of village politics. Methodologically, ours is a rough and rudimentary effort at examining political institutions and processes through the prism of ethnography – the subject matter that usually remains outside the purview of standard ethnographic enquiry.7

2 The Village Narrative8

In some sense, our study villages – Jagatpur in the district of South 24 Parganas and Chatma in Purulia – are atypical. Unlike in many other villages in West Bengal, land reforms, green revolution, technology infusion and agricultural productivity growth have somewhat bypassed these localities – the otherwise major happenings in many Bengal villages in the 1970s and 1980s since the advent of the LF. Throughout the entire period of irrigation-induced boro paddyculture in many other parts of the state, farming in these areas has remained mainly rain-fed. Also, in the general climate of the continued political domination of the LF in the countryside of West Bengal, the GPSs that encompass these villages stand out a bit in that they have regularly witnessed fluctuations in the electoral fortunes of the prominent political parties that are operating here, indicating the countervailing powers of both left and non-left forces. At the zilla parishad (ZP) level, however, in both South 24 Parganas and Purulia, the CPI(M) had an overwhelming presence as per the results of the panchayat elections in 2003.9

2.1 Jagatpur Mouja in Rishi Bankim Gram Panchayat

About 60 miles away from Kolkata, Jagatpur mouja, within Rishi Bankim gram panchayat, under Kakdwip block, in the district of South 24 Parganas, constitutes one of our study villages. Kakdwip was one of the major hubs of the peasant organisation and movement during 1946-50, when the Tebhaga uprising took place in different parts of Bengal. It became a major movement, directly by the Krishak Sabha, in those areas in the Sundarbans region of southern Bengal “where sharecropping was a widespread historical form of sub-tenancy with inferior rights” (Chatterjee 1997). Indeed, the Sundarbans-Kakdwip region is known as “baby Telangana”. Under the able and attacking leadership of people like Kangsari Haldar, Rashbehari Ghosh, Gunadhar Maiti, Jagannath Maiti, Manik Hajra, Hemanta Ghosal, Kartik Khara and Nilkhantha Das, this region was indeed at the forefront of this fierce peasant struggle, demanding a greater share of the agricultural produce for the actual tillers of the land.

Land in the Sundarbans region was kept outside the system of Permanent Settlement. In 1825-30, for the first time, the huge forest area in this region was divided into several plots known as “lots” or “lats”. These were eventually leased out to latdars, who would draw upon the labour of the toiling local tribes to clear the jungle and develop those areas into cultivable lands. Inevitably, several layers of intermediaries (such as chakdars and jotedars) surfaced between the classes of landlords and tillers, extracting exploitative rents from the latter. In the 1930s, when agricultural prices recorded a sharp decline all over India including Bengal, the peasants’ debt burden, revenue arrears, and their discontent – all rose. The soil of Kakdwip was ripe for the ensuing Tebhaga movement. Subsequently, however, the state-level leftist leadership prevailed upon the local activists and persuaded them to eschew the path of militancy, which not unexpectedly created a sense of betrayal among the local peasant leaders.

One wonders whether this legacy of combative and resistance politics, though tempered through supra-local interventions, has something to do with the electoral competition that persists in this GP area. The Rishi Bankim gram panchayat (as also Jagatpur mouja) has witnessed regular alternation in political power, with the left coalition and Congress-Trinamool Congress (TMC) alliance taking turns to win the gram panchayat elections at fairly regular intervals. Between 1978 and 1983 the CPI(M) was in power in this GR, yielding place to the Congress party for the next two terms. They resumed office again in 1993, but got defeated by the TMC-Congress alliance in the 2003 panchayat elections. The boothwise seat share in Jagatpur mouja however indicates the dominance of the CPI(M) in this area. This mouja consists of four constituencies; and in three out of the four booths, the sitting panchayat member is from the CPI(M), while the fourth is under TMC control.

Does this village receive step-motherly attitude from the Congress-TMC dominated GP, in terms of intra-GP allocation of resources? Or is the “opposition” GP itself a victim of discrimination vis-à-vis the left-dominated panchayat samiti (PS) and zilla parishad? Our conversation with the secondary school teacher who happens to be a Congress Party leader gives an idea of perceptions held by this “opposition” GP. This school is run by a board consisting of non-left factions. Hence, it is facing a lot of discrimination, he alleges. While all the secondary schools in the district got building grant of Rs 1.4 lakh, this school was deprived of the same. The member of Parliament local area development (MPLAD) and member of the legislative assembly local area
development (M L A L A D) funds too are allegedly allotted on the basis of party affiliation. Five teachers have retired from this school, but no fresh appointments have been made to fill in the vacant posts. The school has 900 students and only 13 full-time teachers and three para-teachers. There are as many as 150 students in some classes. The only source of drinking water in the school is a tube well which has been out of service for the last three months. The block development officer (B D O) was informed as the tube well re-sinking fund had to be released by him. But till date the tube well is not repaired.

Kinship Network

Just as political competition is quite visible, so is political cross-over. One of the panchayat members in this village, Dilip Jana (D J), was a member of the T M C just about three years ago; in the last election he has won as a C P I(M) candidate. He of course claims that he has joined the C P I(M) party due to ideological reasons, since in T M C and Indian National Congress (I N C) there has been an ideological degeneration. The upa-pradhan – a Congress man – advised us to meet D J, his ex-comrade in the T M C/Congress alliance. D J’s uncle, Arun Kumar Pradhan, was a key political figure in the locality, and had played a major role in the development of the area. He was the founder of a high school in the mouja, and the key person behind the establishment of the Kakdwip Sundarban College and Kakdwip library. Till his death he occupied the position of Congress president at the block level. D J remarked that a number of people had benefited from the land reform measures during the L F regime though his own family had to part with 150 bighas of ceiling-surplus land after the L F had come to power. Now he owns eight bighas and looks after 15 bighas of the family land that are mainly leased out seasonally at a rate of Rs 1,800 for aman paddy and Rs 500-1,000 for other crops. His entire family is involved in politics; most of the members traditionally supported the Congress Party. Indeed, there is a large settler population from Medinipur in this area, a sizeable majority of which belongs to the Mahishya community and has traditionally remained Congress loyalists. This could perhaps explain a kind of non-left political atmosphere here. But shifting political loyalty (d a l b a d a l) may also be a calculated family tactic to cover, represent and capture, through various members, the entire spectrum of political influence.

One interesting change is apparent in the electoral fortunes of the local political leaders. Unlike the past, in more recent times, after almost every panchayat election a new panchayat pradhan has assumed office. In contrast, in the 1960s and till late 1970s, leaders like Bidhu Bhushan Panda (in north Jagatpur) and Sushil Raut (in south Jagatpur) could occupy the respective posts of the panchayat adhyaksha for a long stretch of nearly 15 years (from 1964-65 to 1977-78). Both belonged to the Congress Party. Democratic politics has indeed led to a decline in the erstwhile and almost unassailable social dominance of certain classes. Now Panda earns his living through two very diverse occupations, namely, j a j a m a n i and retail dealership of kerosene. Traditional and modern professions are combined so easily! Also, political, social and economic wherewithal seems to converge. This is true for local leaders of all political colours. The father of a sitting C P I(M) panchayat member is a dealer of a ration shop too. A C P I(M) leader and a panchayat member during 1993-98, Bipin Jana currently heads a watershed development project under the National Watershed Development Project for Rainfed Areas (N W D P R A). His wife is a Shishu Siksha Karamasuchi (s s k) teacher. In a situation of limited employment opportunities public sector jobs (including part-time or contract posts in the panchayat office, health sub-centres, anganwadis, s s k s, self-help groups (S H G s) and even purely temporary posts for cooking mid-day meals), created through various welfare schemes, often serve as attractive sources of both economic gains and political power. The salaried class consists mostly of primary and high school teachers, employees in the postal department or the department of agriculture. Political power and public sector jobs seem to be the preserve of the same set of people.

In another sense, therefore, there is an unmistakable element of continuity in political power and influence in this village. Put somewhat simplistically, the family acts as a political resource. That is to say, the family one belongs to matters for one’s political fortunes. So one may see new individuals/personalities assuming political positions in the panchayat every now and then; but if one looks a bit closer one could often identify without much difficulty a strong familial chain or kinship network binding them together. Indeed, a trace of family legacy in an otherwise democratic political environment becomes palpable, as we discover that the members of a few specific families are at the helm of all kinds of local institutions, starting from panchayati raj institutions (P R I S) to school management committees to local nongovernmental organisations (N G O s) to religious organisations.

For example, Harihar Mandal, a middle-aged primary school-teacher and a C P I(M) political activist, was the upa-pradhan of the G P during 1993-98. He became the panchayat pradhan in the next term, between 1998 and 2003. The current panchayat member from this sansad, Rekha Mandal, is his brother’s wife. Thus, not only does the hold of the C P I(M) continue in this constituency, it continues through a particular family network. A beautiful two-storied house in this locality belongs to his elder brother, Bikash Mandal. Rekha Mandal’s parental family too is a “political family”; her father being an important C P I(M) leader. In her own political career as a panchayat member and in her day-to-day professional activities she is assisted (“directed” as she put it) by party leaders like Binoy Pandit. The family and family connections indeed matter in determining political influence and in shaping political careers. School committees too are important centres of power. A majority of teachers and other staff of the school are involved in local politics. School committee elections are major political events in the locality.

At the Z P and P S levels in this district the dominance of the C P I(M) continues. As the upa-pradhan commented during an interview, the political competition in the area is healthy and does not erupt into major political violence; rather it produces positive outcomes, “just as in Kerala, where political change brings about healthy results”, he says. “Incumbents here can never sit idly, as they do not have any safe and secure support base. They usually win by slender margins and therefore need to nurse their constituencies on a regular basis. Floor-crossing is a
regular feature of political life here, leading to booth-wise waxing and waning of voter support. The luring of the opponent’s supporters via patronage funds (such as loans, vans, etc) is common.1 However, we have not clearly traced, nor have found, any obvious link between such political competition and the overall economic development of the GP or of this mouja.

**Occupation and Livelihood**

Nearly 35% of the sample households are landless. In other words, a majority of the villagers have some amount of land in their possession. But most of the landed households (nearly 60%) own only small (i.e., less than one acre) plots. Also, one general trend is the increasing fragmentation of landholdings. There were 23% of sample households that reported having acquired some land after the LF had come to power in the 1970s, which enabled them to move up and out of their parental occupation of agricultural labour.

The study village and its neighbouring areas that make up this GP depend primarily on agriculture – on the cultivation of rice, chilli, and betel leaf. Rice is grown mostly for family consumption of the (poor) farmers. The other two are commercial crops and sold in the Kakdwip market. But the price of these products fluctuates very often, so there is no guarantee of profit. Some employment opportunities are available in the local small-scale fisheries sector. Because of salinated water, shallow-pump driven irrigation facilities are not common here. As a result, agriculture is mostly rain-fed; farmers usually grow only one crop a year. As the upa-pradhan pointed out, watershed development is an urgent priority in this area.

The change in economic opportunities is reflected through the growth of one new occupation, namely, private tuition. The new high school completers and graduates are increasingly taking up private tuition as their main occupation – the emerging “service sector” in this area. As the survey figures also reveal, as many as 60% of the sample households hire private tutors for their children’s education.

Seasonal unemployment in this mono-crop area is a problem, and hence labourers migrate for work to Bardhaman and Hoogly in March-April to work at the cold storage for storing potatoes, for about 15-20 days. And they earn a net income of roughly Rs 2,000 to Rs 2,500. During June-September some go to Jamundwip island to work in the deep-sea fishing trawlers. There is indeed an organised seasonal contracting system, which mobilises labour for this purpose. The contract workers are given some advance; and they earn about Rs 3,500 per season from this work. The SNVs have been instrumental in providing some livelihood support to the poor families by way of securing bank loans to them for activities like poultry farming, rearing of livestock or cultivation of commercial crops, etc.

A large number of villagers are forced to combine several odd jobs to eke out a living – agricultural labour, fishing, earth-digging, casual work in the cold storage, pulling vans and rickshaws. Due to the connectivity with the main market in Kakdwip, the village economy and economic opportunities have developed somewhat, as many respondents remarked. In particular, some of the poorer farmers have become better off. However, during the time of our study one major complaint from the residents was about the inordinate delay in the construction of the link road that would improve manifold the connectivity between their village and the main road. At the time of our leaving the locale the road (re)construction project had just begun. A more general point is that rural politics also revolves around the rural employment issues. People compete not only for market employment opportunities but also for scheme-based contract jobs; and party contacts or social networks prove crucial for the latter.

**Nature of Party System**

We wanted to examine the nature of the party system as it operates in the locale of our study, and whether there is a penetrative, disciplined party structure. Also, what is the degree of antipathy between the main parties, their respective social bases, the character and strength of various party organisations and so on? Indeed, party activists, of all hues, loom large at the GP level. Also, the majority of the villagers in Jagatpur feel almost compelled to support one of the two major parties.

Presently the GP is headed by a woman pradhan who belongs to the TMC; the upa-pradhan is a “Congresswallah”. In the latter’s view, whatever may be the political equation between the TMC and Congress at higher levels, at the GP level they have to consolidate their power base and form a strong alliance. He made an oblique reference to how the higher level party leadership has been marginalising the able local Congress leadership in the district of Murshidabad. He candidly observed that the CPI(M) party workers are hardworking and committed and that their party runs along “scientific” principles (party discipline, organisation, etc). In contrast, some young members of his party are lazy and indisciplined. As a result, there has been some erosion in their party base, with a few unemployed party members having been drawn into the fold of the opponent party. In his somewhat sarcastic remark, “These days the real communists have been marginalised (in his last days, the veteran communist leader Gunadhar Maiti hardly got any food to eat); in their place the Congressi-turned-communists are calling the shots”.

There is a clear sign of women, at least some of them, emerging – slowly but steadily – as political leaders; some female panchayat members are indeed learning the tricks of politics. A woman panchayat member Swati Patra, though new in politics (elected for the first time in the 2003 elections), appeared quite assertive to us. Her family is a close associate of the CPI(M); her father-in-law received five kotahs of vested land during the era of land reforms. She enjoys being a panchayat member in spite of all the work-related pressures. She exudes confidence about the functioning style of her party, which in her opinion takes care of the interests of the poor more than any other party. No single member can take any decision in her party; unlike in the TMC or Congress, the party organisers take collective decisions. She is proud that a paved road has been built in her constituency with the funds from the MLA who also hails from her own party. She indeed is a party enthusiast!

A TMC supporter on the other hand is quite critical of the way the CPI(M) is operating at the GP, PS and ZP level. The Gram Unnayan Samiti, he contends, is totally monopolised by the left parties. In building a road in the area the CPI(M) member...
allegedly embezzled a sum of Rs 20,000 – the “scam” that was exposed by his party people. This is indicative of keen political contest at the grass roots level, almost forcing people to be polarised along party lines.

Dj had similar complaints about the TMC pradhan who allegedly misappropriated money meant for road construction sanctioned from the MLA fund, when a TMC leader Manohar Pakhira was the MLA. The CPI(M) supporters raised an uproar and the pradhan had to relent. Since then the panchayat works are being looked after principally by the upa-pradhan Sajan Maiti. His leadership in the panchayat has somehow been satisfactory to CPI(M) members like Dj as Maiti seems to be more acceptable to all the parties.

On balance, the gsp's have achieved a good measure of importance and authority in rural Bengal. Their increasing responsibilities for the delivery of centrally-sponsored programmes have enhanced their status in the eyes of ordinary citizens. This is generally true for this gp also. However, the upa-pradhan admits that sometimes key decisions, surrounding panchayat activities, are taken out of elected members’ hands, and instead are made by local units of a member's political party. This is more so in the case of the organisationally strong CPI(M) as compared to the TMC or Congress. Of course, advice from political parties could be advantageous to elected members; and close monitoring of panchayat activities by the parties can help to build accountability. But controlling the activities of elected members on a day-to-day basis, via the so-called “pradhan-chalaks” (read king-makers), may undermine the authority of the elected representatives of the people, as was alluded to by the upa-pradhan of Rishi Bankim gram panchayat.

The ngo-party linkages and party-operated ngos (PONGOS) are also present and active. Several ngos operate here, many working on microcredit programmes, such as the Society for Participatory Action and Reflection (SPAR), Ramakrishna Mission, Kalpataru, Rural Development Society and so on. Some work in close cooperation with the local panchayat for the implementation of various central government schemes such as the sgsy. One of the sitting panchayat members from the area, Dj, works with an ngo called Swami Vivekananda Seva Samiti which is related to the Bangladesh Grameen Trust. Thus the civil society appears to be deeply penetrated by the political parties active in this area. Indeed boundaries between the local political sphere and civil society seem to be porous and blurred. About 60 shgs have been set up under the aegis of this ngo. The groups are engaged mostly in agriculture, fish egg hatching, poultry farming, etc. In his area Dj has also arranged for van-rickshaws for 60 people. All these, he thinks, have helped him win the last election.

Significantly, public participation is lukewarm in sansad meetings, although voter turnout in elections is high. In one such meeting in our study area, in a particular sansad out of 1,260 voters only 33 were present; out of them only one or two were ordinary voters, the rest were party members/workers. It was another form of party meeting. Strikingly, nearly 90% of the sample households in this village report involvement in some kind of party-related political activity such as attending political meetings, campaigning/contributing for a political party, and mobilising party funds (survey data). This overwhelming political involvement of villagers in party politics stands in sharp contrast to their rather unenthusiastic participation in various participatory forums opened up via statutory sanction in order to boost people's involvement in panchayat affairs.

### 2.2 Chatma Mouja in Chatumadar GP

Historically, this area falls under the broader Manbhum region that witnessed the Chuar rebellion against the British in the early 19th century, and subsequently the Kol insurrection by indigenous adivasi communities, especially the Bhumijis of the Jungle Mahal, and the adjacent areas of Chhotanagpur plateau region under the leadership of Jagadish Chandra Jha. Later on this area was divided between Bihar and Bengal. The district of Purulia, within which our study village is located, itself came into being in 1956. However, the administrative partitioning notwithstanding, culturally and otherwise there are significant linkages between this and the adjacent regions in Jharkhand. In particular, the political currents surrounding the recent Jharkhand movement have an important bearing on our study area (Rana 1999).

About 30 km from the district headquarter, the small village of Chatma within Hura block is not all that well connected with the nearest small town of Lalpur, as not many buses pass by each day. For making srt calls one has to go to Lalpur; the roads however are good. This is a single-crop area, with minimal irrigation facilities. Some have acquired – mostly small sized – vested land under the land distribution programme. But the programme as such has not been a major success here.

There was a well-functioning health centre in Chatma village on a sprawling campus, staffed with doctors and nurses. But the 1980-85 local factional politics between the left and non-left parties led to its collapse. Currently it is in a state of bad health; no doctors come regularly; one pharmacist comes from a distant village for an hour or so; but he too is irregular. The Integrated Child Development Services (icds) centre hardly functions; children come at about 8:30 am to collect khichuri and then leave. Chatma has a junior high school, a primary school, and a newly established private school. In the local primary school, in one room four classes are held; children sit in the verandah. The husband of the icds teacher is the headmaster of the school. “West Bengal has not accepted us; hence we get step-motherly treatment”, he says.

Although school participation is growing, only a handful of young children complete school education. The head teacher of the junior high school admits that the academic level of his students is low, as they come from very depressed background. Despite all the challenges, however, teachers try their best – he asserts. Usually all the children get promoted to the next class. Since the dropout rates are very high, detention in classes add to the problem further, because unsuccessful students stop coming to the school altogether. Although on paper in each class there are about 50 to 60 children enrolled, only 20 to 22 come to school regularly. The area, including the gp office, has no electricity connection. The research assistant notes in his diary: “Things stand still here”.

People seasonally migrate from here to the east (Bardhaman) and west (Gujarat, Maharashtra) in search of employment. As
Rana (1999) in his study thoroughly documents, migration has been taking place in this region for centuries. In the late 18th century, the Manbhum region witnessed a series of famines. The then commissioner of Chhotanagpur wrote a letter to the deputy commissioner of Manbhum suggesting that, “...the best way to fight famines is to send the population elsewhere” (qtd in Rana 1999). Three distinct streams of out-migration have persisted since then: a journey to the tea gardens in Assam and north Bengal; a flow of people to the coalmines in Jharia; and more recently, seasonal migration to Bardhaman and Hoogli in search of wage labour either in agricultural fields or in brick kilns and construction worksites. However, incomes from labour migrations are not significant in this village. Cultivation of laq/gala is one major activity here; also a variety of medicinal plants – neem, horitoki, kusum, mohua, piyal, etc – are grown. If medicinal laboratories are set up, the pradhan says, new economic opportunities will be created. Poverty is endemic, as the pradhan claims that 50% of the people are below the poverty line in this area.

The majority of the people in Chatma area are Mahatos and Kurmis, falling under the other backward classes (OBC) category. In the past, Mahatos, often with close kinship or friendship ties with the then landlords, cultivated land distributed by the landlord. The MP from this area (Bhagat Singh Mahato) and the local MLA (Anirban Mahato) both belong to the Kurmi community. Kurmis are mainly an agricultural community; in the past the Gandhabanik community was engaged in petty trade, but subsequently moved to Raghunathpur, Manbajar area. In more recent times, some Muslim families have migrated in from Gaya to set up their businesses. Other caste groups, mostly dependent on agricultural and non-agricultural casual labour, include dalits such as Karmakar, Charmakar, Shahish, and adivasis such as Shabar and Santhali and so on. They are still at the bottom of the caste hierarchy.

**Factional Fighting and Competition**

Political competition is a defining feature of this GP, as in almost every election the incumbent party has had to yield place to the opposition. In the panchayat elections of 2003, a breakaway group from the CPI(M) contested as independents and won. The current board consists of six members from TMC, two independents, and the remaining two seats have gone in favour of the CPI(M). A woman upa-pradhan occupies a reserved place. It seems those who previously supported the CPI(M) became disillusioned and hence have brought the TMC into power. Both the GP and the PS are under the control of the CPI(M). The pradhan, Binoy Mahato (a Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) agent) came to meet us, riding a two-wheeler. He has been with the Congress since 1983. The CPI(M), Congress, and Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) are the dominant local political forces. The previous board was controlled by the CPI(M), and the one before that by the JMM. This locality has witnessed fierce political fights and violence between the prominent parties especially during the late 1980s and early 1990s, leading to a couple of political murders and court cases.

Regular alternation in power notwithstanding, in the last 20 to 25 years not much improvement has taken place in this area. The absence of adequate employment opportunities and ungenial climate seem to be among the major reasons. To mention once again, although the present panchayat board is dominated by the TMC/Congress combine, the state, ZP and block level domination of the CPI(M)-led coalition continues; this is the main reason the pradhan claims why he and his GP face biased treatment from the supra-local agencies. In comparison to other GPs in the block, this one receives lesser grant, making it difficult to carry out various developmental activities. Projects worth Rs 2 lakh and above are supposed to be vetted at the PS level. Unfortunately now even relatively small projects are brought under the command of the panchayat samiti. No sub-allotment of work to his GP is taking place. In this way the activities of GPs under the control of political opponents are stalled by higher-tier panchayats. This also suggests that since many important developmental policies and decisions still remain centralised, GP level political competition alone may not generate adequate democratic pressure for inclusive growth.

Significantly, however, several residents express the view that they no longer suffer from food insecurity that used to be almost a perpetual feature of their life in the 1970s. Undoubtedly, there has been an improvement in their general well-being. But beyond this, economically their lifestyle and livelihood strategies have not undergone any major changes. The majority of toiling families combine jobs, moving in and out of agriculture, and moving in and out of the village to cope with seasonal unemployment. As Bremen (2001) observes in his work on seasonal migration in Gujarat, they are the “footloose proletariat”. One respondent sells vegetables and earns about Rs 70 to Rs 80 a day, while his wife collects firewood from the forest and sells it in the market. His family is a supporter of the LF; in the past they did not have any land, often starved; after the land reforms under the aegis of the LF they have got patta and a plot of land to settle down. They are grateful to the panchayat for their lot.

Agriculture itself is not vibrant and there is not much agricultural surplus. Thus, the area bears all marks of a subsistence economy. But there are a few prosperous cultivator families owning large tracts of land, say about 50 bighas, producing a good amount of paddy a year, most of which is consumed by the family itself. Potato, onion and corn are also grown by them and sold in the retail market in Lalpur; the produce is not taken to any urban markets due to the lack of good transport/communication facilities. Small farmers take loans from large farmers and moneylenders (either in cash or kind – usually an amount of rice) at high interest rates; they do not usually go for bank loans due to several paraphernalia and difficulties as regards timely repayment.

BROADLY speaking, one section in the village is of the view that during the LF rule, the political atmosphere remained vitiated in their area. The ruling coalition provided benefits only to their own supporters. But not much development took place. The current panchayat board, in contrast, caters to the needs of all, irrespective of party or political affiliation. The political atmosphere in the village is relatively peaceful now; and there is social harmony too. But people on the other side of the party divide feel the opposite. They complain that they are excluded from political
favours because of their (left) party affiliation. A CPI(M)-turned independent supporter however comments that during the LF rule village politics got vitiated; even a family feud used to be politicised. Only the left party supporters used to enjoy party favours. The present board is trying hard to improve things.

People’s attitude to the GP shows quite a bit of ambivalence though. A full-time adviser worker of the Jharkhand party says that leaders corner almost all benefits, leaving hardly anything for ordinary workers. Those close to the party in power get all the benefits. He has been unemployed for some time now; the GP keeps on giving assurance for the supply of seeds; the MLA promises to do something about irrigation facilities in the area, but no concrete results ensue. The previous panchayat board, under the CPI(M) control, did not deliver much; the current TMC board is comparatively better. However, many deserving people do not get any BPL benefits. At the time of our research, the new BPL cards were yet to be distributed in this area.

Not unexpectedly, the political identification and loyalty of the respondents shapes their views and comments about particular political leaders in the area as well as about the local political processes. These inherent limitations of perception-based information notwithstanding, conversations with people across the social spectrum give us some idea about factional fighting and competition between and within political parties and its influences on developmental practices.

3 The Idea and Practice of Democracy

It is time now to make some general comments about the style and manner of village politics in contemporary West Bengal, that is to say, about the social base of local power; party and panchayat stratagems/practices; the organisational versus mobilisational ethos of mainstream political parties; the vim and vigor of electoral politics; and the vitality or otherwise of democratic citizenship. This will hopefully shed light on our main thesis about a dominant political regime moulding both the left and oppositional politics in present-day West Bengal.

Evidently, village politics in our study areas, as in the rest of the state, has witnessed the eclipse of the erstwhile feudal ethos of power, yielding place to institutional politics with a broader social base. Again, while family political connections still remain important in determining local political influence in diverse public forums ranging from school committees to panchayats, it is no longer the case that politics in the village has functioned only through a handful of landowning families and their respective factions. Also, people have seen the political eclipse of some of the previously influential families. No doubt some political leaders have come from landed families, but alternative leadership has also emerged. Traditional clientelist networks and patterns of individualised patronage have been shaken up somewhat, giving way to institutional/party patrons. Gram panchayats have further set in motion an institutional base for village politics.

The greater institutionalisation does not however imply that family connections are entirely unimportant. Nor is the historical disadvantage of weaker sections fully neutralised under the framework of representative democracy. For example, local politicians are more likely to be cultivators than agricultural labourers. As a measure of representation of weaker sections, in our sample GPS we look at the proportion of landless labourers among GP members. A majority of panchayat members are indeed middle farmers (though cultivation itself is small-scale in this state); they come from landowning agriculturist families (Table 1). Again, several members are first-time representatives. It suggests that new faces are chosen by political parties to contest the GP elections. However, many such greenhorns come from established, influential families in the locality, suggesting the lingering effects of family connections on the new political leadership.

The female panchayat member of Chatma village who won as an independent candidate is the daughter-in-law of a veteran, but disillusioned, left leader who has recently severed his connections with left parties.

Poverty Concerns and Party Politics

One major point of contact between citizens and panchayat members is around the distribution/procurement of ration/BPL cards and disbursement of relief grants. Village residents routinely complain about their “unfair” exclusion from the so-called BPL list. What we observe is a kind of a political tussle for inclusion into statist categories, produced by the state policies themselves. The thin spreading of available scheme benefits, even among the poor is one of the major political challenges before the panchayat leaders. As the pradhan of Chatumadar mentions, “there are about 600, 60+ people in this GP, but only 36 old age pensions – a quota fixed by the PS. How can we satisfy even the needs of the poor and the deserving?” The small scale of many such benefit schemes is a problem. Hence, limited resources and benefits are thinly distributed among a large number of claimants. As a result, even if there is “targeting” of benefits in favour of the underprivileged sections of society, many deserving claimants still remain deprived. This also creates room for clientelist and partisan distribution of benefits.

Moreover, BPL cards are “rationed” in many GPS, that is to say, benefits are distributed as quotas between different moujas within a GP. This is often considered a democratic way of distributing benefits. For example, in Rishi Bankim GP the available evidence indicates that BPL units are distributed almost uniformly among moujas, although within-mouja allocation appears more sensitive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names of Dealers/Moujas*</th>
<th>Dealer-wise Annapurna Antyodaya Yojana Units</th>
<th>Dealer-wise BPL Units</th>
<th>Share of SC in Mouja Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biren Das/Ganeshpur</td>
<td>442 (24.2)</td>
<td>1313 (24.2)</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pratap Dolai/Balaramnagar</td>
<td>462 (25.4)</td>
<td>1380 (25.4)</td>
<td>40.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhaben Das/Gourangapur</td>
<td>436 (23.9)</td>
<td>1298 (23.9)</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surend Pradhan/Angatpur</td>
<td>480 (26.4)</td>
<td>1431 (26.4)</td>
<td>33.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Names of dealers and moujas have been changed. Figures in parentheses are percentages.
to poverty concerns (Tables 2a, p 89 and 2b). Perhaps, the implicit, albeit quite controversial, assumption is that the incidence of poverty is the same across villages, and that there is no concentration of poverty among particular population groups residing in particular areas within a GP. In Jagatpur mouja, however, we found clear evidence of concentration of poverty in scheduled castes/scheduled tribes (SC/ST)-dominated neighbourhoods. This raises questions about whether the formulaic distribution of benefits across moujas within a particular GP is more of a narrowly redistributive political strategy than a measure to ensure substantive equality.

On the people’s side of the register, they clearly understand the importance of maintaining contacts with those in power. Intriguingly, huge and energetic efforts are undertaken by political parties to mobilise voters in their favour during the time of elections. But the drive to foster people’s participation often seems to stop just at that. Once in power, the elected panchayat representatives do not seem particularly exercised about people’s low participation in various deliberative forums such as gram sabha and gram sansad meetings, where more meaningful discussion, exchange of views and critical reflection on various substantive issues of development and service delivery in the area is possible in principle. In our conversations with a few elected members of the panchayat institutions, only on a few occasions have they voiced their concerns about citizen absenteeism in public forums. In the event they have, the responsibility has been laid usually at the door of the passive and inert villagers, hardly acknowledging their own role in facilitating citizen participation. (It is sometimes alleged that their role is straightforwardly negative in some instances; meetings are deliberately set up in such a fashion as to discourage people from attending them.) The “ballot view of democracy” seems to have taken precedence over the “deliberative view of democracy” (Sen 2004).

Village residents candidly talk about the importance of maintaining close and continued contact with leaders of the party in power and are often keen to cultivate such contacts. Yet they are highly critical, at once, of excessive party politicking, because of which the larger goals of village development are allegedly sacrificed. That “everybody laps up the bounties of party politics” is the common refrain. Similarly, it is almost a foregone conclusion, close to becoming a cliché, that the panchayat only takes care of its “own men”. Such feelings exist even among those who support the ruling party (i.e., in a majority of cases among the left-leaning voters). This is true even after we factor in the point that villagers can for a variety of reasons exaggerate their poverty and misfortune.

A female respondent in Chatma mentions that her family is a loyal supporter of the CPI(M); they routinely vote for the party, yet there has not been much improvement in their economic status. It is no surprise therefore that now with the opposition party in power they hardly receive any benefits. It is openly stated by many that the partisan distribution of targeted services is the order of the day; the TMC people do not offer any opportunities to non-TMC voters, just as the CPI(M) people only help their own supporters. This is nothing but niti chhara rajniti (politics without principles). “The LF, in its earlier incarnation, was much better than what it is today. Now the Left is Right”, a villager laments. “We are useful as mere numbers; as headcounts, as votes; we attend political rallies, we work for election campaigns, but benefits are lapped up by leaders”.

Importantly, there is a face-to-face element in local politics, such that villagers’ political/party affiliation is a matter of common knowledge. It is as though there is no such thing as the secrecy of ballots. Everybody knows who supports whom; and hence the constant refrain that “we, on the wrong side of the political fence, do not receive any benefits”. For example, one resident said that his family is a loyal Congress supporter, and hence did not get any patta benefits from the CPI(M) panchayat, whereas another villager told us that “the CPI(M) has helped us and hence we vote for the party”.

Also, there seems to be an unwritten compulsion to cast one’s vote during the elections and thereby pledge one’s loyalty and support for one party or another, as a crucial insurance against personal or family emergencies. As one villager commented, “If I do not vote, at times of crisis, people will not help me. If we want to stay in the village, we have to cast our vote”. Vulnerabilities abound in the lives of villagers and hence party support, in various forms ranging from hospital admission to loans during marriage in the family, is thought to be a crucial insurance against such vicissitudes in life. High voter turnouts in rural Bengal may perhaps indicate not just the heightened political awareness of the villagers but also, in part at least, such perceived sense of compulsion. This is certainly not to convey a sense of cynicism about the “energy and involvement of the poor voters” in elections. Rather, it is to draw attention to a kind of rift between political participation induced solely by a strategic, self-seeking calculus and the involvement of active thoughtful citizens inspired by an idealistic politics.

No doubt, to poor people electoral politics and voting provide a critical political resource.

As Khilnani observes:

…the unstoppable rise of popular engagement in electoral politics…attests to the authority of the democratic idea. Yet the meaning of democracy has been menacingly narrowed to signify only elections. [There exists] the compulsion to win power publicly and legitimately…[but] other democratic procedures have weakened with neglect…In any modern democracy, elections are part of a larger set of rules and practices designed to authorise the state, but in India they are carrying the entire burden of society’s aspirations to control its opportunities…This expansion of elections to fill the entire space of democratic politics has altered how political parties now muster support (1997: 58-59).

This description is apt for the “left system” in West Bengal operating under the organisational umbrella of the CPI(M) that has worked to reduce democracy to elections, short-circuiting debates and discussions on deeper political issues. The so-called democratic stability—i.e., seven consecutive electoral victories of the LF stretching over 30 years—has almost eliminated political competition within the framework of multiparty competition.

Table 2b: Distribution of the Poor within Jagatpur Mouja Across Sansads

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Booth/Sansad Number</th>
<th>Share of SC in Sansad Population</th>
<th>Share of Poor in Sansad Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>97</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>24.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>98</td>
<td>60.5</td>
<td>75.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>99</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Jagatpur mouja 35.3 28.7

100 12.8 10.0

99 7.9 5.2

98 60.5 75.7

97 50.7 24.5

Source: Survey Data.
What is more, the political leadership, in both left and non-left parties, is under the tight grip of this dominant political ethos that accepts the centrality of electoral politics, to the relative neglect of a programmatic, encompassing politics. The style of functioning of opposition parties does not seem to be much different from that of the left-led parties in this respect, although the organisational advantage of the opposition parties is much less as compared to the left parties.11

Being at the helm of government for too long, left parties have compromised considerably their mass mobilisational spirit in favour of an entrenched organisational culture. No doubt, a lot has been said in favour of the organisational acumen of the established left, especially in the context of panchayat politics. For example, it is generally believed that it is due to inadequate institutionalisation at the grass roots level that panchayat bodies often suffer from serious capacity constraints and therefore are unable to realise their full potential in implementing various developmental projects. Simply put, much institution-building and training must take place before local governments can work effectively. The pro-institutionalisation view is correct when it points to the need to develop the necessary managerial, organisational, and technical capacities to make local government work. It is here that the organisational strength and discipline of the left parties and especially of the CPI(M) provides a significant advantage to the LF coalition, given the capacity constraints of the lower bureaucracy and local politicians. Opposition political parties are seriously weak in this respect. Organisational, managerial and planning capacities of the CPI(M) are therefore part of the solution to the weak institutionalisation of local bodies.

Indeed, it has become customary for the well-organised and well-staffed CPI(M) to assist the local bureaucracy in distributing such things as Employment Assurance Scheme cards or to draw up the list of households that are BPL and which are entitled to access various government programmes and subsidised food grains (Veron et al 2003). This strategy can certainly make the poor people dependent on the party, and widen the scope for corruption. The CPI(M) party activist in 1997:

Our final disquiet is about the challenge that the dominant political culture of contemporary Bengal throws up for substantive...
democratic citizenship. In the classical, Aristotelian sense, citizenship is a kind of activity defined by “sharing in decision and office”. But the masses of Bengal, the rural poor in particular, are mainly beneficiary-citizens, rather than governing-citizens who take part in “government by discussion”. Admittedly, within the framework of representative democracy the poor have gained significant opportunities in the political arenas; the electoral mechanism has facilitated the increasing political visibility of subaltern groups. Drawing a comparison between middle class civic activism and poor people’s activism in electoral politics, Harriss (2007: 2718), for example, spiritedly argues:

Poor people in India show a strong preference for representative democracy, because in spite of the manifest imperfections of political parties and their leaders [they fail to deliver, are at times corrupt, and non-democratic in their internal workings], democracy has still opened spaces for subaltern struggles… Representative democracy has empowered some historically subordinated social groups; principal possibility to obtain representation for themselves is still through political parties.

Acknowledging this, one still needs to ask the next unavoidable question about the nature of party engagement with the society and its people. There is anecdotal evidence in our study areas and elsewhere in the state, which suggests that during elections political parties hold on to the land pattas of villagers in a bid to coerce voters to vote for them. In such cases, citizen activism in the electoral arena may lose much of its potency due to the erosion of people’s effective voice and choice. And in such cases democratic institutions may “lapse into hierarchies and oligarchies of various types”.

Our village study indeed shows that while at one level villagers are aware of the importance of party-centred politics, at another level they remain distant and disengaged from participatory politics and planning. A sizeable section of the local citizenry seems to be far away from the political process except as voters. Voting is taken as a serious and even “sacrosanct” citizen responsibility; yet political participation for most villagers remains restricted only to voting. What is more, there is an element of political marginality of certain population groups and the “disarticulation” of their voices. Now that mass organisations like the Krishak Sabha that used to play the role of mediation between poor people and the “party-state” in Bengal are losing their importance and that unlike in the past the urban middle classes that are at the helm of left political parties are becoming pretty de-radicalised (Bhattacharya 1999; Ghatak and Ghatak 2002), the political opportunities afforded to poorer citizens through formal political and electoral channels appear less substantial.
In the standard analysis of the growing tendencies towards machine politics and clientelism evident in West Bengal, the political system is seen to be sticking to a quid pro quo arrangement between vote maximising political parties and benefit maximising citizens, and hence flawed but efficient, less than democratic but responsive. But what is usually missing from such accounts is that the petty client eventually loses her substantive citizenship, while bigger clients operate from behind. To put it differently, the political machine operates within the frame of persisting class divisions and erodes somewhat citizenship entitlements of the masses, despite the political opportunities representative democracy offers. In sum, the practice of politics in present day West Bengal carries a deficit of democratic citizenship, especially for the poorer masses. It would require a thorough reconfiguring of the relationship between political parties and society – a shift from a party society to a dynamic and reciprocal link between party and society – in order to transform the existing nature of representative politics to “a mode of movement politics” (Heller 2005), and thereby engage “public power” in building a vibrant participatory democracy. There are, however, some unmistakable, though dispersed, signals of social mobilisation political contests demanding of neoliberal reforms, looming in the political horizon of contemporary West Bengal. For example, people’s activism and unrest against various proposals for land acquisition in the state has thrown up new challenges before the mainstream political parties. These are kind of a wake-up call for them – both for the incumbent and opposition parties – to respond to the demands of larger political objectives, as the balancing act between market-promoting and market-tempering strategies gets increasingly more difficult.

NOTES
1. The electoral resilience of the CPI(M) and other left parties at the state and sub-state levels, and at the panchayat level in particular, is well known. An analysis of the election results of 2003, on which this paper is based, only about 30% of the gram panchayat (GP) seats were under the helm of opposition parties. At the time of writing this paper the results of the latest panchayat elections, i.e. in 2008, were still awaited. A few early indications, however, suggested some noticeable reversals in Left Front’s (LFs) electoral fortunes.

2. Scholars like Bandyopadhyay (2007), however, forcefully argue that the seeds of peasant mobilisation around the land question were sown way back in the late 1960s under the aegis of the United Front Government in West Bengal. The mass mobilisation base was further honed by the Naxale movement.

3. One may draw a quick comparison with the local bodies in China that have often taken up, along with the town and village enterprises, an entrepreneurial role for economic development. The central authorities, on the other hand, have recently tried to contain somewhat the market forces through a host of newly introduced welfareist programmes such as the “New Socialist Country-side Programme”. The idea is to somewhat temper the predatory growth strategies followed by its local bodies. See Bardhan (no date).

4. For example, with a substantially augmented presence of the opposition parties at the GP and PS levels after the latest elections (2008) coupled with the continued predominance of the LF at the ZP level, the interactions between panchayat bodies across the three tiers will assume new significance.

5. For example, the limits of land reforms that the state of West Bengal has apparently reached is due, in one view, to the resistance from within the panchayat bodies, especially from middle peasants who now constitute the body of the local Left leaders. Similarly, it is feared that the recently introduced National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme may get embroiled in a new politics of redistribution. That is to say, if guaranteed rural employment drives up local agricultural wages, there could be resistance to such policy drives from middle peasant members within the local bodies who rely on wage labour. I owe this point to Partha Chatterjee.

6. In the 2003 panchayat elections, in as many as 5,374 seats the total of about 48,000, the candidate (in 5,025 seats the candidate was from the ruling coalition) won without any contest, i.e., there were no opposition candidates (CPI(M)/LM Bulletin on Panchayat Election Statistics, 2004). Also see Roy and Banerjee (2006). The 2008 election results were still being processed at the time of writing this paper.

7. Of course, we do not take the village to be a self-contained, closed and autonomous entity. The insightful analysis by Chatterjee (2008) of the present day peasant economy suggests that institutions of the state are no longer an external entity to the village community.

8. Names of sample villages and their people have been changed.

9. In the latest elections of 2008, the opposition party has got a majority in the ZP of South 24 Parganas.

10. The “sarkari” sector, with the salaries and security it offers, still appears attractive to the denizens of the peasantry economy, hidden with youth and seasonal unemployment.

11. The discussion in the following two paragraphs draws on Veron et al (2003).