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**Communicative Planning and
Democratic Decentralisation in India-
Case of Kolkata City**

Thesis for the degree of philosophiae doctor

Trondheim, August 2008

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ISBN 978 – 82 – 471 – 1145 – 1 (electronic version)

ISBN 978 – 82 – 471 – 1144 – 4 (printed version)

Serial no. – 2008 : 227

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I dedicate this thesis to the three revolutionary women of my family – my great grandmother Umatara Debi, who being uneducated herself, launched a domestic guerrilla struggle to smuggle her children out of the paddy fields of rural Bengal to the universities of Kolkata; my paternal grandmother Niharkana Chakrabarty, who, through her profound humanism, quietly and firmly smashed the social laws of caste and religious segregation on a daily basis and my grandmother Renukana Chakrabarty, who, in her life, demonstrated the most incredible and yet effortless blending of a progressive spirit and communicative ethic, which has been the aspiration of this research too. This thesis flows directly out of the heritage of these largely unknown and unsung heroines.

“Until the lions have their own historians, all accounts of the hunt shall go on glorifying the hunter.”

- African proverb

Acknowledgements

This is perhaps the toughest part of the monograph to write. The page on which I type is far too two-dimensional and rectangular to contain the massive, spherical feeling of gratitude towards the people who have been my benevolent allies on this academic journey. But I would begin with three groups of people, who have been absolutely pivotal to the process.

First, I would like to express my gratitude to the wonderful people of the city of Kolkata. Doing a research amidst them is pure joy and one truly understands why the 19th century Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib wrote the following lines about the city ...

“One should be grateful, that such a city as Kolkata exists. Where else in the world is there a city so refreshing ? To sit in the dust of Kolkata is better than to grace the thrown of another dominion.”

Second, I would like to express my unending gratitude to my parents, Shyamali and Ranajit Chakrabarty, and to my wonderful family, who forever kept alive and cherished an atmosphere of deep humanism, cultural openness, vibrant internationalism and scientific inquiry in our home in India.

Third, I am greatly indebted to my supervisor, Hans Christie Bjønness for the wisdom, knowledge and unlimited patience with which he has guided me through this research, which did not involve just a few long detours. Equally, I would like to thank Linn Mo, for her assistance and clarity in some of the most vital stages of the research. Though she was not formally my supervisor, the thoroughness and promptness of her feedback showed me what an incredible academic *karma yogi* she is. Three other teachers, though not of the academic world, provided incredible spiritual support throughout the period of

the research. They are my three ‘Sensei’s - Daniel Braude, S. Venkatesh and Rajashekar Naidu.

I would like to express my thanks to my wonderful fellow researchers at NTNU, who gave me invaluable support, communion and feedback during all these years – Rupa, Rolee, Ayon, Markus, Elias to name just a few. Rolee seemed to be around all the time (quite like the Norwegian summer sun), a perfect well-wisher both in and outside the academic world, and never tiring of my unending monologues on the history and politics of development planning in India. A special thanks to Randi Vikan Strøm for being a mountain of love and caring in the department and for all those quintessentially crushing Trønder-hugs. Unending thanks to the wonderful ladies at the architecture library who treated my endless borrowing and hopeless delays with an almost undeserved compassion. Thanks also to all the teachers of the Department of Urban Design and Planning and the staff of the Faculty of Architecture and Fine Art.

A special thanks to my friend and former girlfriend Annika Diana Berdal. Her contribution in this research process is far too broad and deep to be elaborated in mere words. Her innate sense of creativity, truthfulness, compassion and analytical abilities inspired me all the time.

Unending thanks to Hans Hadders, one of the most humane and scholarly researchers I know. I shall forever be grateful for his *boro dada* like love and compassion, enlightening chat-sessions and his incredible musicianship. Thanks to Pramila Ji for creating a wonderful motherly and homely ambience and for all the delicious Nepali food, which had a direct and positive impact on the quality of the research. A special thanks to my friend Saikat and the residents of Moholt Studentby.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank the Quota programme of the Norwegian Ministry of Education and the State Loan Fund who provided me the scholarship for undertaking this research, and the wonderful employees of the immigration section of the Trondheim police station who work devastatingly hard to give their difficult responsibility a very human touch.

Abstract

This research entails a constructive critique of communicative planning theory from a historical materialist perspective. Communicative planning theory views the role of a planner as an experiential learner, rather than a technocratic leader. In terms of rationality types, it involves a shift away from instrumental rationality and towards communicative rationality. Communicative planning theory has been criticised on a number of grounds right from the start. These have ranged from an inadequate understanding of the generic structures of inequality and oppression in society to turning Habermas' critical theory into a moralistic, normative objective. It has also been argued that communicative planning theory has been an unconscious theoretical vehicle for the justification of the forces of neoliberal urbanisation. While acknowledging both the potential of communicative planning theory as an appropriate planning theory for modern democratic societies and also the criticisms that have been launched against it, this research wishes to see the debate in the light of a serious lacuna in planning theory. This lacuna is the near complete absence of the historical experiences of third world democratic experiments as a contextual basis for the generation of mainstream planning theories. Almost all the major theories of planning have been generated from the historical and contextual experience of western capitalist democracies. This research argues that such a tendency leads to a major contradiction in communicative planning theory which becomes evident when it attempts to guide the creation of successful democratic planning alternatives to a global phenomenon like neoliberalism, while basing itself on a limited and narrow historical and geographical context.

Contrary to mainstream planning theory, mainstream development theory has been more alert toward radical experiments with democratic planning in third world contexts. This research uses the experience of one such experiment – the decentralisation and democratisation of the planning and development structure in the city of Kolkata (the capital city of the state of West Bengal in India) – as a means of expanding the

contextual base of communicative planning theory. In the course of the research it was discovered that creative democratisation experiments such as the one undertaken in Kolkata derived no inspiration or theoretical guidance from communicative planning theory. Let alone guide and inform such radical experiments, communicative planning theorists had not even been able to observe and comprehend them due to their inexcusable contextual bias. The experience of Kolkata shows that a more communicative and democratic planning structure can evolve out of a process that originated with completely opposite strategies of extra-parliamentary politics and open class-confrontation. Finally, it is argued that by broadening the contextual base of communicative planning theory and by learning from the real experience of democratisation experiments in third world contexts, its inner contradictions can be minimised and its capacity to inform genuinely democratic planning practice enhanced.

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Part I

Introduction

1. Partly an Introduction...Largely a Confession

1.1 Practice to Theory to Practice

Perhaps, the best way to introduce this research is by using the concept of ‘involution’, as described by the Indian monk and philosopher Swami Vivekananda. From the point of view of the non-dualistic strands of Indian philosophy, all evolution pre-supposes involution. Only that which has the potential to evolve into something, will be able to evolve. In other words, in order for a seed to evolve into the plant, the totality of the plant must have been involved in the seed. Vivekananda wrote:

Evolution does not come out of zero; then, where does it come from? From previous involution. The child is the man involved, and the man is the child evolved. The seed is the tree involved, and the tree is the seed evolved. All the possibilities of life are in the germ. (Vivekananda: 1947, online source).

When I look back at this whole research process, I could write in a similar way, that the seed of this research lay in a very basic and ordinary sounding question. The question was clearly articulated by the Indian economist and planner, Thomas Isaac, in an article written in 1998.

‘Why are the people so alienated from the planned development process in our country?’ (Isaac: 1998)

Using Vivekananda’s language, it can be written that this little, but deeply troubling question, was the PhD involved.

Given the sheer extent of absolute poverty in the country, the glaring economic inequalities resulting from the embracing of neoliberal policies, a rising agrarian crisis and the increase in communal and religious conflicts in the recent years, such an alienation and apathy seems not only tragic but also unacceptable. The intense desire to find a satisfactory answer to this question made me undertake a general search in the

twin fields of planning practice and planning theory. This general search had three basic objectives -

1. To identify the progressive trends in the fields of planning practice and planning theory which strive toward overcoming the tendencies of alienation, public apathy and the lack of a democratic spirit in planning and development.
2. To identify the external and internal challenges and contradictions that these progressive trends face.
3. To attempt to minimise the weaknesses and contradictions of these progressive trends and maximise their strength and consistency.

The academic search for the answer to this basic question was preceded by a search in the area of practice, when I started working as an activist-planner in a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in India. Apart from a variety of themes concerning social and economic justice, our NGO also played a crucial advocacy role. The intention was to generate increasing awareness among citizens and elected representatives of local government institutions about the provisions of two very important constitutional amendments, which were made in the year 1992. These amendments aimed at empowering the local government bodies all over the country and turning them not only into vibrant institutions of self-government, but also into the main institutions responsible for local planning and development.

The relevance of these amendments can be correctly appreciated only by understanding the prime contradiction in the nature of India democracy, which has strongly contributed to the alienation of the masses from the planning process. Despite the robust tradition of democracy in India, the Indian government can be described as being democratic at the top and undemocratic at the bottom. Although the first two tiers of government i.e. the central government and the various state governments, were recognised by the Constitution of India, the third tier, i.e. the local government, which is the tier closest to the common people, both geographically and functionally, was not recognised as an independent tier. Thus the structure of the Indian government became

that of democracy at the first two tiers and bureaucratic management and control at the bottom tier.

An unfortunate result of this was that the local government institutions, which were ideally placed for discharging the important functions of local planning and development, could never get properly involved in that process at all. Until very recently, both the economic and spatial planning process in India, remained totally under the control of the bureaucrats and technocrats of the various sectoral departments and special purpose agencies of the state governments. Such a state of affairs ensured that the planning and development process largely operated outside any kind of local democratic control.

In the course of working for the NGO I could get a first-hand glimpse of the contradictions inherent in our own approach towards fostering a more democratic planning practice in Indian cities. Through our experience of working with the citizens and the local government of a medium sized town in South India, we were realising more and more, that in order to turn the progressive democratic ideals of the Constitutional amendments into a reality, we would require a radical change in the general mind-set of people, elected leaders, experts and bureaucrats, which can only be possible through strategies of mass participation and mobilisation.

By virtue of being an NGO, with its usual limitations in resource and man-power, our advocacy and our campaigning could never reach the levels of a mass social movement. Moreover, being essentially an NGO and not a radical social or political movement, we didn't really have the mandate to bypass the existing local leadership structure and initiate such activities of our own. Our limited resources were always tied to some national and international funding source which were provided for specific projects and campaigns, which had its own limits and restrictions when diverted to actions which were neither predictable nor driven towards a specific quantifiable goal.

We were realising that the organisational form of the typical NGO was more suited to an approaches to participation and citizen engagement, which focussed on undertaking

small development projects at a very local level with a possibility for direct participation at every stage of the project. Such approaches were not primarily focussed towards a radical, political involvement with the agents of the state and contributing to the process of empowering the local government and turning them into responsive and responsible institutions for democratic planning. Though the wise and enlightened founder and coordinator of our own NGO had correctly identified the need to shift away from an explicit focus on local environmental and developmental concerns and toward a more politically conscious understanding of participation and citizen engagement, the form and manner of functioning of such organisations was clearly unfit for the task at hand. It was the realisation of this contradiction in the field of practice that prompted me to shift my place of operation and observation from the world of practice to the world of the academia. This was the point of time when this PhD research began.

This research, naturally began with an exploration of those planning theories which were concerned with similar issues of trying to offer an explanation of what planning practice means and what it should mean in contemporary democratic societies. It was due to this reason that I focussed on the various strands of communicative planning theory, and especially on the one which had become very influential in both academic and policy circles - collaborative planning. From that point on, this research has essentially been a process of questioning both the descriptive and normative potential of communicative planning theory and identifying the intrinsic contradictions it contains, which prevent it from turning its comprehensive theoretical understanding and genuine commitment toward democratic planning into a truly democratic planning practice which would be able to resist the onslaught of neoliberal urbanisation.

As the analysis of communicative planning theory proceeded, I attempted a slightly unconventional task of analysing the *communicative* turn in planning thought and practice by seeing it through the lens of a similar *participatory* turn in development thought and practice. There was a particular reason for pitting one theoretical field against another in this manner. Mainstream planning theories, including the various strands of communicative planning theory, have all been developed based on the particular historical experiences of planning practice in North America and West

Europe. This contextual bias in mainstream planning theory alienates it from the democratic experiments and experiences of countries of the third world. This leads to a contradiction in communicative planning theory as it seeks to create a democratic alternative to a global phenomenon like neoliberalism by drawing on the experience of a limited geographical and historical context.

Compared to mainstream planning theory, the field of development studies has always had a strong emphasis on third world contexts and experiences. This happened due to the simple reason, that development studies was particularly interested in those regions of the world where development was 'not' taking place in the pace and manner in which it should have. As a result of this, development theory could enrich itself with the recent experiments in third world countries which had a solid potential to resist neoliberalism as they had emerged in the context of real, and often brutal, conflicts with neoliberal forces which tend to reveal themselves with far greater ruthlessness in third world countries than in the first world ones.

This investigation led me to the identification of certain progressive experiments aimed at democratising the planning and development process in India (especially those undertaken in the Indian states of Kerala and West Bengal), the details of which I had not been aware of till then, and which were far more intelligent and effective than the practical work that I had been personally involved in before beginning my PhD research.

In this way, the world of practice and the innovative experiments happening there was never too far from this research. I couldn't but help noticing that many of these splendid experiments in the real world felt no need to derive any inspiration or guidance from mainstream communicative planning theory. Let alone guide such radical processes in the real world, communicative planning theorists had not even been able to observe and comprehend them due to their strange contextual bias, which sometimes borders on a kind of intellectual elitism.

This research, therefore, is primarily an attempt at making communicative planning theory catch up with and learn from creative and radical democratic planning experiments happening outside North America and West Europe. The argument is, that by broadening its contextual scope in this manner, communicative planning theories will be able to minimise their inner contradictions and weaknesses and enable them to generate truly successful alternatives to neoliberal urbanisation and move closer to their ideal of making sense together while living differently in contemporary urban environments.

1.2 The Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into six parts. The first part introduces the research by elaborating why this research was undertaken in the first place, what were the root questions it sought to answer, which theoretical positions it criticised and what its arguments are based on such a critique. The second part consists of a detailed presentation, analysis and critique of the communicative turn in planning theory, seen in the light of the participatory turn in development theory and the real experience of innovative democratisation experiments in third world countries. This part ends with the formulation of the research question. The third part elaborates the main principles underlying the research methodology and why these were considered the most appropriate ones for the purpose of this research. The fourth part consists of three chapters and gives an account of the historical and geographical context within which the democratic decentralisation experiments of West Bengal have happened. The fifth part consists a detailed account of the planning and implementation of a large urban development project at the local level, which helps us to understand how the democratisation of planning through such radical experiments in west Bengal is getting reflected in the execution of real development projects. The sixth part consists of two chapters. The first one presents the findings and conclusions of the research and the way in which they reformulate certain key attributes and assumptions of communicative planning theory. The second one provides some ideas regarding the manner in which the modified communicative planning theory can provide guidance to genuinely democratic planning practices at the local level.

Part II

Theory

2. Communicative Planning Theory

2.1 The Communicative Turn in Planning Theory

According to Patsy Healey, the communicative turn in planning theory is related to a 'broad wave of reflection on identity (ways of being - ontology) and the bases of knowledge (ways of knowing - epistemology) which is influencing western thought in general in these days.' (ibid., p - 29). This intellectual wave' which had been building since the 1970s within planning theory is what came to be categorised as 'argumentative, communicative or interpretive planning theory.' (ibid.). Although such theories have been developed by a number of theorists both from within the American and European planning traditions, Healey highlights certain key realisations that underlie this intellectual wave.

1. A recognition that all forms of knowledge are socially constructed; and that the knowledge of science and technology of experts are not as different from 'practical reasoning' as the instrumental rationalists had claimed;
2. A recognition that the development of communication of knowledge and reasoning take many forms, from rational systematic analysis, to storytelling, and expressive statements, in words, pictures or sound;
3. A recognition, as a result, of the social context within which individuals form interests; individuals thus do not arrive at their 'preferences' independently, but learn from their views in social contexts and through interaction;
4. A recognition that, in contemporary life, people have diverse interests and expectations, and that relations of power have the potential to oppress and dominate not merely through the distribution of material resources, but through the fine grain of taken-for-granted assumptions and practices;
5. A realisation that public policies which are concerned with managing co-existence in shared spaces which seek to be efficient, effective and accountable to all those with a 'stake' in a place need to draw upon, and spread ownership of, the above range of knowledge and reasoning;

6. A realisation that this leads away from competitive interest bargaining towards collaborative consensus-building.

7. A realisation that, in this way, planning work is both embedded in its context of social relations through its day to day practices, and has the capacity to challenge and change these relations through the approach to these practices.

(Healey: 1997, pp - 29-30)

Over the years, this communicative turn in planning gained so much prominence in theoretical discussions, that Judith Innes referred to this phenomenon as ‘planning theory’s emerging paradigm.’ (Innes: 1995, p - 183, quoted in Fainstein: 2000, p - 454). Communicative planning sees the role of the planner as that of a mediator among different stakeholders. The planner’s primary function is to ‘listen to people’s stories and assist in the forging of consensus among different viewpoints.’ (Fainstein: 2000, p - 454). The planner is not a technocratic leader but an ‘experiential learner’ who provides information to participants, but is primarily involved in being ‘sensitive to points of convergence’ to ensure that ‘whatever the position of participants within the socio-economic hierarchy, no group’s interests will dominate.’ (ibid.).

Brand and Gaffikin provide four reasons for the emergence and widespread acceptance of communicative planning theories.

1. The post-modernist perspectives on the reduced certitudes and predictabilities of a complex world.
2. Putative shifts to new modes of governance that acknowledges the need to involve multiple stakeholders.
3. The cross-fertilisation among these stakeholders, supporting a creative milieu for the developing economy; and
4. The increasing hegemony of neo-liberalism.

(Brand and Gaffikin: 2007, p - 283).

However, the authors clarify that communicative planning theories rest more on an ‘a-modern’ ontology, rather than a post-modern one, as they reject both ‘modernistic reductionism and universalism, while also disowning post-modern relativism and hyper-

individualism.’ (ibid., p - 286). Collaborative planning, which has been described by Brand and Gaffikin, as the ‘Healeyan incarnation of communicative planning’ (ibid., p - 284), bases itself on two prominent theoretical positions of the twentieth century - Anthony Giddens’ theory of structuration and Jürgen Habermas’ theory of communicative action.

2.2 The Contradictions in Communicative Planning Theory and Implications for Practice

Giddens’ theory of structuration is not very different from the Marxist position on the relationship between structures and individuals. Like Marx, Giddens argues that, ‘we are born into social relations and we live through them during our lives...through these relations we are linked to particular histories and geographies which constrain our material and conceptual resources and experiences.’ (Healey: 1997, p - 45). Similarly, he also agrees with the Marxist position, when he asserts that despite our lives being structured by processes that have happened before, ‘such structuring power over human existence’ is ‘never absolute’, and that ‘people had the potential to challenge power if they could get sufficient understanding to reflect on their conditions of existence and see their ‘structured oppression’ for what it was.’ (ibid., p - 46). Giddens went on to elaborate that although, we live and operate within structures that have been created and set in place before we came into being, they must have been created by human beings too.

Describing the contribution that Giddens makes to the Marxist notion of structures, Healey writes, that while thinkers like Marx view structures as ‘external forces *acting on* individual subjects’, Giddens, on the other hand, argues, that ‘structural forces work through the relational webs within which we live, as we both use and constitute the structures that surround us.’ (ibid.). Not only are we living in structured relations, but the structures are also contained inside us (ibid.). Based on such an understanding of the internalisation of structures within individuals, Healey writes, that the ‘micro-practices of everyday life are thus key sites for the mobilisation of transformative forces.’ (ibid., p - 49)

Though, Marx and Engels stressed the externality of structures, they were not unaware of the enormously complex zone of inter-connection between structures and individuals. In a letter written to Joseph Bloc in 1890, Frederick Engels wrote the following lines,

Marx and I are ourselves partly to blame for the fact that the younger people sometimes lay more stress on the economic side than is due to it. We had to emphasise the main principle, vis-à-vis our adversaries, who denied it, and we had not always the time, the place or the opportunity to give their due to other factors involved in the interaction. (Engels: 1890, quoted in Namboodiripad: 1986, p - 7)

Engels then went on to clarify, what he means by the ‘other factors’.

The economic condition is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure - political forms of class struggle and its results, such as constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc., juridical forms, and, especially the reflections of all these struggles in the brains of the participants, political, legal, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogmas - also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases determine their *form* in particular. There is an interaction of all these elements in which, amid all the endless host of accidents (that is, of things and events whose inner interconnection is remote or so impossible of proof that we can regard it as non-existent and neglect it), the economic movement is finally bound to assert itself. Otherwise the application of the theory to any period of history would be easier than the solution of a simple equation of the first degree. (ibid.)

The above description shows that Engels had a clear understanding of the variety and subtlety with which structures interact with individuals.

Where Marx’ and Engels’ thoughts on structures really diverge from that of Healey and Giddens, is regarding the ‘key sites’ at which one should act in order to bring about social transformation. By focussing primarily on the micro-processes of life as the sites of transformation one risks feeling empowered at the cost of under-estimating powerful adversaries. While it is true that we exist in relational webs, which are embedded in

particular social contexts, it is not a horizontal web or network, where everybody exerts an equal pull on everybody else. Tom Crumpacker writes, that as 'social change is structural..it occurs by changing institutions rather than personalities. In order to make progressive change, we must first get back to reality...If we start from fantasy, change leads us only to another fantasy.' (Crumpacker: 2002, p - 4). Such a focus on the realm of micro-processes becomes a natural consequence of the focus on cultural diversity as a thing in itself without adequately exploring the underlying causes of such diversity. Healey writes that although the challenge of taking planning decisions in the context of cultural pluralism seems overwhelming at the macro-level, we are negotiating with variety and difference all the time in our daily lives at the micro and individual level.

Understood in this way, living with cultural difference is not something that is alien or new. We have been doing it all the time, with more or less success. Negotiating among diverse thought worlds is part of our daily life experience. Some of us are more aware of this than others, partly because our particular histories and geographies, or webs of relations, give us more experience of being 'on the outside looking in'. We may be women in a man's world, blacks in a white world, working-class people in a professional world, priests in a lay society...Yet we manage to 'live with difference' and to challenge and even change the culturally blind. (Healey: 1997, p - 48)

Such an assumption is risky. By giving such a description of reality Healey, perhaps unknowingly, goes very close to the post-modern relativism and hyper-individualism that she herself criticises. Would it be believable for a poor house-maid living in the slums of Kolkata that the hard reality of existence she faces is created by and through a relational web in which she co-exists with many other actors, such as the CEOs of the major companies in the city who meet at the Kolkata Club to play golf, the political leaders of the nation, renowned scholars and advisors such as Patsy Healey and Anthony Giddens? Wouldn't she find it ridiculously absurd if it be suggested to her that all that is needed to change that devil of a structure called urban poverty is a greater general awareness regarding the way such structural relations operate the actors ?

The other, theoretical position is that of communicative rationality developed by Jürgen Habermas. Habermas widens the concept of reasoning from that of a 'self-conscious autonomous subject using principles of logic and scientifically formulated empirical knowledge to guide actions' to one in which reasoning is based on a process of 'inter-subjective effort at mutual understanding.' (Healey: 1996, p - 239, quoted in Fainstein: 2000, p - 454). His approach can further be traced back to Hegelian idealism, Marxist critical analysis and then to Wittgenstein's analysis of language. (Fainstein: 2000, p - 454).

Communicative action is guided by communicative rationality. According to Habermas, such rationality 'is found in speech meeting the validity claims of comprehensibility, truth, rightness, and sincerity, and at the same time aiming at mutual understanding and agreement.' (Sager: 1994, p - 6).

Habermas summarises the five requirements of the ethics of discourse as follows -

1. no party affected by what is being discussed should be excluded from the discourse (the requirement of generality)
2. all participants should have equal possibility to present and criticize validity claims in the process of discourse (autonomy)
3. participants must be willing and able to empathize with each other's validity claims (ideal role taking)
4. existing power differences between participants must be neutralised such that these differences have no effect on the creation of consensus (power neutrality)
5. participants must openly explain their goals and intentions and in this connection desist from strategic action (transparency)

(Habermas: 1993, p - 35, in Flyvbjerg: 1998, p - 188)

Flyvbjerg writes, that 'in a society following this model, citizenship would be defined in terms of taking part in public debate. Participation is *discursive* participation.' (Flyvbjerg: 1998, p - 188). Although Habermas describes such a speech situation as an ideal type he also writes in his elaboration of universal pragmatics, that he takes 'the type of action aimed at reaching understanding to be fundamental...other forms of social

action - for example, conflict, competition, strategic action in general - are derivatives of action oriented to reach understanding.' (Habermas: 1979, p - 1). He further writes, that 'communicative reason is directly implicated in social life processes insofar as acts of mutual understanding take on the role of a mechanism for coordinating action.' (Habermas: 1990, p - 316, quoted in Flyvbjerg: 1998, p - 187).

In terms of the rationality types, such an application of the theory of communicative action to planning means a shift from instrumental rationality, which had dominated mainstream planning theories until then, toward communicative rationality. Healey wrote that 'the planning tradition itself has generally been 'trapped' inside a modernist instrumental rationalism for many years, and is only now beginning to escape.' (Healey: 1997, p - 7). A theory of planning based on communicative rationality would be totally different from the conventional ones, where the scientific knowledge of the expert plays a crucial role in providing 'an objective basis for identifying present problems and predicting future possibilities.' (ibid., p - 9).

An interesting application of communicative rationality to planning theory was made by Tore Sager, when he used it to contribute to the 'synoptic-versus-incremental' debate in planning theory, which he described as the 'most important one (debate) in the theory of planning after Charles Lindblom had published his paper on 'muddling through' in 1959.' (Sager: 1994, p - 3). Sager argued, that disjointed incrementalism was not the perfect theoretical opposite of the synoptic ideal in planning theory, as the two were not based on two different types of rationality. Both disjointed incrementalism and synoptic planning had instrumental rationality as their base. In order to create the perfect theoretical opposite to synoptic planning, 'the introduction of dialogue and the communicative rationality of Habermas' was required (ibid., p - 1). Sager termed such a perfect theoretical opposite dialogical incrementalism. By applying communicative rationality as a base to incrementalism, the means-end scheme, which characterises synoptic planning, becomes invalidated. This happens not just because 'goals are too unclear and ambiguous to inform action - which they often are', but essentially because 'the ulterior end is embedded in the activity itself' as 'dialogue, close ego-confirming relationships, and the experience of being able to make a difference when issues are

discussed (democracy)...have intrinsic value independent of any goal-oriented strategy.’ (ibid., p - 7). The introduction of dialogue as the basis for incremental planning theory also contributes to countering the usual critiques it has faced focussing on its lack of direction, a tendency to ‘serve those already in power’ (ibid., p - 19), its prioritisation of pragmatics over principles and vulnerability to opportunism (Forester: 1981, in ibid.).

However, Sager is very clear in writing that the benefits of dialogical incrementalism ‘will never be fully realised, because communicative rationality is a theoretical ideal to be completely fulfilled neither in practice nor in the proposed dialogical planning theory.’ (ibid., p 19 - 20). Regarding the impossibility of realising it even in theory, Sager clarifies that the ‘core ideas of incrementalism are incompatible with unbounded communicative rationality’ (ibid., p - 20). When it comes to the difficulties involved in realising it in practice, the ‘modest capacity of human beings for empathy...lack of will to reason behind a ‘veil of ignorance’’ (ibid.), and the ‘severe structural distortion and inequality’ (ibid., p - 19) in real society are enough to make it well-nigh impossible. The real benefit of dialogical incrementalism doesn’t lie in practical application to planning, as Sager elaborates in the following lines. Right at the start of his book on communicative planning theory Sager clarifies that ‘dialogical incrementalism is not a practical mode of planning but rather a theoretical and an analytic tool. This tool can be used when discussing planning theories and assessing planning in a communicative perspective’ (ibid., p - 1) and ‘provides unambiguous reference points for the analysis of planning behaviour.’ (ibid., p - 21).

Susan Fainstein understands the contribution of Habermas’ communicative rationality to planning theory in a similar light. Just like Sager, she writes that Habermas ‘posits the ideal speech situation as a criterion by which to register the distortion inherent in most interactions’ and supplies a ‘vehicle for demystification.’ (Fainstein: 2000, p - 455). Her main disagreement with the communicative turn in planning is not regarding the ideals of communicative rationality but regarding the process of turning this ‘vehicle of demystification’ into an ‘objective of planning’. This process creates theoretical problems, as instead of being a critique of existing distortions in communication it takes a ‘moralistic tone’ and its advocates ‘seem to forget the economic and social forces that

produce endemic social conflict and domination by the powerful.’ (ibid.). She writes, that ‘although their roots, via Habermas, are in critical theory, once the communicative theorists move away from critique and present a manual for action, their thought loses its edge.’ (ibid.).

Fainstein agrees that many planning problems can indeed be resolved and gains for the weaker parties made through the process of negotiations and discussions between diverse stakeholders, however ‘persistent issues of displacement as a consequence of modernisation and siting of unwanted facilities proximate to weak constituencies are less susceptible to resolution. (ibid.). She further writes that ‘even if perceptions of interests are biased or mis-directed by distorted speech and even if structures are socially constructed, changing speech alone doesn’t transform structures.’ (ibid., p - 458). For that to happen a phase of struggle and mobilisation becomes necessary.

She further demonstrated, that in those situations where gains seemed to have been made for the less powerful in a communicative/collaborative process, the communication was restricted to issues which did not substantially challenge the status quo. While criticizing the same New Jersey state plan, which was praised by Judith Innes for being a good example of the communicative model, Fainstein wrote, that ‘the plan contained only weak requirements for the construction of affordable housing, suburban integration, and compact development even though lack of housing for low-income residents, suburban exclusion of the poor and minorities, and lack of open space were identified as the principal problems that planning was supposed to overcome.’ (ibid., p - 459)

Fainstein then goes on to list the various kinds of problems that arise, when communicative planning is put into practice. In practice, it often leads to the continued dominance of the powerful, extremely lengthy processes of discussions and deliberations (which, in one case referred to by the author, made the participants describe the policy forums as “talking shops”) (ibid.) and the problems which arise when planners play only a ‘non-directive role’ and ‘desist from agenda setting.’ (ibid., p - 460). She also brings forward one point which is ignored by communicative planners

as a rule - the potential role of the paternalistic and bureaucratic modes of planning in producing desirable outcomes for the people. She writes that 'various studies of the European welfare states and the New Deal in the United States have concluded that the principle measure for ensuring health and welfare were generated by state officials with little reference to interested publics.' (ibid., p - 457)

Despite all these problems why has the appeal of the communicative model remained so strong? What explains this popularity of the model despite such concrete criticisms ? Various authors have come out with various explanations. Tore Sager summarised some of those explanations in the following points -

- Many western societies and cities are becoming more multi-cultural, with a more diverse ethnic and cultural make up and thus increased need for negotiation and communication in the preparation of public plans and projects.
- The citizenry is more educated than ever before and demands to be heard in public matters.
- Civil society is thoroughly organized with a large number of interest organisations and social movements that are strong enough to challenge bureaucratic and political decisions.
- The 1970s saw a large extension of the range of effects deemed relevant to the evaluation of plans and projects. There is a lack of objective standards for assessing many of the environmental and social consequences, in contrast to the traditional technical and economic ones, so the preferences of affected groups are needed in addition to expert calculations.

(Sager: 2005, p - 3)

The crisis of the welfare state which started setting in from the 1970s onwards, which coincided with the rise of the neo-liberal ideology is another reason. In fact, the rise of communicative planning coincides with the crisis of the welfare state and the rise of neo-liberal ideology. In their paper on collaborative planning and governance capacity, Judith Innes and David Booher had written that 'we live in a time of crisis, uncertainty and change. We also live in a time when our institutions seem to lack the capacity to deal with those conditions.' (Booher and Innes: 2003, p - 5). In such a world of

‘globalisation, rapid growth of technology, instantaneous worldwide communication, and fragmentation of institutions and communities...the familiar models of governance do not work because they depend on predictability, approach problems piece-meal, and presume experts can design workable solutions to meet recognized goals.’ (Friedman: 2000 and Castells: 1996, in *ibid.*)

This crisis of governance was recognised by other sources too, and was seen to be affecting the countries of the north and the south alike. For example, a study sponsored by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation pointed to the need to building a ‘new relationship between local government and local people’ in the UK (Clark and Stewart: 1998, p - 3, quoted in Gaventa: 2004, p - 26). The report went on to state the reasons for the need build such a new relationship in the following words,

There are two reasons for this. The first has to do with alienation and apathy. There is a major issue about the attitudes of the public as customers or citizens, towards local government...This is a symptom of a deeper malaise, the weakness or lack of public commitment to local democracy. (*ibid.*)

Booher and Innes write, that it is in this context, that ‘some new forms of collaborative dialogue, policy making, and action are filling the gaps left as our formal institutions of government are failing to carry out their responsibilities or where no agency has jurisdiction.’ (Booher and Innes: 2003, p - 6). Many of the experiments with discursive participation and institutional reforms, such as the democratic decentralisation processes initiated in scores of third world countries, can be seen as attempts to address the general crisis of governance and undermining of democratic processes by actually existing neoliberalism. Healey’s own motivation for developing the concept of collaborative planning was to contribute to the development of a more appropriate planning process for contemporary democratic societies, and enable it to face the twin challenges of post-modernism and neoliberalism.

However, while communicative action in the form of discursive participation in the planning and development process might show a way to restore a democratic planning

process, Christer Bengs (2005), argues that instead of generating an alternative to neoliberalism, communicative planning becomes conducive to it. Brand and Gaffikin also draw attention to this point, when they write that ‘there is an apparent paradox in the promotion of collaborative practices rooted in values of cohesion, solidarity and inclusivity in a world that can be seen as ever more individualist, socially fragmented, competitive, or in other words, uncollaborative.’ (Brand and Gaffikin: 2007, p - 283).

Bengs cannot find a satisfactory answer to the prevalence of communicative planning theories from the conventional reasons generally given to explain its rise. He makes the bold move of hurling a salvo at the relevance of planning theory in general by posing the following question - ‘If planning theory is of little use to practitioners, perhaps it is of some use for others?’ (Bengs: 2005, p - p - 3). Referring to John Friedmann’s assertion that planning theory ‘...is essential to the vitality and continued relevance of planning profession.’, Bengs comments on the material context within which such theories and arguments for them are generated by writing, that such a justification as provided by Friedmann, ‘is of course understandable coming from a university professor who earns his living by producing planning theory.’ (ibid.).

He writes, that although ‘practical skills can be picked up in professional practice...professional skills include theoretical knowledge as well as particular ethical attitudes and aesthetic preferences, which form the core of a professions training programme.’ (ibid.). Bengs’ intention is not to prove the irrelevance of planning theory but to probe into the real reasons for its existence. If it is not substantially helping in a progressive professionalization of planning, then what or who is it helping ?

Advancing this scepticism towards the particular arena of communicative planning theories, Bengs argues that the reason for the prevalence of communicative planning theory is that it ‘satisfies the need to establish social institutions consistent with the neoliberal society.’ (Bengs: 2005, p - 7). He writes that ‘a new planning regime with a minimum of predefined restrictions and guidelines and ample possibilities for striking deals on the local level is in conformity with neoliberal ideals.’ (ibid.).

According to Tore Sager ‘whether the explanation is right or wrong, it is certainly the most interesting and challenging hypothesis.’ (Sager: 2005, p - 3). In his reply to Bengt, Sager writes that it has never appeared to him from the works of any of the prominent communicative planning theorists that they wilfully intended to adapt the theory to the ‘neoliberal *realpolitik*’ (ibid., p - 7). The correctness of Sager’s observation can be judged from the following lines that Patsy Healey wrote two years earlier expressing both her surprise and alarm concerning the manner in which the notion of collaborative planning has been used and misused.

Six years after completing *Collaborative Planning*, I have been surprised, pleased and also a little alarmed by its reception. The metaphor ‘collaborative planning’ became used and misused by politicians and policy-makers in the UK from the mid-1990s onwards to describe their ambitions for a new form of governance, borrowing heavily from business management literature. Several groups promoting inclusive participative processes in project design and development were also using the collaborative label. By the late 1990s also, US concepts of consensus building were beginning to become known in Britain...These experiences raised questions about their ‘collaborative qualities’. What had seemed a distant prospect in the late 1980s was beginning to look like a dominant rhetoric 10 years later. The practice, though, was often far from reflecting the inclusionary qualities of a potential collaborative process. (Healey: 2003, p - 108)

However, Sager is aware of the fact, that the absence of such a tendency among the leading theorists is not a guarantee that the results of ‘public intervention’ would not turn out to be exactly opposite of what was expected. (ibid.). From the above lines of Healey, this is exactly what seems to have happened.

This tension between the honest and sincere intention of the communicative planning theorists to create a theoretical platform for a truly inclusive and sensitive planning process which would be in tune with the spirit of modern democratic societies, and the inherent potential of such planning theories to be misused by the proponents of neo-liberal ideology to function as a legitimisation for highly un-democratic economic strategies constitutes one of the most challenging contradictions in communicative planning theory.

3. Communicative Planning and the Neoliberal Challenge

3.1 *The Contradiction in Neoliberal Ideology*

The challenge that is posed by neoliberal urbanisation to communicative planning experiments has its roots in the contradiction that lies between neoliberal ideology and what analysts have described as ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ (Brenner and Theodore: 2002, p - 2). According to Brenner and Theodore, ‘the linchpin of neoliberal ideology is the belief that open, competitive, and unregulated markets, liberated from all forms of state interference, represent the optimal mechanism for economic development.’ (ibid.). The intellectual roots of neoliberal ideology lay in the post-war writings of the Austrian political philosopher Friedrich von Hayek and the economist Milton Friedmann. However, the concept didn’t gain in prominence until the global recession, that set in at the end of the 1960s and continued through the 1970s, threatened and exhausted the embedded liberalism of the industrialised countries of the west. Embedded liberalism refers to how ‘market processes and entrepreneurial and corporate activities were surrounded by a web of social and political constraints and a regulatory environment that sometimes restrained but in other instances led the way in economic and industrial strategy.’ (Harvey: 2005, p - 11)

The experience of the second world war and the eagerness to prevent a recurrence of the devastating economic depression that preceded it, led to the belief that ‘to ensure domestic peace and tranquillity, some sort of class compromise between capital and labour had to be constructed.’ (ibid., p - 10). At the international level, this understanding led to the creation of a New World Order, ‘through the Bretton Woods agreements, and various institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank, the IMF, and the bank of International Settlements in Basle’, and keeping it under the ‘umbrella protection of US military power.’ (ibid.). At the national level this system led to the creation of a variety of state forms, all of which agreed on the pivotal role that the state must play in the generation of ‘full employment, economic growth, and the welfare

of its citizens.’ (ibid.) It was when the economic crisis of 1960s set in and the Keynesian policies stopped working that ‘the capitalist world stumbled towards neoliberalisation as the answer through a series of gyrations and chaotic experiments.’ (ibid., p - 13)

There were various factors that contributed to the rise of the neoliberal ideology, but Harvey wishes to draw attention to one particular element in the period which marked the transition from embedded liberalism to neoliberalism. He writes that the widespread discontent that was caused by the crisis of capital accumulation led to the strengthening of communist and socialist parties in Europe, the US and in many third world countries. This trend pointed to the ‘emergence of a socialist alternative to the social compromise between capital and labour that grounded capital accumulation so successfully in the post war period.’ (ibid., p - 15)

Interestingly, just before the emergence of the economic crisis in the western capitalist countries there was a strengthening of the position of the Left parties in India, led by the undivided Communist Party. The realisation of emerging crisis of capitalism and the perceived influence of socialism was so strong that even the bourgeois-landlord alliance, that characterised the ruling Congress Party of India at the time, was compelled to invite the noted socialist planner and economist Oskar Lange as an advisor during the preparation of the second five year plan (1956 - 1961) for the country.

Harvey’s assertion is that this resurgence of socialist and communist parties in so many countries posed a ‘clear political threat to economic elites and ruling classes everywhere.’ (ibid., p - 15). The earnings of the top 1 percent of income earners in the US comprised a chunk as high as 16 percent in the national income of the country before the second world war. This share fell to 8 percent in the post-war period due to restraints imposed upon this class (ibid.). However, as long as the economic growth and capital accumulation happened at a steady pace ‘to have a stable share of an increasing pie’ was not a problem (ibid.). However, with the stalling of capital accumulation and the rise of socialist tendencies the upper classes felt the need to organise and exert themselves. Referring to the careful analysis done by Gerard Dumenil and Dominique Levy, Harvey writes, that ‘after the implementation of neo-liberal policies in the late

1970s, the share of the top 1 percent of income earners in the US soared, reaching 15 percent (very close to its pre-Second world war share) by the end of the century.’ (ibid., p - 16)

Similar trends were observed in India after the influence of neoliberalism picked up in the country since the mid-1990s. P. Sainath, noted Indian journalist and winner of the Ramon Magsaysay award for being one of the very few journalists to cover the agrarian crisis in the country, wrote in 2005, that the ‘collective worth of 311 Indian billionaires is now Rs. 3.64 trillion. This is up 71 per cent from last year, when it was a paltry Rs. 2.33 trillion.’ (Sainath: 2005, p - 1). According to the *Business Standard*, the magazine which tracks this elite class in India, ‘India’s billionaires have never had it so good.’ (Business Standard, Nov 9, 2005, quoted in ibid.). Sainath rounded up his critical account of the state of things in India by writing that, ‘some hundreds of millions might never have had it so bad either.’ (ibid.)

Harvey writes that ‘redistributive effects (in favour of economic elites) and increasing social inequality have in fact been such a persistent feature of neoliberalisation as to be regarded as structural to the whole project.’ (Harvey: 2005, p - 16). Based on his observations regarding the actual effect of neoliberal policies he makes the following argument.

We can, therefore, interpret neoliberalisation either as a *utopian* project to realize a theoretical design for the reorganization of international capitalism or as a *political* project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites. In what follows I shall argue that the second of these objectives has in practice dominated. (ibid., p - 19).

Advocates of neoliberal ideology are ‘assiduous in seeking the privatization of assets’ and see ‘the absence of clear private property rights - as in many developing countries...as one of the greatest of all institutional barriers to economic development and the improvement of human welfare.’ (ibid., p - 65). However, neoliberal theorists are also ‘profoundly suspicious’ of representative democracy and see ‘governance by

majority rule' as a 'potential threat to individual rights and constitutional liberties.' (ibid., p - 66). As a result of this, neoliberal theorists 'tend to favour the governance of experts' and show a strong preference for 'government by executive order and by judicial decision rather than democratic and parliamentary decision-making.' (ibid.). This manifests itself in reality in the eagerness to privatize public assets and the rolling back of the nation state, particularly from areas of social and economic development. From this perspective the concept of communicative planning would not seem unsettling to neoliberal theorists as it can be seen both as a strategy for and legitimisation of the weakening of representative democracy by focussing on the nurturing of a broader and more flexible political society inspired by the theories of structuration and communicative action.

3.2 Characteristics of Neoliberal Urbanisation and Implications for Communicative Planning

Swyngedouw, Moulaert and Rodriguez describe the characteristics of neoliberal urbanisation in Europe through their study of large urban development projects. These authors assert that as a result of the influence of neoliberal ideology in urban planning and development, there has been a steady shift of emphasis from planning to projects and from people to places. Rather than being directly involved in comprehensive planning of the city and the welfare of the socially and economically weaker sections of the city, neoliberal ideology preferred the withdrawal of the state from these arenas. Instead of the comprehensive plan, 'large scale projects and events are perceived as strategic instruments aiming at reshaping the city.' (Swyngedouw et al.: 2002, p - 215). However, the irony of the situation is that when it comes to 'actually existing neoliberalism' instead of neoliberal ideology, the role of state planning remains pivotal. Rather than rolling back entirely, the state rolls back from planning for the sake of welfare and regulation of market forces and re-orientes itself towards creating 'the social, physical, and geographical infra- and superstructures that support, finance, subsidize, or otherwise promote new forms of capital accumulation.' (ibid., p - 200).

'Re-centring the city' became the focus of the new urban policy which developed parallel to the neoliberal economic policy. (Swyngedouw, Moulaert and Rodriguez:

2002, p 198). In the face of increasingly globalised economic processes, cities and regions competed with each other to 'carve out their niche' within the emerging new patterns of divisions of labour, production, consumption and political transformations. (ibid.) Moreover, this re-centring, re-structuring and re-imagination of the city was done not just for the 'eyes of the master planners and city fathers and mothers, but primarily for the outsider, the investor, developer, businesswoman or -man, or the money packed tourist.' (ibid.). The creation of monumental projects, such as 'EU's encroaching office expansion in Brussels, the Guugenheim museum in Bilbao, the new financial district in the Dublin dockyards, the science-university complex Adlershof in Berlin, Copenhagen's Orestaden project...testify to the unshakable belief of the city elites in the healing effects that the production of new urban complexes promises for the city's vitality.' (ibid.)

The concepts of participatory governance, bottom-up planning and decentralisation all assume roles that are favourable to the project of neoliberal urbanisation. In a context of urbanisation dominated by 'project-focussed and market-led initiatives'(ibid., p - 215) where 'the assumed trickle-down mechanisms, occasionally accompanied by targeted policies to facilitate social inclusion processes, are considered of sufficient strength to permit a socially balanced and successful development' (ibid., p - 216), the role of communication in planning and democracy in decentralisation is acceptable only to the extent that it frees the market from the fetters of state control while keeping aloft a superficial image of cherished political ideals. As David Harvey notes at the start of his book 'A brief history of neoliberalism',

For any way of thought to become dominant, a conceptual apparatus has to be advanced that appeals to our intuitions and instincts, to our values and our desires, as well as to the possibilities inherent in the social world we inhabit. If successful, this conceptual apparatus becomes so embedded in common sense as to be taken for granted and not open to question. The founding figures of neoliberal thought took political ideals of human dignity and individual freedom as fundamental, as 'the central values of civilisation'. In so doing they chose wisely, for these are indeed compelling and seductive ideals. (Harvey: 2005, p - 5)

Swyngedouw et al., for example, describe how the creation of new institutional arrangements based on the ideas of pluralistic governance and stakeholder participation are typically projected as the establishment of a ‘democratic forum that permits open and non-distorted communication and action’, whereas, in their investigations they discovered ‘an extra-ordinary degree of selectivity’, where, ‘although a varying choreography of state, private sector, and non-governmental organisation (NGO) participation is usually present, these forms of urban governance show a significant deficit with respect to accountability, representation and the presence of formal rules of inclusion or participation.’ (Swyngedouw et al.: 2002, p - 209). Participation in such contexts often boils down to being operated through co-optation and invitation and ‘public-private partnerships epitomise the ideal of this cooperative and coordinated mode of “pluralistic” governance.’ (ibid., p - 214).

Peck and Tickell write that such competition between cities has a ‘powerful disciplinary effect.’ (Peck and Tickell: 2002, p - 46). Harvey describes the challenge of such a disciplinary effect when he writes the following lines.

It is by no means clear that even the most progressive urban government can resist [social polarisation]when embedded in the logic of capitalist spatial development in which competition seems to operate not as a beneficial hidden hand, but as an external coercive law forcing the lowest common denominator of social responsibility and welfare provision within a competitively organised urban system. (Harvey: 1989, p - 12, quoted in ibid.)

3.3 Understanding the Contextual Bias and the Need for Internationalisation of Communicative Planning Theory

From the point of view of this research the problem with communicative planning theory, as it exists today, is not just regarding the contradictions it has and the way such contradictions have an effect on planning practice, as described in the previous section. The inadequacy of the theory, which this research is more interested in, arises from the fact, that all the mainstream theories of planning, including the theory of communicative planning have been generated within the historical context of West Europe and North

America. Such a geographic focus becomes conspicuous in the following elaboration of Tore Sager regarding the relationship between mainstream planning theories and the political contexts within which they were developed.

Synoptic planning was associated with the technical-economic enterprise valued in the reconstruction period following World War II. Disjointed incrementalism was seen as a translation of economic market logic to the 'market of ideas' laying the basis for planned intervention. Advocacy planning was a response to the degeneration of many US inner cities in the early 1960s. Moreover, the transactive planning of John Friedmann (1973) reflected the radical trends and the quest for more participation of the late 1960s and early 1970s. (Sager: 2005, p - 2)

Communicative planning seeks to create an appropriate planning process for democratic societies in an ever globalizing world. It has already been seen that it wishes to resist, but often ends up being misused, neoliberal trends in urban planning and development, and neoliberalism is a global phenomenon. Given such obvious realities, communicative planning theory is strangely quiet about the world outside Europe and North America. This silence is both regarding the numerous democratic experiments with planning and development being undertaken in the various countries of the third world and also the democratic heritage of such countries, which was often built through painful struggles against the imperial ambitions of those very countries who cannot praise themselves enough for being the direct descendents of *European Enlightenment*.

In her elaboration of the communicative turn in planning theory, Patsy Healey refers to the experience of 'planners in Britain, in planning schools and planning practice, who have shared a particular experience of the 1970s and 1980s.' (Healey: 1996, p - 234). She traces the idea of planning to the 'enlightenment tradition of "modernity"', which is the source of 'so much of Western culture.' (ibid., p - 236). This connection of planning in Western democratic countries to the enlightenment project is so firmly established in the writing, that the assault of the French 'deconstructionists' on the project of 'modernity', is described by her in the following words,

Whereas post-modernism in architecture is primarily a critique of a particular paradigm and style within Western art and architecture, philosophical postmodernism challenges the foundation of two hundred years of Western thought. (ibid., p - 237)

What is important to note is not just the substance of what Healey is writing but also the feeling of a sense of grand loss and crisis that marks the tone of the lines. It makes one wonder if at all a world exists outside Western Europe and North America and if that alien world has ever made even the slightest contribution to the idea and practice of democracy. The *enlightenment* is described in a way which borders on religious faith and the historical phenomenon gets a mystical aura.

Such selective amnesia regarding the historical development of ones own society is not something peculiar to the authors of mainstream planning theory. While seeking the causes for the non-emergence of capitalism in India, Max Weber had concluded that it was due to the absence of a Puritan ethic in the belief and function of the religious sects in India. The presence of such a Puritan ethic in Christianity, which ‘favoured frugality, saving and investment of wealth, a commitment to a vocation and a concern for the salvation of soul...was the crucial factor in the emergence of capitalism in Europe.’ (Thapar: 2002, p - 8). Not only was Weber’s analysis of Indian religious sects erroneous, the eminent Indian historian Romila Thapar also points out, that ‘curiously, the contribution of colonialism to the emergence of capitalism in Europe was given no attention in this analysis.’ (ibid., p - 9). Similarly, economist Utsa Patnaik observes, that as Britain’s most prized colony, Indian alone was earning 71 million pounds sterling through exports before the outbreak of the first world war (the second largest export earnings in the world) and ‘these earnings were siphons off to Britain to pay for its own deficits.’ (Patnaik: 2003, p - 11)

Already by the late nineteenth century, the eminent Indian scholar and political activist Dadabhai Naoroji was developing the ‘drain theory’, which argued, that a significant part of India’s national income, or the material values produced every year by the working people of India, is taken away from, or ‘drained’ out of the country and used by

Englishmen for their own purposes.’ (Namboodiripad: 1966, p - 15). This is how Naoroji himself explained the process of economic drain .

Whatever revenue is raised by other countries, for instance, the £ 70 million in England, the whole of it returns back to the people and remains in the country; and therefore, the national capital, upon which the production of the country depends, does not suffer diminution, while, on account of India being subjected to a foreign rule, out of £ 50 million of revenue raised every year, some £ 20 million or more are carried away to England and the national capital - or in other words, its capability of production is continually diminished year after year. (quoted in *ibid.*)

Naoroji had aptly named his book ‘Poverty and Un-British Rule’ in India. Karl Marx was far more direct when he lashed out at the double standards resorted to by the European nations in their interaction with the colonies,

The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies, where it goes naked. They are the defenders of property, but did any revolutionary party ever originate agrarian revolutions like those in Bengal, in Madras, and in Bombay? Did they not, in India, to borrow an expression of that great robber, Lord Clive himself, resort to atrocious extortion, when simple corruption could not keep pace with their rapacity? While they prated in Europe about the inviolable sanctity of the national debt, did they not confiscate in India the dividends of the rajahs, 171 who had invested their private savings in the Company’s own funds? (Marx: 1853, online source)

Even if one talks just of Europe, leaving the colonial question aside, it is possible to have an idea of the high degree of awareness regarding the bourgeois appropriation and perversion of the ideals of *enlightenment* and the articulation of the critique mounted against such appropriation had both reached by the late nineteenth century, from the following lines of Frederick Engels,

We know today that this kingdom of reason was nothing more than the idealised kingdom of the bourgeoisie; that this eternal Right found its realisation in bourgeois justice; that this equality reduced itself to bourgeois equality before the law; that bourgeois property was proclaimed as one of the essential rights of man; and that the government of reason, the *Contrat Social* of Rousseau, came into being, and only could come into being, as a democratic bourgeois republic. The great thinkers of the 18th century could, no more than their predecessors, go beyond the limits imposed upon them by their epoch. (Engels: 1880, online source)

All these observations point towards the need to not only understand the role played by capitalism in shaping the ideas and processes of planning, but to add an international dimension to such understanding.

In this regard, the critics of communicative planning theory often fare no better. Susan Fainstein, who provided a sharp and clear critique to communicative planning theories, also fails to cross over this contextual barrier. In her account of the 'Just City' theory, she refers to the argument put forward by Frederick Engels in his classic work *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* that with the 'recognition at last of the real nature of productive forces of today, the social anarchy of production gives place to a social regulation and production upon a definite plan, according to the needs of the community and of each individual.' (Engels: 1935 [1892], pp 68-69, quoted in Fainstein: 2000, p - 466). Fainstein then immediately goes on to write that 'at the millennium's end, one can hardly be sanguine that the hegemony of any social grouping will produce outcomes that will fulfil "the needs of the community and of each individual".' (Fainstein: 2000, p - 466).

Here again there is a selective amnesia and a huge leap in historical time - but with respect to classical Marxist writing, rather than the *enlightenment*. Such an analysis of Engels violates the basic tenets of dialectic and historical materialism which sees reality as an 'eternal coming into being and going out of being, in a ceaseless flux' (Engels: 1883, quoted in Stalin 1938, online source), and therefore urges the agents of social transformation to base their orientation not on those 'strate of society which are no

longer developing, even though they at present constitute the predominant force, but on those strata which are developing and have a future before them, even though they at present do not constitute the predominant force.’ (Stalin:1938, online source). Fainstein’s analysis too ignores the role of imperialism and of colonial transfers in the creation of an ‘aristocracy of labour’ in Europe and the role it played in the ‘conflict between the reformist and revolutionary sections of European social democracy’ in the early decades of the twentieth century. (Namboodiripad: 1966, p - 278).

Although Marx and Engels didn’t live to see the full manifestation of imperialism on a world stage, they were keenly aware of the trends. In a letter dated October 7, 1858, Engels wrote to Marx that,

‘...The English proletariat is actually becoming more and more bourgeois, so that this most bourgeois of all nations is apparently aiming ultimately at the possession of a bourgeois aristocracy and a bourgeois proletariat *alongside* the bourgeoisie. For a nation which exploits the whole world this is of course to a certain extent justifiable.’ (Engels: 1858, online source).

Similarly, in a letter to Karl Kautsky, dated September 12, 1882, Engels wrote the following lines.

You ask me what the English workers think about colonial policy. Well, exactly the same as they think about politics in general. There is no workers’ party here, there are only Conservatives and Liberal-Radicals and the workers gaily share the feast of England’s monopoly of the world market and the colonies. (Engels: 1882, quoted in *ibid.*)

Rather than observing, like Healey, that ‘these days, such broad structural struggles (e.g. between labour and capital) are less clear-cut and less visible’ (Healey: 1997, p - 32) or be less ‘sanguine’ about the ‘hegemony of any social grouping’ like Fainstein (Fainstein: 2000, p - 466), Engels appears to be quite clear on the fact that structural struggles were less visible in England already by the 1880s because there simply was no

workers' party worth the name there as a consequence of dominant position the country had among all the imperialist powers in Europe.

Similarly, Isaac and Franke write, that the much discussed phenomenon of globalisation is essentially a process of 'centralisation of international economic power in the hands of First World appointed bureaucrats' operating through agencies such as the World Trade Organisation, the International Monetary Fund etc (Franke and Isaac: 2000, p - 250). In such a context of the widespread globalisation of capital and of the exploitation of people and resources that has gone along with it, it is but obvious that the progressive forces and sites of resistance would also be scattered around the globe. Rather than being less sanguine about the writings of Engels and Marx, scholars like Aijaz Ahmad find them to be more relevant than ever before in the current conditions. Ahmad writes that,

It is only after the Second World War that we can speak of a united global capital and a singular global empire, over and above nationally based capitals and colonial empires like those of Britain and France. For the first time in human history, Marx's prediction comes true: capital and labour face each other on a world scale. (Interview by Seemin Qayum, North American Congress on Latin America, online source)

This conspicuous absence of the third world in mainstream planning theory is all the more unfortunate considering the fact that many of the bold experiments with democratic governance, in the recent decades, have been undertaken in the third world countries. The wave of democratic decentralisation experiments, the particular experiences of the oft referred (though not in planning theory) cases of the states of Kerala and West Bengal in India, the ability of the economically poor but politically mature electorate of India to vote out of power a right-wing neo-liberal regime and the experiments with radical democracy in Venezuela and Bolivia seem to be largely alien events to the champions and saviours of planning in 'western democratic societies.'

These points are not being raised to create an argument that the ideals of communicative planning are not relevant for third world countries. In the present times the need for

making sense while living differently in our cities is a pressing necessity. The fragmentation of urban society as a result of incessant competition between different urban centres becomes all the more tragic in the case of third world cities where the differences are not just in terms of religious or cultural identity but in terms of extreme economic inequality. The year 2007, was a landmark year in the history of urbanisation, as for the first time the size of the urban population of the world equalled that of the rural population. The 'State of the World's Cities 2006-2007' report published by the UN - Habitat which made the above observation also stated that much of urban growth in the future shall be concentrated in the countries of the third world. The colonial experience, the absence of successful 'embedded liberalism' as in the case of post-war Europe and North-America, the declining faith in state-led and expert driven modes of development and the sheer extent and intensity of urban poverty create a greater demand for innovative, inclusive and democratic forms of planning in these cities than in the cities of the first world.

It is argued here that although the ideals of communicative planning are not only desirable but necessary in current times, the theoretical base that exists so far is so riddled with contradictions that it is hard to be sure whether it has a greater potential for democratic planning or fostering neo-liberal urbanisation when it is put in practice. It has been shown in the previous sections that although neoliberal urbanisation often ends up co-opting communicative planning practice or certainly has the potential to do so, the communicative planning theorists are genuinely committed to the fostering of democratic ideals in planning and through that, to resist neoliberal influences. In this section it has been argued that such a weakness of communicative planning theory perhaps stems from a contextual bias which leads to an explicit focus on the democratic heritage and planning experience of West Europe and North America (i.e. the bulk of the first world nations) and a near absence of similar experiences in third world countries.

Throughout the post-war years, cities in the third world have tried to import first-world planning theories and techniques to find solutions to the urban challenges that they face. This research attempts a reversal of the process and seeks to enlighten first world

planning theories on democratic and communicative planning with the historical experience gathered from a third world context. Such a reversal is tantamount to broadening the base of communicative planning theory and correcting the contextual bias that it suffers from. With the continuation of such a process communicative planning theory may be better capable of weakness vis-à-vis anti-democratic forces of both unbridled capitalism and political totalitarianism.

As the third world contexts are nearly absent from the literature of mainstream planning theories, I had to move out of planning theory and undertake a review of a related discipline where the third world context lies at the very heart of things - development studies. Such a situation was only to be expected, as development studies in the post-war decades has been pre-occupied with the investigation of countries and regions where development was 'not' taking place. A parallel to the communicative turn in planning theory and practice can be found in the participatory turn in development theory and practice. Interestingly, they originated and rose to prominence at around the same time, provided similar reasons for coming into being and faced similar criticisms of being too naive and apolitical to be able to resist structures of political and economic power.

4. Communicative Planning in the Third World Context

4.1 The Crisis of Participatory Development

The notion of direct participation started gaining importance in the field of development from the 1980s onwards. Just like in the case of the communicative turn in planning, the rise of post-structural and post-modern social theories played a role in the participatory turn in development. Peet and Hartwick write that,

In the context of the growth of post-colonial studies and the indigenisation of knowledge, and with reference also to post-structural and post-modern social theory, the field of development studies has undergone a significant critique and re-thinking.

Indeed, the very notion of development has increasingly been challenged. (Peet and Hartwick: 1999, p - 138)

By the 1980s, there was a clear recognition of the inadequacies of top-down, centralised and expert driven development approaches. The alleged ineffectiveness and insensitivity of this kind of development created the conditions for more participatory approaches. Rather than official agencies and institutions like the World Bank, United Nations, or the independent nation states, 'voluntary groups or non- governmental organisations (NGOs), were seen as having greater diversity, credibility and creativity' to bring about 'just development' (ibid., p - 139). According to Cooke and Kothari, 'the ostensible aim of participatory approaches to development was to make 'people' central to development by encouraging beneficiary involvement in interventions that affect them and over which they previously had limited control or influence.' (Cooke and Kothari: 2002, p - 5). The authors further wrote that the work of Robert Chambers, 'which built from an interest in participatory rural development, and an advocacy of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) to participatory development more generally' (ibid.) was particularly influential in the popularisation of such approaches.

Chambers himself described the spread of participatory approaches as a paradigm change in development. This is how he understood and described the phenomenon,

The paradigm of things was dominant in development in the 1950s and 1960s, with emphasis placed on big infrastructure, industrialisation and irrigation works. Economists and engineers, and their top-down physical and mathematical paradigm, determined norms, procedures and styles. Economic analysis continues in the 1990s to be the dominant mode of development thinking and practice, but the paradigm of people has come to be increasingly influential. This is shown by the burgeoning literature on people and participation, by the increase in numbers of non-economist social sciences in some aid agencies, notably Overseas Development Administration, and by the development and spread of participatory approaches and methods. (Chambers: 1995, p - 33)

However, it was clear to Chambers, that increasingly influential though it may be, the paradigm of the people was certainly not the dominant paradigm at the time he was writing. He wrote that there are three main ways in which participation is used in development. He writes,

First, it is used as a cosmetic label, to make whatever is proposed appear good...Second, it describes a co-opting practice, to mobilise local labour and reduce cost. Communities contribute their time and effort to self-help projects with some outside assistance. Often this means that 'they' (local people) participate in 'our' project. This, it is used to describe an empowering process which enables local people to do their own analysis, to take command, to gain in confidence, and to make their own decisions. (ibid., p - 30)

Moreover, it must be noted that he was aware of the fact that paradigm shifts in development thought and practice must be seen differently from similar shifts in the physical sciences. He stated his views by writing that 'in the physical sciences, one new paradigm tends to replace an old one. In development thinking, paradigms tend to coexist, overlap, coalesce and separate.' (ibid., p - 32). Yet, he preferred to use this in order to 'illuminate major trends' by setting out 'polarized extremes'. (ibid.). Furthermore, an intelligent and compassionate practitioner like him was also aware, that, although the paradigm has shifted in theory, the conventional approaches still remain strong in practice. He gave a number of reasons as to why that happens.

The first reason, according to Chambers is, that major infrastructure projects, which inevitably involve heavy financing and expert steering, are truly very much in need in the third world. The second cluster of reasons is a set of 'normals' such as normal professionalism, normal bureaucracy, normal careers and normal teaching. This cluster of 'normals' creates a vicious cycle, where normal professionalism 'seeks and values controlled conditions and universal truths', the normal bureaucracy champions the values of 'centralisation and standardisation', normal careers that creates distances from field realities and finally normal teaching, which contributes to reproducing all this. (ibid., p - 33). However, Chambers doesn't really go on to explain why and how these 'normal' situations come into being in the first place.

Over the years, participatory development had indeed moved from the periphery to the mainstream of development thought and practice. This had happened mainly in the form of major donor agencies embracing these approaches. By this time, participation, rather than being perceived as a threat by development institutions and governments, was seen as ‘politically and economically attractive, a good fund raising device, and...in keeping with a move toward the privatisation of development as part of neoliberalism.’ (Peet and Hartwick: 1999, p - 141). The development process thus acquired a ‘new face’ - ‘the face of a repentant saint, ready to amend, to work in a new fashion with the poor, and even to learn from them.’ (Rahnema: 1990, p - 201, quoted in *ibid.*)

Yet, the participatory turn in development was not free from criticism. The sincerity and integrity of the practitioners of participatory development notwithstanding, ‘Rahnema asked whether the change agents had really embarked on a learning journey into the unknown, or were they more concerned with finding ways of convincing the “uneducated” of the merits of their own educated views? In the latter case their scenario was hardly different from the conventional approach to development.’ (*ibid.*). During the 1990s the voices of criticism against the overwhelming fascination with participatory approaches were getting stronger. Hickey and Mohan summarised the key arguments that developed against participatory development during this decade include, as follows -

- An obsession with the ‘local’ as opposed to wider structures of injustice and oppression.
- Insufficiently sophisticated understanding of how power operates and is constituted.
- Inadequate understanding of the role of structure and agency in social change.
- A tendency to treat participatory development as a technical method of project work, rather than as a political methodology of empowerment.

(Hickey and Mohan: 2004, p - 11)

In 1995, a collection of papers edited by Nelson and Wright, encouraged a critical discussion on the theories and practice of participatory development. Incidentally, this

was the same collection in which Chambers' above mentioned article was also published. The editors and the various contributors acknowledged that, 'participation, if it has to be more than a palliative, involves shifts in power. These occur within communities, between 'people' and policy-making and resource holding institutions, and within the structure of those organisations.' (Nelson and Wright : 1995, p - 1)

4.2 Is Participatory Development Tyrannical ?

The critical discussions regarding participation reached a high-point with the publication of the collection - 'Participation-The new Tyranny?' (henceforth called 'the tyranny collection'). Till the publication of this book, the critique of participatory development, referred to as 'internal critique' by the editors of the tyranny collection, took two main forms -

1. those that focussed on the technical limitations of the approach and stressed the need for a re-examination of the methodological tools used e.g. PRA, and,
2. those that focussed on the theoretical, conceptual and political limitations of participation.

(Cooke and Kothari: 2002, p - 5)

The idea of the book was to provide a platform to deepen and sharpen the emerging critiques of participatory development. The editors wrote, that 'the manner in which participation has been critiqued, and the language with which this has been done, has clearly thus far failed to affect, quantitatively or qualitatively, the apparently inexorable spread of participation in development.' (ibid., p - 3). The reason why an apparently good thing such as the 'inexorable spread of participation', was seen as a cause for concern was, that participation was seen no longer to have the 'radical connotations it once had.' (Mosse: 2002, p - 16). Mosse wrote that the reasons and consequences of the embracing of participation by mainstream development institutions were pragmatic policy interests such as 'greater productivity at lower cost', rather than radical social change or material well-being of the poor.

Cleaver, another contributor to the collection, writes, that, despite the 'heroic claims made for participatory approaches to development...there is little evidence of the long-term effectiveness of participation in materially improving the conditions of the most vulnerable people or as a strategy for social change.' Cleaver: 2002, p - 36). Hickey and Mohan wrote that this was a period when there was a 'growing backlash against the ways in which participation managed to 'tyrannise' development debates without sufficient evidence that participatory approaches were living up to the promise of empowerment and transformative development for marginal peoples.' (Hickey and Mohan: 2004, p - 3)

The editors of the collection used the word 'tyranny' to serve two purposes. One was to use a 'language that would be harder to ignore', as the strong internal critiques by scholars and practitioners such as Stirrat and Mosse 'had little or no apparent impact on mainstream discourse and practice.' (Cooke and Kothari: 2002, p - 3). However, the main reason for using the word was the fact that the editors of and contributors to the collection believed, 'that tyranny is both a real and a potential consequence of participatory development, counter-intuitive and contrary to its rhetoric of empowerment though this may be.' (ibid). The editors further argued that the tyrannical potential of participation is systemic and not just a function of operational and technical details. Linking their main arguments to the literal meaning of the word 'tyranny', they wrote,

'In sum, then, tyranny is the illegitimate and/or unjust exercise of power; this book is about how participatory development facilitates this.' (ibid., p - 4)

This general definition of tyranny was then broken down into three particular sets of tyrannies, under which the main questions were arranged. These are listed below -

1. The tyranny of decision-making and control - The main question asked with respect to this kind of tyranny was, whether 'participatory facilitators override existing legitimate decision-making processes?' (ibid., p - 7)

2. The tyranny of the group - The main question asked here was, whether group dynamics 'lead to participatory decisions that reinforce the interests of the already powerful.' (ibid.)

3. The tyranny of method - The question here was, whether participatory methods have 'driven out others which have advantages participation cannot provide ?' (ibid., p - 8)

Right in the introductory chapter of the book, the editors made it clear, that 'between them, the chapters in this book suggest that the answer to each of these questions is, or can be in some circumstances, 'Yes'.' (ibid., p - 9) Glyn Williams summarises the arguments forming the tyranny critique in the following words,

The argument is that participation actively 'depoliticizes' development; incorporating marginalized individuals in development projects that they are unable to question; producing grass-roots knowledge ignorant of its own partiality; and foreclosing discussion of alternative visions of development. (Williams: 2004, p - 93)

However, the editors of the collection make it very clear that despite the assertions made in the various articles, they would 'resist being labelled anti-participation' (ibid., p - 13). They agree that there are aspects of participation which are impossible not to acknowledge, such as sharing of knowledge, political activism, participation in social movements etc. These processes, 'are about challenges to day-to-day and structural (for want of a better word) oppressions and injustices within societies.' (ibid.) Having clarified their position the editors go on to state that, 'acts and processes of participation described in the same way...can both conceal and reinforce oppressions and injustices in the various manifestations.' (ibid.)

The attacks of the tyranny critique came from diverse positions. Henkel and Stirrat, wrote that despite the espousal of participation by every major bilateral development agency, the new orthodoxy of development lacks any systematic ideology. (Henkel and Stirrat: 2002, p - 168). This observation of the authors was better articulated by Mohan and Hickey in their contribution to the collection that came as a reply to and a

continuation of the critique of conventional participation. According to Hickey and Mohan,

The absence of a coherent theory of participation that seeks to explain and articulate the role of agency within development processes closely informs the limitations of the participatory movement, and helps explain the ideological malleability that has beset participation in practice. (Hickey and Mohan: 2004, p - 59)

I will get back to Hickey and Mohan's position at a later section. But it helps us to understand the observation Henkel and Stirrat made as they embarked on their anthropological analysis of participatory development. (Henkel and Stirrat: 2002, p - 169). These authors set out to describe, not that which participation fails to do, but that which it succeeds in doing. The authors argued that the genealogies of participation are primarily religious and were a 'key issue in the reformation movement' (ibid., p - 173). They emphasised that having derived out of its roots in the Protestant movement of the sixteenth century and the social reforms during the enlightenment, participation is not just viewed as a right, but also as a duty - something morally superior and imperative. Such an analysis of participation led to the conclusion, that 'the concept of participation as it is used in contemporary development discourse is a culturally specific concept rather than a matter of universal common sense.' (ibid., p - 175)

According to Uma Kothari, although PRA seeks to reveal the realities of the day to day life of poor people and discover local knowledge, paradoxically, its public nature also ensures that the local power structures remain masked and misunderstood. Taking a Foucauldian approach she criticises the dichotomous approach to power, which is so often assumed in conventional participatory development. She writes, that 'within participatory discourse a number of binaries or opposites are presented, such as 'uppers' and 'lowers', North and South, professional knowledge and local knowledge' (Kothari: 2002, p - 140). The tendency is to view local knowledge as something people 'intrinsically have and own'. (ibid.). Kothari argues that, 'knowledge is culturally, socially and politically produced and is continuously reformulated as a powerful normative construct.' (ibid.) Such a dichotomous view of power 'allows the revealing of

power not as a social and political discourse or as embodied practice, but only as manifest in material realities.’ (ibid.)

Similarly, David Mosse, uses his analysis of a donor funded Indo-British farming project (the Kribhco Indo British Farming Project), to challenge the notion of the purity of local knowledge and the ‘potential that a PRA-based focus on ‘people’s knowledge’ has to provide a radical challenge to existing power structures, professional positions and knowledge systems.’ (Mosse: 2002, p - 17). He shows through his accounts that what is taken as people’s knowledge is itself generated in the context of the planning process, as the people try to gauge what the agency would succeed in delivering in terms of benefits. This quest for people’s knowledge, therefore ends up generating a unique kind of planning knowledge, which reflects more the planning process and the context within which it took place, rather than some exclusive knowledge possessed by the people.

Francis Cleaver focuses on the ‘blindness to historical and social context’ (Cleaver: 2002, p - 42), that characterises participatory development and argues that there is a vague understanding of what motivates people to participate, but nonetheless, simplistic assumptions are made regarding the ‘rationality inherent in participating, and the irresponsibility of not doing so.’ (Cooke and Kothari: 2002, p - 9)

John Hailey takes the example of the development and growth of NGOs in South Asia that have succeeded in ensuring people’s participation without resorting the typical set of formal tools or participatory techniques. Hailey argues, that ‘formal participative tools and techniques may play less of a role than has otherwise been expected.’ (Hailey: 2002, p - 89). Success of these NGOs was achieved through long durations of engagement of the people, building up personal ties, keeping regular contact etc. (ibid., p - 90)

Bill Cooke takes a unique position and criticises participatory development using four concepts of social psychology viz., risky shift, Abilene paradox, groupthink and coercive persuasion. (Cooke: 2002, p - 106). Risky shift happens when people are led to

take collective decisions that are more risky to them, than those they would have taken individually. Abilene paradox, leads people to 'second-guess' what everybody else wants and opt for it, while the truth may be exactly the reverse of it. Group think involves the taking of wrong decisions due to a conviction in the 'inherent morality' of what is being done and the consequent employment of 'self-censorship'. Coercive persuasion refers to the forced shaping of a group process to achieve a particular objective. Cooke argues, that all these concepts can come into play in the context of the public and face to face interactions, which are a defining feature of participatory development and all these four can threaten and jeopardise the empowering mission of participation.

One of the most comprehensive and articulate papers in the collection was that of Giles Mohan, who was also one of the editors of the book 'Participation: From Tyranny to Transformation?' (henceforth referred to as the transformation collection), which came as the main answer to the tyranny collection two years later. Mohan used concepts from the field of post-colonial studies to criticise conventional participation and also identify the arenas where alternative strands of participation are achieving success in overcoming the tyrannical tendencies. Mohan argues that a 'subtle Euro centrism infects and shapes the interventions of non-local development workers despite claims to the contrary.' (Mohan: 2002, p - 158)

Mohan attacks the concept of 'local knowledge' too as being an outcome of the West's 'current fascination with the local...which reflects both older traits and newer concerns of Western society in the way it confronts the non-West.' (ibid.) He quotes Chabal, whose lines explain beautifully the tendency to view non-Western contexts, in this case Africa, as mysterious and exotic, and therefore un-knowable.

Mysteries not just in the sense that we do not understand its reality well but also in that its reality is not really amenable to our understanding. Exotic in that it fulfils in us the most enduring need to find in some (suitably distant) 'other' that quality of inexplicability which is both frightening in its apparent irrationality and reassuring in

that it highlights our own rationality. (Chabal: 1996, p - 41, quoted in Mohan: 2002, p - 159)

According to Kanneh, this 'predication of mystery allows the obliteration of dialogue.' (Kanneh: 1995, p - 5, quoted in Mohan: 2002, p - 159). The concept of the exotic also leads conventional participation to treat people's knowledge as something more 'organic'. (Mohan: 2002, p - 159). Mohan tries to hit home the obvious but often disregarded point that, 'what appears to be less energy-intensive technology may be not born out of an innate wisdom resulting from their relationship to nature, but a result of necessity.' (ibid.) Campbell is even more candid when he criticises the perverse identification of sustainability in a situation that is not a voluntary reflection of the culture of the people but the result of the brutal coercion of poverty.

Interpreting African dire necessity as a product of "indigenous knowledge" rather than a product of grinding poverty, the concept of indigenism can then be served up to gullible Westerners, as a "sustainable" system that they should be proud to live by. (Campbell: 1997, p 50-51, quoted in Mohan: 2002, p - 159)

Mohan identifies in this process a 'privileging of the cultural realm over the material and its appropriation by Westerners.' (Mohan; 2002, p - 159)

By throwing the cover of culture over material relationships, as if the two had little to do with each other, such a focus diverts criticism of capitalism to the criticism of Eurocentric ideology [and] provides an alibi for inequality, exploitation, and oppression in their modern guises. (Dirlik: 1994, p - 346, quoted in Mohan: 2002, p - 159)

4.3 Politicising Participatory Development and the Growing Influence of Critical Modernism

The tyranny collection was a very important not just because it marked the high-point of the critique against participatory development, but also because it marked the turning point. Although, the critiques come from a wide variety of positions a shift can be noticed from the post-modern and post-structural theoretical positions, which were so influential when participatory development first came into prominence, towards a critical modernist position, as seen in the critique put forward by authors like Mohan, Charbal etc. The response to the tyranny critique came in the form of another collection titled 'Participation : from Tyranny to Transformation ?' (henceforth referred to as the transformation collection) in which the critical modernist position got further emphasised.

In the transformation collection one can identify a clear departure from an exclusive focus on PRA based approaches to a search for transformation in more politicized arenas. In fact, one of the critiques that the transformation collection had against the tyranny collection was the latter's exclusive focus on the work of Robert Chambers. This, according to the editors, of the transformation collection, leads to two distinct problems. One is the reduction of participation of one 'particularly visible' and 'mainstreamed' variant, which fails to capture the diverse approaches of participation that have developed historically and also the current experiments, which can offer a way round the failures of the populist approaches. The second is a tendency to take Robert Chambers' work on 'face value' and therefore attacking even those aspects of PRA, which have a potential to be extremely useful for marginal people. (Hickey and Mohan: 2004, p - 12)

The editors and contributors agreed to the allegation made by the tyranny critique that participatory development has often failed to understand adequately and engage effectively with issues of politics and power. This inability to grapple successfully with power and politics turned participation into a purely technical approach and depoliticised that, which should have been an 'explicitly political process.' (Hickey and Mohan: 2004, p - 4)

The editors emphasised the difference between ‘immanent development’ and ‘imminent development’. According to Hickey and Mohan, ‘immanent development’ refers to development ‘as a historical process of social change’, whereas ‘imminent development’ refers to development in the form of ‘specific interventions’ which ‘emerged over the past two centuries largely as a means of managing those ‘surplus populations’ that have either been excluded from or ‘adversely incorporated’ into processes of immanent development.’ (Cowen and Shenton: 1996, quoted in Hickey and Mohan: 2004, p 10)

One of the characteristics of development studies had been to focus on imminent development rather than on immanent development. According to the authors, this happened due to two main reasons. The first was the failure of classic development theory to fully understand and predict these historical processes of change, and the second was the need that was felt to make development research ‘more ‘relevant’ in terms of directly informing interventions.’ (Hickey and Mohan: 2004, p - 10) However, this wish to create relevance by undertaking specific interventions has contributed to the de-politicization of development in developing countries, thus creating another kind of irrelevance. It is these various kinds of ‘irrelevancies’ that the populist approaches to participatory development that arose in the 1980s claimed to overcome. (ibid.). Much of the assumptions and strategies of PRA based approaches have stemmed from this wish to make the already depoliticised ‘imminent development’ more participatory and empowering. However, the authors observe, wherever one finds examples of empowerment and transformation happening as a result of participation, it has been a result of an ‘engagement with development as an underlying process, rather than as a series of technical interventions, and are tied into broader projects of social justice and radical social change.’ (ibid., p - 13)

Apart from this emphasis on imminent development, the other shortcoming of conventional participatory development approaches, according to the transformation collection, was, ‘the absence of a coherent theory of participation that seeks to explore and articulate the role of agency within development processes.’ (Hickey and Mohan:

2004, p - 59). The authors argued that such a failure to theorize has led to the 'ideological malleability that has beset participation in practice.' (ibid.)

The critique of conventional development, which led to the participatory turn, was primarily inspired and guided by postmodern social theories. Peet and Hartwick write, that the critique of development from the left, in general, come from two different theoretical positions - 'critical modernism (sometimes called radical humanism or socialist feminism, both generally inspired by socialist ideas); and postmodernism (including many post structural ideas, much of post colonialism and parts of feminism)' (Peet and Hartwick: 1999, p - 199). At the time when participatory development rose to prominence it was postmodernism, which had become the dominant theoretical position criticising development.

Despite the contributions of postmodernism towards the participatory turn, it focussed primarily on 'development as discourse' and engaged in a rigorous critique of the 'discourses and ideas to undermine their certainty' (ibid.). A never-ending investigation of the micro-practices of everyday life, the fine-grain of taken for granted assumptions and of the circularity and omnipresence of power has often affected the ability of the agents of social transformation to acquire sufficient theoretical clarity and consistency to generate relevant and effective strategies for action. Peet and Hartwick write that,

The post structural critique overemphasizes representation at the expense of practice, as though words were the main problems in life: Change the word, and the world will change. As a result of overvaluing words, too many postmodern critiques end in a nihilistic never-never land, where nothing is proposed, and little gets done in anything approaching real terms. (ibid.).

They further write, that 'there is a disturbing tendency for post structural discussions to see poverty in terms of the social construction of a deficient term, rather than in terms of the material reality of massive and absolute deprivation.' (ibid., p - 202).

If poverty is considered purely as a social construct, or something that has entirely different meanings depending on the cultural context, then simplicity, dignity, and the discovery of inner richness may have some validity as responses. But if poverty is considered materially as the absolute lack of inputs vital to continued existence, such as not enough food (of any kind) to keep people alive, as a far too universal reality, then postmodern ethical advocacy is a cruel hoax: it amounts to telling those who are about to expire that they are (astonishingly !) rich, that they should die with “dignity” rather than struggle for life. Here “dignity” is the postmodern equivalent of the myth of heaven, “put up and shut up”. (ibid., p - 203)

Critical modernism is theoretically rooted in Marxism and Feminism along with post structuralism. Critical modernists attempt to revive the classical Marxist critique of capitalism and urged a separation of modernity and capitalism in analysis and critique. Synthesizing the various theoretical positions it is rooted in, critical modernism ‘entails a critique of capitalist power systems in traditional Marxist terms of class ownership of productive resources, in feminine terms of male dominance, and in post structural terms of the hegemony of elite discourses.’ (ibid., p - 198).

Rather than abandoning the development project and modernity, it seeks to criticise them constructively. Peet and Hartwick summarise the critical modernist position brilliantly in the following line.

‘Criticize everything, convert critique into proposal, criticize the proposal, but still do something - that is the critical modernist credo.’ (ibid., p - 198)

Such a renewed emphasis on material conditions of poverty, need to politicise participatory development and a general shift towards critical modernism was caused by the continued existence of widespread poverty on the one hand and the increasing significance of neoliberalism on the other hand. The shift in the theoretical position coincided with a search for cases, which had used participation in radical and politically conscious ways, and thereby, moving beyond the problems that were identified in the

tyranny collection. Hickey and Mohan, draw their empirical evidence from ‘a selection of the fields of policy and practice, where participation forms a key element’ -

1. Participatory poverty assessments of the World Bank and their further formalisation through the poverty reduction strategy paper initiative.
2. Participatory governance and democratic decentralisation.
3. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Participatory development.
4. Social Movements.

(Hickey and Mohan: 2004, p - 159)

From among the above four areas, all of which have their own potentials and challenges, this research focuses on democratic decentralisation, as it has been the preferred strategy of the proponents of some of the most pro-poor and egalitarian planning and development endeavours in India. Most notable among these experiments were those initiated by left coalition governments in the states of Kerala and West Bengal in southern and eastern India respectively. Partly inspired by these regional experiments, there was a substantial scaling up of such democratic decentralisation initiatives when they were initiated at a nationwide level through two important amendments to the Indian Constitution in 1992. The tyranny collection too focussed on the experiments undertaken in Kerala and West Bengal and observed that that the goal of transformation can be reached by democratic decentralisation experiments only when certain conditions are fulfilled. Interestingly, while highlighting these pre-conditions Hickey and Mohan refer to Crook and Sverrisson’s research findings from the decentralisation experiments in West Bengal, Kerala and Brazil. Hickey and Mohan list the factors responsible for the success of these experiments as follows -

- (i) they were pursued as part of a wider (radical) political project.
- (ii) they were aimed specifically at securing citizenship rights and participation for marginal and subordinate groups.
- (iii) they sought to engage with development as an underlying process of social change rather than in the form of discrete technocratic interventions.

(Hickey and Mohan: 2004, p - 159)

The following section takes a deeper look at the concept of democratic decentralisation, the theoretical rationale underlying it and the challenges it faces in providing new avenues of citizen participation.

4.4 Democratic Decentralisation - A Communicative Turn in Indian Planning ?

‘Democratic decentralisation is the process of devolving the functions and resources of the state from the centre to the elected representatives at the lower levels so as to facilitate greater direct participation by the citizens in governance.’ (Isaac: 2000, p - 1). According to Thomas Isaac, the main principle behind the concept is that of ‘subsidiarity’, i.e. matters that are best resolved at a certain level, should be resolved at that level and not passed on to higher levels (ibid.). Hickey and Mohan, further describe the concept as a ‘key aspect of participatory governance agenda, and is associated with the institutionalisation of participation through regular elections, council hearings, and, more recently, participatory budgeting.’ (Hickey and Mohan: 2004, p - 161). John Gaventa, another contributor to the transformation collection writes, that increasingly, ‘the concept of participation is being related to rights of citizenship and to democratic governance’, and ‘nowhere is the intersection of community participation and citizenship seen more clearly than in the multitude of programmes for decentralised governance that are found in both southern and northern countries.’ (Gaventa: 2004., p - 25)

The wave of decentralisation which we are familiar with today, started in the 1980s. Since that time, the spread of decentralisation around the world has been tremendous. According to Faguet, ‘over the past two decades decentralisation has become one of the broadest movements, and most debated policy issues, in the world of development’ (Faguet: 2004, p - 867). A study by Dillinger stated, that 63 out of 75 developing countries with a population of over 5 million had experimented with some form of decentralisation. (Dillinger: 1998, p - 8, in Franke and Isaac: 2000, p - 230). It is not just the number of countries that bears testimony to the popularity of the concept, but the range of regime types which have embraced it as a political strategy. Crook and Sverrisson write that ‘since the mid-1980s decentralisation reforms have been

introduced in states rules by virtually all varieties of regime, from military dictatorships, authoritarian presidencies and monarchies through single party or dominant party regimes to multi-party competitive democracies.’ (Crook and Sverrisson: 2001, p - 1)

These various experiments with decentralisation happening around the world have been categorised into four broad types which are listed below.

- Deconcentration - This is the weakest and least radical form of decentralisation and involves just an ‘administrative re-shuffling’(Thörlind: 2000, p - 36) where ‘the central offices of line ministries transfer certain decision-making authority to regional or sub-regional offices.’ (Franke and Isaac: 2000, p - 232)
- Delegation - In this form of decentralisation some government authority for managing and undertaking specific tasks is transferred to organisations outside the formal bureaucratic structure such as ‘public corporations, regional development agencies, special function authorities, semi-autonomous project implementation units, and a variety of para-statal organisations.’ (Rondinelli et al.: 1983, p - 19)
- Privatisation - In this form of decentralisation, the governments hands over the responsibility of undertaking some of its functions to voluntary organisations, private organisations and ‘parallel organisations’ such as ‘national industrial and trade associations, professional groups, religious organisations, political parties and cooperatives.’ (ibid., p - 28)
- Devolution or Democratic Decentralisation - This is the most radical form of decentralisation and is described as ‘...reciprocal and mutually benefitting relationships between central and local governments (that) are not merely subordinate administrative units, but...have the ability to interact reciprocally with other units of government.’ (Rondinelli et al. : 1984, p - 20, quoted in Franke and Isaac: 200, p - 233)

According to Franke and Isaac, deconcentration is the most frequently occurring type and devolution the most rarely occurring type of decentralisation encountered in different countries. (Franke and Isaac: 2000, p - 232)

It is interesting to note that this was the second wave of decentralisation to hit the third world. The first wave had come in the 1950s, in the period immediately following the gaining of political independence by many of these countries. According to Crooke and Manor, 'by the 1970s, most of these initiatives had been vitiated by distrust and interference from above, and by infighting and shortages of resources and expertise in elected councils and local communities.' (Crooke and Manor: 1998, p - 1 and 2).

Yet, the failure of the first wave didn't prevent the second one to be ushered in with great enthusiasm. Different researchers provide different reasons for the renewed thrust on decentralisation from the 1980s onwards. Crooke and Manor described how the notion of decentralisation appealed to different sets of people 'who often disagreed on other issues.' (ibid., p - 1).

Economists who had been influenced by neo-liberal ideas saw it as a way of shifting power away from the centralised state which had discredited itself in their eyes through voracious rent seeking and other abuses. Advocates of pluralist, competitive politics regarded it as a device for prying open closed systems, to give interest groups space in which to organise, compete and otherwise assert themselves. Enthusiasts for efforts by village communities to achieve things through co-operation rather than competition viewed it as a means to that end. The leaders of some autocratic regimes in Asia and Africa saw it as a substitute for democratisation at the national level, as a safe way to acquire much-needed legitimacy and grass-roots support. Democratic politicians in less-developed countries regarded it as a way to make government more responsive to local needs and preferences. Taken together, these diverse groups represented a potent coalition for change. (ibid.)

The authors further elaborated that by the 1980s, 'every sort of critique of the state - Friedmanite, Gandhian or whatever - seemed plausible.' (ibid., p - 2). It is acknowledged by the various researchers and commentators that the reasons for

undertaking decentralisation are specific to the different nations and governments where it has happened. However, according to Shah, 'generic catalysts for change include the demise of communism, desire to breakaway from vestiges of colonialism as in Africa, national government failures, sub national government failures, assertion of basic rights by the courts, globalisation of economic activities and the demonstration effects of the European Union and Latin America.' (Shah: 1998, p - 1).

Crook and Manor also stress the importance of the feeling of ownership that third world states feels towards the concept of decentralisation. According to the authors, most governments have turned towards decentralisation by their own choice and using the experiments of other third world countries as models. Neither was the concept borrowed from experiments in the first world nor from the various international development agencies. The authors further elaborate, that 'in fact, most international agencies lagged behind a number of developing country governments in recognising the benefits of decentralisation.' (Crook and Manor: 2000, p - 3). However, once the first wave of decentralisation had come and gone the development agencies and first world interest groups woke up to the phenomenon very actively, and not always in the interests of the third world states.

However, it would not be possible to say that any of the above causes played the critical role to the exclusion of others in the tremendous spread of decentralisation the world over. In all probability it is, as Crook and Manor write, a combined effect of all these multiple causes. But still one can't help noticing the fact that the voices that appear earlier on in the current section belong to scholars from the first world who have been keen observers of decentralisation experiments but have neither been directly involved in the planning and execution of any nor have forfeited their basic platforms of employment in the Universities of northern countries for the sake of studying or implementing these experiments. Authors like Thomas Isaac and Patnaik have been personally involved in the planning and execution of the massive decentralisation experiment in Kerala and are as much observing academics as they are practitioners of decentralisation, who face the full brunt of reaction when things go wrong in reality.

May be that explains the blatant and focussed manner in which they call a spade - a spade.

At first glance, the whole concept of decentralisation seems very effective in making any system more efficient, accountable and participatory. From the standpoint of economic theory, the argument in favour of decentralisation is that 'only by providing services consistent with the spatially differentiated tastes and preferences of the people can welfare be maximised.' (Franke and Isaac: 2000, p - 2). From the political standpoint, 'decentralisation is typically viewed as an important element of participatory democracy that allows citizens to have an opportunity to communicate their preferences and views to elected officials who are subsequently rendered accountable for their performance to citizens.' (Bardhan and Mookherjee: 2006, p - 4)

The process is believed, by many, to be able to invariably increase the participation of the local people and especially of the poor in the political and developmental process. According to Robert Thörlind,

Decentralisation is seen by scholars as one of the most necessary steps towards sustainable development. Consequently, popular participation in local development planning, decision-making, and implementation is viewed as the most crucial element needed to efficiently link people's needs and frustrations into popular demands and thus ensure effective participation and grassroots influence over local policy-making. (Thörlind: 2000, p - 36)

James Manor, who is no blind admirer of the process, lists all the things that the process can lead to if it works well. 'When it works well', he writes, 'popular participation in the policy process and in local politics almost always increases. More people participate, more often and in more ways – campaigning, contacting bureaucrats and elected representatives, protesting, petitioning etc. Civil society is galvanized – more people join voluntary associations which become more active and numerous and do more things...transparency increases.' (Manor : 2003, p –5). However, in the very next

page of the report he claims that ‘democratic decentralisation often fails to work’ (ibid., p – 6)

In the context of developing countries, the same logic quickly builds up to the claim that democratic decentralization makes governments more responsive to the needs of the poor. Crook explains this connection by writing, that, ‘insofar as the majority of the population in developing countries is both poor and excluded from elite politics, any scheme that appears to offer greater political participation to ordinary citizens seems likely to increase their ‘voice’ and hence (it is hoped) the relevance and effectiveness of the government’s policy.’ (Crook : 2003, p – 77)

The evidence collected by various authors on the subject divides them into two camps. The first camp, comprising of the proponents of decentralization, arguing that ‘because decentralization brings government closer to the governed, both spatially and institutionally, government will be more knowledgeable about and responsive to the needs of the poor’ (ibid., p – 77). The other camp argues that, ‘decentralisation schemes cannot be treated as technically neutral devices which can be ‘implemented’ without constraint...different governments have different political purposes and motives for introducing decentralisation’ and ‘these intentions are embodied in the structure and form of decentralisation, or more subtly, are revealed in how the system functions after it is introduced.’ (ibid., , p – 78)

However, the point on which both the camps agree, is that there isn’t substantial data on the process so far to say conclusively which claim is true. Jean-Paul Faguet, whose research findings certainly put him in the first camp, writes that, ‘50 years of research has failed to establish clearly whether decentralisation makes government more or less responsive to citizens.’ (Faguet : 2004, p – 869). After undertaking a detailed study, using econometrics, of the Bolivian decentralisation experiment, he concludes, that ‘decentralisation significantly changed public investment patterns in Bolivia...and these shifts are strongly and positively related to local needs...decentralisation thus led to higher investment in human capital and social services as the poorest regions of the country chose projects according to their greatest needs’ (ibid., p – 886)

Interestingly, Crook and Sverrisson seem to have given a pre-emptive rebuttal to Faguet's claim when they explained the essential difference between, what they categorised as the successful and unsuccessful examples of decentralisation, by writing that, 'the essential difference, therefore, between West Bengal and the Brazilian states on the one hand, and Bangladesh, Nigeria, Mexico on the other, is *not* that the latter countries did not allocate sufficient funds to the decentralised authorities, or that they lacked centrally-funded development and anti-poverty programs. The real difference was that the latter group failed to ensure that central funds were used in a responsible and accountable manner, and failed to ensure implementation of pro-poor policies, where they existed, if only formally.' (Crook and Sverrisson : 2001, p – 27)

What then could be a reasonable framework for understanding the link between democratic decentralisation and the needs of poor people, according to the researchers of the second camp ?

To answer this question Crook describes, what he terms as the 'West Bengal' model, and writes that, 'decentralisation is most likely to result in pro-poor outcomes where it has been designed by a central government (including a state within a federal system) intent on challenging conservative local elites, and which has a strong ideological commitment to anti-poverty politics.' (Crook : 2003, p – 85) Thus, according to Crook, the politics of local-central relations creates the proper framework for understanding the link between democratic decentralisation and the needs of the poor.

In both the successful cases in India (the Kerala and West Bengal experiments), the process was part of the political project of the Left parties, and especially of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Thomas Isaac, who was one of the architects of the famous 'People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning' in Kerala, writes that, as 'the Kerala experiment is part of a political project of the left parties, and because those parties hold to a program of ending inequalities to the greatest extent possible, we see in the Kerala experiment a far larger set of goals than to develop a mere administrative design.' (Isaac and Frank: 2000, p – 253)

In the case of West Bengal, the process of decentralisation was linked to the wider mass mobilisation for land reforms in the rural areas. The empowered local governments became the platform at the local level to support the massive land-reform campaign known as 'Operation Barga'.

A similar observation is made by Crook in the case of Brazil. He writes, that 'in Brazil, in spite of radical autonomy given to local government by the 1988 Constitution, the most positive anti-poverty outcomes have been associated with either federally funded rural development programs (most notably the North-East Rural Development Program) or state and city level programs launched by progressive reforming parties -- the PSDB (Brazilian Social Democratic Party) and the PT (Workers Party) -- in Ceara, Minas Gerais and Rio Grande do Sul.' (Crook : 2003, p – 84)

A very important feature of the decentralisation experiments in West Bengal and Kerala, was, that a simultaneous process of democratising the development planning structure in the rural areas and the spatial planning structure in the urban areas, was initiated alongside the devolution of power, resources and functions to the lower tiers of government. This process was later granted Constitutional recognition and initiated at a national level through the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian Constitution. In relation to the specific conditions existing in India, such a democratisation was attempted by taking the crucial function of planning away from the bureaucratic line departments and special purpose agencies, both of which were outside local democratic control, and delegating them to democratically elected local government institutions.

The fact that such a process of decentralisation and democratisation of the planning process was being championed by the leftist parties, led by the communists, who usually tend to favour centralised planning, was mysterious to many observers. Though the reasons for such a favouring of decentralisation by the leftist parties are complex, and shall be explored in detail in a later chapter, one cannot but fail to observe the similarities between what they had set out to achieve through such a process and the ideals of communicative planning.

Mark the language used by one of India's most accomplished Communist leaders and one of the main architects of the decentralisation experiment in Kerala, as he gave the following Presidential address at the International Congress of Kerala Studies,

'Our greatest assets are our mass organisations and the democratic consciousness of our people. The combined strength of all mass organisation in the state is about ten million. Besides, there is a vast network of co-operative organisations and movements, such as the organisations of the library and the literacy movements. I am aware that there are some people who consider all these to be the bane of Kerala society. I have devoted my life to mobilising the people for the radical transformation of our society, and I cannot but disagree with such perceptions. I feel that one big question that we face is whether the organised strength and political consciousness of our people can be used to increase production and productivity. I want to answer in the affirmative. But there is a precondition: the government and the ruling classes must change their attitude to the organisations of the people and their demands. Instead of suppressing people's struggles and adopting negative attitudes, amicable solutions should be found through collective bargaining and discussions. Further, institutions and social mechanisms have to be developed to ensure that the toilers get their due share from increased production. I must emphasize the importance of democratic decentralisation in this context.'

(Namboodiripad: 1994, in Franke and Isaac: 2000, p - 26)

This text is interesting because it contains almost all the ideas and concepts that have been discussed in this chapter thus far. The faith in the 'democratic consciousness' of the people of the state irrespective of their structural position, the mobilisation of diverse kinds of civil society organisations, the appeal to the ruling classes to discard 'negative attitudes' to find 'amicable solutions' all point to the wish to create an 'inter-subjective understanding' which communicative planning theorists are talking about.

Democratic decentralisation is emphasised as it is considered to be an effective process to create the appropriate institutional environment for pursuing such a development strategy. Devolution of power and finances to the local government and opening them

up for multi-party elections is seen as a way of deepening democracy and ensuring that the people can take ownership of the democratic institutions at the level where it is closest to them both functionally and territorially.

Thus, it can be argued that by studying these experiments in democratic decentralisation in Kerala and West Bengal one can contribute to the understanding of how a communicative turn in actual planning practice has been attempted in a developing country context. But such attempts towards communicative planning through democratic decentralisation face a difficult challenge in the current times. It is interesting to note that exactly the same critique that Christer Bengs had against communicative planning theory, that it serves to establish social institutions consistent with the neo-liberal society, has been raised against the concept of democratic decentralisation also.

4.5 Decentralisation Experiments in India - Communicative Islands in Neoliberal Waters ?

Isaac and Franke note that all the major international development agencies such as the World Bank, The International Monetary Fund (IMF), Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the USAID, all actively 'promote, finance and evaluate decentralisation experiments.' (Franke and Isaac: 2000, p - 231) and, incidentally, these are the very agencies, which subjected more than 70 third world countries to 566 structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) between 1978 and 1992, in order to 'help' them to recover from their debt crises. These adjustment programmes have the effect of radically reducing government spending, 'including education and health spending, liberalise imports, remove restrictions on foreign investment, privatise state enterprises, devalue currency, and freeze or cut wages.' (Bello: 2003, p - 12-13, quoted in Franke and Isaac: 2000, p- 248). These programmes had a devastating effect in terms of reduction in per capita incomes, increase in child mortality and percentage of underweight children, declining life expectancy etc. in these countries.

Since the championing of decentralisation, especially in the form of privatization, was done by these agencies at the same time as the SAPs were being promoted, Franke and

Isaac wrote that, 'it would not be surprising if many in the South suspected decentralisation of being part of a grander scheme to weaken third world states in order to gain greater access to cheap labour and raw materials.' (Franke and Isaac: 2000, p 247)

The noted Indian economist Prabhat Patnaik is even more direct, when he distinguishes between decentralised planning campaigns and experiments launched in third world countries by coalitions of leftist political parties and that which he describes as the 'world bank-style decentralisation' (Patnaik: 2004, p - 1). Referring to the famous People's Plan Campaign, which was launched in the Indian state of Kerala in 1996 by the Left Democratic Front (LDF) he wrote that,

'The decentralization proposed by the Left, propagated by the People's Plan campaign, and implemented during the years of the LDF rule is fundamentally different from the "decentralisation" promoted by the World Bank and other imperialist agencies. While the "decentralisation" agenda of the left is a means of carrying class-struggle forward, of buttressing the class-struggle of the rural poor by developing institutions where they can, in principle, assert themselves directly and hence more effectively, the "decentralisation" promoted by the imperialist agencies has precisely the opposite objective, of blunting class-struggle, of encouraging a scenario of "obedient-and-suppliant-villagers-being-patronised-by-NGOs", and of substituting the concept of the "Rights" of the people by the concept of "Self-Help".' (ibid.)

He also offers a bold explanation to the tremendous championing of the concept of decentralisation by the international development agencies from the 1980s onwards. Whether his assertion is entirely correct or not is neither within the scope of this research nor within the capacity of the researcher to investigate. But it is worthwhile to pay attention to it simply to add some spice to the prevalent literature on subjects like participation, democratisation and role of international development agencies in furthering the cause of decentralisation. Patnaik writes, that,

‘It is a deliberate ploy of imperialism to borrow concepts from the Left and incorporate them into its own lexicon after giving them a different meaning. This habit of borrowing concepts serves many purposes: first, the analytical depth that is usually associated with any Left concept is mistakenly attributed to the imperialist concept as well and imparts a prestige to imperialist theory; secondly, since the same concept is used by the enemies of the Left as by the Left itself, it creates confusion in Left ranks, and blunts a basic weapon of the latter, namely theoretical clarity ; thirdly, by creating fuzziness around basic concepts imperialism seeks to destroy clarity of thinking in society as a whole, which helps to establish and perpetuate its hegemony.’ (ibid.)

These arguments presented above point to two things. Both the concepts of communicative planning and democratic decentralisation are susceptible to subversion and co-optation by the neo-liberal ideology. Yet, at the same time, communicative planning and democratic decentralisation both have the potential to set in motion a participatory process which can lead to the creation of a truly democratic planning process rather than one where the market forces have the last word. The challenge of neoliberalism becomes all the more serious because the decentralisation experiments of the two state governments have to be ultimately undertaken within the overall economic environment of India and are bound to be affected by macro-economic conditions prevailing at the national level.

Thinking in these lines one cannot disagree with Bengs’ arguments against communicative planning theory. But such arguments hold only if communicative planning and democratic decentralisation are seen as technically neutral devices functioning independently of the specific contexts in which they were attempted. As we have already seen in the case of democratic decentralisation, such an assumption of technical neutrality does not hold and the through the analysis of the politics of central-local relations Crook and Sverrisson have shown the circumstances in which democratic decentralisation can truly hold its ground against the influence of social and economic elites. This is exactly how the noted economist Thomas Isaac, who was one of the architects of the Kerala decentralisation experiment and the Finance Minister of the

state of Kerala, replied to the threat of neoliberal subversion of decentralisation experiments,

If decentralisation can be part of the neoliberal strategy to weaken Third World states and assist in selling off the people's assets through privatisation, can it also be an alternative mechanism of development and therefore a means of resistance to First World dominated globalisation? (Franke and Isaac: 2000, p - 251)

4.6 Formulating the Research Questions

Through this analysis of recent debates within planning theory and development studies, we have seen that there is much in common between the communicative turn in planning thought and practice and the participatory turn in development thought and practice. Both positions originated through a critique of conventional, expert driven forms of planning and development, and were strongly affected by the rising influence of postmodern social theories. Both were hailed as paradigmatic changes in planning and development respectively. By the turn of the last century both had to face stern critique from diverse quarters for a failure to grapple successfully with issues of power and politics, and for containing intrinsic potential of being co-opted by neoliberalism rather than of being able to resist it. However, the critique of participatory development could develop further than the critique of communicative planning, through the observation of processes and experiments with participation in various third world countries which were able to overcome many of the typical problems that beset participatory development during the 1980s and 1990s.

As the majority of the people affected most strongly by processes of globalisation and neoliberalism lived in third world countries, the new sites of democratic resistance also developed in these parts. The scholars and researchers of development studies, who, in general, have focussed on these countries, could begin the process of identifying and theorizing these alternative experiments. Contrary to that, the proponents of communicative planning theory, with their explicit focus on the West European and North American contexts, failed to accommodate the experiences of such radical experiments in their own theoretical formulations. As a consequence of this, it can be

argued, they denied themselves a greater possibility to correct the contradiction in communicative planning theory, which stems from a wish to resist global processes such as neoliberalism by generating democratic planning alternatives drawn from a very limited geographical and historical context.

Earlier in this chapter, we had seen that if we put the normative ambitions of communicative planning theory aside, a strong critical function which it can play is that of acting as a ‘vehicle for demystification’ for real life planning and development processes. This is what some authors such as Sager (Sager: 1994; analysis of the Trondheim toll ring case) and Brand and Gaffikin (Brand and Gaffikin: 2007; analysis of collaborative planning cases from Northern Ireland) have attempted.

What this research attempts to do is to contribute to communicative planning theory by doing exactly the opposite. It attempts a reverse-demystification of the assumptions and arguments of communicative planning theory, through an analysis of the historical evolution and generation of democratic planning structures in a third world country like India. As we have seen earlier in the analysis of communicative planning theory, that, despite its intention to foster a genuinely democratic planning process, its proponents also have a tendency to follow an idealistic approach to understanding and analysing the historical context of their democratic heritage on which they base their primary assumptions and predictions of success. A process of reverse-demystification of informing communicative planning theory, developed out of a first world historical context, by analysing democratic planning experiments being undertaken in a third world country and based on its own historical context and democratic heritage, could correct such idealistic tendencies.

The research wishes to accomplish this task by answering the following three research questions -

1.Has the creation of the democratic planning structure in the city of Kolkata made the local planning and development process in the city more communicative?

2. What was the historical process involved in the creation of such a planning structure?

3. Does the process of creating a more communicative planning process through a democratisation of the planning structure increase the capacity of the poor citizens of the city to resist the trends of neoliberal urbanisation in Kolkata?

Part III

Methodology

5. Research Methodology

5.1 In Search of the Appropriate Methodology

A number of factors have gone into the selection of the appropriate methodology for this research. In fact, it would not be correct to say that it was a 'selection' at all. It is more correct to say, that the methodology evolved over time as the research progressed and eventually acquired a certain form which was the most appropriate one for answering the research questions.

As has been written in the previous chapter, what this research attempts to accomplish is a reverse de-mystification of communicative planning theory using the real experience of the democratic decentralisation experiment in West Bengal and the consequent democratisation of the urban planning structure in Kolkata. The research questions that I had formulated, therefore, craved for a detailed and in-depth understanding of the historical and geographical context in which the democratisation of the planning structure in Kolkata was taking place, how such structures were operating on the ground in the planning and implementation process and how such a historical process of structural transformation was interacting with the processes of neoliberal urbanisation.

The peculiarity of the democratisation experiments being undertaken in the city of Kolkata had to be considered while deliberating on the methodology. The first thing one notices about the experiment in West Bengal, is that any meaningful study of the effects of democratic decentralisation on the planning and development process would inevitably have to be multi-disciplinary. The processes of institutional reform, restructuring of property relations in urban and rural areas, politicisation of the development process, increasing the responsiveness of the development process to the poor etc., were all happening simultaneously and were completely interlinked with each other. It is not possible in such a situation to study the process of decentralisation, without also studying the process of land reforms, and these two again cannot be

separated from a study of the pro-poor development strategy of the Left Front. In fact, it is not even possible to study one of the processes, through the lens of the other. They have to be studied in the whole - with full awareness of the way in which they are linked to each other.

Thus, the challenge of creating the appropriate methodology for this research, became the challenge for discovering or generating a methodology which would allow for such a holistic investigation and analysis to be undertaken without leading to a dilution of the empirical content. I had begun to appreciate the need for such an approach already when I began the literature study for the research. The existing studies on the decentralisation experiment in West Bengal were spread over multiple disciplinary areas, such as political science, development geography, planning theory, public finance and international studies; and sub-disciplinary thematic areas such as participatory development, deliberative democracy, decentralised planning, local government reform etc. Yet, each of these accounts described the overall experiment only partially. If the institutional analysis was solid then the analysis of the decentralised planning aspect was weak; if the decentralised planning aspect was well analysed in economic terms then the spatial aspect of such a planning process was missing; if the analysis was strong from a political science perspective, then both the economic and spatial aspects of planning were missing, and so on.

Such a problem of viewing complex social experiments through the lens of this or the other discipline or thematic area was described splendidly by Albert Einstein in the following lines,

The area of scientific knowledge has been enormously extended, and theoretical knowledge has become vastly more profound in every department of science. But the assimilative power of the human intellect is and remains strictly limited. Hence it was inevitable, that the activity of the individual researcher should be confined to a smaller and smaller section of human knowledge. Worse still, this specialisation makes it increasingly difficult to keep even our general understanding of science as a whole, without which the true spirit of research is inevitably handicapped, in step with

scientific progress. Every serious scientific worker is painfully conscious of this involuntary relegation to an ever-narrowing sphere of knowledge, which threatens to deprive the investigator of his broad horizon and degrades him to the level of a mechanic...It is just as important to make knowledge live and to keep it alive as to solve specific problems.

(Quotes by Albert Einstein, online source)

In the above lines Einstein emphasised exactly those three things which were at the heart of the dilemma I was facing regarding the development of my research methodology - a painful consciousness of the negative effects of ever-narrowing spheres of specialised knowledge, the limited assimilative power of the human intellect and the importance of keeping scientific knowledge *alive* despite such obvious limitations. It is interesting to note, that rather than giving any mechanical solution to the problem by suggesting strategies for inter-disciplinary research, cross-disciplinary research etc., Einstein simply mentions the word 'alive'. Despite, all the genuine need for creating areas of specialisation for managing the vast amounts of knowledge gathered, it was extremely crucial for him to keep this knowledge alive. In order to do so it was necessary to have a 'general understanding of science as whole' and any unreflected 'relegation to an ever-narrowing sphere of knowledge' was equal to making knowledge lifeless.

In which way, then, could I keep the knowledge alive and holistic in my research ? How could I avoid the narrowness of specialisation without sacrificing its depth ? How could the assimilative powers of the researcher's intellect be enhanced so that he or she is capable of undertaking such a holistic investigation and analysis ? These became the prime questions I sought to answer in the process of creating the methodology.

Side by side with this felt need for a holistic methodology was the painful realisation of the inadequateness of the methodology adopted by me in the initial phases of the research. I couldn't help noticing that it had many of the same characteristics for which the conventional participatory development approaches of the 1980s and 1990s were criticised. The salient features of the critique against such approaches, as highlighted by

authors like Hickey and Mohan, could as well be the features of a critique against my first research methodology -

1. An obsession with the 'local' as opposed to wider structures of injustice and oppression.
2. An insufficiently sophisticated understanding of how power operates and is constituted.
3. An inadequate understanding of the role of structure and agency in social change.

(Hickey and Mohan: 2004, p - 11)

Such characteristics of the first methodology were a result of restricting the geographical focus of my analysis to a single slum settlement within the city of Kolkata, and restricting the contextual analysis to just the processes of local government reform and pressing urban issues within the city. Such an approach would certainly have allowed me to have a very in-depth analysis of how the democratised planning structure actually interacts with the lives of the poor citizens of Kolkata, but it wouldn't have helped me to understand how and why such structures came into being in the first place and, therefore, not enable me to answer why exactly do they interact in that particular manner.

Another aspect missing from that methodology was the dimension of time, which was crucial to understanding the processes of the West Bengal experiment from a historical perspective. In order to understand the 'why' and 'how' of things, I had to get a proper understanding of the 'when' of things. The importance of the time dimension is explained in a very simple and clear fashion in the following lines of Einstein,

The non-mathematician is seized by a mysterious shuddering when he hears of 'four dimensional' things, by a feeling not unlike that awakened by thoughts of the occult. And yet, there is no more common-place statement than that the world in which we live is a four-dimensional space-time continuum. Space is a three-dimensional continuum...Similarly, the world of physical phenomena which was briefly called 'world' by Minkowski is naturally four dimensional in the space-time sense. For it is composed of

individual events, each of which is described by four numbers, namely, three space coordinates x,y,z, and the time co-ordinate t.

(Quotes by Albert Einstein, online source)

Yet, despite having an understanding of all these factors, I couldn't radically alter the methodology at that time. The inability to do so was caused by a kind of fear. The limited time available for completing the research, the rigorous requirements of a successful PhD research and the mystic aura of mainstream academia all played a role in my opting for a *safe methodology* aimed at completing the research on time and satisfying the basic requirements of a PhD research, rather than a *correct methodology* aimed at reaching the *truth that mattered* - the knowledge which could inform correct practice.

Interestingly, this inappropriate methodology received its death blow not at the hands of the academic community, which had actually given a very positive feedback to the research proposal I had submitted, but at the hands of those very people who were at the very heart of this research - the citizens of Kolkata. My field work for the research was undertaken in two phases of a few months each, spread over the first two years of the research. During the first phase of my field work, I supplemented my field work in the selected slum with evening walks through the many middle- and lower-middle class neighbourhoods in the dense central parts of Kolkata. This dense clustering of land-uses of all kinds and the hustle and bustle of human activity seemed far more interesting than and a far cry from the well-planned and sterile methodology I had trapped my research process into. It was during one of these walks through the famous *boi-para* or book-neighbourhood (so named, due to the existence of book sellers all over that neighbourhood) of College Square, that I ventured into a neighbourhood called Jalwatoli and met a unique man who played a key role in demolishing the stagnant methodology.

5.2 Mastaan Baba's Katsu

Jalwatoli lies in ward 44 of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation. The neighbourhood is largely inhabited by Muslims and it is an extremely dense and lively area. I found a diverse range of economic activities going on right on or along the narrow streets - tea and snack stalls, sweet shops, shops for kitchen utensils and other house-hold wares, general stores, garment stores etc. As I tried to inquire about the neighbourhood from some by-standers, I was spotted and invited into a tiny room, which functioned as the local office of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), for a conversation. The discussions were mainly in Hindi and Urdu, but the residents could speak Bengali with equal ease. Though originally from the neighbouring state of Bihar, the families of residents I talked to had been living in Kolkata for many generations.

The room was occupied by a college student called Shabbir, two shop-keepers called Israel and Billal and another person who, considering his dense beard, a physique which was thin almost to the point of emaciation and his shabby clothing, could best be described as a combination of a beggar and a *fakir*. This man was lying flat on one bench in the corner of the room when I entered. It did turn out that this man, called Mastaan Baba, was a beggar, albeit a highly respected one in the neighbourhood. In the words of Billal, "*Mastaan Baba has the skill of turning a lifeless mind back to life and vitality.*"

None of these people seemed to be members of the party. Apart from being the local party office, this little room also functioned as an informal meeting place for the residents of the area. On being asked, I gave a short introduction of myself and my research. The responses to my introduction were diverse. Shabbir was listening throughout with great interest. Billal listened throughout with a smile but uttered nothing. Israel went into the offensive.

"What is all this research for ? This is where we were born, this is where we spend each hour of our lives just to earn a decent living for our families, and this is where we will die. That's it! The whole story of our lives! All this urban planning and urban

development are high concepts for people who are sitting high up. Nothing changes or will ever change in our lives.”

Billal and Shabbir nodded in agreement. It was at this moment that Mastaan Baba got up and looked at me with his piercing, bloodshot eyes.

“Pooh ! That’s not why nothing changes here ! Do you know why nothing changes here ? Because the people here have become like vegetables. Their consciousness has fallen asleep...nay...it has died!! They are thirsty but they wouldn’t even open their own mouths to sip the water...you will have to put it using a needle into their bodies. But hey! Just put their hospital beds on fire and you will find them running with the vitality of an Olympic athlete. This is not the life of a human! This is the consciousness of an animal. The only time they truly participate in social activity of any kind is when someone puts their beds on fire !”

The rest of the listeners seemed positively delighted to hear Mastaan Baba speak again and I was amused to hear such a solution to the problems of the poor in Kolkata. Shabbir ordered tea for everyone, and insisted on paying for me, as I was their guest.

After sipping the tea Mastaan Baba continued.

“Ahh! I was dead before I sipped the tea. But now I am back on my feet because of this hot tea. What tea can you researchers bring to this city that it can become alive and fresh? If you can bring such a tea then you will pass...if not, then your research may pass in the university, but you will still fail here !”

As the discussion went on, Mastaan Baba started talking on the topic of citizen participation and communication in planning and development.

“What is development, without power? What is this ‘participation’ of yours without power? Do you have any idea of what is power?”, he boomed.

The force of his voice and the red, piercing eyes peering out of his bony, bearded face quite caught me unawares. As I was struggling to find an equally forceful answer, the Baba continued.

“I will tell you what is power? It is not just about politics and being in power. To have eyes and be able to see...that is also power. To have ears and to be able to hear...that is also power. To be able to hold your tea cup firmly with your five fingers...that is also power !”

The last line was directed at my own fingers, which, I must admit, had slackened a bit surrounded by such forceful pessimism. But Mastaan Baba was relentless.

“Haha...look how you are holding your tea cup ! You are not able to assert your point of view and your reason for being, just as you are not able to hold the tea cup firmly. What change can you possibly bring, being so powerless as you are ? You are part of a game and so is your professor and so is your university - the game of surviving and earning a living. Your professor is earning his living in the university, you are earning your living studying our lives and we will earn our living doing what we do. All this is not about making a change, you are too powerless to bring about that change. Accept it !”

By this time I was getting more and more curious about Mastaan Baba’s thoughts than trying to contradict them. Seeing the researcher from a European university cornered in this way by the street *fakir*, Billal started laughing, *“Haha....I knew from the beginning that nothing comes out of these studies. These studies and researches are all useless things for us”*. Mr. Israel didn’t laugh but agreed with Mr. Billal. Quite surprisingly, these words of contempt brought out a totally unexpected reaction from Mastaan,

“Shut Up you fools!! It is you who are useless. It is you who will remain helplessly in despair, because you have turned into burnt out pessimists. I only wanted to question this young guy and crush his university pride. But I will never become a pessimist!”

Mr. Israel had had enough of Mastaan's dramatics.

"One day I will shoot this Mastaan with a gun !!"

Mastaan thrust out his bony chest and thundered, *"Shoot me and be damned!! Who is afraid to die?"*

All the people in the room laughed out at this serio-comic outburst. As the mood became slightly lighter I asked Mastaan Baba, how he earned his living.

"How does a bird learn to fly? Don't ask me stupid questions!", he replied without batting an eyelid.

Evidently Mastaan Baba was far more interested in talking about power, participation and development, than about himself. As he spoke on, the rest of the people in the room seemed pretty bored and annoyed by his continuous talking. When they saw no chance of Mastaan stopping to talk anytime soon, they started leaving the room one by one.

At the sight of the four men leaving, Mastaan Baba seemed very happy. He said,

"Look !! Five minutes ago, these fools were brooding...they were dead ! But now they are running. One of them will eat, one will drink, one will talk to his wife, will work, or do whatever. Four dead people just got alive !!"

From the point of view of the research process, my encounter with Mastaan Baba, could perhaps be best described by a term from Zen Buddhism called *Katsu*. The word doesn't have any exact meaning. It rather refers to a word that a teacher often shouts out in a loud and sharp manner to startle a distracted or deluded student back into focus and attention. It refers to a process of being stunned out of stupor and into enlightened action.

I never met Mastaan Baba after that day, but he had thrown a clear challenge to me as a researcher. I could also realise that I couldn't hold my ground against him because I was

myself not convinced by the methodology I had adopted. The fears and doubts within me, which I had somehow hidden away inside a safe methodology had not been obliterated and were affecting my ability to be confident and articulate about my research aims and ambitions.

Mastaan Baba's *katsu* encouraged me to completely overhaul my first methodology and also to inquire deeper into the nature of the kind of research through which one could generate knowledge which was relevant enough to inspire social change. It was also interesting for me to note, that in his own language and style, Mastaan Baba was describing the kind of change initiating knowledge that was described by the Marxist geographer David Harvey in his splendid description of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary theory in the social sciences.

The voices of Mastaan, in the streets of Kolkata, and Harvey, in the intellectual/academic world, seemed to merge in the following lines by the renowned geographer ,

‘...there is a clear disparity between the sophisticated theoretical and methodological framework which we are using and our ability to say anything really meaningful about events as they unfold around us. There are too many anomalies between what we purport to explain and manipulate and what actually happens...There is an ecological problem, an urban problem, an international trade problem, and yet we seem incapable of saying anything of depth or profundity about any of them. When we do say something, it appears trite and rather ludicrous.’ (Harvey: 1988, p - 128)

5.3 Revolutionary and Counter-revolutionary Theory

In his well known book *Social Justice and the City* Harvey provides a very interesting critique of Kuhn's analysis of revolutions in the natural sciences. According to Kuhn, the practice of 'normal science', over time, gives rise to certain anomalies i.e. 'observations or paradoxes which cannot be resolved within an existing paradigm...(a paradigm being a set of concepts, categories, relationships and methods which are generally accepted throughout a given community at a given point of time)' (Harvey: 1988, p - 120). If these anomalies persist, then they become the focus of increasing

attention and develop into a full fledged crisis. The attempts to sort out these anomalies finally gives rise to a whole new set of concepts, categories, relationships and methods 'which successfully both resolves the existing dilemmas and incorporates the worthwhile aspects of the old paradigm (ibid.).

According to Harvey, Kuhn's analysis fails to generate satisfactory answers to the following two questions -

1. How do anomalies rise in the first place, and how, once they have risen, do they generate a crisis ?
2. In which way does a new paradigm get accepted ?

(ibid., p - 121)

Harvey himself provides an answer to the first question by distinguishing between significant and insignificant anomalies. He gives the example of Newtonian physics and writes that although 'it was known for many years that the orbit of Mercury did not fit Newton's calculations, yet this anomaly was insignificant because it had no relevance to the use of the Newtonian system in an everyday context.' (ibid., p - 121). However, if anomalies had risen in activities of great practical importance e.g. bridge construction, then such anomalies would be deemed highly significant. Regarding the second question Kuhn explains, that the acceptance of a new paradigm is 'not a matter of logic', but rather, 'involves a leap of faith' (ibid., p - 121).

Harvey is not satisfied with such an explanation and writes that,

'The central criticism of Kuhn, which these two cases point out, is his abstraction of scientific knowledge from its materialistic base. Kuhn provides an *idealist's* interpretation of scientific advancement, while it is clear that scientific thought is fundamentally geared to material activities.' (ibid.)

Material activities involve the understanding, control and management of nature in the interests of mankind. However, Harvey writes that 'at this juncture, we are forced to add

a further perspective because “the interest of man” is subject to a variety of interpretations, depending on which sector of society we are thinking of.’ (ibid.)

‘The coalition of industry and government heavily directs scientific activity. Consequently, “manipulation and control” means manipulation and control in the interests of particular groups in society (specifically, the industrial and financial community together with the middle class) rather than the interests of society as a whole. With these perspectives we are better able to understand the general thrust of scientific advancement hidden within the recurrent scientific revolutions which Kuhn has so perceptively described.’ (ibid., p - 122)

Harvey undertakes a Marxist, class-based analysis of revolutions in the natural and social sciences and agrees with Marx’s and Engel’s position, as put forward in *The German Ideology*, ‘that the ruling class produces the ruling ideas of society’ (ibid., p - 147). This production of the ruling ideas is not a simple or pre-meditated process. Harvey writes, that ‘there is no necessary plot involved (although the control of the media, indoctrination and propaganda often suppress potentially revolutionary ideas)’ and that ‘the “hidden hand” is fairly effective at ruling our thoughts as well as our economy.’ (ibid.). The production of ideas extends itself to the production of knowledge in mainstream academia also.

‘The whole organisation of knowledge (the organisation of the learning process, the structure of the educational system, the division of knowledge into distinctive disciplines, and so on) also reflects the ruling interests in society, for these are all part of the process which contributes to the reproduction of society. Graduate students are thus “produced”, as are geographers, planners, chemists, doctors, teachers, and the like...This means that *in general* all knowledge is suffused with apologetics for the *status quo* and with counter-revolutionary formulations which function to frustrate the investigation of alternatives. It also means that the organisation of knowledge (including disciplinary divisions) has an inherently *status quo* or counter-revolutionary posture. The pursuit of knowledge and the organisation and dissemination of it are inherently conservative.’ (ibid.)

This is not to say that radical and revolutionary turns in thought do not occur within the confines of the academia. In fact, such revolutions in thought are ‘necessary to maintain manipulation and control under changed circumstances for those in control of the means of production.’ (ibid., p - 148). To illustrate this point Harvey gives the example of the Keynesian revolution, which became necessary, because the *status quo* theories were failing completely to grapple with the crisis generated by the great depression. It was revolutionary in the sense that ‘it completely threw overboard the theoretical basis of Classical (Bourgeois) Political economy.’ (Namboodiripad: 1966, p - 87). However, in the real sense, it was no revolution at all, as ‘it did not touch the essentials of the capitalist system in whose defence bourgeois political economy had originally risen.’ (ibid.). From this illustration of the Keynesian revolution, Harvey concludes, that ‘revolutions in thought are thus possible and necessary without real revolutions in social practice.’ (Harvey: 1988, p - 148).

Seen from this perspective, the revolutionary nature of a theory can be truly judged only from the influence it has on revolutionising practice. Harvey writes, that ‘if such revolutions in thought are to be anything more than adaptations whereby those in control in society perpetuate their ability to control, they must be viewed as the beginning of a struggle to bring into being a more complete revolutionary theory which can be validated through revolutionary practice.’ (ibid.). Namboodiripad expresses a very similar view in his analysis of the particular example referred to by Harvey,

‘The ‘Keynesian Revolution’ in bourgeois Political economy, and the policy of state intervention and planning which follow there from, are therefore neither progressive or democratic, nor reactionary, in themselves. The whole thing depends on how far the progressive democratic forces are able to use them in order to strengthen the positive features and undermine the negative features of the bourgeois character of state intervention and control enjoined on the economy by the Keynesians.’ (Namboodiripad: 1966, p 92)

Harvey then goes on to elaborate the main features of status quo, counter-revolutionary and revolutionary theory.

(i) *Status quo theory* - a theory which is grounded in the reality it seeks to portray and which accurately represents the phenomena with which it deals at a particular moment in time. But, by having ascribed a universal truth status to the propositions it contains, it is capable of yielding prescriptive policies which can result only in the perpetuation of the *status quo*.

(ii) *Counter-revolutionary theory* - a theory which may or may not *appear* grounded in the reality it seeks to portray, but which obscures, be-clouds and generally obfuscates (either by design or accident) our ability to comprehend that reality. Such a theory is usually attractive and hence gains currency because it is logically coherent, easily manipulable, aesthetically appealing, or just new and fashionable...A counter-revolutionary theory automatically frustrates either the creation or the implementation of viable policies. It is therefore a perfect device for non-decision making, for it diverts attention from fundamental issues to superficial or non-existent issues.

(iii) *Revolutionary theory* - a theory which is firmly grounded in the reality it seeks to represent, the individual propositions of which are ascribed a contingent truth status (they are in the process of becoming true or false depending upon the circumstances). A revolutionary theory is dialectically formulated and it can encompass conflict and contradiction within itself. A revolutionary theory offers real choices for future moments in the social process by identifying immanent choices in an existing situation. ..A revolutionary theory consequently holds out the prospect for creating truth rather than finding it.

(Harvey: 1988, pp 150-151)

From a Marxist view-point, which Harvey himself subscribes to, it is only the third kind, which would be considered as a theory at all. This view-point is further clarified in the article *On Practice* written by Mao Tse-tung in 1937.

‘Marxism emphasizes the importance of theory precisely and only because it can guide action. If we have a correct theory but merely prate about it, pigeonhole it and do not put it into practice, then that theory, however good, is of no significance. Knowledge

begins with practice, and theoretical knowledge is acquired through practice and must then return to practice.’ (Mao Tse-tung: 1937, online source).

Seen in the context of this conflict between genuinely revolutionary and counter-revolutionary theory in the social sciences, the trend towards over specialisation of knowledge and its confinement to ever narrowing spheres, so lamented by Einstein, starts playing a deliberate counter-revolutionary role rather than just being a natural consequence of the vastness of hitherto accumulated knowledge. This counter-revolutionary role is explained by Harvey,

‘...it has to be first realised that *all* disciplinary boundaries are themselves counter-revolutionary. The division of knowledge allows the body politic to divide and rule as far as the application of knowledge is concerned. It also renders much of the academic community impotent, for it traps us into thinking that we can understand reality only through a synthesis of what each discipline has to say about its particular segment and we quickly shrink away from what is so clearly an impossible task. Inter-, multi-, and cross-disciplinary studies are potentially revolutionary, but never really succeed - the odds against them working are just too great.’ (Harvey: 1988, p - 149)

As a way out of such a state of affairs, Harvey writes, that ‘reality, has therefore, to be approached directly rather than through the formulations of academic disciplines.’ (ibid.).

5.4 Dialectical Materialism and the Holistic Methodology

Harvey’s description of revolutionary theory clearly highlighted the need for it to be formulated dialectically through a process of approaching reality directly. Such a methodology would necessarily acquire the characteristics of dialectical materialism. In classical Marxist literature, the dialectical mode of reasoning is distinguished from the metaphysical mode of reasoning. Engels draws a connection between the negative effects of over-specialisation of knowledge and the metaphysical mode of reasoning. Describing the tendency of specialisation in a very similar language as Einstein’s and Harvey’s, Engels wrote that ‘the analysis of Nature into its individual parts, the grouping of the different natural processes and objects in definite classes’ had ‘also left

us a legacy of observing natural objects and processes in isolation, apart from their connection with the vast whole; of observing them in repose, not in motion...in their death, not in their life.’ (Engels: 1880). However, he went a step further to write that ‘when this way of looking at things was transferred by Bacon and Locke from natural science to philosophy, it begot the narrow, metaphysical mode of thought.’ (ibid.).

The metaphysical mode of thought described by Engels has exactly the same characteristics, which, according to Harvey, prevents the inter-, multi- and cross-disciplinary experiments in mainstream academia to generate revolutionary theory - a tendency to view things in isolation, one after the other and apart from each other. Engels wrote, that to a metaphysician, ‘a thing either exists or does not exist; a thing cannot at the same time be itself and something else.’ (ibid.). According to Engels, such a manner of viewing the world was bound to be a failure as it negated the very nature of nature itself.

‘All nature, from the smallest thing to the biggest, from grains of sand to suns, from protista to man, has its existence in eternal coming into being and going out of being, in a ceaseless flux, in unresting motion and change.’ (Engels: 1883, online source)

The dialectical mode of thinking and reasoning was, of course, not an invention of Marx and Engels. The philosophers of most ancient and medieval civilisations had used it. According to Engels, the ancient Greek philosophers, in general, and philosophers like Aristotle and Heraclitus, in particular were ‘born natural dialecticians’ (Engels: 1880, online source). The word itself comes from the Greek word *dialego* (to discourse, debate) which ‘was the art of arriving at the truth by disclosing the contradictions in the argument of an opponent and overcoming these contradictions.’ (Stalin: 1938, online source). Similarly, in the case of Indian philosophy, the almost forgotten and lost writings of the *lokayatikas* (ancient Indian materialists), the concept of the trinity (co-existence of creation, preservation and destruction symbolised by the three gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva respectively) and even the concept of relative-idealism (the world is essentially an illusion but it is also real as long as ignorance remains) of the non-dualistic school of Vedanta had strands of dialectical thought. In the far east, the

writings of Japanese philosopher Takuan Soho (1573-1645) were highly dialectical. This is how Takuan described the notion of *immovable wisdom* :

‘Although wisdom is called immovable, this does not signify any insentient thing, like wood or stone. It moves as the mind is wont to move: forward or back, to the left, to the right, in the ten directions and to the eight points; and the mind that does not stop at all is called *immovable wisdom*.’ (Takuan Soho, translated by William Scott Wilson, online source)

The contribution of Marx and Engels was to separate the dialectical mode of reasoning from the idealistic world view that it had been associated with in the past, and base it on a materialistic world view. According to Marxist dialectics the causes for the emergence and disappearance of human ideas was not to be sought in the ideas themselves, but in the material conditions which gave rise to them. The recognition of movement, contradictions, continuous change are at the heart of dialectics. Lenin wrote that,

‘Dialectics is the teaching which shows how opposites can be and how they happen to be (how they become) identical, - under what conditions they are identical, becoming transformed into one another, why the human mind should grasp these opposites not as dead, rigid, but as living, conditional, mobile, becoming transformed into one another.’ (Lenin: 1914, online source).

In his brilliant article titled *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* Joseph Stalin listed the essential characteristics of Marxist dialectical materialism which I attempted to integrate into my revised research methodology. These characteristics have been listed below.

(Stalin: 1938, online source)

1. Nature Connected and Determined - The first characteristic of the dialectical method is the viewing of nature not as an ‘accidental agglomeration of things’ which are ‘unconnected with, isolated from and independent of each other’, but as a ‘connected and integral whole.’ (Stalin: 1938, online source). Stalin wrote that a phenomenon can

only be understood completely and correctly if it is seen in the context of the conditions that it is surrounded by and connected to.

2. Nature is in a State of Continuous Motion and Change - The second important characteristic builds on the first one. Dialectics views nature not only as a connected and integral whole but also as an entity which is in a 'state of continuous movement and change, of continuous renewal and development, where something is always arising and developing, and something always disintegrating and dying away.' (ibid.).

This feature has very significant consequences for the generation of revolutionary theory, which can lead to social change, as it urges us to 'not base our orientation on the strata of society which are no longer developing, even though they at present constitute the predominant force, but on those strata which are developing and have a future before them, even though they at present do not constitute the predominant force.' (ibid.)

3. Natural Quantitative Change leads to Qualitative Change - The dialectical method views development as a process 'which passes from insignificant and imperceptible quantitative changes ...to qualitative changes; a development in which the qualitative changes occur not gradually, but rapidly and abruptly, taking the form of a leap from one state to another; they occur not accidentally but as the result of an accumulation of imperceptible and gradual quantitative changes.' (ibid.)

4. Contradictions inherent in Nature - 'Contrary to metaphysics, dialectics holds that internal contradictions are inherent in all things and phenomena of nature, for they all have their negative and positive sides, a past and a future, something dying away and something developing; and that the struggle between the opposites, the struggle between the old and the new, between that which is dying away and that which is being born, between that which is disappearing and that which is developing, constitutes the internal content of the process of development, the internal content of the transformation of quantitative changes into the qualitative changes.' (ibid.)

These above four characteristics were further condensed by Stalin by writing that ‘everything depends on the conditions, time and place.’ (ibid.)

5.5 Specific Modifications to the Research Methodology

The first visible modification to the initial research methodology was in the form of a move away from the ‘obsession with the local’. An investigation focussed on just one slum neighbourhood, no matter how deep would not give me a balanced understanding of the overall nature of the West Bengal experiment. Instead of that the methodology was widened to undertake a historical analysis of the West Bengal experiment at three geographical levels -

1. The State Level - The investigations and analyses at this level would focus on the effects of democratic decentralisation on the planning and development process in the rural areas of West Bengal. To include this level becomes crucial because the alterations to the planning structure in Kolkata were done in the context of the combined processes of decentralisation and land-reform in the countryside. Moreover, as the countryside constitutes the larger part of the state both in terms of the general population and the below poverty line population, the performance of the democratisation experiment in the city is bound to be dependent on and connected to the performance of the experiment in the countryside.

2. The City Level - The investigations and analyses at this level would focus on the effects of the West Bengal experiment on the democratisation of the planning structure in the city of Kolkata.

3. The local (sub-city level) - The investigations and analyses at this level would focus on the manner in which these macro-processes of structural and institutional change were getting manifested at the local level in the planning and implementation of large development projects in Kolkata.

Such a historical dialectical method seemed to be the only method by which I could properly understand the particular attributes of the democratic decentralisation

experiment in West Bengal. Simply put, all that I really needed to do was to investigate the conditions in which a particular event happened, the location where it happened and the particular point of time in which it happened in order to get the holistic understanding that I needed.

The data for the first two levels was to be collected from a variety of secondary sources - historical accounts, government reports and documents, media reports, reminiscences of professionals involved in the decentralisation experiment and the research undertaken on the West Bengal experiment within various disciplinary areas. For the third level, I selected the case of a cluster of highly controversial environmental improvement projects being undertaken on and along a prominent inland waterway system in the city, which put the achievements and ambitions of the democratic planning structure in Kolkata to the severest test. The specific methods used in the study and analysis of this local level case shall be elaborated in the chapter devoted to it.

Part IV

**Historical and
Geographical
Context**

6. The Quest for Decentralisation in India

Urban planning in India has been known to be top-down, bureaucratic and centralised in nature, and generally exclusive of the socially and economically poorer sections of society. This condition afflicts the national economic planning process too. According to Annapurna Shaw, 'both economic planning and urban planning, was essentially a top-down process, bureaucratically implemented' (Shaw : 2004, p - 5), and the evolution of urban planning has 'invariably excluded the poor from adequate access to basic civic amenities.' (ibid., p - 11).

The roots of both modern urban planning and modern local government lay in the colonial period. To understand why the urban planning and development process is so exclusive of the poor in our cities it is important to have a certain understanding of how this process came into being and evolved over time. While undertaking an analysis of the planned development process in India, the noted political activist and theoretician E.M.S. Namboodiripad had written, that answers to the most critical questions regarding the short-comings of economic planning in India 'cannot be found in the realm of economics pure and simple...the basic issues involved in answering them are as much political as economic.' (Namboodiripad: 1966, p - 274) In the same manner I would like to say that the answers to the most critical questions that plague the urban planning and development processes are not to be found in the realm of urban planning - pure and simple. The causes are an amalgamation of historical, cultural, political and economic factors, and a brief elaboration of these is essential to put the specific theories that this research uses, in context.

6.1 Society and Local Government in Pre-British India

Modern local government in India started before modern urban planning. Therefore this historical account has to start with an account of those institutions. Although, modern local government as we find it today was a creation of the British, India had her own indigenous system of local government in the villages in the pre-British times. In

traditional Indian society it was the village which was the unit of social and economic life. The indigenous system of local government existing in the Indian villages was called the panchayat. The popular translation of 'panchayat' is a council of five village elders. But the literal translation would, most probably be 'what the five believe in'.¹

The panchayat 'looked after the common affairs of the villagers without interference from outside.' (Mathew: 2004, p - 7). This local government system has often been romantically described as 'little republics', 'idyllic republics' etc.

According to Charles Metcalfe, the acting governor general of India in 1830,

The village communities are little republics, having nearly everything they can want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down; revolution succeeds revolution...but the village community remains the same... This union of the village communities, each one forming a separate little state in itself, has, I conceive, contributed more than any other cause to the preservation of the peoples of India, through all the revolutions and changes which they have suffered. It is in a high degree conducive to their happiness, and to the enjoyment of a great portion of freedom and independence. I wish, therefore, that the village constitutions may never be disturbed and I dread everything that has a tendency to break them up. (Kalyanaraman: 2003, online source)

The account of Metcalfe is very interesting, and if it is true then one has to accept that India had a very strong tradition of democratic self-government, which put the people at the local level at the centre. It was essentially a bottom-bottom approach if not a bottom-up one. Due to some reason the Indian village communities clung to their philosophy of local self-government, no matter what kind of political change and

¹ In his analysis of ancient Indian materialism the historian Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya had written that the word 'Lokayata' is actually formed by joining two words - Lok, which means 'people' and ayatah, which means 'believe in'. I have used the same method to divide the word panchayat into 'panch' and 'ayatah'. (Chattopadhyaya: 1978)

turmoil affected the Government at the national level. How can one explain the transformation of such passionate and eternal champions of the 'little republics' into people, who, on the eve of their political independence from colonial rule ended up adopting a Constitution, which gave absolutely no recognition to the local government institutions as the third tier of government ? Either, something happened during the colonial rule that totally wiped out not only the institutions of local democracy but also the idea of local democracy from the minds of the Indian people, or, there must be some inconsistency in Metcalfe's account of the 'little republics'. Metcalfe's lines are often quoted in any description of the traditional Indian panchayats, but there have been many skeptics also. According to Hugh Tinker, Metcalfe based his comment on his observations of a very limited geographical area in north India at a particular period of time.

From his Delhi experiences, Metcalfe drew his famous picture of the 'little republics' which has often been loosely applied to the whole of the sub-continent; had Metcalfe's service lain some leagues to the east, he would have written otherwise. (Tinker : 1968, p - 21)

According to A.S. Altekar, 'observations made by early writers like Metcalfe and Maine about Indian village community being unchanging have to be accepted with great reservations.' (quoted in Desai : 1959, p - 215, quoted in Namboodiripad : 1966, p - 328). He goes on to write, that 'in the Vedic times it appears probable enough that each village community was an independent republic, but throughout the historical period, the community was always subordinate to and constituent of larger political units.' (ibid., p - 329). However, the most important finding of Altekar was regarding the appropriateness of calling these pre-British village communities 'republics'. He writes -

The word republic again is very unfortunate; it conveys notions of democracy, of equal rights, of general election and so on. Nothing of this kind took place in our village communities. There was no idea of equality. We in modern times should never forget that democratic notions were never prevalent in our village communities. (ibid.)

These findings raise serious questions regarding the ‘democratic’ nature of the village governments in pre-British India. Even the authors who wished to revive the ancient local government institutions of the villages in the context of post-colonial India and couldn’t come to disregard the findings of Metcalfe, had to admit that although these institutions ‘were vibrant with energy in the early stages’, ‘in later times...the essential changes were not brought about in their pattern in accordance with changed circumstances, social, political and economic, and they tended to become stationary and vegetative, giving the society an economic basis akin to feudalism...and this timeless base of Indian economic life received the mortal shock of its life when the British came.’ (Malaviya, p - 95, quoted in Namboodiripad : 1966, p - 326)

Whatever the true causes, the fact remains that the local government system introduced by the British in India, was a clear break from the indigenous system that she had earlier. Regarding this radical break with the indigenous system in the creation of modern local government in India by the British, two authors give two different reasons. According to Tinker, the period of political and military chaos that followed the fall of the Mughal empire and continued till the restoration of political control by the British, the new rulers of India didn’t get the opportunity to fully appreciate and incorporate the useful features of the indigenous local government institutions into the modern system.

Throughout the wide areas of India a period of anarchy or military despotism intervened between the breakdown of Mughal rule and annexation by the East India Company. In this interregnum the ties of the social framework were loosened, and in many places local institutions had been perverted or sapped before British officials had any opportunity to assess their value. In Bengal almost all traces of village autonomy were obliterated; in the ceded districts of Oudh only the shell remained of the centralised municipal organisation of the Mughal times. (Tinker: 1968, p - 15)

George Mathew added that, ‘the role the village institution like panchayat was playing in local governance was found to be incongruous in the context of the new system of law, administrative structures, judiciary and other public institutions introduced by the British, especially after the establishment of the direct rule of the crown in 1858.’

(Mathew: 2004, p - 7). And yet it was very important for the colonial rulers to manage and administer the affairs of the innumerable villages of the country, as they ‘provided the supply base of their trade and commerce.’ (ibid.)

6.2 The Rise of the Efficiency-Democracy Conflict

The first local government institution created by the British in India, was the municipal corporation of Madras (now Chennai) in 1688. By 1762 municipal corporations were set up in the cities of Bombay (now Mumbai) and Calcutta (now Kolkata). According to Mathew, ‘these institutions were no doubt ‘local’ in nature, but they were by no means institutions of ‘self-government’, as the committees consisted of official and non-official members, the latter being nominated and endorsed with limited powers.’ (Mathew: 2004, p - 7). Moreover, the emphasis was on the creation of urban local governments rather than rural ones. This was in line with the priorities of the colonial administration.

In fact, a constant conflict between the proponents of local democracy and the proponents of administrative efficiency became a defining feature of the evolution of modern local government in India. This conflict is a very important one as in this historical process one can find the roots of the top-down, bureaucratic system of planning and development that one finds in the country today. Though, modern local government institutions had seen the light of day long before the late 19th century, it was in this period that a resolution was passed which gave ‘for the first time a comprehensive theory of local government.’ (ibid.). The resolution was officially known as the ‘Resolution on Local Self-Government of 18 May, 1882’, and unofficially as the resolution of Lord Ripon, who was the Viceroy of India during that period.

Describing the kind of person that Lord Ripon was, Hugh Tinker writes that he ‘has an honoured place in Indian affections as almost the only viceroy who did not automatically assume that an Olympian hauteur and omniscience was an essential part of his office’ and ‘brought an open liberal mind to political and social questions instead of the ‘two nations’ attitude which was an almost inevitable component of British-Indian relationships in the late nineteenth century.’ (Tinker: 1968, p - 43)

Based on his experience from an ‘unusually full public life in England’, Ripon argued that ‘if local government is to have any vitality, then it should evolve out of local circumstances; if it has to be created artificially, at least it should be planned in detail by local administrators, and not to be imposed ready-made by the central government.’ (ibid.) The political reasoning of Ripon was very clearly spelt out in the various paragraphs of the resolution. Paragraph five of the resolution read as follows,

It is not primarily with a view to improvement in administration that this measure is put forward and supported. It is chiefly designed as an instrument of political and popular education. (ibid., p 44)

In framing the resolution Ripon also expressed his concern about an ‘apparent confusion by British administrators in India of ‘means’ and ‘ends’, producing a cult of efficiency for its own sake.’ (ibid., p - 45). This shows that already by the late 19th century the tendency of focussing on efficiency at the cost of democracy was becoming strong in India. Tinker goes as far as to say that ‘in the India of 1882, the Viceroy was almost alone in his liberalism’, as the ‘vast majority of local Anglo-Indian officials were conservatives, supporters of ‘paternal’ administration’ (ibid., p - 43). However, it would be seen that the causes for the bias towards efficiency were more complex than the conservatism of local Anglo-Indian officials.

Added to this genuine interest in creating vibrant local self-government in India was the pragmatism expressed in the sixth paragraph of the resolution, which read as follows: ‘As education advances there is rapidly growing up all over the country an intelligent class of public spirited men who it is not only bad policy, but sheer waste of power to fail to utilise.’ (ibid., p - 44). It was in this regard, that O’ Malley found a ‘remarkable similarity in the language used by Lord Ripon and A.O. Hume².’ (O’Malley : 1941, p - 745-6, quoted in ibid.)

²Allan Octavian Hume was a retired Indian official, who spent a huge amount of energy and resource to encourage and organise Indians to express their national feelings and views politically and was the founder of the Indian National Congress, which, in course of time, became the strongest political organisation fighting British imperialism in India

Along with municipal boards in the cities, rural boards were to be set up in the villages. This was another unique development considering the times, as the decision to set up a network of rural local bodies was taken by Ripon six years before there were any rural councils in England (ibid., p - 52). Ripon was keen 'to revive and extend the indigenous system of the country' and 'to make full use of what remains of the village system.' (Wolf : 1921, p - 100, quoted in Tinker: 1966, p - 45)

It was further provided in the resolution that all local government boards must contain a two-third majority of non-officials, and these members must be elected whenever possible. Regarding regular elections, it was provided that they were to 'begin immediately in more progressive towns; gradually and by informal experimental methods in smaller towns and the countryside.' (ibid., p - 52).

Ripon's reforms were heartily welcomed by certain British governors and all the prominent political leaders among the Indians at the time, such as Surendranath Bannerjee, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Pheroze Shah Mehta and Raja Peari Mohan Mukherjee (ibid., p - 58). However, the governors of most of the provinces in India remained strongly against the liberal principles of Ripon and the Government of India on the whole was reluctant to let the resolution be a complete success in reality. According to Tinker, Ripon's own personality was partly responsible for the failures too. Describing the individual person, he wrote, that 'a wide experience of affairs, sensitivity and intellect, were unfortunately accompanied by a lack of stamina, an inner uncertainty, which prevented Ripon from fully carrying through the large schemes of his imagination.' (ibid., p - 43). Apart from that, the elective system failed to become widespread. The percentage of people who could vote in municipal elections was 'less than two per cent' in most provinces with the exception of the Bengal province, where it was 'perhaps five percent' but embraced mostly the '*bhadralok* or middle and clerical classes.' (ibid., p - 50).

As is often the case with local governments, the most effective check on the enthusiasm of the small minority of progressive local government bodies was kept through financial constraints. Tinker writes, that ‘the prices of export goods had fallen in the 1870’s, the value of silver sank steadily, and the Indian national income fell to a low level, while the expenses of the Government of India were constantly rising; annexation of Upper Burma in 1886 proved a particularly costly luxury.’ (ibid., p - 59). Here was another splendid example of how global trends and events and the imperial designs of the British empire had direct consequence on the development and strengthening of local democratic institutions.

The influence of officials remained strong and kept on growing. This was the time, when instead of allowing the local governments to become deliberative and regulatory bodies taking decisions on the welfare and development of the local areas, a ‘new hierarchy’ of ‘experts’ was allowed to grow and become powerful. These were the bureaucratic line departments and offices of the Government, such as ‘the Public Works Department, the Education Department, the Sanitary Commissioner, the Accountant General’ etc. ‘In time all came to have a say in local government affairs. As a result, a rigid system of supervision was created, which ran from the smallest municipality up to the Secretary of State.’ (ibid.)

Ripon’s idea was to provide a space for the ‘western-educated middle classes’ of India in the Government, but the rise of the non-officials in the local government ‘was continually deplored by officials’ (ibid., p - 60). The conflict between the ideas of efficiency and ideas of local democracy was illustrated very clearly by Tinker through an example from the province of Bengal, which was progressive enough to have municipal boards which ‘ would reject suggestions from the District Magistrate as a matter of course’ (ibid., p - 67). Even in this progressive province, in 1892,

The Bengal Government put forward a scheme to restrict the powers of municipal boards, to tighten government control, and to raise the qualifications for the franchise. A considerable campaign was waged, led by S.N. Bannerjee, in which the political associations and newspapers of the province joined in unison. It was said that the new

proposals would reduce the electorate to about 0.3 per cent and disfranchise the great majority of Muslims. The proposals were completely re-written as a result of the protest. (ibid.)

The grand ideas of reform, therefore, largely failed to have a solid impact on the reality on the ground. If it was so difficult for the elite of the city to participate in the decision making process, then one can well imagine the impossibility of participation on the part of the poorer sections of the population. Following the Ripon resolution, a Royal Commission on Decentralisation was set up, which again stressed on the need to involve the local people in the 'local tasks of the administration' (Mathew : 2004, p - 7). These findings were taken up seriously in the Constitutional reforms of 1918.

The activities of the liberal and progressive elements of the Government of British India to revive the local governments of the country, have to be seen in the light of the activities of the leaders of the national movement that had been growing steadily since the formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885. The Lahore session of the Indian National Congress in 1909 articulated the interests of the growing national movement of India in matters concerning local government. Gandhi tried to evoke the memory of the independent village republics of India and turn it into an ideal for the freedom struggle. I have written about the debates regarding the democratic nature of pre-British Indian villages earlier in this chapter. Though, the historical research done in modern times sheds a much clearer light on the exact nature of rural society in pre-British times, in the early 20th century the context was totally different. It was important for the politically active Indians to show that Indians were as capable as the British in running a democratic government of their own and take charge of their country. To do this they also tried to show that, in fact, such systems had been prevalent in Indian villages since ancient times.

Very crucial to this struggle was the publication of two books by eminent Indian historians of the time. These were '*Hindu Polity*' by Jayaswal and '*Corporate Life in Ancient India*' by Majumdar. The former was published in 1924 and the latter in 1919. Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, one of the most eminent modern historians of India wrote

that ‘these dates are important. For there was something more than mere historical enthusiasm behind these works.’ (Chattopadhyaya : 1978, p - 151)

According to Dange,

The celebrated volume of Jayaswal on *Hindu-Polity* was written with the motive to refute the assertion of the British ruling class that India was unfit for parliamentary democratic institutions, by showing that India had republics and ‘self-governing democracies’. (Dange : 1949, p - 3, quoted in Chattopadhyaya : 1978, p - 151)

The important political consciousness and motive behind this work of history was confirmed when the author Jayaswal himself ‘noted with gratification’ that,

The book was cited by Sir Sankaran Nair from the manuscript in his note to the *Government of India’s First Despatch on Constitutional Reforms* (dated 5th March, 1919). (Chattopadhyaya : 1978, p - 151)

Describing the relevance of the book for the political movement for freedom Chattopadhyaya wrote,

It is no wonder, therefore, that the book should show tremendous enthusiasm to discover in the ancient *ganas* (tribal councils of ancient India) such minute details of parliamentary democracy as seats in the republics, motion, resolution, quorum, whips, votes, votes of absentees, ballot voting, procedure of majority, principle of referendum, basis of franchise and citizenship, judicial representation and laws of republics, etc., etc.; in short, practically everything that our national movement was trying to achieve in those days. (ibid.)

While accepting the role and value of the books as ideological weapons for the freedom struggle of India, Chattopadhyaya refuted the conclusions made by Jayaswal. But the examples of these two books shows the range of inter-disciplinary activities that were going on and which led to the articulation of the ideal of *Gram Swaraj* (village self-rule)

as the national ideal championed by the Indian National Congress under the leadership of Gandhi.

The struggle bore fruit after the first world war, when, under the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms, the subject of 'local self government' was transferred to the Indian ministries in the various provinces of the country. Yet, despite all these efforts,

The local bodies at the end of the colonial rule were characterised by low resource capability, little functional devolution other than civic duties, excessive control by the bureaucracy and over-representation of the landed gentry and upper castes. (Isaac : 2000, p - 5)

Isaac's observation is supported by Mathew according to whom, despite the lofty claims made by the British about the introduction of modern local government institutions to India, 'the Indian leaders held the same low esteem', as 'the local bodies had to work under the surveillance of the bureaucracy and were denied the administrative and financial resources that jeopardized their effectiveness.' (ibid., p - 8)

Mathew described the situation as 'two local governments' existing at the local level, where, ideally, the elected local self-government should have been the sole responsible government. Instead, 'in reality, only weak bodies with representatives drawn from restricted electorates were superimposed upon an essentially bureaucratic structure of district administration.' (ibid.).

This system of 'two local governments' dominated by the bureaucracy rather than the elected council of the local people continued well into politically independent India too. India won political freedom from British rule in 1947, and became a republic in 1950. It was in the same year that it adopted the Constitution of India, which was 'oriented towards a strong centre and weak subordinate states' (Bhattacharya: 1992, quoted in ibid.). According to noted economist Arun Ghosh, although 'they (the founding fathers of India's Constitution) were conscious of the wide diversity - in matters of resource endowment, levels of living, literacy and education, and indeed even in regard to

cultural mores - in the different regions and states, which suggested a Federal Constitution for India', the reason that lay behind opting for a 'union of states' rather than a 'federal entity' was 'the trauma of India's Partition embedded in their consciousness.' (Ghosh: 2001).

Indeed, a perusal of the debates on the draft Constitution makes it clear that the founding fathers of the Constitution resiled from opting for a Federal Constitution only because Partition made them concerned about the danger of a further dismemberment under a Federal Constitution. Some part of the wide powers of the Centre is obviously the result of that apprehension. (ibid.)

6.3 Centralisation Intensifies - Local (non) Government in Independent India

Though India achieved political independence on 15th August, 1947, in many ways the influence of colonial times continued unabated. According to historian Suranjan Das,

It can be reasonably argued that despite certain obvious outward changes in forms of governance or employment of new political hyperbolas, the Indian Government under Jawaharlal Nehru represented in many respects a continuation of British attitudes both in form and substance. (Das: 2001, p - 7)

Instead of developing an alternate state which would be a clear break from the repressive apparatus built up by the British imperialists the new rulers of India largely kept the colonial system intact. It was due to this reason, that, despite all the socialist intentions and rhetoric of Prime Minister Nehru, the Indian people were 'confronted with the same civil servants, the same policemen who treated them with the same scorn and brutality as under British rule.' (ibid.)

N.K. Bose explained the character of the independent government in the following words,

Its idea became, not to disrupt the status quo, but to build up its 'socialist pattern' of economy on the foundation of the existing order without a violent disturbance...In this prosaic task of reformation, the Congress Party...had tried to convert every problem of national reconstruction into an administrative problem. (Bose: 1958, quoted in Das: 2001, p - 7)

The consequence of this legacy of bureaucratic centralisation in the colonial period was summarised by Franke and Isaac.

Indian democracy is highly centralised. The Union Government holds most of the powers and the rights of the federated states are very weak...even its most ardent admirers have described the Constitution as quasi-federal...Until recently, it was not mandatory to elect office holders below the state level at district, sub-district, village or municipal levels. In other words, Indian democracy was a parliamentary system at the central and state levels with bureaucratic governance at the lower levels. This current power pyramid needs to be reversed. (Franke and Isaac: 2000, p - 2)

It is an ironic situation that the party which was in the forefront of the freedom struggle of India and which raised the slogan of 'village self-rule' under the leadership of Gandhi, would become the most steadfast champion of centralised governance and planning after the goal of political independence had been achieved. Despite Gandhi's efforts and interventions the authors of the Indian Constitution were hesitant to devolve powers to lower tiers of the government and absolutely refused to give constitutional recognition to the local government.

Franke and Isaac gives a list of five reasons that explains the continued tendency towards centralisation in independent India.

A number of factors have contributed to the highly centralised state structures in the Third World, even among those nations like India that have a track record of representative democracy. Firstly, colonialism bequeathed a historical legacy of centralised government. Secondly, social and economic crises in these countries during the post-colonial period have been powerful stimuli for centralisation. Thirdly, powerful

political and bureaucratic vested interests have consciously thwarted attempts to decentralise. Fourthly, successful decentralisation requires certain pre-conditions such as an appropriate legal and administrative framework, a local information base, capacity-building programmes and civic culture. To make the fulfilment of these preconditions a requirement for introducing democratic decentralisation can become an argument for postponing devolution of powers to the lower levels. Such postponement has been the major feature of decentralisation in India. (Franke and Isaac : 2000, p - 4)

The Constitution of India did not recognise the local government bodies as a third tier of government. There was only a provision in the non-enforceable 'directive principles' of the Constitution which instructed the individual states to develop urban and rural local governments as institutions of self-government. However, the tendency of the state governments apart from very few exceptions has been exactly the opposite i.e. to curb the powers and resources of the local governments and in many instances to supersede them completely. The tragic situation was summarised by Girijapati Mukharji in the following lines.

A direct consequence of this situation (of not granting Constitutional status to the local governments and their progressive neglect at the hands of both central and state governments) is the absence of the emergence of any positive and purposeful relationship among the three tiers of government...It has to be realised that urban governments are created by elections and they are, thus, in every sense political entities, and must therefore be allowed to function as such...Thus, urban government with functions which affect the citizen in practically all facets of his life has been left neither with political stature nor that amount of administrative and financial power as would enable it to render service to the people. (Mukharji: 1972, p - 4 to 6)

In most states the urban and rural local governments remained suspended for long periods of time, losing the capacity, experience and confidence to tackle the ever growing challenges of urban India. It was an ironic situation indeed that the local governments were more effective at a time when the urban situation was relatively unproblematic, and became steadily ineffective when their political vision and managerial capacity were seriously needed to face the urban problems. Girijapati, after

having given a thorough account of the urban challenges and the powerlessness of the local governments wrote that, 'the community is thereby deprived of its organ of government at the local level; the punishment is not meted out to the elected councillors but to the whole lot of citizens.' (Mukharji : 1972, p - 6)

In the decades following independence there have been three major attempts officially to empower the urban and rural local governments. The first of these were the institutional changes that were introduced following the recommendations of the Balwantrai Mehta committee in the early 1950s. This was followed by the recommendations of the Ashok Mehta Committee in 1978 and finally, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments Act in 1992. Before introducing the extremely important connection between these attempts towards empowerment of local government and urban planning in India, it would be useful to give an account of the salient features of these empowerment waves.

6.4 The Steps to Decentralisation

According to George Mathew, the report of the Balwantrai Mehta team and the actions taken as a response to its findings formed the 'first major attempt to institutionalise' rural local government institutions in India (Mathew: 2004, p - 8). Though Mathew writes specifically about rural local governments in his paper these major attempts at institutionalisation and empowerment were just as crucial for urban local governments.

The need to study the local government system of the country was felt in the light of the massive community development programme (CDP), that was launched as part of the first five year plan (1951-1956). The scale of the programme was vast. The country was divided into approximately 35000 administrative blocks through which the plan funds were to be channelised for undertaking rural development projects. However, in the absence of any elected representatives at the local level it became progressively difficult to assess or ensure any effective participation of the people in the programme.

In the course of its investigations, the team concluded that 'CDP could not succeed, if the people did not own them' and that the revival and empowerment of the local

government institutions was necessary to create such an ownership. Based on their findings, 'the team pleaded for democratic decentralisation and went on to recommend the constitution of a three-tier structure of panchayats with gram panchayat at the bottom covering a single or a group of villages, panchayat samiti at the level of community development block and zilla parishad at the district level. The principal functions would be to conduct the community development programme with people's participation.' (Government of India: 1957, quoted in *ibid.*)

It was thus observed that democratic decentralisation had a direct and important role to play to make people's participation in the planning and execution of development projects effective. The first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru gave 'enthusiastic support' to the recommendations of the team and naming the new system as 'Panchayati Raj'. (*ibid.*) All the states of the country passed new panchayati raj Acts and by the mid 1960s the three tier structure was in place in most states. However, it came to be known that it was the enthusiasm of the Prime Minister which was behind much of the progressive action by the states and not a general realisation of the importance of local government institutions. The system began to stagnate after the demise of Nehru and 'by the end of 1960s, the system collapsed in nearly all the states.' (*ibid.*, p - 9)

Apart from the death of Nehru, the other factor was a deep agrarian crisis that hit the country in the mid-1960s, which prompted the central government to launch the 'Intensive Agricultural District Programme' (IADP) which effectively by-passed the local self-government institutions and the Community Development Programme. (Franke and Isaac : 2000, p - 6)

The next major initiative at revitalising the local government institutions was in the late 1970s with the submission of the *Ashok Mehta Committee Report* in 1978. The political context of the country was favourable for such a committee to be set up. The centralising tendency of the Congress party culminated in a national emergency which lasted from 1975 to 1977. When elections were finally held, the Janata Party swept the polls and removed the Congress party from office. A committee was set up by the

Government of India, under the chairmanship of Ashok Mehta, for the revival of local government institutions. According to the committee the local government institutions 'had both an instrumental value and an end value.' (Mathew: 2004, p - 9). The committee listed down why these institutions should be seen as appropriate instruments of development.

First, through these institutions the planning processes and the development activities can be decentralised. Second, these institutions provide appropriate forums for people's participation in the development process. Third, an institution like panchayat provides opportunity to the people to have a say in the future of their own communities and thus fulfils a basic development need. (ibid.)

The committee also admitted that over the years the political consciousness of the people had increased and they were demanding a greater involvement in the management of local affairs. As regarding the local government institutions as ends in themselves the committee noted that their revival would allow a new leadership to emerge in the rural areas of India who were best suited 'to churn the soil of rural India and induce social change.' (Government of India : 1978, p - 33, quoted in ibid.). The similarity with the views of Lord Rippon couldn't be more, and yet almost a hundred years had passed without the dream being fully realised.

The committee noted that the various state governments were reluctant to give away powers to the local governments out of fear of 'local claimants' (Franke and Isaac : 2000, p - 6). The consequence was that in most states elections to local bodies had not happened for many years. In the state of Tamil Nadu, elections to local governments were postponed twenty-one times. Although, Franke and Isaac wrote in their book that the reason behind state governments' reluctance to share power with the local governments was the central government's reluctance to share power with the former, 'the Ashok Mehta Committee considered it beyond their charge to inquire into centre-state relations.' (ibid.)

The recommendations of the committee were welcomed by the state governments ruled by regional political parties which were in opposition to the Congress party. Amendments were made to the local government laws in the states of West Bengal, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir (ibid.). However, in all the cases except West Bengal, the new system collapsed when new regimes took over the respective state governments. Only in West Bengal, the movement towards democratic decentralisation could deepen itself because the same left coalition led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) remained in power. In later chapters we would see how the very deepening of democratic decentralisation coupled with land reforms, was in turn, critical to the political triumph of the coalition.

After the general failure of the Ashok Mehta Committee recommendations, it was steadily realised that critical matters such as 'holding regular elections to the panchayat bodies of devolving functions and fiscal resources to them depended on the vagaries of political practices of different regimes in the states.' (Mathew: 2004, p - 9). For an overall and permanent institutionalisation, it was necessary to grant Constitutional recognition to these bodies. Demands for such a recognition kept being raised until the matter was taken up by the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi took the matter up and at his initiative the 64th and 65th Constitutional Amendment Bills were presented and passed in the Lok Sabha (lower house) of the Parliament in 1969.

The whole situation was a bit ironic, as the initiative was being taken by Rajiv Gandhi, who belonged to the ruling Congress Party, known for its reluctance towards decentralisation. Moreover, the opposition to the bill came from various quarters including the leftists who had been the known champions of democratic decentralisation in the country. According to Franke and Isaac, the 'initial versions of the 64th and 65th Constitutional Amendments' were 'the attempts of central government to bypass the state governments and link itself directly to the local bodies.' (Franke and Isaac : 2000, p - 6). The bill failed to get the necessary majority in the Rajya Sabha (upper house) of the Parliament .

The bills were introduced again by the Congress Government under the leadership of Narasimha Rao. The bills were passed by both houses of the Parliament and, after ratification by the states, came to force between April and June 1993, known as the 73rd (Panchayat) and 74th (Municipalities) Amendment Acts. The local government institutions finally got the Constitutional recognition that they had been denied in the colonial and post-colonial times.

6.5 Planning in India - In service of the Elite

Before elaborating on the specific features of the amendments and the relevance they have for urban planning, it is better to have an overview of the essential problems that both economic and urban planning face in India. Neither of the two have been able to shake off completely the colonial legacy of the pre-independence times. In the above sections we have seen how the logic of 'efficiency' was used by the colonial administrators to undermine any serious attempt to democratise the local government institutions. During the years after independence, 'this unfortunate tendency has been intensified, through an awesome centralisation of economic and political power.' (Ghosh : 1992, p 21)

The eminent planner Arun Ghosh described very beautifully the connection between centralisation, bureaucratisation and the reduction of the capacity of planning to change the status quo.

'Invariably, (with political and economic centralisation), the power of the bureaucracy has also grown. Every 'elected' government has had to rely heavily on the bureaucratic establishment to carry out its directives, and with increasing centralisation of authority, effective power has passed on, from the elected representatives of the people, to the permanent civil service. This has been a powerful instrument for the maintenance of the status quo. While a major objective of planning has been to change the status quo, the increasing power of the bureaucracy has proved to be a major obstacle to any fundamental restructuring of society. In fact, of late, the concept of planning has been subverted, and has come to be equated with the regulation and control of the economy by the bureaucracy.' (ibid.)

E.M.S. Namboodiripad seeks the cause of this subversion of the concept of planning by the bureaucracy in the connection between political power and class combinations in Indian society. He writes, that

Answers (to planning problems facing the country) will remain purely academic, fail to be put into practice, unless the question of political power - which class or classes are in control of the state machinery ? - is satisfactorily solved. After all, no class in control of the state machinery will allow the political power which it wields to be used in furtherance of those policies which are detrimental to its class interests. (Namboodiripad : 1966, p - 274)

Throughout the history of urban planning in India too, one sees this issue of class combinations playing its role. The typical colonial city was notorious for its segregation of the white/European town and the black/native town. In his analysis of urban planning in colonial cities Anthony King wrote that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the urban planning ideology in England was dominated by the Garden City movement of Ebenezer Howard with the primacy of 'health, light and air' and its emphasis on 'physicalist solutions to social, economic and political ills.' (King : 1990, p - 54)

The colonial administrators certainly imposed the same ideology on the Indian city living by the Garden City slogan,

'We want not only England but all parts of the Empire to be covered with Garden Cities.' (Garden City, 2 (15) 1907, quoted in *ibid.*)

But they modified the slogan to include the British upper classes of the colonial city and excluding the larger part of the native population. It was important to ensure 'health, light and air' to the guardians of British commercial interests in India and the provision of basic amenities of water supply, sanitation and extensive open spaces was largely for them.

But such a situation was bound to continue after political independence from Britain for certain very basic historical reasons. Though, the masses of India had rallied for the political freedom, the classes that benefitted and consolidated most through political freedom were India's own leading capitalists, its own bourgeoisies, and not the lower industrial and agricultural working classes. E.M.S. Namboodiripad provided a detailed account of the various classes of Indian society that joined together in the struggle for national independence. At the top of the ladder in the colonial society were the ruling classes themselves. Describing this main target of the national struggle, Namboodiripad wrote,

Firstly, since the economy and the state structure were dominated and controlled by a foreign power in the interests of foreign power in the interests of foreign monopolists, the entire nation was objectively interested in the victorious struggle against foreign domination. (Namboodiripad : 1966, p - 275)

The other classes included the feudal remnants of the society, such as rulers of the various princely states and the big landlords, who depended largely on the British rule for their very existence. In return they became enthusiastic allies of the British empire every time the master called on their services to quell the national struggle, such as during the great revolt of 1857. There was a section of the growing capitalist class also which depended strongly on the British empire 'since they depended for their profits on foreign trade, or such lines of manufacturing industry as were organically linked with the British monopolists.' (ibid.) The rising intellectual and professional classes were also depending on the empire for jobs, promotions and securing a higher standard of life for themselves. In the passage below Namboodiripad describes the different classes that ultimately participated in the struggle against the British empire and the reasons why they did so.

In the ranks of those who fought for the victorious conclusion of the anti-imperialistic, anti-feudal and democratic revolution were not only the rapidly-growing working class and the mass of peasantry who together constituted more than 80 percent of the

population. Among them were also the mass of small proprietors and professionals in towns and villages: their salvation lay in the rapid modernisation of the economic and cultural life of the country which could not obviously be undertaken without the victorious anti-imperialistic, anti-feudal and democratic revolution. Furthermore, there were elements within the capitalist and landlord classes who were farsighted enough to subordinate their short-term narrow interests to their own and the nation's long-term interests. They, therefore, took their position along with the mass of the working people. Thus was formed the multi-class united front of the Indian people fighting for the removal of those obstacles which prevented the development of the country as a free, democratic, modern and prosperous nation...Class relations were, in other words, modified to a certain extent by the relations of national struggle' (ibid., p - 276)

The freedom of India removed the cause of alliance between these naturally antagonistic classes and exposed their differences of interest. Describing the situation in free India, the author wrote that, 'the exploiting classes as a whole have now become the ruling classes; it is in their interests that the economy and the state machinery of free India are being guided.' (ibid.) Apart from the main stream bourgeoisies, there was a new class of people forming, which the author described using Lenin's concept of labour aristocracy. This refers to the section of population comprising of 'young men and women born and brought up in impoverished peasant, artisan and even agricultural labour families, including those belonging to the scheduled castes, are getting opportunities of securing higher general education or technical education and thus become skilled workers, technicians and white collared professionals; before them are dangled the prospects of rising up the social ladder.' (ibid., p - 277). As early as in 1962, D.R. Gadgil had written that 'the largest units in private industry and trade in India pay their highest employees salaries comparable to those paid in the most developed and richest countries of the world.' (Gadgil : 1962, p - vii, quoted in ibid., p - 279)

Nambudiripad goes on to write that compared to the total work force of India, the percentage of this new aristocracy may be small, 'but, together with other middle class elements who have gone into trade, industry, contract, etc., they occupy a very important place in present-day Indian society.' (ibid., 279)

Much of the urban planning and development that has happened in India has been dictated by the needs and preferences of this articulate, resourceful and well-connected affluent class.

According to Prof. Dantwala,

Conspicuous consumption is a fact which is too glaring to be ignored. A visitor to any metropolitan cities of Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Delhi will not fail to notice several of the symptoms of an affluent society, crowded air-conditioned restaurants, traffic jams, parking headaches, 'houseful' theatres, high premium on club membership, long waiting lists with the Air Lines Corporation and 'no booking' advices from first class hotels. (Dantwala, quoted in Namboodiripad : 1966, p - 281)

Such was the situation in the 1990s. Thirty nine years later, this is how the eminent journalist P. Sainath described the situation,

The collective net worth of 311 Indian billionaires is now Rs.3.64 trillion. This is up 71 per cent from last year, when it was a paltry Rs.2.13 trillion. The tribe has also grown. It now includes 133 new entrants who just months ago were merely millionaires. The daily newspaper that tracks this elite club (Business Standard, November 9, 2005) puts it simply: 'India's billionaires have never had it so good. (Sainath: 2005, p - 1)

At the same time the absolute number of poor in most large cities was reaching staggering proportions. The total slum population in the cities of Delhi, Kolkata and Greater Mumbai were 1.85 million, 1.48 million and 6.48 million respectively, according to the census of India (Census of India: 2001). In many large cities of India almost half the population comprises of slum dwellers. The part of the urban poor which is deprived of a job in the organised sector and doesn't not have any security of tenure is even more vulnerable.

This widening gulf between the classes in India coupled with a strong tendency to bureaucratic centralisation, is, according to many prominent thinkers and activists, the main cause for the inability of the development process to be more inclusive in both the

urban and rural areas. We have already seen how the failures of rural development programmes was directly connected to the absence of rural local governments in the report of the Balwantrai Mehta report. But rather than respecting the findings of the committee the tendency to centralise and boss over the wisdom of local leaders continued unabated. Over the years this was visible in the form of the proliferation of 'Centrally Sponsored Schemes' for development. Arun Ghosh describes the rationale behind this strategy,

It is a sobering thought that as of March 1990, there were as many as 237 centrally sponsored schemes...The proliferation of schemes to as many as 237 has a rationale. Different central ministries dream up the concept of new schemes from time to time; the bureaucracy at the centre and the bureaucracy at the state level both find it a useful device to extend their power and patronage; and schemes keep proliferating in the name of 'national interest', for which funds then get earmarked. (Ghosh : 1992, p - 39)

This situation concentrated an extra-ordinary power and influence at the hands of the bureaucratic ministries and line-agencies. The situation in large urban centres was no different. In most large cities the functions of large scale planning, development and service delivery is undertaken not by the locally elected municipalities, but by specialised agencies called 'Special Purpose Vehicles' or 'para-statal'.

The special purpose agencies responsible for planning and development continued with the colonial ideology of physicalist intervention through the creation of Master Plans, without attacking the true causes of socio-economic inequality in the urban areas and without altering the institutional structure of the planning process. The rationale behind setting up special purpose vehicles was the same that led to the creation of line agencies and the fanatic pursuit of 'efficiency' during the colonial period and led to the marginalisation of local government institutions.

Sivaramakrishnan writes, that 'development authorities, special purpose agencies and para-statal organisations' which 'have been a major feature of the Indian urban scene' were justified using two theories.

The first theory was that ‘technical efficiency and the scale of resources required for delivery of some services were such which the municipalities couldn’t mobilise’, and the second theory was that ‘city redevelopment or city extension involved large scale acquisition and assembly of land, which has to be organised and run on commercial lines’ (Sivaramakrishnan : 2004, p - 15). But the author concludes that none of these theories could actually justify the creation of these organisations, as ‘across the country these non-municipal or para-statal organisations are afflicted by the same problems of inefficiency, wastage, insensitivity, non-accountability and corruption, which were freely laid at the doorsteps of municipalities at the time when these parallel organisations were formed.’ (ibid.)

6.6 Constitutional Amendments and their effects on Planning

One of the most immediate and noticeable effects of the amendments was a tremendous widening of the democratic base of the country. George Mathew gives the exact figures to bring home the gigantic effect of the amendments,

‘Today there are around 600 district panchayats, about 6000 panchayats at the intermediate level (block/taluka/ mandal) and over 232000 gram panchayats. In urban areas over 1500 city corporations/municipalities are in position, besides over two thousand *nagar panchayats*. Around three million elected representatives of people run these local government institutions of whom not less than one million are women and around 660 thousands belong to scheduled caste/scheduled tribe categories. At one stroke, the amendments have put in place over three million people’s representatives to take charge of public affairs in place of merely 5000 representatives constituting the parliament and the various state assemblies.’ (Mathew : 2004, p - 12)

With the passing of the amendments the arbitrary supersession of the local governments by the state governments ended once and for all. All states were required to enact or modify existing legislations pertaining to local governments and ensure that in the event of a dissolution of the local government, fresh elections were held within six months of the dissolution. The normal term of these bodies would be five years. Talking about the amendment on urban local government the tenth five year plan states that ‘the

enthusiasm among urban residents for the urban local bodies has been amply demonstrated by the fact that voter turnout in elections has been in the range of 65 to 70 percent, much higher than the participation in elections to Parliament and state legislature.’ (The Tenth Five Year Plan, 2002 - 07, p - 611)

A three-tier structure of local government was prescribed with ‘district, taluk/block and village levels in the rural areas and town panchayats in smaller urban centres besides the existing municipalities and corporations in the larger urban centres.’ (Franke and Isaac : 2000, p - 7)

Provisions were made for fair representation of women and scheduled castes and tribes in the elected bodies. To increase direct citizen participation in matters of governance and development ‘*gram sabhas*’ (village council), comprising of all adult members of the village registered in the electoral list were to be recognised as a part of the local government. In the cities ‘ward committees’ were to be constituted in similar lines, though the eligibility for membership varied from state to state, depending on the legislation. Each state would constitute an election commission for directing the electoral process of the local governments and every five years a finance commission would be constituted to ‘determine the principles on the basis of which adequate financial resources would be ensured for panchayats and municipalities.’ (Mathew : 2004, p - 11)

However, one of the most important aspects of the amendments was pertaining to planning. It was categorically stated, that the panchayats in the villages and the municipalities in the cities would prepare ‘plans for economic and social justice.’ (The Constitution of India : 1996, p - 190). Therefore, in one stroke, the amendments wanted to do away with the problems of narrow physicalist-planning and the tyranny of bureaucratic expertise which operated largely outside local democratic control.

Not only that, in the urban areas, the function of urban planning was devolved to the elected municipalities. The special purpose development authorities and the line agencies could no longer function independently of them. The role that these para-

statal bodies were ideally required to play in the new situation has been described in the tenth national plan drafted by the planning commission of India.

Para-statal agencies and bodies such as development authorities, need to play a supportive role to the elected bodies rather than taking over the functions which properly belong to the urban local bodies. (Planning Commission of India, Tenth Five Year Plan, 2002 - 07, p - 614)

As regarding large metropolitan centres, where most planning issues would cut across the boundaries of individual wards or even Municipal Corporations, Municipalities and Panchayats, the seventy-fourth amendment provided for the creation of a Metropolitan Planning Committee (just like the District Planning Committees for the districts), which had to prepare a 'draft development plan for the metropolitan area as a whole.' (The Constitution of India : 1996, p - 192)

Such planning committees were a far cry from the para-statal bodies in both their constitution and the unique bottom-up style of planning. The amendment specified that 'not less than two-thirds of the members of such Committee shall be elected by, and from amongst, the elected members of the Municipalities and Chairpersons of the Panchayats in the Metropolitan area in proportion to the ratio between the population of the Municipalities and of the Panchayats in the area.' (ibid.)

Regarding the planning process the amendment stated that in preparing the draft development plan the Committee must 'have regard to' the plans prepared by the municipalities and panchayats in the metropolitan area and matters of common interest between the municipalities and panchayats. (ibid.)

The task of existing bureaucratic and technocratic agencies was to provide technical support to this essentially democratic body in the task of preparing such an amalgamated plan. If one looks at the provisions for creating such planning committees, the requirement for preparing holistic socio-economic plans and the amalgamation principle based on the individual plans of separate municipalities and panchayats in a

region, then it seems to fit well with the three-fold strategy that the planner Arun Ghosh had suggested to revive the planning system of India, which combined the concepts of -

- (a) Democratic decentralisation;
- (b) Area planning; and
- (c) Convergence of social services, with the revised role of government.

(Ghosh : 1992, p - 36)

Thus it can be seen that in the early 1990s, through the amendments, the struggle for democratic decentralisation and the struggle for a more democratic planning process totally merged, as one was deemed absolutely necessary for the other and this recognition was given by no less an authority than the Constitution of India.

However, despite the various advisory and constitutional measures undertaken, in the form of the recommendations of the Balwantrai Mehta Committee and the Ashok Mehta Committee and the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, any genuine effort made to change the centralised and bureaucratic system met with no lesser resistance than the democratic nationalists faced during the colonial times. These efforts were aimed at empowering the institutions of local government, granting them planning and regulatory functions and making the bureaucracy subordinate to them. As a rule they were welcomed by those states in India where left-of-centre political parties, which stood in opposition to the Congress Party had come to power. These included the democratic decentralisation experiments undertaken in the state of Karnataka, when the Janata Dal came to power and in the states of Kerala and West Bengal, when the Left Front coalition governments, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), were in power. Of these three states the experiments in Kerala and West Bengal went far beyond the agenda of merely providing political opposition to the Congress Party and actually initiating a development planning process that was more democratic and responsive to the needs of the poor. However, the control of the immensely powerful central government by the Congress Party ensured that all attempts at genuine democratic decentralisation met with stiff opposition. This was first demonstrated in the case of the state of Kerala. Before taking a deeper look at the West Bengal decentralisation experiment in the next chapter, it would be worthwhile to give a

description of how the first genuine experiment to democratise the planning process in post-independence India got sabotaged.

6.7 Sabotaging the First Experiment - Attacks from Unexpected Quarters

The first elections to the legislative assembly of the state of Kerala were held in 1957. This led to the historic event in which the first democratically elected communist government of the world was formed in the state. The eminent Marxist politician and freedom fighter E.M.S. Namboodiripad became the first Chief Minister of the state. Right after coming to power the government under the undivided Communist Party of India (CPI) started initiating its socialist policies, which it described as a democratic revolution. The government could stay in power only for 28 months before being dismissed, but it enacted no less than 88 bills which tried to make substantial improvements in the conditions of the urban and rural working classes.

These bills included The Minimum Wages Act, aimed at improving the conditions of workers in 18 industries and of agricultural workers; the Maternity Benefit Act, aimed at improving the condition of women workers in agricultural plantations and other sectors; Agricultural Debt Relief Act to help debt ridden cultivators; the Agrarian Relations bill, which aimed at granting security of tenure to tenant farmers, imposing land ceilings, distributing land among tenant farmers by paying compensation to landlords and many others (Venugopal: 2007, p - 1). Another extremely important act was the Kerala Education Act, which sought to provide universal free education and put a control on the influence of private school managements. According to Venugopal, the Christian educational managements severely opposed this Act and they were joined by the Nair Service Society (NSS), which was an organisation of the dominant Nair caste in the state. (ibid., p - 2)

These socialist measures were supported by moves to change the centralised and bureaucratic structure of the administration. Namboodiripad chaired the Administration Reforms Committee, which was formed in 1958, and argued for a two-tier set up of rural and urban local government - one at the settlement level and the other at the

district (regional) level. A District Council bill was introduced, which provided for the creation of elected District Councils to co-ordinate the functions of the rural panchayats and the urban municipalities and municipal corporations. According to Franke and Isaac, such elected committees were supposed to take over 'the entire development administration in the districts.' (Franke and Isaac: 2000, p - 13). This move was a serious challenge to the dominating position of the District Commissioner or Collector, who was the main bureaucrat in-charge of the administration of the districts, since the colonial times.

Though the issue of land reforms was high on the agenda of the Congress Party and of the central government of India, the class alliances formed by the Congress Party ensured its opposition to any serious implementation of such policies. The Prime Minister of the country, Jawaharlal Nehru, was committed to socialist ideals himself and reluctant to move decisively against the government in Kerala. However, his daughter and the then President of the Congress Party, Indira Gandhi, mobilised the Congress machinery to support the local agitations that were developing in the state against the Namboodiripad government. According to Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer, who was minister for home affairs in the Kerala government, the 'communal forces, capitalists and landlords got united' against the state government. (Information and Public Relations Department, Government of Kerala: 2007)

The clashes between the police and the agitators turned violent and this was presented as evidence of a serious break down of law and order in the state and an argument for the dismissal of the elected state government through the imposition of President's rule by the central government. Article number 356 of the Indian Constitution was used to dismiss the communist government on 31st July 1959 and President's rule was imposed. This led to the postponement of many of the moves towards progressive reforms in land relations and institutional/administrative structure of the state till a left-democratic alliance was elected to power again eight years later.

Evidence revealed many years later showed a much more serious aspect of the toppling of the communist government in 1959. The electoral success of the communists in

Kerala came in the years of the cold war and in the words of retired South Asia Specialist of the US state department, Dennis Kux, the event 'rang alarm bells in Washington' (Kux: 1993, p - 145, quoted in Schaffer: 2003, p - 67). The hand of the US government in overthrowing the Kerala government in 1959 was first brought to notice, when Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who was US ambassador to India in the early 1970s, wrote in a book published in 1979, that Indira Gandhi received clandestine Central Intelligence Authority (CIA) funding to help remove the elected government of Kerala (Moynihan, D.P. and Weaver, S.: 1979, p - 41).

The biography of Ellsworth Bunker, who was the US ambassador to India at the time of the Kerala elections, was published in 2003 and documented at length the role played by the Eisenhower administration and the CIA in the dismissal of the state government. This is how the process was described by the biographer Howard Schaffer,

The Eisenhower administration at first adopted a wait-and-see attitude towards the CPI state government, but soon became more hostile. Bunker's embassy concurred with Washington's approach and made recommendations for implementing it. Eventually, a clandestine CIA operation was mounted to help dislodge the communists from power. This apparently involved agency funding for political demonstrations organised by the Congress Party and other opposition groups, that were designed to create a law and order situation sufficiently chaotic to justify the central government's dismissal of the Kerala administration. Citing such internal turmoil, New Delhi forced the communists out in 1959. (Schaffer: 2003, p - 67)

Following this event, the pace and intensity of decentralisation in the state of Kerala depended on when and for how long the coalition of leftist political parties led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) were in power in the state.

7. Land Reforms and Democratic Decentralisation in West Bengal

7.1 The State of West Bengal

The state of West Bengal lies in the eastern part of India. It had a population of 82 million people according to the 2001 census and, at 904 persons per square kilometre, has the highest population density among all the states in the country. While it accounts for only 2.7 per cent (88752 square kilometres) of the total land area of the country it contains 7.8 per cent of the country's population within its borders (Ghosh: 2004, p – 3).

The city of Kolkata is the capital of the state. Before the partition of India in 1947, the province of Bengal in British India included the territories of the current state of West Bengal and the nation of Bangladesh. In the year 2000, 27 percent of the population of the state lived below the poverty line. The national average for people living below the poverty line in the same year was 26 percent. The concentration of the poor in West Bengal is mainly in the rural areas. 84 percent of the below poverty line population in the state lives in rural areas compared to the national average of 74 percent (Ghosh: 2004, p - 9).

From a political perspective the state is a unique one in India, as it has been ruled by a coalition of left-wing parties led by the Communist Party of India – Marxist (CPM), called the Left Front continuously since 1977. According to economist Jayati Ghosh, 'this government in turn has been motivated by a vision of political, economic and social change, which has been different from that observed among most other state governments or the central government.'(ibid.). This vision led to a focus on two inter-related strategies for development - land reform and democratic decentralisation. Right from the start, it was the contention of the Left Front, that the reform of property relations in the state was crucial to tackling the problems of poverty and under-

development. The twin strategies of land reform and decentralisation were never seen in isolation from each other. The devolution of power to and the revival of the *panchayats* (rural local government institutions) was seen as the best way to make the land reforms more effective in terms of scope, fairness and sustainability, and the land reform process was, in turn, seen as a way to strengthen the institutions of local democracy.

Figure 1 West Bengal and its districts



(Source: Thörlind: 2000, p – 11)

7.2 Land Relations in West Bengal

The complex property relations that existed in the state of West Bengal before the Left Front came to power were a consequence of the ‘*Zamindari*’ or ‘Permanent Settlement’

system of revenue collection adopted by the British East India Company in the province of Bengal in the year 1793. The Company used two main systems for the collection of revenue from the territories, which were directly under its administration. One of them was called the '*Ryotwari*' system and the other was called the '*Zamindari*' system. According to the first system the revenue was collected directly from the *ryot* i.e. the individual cultivator who actually tilled the land. This system was in operation in the presidencies of Bombay and Madras and in Assam and Burma.

According to the '*Zamindari*' system, the revenue was collected indirectly through arrangements with the '*Zamindars*' i.e. landlords, who in turn collected the revenue from the tillers of the land. The '*Zamindars*' had been performing the same function during the Mughal period, when they collected the revenue on behalf of the '*Diwan*' i.e. the regional representative of the Emperor. Following the battle of Plassey in 1757 and the battle of Buxar in 1764, in which the Mughal chief of Bengal was decisively defeated by the forces of the East India Company, the Emperor granted the latter the '*diwani*' or administrative rights to Bengal.

The initial years of British administration in Bengal were a legacy of mismanagement and rampant exploitation of the local population through arbitrary taxation. The Governor General Warren Hastings tried to replace the indirect system of revenue collection by appointing revenue-farmers, who would collect the taxes for the Company, and be subject to a five yearly inspection system. This arrangement didn't work well, as the revenue-farmers often squeezed out as much tax as possible from the cultivators and then absconded at time of inspection. The exploitation reached such high levels that it contributed to one of the most devastating famines in the history of Bengal in 1770.

The next Governor General, Lord Cornwallis, set into motion a process to rectify this situation by getting into a permanent arrangement with the *Zamindars* by granting them security of tenure on a hereditary basis and permanently fixing the land tax. The first move was aimed at providing the necessary incentives to the landlords to invest in land improvement and development of infrastructure, and the second one was aimed at

curbing the tendency of the British administrators to amass large fortunes through the process of arbitrary taxation.

The adoption of the permanent settlement had a range of consequences, which is beyond the scope of this research to document and analyse in detail. However, two of the most important consequences were the creation of a ‘class of parasitic, non-cultivating landlords who expropriated rent from the actual tillers who cultivated their lands’ and the ‘high prevalence of sub-infeudation, with many layers of intermediaries between the actual cultivators and the “landlord”, all of whom had some rights or claims upon the produce of the land.’ (Ghosh: 2004, p – 27). The land of the largely absentee landlords was cultivated by sharecroppers, or *bargadars*, who received a part of the farm produce as payment. Gradually, the *jotedars*, a class of farmers who became dominant in rural Bengal by taking over many of the functions of the largely absentee landlords, became the principal agents for rent collection. The *jotedars* became the most oppressive and feared class in the countryside rather than the *zamindars*. Despite the amount of the tax being fixed, the very high amount of rent which the Company extracted from the landlords forced the latter to pass on that burden to the already impoverished cultivator. The coercion of the tenants by the landlords, operating through the *jotedars*, was ‘achieved with the threat of eviction and other extra-economic pressures.’ (ibid., p – 28)

This arrangement continued even after the system of permanent settlement had effectively come to an end with the political freedom of India and the partition of the province of Bengal into the states of West Bengal (belonging to India) and East Pakistan (belonging to Pakistan and later becoming the independent nation of Bangladesh). By this time, there were five broad categories in the production system in rural West Bengal, which are listed below-

1. The landlords.
2. The large group of sub-infeudaries with varying claims to the land.
3. A small group of middle peasants who mainly used family labour and, sometimes, hired labour.
4. The large and growing class of poor landless labourers.

5. The sharecroppers who did much of the cultivation on small plots of land and were generally impoverished and indebted.

(ibid.)

This state of affairs led to a vicious circle of poverty and under-development, as the sharecroppers, who had no security of tenure, had neither the incentive nor the money to invest in their lands and undertake various improvements to increase production. According to Ghosh, 'both production and distribution were adversely affected by the existing state of land relations. The land tenure system served as an obstruction to agricultural production, affected incomes and access to productive employment for the landless, and created unequal access to social and political power as well.' (ibid.) At the time of independence West Bengal was one of the poorest states in India, with a high incidence of rural poverty, and dependent on other states for its food supplies. The inequality was made even more glaring by the fact, that the city of Kolkata continued to be one of the most prominent economic centres of India.

7.3 The Quest for Land Reforms after Independence

An important peasant movement broke out in Bengal in the year 1946 in the aftermath of the Bengal famine of 1943 in which approximately 5 million people died. This movement was called the *Tebhaga* movement. The aim of the movement, was that the landlords should get one-third of the produce of the land instead of one-half, which they often expropriated using various kinds of economic and extra-economic threats. The remaining two-thirds should go to the actual cultivators - i.e. tenant farmers and agricultural labourers. The movement was led by the 'Krishak Samiti', the peasant wing of the Communist Party of India (CPI). The first eruption happened in a village under the Chirirbandar police station in Dinajpur district, which currently lies in Bangladesh. The local communist leader of the area, Rupnarayan Roy, was himself a small land owning farmer and the organiser of the Krishak Samiti in the area. The Samiti organised the Hindu and Muslim farmers in the area to resist the *jotedars*.

On the day of rent collection, the peasants refused to part with more than 33 percent of the yield. The confrontation turned violent and led to a clash between the *jotedars*'

goons and the peasants. When the police arrived, it took the side of the *jotedars*' men and opened fire on the peasants. Although the police retreated that day, the violent repression of the movement by the combined forces of *jotedars* and the state police continued. In the words of Ajoy Roy, the 'police force set a reign of terror in village after village in Chirirbandar police station - the leaders were hunted out, even common villagers including women folk were not spared from physical torture and repressive action.' (Roy: 2002, p - 2)

With the independence of India and the partition of Bengal in 1947 the Tebhaga movement came to an end but it played an extremely important role in raising the consciousness of the farmers and the state about the importance of such reforms. This was acknowledged by the government of independent India right from the start, but not much was achieved in terms of concrete results in any of the states. Moreover, as land was a subject under the list of functions devolved to the individual states according to the Indian Constitution, it was primarily up to them to undertake necessary reforms.

The Congress Party, which emerged as the most influential political party in India through the years of the freedom struggle, didn't have control of the state legislature in Bengal prior to independence. Due to the majority of the population in undivided Bengal being Muslim, it was the Muslim League that had formed the state government. After the independence, most of the territories where the Muslim population was concentrated became part of East Pakistan. As a result of this, there was a 'serious power vacuum in the state of West Bengal' (Kohli: 1990, p - 126) This vacuum was filled in by the most important and influential political party in India at the time of independence - the Congress Party. Following its strategy elsewhere, the Congress party consolidated its hold over the political environment in West Bengal by building an 'elaborate patronage network.' (ibid.). This network of patronage had its centre in the city of Kolkata and penetrated into the countryside from there.

In the aftermath of the Tebhaga movement, two laws were passed in the state of West Bengal related to land reforms. The first of these was the West Bengal Bargadari Act of 1950, which provided for a share of 60 per cent of the total yield to the bargadars, or

sharecroppers, if they provided the farm inputs. The issue of the security of tenure was not addressed in this law. Five years later, a more comprehensive law called the West Bengal Land Reforms Act was passed. This law provided for the elimination of intermediaries between the landlord and the cultivator and the imposition of ceilings on land holdings. In subsequent years, amendments were made to this act which made the right of cultivation of the sharecropper hereditary, made the requirements of terminating bargadari contracts more stringent and made the share of the bargadar 75 per cent in case of input contribution (Ghosh: 2004, p - 29).

However, the alliances that the Congress Party, which was the ruling party at the central level, had with the landlord class, contributed to a reluctance on the part of the former, to pursue any reforms that threatened the power of this class (Kohli: 1987, Ghosh: 2004). A direct consequence of this was the failure to create a complete official record of the *bargadars*. In the absence of such a record the implementation of the provisions of the laws became well-nigh impossible. In fact, the situation became worse for the *bargadars* following the Acts, as the landlords tried to downgrade their status from the sharecropper to that of agricultural labourers to prevent them from claiming the rights that had been bestowed to them.

The leadership of the Congress party passed on from Atulya Ghosh to Bidhan Chandra Roy and then on to P.C. Sen. According to Kohli, it was under the leadership of a 'dominant personality' such as P.C. Sen, that 'an already corrupt Congress became deeply factionalised' and created an atmosphere of increasing political chaos in the state (Kohli: 1990, p - 126). Throughout this period of Congress leadership, the implementation of the land reform legislations remained negligible, and consequently, the opposition of various left of centre parties gained in strength. At the forefront of this opposition were the two parties that the earlier Communist Party of India had divided into in 1964 - the CPI and the CPM. Land reforms and the condition of urban labourers remained the most important political slogan of these opposition parties.

The years 1964 and 1965, were years of drought, food shortages and rising food prices. According to Kohli, the successful utilisation of these situations and the rampant

corruption and rising factional disagreements within the Congress led to the defeat of the Congress Party in the state elections of 1967.

After the defeat of the Congress party, a coalition of leftist parties formed the United Front government. The CPM was the most important political party within this coalition. It was in this period that the leftist parties began to understand the challenges of working as a regional state government within the political structure of India in which much power was concentrated in the central government. Regarding the constraints under which CPM, the dominant party of the left operates, Kohli remarks, that 'these not only involve the general constraints of India's political-economic arrangements, but also the more specific constraints of the Constitution, and of the centrally controlled administration and finances, as well as those stemming from the prospect of presidential rule in case the government performance is deemed inadequate.' (Kohli: 1987, p - 96).

The United Front government had assumed that by controlling the state government it was in a strong position to unleash all its radical programmes involving class struggles both in the urban and rural areas. In the rural areas, this meant the appropriation and redistribution of land held above the prescribed ceiling and implementation of the legislations on land reforms already enacted. In urban areas it involved the intensification of trade union activity to demand better rights for the industrial workers. The militant nature of undertaking these processes led to a break down of law and order in the state. In this period of disorder, the central government in Delhi imposed Presidential rule and dismissed the United Front government in late 1967. However, by the time elections were held in 1969, the Congress party had grown even more unpopular and lost to the United Front. (Kohli: 1990, p - 127)

Despite the bitter experience of the first phase of being in power, the political adventurism of the United Front government continued unabated. In the words of Kohli,

'Again, the UF formed a government similar to that in its first reign, and again chaos resulted. Gheraos (encirclement), forced redistribution of land, internecine fighting

among political parties, riots, and political murders once again became the order of the day.’ (ibid.)

As a result of this situation, the central government imposed presidential rule again and dismissed the United Front government in 1970. The role that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi played in the Bangladesh war of freedom in 1971 made her popularity soar as India achieved military victory over the Pakistani forces. Congress party used this wave of popularity to come to power in West Bengal in 1972. This resulted in the decline of the campaign for land reforms and the landlords, in many cases, even reclaimed the land that had been redistributed during the rule of the United Front governments. (Kohli: 1989, p - 108). A massive repression of the leftist forces and of the *bargadars* was let loose by the Congress ruled state government and the landlords who were allied to it. Police assisted in the mass eviction of the *bargadars*. Kohli writes, that ‘according to Amnesty International, over 25000 cadres, mostly of the CPM and the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPIML), were in jail in the first half of the seventies.’ (ibid.)

Between 1972 and 1977, certain important events happened in the political arena, which led to a situation, where the CPM, ‘which already had considerable power base within West Bengal, finally emerged as the single most important voice of the Bengali left.’ (Kohli: 1990, p - 127). The two main contenders of CPM within the leftist forces in West Bengal were the CPI and the extreme-left CPIML. The main contender outside the leftist forces was the Congress party. In 1972, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi used the opportunity created by the concentration of armed forces in West Bengal for the Bangladesh war to quell the militant extreme-left movement (ibid.). Following the declaration of national emergency by the central government ruled by the Congress party in 1975, the popularity of the party and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi suffered immensely. The Communist Party of India, under the influence of Soviet Union decided to ally with the Congress party during the emergency and faced a similar decline in popularity. In the national elections in 1977 Congress party was decisively defeated and the political party called Janata Dal came to power. In the state of West Bengal, the

CPM benefitted indirectly from all these factors and had a resounding victory over the Congress party in the state elections of 1977.

The elections of 1977 was a landmark event, as the CPM, which had always had land reforms high on its agenda, was never to lose political power in any state election after that. Its electoral success itself was substantially due to its contributions to these reforms in the following years. However, what was most important was the shift away from political adventurism and a serious rethinking of the strategies that could be pursued within the democratic-capitalist set up of the Indian state to undertake land reforms without being removed from power by the imposition of presidential rule. This rethinking of strategy was clearly expressed in the resolution adopted by the party in its tenth party congress which took place in the aftermath of the national emergency. No longer relying on the possibility of launching a revolutionary class struggle within a parliamentary democratic system, the focus of the party became 'expanding democracy and introducing new clauses in the constitution putting the fundamental rights of the people beyond the mischief of any ruling party or government.' (Political Resolution adopted at the tenth Congress of the CPM, quoted in Kohli: 1989, p - 99)

Within this broad re-orientation of party strategy was the shift in the land reforms agenda from one of 'class confrontation', to 'development and redistribution.' (ibid.) Rather than militant forms of struggle, the new strategy of empowering the local governments by devolving power and functions to them and using these institutions of local democracy to pursue land reforms started gaining ground. To many supporters of the communist movement, this re-thinking of strategy appeared like a dilution of the revolutionary goals of the party and a compromise with the powerful classes. The noted theorist and communist leader from Kerala, EMS Namboodiripad clarified the position of the party in the following lines,

Our experience of working of this system proves that since the parliamentary democratic system as prevails today provides the exploited majority a powerful weapon with which to fight the exploiting minority, the latter does its utmost to reduce democracy to a mere formality to subvert it whenever and wherever the exploited majority uses it to get

anywhere near the seats of power. Defence of parliamentary democracy at the Central and State level (where it exists but is very often threatened by the authoritarian forces) and its extension to the district and lower levels as envisaged in the four-pillar democracy is, therefore, of extreme importance in the advance of Indian society. My faith in democratic decentralisation in other words, arises from the fact that it helps the working people in their day-to-day struggles against their oppressors and exploiters. (Note on Report of the Committee on Panchayat Raj Institutions 1978, quoted in Isaac: 1998)

It is from this point onward the processes of democratic decentralisation and land reforms got intrinsically bound in West Bengal.

7.4 Land Reforms through Democratic Decentralisation

According to government sources, the land reforms initiated by the Left Front government had the following objectives -

1. To weaken the domination of landlords in rural Bengal, and therefore, contribute to the distribution of assets and wealth.
2. To unleash the productive forces, which had been constrained by the prevailing pattern of land relations.
3. To create a market in rural areas by increasing purchasing power among the peasantry, which was expected to lead to development of rural industries, trade, commerce and other services.
4. It was believed, that such land reforms would provide the basic conditions for the expansion of literacy, education and public health.
5. Finally, the aim was to empower the weaker sections of society, including Dalits and women, and shift the balance of class forces in the state in favour of working people generally.

(Ghosh: 2004, p - 30)

Although the decentralisation experiment undertaken by the Left Front Government was the most radical and innovative one in West Bengal, there had been various attempts at empowering the rural governments from a much earlier date. The first such attempt was in the year 1919, with the passing of the Bengal Village Self Government Act. This act

provided for a two tier structure of rural local government with District boards at the higher (district) level and Union boards at the lower (block) level. Though the community development blocks had been set up much later the union boards were co-terminus with the blocks. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the local government institutions created in this period were victims of low resource capacity, excessive bureaucratic control and domination by local elites.

The next attempt was in the form of the West Bengal Panchayat Act of 1957. This act provided for the creation of a Gram Panchayat in every village, that would function as the executive arm of the Gram Sabha (the village council comprising all the voters in the village). The number of elected members of the Gram Panchayat was to vary from 9 to 15. There was also a provision for the nomination of eminent persons from the locality. There were two executive posts of the Adhyaksha (President) and the Upadhyaksha (Vice - President).

The problem with this act was that it was prepared before the submission of the Balwant Rai Mehta report which had a major impact on the setting up of panchayat institutions all over the country. Due to this reason there was some problem in integrating the community development blocks into the panchayat structure of West Bengal. (Ghosh: 2004, p - 46). This structure was further modified with the enactment of the West Bengal Zilla Parishad Act of 1963. This led to the replacement of the existing District Boards with Zilla Parishads and the creation of a four-tier structure of rural local government, which is shown below.

Table 1 Four-Tier Structure of Rural Local Government, as per the Act of 1963

Tier	Name	Jurisdiction	Total No. (at the time of creation)
First	Zilla Parishad	The district	15
Second	Anchalik Parishad	The community development block	325

Third	Anchal Panchayat	Cluster of 8 – 10 villages	2926
Fourth	Gram Panchayat	The village	19602

(Source: Ghosh: 2004, p – 46)

However, this was the period when the severe economic crisis hit the state in 1964 and 1965. Under those circumstances, no elections to the local government institutions could take place.

The West Bengal Panchayat Act of 1973, replaced the four-tier structure with the three-tier structure which was emerging all over India. The structure is shown below –

Table 2 Three -Tier Structure of Rural Local Government, as per the Act of 1973

Tier	Name	Head	Jurisdiction
First	Zilla Parishad	Sabhadhipati	Co-terminus with districts
Second	Panchayat Samiti	Sabhapati	Co-terminus with blocks
Third	Gram Panchayat	Pradhan	8 – 10 villages

(Source: Ghosh: 2004, p – 47)

The Pradhan (chairperson) of the gram panchayat was ex-officio members of the panchayat samiti and the Sabhapati (chairperson) of the panchayat samiti was the ex-officio member of the district level tier. However, due to the political turmoil in the state during this time and the spells of President's rule and national emergency, elections to these bodies could not be held.

From the experiences of the previous two United Front governments, the Left Front had realised that militant forms of struggle and forced appropriation and redistribution of

above the ceiling land would not be sustainable unless there was a pro-Left regime in place at the national level too. The alternate strategy adopted was to empower the ever neglected local government institutions and use them for undertaking the necessary reforms. Although, the local government institutions had been legally empowered earlier, the reluctance of the Congress Party and the political turmoil in the state made regular elections and a genuine transfer of powers and functions impossible.

Elections were held simultaneously for all the three tiers of the rural local government, viz. The Zilla Parishad (at the district level), Panchayat Samiti (at the block level) and the Gram Panchayat (at the level of a cluster of 8 to 10 villages) in the year 1978. A bold departure from the Mehta Committee required the representatives at two tiers above comprising panchayat samitis and zilla parishads to also be elected directly by the voters. (Bardhan and Mookherjee: 2006). Ever since that year, elections have been held every five years without fail. This continuity of local elections was a unique achievement of the West Bengal government and was not to be happen at a national level till the ratification of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments 14 years later.

The main strategy of CPM was to encourage the participation of rural non-elites to participate in the local elections as party candidates and then use the ‘new politicised panchayats’ (Kohli: 1987, p - 108) to register sharecroppers and landless farmers, implement land reform and undertake poverty alleviation and agriculture support programmes. In one analysis of these local bodies, they were even termed as “red panchayats” (ibid.). Apart from playing the crucial role of being the most appropriate institutions for undertaking land reform these panchayats also helped CPM to ensure its political penetration of the countryside.

Kohli writes, that one of the main tasks of the CPM after coming to power was to consolidate its political presence in the state. This could be done by expanding the party base, but that would bring its own problems. Inviting more and more members into the ranks of the party at a time of political victory would definitely bring in opportunists and compromise the two characteristics that were CPM’s strong points - discipline and loyalty. According to Kohli, the very organisation of the party is linked to its ability to

take a non-elitist path to politics and development. This is how he describes the characteristic of 'party discipline' in the CPM,

The core membership of the party is a highly disciplined and select group. Each member actually gains that status after several years of party work. This work is typically in the trade union movement, or in the Kisan Sabha, or in the student movement. Those sympathetic and dedicated to the party's mission are observed closely by those who are already members...The prospective members in turn absorb the party line as well as the belief that discipline and loyalty to the party line constitutes the highest virtues, enabling one to become a member. (ibid., p - 102)

Given this state of affairs, there was no way CPM would have allowed the party to grow in a callous way. Moreover, as a political party it was attempting something, which most other political parties in India had failed to achieve - to consolidate power 'by building its power base primarily on the lower and lower-middle classes.' (ibid., p - 109). As an alternative to expanding the party, opening up the panchayats for multi-party elections at a time when the collective consciousness of the rural lower classes favoured the party and its slogan of land reform would have enabled the political penetration in the countryside without compromising party discipline. The assumption of CPM proved correct and the party candidates won a massive electoral victory in 1978 at all the tiers of the local government. These elections were a marked departure from the earlier trend in India, when local governments were either superseded by higher tiers of government or got captured by local landed elites.

As has been noted earlier, that one of the major problems with earlier attempts at implementing land reforms was the failure to register the sharecroppers. After 1978, the panchayats got active in the process of recording the *bargadars* or sharecroppers. Alongside the efforts of the panchayats was the 'active participation' of the bureaucracy and workers' unions (Ghosh: 2004., p - 31). Group meetings with sharecroppers were used as a method to make the registration process more participatory and the paperwork easier. Political workers of the Left Front played a very active role in campaigning for this process which became famously known as 'Operation Barga'. Ghosh notes, that

the pace and effectiveness of land reforms in various districts varied with the strength of the political machinery (ibid.).

The registration of sharecroppers and redistribution of above ceiling land became a remarkable achievement of the state. Despite having just 3.5 percent of the arable land in India, the amount of land distributed in West Bengal accounted for 20 percent (1.39 million acres) of the total land distributed in the country. The state also accounts for nearly half (2.7 million persons) of the total beneficiaries of redistributive land reform across the whole of India. (ibid., p - 34). The land reform process was also weighted in favour of the low caste groups and minority groups such as the Muslim households, who are among the poorest in West Bengal.

7.5 Decentralised Planning in the Countryside

From the early 1980s onwards there were also attempts at getting the panchayats seriously involved in a decentralised development planning process. The implementation of as many as 27 rural development programmes were handed over to the panchayats. The structure of decentralised planning system that was generated for the rural areas is shown in the following table -

Table 3 Structure of Decentralised Planning After 1985

Level	Government	Planning Body	Plan
State	State Government	State Planning Board	Annual and five year state plans
District	Zilla Parishad	District Planning and Coordination Committee (DPCC) and District Planning Committee (DPC)	Annual and five year district plans
Block	Panchayat Samiti	Block Planning Committee	Block plans

Village	Gram Panchayat	-	Basic Needs Statements
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(Source: Ghosh: 2004, p – 53)

Though the state planning board was responsible for preparing plans for the whole state, it played a crucial role in guiding the planning process of the lower levels. At the district level, the DPCC was more of a deliberative body, while the DPC was the executive arm and responsible for preparing the plan. DPCC for approval. The DPC was headed by the Chairperson of the Zilla Parishad and had a mixed membership of officials and non-officials. The district collector was the member secretary of the DPC. The committee was empowered to integrate the various block level plans and approve schemes with a budget of up to Rs. 5 Lakhs. Schemes with higher value required the approval of the state planning committee.

The Sabhapati of the Panchayat Samiti was the head of the BPC, which comprised of the chairpersons of all standing committees of the Samiti, chairpersons of the Gram Panchayats and officers of the various line departments at the block level. The block development officer was the member secretary of the BPC. The BPC was empowered to make block plans by integrating the needs statements of the various Panchayat Samitis and approve schemes with a budget of up to Rs. 50000. Larger schemes required the approval of the DPC.

By making the district collector and the block development officer the member secretaries of the DPC and the BPC respectively, a serious attempt was made to make the bureaucracy subservient to the elected leaders in the planning and development machinery at the local level. This move, however, was not to the liking of the bureaucrats in general, as they considered it a threat to their power and prestige.

This planning structure provided the blue-print to the decentralised planning system that was to be applied nation wide through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments of 1992. The principle underlying this planning system was that rather than the plan being

dictated from the top, the overall plan of the district would be made by coordinating and integrating the plans prepared at the lower levels. Therefore, the basic needs statements of the Gram Panchayats were supposed to be integrated in the preparation of the Block Plans and these, in turn, were to be integrated to generate the annual and five year district plans.

The state planning board had identified the development of agriculture and allied activities to be the overall goal of these plans as this would generate maximum employment and secure a high rate of growth. A lot of attention was paid to development of irrigation as this would enable the farmers to cultivate the high yield variety of rice called 'Boro rice'. Agricultural development would generate the employment and overall economic growth which could tackle the problem of poverty in the state. Irrigation works and road construction would also generate employment opportunities in the villages. As it has been noted right at the start of this chapter, poverty in West Bengal, was concentrated mainly in the rural areas. According to the guidance provided by the state planning board, one-third of the available plan funds were earmarked for irrigation works; one-third for road construction and the remaining one-third for other projects.

Much of the funding for the plans came from the centrally sponsored development schemes such as the (IRDP), National Rural Employment Programme (NREP) and the Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP). One strong indicator of the willingness of the state government to empower these institutions for plan making was the amount of financial resources devolved to them. At a time when supersession of the local governments by the state governments was the norm, the state government of West Bengal not only guaranteed the political existence of the former but consistently increased their resources. Ghosh writes, that 'in constant price terms, there was a five-fold increase in the total funds received by panchayats, and a seven-fold increase in Plan funds between 1993-94 and 2000-01.

Despite the increase in the amount of funds devolved it was also true that the state government never had enormous financial resources to devolve from in the first place.

Ghosh writes that 'the actual financial devolution has been relatively constrained, especially in the period when the state government's own severe fiscal problems reduced both the ability to make available untied funds and even the amount of planning and other departmental funds which could be utilised by the panchayats.' (Ghosh: 2004, p - 59).

However, the lack of finances, despite being a crucial factor, was just one of the many factors that affected this essentially bottom-up planning system. Jayati Ghosh writes that there are 'three aspects to a success decentralised planning process.' (Ghosh: 2004, p - 57)

1. Mobilisation of the common people - This aspect is crucial to the success of the planning process. A democratic and decentralised planning process cannot be conceived without sufficient mobilisation of the local people.

2. Organisation or Institution building - Here, Ghosh focuses on the need to link up the three officially recognised levels of the local government to ad hoc institutions and community based organisations that exist in the locality. It is a process of continuing the decentralisation of the planning process even further down and closer to the people.

3. Planning - Under this aspect, Ghosh stresses the need for sustainability. The planning process must be able to sustain itself in order to be able to make a difference in the long run. This becomes all the more difficult in the context of limited financial resources.

(ibid.)

Though the planning process started with enthusiasm, there was a substantial diversity in the quality of the district plans prepared. The paternalistic government and administrative machinery so taken for granted in the rural districts of India since colonial times had created such a culture and mind-set of dependence that it created enormous barriers in the path of such a progressive planning process. The conflicts between the bureaucracy and the panchayat leaders, the maturity and wisdom of the Zilla Parishad chair-persons, the involvement of the state planning board in the planning process of the districts, the disagreements between the state level ministers and the local

government leaders from the same localities all took their toll on the new experiment over and above the obvious problems of limited resources and technical capacity.

Despite all these difficulties, most of the districts prepared their first development plans by 1985. The plan prepared by the Medinipur district was hailed as a model plan. Arun Ghosh, the eminent Indian planner, who was invited by the then Chief Minister of West Bengal to act as an advisor to the state planning board during the decentralised planning process, described the role that the Sabhadhipatis, or elected chair-persons of the Zilla Parishads, and people's mobilisation played to make the planning process in Medinipur a success.

'The exercise on district planning in Midnapore was initiated by SKM, the Sabhadhipati there...The first task was to educate the local populace; SKM personally undertook trips of each of the 53 blocks, and to a number of Gram Panchayats especially in the more backward and problem areas. In largely attended meetings, he explained the purpose and the rationale behind the planning exercise. Each Gram Panchayat was required to prepare an inventory of resources, and a statement of the urgent needs of the local population. These were consolidated for each block at the block headquarters, and the Sabhapati of the Panchayat Samiti, The Block Development Officer, and all others connected with the Block Planning Committee were asked to prepare block plan proposals based on the statement of needs and resources for the entire block. These "plan documents" for each block were thus merely an aggregation or compilation of the inventory of resources and of the needs statements of all Gram Panchayats in the block...All the block plans were then pooled together, and a profile of the district plan emerged almost automatically. The existing situation, the currently available facilities, the needs and aspirations of people, the funds currently estimated as being deployed - and the schemes on which they were being deployed - by different authorities, were thus put in juxtaposition of each other for the first time. The programmes being promoted by different departments thus got highlighted in the background of needs and aspirations of the people.' (Ghosh: 1989, p - 286)

On the other end of the spectrum were districts like Malda, where even the simplest steps of the planning process got complicated due to political rivalry and lack of coordination between the state planning board and the district planning committee. The state planning board had been dissatisfied with the district plan prepared in Malda. Arun Ghosh wrote, that 'they (the local authorities) have not really taken note of the "needs" of the people, nor formulated any block plans.' (ibid., p - 287). The state planning board had also requested that in the first year of decentralised planning (1985-1986), the district plans be discussed with them before finalisation and submission to the DPCC. As the DPCC had the final authority in the finalisation of district plans, the state planning board couldn't intervene afterwards. Such an intervention would go totally against the very spirit of decentralisation. Moreover, one of the characteristics of the decentralised planning process was that private contractors should not be used in the undertaking of development works.

In Malda, all these requirements had been violated. The plan was submitted to the DPCC without consultation with the state planning board and the local politicians resorted to arbitrary selection of projects and involving private contractors to please the electorate. One of the reasons for this state of affairs was attributed to the political situation in the district. In Malda, 'the Congress...and the CPM are divided nearly 50:50; and politics rather than the condition of the people is what concerns the elected representatives of the people.' (ibid., p - 289). Apart from this there was a gap in the communication between the district authorities and the state planning board. A meeting was called in the district to correct these errors and modify some parts of the plan. The district chair-persons and panchayat leaders were in agreement with the state planning board. The MLAs (Member of Legislative Assembly), who are state level politicians elected from the district, were the ones who benefitted most from the patronage politics of arbitrary project selection, and were thus very reluctant to have a meeting once they have made their promises to the electorate. In the words of Ghosh, 'stormy would be a mild word for the way the meeting of the DPCC started.' (ibid.). This is how Ghosh describes the meeting that he witnessed first hand.

One MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly) jumps to his feet. Please do not lecture us; we are the elected representatives of the people, we know the rural areas and represent them; we are answerable to them. We know the priorities. And why were we not told earlier of these diverse conditions? With what face can we confront the electorate - whom we have already advised as to the schemes we are going to implement - that these schemes are not to be allowed ? MLA after MLA jumps to his feet. For a while there is pandemonium. (ibid., p - 291)

Although the matter could be resolved later, mainly through the energetic intervention of the elected leaders of the panchayats, it shows the incredible challenges that arise when a planning process is both decentralised and democratised at the same time.

Though he was always appreciative of the efforts of the Left Front government to initiate the process of democratic decentralisation, his observations in West Bengal also made him conclude that, 'in the final analysis, it is the timber of the local politicians rather than party politics *per se* that would determine the quality of the local level plans. The only safeguard is to get the people enthused about this entire matter. There is nothing like the popular will to tame politicians.' (ibid., p - 289)

Despite this energetic beginning made by most districts in the state, the process of decentralised planning could not develop into a full fledged bottom-up process as had been hoped by seeing the achievements of districts like Medinipur. Jayati Ghosh wrote that, 'most of the districts stopped systematic attempts at district planning and local resource mapping after the mid-1990s.' (Ghosh: 2004, p - 55).

7.6 The Next Strategic Re-Orientation

On the whole, the path to development through the twin strategies of land reforms and democratic decentralisation has been quite a unique one in the country. Land reforms and democratisation were major achievements by themselves, but they had a strong impact on poverty reduction and empowerment in the countryside.

The extremely small size of the parcels that got created as a result of the land reform process created doubts in the minds of some observers, who had doubts about the

economic viability of such an empowerment strategy. The average size of plots distributed turned out to be 0.39 acres and the ceiling on any parcel distributed was 1 acre. However, such fears were proved false. Ghosh writes that 'in the early 1980s, observers were talking of an "agricultural impasse" in the state, but in fact it was precisely from that period that agricultural output took off, making crop output in West Bengal the most rapidly expanding in India for the 1980s as a whole.' (ibid., p - 74). She further writes, that 'the moving force of this agricultural output expansion has been small cultivators, unlike the rest of India, and this was substantially due to the fact that productive forces were unleashed as a combination of the land reform and greater power to decentralised elected bodies.' (ibid.).

The state experienced one of the highest growth rates in the country in recent years and much of that happened in the agricultural sector. During the 1960s and 1970s the state domestic product growth in West Bengal was below the national average. By the 1990s, West Bengal had become one of the fastest growing states in India. Between 1991-92 and 2000-01, the average annual growth in the net state domestic product was 6.75 per cent, which was higher than that of both Gujarat (6.34 per cent) and Tamil Nadu (6.25 per cent), which are generally considered economically dynamic states.

When the Left coalition government was formed in West Bengal in 1977, the incidence of poverty in the state was 60.52 percent. This was well above the 'below poverty line' (BPL) figure for India which stood at 51.32 percent. However, by 1999 - 2000, the below poverty line figure for West Bengal had come down to 27.02 percent, whereas that for India had come down to 26.10 percent. This shows a 55.35 percent decline for West Bengal compared to the 49.22 percent decline at the national level (Guruswamy: 2005, p - 4).

However, an important point to be noted about the West Bengal experiment is, that despite all the pro-poor orientation and achievements of the experiment, it is not true that the absolutely poor or powerless groups could become the dominant forces in the political spectrum of West Bengal. Kohli writes, that, despite the focus on structural change three points must be borne in mind while assessing the West Bengal situation -

1. The change is in the organisation of regime power and in the underlying class alliances rather than in the class structure.
 2. The structural political change is not from the upper to the lower classes, but rather from the former to an in-between group.
 3. The majority of the new office-holders are party supporters rather than party activists.
- (Kohli: 1987, p - 113)

Therefore, one cannot focus just on the tangible, material aspects of the West Bengal experiment. Apart from these tangible material achievements of the decentralisation experiment in West Bengal, there was a very important social-psychological achievement too. Robert Thörlind, agreeing with Biplab Dasgupta's argument, explains the social-psychological achievement in the following lines.

It is not that these land reforms have made the West Bengal peasant economically independent, or that he does not have to sell his labour power anymore. Instead Biplab Dasgupta argues that the main achievement of these land reforms is more of a social-psychological nature - to curb the former monopoly of the rich and to make the poor peasant feel that the state is behind him and supports his rights. The land he now holds, or more securely rents, provides the peasants with 'a certain amount of income and social status, and thus the ability to break through the mental barrier that makes him accept poverty and a low social ranking'. (Dasgupta: 1995, p - 2696, in Thörlind: 2000, p 75)

Thörlind further writes that 'this clearly fits with the radical NGOs' views on conscientisation and empowerment.' (ibid.).

By the early 1990s however, major changes were happening in the macro-economic processes in the country, which had a strong impact on the situation in West Bengal. This was a period of economic liberalisation in India, which, according to Jayati Ghosh, 'bore a strong resemblance to the standard Washington Consensus.' (Ghosh: 2004, p - 6). Some of the main characteristics of this liberalisation process are given below -

1. A substantial reduction in state control in terms of administered prices and regulation of economic activity.
 2. Privatisation of state assets.
 3. Reduction of direct and indirect taxes, leading to declining tax-GDP ratios.
 4. Cut backs in social expenditure, increase in user charges for public services and reduction in subsidies to farmers.
 5. Sharp reduction in rate of tariff production.
 6. Removing interest rate ceilings, leading to increased cost of borrowing.
 7. Easing of rules for foreign direct investment.
- (ibid.)

Among these, the reduction in state subsidies to farmers and the high costs of borrowing have hit the Indian farmers the hardest. Despite the extreme reluctance of the corporate media, news of a growing agrarian crisis was trickling in. One of the most unfortunate aspects of this crisis was the growing number of suicides by indebted farmers in India. The growing input prices, withdrawal of state support, the falling international price of cotton and the high subsidies provided to their farmers by most first world states, created a vicious cycle of poverty and indebtedness for the Indian farmers. Sainath wrote that, 'close to 150000 Indian farmers committed suicide in nine years from 1997 to 2005.' (Sainath: 2007, p - 1).

Though, West Bengal did not face the extreme issue of farmer suicides, the farmers in the state did feel the impact of the neo-liberal policies. Ghosh writes that,

Cultivators in West Bengal over the 1990s were hit by higher input costs, especially for seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, water and electricity; highly volatile, stagnant and even falling farm gate prices of food grains and some cash crops; sharp declines in access to formal credit and crop loans; inadequate investment in physical infrastructure such as roads as well as irrigation and water management; and declining access to agricultural extension services run by the public sector. (Ghosh: 2004, p - 75) .

Alongside the challenges faced by the farmers in this new macro-economic environment, was the problem of industrial decline that had haunted the state ever since the Left Front assumed power. Between 1984 and 2001, the investment of industrial capital increased only four times in West Bengal, while it increased seven times in the rest of India. In the same period, 'the numbers employed in the organised sector in West Bengal almost halved, from 917000 to about 456000.' (ibid., p - 2). Though West Bengal's record in reducing poverty and increasing agricultural production was impressive, it was also clear that the 'flight of capital and the prolonged industrial unrest' had also 'taken their toll.' (ibid.). The Left Front had started realising that, under the new circumstances, a continued emphasis on the agricultural sector, without developing the industrial base of the state would be politically unstable.

From the late 1990s onwards, the Left Front started initiating the next major re-orientation of its development strategy - this time focussing on promoting the state as an ideal destination for industrial investment. This shift of focus automatically signalled a shift from a rural focus to an urban focus for the first time in the history of Left Front rule in West Bengal. In the absence of any major urban centre apart from the capital city of Kolkata, a focus on urban areas automatically meant a focus on the city of Kolkata and a concerted effort towards turning the city as investor friendly as possible. Environmental improvement of slums, city beautification and infrastructure creation and up gradation became the new *mantras* of planning and development in such a situation. This re-reorientation geared towards urban development for investment attraction created new challenges for the process of decentralised and democratic planning in Kolkata. The situation was all the more ironical, because this was also the period, when the city of Kolkata took the lead in implementing the provisions for further democratisation of its planning structure by creating the Kolkata Metropolitan Planning Committee. Although, all major cities of the country had to take these steps towards democratising their planning structures according to the provisions of the 74th Amendment to the Constitution, it was again the state of West Bengal that took the lead.

In the next chapter, the urban dimension of the decentralisation experiment of west Bengal; the consequences of focussing on rural areas at the expense of the urban centre;

and the conflicts emerging from the re-orientation of the overall development strategy of the Left Front from a focus on agriculture and rural development towards a focus on industry and urban development shall be discussed.

8. Democratising of the Planning Structure in Kolkata

8.1 *The City of Kolkata*

Kolkata, the capital of the state of West Bengal, has had a very unique position among India's cities in the past. From the time the agents of the British East India Company first set up their trading posts on the banks of the river Hugli in the seventeenth century, till the year 1912, Kolkata was the capital of British India. Although the capital subsequently shifted to Delhi, the economic importance of this second city of the British Empire remained strong. The following description by historian Rajat Ray gives a good idea of the position of Kolkata in the national and international context post 1912.

Kolkata remained the nerve centre of the economic connection between Britain and India. From this city the tentacles of British economic imperialism had spread over the vast north Indian hinterland during the nineteenth century. The overall subordination of the Indian economy to British capitalism was reflected in the dominating importance of Kolkata as a centre of commerce. Situated in the gateway of the river systems of northern and eastern India, Kolkata's port provided easy access to ocean going vessels. It was the natural outlet for tea, jute, coal, indigo and other raw materials which fed Britain's industrial economy, as well as the major point of entry for cloth, sugar, salt and other British manufactures which had captured the vast market represented by India's teeming millions. A terminus of important rail and steamer systems which linked it with the tea-gardens of Assam, the jute fields of East Bengal and the coal-mines of West Bengal and Bihar, Kolkata held sway over the biggest industrial complex in India. It enjoyed with Mumbai one of the most organised financial markets and active stock exchanges in India. Out of 44 crores invested in various industries by joint stock rupee companies in India, no less than 23 crores were invested by companies with headquarters in Kolkata. (Ray: 1979, p - 3)

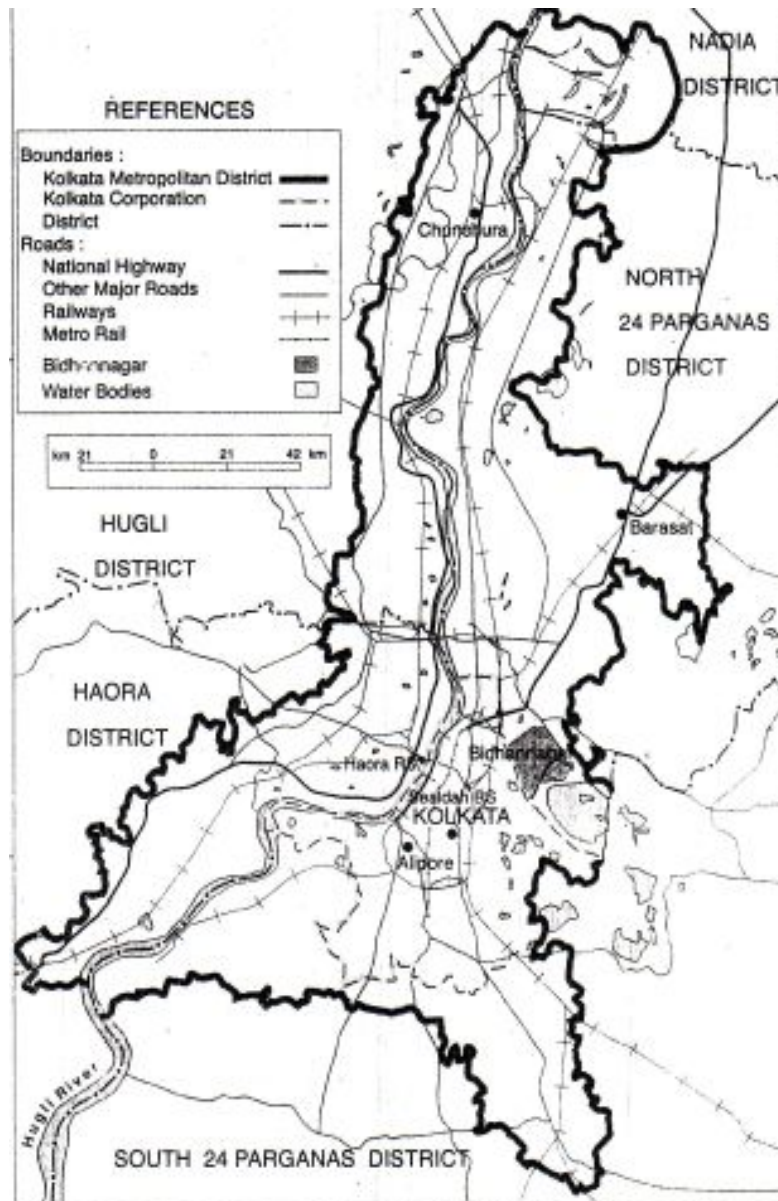
The economic position of the city remained strong even after the independence of India. Banerji and Chakravorti write, that 'according to 1964 figures, the Kolkata port handled

92 per cent (by tonnage) of India's export and 25 per cent of its import. The metropolitan district at the time contained 15 per cent of India's manufacturing capacity and handled 30 per cent of the total value of bank clearances nationally.' (Banerji and Chakravorti: 1994, p -2). This dominant economic position of the city led to a steady growth in the city population and in the last decade of the twentieth century the Kolkata Municipal Corporation had 'three times the population density of New York City.' (Kohli: 1990, p - 123).

According to the 2001 census the Kolkata Metropolitan Area had a population of 13.2 million persons and a total area of 1854 sq.km. The Kolkata Metropolitan Area consists of 3 municipal corporations, 38 municipalities and 527 towns and villages. Kolkata city, which is administered by the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC), had a population of 4,572,876 according to the 2001 census and an area of 187 sq. km. Almost 32 per cent of the population (1,485,309 persons) lives in slums and it is estimated that as many as '500,000 to 600,000 live on the streets.' (Ibid.). The Kolkata Municipal Corporation is territorially divided into 15 boroughs, which are further sub-divided into 141 municipal wards.

In his splendid account of local politics in the city of Kolkata, Atul Kohli draws attention to four demographic facts, which are important for a more nuanced understanding of the historical processes underlying the sheer size of the population of this city. The first one is, that despite the high density of population, the growth rate of the population has actually declined in the last few decades of the twentieth century. From the late 1970s onwards West Bengal started losing its pre-eminent position in the Indian economy. Between 1980 and 1998, i.e., precisely during the period when the left Front consolidated its hold over the state and initiated successful agrarian reforms, the share of West Bengal in the total value of industrial output in India declined from 9.8 per cent to 5.0 per cent (Ghosh: 2004, p -6). The decline in economic importance also caused a decline in the population growth rate of the city. According to Kohli, the city 'just doesn't attract migrants as it once did' (Kohli: 1990, p - 123).

Figure 2 Kolkata Metropolitan Area



(Source: National Atlas and Thematic Mapping Organisation, Kolkata)

The second fact is the high rate of literacy in the city. This is true for the overall population in the city and also among the slum dwellers. This high level of literacy exists side by side with a high level of unemployment in the city. Kohli correctly points

out, that such a co-existence of ‘poverty and unemployment among a literate population can be politically explosive.’ (Kohli: 1990, p - 124)

The third point that Kohli mentions is, that contrary to popular assumption Kolkata is not an ‘exclusively Bengali city.’ (Ibid.). Its economic and political importance drew migrants into the city from various parts of India. The city has considerable diversity both in terms of mother tongue and religion. The fourth demographic fact was that at the time of partition of India, there was not a substantial migration of Muslims out of Kolkata to East Pakistan, as had happened in the case of Muslims living in Punjab. This was another cause of the extremely high population density in the city.

Based on the above facts Kohli writes that it was much easier to expect a perennial state of chaos to prevail in the city rather than peace and good governance.

Because of severe overcrowding, extremes of poverty, high rates of unemployment among the educated youth, great ethnic diversity and the presence of a large homeless population, one wonders how political order in such a setting can ever be achieved. It is much easier to expect breakdown and chaos here than to expect a functioning and effective local government. (Ibid.).

The Left Front government had started making attempts to democratise the planning process in the city of Kolkata long before the 74th Amendment to the Constitution was enacted. Like in the rural areas, the democratisation strategy in Kolkata too focussed on a twin strategy of empowering the urban local government institutions and fighting for security of tenure for the urban poor. However, the first major planning intervention in Kolkata in the post-independence period happened before the Left Front came to power, and was triggered by a public health disaster.

8.2 The Basic Development Plan - The Politics of Apolitical Planning

In the year 1958 an outbreak of cholera in the city claimed 250 lives. In 1959 a team from the World Health Organisation visited Kolkata and ‘recommended immediate planning for potable water supply, drainage and sewerage, along with a general

planning effort to address the abominable condition of the city's transportation system, housing, slums and land-use.' (Banerjee and Chakravorti: 1994, p 1). The state government, which was under the rule of the Congress Party, decided to invite the Ford Foundation as consultants to prepare a plan for Kolkata. In the absence of any formal agency for planning in the early 1960s, The Kolkata Metropolitan Planning Organisation was created in 1961 to be a base for the planners of the Ford Foundation and the main planning agency for the whole city.

According to Banerji and Chakravorti, 'the effect of American planning style was apparent from the very beginning.' (Ibid, p - 2). The Basic Development Plan (BDP) prepared by the Ford Foundation marked a significant departure from the British influenced master plan approach, which was prevalent in India during that time. Instead of a detailed focus on land use, the approach of the BDP was strategic and aimed at overall economic development. Rather than listing out specific projects the plan was to 'simply outline the desired direction of growth.' (Ibid.). Some of the major characteristics of the BDP are listed below -

1. Strategic - It had a strategic approach, rather than one based on primarily physical solutions to urban problems.
2. Regional - The plan suggested the development of four economic growth poles, viz. the Kolkata Metropolitan District (which encompassed a far larger area than the municipal limits of the city of Kolkata), the Haldia port area, the Durgapur-Asansol industrial complex, and the Siliguri market area.
3. Comprehensive - The plan attempted to encompass all aspects of urban life and proposed the preparation of separate plans for water, sanitation and transportation. It also sought to incorporate the existing urban institutions and their roles within its scope.

Such an approach truly rectified many of the technical problems associated with the master plan approach. The Ford Foundation was instrumental in transferring the innovations of American planning to an Indian city. Banerji and Chakravorti wrote, that 'the three basic tenets of Ford Foundation expertise - regional planning, a strategic

policy orientation, and a strong reliance on data analysis and modelling - were accepted locally with no resistance.’ (Ibid, p - 5)

However, despite all the improvements over the rigid master plan approach, the BDP failed to live up to its own ideals. The failure of BDP is very interesting, as it showed very clearly that merely altering the technique of plan making and the strategic approach of the plan, does not ensure a better planning process in reality. Just like the master plan approach, the strategic plan also assumed a massive availability of data, the capacity to process it and the necessary institutions and political eagerness to carry forward the grand ideas.

Right from the very start the implementation of the BDP regressed from the strategic approach to the physicalist approach. Banerji and Chakravorti write, that ‘although the BDP was never intended to be project specific, it now included a list of projects in an addendum obviously forced by political exigencies.’ (Ibid, p - 2). The irony was, that despite being a serious deviation from the essential philosophy of the BDP, these projects were considered inevitable for the development of the city. Over time, this list of projects ‘turned out to be the very essence of the BDP.’ (Ibid, p - 2). However, there were other processes taking shape in the city, which not only derailed the implementation of the BDP substantially but also exposed very clearly the flaws inherent in such strategies at reviving urban environments.

It was in this period, as we have seen in the previous chapter, that the popular movements for land reforms were getting stronger. These movements had an urban dimension too which focussed on the plight of the scores of *bustee* dwellers in the city. As the economic importance of Kolkata grew during the nineteenth century, scores of migrants came into the city in search of the myriad economic opportunities that the city offered. In response to the need for shelter of this growing work force a unique and complex three-tier tenure structure got developed in the city. At the top of this structure was the landlord, who would rent out large plots of land to ‘members of his retinue’ (popularly known as the *thika* tenants) (Chakravarti and Ramaswami: 1997, p - 64). The *thika* tenants would build small huts on the land and rent them out to the labourers. The

landlords didn't show any incentives to provide basic services on these plots of land. Whenever the city authorities provided civic facilities, the landlords simply evicted the labourers and rented the land to more prosperous tenants to earn high profits.

During the 1950s the communist parties spear-headed a movement focussed on the land rights of the *bustee* dwellers. This coincided with the passing of legislations both at the national and the state level. At the state level the rights of the landlords were curtailed and tenancy rights granted to the intermediary *thika* tenants. Throughout the post-independence period, when the Congress Party dominated both the State Government and the KMC, the communists provided consistent political opposition. However, the Congress rule was not threatened until the late 1960s, due to the lack of unity among the various parties leftist parties.

A well planned city had a very specific political purpose to serve. Banerji and Chakravorti wrote that the 'underlying assumption of the interests promoting and funding the BDP was that "better" infrastructure would lead to a "better" and less Marxist city.' (Banerji and Chakravorti: 1994, p - 3). These overt and covert arguments in favour of the BDP reflected at the micro-level the general rationale for what Hickey and Mohan have described as 'imminent development'. (Hickey and Mohan: 2004, p - 10). In the years of the cold war, apparently apolitical and physicalist solutions to developmental problems were promoted not so much out of a genuine concern for the plight of people and the environment in developing countries, as for preventing the rise of communist movements, which invariably focussed on 'immanent development'.

We have already discussed in an earlier chapter, the role played by the CIA and the United States embassy in India in the dismissal of the democratically elected leftist government of Kerala. Similarly, in just the period when the Ford Foundation specialists were busy advising the Kolkata Metropolitan Planning Organisation, the foreign aid received by India from the United States was increasing steadily for quite a unique reason. In her analysis of the Indo-Chinese border conflict of 1962, the eminent journalist Anna Louise Strong wrote that,

Aid granted India by the U.S.A. and U.S. - controlled funds in the past ten years averaged only \$ 105.2 million a year for the first six years when India was neutral; then from mid-1956 to 1959 when she moved to the right, India got \$ 645.5 million yearly; now for the three years 1959-62 in which she fights China, she averages \$ 1,290.8 million a year. Is Nehru any longer a fully “free agent” ? Or is he bound to his creditors? (Strong: 1962, p - 3)

The involvement of the Ford Foundation in the planning process of this communist hotbed of India is also a very interesting fact, and further underlines the political motive behind seemingly apolitical instrumental interventions for planning and development. In his essay on the interactions between the CIA and philanthropic foundations in the United States, James Petras wrote, that ‘the Ford Foundation-CIA connection was a deliberate, conscious joint effort to strengthen U.S. imperial cultural hegemony and to undermine left-wing political and cultural influence.’ (Petras: 2001, p - 1). Petras further wrote that this ‘collaboration of respectable and prestigious foundations, according to one former CIA operative, allowed the Agency to fund “a seemingly limitless range of covert action programs affecting youth groups, labour unions, universities, publishing houses and other private institutions”.’ (Saunders: 1999, p - 135, quoted in *ibid.*)

In the case of Ford Foundation’s entry to India, again a strong role was played by the US embassy. Ambassador Chester Bowles was involved in the process which culminated in the Ford Foundation setting up its office in India in 1952. An article published by the Research Unit for Political Economy (RUPE), Chester Bowles wrote the following lines to Paul Hoffman, who was president of the Foundation from 1950 to 1953 and had opened its international office in Delhi.

The conditions may improve in China while the Indian situation remains stagnant...If such a contrast developed during the next four or five years, and if the Chinese continued their moderate and plausible approach without threatening the northern Indian boundary...the growth of communism in India might be very great. The death or retirement of Nehru might then be followed by a chaotic situation out of which another potentially strong communist nation may be born. (R.U.P.E: 2003, online source)

Paul Hoffman, agreeing with Bowles' analysis wrote that,

A strong central government must be established...The hardcore of communists must be kept under control...The Prime Minister Nehru greatly needs understanding, sympathy and help from the people and governments of other free nations. (ibid.)

The growing leftist movements voicing the demand of the landless poor in the country for agrarian land reform prompted the Ford Foundation to get involved in the agrarian sector too. The Foundation was closely involved with the Community Development Programme (CDP) initiated by Prime Minister Nehru in the 1950s. The CDP was described by the Prime Minister as 'a model for meeting the revolutionary threats from left-wing and communist peasant movements demanding basic social reforms in agriculture.' (R.U.P.E: 2003, p - 3)

According to R.U.P.E, the Foundation 'helped train 35000 village workers for the CDP' and 'by 1960 the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations had between them extended over \$ 50 million on the CDP alone.' (R.U.P.E: 2003, p - 3). The problems of de-linking such a large development program from the local government institutions has already been discussed in an earlier chapter.

The suggestions of the Foundation to the agrarian problems of India were completely the reverse of what was attempted later in West Bengal. While the West Bengal experiment focussed on the twin strategies of land distribution and empowerment of local government and increasing agricultural productivity through mobilisation of scores of small and middle farmers, the strategy of the Foundation focussed on purely technical interventions to assist the Green Revolution. According to R.U.P.E, the Foundation 'even funded the Intensive Agricultural Development Program (IADP) as a test case...providing rich farmers in irrigated areas with subsidised inputs, generous credit, price incentives' and 'the World Bank too puts its weight behind this strategy.' (ibid., p - 4)

Initially, urban and regional planning was not one of the focus areas for the Ford Foundation's mission in India. It wanted to stay focussed on rural development issues. However, in the 1950s it found itself involved in a major planning initiative to prepare the Delhi Master Plan of 1962. Following this planning exercise, the Foundation was approached by the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, for assistance regarding the preparation of a plan for Kolkata too. Initially, the head of the Foundation's office in Delhi, Douglas Ensminger, was reluctant to get involved in yet another urban planning exercise. However, the Chief Minister stressed on the political situation in the region as a strong reason for the Foundation to get involved. This is how he described the situation in Kolkata to Ensminger,

You have seen the condition of Kolkata with your own eyes. India is in real trouble with respect to Kolkata. It was no longer a foregone conclusion in the next and succeeding elections the Congress could win and unless the Congress Party gave leadership to changing and improving the living conditions in Kolkata, the communists would be voted into power and if the communists were voted into power in Kolkata and West Bengal then there would be a real threat of communism in Eastern India. Kolkata had to be looked upon as India's problem as well as the world's problem if, particularly the Western world, was interested in the success of democracy in India. (Ensminger: 1972, p - 7, quoted in Banerjee: 2005, p - 155)

The plan document was finally published in December 1966, just a few months before its main patron, the Congress Party was defeated in the assembly elections of 1967. As the coalition of fourteen leftist parties, called the United Front, assumed office, the BDP was sidelined. The political instability and chaos that followed the election and the imposition of president's rule in late 1967 and the re-election of the United Front in 1969 meant that the BDP would remain shelved till 1970. In those years before the 10th Party Congress of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the approach of the Left Front was tilted towards open class confrontation. Such an approach was totally different from that articulated through the BDP.

Kohli gives an interesting example of the application of such strategies in urban areas. One of the stands of the United Front, when it came to power, was to order the police 'not to interfere' in labour-management conflicts (Kohli: 1990, p - 126). The United Front labour minister Subodh Bannerjee said,

"I have allowed a duel between the employees and employers in West Bengal, and the police have been taken out of the picture so that the strength of each other may be known." (ibid., p - 130)

Kohli writes, that through such strategies, 'the United Front...may have improved its political standing with labour, but industrial production plummeted, and capital fled to other parts of India.' (ibid.). The flight of capital was preceded by utter chaos in the industrial scene of Kolkata and within the first few months of the United Front government as many as 1000 *gheraos* were recorded in and around Kolkata. (ibid.)

This flight of capital was further aided by the absence of a well developed regional bourgeoisie in West Bengal. Ghosh writes, that 'the traditional (mainly Marwari) business houses of Bengal have shown a tendency to move new investment to other states, unlike the regional bourgeoisie of other states such as Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh.' (Ghosh: 2004, p - 77)

Another characteristic of the period, was the rise of the ultra-leftist Naxalite movement, which refused to participate in electoral politics and decided to wage war against 'class enemies' using violent means. The class enemies included 'members of other political parties (especially the CPM), university professors, informers, and, of course, members of the police.' (Kohli: 1990, p - 130). Kohli writes, that 'one measure of the chaos that existed in Kolkata in 1970 and 1971 is that even under presidential rule, there could be as many as sixty political murders committed in a day.' (ibid.). Side by side with the ultra-leftist Naxalites, the Congress party too turned increasingly violent by including hoodlums and toughs into its ranks. When elections were held in 1969, after the first spell of presidential rule, the United Front was again voted to power. As the political chaos remained unabated, this government too was dissolved and presidential rule

imposed again in 1970. It was in this phase of complete undermining of all democratic institutions and processes in the whole state of West Bengal, that the BDP found new life.

8.3 The Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority - Increasing Centralisation

The resources required for the program package prepared by the BDP creators for immediate implementation, was far beyond the financial capacity of the Government of West Bengal in 1966. However, the political volatility of the state in the last three years of the 1960s increased the eagerness of the central government of India to do something about the proper development of the city of Kolkata. In such a political atmosphere the general assertion of the Congress ruling elite both in Kolkata and in Delhi was that 'what was needed at once in Kolkata...was a massive infusion of funds for physical improvement projects that would improve the physical city, create jobs, and ultimately counteract the rising twin forces - revolutionary Marxism and electoral Marxism.' (Banerji and Chakravorti: 1997, p - 3).

The requirement of Rs. 100 crores for the projects that required immediate implementation in the city in 1966, had increased to Rs. 150 crores, by the time the Government of India agreed to release funding for their implementation in 1971. Out of the total amount, Rs. 43 crores was to be provided from the plan funds and the rest was to be raised from other sources including market borrowing. In the same year, the KMDA was authorised to go in for market borrowings (Banerjee: 1991, p - 34).

Between 1971 and 1974, the KMDA received capital funds to the tune of Rs. 130 crores. From 1974 onwards the World Bank also got involved in the Kolkata planning project. Though, the funds from the World Bank were not transferred directly to the Authority, but flowed through the Government of India and the Government of West Bengal in the form of plan funds, a certain regularity and certainty of funding was ensured through the Bank's involvement. However, the Bank also showed a particular bias towards the implementation of those projects of the BDP which were concerned with the physical aspects of the city, rather than those which focussed on the socio-

economic conditions prevailing in the city. Of the 160 projects listed by the BDP, the Bank funded 44, and these included projects dealing with water supply, sewerage and transportation. Interestingly, the *Bustee* (slum) Improvement Programme, which was considered one of the major achievements of the BDP was not funded by the World Bank.

The idea behind setting up the KMDA was not to let it encroach upon the functions of all the existing urban planning and development institutions such as the Kolkata Improvement Trust (KIT), the Howrah Improvement Trust (HIT), Kolkata Municipal Corporation and the Kolkata Metropolitan Water and Sanitation Authority (KMSWA) for the sake of implementing the BDP, but to coordinate them. However, the power of raising finances and the urgency of addressing the myriad of challenges facing the city increasingly led to the centralisation of all planning and development authority at the hands of the KMDA. Shortly after its formation, the KMDA took over the management of the HIT and KMSWA.

According to Tapan Banerjee,

The advent of the KMDA marked the beginning of centralisation of local functions in this Authority in respect of the development of the KMA. All urban local bodies in the KMA, including the Kolkata Corporation, the KIT, HIT and KMSWA, were now to receive capital fund from a single source, i.e. the KMDA, which mobilised capital fund through market borrowing and Central and state assistance....The KMDA itself grew into a massive organisation quite rapidly. The size of the staff increased from 800 in 1972 to around 5000 by 1980, excluding that of the KMSWA, KIT and HIT. (ibid., pp 34-35)

This centralisation of power at the hands of a special purpose agency like the KMDA led to a steady marginalisation of local government of Kolkata. According to Banerjee, 'the Kolkata Corporation was soon to find itself in the role of an 'agent' implementing the projects of the KMDA.' (ibid., p - 35). Therefore, despite all the creativity of the strategic approach of the BDP over the physicalist master plan, we again end up

encountering the same issue that had been plaguing Indian planning for ages - the victimisation and marginalisation of the institutions of local democracy in the name of efficiency and a narrow conception of instrumental rationality. And just as has been discussed in an earlier chapter on the conflict between efficiency and democracy in Indian planning, the functional agency, despite all the centralisation of functional and financial authority at the cost of local democracy, failed to make a substantial difference to the overall fabric of the city of Kolkata.

However, it is wrong to assume that the mere presence of a functional agency automatically undermines the capacity and importance of local government. In a city of the size of Kolkata, with all the challenges that it faces, a local government may very well be in need of a body of trained experts purely devoted to the task of planning for the city. It is the unhealthy encroachment of each (whether local government or functional agency) into the other's realm of activities and responsibilities, which causes problems for the city at large.

By 1983, the KMDA had invested Rs. 450 crores in the development process that it initiated, but still it was felt that 'its impact on services was perhaps little more than marginal.' (Banerji: 1991, p - 35). Similarly, Arun Ghosh wrote the following lines in his memoirs in the winter of 1983.

Kolkata is an impossible place. Not because of the dust, the crowds, the traffic. Nor because of the occasional power shedding which is quite disconcerting...not even because of the appalling road conditions and the suffocating atmospheric pollution. Occasionally, it is difficult to breathe freely even while one is being driven (in relative comfort), so nauseating are the diesel exhaust fumes of buses and trucks. These are all disquieting features of Kolkata, as is the sight of roads dug up and not repaired, of the overcrowded trams and buses, people holding on to a knuckle-hold or toe hold space on the foot-board while the buses careen along at great speed...look at the revolting squalor on the pavements, of whole families living like animals, eating, bathing, defecating, sleeping, copulating and giving birth to new life on the pavements...Nothing seems to move here. It is difficult to fathom the reason for this inaction...A large section of the bureaucracy in West Bengal is not dead, it is simply perverse...Few people seem to be

bothered about the State's development program. The usual pastime is to stymie others effectively...This, then, is the Kolkata of today. (Ghosh: 1989, pp 34-37)

These lines are important as they come from one of the most brilliant and conscientious development planners of India, who was a great admirer of the democratic decentralisation experiment in West Bengal, was invited as an advisor to the State Planning Board by the Left Front government and shared none of the elitist prejudices of authors like Rudyard Kipling, despite the outward similarity in the nature of the reflection.

Such reflections hardly speak of a city where the BDP has been implemented successfully for over a decade. Arun Ghosh travelled widely throughout West Bengal as an advisor to the state planning board and in his writings one finds a stark difference between the conditions existing in the metropolis and the processes initiated in the rural areas of the state after the Left Front government came to power in 1977. Comparing the situation in the city and in the countryside, he wrote the following lines,

What a difference between the spirit, the vitality one sees in the rural areas and the stale breath of decay of Kolkata? How is this possible, in this city of culture, of tradition?...May be Kolkata is sickening, but the rest of West Bengal is not. While the loudspeakers are blaring in Kolkata, all through the State, in the villages, people are ploughing, harrowing, sowing, weeding, watering, harvesting, in sunshine and in rain, painstakingly going about their business...the signs of new life sprouting, a robust new community emerging...That is life. That is the story of human civilisation for upwards of 5000 years. (ibid., pp 36-37)

This difference between the energy and vigour of development effort in the country-side and the exact opposite of that in the main urban centre of the same state is one of the main contradictions in the whole democratic decentralisation experiment of West Bengal. This is not to say that the endeavours of KMDA had no effect at all. Indeed, the transport projects like the Barrackpore-Kalyani expressway, the eastern metropolitan bypass, pro-poor environmental projects such as the sanitization of registered slums and

socio-economic projects such as the small scale enterprise program have been important successes. But the combined challenges of political unrest, environmental degradation, the extent and intensity of urban poverty, the flight of industrial capital and an acute public apathy concerning issues of the local environment in the midst of a keen political consciousness have been rather overwhelming on the whole.

In the next section I shall discuss how the approach towards meeting these challenges changed after the Left Front Government came to power. When the United Front government came to power during the 1960s, the leftists couldn't capture the local government institutions in Kolkata, which remained under the control of the rival Congress Party. The competition between the Leftists and the Congressites to win the urban votes led to the adoption of unsustainable ploys by both groups. Interestingly, as Kohli points out, the Leftists couldn't score a substantial victory over the Congress party even in the State Assembly elections when it came to the Kolkata seats. The ethnic mix of the poorer sections of the city population had a role to play in this state of affairs.

Much of the migrant worker population of Kolkata are Hindi speaking people coming from outside the state. Since the days of the freedom struggle and particularly after it, the Hindi speaking belts of north India had been a particular strong-hold of the Congress party. On the other hand, the substantial presence of educated middle-class Bengalis in the Leftist parties and their championing of the cause of the refugees who poured into the city during the Bangladesh war created the impression that the CPM and the other Leftist Parties are primarily representative of Bengali interests. This cultural factor enabled Congress, and later, its break away factions like the All India Trinamool Congress, to maintain a substantial political presence in the city.

Though, from the early 1980s, the Left Front was in control of both the State Government and the Kolkata Municipal Corporation, and seriously tried to revive the institutions of local government and provide security of tenure to the *bustee* dwellers, the success of this twin strategy was nothing as remarkable as seen in the villages. One of the main reason for this was, that while the approach of the Congress Party was to solve the developmental problems of the state of West Bengal by investing in the

development of Kolkata, the approach of the Left Front was the reverse - to solve the problems of the metropolis by first concretely addressing the developmental problems of the countryside, where the bulk of the poor of the state lived.

The Leftist parties were aware, that the regional influence of Kolkata stretched far beyond the state and encompassed the whole eastern region of the country, and even the substantial reforms undertaken in the West Bengal countryside might not be enough to relieve the pressure on Kolkata. Tapan Banerjee, in his article, referred to a speech delivered by Jyoti Basu, the Chief Minister of West Bengal from 1977 to 2000, in which the leader 'sincerely hoped for fast economic development of all states in the eastern and north-eastern regions as that would largely solve the urban problem and the poverty in the KMA' (Banerjee: 1991, p - 24). Banerjee further wrote about Jyoti Basu, that 'as a visionary he could well perceive a durable solution to Kolkata's urban problem in a well conceived regional planning or macro-planning approach.' (ibid.)

This is interesting and ironic, as the macro-planning and regional approach aimed for in the BDP was attempted in a much more comprehensive and politically mature manner by the Leftists who were staunch opponents of the political patrons of the BDP. But taking such an approach while being forced to geographically restrict the scope of application within the boundaries of the state of West Bengal resulted in an unfortunate, but perhaps inevitable, shift towards rural development at the cost of urban development.

8.4 Planning and Governance Under the Left Front - Decentralising the Centralised

When the Leftists first came to power in 1967, the city of Kolkata had an elected local government which functioned for five years before being superseded by the state government in 1972. However, this period was so full of political changes with the creation two United Front Governments and the imposition of presidential rule, that the local government hardly found the time and opportunity to organise itself to meet the urban challenges. From 1972 to 1975, the local government remained superseded by the state government ruled by the Congress party. In the last two years before the election

of the Left Front, the nation was under Emergency, ruling out the possibility of having any kind of democratic government at any level.

Immediately after coming to power 1977, the Left Front initiated a strategy towards urban development which had three main characteristics -

1. Reviving and strengthening the institutions of urban local government.
2. Addressing the needs of the *bustee* dwellers regarding civic services and security of tenure.
3. Doing the above two without risking the hard earned political victories over the rival political parties, especially the Congress Party.

After coming to power, the Left Front government responded to the problem of the three-tier tenure system in the slums by taking over most of the *bustee* lands. However, this step wasn't enough for the purposes of comprehensive environmental improvement of the slums. According to existing laws, it was the intermediary *thika* tenant who had the authority to undertake such improvements. To rectify this problem, the Kolkata *Thika* Tenancy (Acquisition and Regulation) Act was passed, which substantially curtailed the power of the *thika* tenants while protecting the rights of the slum dwellers.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a series of steps were taken, which showed that the Left Front was eager to empower the urban local governments and make them the prime institutions for planning and development in Kolkata, rather than any super centralised functional agency such as the KMDA. In 1979, the West Bengal Municipal Finance Commission was set up to review and improve the fiscal performance of the municipalities and also develop the mechanisms for revenue transfer between the state government and the individual local government institutions based on the fiscal performance of the latter.

The Bengal Municipal Act of 1932 and the Kolkata Corporation Act of 1951 were both amended in 1980, to strengthen the managerial and financial capacity of the local government institutions. In the same year some institutions were created to act as

support structures for the local government. The Central Valuation Board was set up to ensure a 'fair and uniform valuation' of properties across the state for more efficient property tax collection. The Directorate of Local Bodies was set up to oversee the 'governance of the Bengal Municipal Act, to perform inspectorial functions and provide help, assistance and guidance to the municipalities.' The Municipal Engineering Directorate was set up to provide technical support. Apart from all these an Institute for Local Government and Urban studies was set up for knowledge dissemination, research and for creating an urban data bank (Banerjee: 1991, p - 37).

Another very important process initiated from the early 1980s was intended to curtail the tremendous centralisation of functions at the hands of KMDA. As has been noted earlier, that despite all the concentration of resources, the KMDA had not been very successful in reducing the urban problems of Kolkata. The very concentration of power and functions was coming in the Authority's way to function effectively. As Tapan Banerjee correctly points out, that 'being over centralised, the investment decisions of the KMDA were far removed from area specific-needs and aspirations at the local level; and thus quite understandably suffered from lack of popular participation, which eventually proved to involve higher social costs when the KMDA failed to carry out the responsibility of operation and maintenance of the civic assets it had created due to both want of financial resources and lack of compatible organizational competence.' (Banerjee: 1991, p - 36)

Alongside all the interventions being made to enhance the capacity of local government institutions, a high powered committee was set up in 1980, called the West Bengal Urban Development Strategy Committee. The committee made the following observation.

A decentralised organisational pattern is likely to step up the work of municipalities. Under the new Municipal Act, the municipalities will be given more power and strengthened by technical persons like engineers and financial experts. Even then a district level coordination committee may be necessary. At the other end, ward or

mahalla committees may be very useful to involve local people in development work.
(Banerjee: 1991, p - 38)

The state planning board, which was already active in promoting the decentralised planning structure in the villages also started taking steps in Kolkata so that the KMDA devolves the planning and implementation of local and area-specific projects and services to the local government institutions. After such a process of devolution, the main functions of the KMDA would be the following -

1. To continue acting as a mobiliser of capital fund.
2. Allocating capital assistance to municipal bodies.
3. Implementing trans-municipal and area-wide projects.
4. Inter-agency coordination.
5. Monitoring of project implementation at all levels.

(ibid.)

Thus, the role of the KMDA was perceived as an umbrella funding, coordinating and monitoring agency. It is not difficult to see, that this structure was not only more in line with the strategic planning approach that was embodied in the BDP but also provided it with a democratic aspect, which was lacking earlier. The local government was to be more robustly involved in the planning process than ever before. It was this process which was to culminate in the creation of the Kolkata Metropolitan Planning Committee (KMPC) in 1994, following the passing of the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act. A more detailed account of the KMPC shall be provided in the next section.

Following the recommendations of the West Bengal Urban Development Strategy Committee, were backed up by, what Banerjee describes as a, 'quantum jump in the capital assistance' to municipal bodies, 'from almost nothing to Rs. 1 to 3 crores.' (ibid.). This money was to be spent by the local government for local and area specific interventions, over a period of five years, and to be 'handled all by themselves.' (ibid.). These major changes went into effect from 1983 onwards.

In 1981, municipal elections were held all over West Bengal apart from Kolkata and Haora. According to Kohli, the reluctance of the Left Front to hold elections to the municipal corporations of Kolkata and Haora 'must be attributed to fear of losing the city to Congress or to a combination of Congress and other non-leftist parties.' (Kohli: 1990, p - 151). Even in the state assembly election of 1977, which brought the Left Front to power, the combined vote of Congress and the Janata party was more than 50 per cent. (ibid.)

The CPM and its allies in the Left Front estimated, that to hold elections in Kolkata under such circumstances, especially since they had no strong program for urban development, would mean certain defeat. At the same time, they, more than any other cluster of political parties in India were committed to reviving the local government. The CPM therefore devised a strategy to both preserve political power in Kolkata and revive the local government.

The total number of wards in the KMC, when the Left Front came to power was 100. Between 1977 and 1985, the Left Front undertook a process of adding 41 more wards. Most of these wards were located on the periphery of the Kolkata city and included the Jadavpur area, whose residents, being former refugees from East Pakistan/Bangladesh were strong supporters of the leftist parties. Moreover, these outlying areas, being semi-rural in character, had received the benefits of the rural development strategies so ardently promoted by the Left Front government.

In 1984, elections were held for the Haora Municipal Corporation after a gap of twenty years. One year later, elections were held in the 141 wards of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation, after a gap of twelve years. The calculations of the leftists proved to be correct. The CPM and its Left Front allies 'eked out a thin majority, just enough to form a city government.' (Kohli: 1990, p - 151). Kohli writes, that 'it is clear that without expanding the city, the CPM would not have won the KMC election.' (ibid.). However, it is also true that the legalisation and environmental improvement of slums also had a role to play in the victory. The support of the Left Front in the slums of Kolkata had also become strong by 1985. The decision to legalize the slums, which had never been

done by the previous Congress governments, reduced the perennial fear of being evicted. Following the legalisation, the government 'initiated new programs to introduce sewerage, running water, and electricity into those areas.' (Kohli: 1990, p - 141). Kohli referred to an analysis of the elections to KMC, which concluded, that 'the majority' of the dwellers of legalised slums voted 'in favour of the Left Front.' (ibid.).

However, it soon became clear, that the political strategies of the CPM had a wider vision behind them and the long preparations for ensuring victory had been made mainly to get the chance to initiate a process of empowering urban local government, which had so often been thwarted and shunned in the India. As per the requirements of the amended Kolkata Municipal Corporation Act of 1980, a Mayor-in-Council system for a local government was set up in India for the first time. In this system, the elected Mayor appoints a council, which is the city level equivalent of a cabinet. The cabinet becomes the city's 'ruling body.' (ibid.).

The 141 wards were grouped under 15 boroughs. Each borough had a committee consisting of councillors elected from the respective wards within it. These borough committees were made responsible for numerous civic services such as maintenance of government aided schools, hospitals, street lighting, road maintenance, municipal markets etc. Banerjee writes, that in both Haora and Kolkata the decentralisation of civic management had been 'perceived in the form of borough committees.' (Banerjee: 1991, p - 37)

With democratic decentralisation procedures strongly in place in both rural and urban areas, West Bengal could take the lead even in the implementation of the provisions of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments. One of the major provisions of the 74th amendment, which focussed on urban local bodies, was the setting up of Metropolitan Planning Committees for all metropolitan areas. In a metropolitan region of the size of KMA, most of the planning issues would spread over and across the boundaries of the individual municipalities and panchayats. Devolution of planning functions to these local government institutions would invariably call for a coordinating system which

much be able to meet the needs of spatial planning without compromising the democratic character of the planning structure.

The West Bengal Metropolitan Planning Committee Act (WBMPC) was passed in 1994, and the Kolkata Metropolitan Planning Committee (KMPC) set up in 2001. The KMPC was designed to be a democratic body for planning for the Kolkata region. Two-thirds of its members were elected by, and from among the locally elected representatives of the 41 municipalities and the approximately 100 gram panchayats in the KMA and the remaining one-third were comprised of nominated members such as the technocrats of the various line departments, academicians, members of the legislative assembly and professionals of other agencies like the Kolkata Improvement Trust.

The arrangement was similar to the decentralised planning system already in place in the villages. Just like the DPCC, the KMPC was supposed to prepare a 25-year Draft Development Plan (DDP) for the KMA by amalgamating the individual plans of the various municipalities and gram panchayats. The earlier recommendations by the West Bengal Urban Development Strategy Committee had suggested such a coordinating role for the KMDA, but the WBMPC Act gave a democratic angle to the whole task of regional planning by making the KMPC in charge of regional planning and coordination. According to the act, the KMDA would function as the technical secretariat of the KMPC. After being made the technical secretariat of the KMPC the KMDA prepared a 25-year plan called *Vision 2025: Perspective Plan of KMA*. The KMPC is also preparing five sectoral plans for the KMA.

The various urban local bodies were required to prepare 5-year DDPs. The West Bengal Municipal Act of 1993, was amended to incorporate this requirement of DDP preparation. The annual needs statements of the various municipal wards would have to be taken into consideration for the preparation of the 5-year DDPs. Thus, for the first time in India, a planning system was set up in an urban area which, at least in terms of the institutional arrangement, ended the subordination of local government institutions by technocratic functional agencies. However, in practice, the process, though

democratic in form, is yet to become democratic in spirit and content. In this structure too, the top is functioning better than the bottom. The 25-Year perspective plan has been prepared, but the amalgamation of municipal DDPs is incomplete and the mobilisation of ward committees for planning nearly absent. In fact, the process cannot start functioning properly until the people at the level of neighbourhoods and wards start taking ownership of the process and use the Ward committees to actively articulate the needs of the area and demand the necessary responsiveness from the higher tiers, where the lower plans are being amalgamated.

8.5 Left out under the Left Front

The support of the Left Front in the slums of Kolkata had also become strong by 1985. The decision to legalize the slums, which had never been done by the previous Congress governments, reduced the perennial fear of being evicted. Following the legalisation, the government 'initiated new programs to introduce sewerage, running water, and electricity into those areas.' (Kohli: 1990, p - 141). Kohli referred to an analysis of the elections to KMC, which concluded, that 'the majority' of the dwellers of legalised slums voted 'in favour of the Left Front.' (ibid.). However, while the Left Front achieved success in its development strategies in the countryside, consolidated its support among the slum dwellers through tenancy reforms, and strengthened the foundations of its political power and influence in the state, it also lost its support among some important groups in the city due to a combination of the very reasons that had given it its successes.

After coming to power, the Left Front started losing support among the Bengali middle-class population in Kolkata. Even in the 1985 municipal elections it was noted that the middle-class population and the Bengali intelligentsia, were moving away from the Left Front. Kohli attributes three reasons to this state of affairs. First, the whole strategy of the Left Front was focussed on developing the rural areas at the expense of urban areas. Such a focus led to the 'neglect of those city services that affect many middle-class urban residents.' (Kohli: 1990, p - 143). Even after two decades of being in power, it was noted in an Asian Development Bank report, that only 17 percent of the population were connected to the sewerage system, and less than 50 percent of the KMC area was

covered by a drainage system.’ (ADB: 2000, p - ii). Decline in Industrial development and the consequent shrinking of employment opportunities forced many well educated young women and men to seek jobs in other parts of India. The transport situation in the city was clear to anyone who had the experience of getting stuck in the notorious traffic jams of Kolkata, where the only choice for the commuter was to wait for hours in his car, breathe the air of one of the most polluted cities in the world and have his ears split by the constant honking of horns and the human rudeness which comes as a natural consequence of all these.

The second reason given by Kohli, was a ‘more diffuse, cultural reason’, which reflects an attitude that many middle class Bengalis have of themselves as being essentially ‘anti-establishment.’ (ibid.). This was also brought out in an interview that Kohli had with a member and District President of the opposition Congress Party, in which the President said, “When communists were not in power, the Bengali intelligentsia supported them; now, not so.” (ibid.). The very political maturity of the Left Front, that made it move away from revolutionary class struggle towards a process of land reform and democratisation ‘may have disillusioned the more romantic among Kolkata’s lively political strata.’ (ibid.)

The second group of people to start feeling alienated from the Left Front, were none other than the industrial workers, who were staunch supporters of CPM during the most difficult years that the party had to face in the 1960s and 1970s. As has been discussed earlier, the labour militancy encouraged and abetted by the United Front government created a political and industrial chaos in Kolkata, which finally forced the leftists to take a much more reformist stance in subsequent years.

Though such a stance reflects the political wisdom of the Left Front to survive and do what it can within the overall democratic-capitalist structure of the Indian state, it was no respite for the workers who sacrificed much in bringing the CPM and its allies to power. This is well documented in Nandini Gooptu’s paper on the condition of jute mill workers in the city of Haora, in the Kolkata Metropolitan Area. The jute industry had been one of the most prominent industrial sectors in Bengal from the colonial period

onwards. During the 1960s, there was a considerable increase in the strength of worker's unions and their ability to bargain collectively with the industrialists. Gooptu writes, that 'by the early 1970s, the norm of job security and the notion of worker's rights and entitlements in the jute industry had come to be recognised by the state, often in response to worker's mobilisation, in particular, after a strike wave in 1966, and general strikes in 1969 and 1970.' (Gooptu: 2007, p - 1924). These important entitlements included progressive labour legislation, increase and standardisation of wage rates, improvement in working conditions, social security and other welfare measures and the abolition of 'sardari' (labour recruitment through intermediaries) (ibid.).

However, Gooptu writes, that the employers used their superior resources and power to thwart such processes whenever they could. The militant labour movements, which reached their peak during the United Front government, showed, according to Gooptu, 'that workers...had come to internalise the legitimacy of their newly gained and hard-earned rights, and were prepared to fight in their defence.' (ibid.). The response of the employers was to use the mechanism of state coercion, when the Congress Party was in power. When the state apparatus was denied to them during the United Front rule, by asking the police to stay out of labour disputes, the employers resorted to rampant lock-outs. The national emergency came as a boon to industrialists. During these two years, 'labour movements were brutally repressed nationwide...and jute employers resorted to large scale retrenchment in their mills.' (ibid.). Such an analysis raises serious questions about the reality that gets described through terms such as 'chaos' and 'normalcy'. To have a more complete picture of the reality, it is, perhaps, better to say, that the move towards normalcy from the point of view of the employers created a crisis for the workers, and any move towards normal and human living and working conditions for the workers created chaos for the employers.

All through this period, the CPM, its allies and its trade union wing - Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) - had provided leadership and support to many workers' movements in the city. However, the more the Left Front aligned itself with the struggles of the workers, the more they created the conditions which would have

‘disastrous implications for governability.’ (Kohli: 1990, p - 145). Kohli writes, that although such actions consolidated CPM’s position as an authentic revolutionary party in the eyes of the of the workers, at that time, it simply was ‘not capable of understanding the detrimental effects of such a strategy on the overall political and economic situation, and thus the long-term prospect for building broad political support.’ (ibid., p - 146).

With the change in the overall strategy of the Left Front, its support for radical workers’ movements reduced drastically. What was important now was to lure back the industrialists and create a congenial atmosphere for investment, while at the same time trying to safeguard the rights of the workers as much as possible. Unfortunately, the eagerness to do the former often pushed the latter aspect to the background. This trend became even stronger with the emergence of neo-liberal economic policies from the 1990s onwards, which strengthened the position of the employers vis-à-vis the employed. Gooptu writes, that according to various estimates, ‘the number of permanent workers had been reduced by as much as about 100000 by the early 1990s out of a total work force of about 250000 and only about 30 per cent of workers enjoyed “permanent” status by 2000.’ (Gooptu: 2007, p - 1925). Even the rights of the permanent workers were being steadily encroached upon. This is how a worker, interviewed by Gooptu, describes the situation.

‘Our employer...pays his workers the weekly wage...You work, you get money [implying bare wages only, no other entitlements]. Don’t ask for your rights [a reference to the lack of dearness allowance, bonus, pensions, gratuity, guaranteed employment, etc.]. What you work for, ask only to be paid for that, but no more.’ (ibid.)

As the Left Front government in general and the trade unions in particular adopted an attitude of collaboration with the industrialists, the workers felt more and more vulnerable and isolated. Gooptu writes, that ‘the most influential and militant labour union of the 1970s CITU, dramatically attenuated its militancy in the 1980s, towing the government line to avoid alienating employers in search of investment.’ (ibid.).

Table 4 Decline in Labour Strife in West Bengal under the Left Front

Year	Number of strikes per year	Number of men in strikes per year	Number of man-days lost per year
1969 - 76	306	321122	5550000
1980	78	68411	1485399
1981	43	16592	620110
1982	29	8114	309292
1983	39	12014	563946
1984	49	286460	21596573
1985	39	13527	197215
1986	30	23130	273864

(Source: Kohli: 1990, p – 148)

Note: The increase observed for the year 1984 was due to a three-month long strike in the jute mills of Kolkata)

The disillusionment that set into the workers as a result of all this is vividly captured in their own words, as recorded in Gooptu’s interviews. This is how some workers living in the slums around the jute factories described the situation.

‘Here there is nothing. They [mill authorities] have cut off the electric supply [while the mill is closed]. Next they will cut off the water supply. Don’t drink supplied water, drink dirty water. Somehow the workers have to be broken in every way...If we have nothing to live on for a week or two, one is bound to run away. Leave the struggle and run away...

See this [battered] pole of bamboo. We are like this - left to rot away; we are standing upright today with difficulty, but we will collapse soon as we rot away.’ (ibid., p - 126)

Another group of workers said that ‘earlier there used to be agitation on behalf of the workers; now there is agitation on behalf of the employer.’ (ibid.). Some others drew incredible parallels with events in international politics to describe their condition,

‘[Osama bin] Laden made a cremation ground of America and no one could catch him. Our bastard employer is not getting into the hands of any union or the government. So you can say he is Laden no. 2...He [bin Laden] is not going to come into anyone’s hands [meaning he cannot be captured or brought to justice]. He [bin Laden] is no. 1, and our employer is no. 2. He is not going to come into anyone’s hands either. The government here [West Bengal] and the government in Delhi are in his pocket - he says so openly. He says he has power. He says a third of the High Court is under him’ (ibid.)

One of the best evidence of the changed circumstances in the political landscape of Kolkata comes from an editorial comment made by none other than the *New York Times*, two years after the municipal elections in Kolkata,

West Bengal’s Left Front Government is currently playing a constructive role as gadfly to the country’s inertia-bound Congress party...Local industrialists have made their peace with Mr. Basu. They argue that the communists out of power are trouble. In power, they have become realists, adept at persuading fractionalised unions to honour their agreements...West Bengal’s communists clobber their me-too opponents at the polls because they are smarter, better organised and less corrupt. (New York Times, April 16, 1987, quoted in Kohli: 1990, p - 150)

However, there is an interesting aspect to the marginalisation of workers’ movements in Kolkata, which can be considered as a positive achievement of the Left Front government. The undermining of workers’ movements and solidarity, is accompanied, in many cases, with a rise in narrow sectarian identities and communal tensions and conflicts. Gooptu refers to Jan Breman’s and Chitra Joshi’s analyses of industrial decline in the cities of Ahmadabad and Kanpur respectively to show how ‘the erstwhile political tradition of working class collective action gave way to narrow sectarian

identities and religious mobilisation, within a wider context of the rise of fundamentalism, caste conflict and communal tensions.’ (Gooptu: 2007, p - 1923).

However, even those journals and newspapers who were severely critical of the Left Front government in West Bengal, either for being too leftist (e.g. major local newspapers like ‘The Telegraph’ and ‘Ananda Bazaar’) or for not being leftist enough (e.g. journals such as the ‘Economic and Political Weekly’), had to agree in 1987 that, ‘in fact, there has been no report of any communal riot or caste conflict in West Bengal during the last ten years. [The] Left Front can really take pride in...the political stability it has ensured.’ (Kohli: 1990, p - 150). Kohli also observed, that ‘CPM is one of the few national parties that has scrupulously avoided entering into collusive electoral arrangements with the Hindu-chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).’ (ibid., p - 142).

Thus, it cannot be concluded that the softening of radical worker’s movements was a betrayal of the workers’ cause by the Left Front. If the Left Front had been completely sold out to the interests of capital, it would probably have succumbed to the rising influence of sectarian forces that were gripping many major Indian cities during the last two decades. In Kolkata an attempt was made to create a sustainable arrangement to prevent capital flight and yet try to accommodate the interests of the workers, just like the one attempted in the countryside between landlords and sharecroppers. However, it can be argued, that due to the overall focus of this resource constrained state government being on rural areas, the urban versions of the experiment failed to show similar results.

The third important group consists of the hundreds of thousands of people, who belong to the poorest of the poor in the city of Kolkata - the residents of informal settlements. Just like the slums, the settlements of these people can be found all over the city. Despite the legalisation of slums by the Left Front government, the sheer number of the informal settlements and the extreme location of most of them meant that granting formal recognition and undertaking environmental improvement in such settlements would be well-nigh impossible. Many of these settlements are located on the banks of the many inland waterways passing through the city, on the roadside footpaths or on

buffer land along railway lines. Many of these settlements were created in the aftermath of man-made disasters such as the great famine of 1943 (which is often referred to as the greatest man-made famine of all time) and the refugee crises caused by the partition of India in 1947 and the Bangladesh war of independence in 1971. Partha Chatterjee writes, that as a result of such crises the suburbs of Kolkata came to ‘accommodate a refugee immigration of more than three times the original population of the city.’ (Chatterjee: 2004, p - 54). These settlements almost always grew up illegally on private or public property, but with the ‘tacit acquiescence of the authorities.’ (ibid.).

The cause of the East Pakistan/Bangladesh refugees was championed by the leftist parties when they were in the opposition. The settlements which were located on illegal properties, such as garden houses, could benefit from the slum legalisation procedures initiated by the Left Front. However, those that lived on canal banks, roadsides and along railway lines, continued to live under the constant threat of eviction and excluded from all environmental up gradation schemes. The support that this group extended to the Left Front still remains, but it has a very different spirit and purpose - to extend support to the ruling coalition at least to mitigate the possibility of involuntary eviction.

8.6 Wooing the Investors

The failure to make a noticeable difference in the socio-economic and environmental condition of the city of Kolkata and the alienation of the three major groups of people described above had a negative effect on the political supremacy of the Left Front in the city. A new and energetic rival of the Left Front started appearing in the political arena in the late 1990s in the form of the National Trinamool Congress party. The Trinamool Congress was largely made up of defectors from the Congress party and was led by the dynamic and vocal leader Mamata Bannerjee. Although the Trinamool Congress was far from removing the Left Front from power from West Bengal, it stunned all by wresting the KMC from the Leftists. It was for the first time that a non-Left political party took control of the local government in Kolkata. The rising influence of the Trinamool Congress and the alliance it formed with a coalition of religious right-wing parties led by the BJP, which was in control of the central government, caused alarm to the Left Front.

It has already been noted in the previous chapter, that despite all the measures taken by the Left Front government to control labour unrest and ensure political stability, the industrial stagnation of the state continued. The political challenge posed by the new rivals and the problems of sustaining the rural development experiment in a neo-liberal economic environment compelled the Left Front to re-orient its political and development strategy from rural and agricultural issues to urban and industrial issues. Partha Chatterjee wrote that 'after tripping over numerous ideological hurdles, the political leadership has been finally cornered into acknowledging that the economic revival of Kolkata depends on high technology industry.' (Chatterjee: 2004, p - 146).

From the late 1990s, the Left Front got into action to tackle the economic challenges facing the state and the political challenges posed by the new rivals simultaneously. In the year 2000, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, who had set a record of being the longest serving Chief Minister of any state in India (1977 - 2000), stepped down and Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, who had been in charge of the Ministry of Information and Culture, stepped in. Ever since stepping in as the Chief Minister, Buddhadeb Bhattacharya championed the cause of West Bengal's industrialisation actively and initiated discussions with many big industrial houses, such as the Tata Motors, for the setting up of its first small-car manufacturing plant in West Bengal; the Salim Group in Indonesia, for setting up of agro-based industries, a special economic zone (SEZ) and the construction of an expressway and a bridge; and various information-technology (IT) companies. He also showed willingness towards the restructuring of ailing public sector companies in the state.

It was not that a change of Chief Ministers, was all that was required to change the approach of the Left Front towards industrialisation. The Left Front had been trying to make West Bengal attractive to investors for a long time, but the special combination of political-economic factors that were becoming strong during the 1990s got the process going. The fielding of a new leader of the state, who was considered honest and completely incorruptible, leading a spartan life-style with his family in his small apartment, possessing a deep understanding to art and culture and, yet, proving to be

willing to make the necessary concessions to big business, was a very important signal given by the Left Front both to the middle-classes in Kolkata and the investors.

The political intelligence of the Left Front was once again proved, when it took back all the political space that the Trinamool Congress had taken possession of. In the municipal elections that happened in West Bengal in May 2005, the Left Front won 49 out of the 79 municipalities (excluding the Kolkata Municipal Corporation and the Bidhan Nagar Municipality). In the KMC elections that happened later that year, the Left Front won 75 out of the total 141 wards and reclaimed the most important local government body from its political rivals. The Left Front actually won in 14 more wards than in 2000. This was a significant victory as the city of Kolkata had ‘traditionally voted against the party in power.’ (Chattopadhyay: 2005, p - 4). The KMC election results showed, that the Left Front had been ‘able to attract a sizeable number of voters from the upper and upper-middle classes, and the non-Bengali business community.’ (ibid.). Equally revealing was its victory in the posh suburban township of Bidhannagar, lying to the north-east of the KMC. In the Bidhannagar Municipality, the Left Front won 18 out of the 23 wards.

According to Chattopadhyay, ‘the Left Front’s policies of inviting investment to West Bengal and promoting industrialisation, and the clean image of Buddhadeb Bhattacharya have contributed to bolster the confidence of the urban middle class.’ (ibid.). In the state assembly elections that happened in 2006, the Left Front completely trounced its opponents by winning for the seventh consecutive time and with a massive three-fourths majority. The industrial orientation was working extremely well for the Left Front politically and a survey conducted by the Indian Chamber of Commerce ranked West Bengal ‘as the third most preferred destination for investment’ after industrial heavy-weights such as Gujarat and Maharashtra (Chattopadhyay: 2006, p - 1).

Chattopadhyay observed that the Left Front had always tried to maintain a balance between the ‘need for industrialisation and the interests of the working class’ (ibid., p - 2). Bikas Ranjan Bhattacharya, the new mayor of Kolkata, who grew up in a slum himself, started giving priority to the improvement of slums in the city immediately

after being elected. Chattopadhyay wrote that this ‘was a welcome change from the emphasis on new flyovers and garden layouts, which appeared to have preoccupied the outgoing KMC leadership.’ (Chattopadhyay: 2005, p - 4). Similarly, Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya said the following lines in an interview.

Not everything about liberalisation is right. We are against the policy of hire and fire of labour and arbitrary privatisation. I believe socialism is a better system, but we live in a time where we have to work according to market conditions. (Chattopadhyay: 2006, p - 2).

However, even if the Left Front succeeds in the daunting task of balancing the need for investment attraction and the interests of the working class, the beneficiaries are going to be the organised sections within the labour force (in terms of livelihood) and the residents of the legalised slums (in terms of residence). Both the populace involved with the substantial informal economy of the city and the hundreds of thousands of residents of the informal settlements, are undoubtedly going to suffer more than ever before.

It is not that there would be a severe stepping up of governmental action against them. Indeed, the implementation of neo-liberalism increases the number of people in the informal sector rather than acting directly against it. However, the city of the informals, will be more and more in the way of the city that the rising upper- and middle-classes would demand. The shelters of the informal residents will increasingly come in the way of faster expressways, canal-side walkways, clean parks, shopping malls, cineplexes, high-tech office complexes etc.

Thus, during the 1990s three important processes were happening simultaneously, which affected the nature of the overall development strategy of the Left Front.

1. The rise of neo-liberal economic policies in India.
2. The strengthening of local democratic institutions nation-wide through the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution of India.

3. A re-orientation of the development strategy of the West Bengal government from a rural and agricultural focus to an urban and industrial focus due to political and economic reasons.

In the next chapter I shall, through the use of an area-level case study, show how such changes are affecting one of the poorest sections of the city of Kolkata - the residents of informal settlements along an important canal system of Kolkata. Such an account would give a clear picture of how all the macro-level changes, as well as the institutions created for democratic decentralised planning are being seen from the point of view of this section of the population. Such a local level investigation is also a litmus test for the overall democratic planning structure set up in Kolkata, and a way of testing the potential that such a structure has in resisting or mitigating the effects of neo-liberal urbanisation on the poorest groups in the city.

Part V

The Case

9. Environmental Improvement of the Baghbazar Canal System - Understanding actually existing Democratic Planning

This chapter turns the analytical frame used to understand the democratic planning and development process in West Bengal up-side down. It may be better to say that it substantially zooms into the local area and see the effects of macro-level planning interventions and strategies, as they unveil at the micro-level. After having elaborated in detail the context and history of democratic planning in West Bengal, this chapter attempts to study and analyse the implementation of a cluster of environmental improvement projects to understand the nature of actually existing democratic decentralised planning in Kolkata.

The case selected for this purpose, was a cluster of small and big environmental improvement projects being undertaken to revive a major canal system of the city. These canal systems of Kolkata are a part of the inland waterways constructed by British engineers and planners during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to connect the resource producing areas of East Bengal with the markets of Kolkata. Over time, these canals became non-functional in terms of inland navigation, and their banks became home to tens of thousands of informal settlers. In the recent years, as the economic importance of the city of Kolkata started growing and it started being championed as a potential investment destination, the demands for undertaking widespread environmental improvement and beautification of this severely dense and polluted city became stronger. The canals of Kolkata became a focus of such improvement projects, as their revival could contribute to sustainable city transport options, creation of much needed recreational spaces and opening up the land on the canal banks for commercial use.

However, undertaking such improvement would also mean coming up against severe humanitarian and political issues of removing the informal settlers from the banks. How does such an improvement process originate and navigate its way towards implementation ? What role do the institutions of local government and the newly set-up democratic planning structure play in such a situation ? How do the informal settlers view the turbulent evictions that they are faced with ? How do the different wards and local government bodies coordinate with each other in executing such a complicated project, especially since the canal system flows through the territories of four major municipal bodies in the KMA (the Kolkata Municipal Corporation, Bidhannagar Municipality, South Dum Dum Municipality and the Rajarhat-Gopalpur Municipality) and across numerous wards. Answering such questions can provide us with a clearer understanding of how neo-liberal urbanisation and democratic planning actually work at the local level.

In the following section a short history of the inland waterways of Bengal is provided before moving on to a detailed account of the Baghbazar canal system, its informal residents and the improvement projects being undertaken on and along it.

9.1 The Inland waterways of Kolkata

The man-made canal systems that traverse the surface of the city of Kolkata are more than just an ingenious system of waterways developed for the twin purposes of inland navigation and storm-water drainage. Within their now stagnant waters, they contain the environmental and economic history of the city ever since it was established as the seat of the British East India company in the late 17th century. Though, I used the word man-made, the actual proportion of artificial canals in the whole system is very less. Out of the total network of waterways, the combined length of which is more than 1803 kilometers, only 120 kilometres is man-made. The original design idea was to link long stretches of naturally existing waterways with artificial canals at specific points and stretches.

Adam Smith had made a mention of the role played by inland navigation in the economic prosperity of the Bengal region in his classic work 'The Wealth of Nations'.

The improvements of agriculture and manufacture seem, likewise, to have been of very great antiquity in the provinces of Bengal, in the East Indies, and in some of the eastern provinces of China...In Bengal, the Ganges and several other great rivers form a great number of navigable canals in the same manner as the Nile does in Egypt...It is remarkable that neither the ancient Egyptians, nor the Indians, nor the Chinese, encouraged foreign commerce, but seem to have derived their great opulence from this inland navigation. (Smith: 1776, Book 1, Chapter 3, p - 3)

Figure 3 Inland waterways of Bengal



(Source: National Atlas and Thematic Mapping Organisation, Kolkata)

According to the imperial gazetteer of India, published in 1908, in the late nineteenth century this was ‘one of the most important systems of river canals in the world, judged by the volume of the traffic’, which averaged ‘1000000 tons per annum, valued at nearly four millions sterling.’ (The Imperial Gazetteer of India: 1908, p - 287). The area between Kolkata, and East Bengal was criss-crossed with numerous tidal creeks and

channels. Most of these were flowing in the north south direction, but sometimes they had a horizontal connection. For many years, these tidal creeks and channels had been used to bring rice from Barisal, which was the head-quarters of the major rice growing district of Backergunge, tea from Assam and Cachar and wood from the jungles of Sundarbans into Kolkata. In the other direction, salt, finished products and kerosene oil were transported from Kolkata to these very eastern districts. (The Imperial Gazetteer of India: 1908, p - 287)

Before the man-made canals were built to connect the naturally existing ones, the boats had to follow a long and treacherous route to reach Kolkata. Starting from the eastern districts they had to turn south and travel along the sea face and reach Hooghly through the Baratala creek, which lay 112 kilometers to the south of Kolkata. After completing this long circuit the boats would again travel northwards to reach Kolkata. This water route was known as the 'Outer Boat Route' or 'Lower Sundarbans Passage' (Mitra: 1980, p - 154, The Imperial Gazetteer of India: 1908, p - 287) . Travelling along the sea-face was particularly dangerous and virtually impossible for the small country-made boats during the rainy season.

The pioneering intervention was made by one Major Tolly, who devised a plan to create an inland waterway which would directly connect Kolkata with the east without having to take the detour along the sea face. Major William Tolly conceived the idea of joining naturally existing channels and riverines with man-made canals to create a straighter west-east water-way to avoid the longer and more dangerous 'outer boat route'. The construction began in 1775 and the canal became functional in 1777. (ibid. - 1953). This was the beginning of an ingenious process of creating a network of waterways by connecting naturally existing creeks and riverines with man-made constructions. After the creation of Tolly's nulla, many such canals were constructed by improving and extending existing waterbodies. These included important urban waterways, such as the Belegkata canal (completed in 1810), the Circular canal (completed in 1831), the New Cut canal (completed in 1859) and the Keshtopur canal (completed in 1910). The steady increase in the volume of traffic and the continuous process of siltation was the reason behind the construction of so many canals.

Tolly's Canal in 1835



(Source: Lotsy: 1990, p – 104)

Before the independence of India, this above network of canals was under the administration and supervision of an independent department of the Government of Bengal, known as the Circular and Eastern Canals Division. After independence, in 1947, all the eastern canals outside of Bangladesh (East Bengal became East Pakistan in 1947 and then the independent nation of Bangladesh in 1972), were under the administration of Irrigation and Waterways Department of the Government of West Bengal.

From the middle of the 20th century onwards, the condition of these vibrant waterways became increasingly poor. The maintenance of the canals declined steadily in the years following the independence of India. East Bengal became a part of Pakistan and West Bengal remained in India. This partition affected the economic inter-dependence

between the east and the west, which was the main rationale behind the construction of the canal system. The political turmoil in the city of Kolkata, lack of resources to maintain the canals, decline in traffic, the prioritisation of rural development over urban development by the ruling left-front government, the massive migration of refugees from Bangladesh during independence (1947) and the Bangladesh war of independence (1971) were some of the important factors that led to the transformation of these vibrant waterways to the near stagnant drains that one finds in the city in the present times.

Informal Settlement along the Circular Canal, 2005



(Photograph taken by author)

Apart from the economic function, the canals of Kolkata performed a very important environmental function too. Right from the establishment of the first urban settlements, the history of planning in Kolkata has been the history of finding the harmony between land and water in this region dotted with innumerable wetlands and criss-crossed by riverines, creeks and canals. Despite all the economic advantages and temptations that the location of the city provided, it was hardly a comfortable place for the English

traders to live in. The marshy land, dense jungles, intolerable heat and humidity in the summer months and the vigorous cyclonic storms from the Bay of Bengal all took their toll on the inhabitants. According to Davies, 'until 1800 the European inhabitants met on the 15th November each year to congratulate each other on having survived.' (Davies: 1985, p - 48). Hamilton, a private trader who operated in Kolkata independently of the East India Company, gave the following description of the state of health in the initial years of the city's development -

One year, I was there, and there was reckoned in August about 1200 English, and before the beginning of January there were 460 burials registered in the clerk's books of mortality. (Hamilton: 1727, in Davies: 1985, p 48)

Hamilton was further disgusted by the situation that got created with the flooding of the wetlands, lying to the east of the city, during the monsoon season. After the rains the waters would withdraw leaving behind a large amount dead and rotting fish and an unbearable stench. Being essentially a low-lying marshy land, storm water drainage and sewage disposal have always been a problem in Kolkata. It is interesting to note, that for about a hundred years after the establishment of the settlement, the administrators and planners continued to generate solutions to this problem based on the understanding that the city sloped toward the river Hooghly to the west rather than toward the wetlands to the east. In the early 1800s the Lottery Committee, which had been created to finance urban development in the city noted that the land actually sloped towards the east.

Kolkata's combined drainage and sewerage system was sanctioned in 1859 and laid out between 1860 and 1865 (CEMSAP: 1997, p -62). The underground trunk line is connected to 17 pumping stations in the eastern parts of the city. The pumping stations are necessary as the design capacity of the system is much lower than the amount of sewage it has to discharge in present times. It was only the central core of the city that had a proper coverage under this combined system. Most of the outlying areas of the city were not covered at all. According to an Asian Development Bank (ADB) report prepared in 2000, 'only 17 percent of the population in Kolkata municipal area are connected to the sewerage system and less than 50 percent of the area is covered by a

drainage system.’ (ADB: 2000, p - ii). The industrial waste flows largely untreated and the months of the monsoon flood substantial parts of the city practically every year.

The canals of Kolkata, which had been developed for inland navigation started performing an additional function of draining storm water and sewage out of the city. Even in their present dilapidated condition, the Bagjola and Baghbazar Canal systems in North Kolkata drain 15 percent and the Tolly’s Nullah drains 10 percent of the total waste water of the city. The remaining 75 percent flows through two channels constructed later, called the Dry Weather Flow (DWF) and Storm Weather Flow (SWF) channels. Thus at their fully functional stage the canal network performed the twin functions of solving the drainage problem of the low-lying city and also enabling the city to maximise its economic potential.

Apart from these functions, there was the obvious aesthetic appeal of having a network of waterways with a stretch of open space along both banks. This was especially important for a polluted city like Kolkata, which over time, lost much of its limited open space to the twin challenges of increasing density and poverty.

9.2 The Decline of the City Canals and the Calls for Revival

There were many reasons for the decline of the canal system of Kolkata from the mid-20th century onwards. The challenges of siltation and frequent shifting of course by the natural waterways were always there. Old canals had to be abandoned and new ones constructed in many cases, as has been documented above. What made the system necessary was the volume and vibrance of the inland trade, the overall economic and political significance of Kolkata as the second city of the British empire and the consequent ability to allocate necessary resources for the maintenance and upkeep of the canals. After the independence of India in 1947, all these necessary elements crumbled all at once.

The political and administrative importance of Kolkata had already started declining since 1911, when the capital of British India was shifted to Delhi. However, it still continued as an economic powerhouse. This economic prominence of Kolkata also

started declining due to various reasons after the political independence of India. The eve of independence was also the eve of the tragic partition of the country into the states of India and Pakistan. East Bengal, which always had a majority of Muslim population became a part of Pakistan and was called East Pakistan. Pitting one religion against another and one community against another in order to thwart any conscious efforts towards nation building on the part of the colonised people was a typical strategy of British imperialists in India.. This *divide et impera* strategy had some severe economic separate resource producing areas of the country from the resource processing and marketing areas. The separation of jute producing East Bengal from the jute processing and exporting West Bengal by a national boundary, thus, broke the back of the powerful jute based industry of Bengal. As, one of the prime purposes of the canal network was to connect the resource producing zones of the east to the markets and ports of the west, such a separation affected the prime economic rationale for having the canals in the first place. The maintenance of the canals suffered and the already existing problems of siltation compounded.

Added to all this was the human dimension of the problem, which presented itself in the form of massive inflows of refugees from East Pakistan during the partition of India in 1947 and the Bangladesh war of independence in 1972. Millions of refugees came to the city during this time and were forced to occupy any land that was available. Thousands crowded onto the platforms of the Sealdah railway station and made it their home for months together, others occupied the vacant garden houses of the elites and campaigned together with the leftist political parties for getting ownership rights for the land and equally large numbers filled up other public lands such as pavements and green buffer strips along railway tracks and urban canals.

From the late 1970s onwards the canals became practically unrecognizable as inland waterways. Crowded with informal housing on both sides, they resembled, at best, stagnant waste water drains with nothing better to contribute to the city than an increased number of malaria victims. At many stretches, where the water hyacinths covered the water surface, even the semblance to a drain disappeared. The plight of the people living on the banks of these canals was no better than the canals themselves.

They were engaged in the most menial jobs the city had to offer ranging from collection and sorting of uncollected solid waste, household help, running road-side food and tea stalls, informal wage labour in small and medium factory units, construction work, idol making for religious events, rickshaw pulling etc. Within the urban poor, the condition of this strata is the worst as both their livelihoods and place of living are outside any kind of security net. Their jobs are all within the informal sector, which is totally devoid of any kind of social security for the work-force and their housing, being located on the shoulder and the green belt along the canals, has no security of tenure. And yet, the services of these people are indispensable to the city.

Condition of Keshtopur Canal in 2004



(Photograph taken by author)

Another important reason for the decline of the canals was the reclamation of land for residential development in the eastern fringes of Kolkata. One of the biggest urbanisation projects undertaken in the city after independence, was the creation of the suburban township known as Salt Lake. The suburb was so named, because it was created after filling up the extensive salt water lakes in the region with silt dredged from

the river Hugly. Soon after the construction of the township began, the section of the New Cut canal that joined the Circular canal with the Belegkata canal was filled up to construct the Eastern Metropolitan Bye-pass road. Although, the bye-pass played a very significant role in easing the severe traffic congestion in the city core, environmentalists warned of the effects these projects could have on the natural drainage patterns of the city. Private developers started buying land along this traffic corridor and constructing numerous housing estates. The effect of these developments started getting felt from the 1980s, when Salt Lake and the neighbourhoods bordering it started getting flooded almost every year during the monsoons.

The state of West Bengal was hit by massive floods in the year 1978. A government report prepared in the aftermath of the floods recommended the de-silting of the canals to protect the city of Kolkata from such paralysing floods. The department of environment of the Government of West Bengal also prepared a report recommending the improvement of Kolkata's canals and wetland systems. The Central Inland Water Transportation Corporation put forward similar proposals to the state transport department in order to address the chaotic traffic conditions that existed in the city and to explore the possibility of strengthening the canal based cargo movement from and to Bangladesh. Alongside these formal, departmental demands to revive the canals, there were also demands from concerned citizens, environmental NGOs and civil society organisations like residents' welfare associations of middle and upper income neighbourhoods located along the canal. Public health experts also supported this cause, as the stagnant canals were breeding grounds for malaria and various kinds of skin and stomach ailments.

In the year 1996, an independent report on the traffic and environmental situation of the city of Kolkata was prepared by Prof. John Whitelegg of the School of Built Environment, Liverpool, at the request of various NGOs in the city. The purpose of the report was to generate sustainable transport solutions for the city. Sustainable transport solutions were described as those, which met the needs of the all residents regardless of income; protect and preserve and enhance the health of the residents; and are not damaging to the present and future conditions of the city (Whitelegg: 1996).

The report took note of the severe traffic and environmental conditions that prevailed in the city. The traffic levels had doubled between 1985 and 1996. Particulate matter pollution, which should not exceed 90 µg/cu.m according to the regulations of the World Health Organisation (WHO), were in the range of 1300 - 3000 µg/cu.m during the winter months. Benzene levels are exceptionally high at 30 - 100 mg/ cu.m. Noise pollution is another major problem due to the high traffic volumes. Noise levels in the city often cross 90 decibels, whereas the WHO recommended limit is 55 decibels during daytime and 45 decibels during the night. The incidence of traffic accidents is high, causing injury and death mainly to the pedestrians and cyclists (Whitelegg: 1996).

The report went on to list the potential transport resources of the city, which could be reclaimed and improved in order to generate sustainable transport solutions for the city. One such under-utilized resource identified by the report was the canal system of Kolkata. The report stated, that 'in a city where the most often quoted complaints are about congestion and lack of road space, the use of river and waterways in combination has tremendous potential to improve the quality of life and transport choices for the citizens of Kolkata.' (Whitelegg: 1996, p - 6) The report came up with ideas to create river-buses and integrating them with the existing bus, tram, train and metro networks in the city. Such a development of the waterways could also generate a better micro-climate and possibilities for water based recreation.

Despite, all these voices for reviving the canal network of the city, the improvements could not be undertaken for many years. This was due to the fact, that there were also scores of people on the other end of the spectrum who would lose much if any dredging project got implemented. These were the thousands of squatter families who had made the canal banks their home for many years. In many cases, the families had lived on the canal banks for more than one generation.

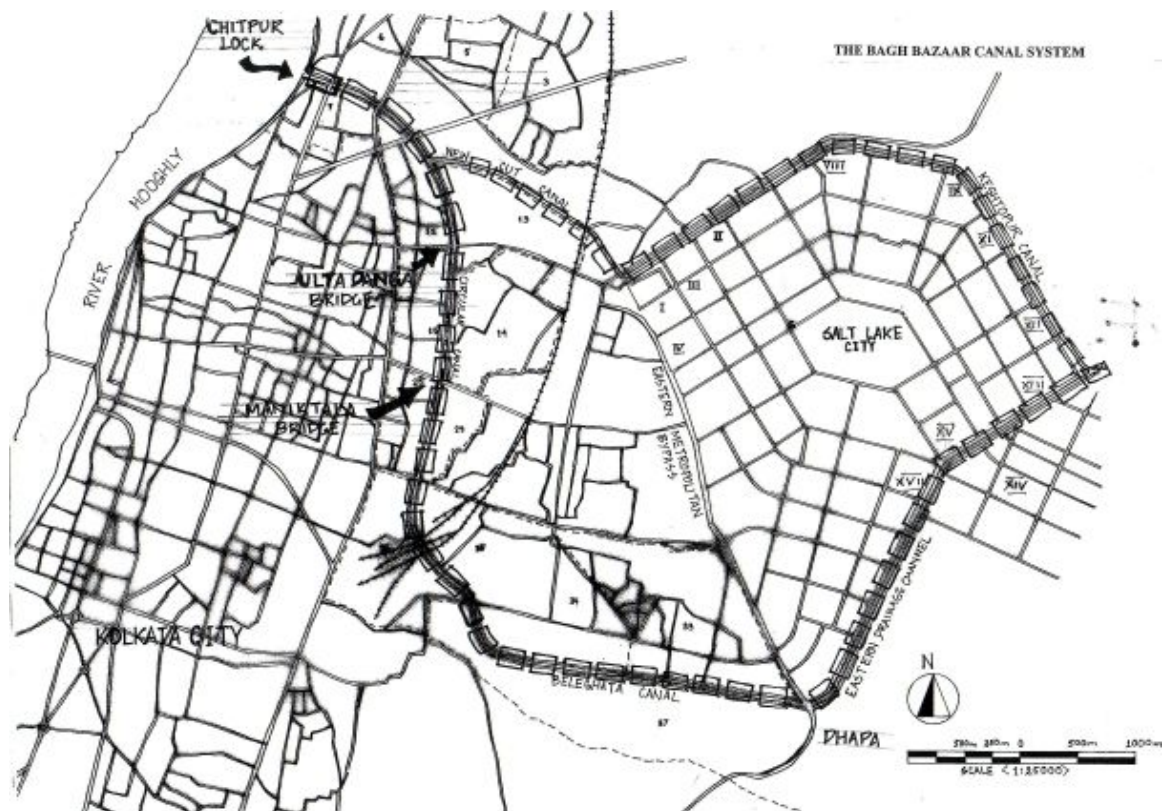
In my research, I focused on the process of improving and re-claiming various stretches of a canal system known as the Bagh Bazaar Canal System. In the following sections I

shall elaborate the various conflicts and dilemmas that arose in the process and the ways in which they challenged the democratic planning apparatus of Kolkata.

9.3 The Baghbazar Canal system

The Baghbazar canal system originates at the Chitpur lock at Baghbazar in north Kolkata. The system is made up of separate canals, which were constructed at different points of time, viz., the New Cut canal, the Circular canal, the Belegkata canal, the Eastern drainage channel and the Keshtopur canal. However, all these individual canals are ‘parts of the same hydrographic system.’ (CEMSAP: 1997, p - 132)

Figure 4The Bagh Bazar Canal System



(Map drafted by author)

In 1997, a limited survey of the informal settlements along the banks of the canal system, was conducted as part of the ‘Calcutta Environment Management Strategy and Action Plan’ (CEMSAP), prepared by the Department of Environment of the Government of West Bengal. According to the CEMSAP survey, the total number

households residing along the various stretches of the Baghbazar Canal System is about 3300. Assuming an average family size of 5 persons, the survey estimated a total population of 16500. Based on its observations, the CEMSAP study categorized the various stretches of the system as high encroachment, medium encroachment and low encroachment stretches.

Table 5 Approximate Population of Informal Settlers on Baghbazar Canal System

Canal	Stretch	Households	Population
Baghbazar Canal	Chitpur lock to Ulta danga Gridge	1250	6250
Circular Canal	Ulta Danga Bridge to Chawlpatty	1300	6500
Beleghata Canal	Chawlpatty to Eastern Metropolitan By-pass (EMB) and Dhapa lock	50	250
Eastern Drainage Channel	EMB to Korunamoyee, in Salt Lake Township	60	300
New Cut Canal	At Ulta Danga along the VIP Road	300	1500
Keshtopur Canal	VIP Road to Korunamoyee	25	125
Keshtopur-Bhangar Canal	Beyond Korunamoyee, till Ghusighata	300	1500
Total		3285	16425

(Source: CEMSAP: 1977, p - 134)

The strategy to revive the canal system consisted of two main parts. The first one was to dredge and de-silt the whole system. The second part consisted of various post-dredging services and development projects, such as operating cargo and leisure transport on the canals, improving and widening the roads along the canals, developing recreational and commercial uses along the canal banks and around the proposed terminals etc. Although the strategy consisted of these two parts by necessity (no development could be possibly undertaken on or along the canals unless they were dredged), they didn't follow any strict chronological order in terms of the overall planning process. Discussions

regarding development alternatives for a particular stretch of the canal often started years before the dredging of that very stretch could be initiated and the dredging of the various stretches itself followed a highly staggered time schedule depending on a number of factors.

Figure 5 Density of Informal settlements along Bagh Bazaar Canal system



(Source: CEMSAP: 1977, p – 134; re-drafted by author)

The various improvement projects can be broadly categorised according to the two main stretches of the system on which they took place, viz. The New Cut-Keshtopur canal stretch and the Circular-Beleghata canal stretch. The first of these two stretches is also known as the North Kolkata canal system and the improvement projects undertaken on it were cumulatively called ‘The North Canal Reclamation project’. The other stretch starts at the Ulta Danga Bridge and extends southwards and then eastwards including the Circular canal and the Beleghata canal, all the way up to the EM by-pass road.

9.4 Planning and Resistance Along the Canal System

In the year 1995, in line with the renewed thrust of the Left Front government towards industrialisation and urban infrastructure upgradation, the Government of West Bengal and the ICICI bank (the second largest bank of India) formed a joint-venture company called the ICICI-West Bengal Infrastructure Development Corporation Limited (ICICI-Winfra or IWIN). The primary objective of such a joint venture was to accelerate the development of infrastructure in the state. In 1998, the State Transport Department, through the West Bengal Transport Infrastructure Development Corporation (WBTIDC), had appointed IWIN to prepare a feasibility report for the canal reclamation project. In the month of September IWIN approached British Waterways for assistance regarding the preparation of the feasibility report. (West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation, www.icici-winfra.com)

In September, 1999, while IWIN and British waterways were, presumably, preparing the feasibility report for canal improvement, the city of Kolkata and the planned suburb of Salt Lake got flooded due to monsoon showers. The drainage system was so incapacitated, that the water didn't recede for up to ten days in many parts of the city (Asia Times: 30th November 1999). The flooding, though severe, had become an annual feature in the city. The floods added fresh fuel to the demands for restoring the canals of the city, which were already coming from various quarters.

The report prepared by IWIN and British Waterways was submitted to the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mr. Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, in 2000. It covered all the technical, market and financial feasibility aspects and expressed the view that the canal project was both technically feasible and financially viable. (Business Line: Oct 16th 2002). The report estimated a project cost of Rs. 60 crores, of which Rs. 31 crores was for canal work and Rs. 29 crores was for the creation of terminals for the operation of passenger and cargo ferries. However, it is important to note that the feasibility study excluded the cost of land and the cost of removing and resettling the squatter population from the canal banks.

Figure 6 Proposed Ferry Route along Bagh Bazar Canal System



(Map drafted by author)

The project was planned to be implemented in two main phases. The first phase involved the dredging of the canals and the second phase involved the environmental improvement of the green belts on the canal banks, improving and widening the roads along the canals, undertaking commercially viable development on the canal banks, building navigational infrastructure and operating passenger, cargo and leisure vessels. The eviction of informal settlers on the canal banks and the dredging of the canal was to be undertaken by the Irrigation and waterways Department of the Government of West Bengal with the cooperation of the various local governments through whose territory the canal system was passing. Following the clearing of the canal banks and the dredging a private developer would implement the second phase of the project on a 30 years Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) basis. The developer would be responsible for creating the necessary infrastructure and recover the costs by operating directly or leasing out the operation of vessels (www.icici-winfra.com).

The passenger transportation was proposed both for urban commuters (e.g. between the upcoming New Town at Rajarhat and Salt Lake/North Kolkata) and for longer routes stretching up to Kulti in the east. Just as Prof. Whitelegg's assessment had also hoped, the project aimed at integrating the canal route into a multi-modal transport system. The proposed Chitpur terminal of the North canal passenger route would be within a distance of 100 meters from the Shovabazar station of the metro rail and the Baghbazar station of the circular rail system. Leisure vessels were proposed to be operated to the east of the busy corridor between Chitpur and Rajarhat.

The cargo movement would begin by bringing fresh vegetables and other farm products into Kolkata from the countryside and taking building materials, finished products out from the city. The cargo movement was proposed during the night time and the passenger movement during the day. In the same year, the IWD took up a Rs. 200 crore loan from the Housing and Urban development Corporation of India (Hudco) to dredge some of the major canals of the city. The deadline for the project's completion was set at May 2003. (The Times of India, Kolkata: 19th Oct, 2002). The dredging of the remaining stretches of the Baghbazar canal system were to be undertaken as part of this project.

Despite, all these endeavours, practically nothing happened on the ground for the next two years. The political and human costs of evicting the informal settlers continued to haunt the implementation process. In 2002, many parts of Kolkata got flooded again after the first showers of monsoon. This initiated a fresh round of blame-game between the KMC and the IWD over the issue of drainage and canal dredging. The KMC officials claimed that they had done their part by upgrading all the pumping stations. However, they warned, if the IWD failed to dredge the canals, then the filtered water supply of the KMC could get contaminated. Rajib Deb, Mayor-in-Council for Sewerage and Drainage, KMC, said,

"We have repaired all the six faulty booster pumping stations in the city. Even if the water collects, it should be drained soon after. But now we are facing a strange

problem. Even after the water is drained out, the choked canals are forcing it back on the streets.” (The Times of India, Kolkata: 17th June 2002)

Ganesh Chandra Mandol, the Minister of State for Irrigation and Waterways replied by saying, that the clearing of the silt would require a high powered dredging machine, which the department couldn't afford at that moment. The Minister expressed the wish to have an urgent meeting with KMC mayor Subhash Mukherjee to work out a solution. On September, 2002, a high level meeting was organised to address the issue of canal improvement. The meeting was attended by Irrigation Minister Amarendralal Roy; Minister of State for Irrigation, Ganesh Mandol; Transport Minister Subhash Chakrabarty; and Mayor-in-Council of KMC for Sewerage and Drainage, Rajib Deb.

The participants of the meeting reached a decision, that the informal settlers living along the 8 kilometer stretch of the Keshtopur and Belegkata canals and numbering upto about 16000 persons, would be evicted by the month of November. The concluding remark by the participants was as follows,

“A Rs 150 crore project taken up in 2000 to clear the city's waterways has been delayed because of encroachments. Costs have now escalated to Rs 200 crore. de-silting, dredging and excavation work along the canals have not been possible. Now we are determined to remove the squatters.” (The Telegraph, Kolkata: 20th Sep2002)

The eviction and the dredging, was going to be a joint effort of the IWD, which is a department of the left front controlled State Government and the KMC, which was controlled by the rival Trinamool Congress Party (TMC). This collaboration, for the purpose of eviction and environmental improvement created conflicts within the ranks of both the left front and the TMC. The latter had always used anti-eviction campaigns, primarily organised by its associated activist organisations such as the Hawker Sangram Committee (Hawkers' Resistance Committee) and Uchedh Birodhi Mancha (Anti-Eviction Forum), as a political strategy against the ruling left front.

However, in this case, the Mayor of KMC, who was himself a prominent leader of the TMC, was at the very front of an alliance with the State Government to undertake a massive eviction drive. Similarly, the Kolkata unit of the left front started applying pressure on the Government to offer some sort of trans-shipment package for the 16000 odd informal settlers living along the canal. The Uchhed Birodhi Mancha, on the other hand, was totally against any eviction at all.

Though, the canal bank settlers live on the very fringes of the municipal wards, most of them are active during state assembly and municipal elections, both by voting and campaigning. Considering the active political participation by the informal settlers and the fact that almost all the wards along the stretches of the canal, where these settlements are concentrated, are controlled by the left front, the TMC certainly stood to gain if it could successfully mobilise the people against eviction.

Initially, the date for the eviction was decided to be October 22, 2002. The local councilors of the wards along Canal East Road and the urban units of the Left-Front insisted, that the eviction drive be deferred till after the *Durga puja* and the month of the *Ramzan*, which are the two major religious events of the Hindus and Muslims respectively. The postponement was also for the sake of 81 tenth-standard students in the informal settlements, who had to take a very important examination during that period and the community of idol-makers who would lose out on their main season of work if evicted at that time. The eviction re-scheduled to the 10th of December i.e. after the Ramzan, as a result of these discussions. The date was decided at a meeting attended by representatives of KMC, KMDA, IWD and the Urban Development department. Regarding the trans-shipment package the Urban Development Minister Ashok Bhattacharya said,

“On humanitarian grounds, we may pay Rs 2000 to 2500 to the 4500 odd families living in the hutments.” (The Times of India, Kolkata: 22nd Oct, 2002)

The irrigation Minister Amarendralal Roy emphasised that the delays had increased the cost of the project by 25 %. He also stressed that the loan from Hudco did not have a resettlement component.

“Restoration of the canal was to have begun long time ago. Now the dates for the eviction have been fixed. We realise the human problems but we have to do this in the larger interest.” (The Times of India, Kolkata: 8th Nov. 2002)

Subrata Mukherjee, the Mayor of KMC was utterly disappointed due to the delays in the improvement. He expressed his exasperation to the media through the following statement,

“This is a complete betrayal of the people of Kolkata. Just for the sake of a few, they are playing with the lives of millions of residents of the city. I have said repeatedly, that the canal clean up process should be now or never. If the eviction process is not taken up immediately, no one should blame us if streets remain waterlogged or people die due to malaria.” (The Times of India, Kolkata: 19th Oct, 2002)

The moment the date of eviction was finalised, the Uchhed Birodhi Mancha tried to organise the informal settlers to resist the eviction drive. Shaktiman Ghosh, a prominent activist in the organisation told the journalists present, that *“the settlers are ready to be smashed by bull-dozers, but are not ready to leave their homes before the authorities provide them with proper rehabilitation.”* (The Telegraph: 9th Dec, 2002)

The authorities showed no signs of changing their plans. The joint action by the various agencies was aimed at cleaning the 4.5 km stretch from Belegkata to the R.G. Kar medical college in the north. Four contingents of the Rapid Action Force (RAF) riot police and lots of normal police were present to assist in the eviction process. Sanjoy Mukherjee, Deputy Commissioner, Eastern Suburban Division, told the journalists present that the police was not expecting any major resistance against the drive. (The Telegraph, Kolkata: 10th Dec, 2002)

The payloaders went into action in the morning of 10th December. After the hutments along a 2.5 km stretch were demolished, some of the hutments were set afire by the people. The eviction drive went on for six hours. Shaktiman Ghosh was present during the eviction. Only two human rights groups were present during the drive. One was the Uchhed Birodhi Mancha and the other was the Association for protection of Democratic Rights. Despite all the threats of strong resistance to the drive, it was the prediction of the deputy commissioner that turned out to be true. This is how one journalist covering the drive described the interaction between the activist groups and the police,

'A quiet word from Deputy Commissioners Piyush Pandey (Detective Dept., Special) and Sanjoy Mukherjee, that there was enough force at hand and they being "gentlemen" should see reason, had the desired effect. After voting to resist demolition "at any cost", both groups chickened out, with only 19 people courting arrest.' (The Telegraph, Kolkata: 11th Dec, 2002)

It was by pure co-incidence, that during my field work in Kolkata in 2005, I could meet and interview a person who was not connected to the canal project in any way, but had been an eye-witness of the eviction drive on 10th December 2002. The name of the young man was Bubai and he was the driver of the private taxi that I hired for a couple of days to go around the whole canal network and photograph its various stretches. While driving on the Canal east road, along the Circular Canal, he told me that on the day of the eviction drive he had driven by the same area on his way to meet a friend in Manicktala. This is how Bubai described what he saw,

"What a terrible situation it was ! There was police everywhere...over the Manicktala bridge and on the Canal east Road. At around 8 am, large bulldozers started demolishing the hutments. At first, the settlers tried to stop the police...a verbal confrontation gave way to a physical one. But the demolition just continued. Household items were scattered all over the place. The children were scared and crying loudly. I felt so bad....so bad. But there was nothing to do. Later I learnt that the drive went on all the way till evening." (Interview with Bubai: 2005)

The eviction drive was resumed on the next day. Starting at 9 am, it went on without any incidents for one and a half hours. After that lots of women and some children lay down in the path of the payloaders to stop them. The settlers started pelting the payloaders with stones. The RAF was brought in to control the situation. After the drive was completed, Piyush Pandey said that, *“The job, undoubtedly, was tough, and we have completed the operation successfully. We demolished 1000 structures on Wednesday on the 1.3 km stretch from Manicktala thana to R.G. Kar hospital bridge. Now the 4.8 km stretch on both sides of the canal is clean.”* (The Telegraph, Kolkata: 12th Dec, 2002)

The Uchhed Birodhi Mancha, through its council Bijon Ghosh, had sought an ex parte injunction with the Supreme Court of India, restraining the state government and its agents from proceeding with the eviction. The Supreme Court directed the organisation to move the Kolkata High Court against the eviction of an estimated 5000 families on Canal east and Canal west roads. (ibid.)

As had become a routine affair in the city, Kolkata got flooded yet again in 2003 causing great inconvenience to the citizens. This time the flooding happened before the monsoons arrived, causing worries that the suburb of Salt Lake would face serious problems if the Keshtopur canal was not dredged soon. According to Amerandralal Roy, *“The encroachment problem along the banks of the Keshtopur canal has to be resolved first. Once the ongoing dredging of Belegkata canal is completed, the programme will be taken up for Keshtopur canal.”* (The Telegraph, Kolkata: 16th June 2003).

The Salt Lake Municipality, which is the second most important local government after the KMC in the Kolkata Metropolitan Area had been under the control of the left front in 2003, but the number of wards under the left front and the opposition was almost equal. the left front and allies controlled 12 wards, while the opposition controlled 11. The opposition had always blamed the left front for having used unfair tactics to win the one extra ward, though, that allegation could not be confirmed. In this tense and precariously power balance of the Salt Lake Municipality, the continuous delay in the

implementation of the canal dredging gave the opposition a very good opportunity to criticise the left front leadership in the local government.

Apart from the massive problems of poor drainage and flooding the stagnant canal also created a huge mosquito menace for the residential blocks in Salt Lake which lay adjacent to it. This also led to waste of resources. In 2003 Rs 12 lakhs were allotted by the Municipality to Malaria control medicine and to spray Pyrethrum. In the winter months it became almost impossible to walk along the canal due to the stench and the mosquitoes.

In July 2003, the Salt Lake authorities decided to undertake the largest eviction drive in the history of the township. The aim of this drive was to check the mushrooming of informal settlements in and around the planned suburb. Apart from the direct connection to the canal dredging project, this drive was also demanded by the various residents' welfare associations of the suburb, who alleged that the growth of informal settlements was increasing the crime wave in the area. Six teams were to undertake the drive, accompanied by a magistrate and a senior police officer. A total of 1000 hutments were to be demolished. (The Telegraph, Kolkata: 29th July 2003)

It was in the same year, that the residents' welfare associations of three residential blocks of Salt Lake filed complaints to the West Bengal Pollution Control Board regarding the failure to dredge the Keshtopur canal. They were assisted by Justice Bhagabati Prosad Banerjee of the Kolkata High Court, who is also a resident of Salt Lake. (Interviews with Justice Bhagabati Prosad Banerjee: 28th June 2005; and Sudhir Dey, Editor of Salt Lake News: 1st July 2005)

Despite this massive eviction drive and the demands by the citizens of Salt Lake, the plans to dredge the North Canal couldn't be activated until January 2004. The plan could be activated, when the West Bengal Housing and Infrastructure Development Corporation (Hidco) stepped in with financial contributions for the project. Hidco was set up as a government company in 1999 with the immediate purpose of developing a residential and industrial hub called the 'New Town' to the east of the existing suburb

of Salt lake. In the long run, the dredging of the Keshtopur canal would benefit the New Town both as a water transport route and a source of fresh water for its residents. However, the immediate interest of Hidco was the fact, that the silt dredged from the Keshtopur canal could be used for the extensive land-filling that was required for the development of the New Town. (Interview with Sudhir Dey, Editor of Salt Lake News: 1st July 2005)

It was planned that the IWD will undertake the dredging and improvement of a 10 km stretch of the canal from Baghbazar to Keshtopur and Hidco would undertake the same tasks for a 20.5 km stretch of the canal from Keshtopur to Bhojerhat. It was estimated that approximately 1000 informal settlers would have to be evicted for the dredging. (The Telegraph, Kolkata, 16th Jan 2004) in the first phase of the eviction the settlers on the stretch between Nayapatti in Salt Lake ward number 14 and Baisakhi in Salt Lake ward number 9 were evicted. In the second phase, another 400 hutments were demolished in Ward 14. (Laban Hrad Sambad: 24th March 2004)

The dredging of the North Canal got into trouble right from the start. In the month of April, the dredging was called off as a result of the collapse of the guard wall at Chitpur and damaging of the embankment at Salt Lake. Ganesh Mandol, Minister of State for Irrigation, told the media that the severe north-westerly winds that had hit the city were responsible for these damages. According to the IWD, there was hardly any possibility of resuming the work before the monsoon were over (The Times of India, Kolkata: 20th March, 2004)

In August 2004, the issue of the dredging of the North Canal was taken up by a high level meeting attended by the Chief Minister, the Urban Development Minister, the Public Health Engineering Minister, the Minister of State for Irrigation and the Transport Minister. This meeting gave another thrust to the North Canal reclamation project. However, the dredging didn't resume until December 2004. The Left-Front councilors of the Salt Lake municipality kept stressing that the dredging process will continue very soon, but the opposition councilors of the TMC alleged that it had become a trend to start the dredging early on every year to silence the critics, and then

abandon it at the onset of the monsoons (Interviews with Anita Mandol, councilor (TMC), Salt Lake Ward no. 11 and Tulsi Sinha Roy, councilor (TMC), Salt Lake ward no. 12: 16th November, 2004).

The dredging of the Belegkata and Circular canal got completed by the beginning of 2005. Following the dredging the improvement of the canal banks and the widening of the canal east and West roads was initiated in the summer of the same year. The widening of the roads was to be undertaken by the Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority (KMDA) at a total cost of Rs 545 Lakhs. Out of this total amount Rs 200 lakhs was to be contributed by the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) and the remaining was to be provided by an agency called Hooghly River Bridge Commissioners, through funds borrowed from the Japan Bank of International Cooperation (JBIC). The project technicalities were worked out jointly by the KMC and the KMDA. It was decided, that after the improvement of the roads they will be maintained by the KMC. The street lights would be arranged by the KMC and the advertisement rights would also go to them. The project got completed in the beginning of 2006.

On August 15th of 2005, a project was launched to beautify the banks on either side of the Belegkata canal. The project was to cover an 18 km stretch on either side of the canal, including the Canal East and West roads and the Chawalpatti road. The tasks included planting of trees and development of children's parks. The total cost of the project was Rs 73 lakhs and the funding was provided by the Department of Environment, through the West Bengal Pollution Control Board. The duration of the project was to be three months.

The dredging was completed in early 2006. The 8th of August 2006, was an extremely important day in the history of the Bagh Bazar canal system, as it was the day on which a trial run of two launches was to be conducted after many years. The larger launch called 'MV Durga' carried the important officials and political leaders involved with the reclamation project and the smaller one called 'MV Niharika' carried the journalists. The passengers of neither launch expected the unpleasant surprises that awaited them on

the trial run. Both the launches got stuck on the way from Chitpur to Salt Lake. The first launch got stuck close to the Ulta Danga railway station and it was impossible to turn it around. The second launch turned back, but also got stuck close to the R.G. Kar medical college. After waiting 40 minutes the passengers of the first launch tried to reach the canal bank using a wooden plank. According to one journalist, ‘the VIPs made quite a picture, clutching on to their *dhotis* and hopping on to the ground from the wooden plank with great relief. Hundreds of spectators from the shanties, including many children, cheered and clapped.’ (The Telegraph, Kolkata: 9th August 2006)

The unfortunate incident created a furore, as everyone started blaming the IWD, which was responsible for dredging that stretch of the canal system and had confirmed that the process had been completed. In the words of one Hidco official,

“The launches got stuck due to low depth. The excavation work was not carried out properly. The irrigation department was responsible for de-silting the canal and repairing the lock gates.” (ibid.)

The average depth of the canal, after the dredging, should have been 8 feet, but it was alleged that the average depth was no more than 5 feet and at some points it became as less as 2 feet. (ibid.)

After this incident, the plan to start the launch service on North Canal remained suspended for almost one year. The irrigation department tried to rectify the errors left from the dredging project. Finally, on 5th August 2007, the service could be resumed again. This time, the launches used were much smaller.

According to Sadhan Das, former irrigation secretary and technical advisor to Hidco, *“The launch used in the trial run was too big and heavy for Keshtopur canal. The 63 feet long vessel was of the type that plies in the Sundarbans. This time we are deploying 42 feet long launches which can carry 50 passengers each.”* (The Telegraph, Kolkata: 25th July, 2007).

The West Bengal Surface Transport Corporation, a state government undertaken corporation, was given the contract for operating the service.

9.5 From Simplistic Conclusions to Deepening Questions

This chronological account of the projects provides us with extremely interesting insights into the overall process of planning and implementation and also raises many questions. The first glaring observation is the complete absence of any mechanism for participation of either the informal settlers living on the canal banks, or the middle and upper income residents in the formal neighbourhoods along the canal system. Most of the decisions were taken at high level meetings, where there was a strong representation of project authorities, line departments and the local government, but which precluded any kind of active citizen participation or control.

There were no public meetings, hearings, citizen consultations or grievance redressals of any kind. Even when it concerned serious human rights issues such as the eviction of thousands of poor families from the only land they could occupy close to their sources of livelihood, these were overwhelmed by quick decisions and stern official rhetoric. The absence of mechanisms for participation and the extent and nature of the eviction drives in 2002 and 2003 hint at the complete exclusion of the poor from the planning and implementation of such large development projects and their utter powerlessness in the face of such events.

Yet, this conclusion, which is both easy and tempting to reach in the context of such projects in cities of developing countries, hides a serious anomaly. Throughout the history of the projects, and even before they started, it was acknowledged by the concerned government departments and ministers that the major obstruction in the path of improving and reclaiming the canals were the informal settlers. For many years, these abjectly poor, excluded and powerless people successfully frustrated all the efforts of the various bureaucratic departments of the state government to evict them and dredge the canals. Some 'powerlessness' that must have been !

Let us consider another observation. The ruthless eviction drive along the Circular and Belegghata canals was undertaken in December 2002. Subsequent to that, the largest eviction drive in the history of Salt Lake township was undertaken in July 2003. Yet, during my field work in Kolkata in 2004, I saw large concentrations of informal settlers both along the Circular canal and the Keshtopur canal. I was even more surprised, when I returned to Kolkata for the second phase of my field work in 2005, and still found more or less the same clusters standing along the canal banks. I am writing 'more or less', because it was clear that sporadic eviction drives had happened between 2004 and 2005. But still, the major clusters were present.

How had this happened ? How did the dredging get completed and yet, so many informal settlers continue to inhabit the canal banks? What were the methods they used to deal with the eviction drives ? How did they perceive this massive development project and how did they prepare for it ? These were some of the questions that automatically arise from the above observations. Answering these questions would also throw light on the way in which the local institutions empowered by democratic decentralisation processes try to be responsive to the poor in the face of such large development projects. This is what I shall attempt to do in the following sections.

9.6 The Improvement Process - In the Informal Resident's Words

One of the first things I did was to take long walks along the whole Baghbazar canal system, starting with that particular area, which was the site of the most intense confrontation between the informal settlers and the project authorities. Before proceeding with the details of the field observations I would like to present an unplanned but very revealing encounter that I had on one of my reconnaissance walks on the canal east road. Though this encounter happened in the second phase of my field work i.e. in 2005, it is worthwhile to present this right at the start, as it summarises in the words of an informal settler herself the complexities and dilemmas involved in the canal improvement project.

It was late afternoon, when I set out for the site of confrontation - the stretch of the Canal East Road between Manicktala Bridge and Altadena Bridge.

As I walked to the center of the Manitoba bridge I was stunned by the view of the canal and its banks. Instead of a view of thousands of shanties crowding along the canal bank and encroaching almost half of the two roads that run adjacent to it, I saw a wide, spacious road and an equally impressive footpath lit brightly by powerful sodium lamps. A magician of urban development seemed to have waved his wand and the ever-predictable sight of abject poverty along the roads and canals of the city had completely disappeared from this stretch of the Circular Canal.

As I walked down that bridge and started walking along the Canal East Road, I started seeing the other details of the landscape, which had not been revealed in the 'zoomed-out' view from on top of the bridge. I saw families and groups of people huddled together around cooking-stoves along the canal bank. As I walked on towards Narkeldanga bridge, the number of huddled groups kept increasing. It was around eight in the evening and the cooking had started. The intoxicating smell of boiling rice seemed to create a festive atmosphere among the huddled people. Children clung on the back of their mothers looking with anticipation at the rice pots and hearing the appetizing gurgling sound of food getting ready. The old chatted and smoked. Many young men slept deeply on top of their cycle-rickshaw vans³ in such positions of exhaustion and heat related undress, that they seemed to become a veritable supply of free male models for a nude sculptor. At some places the children huddled around the old listening to stories. It seemed from the way they crouched even when they sat that their bodies had not yet got accustomed to the sudden exposure of becoming roof-less and wall-less. But the fact that they were not rice-less as yet was very evident from the number of stoves and smiling faces.

³ A modified version of the cycle-rickshaw used to transport machine parts, furniture etc. The van drivers are hired on a daily wage basis by the many motor vehicle units on the Canal East Road.

I felt that the magician's wand had not had a perfect effect. The landscape had not been wiped as clean as it looked from the bridge. Like a dusty floor being cleaned with a broom on a breezy afternoon, the dust left the ground, floated around for a while and then seemed to settle again on the very same spot. This world of huddled, homeless people seemed like a parallel and different world, though it existed in such spatial proximity to the bulldozers and the cement mixers that all this could be shown together in any GIS program only through overlays.

I walked over the footpath and went totally to the edge of the canal and looked at its dark waters. The sodium lamps didn't light up its waters and the canal looked like a mute witness to the drama unfolding on its banks, though all of that was formally done in its name.

It is when I was contemplating the rather quick revelation of these three worlds of sleeping bulldozers, rice-awaiting huddled people and a very slow moving, complacent canal, when the perfect question came from behind me.

'Ki dekhchhen Babu ?' ("What are you looking at Babu ?")

I was a bit startled by the question suddenly emerging from behind me as I was staring into the darkness of the murky waters of the Circular Canal as it barely flowed by under the Maniktala bridge. I felt no alarm, as there was more warmth and calmness in that feminine voice than a paranoid challenge to a possibly antagonistic intruder from the upper classes. Evidently a footpath dweller on the Canal East Road, she was dressed in an old sari which also partially covered the body of the naked baby she was breast-feeding. The baby suckled on in eternal safety, completely oblivious to the magic of urban development that was unfolding all along the Baghbazar canal system. The accent in which the woman spoke Bengali and the bright, golden ear-rings that she wore even in the midst of obvious poverty, suggested to me that she was Muslim.

“Well...just looking around”, I replied. “I had been reading and hearing about the improvement projects going on along the canal bank, so I just came by to see how it is going on.”

“What is there to see Babu ?...Just look at our condition. Our homes were pulled down and burnt so long ago. Ever since then we have been living under the open sky like this.”

“Have you lived on the canal bank all your life?”

“Yes, I have lived here all my life...I was born here. I have no home at all anywhere else. Many of the families living on the canal bank have some land of their own somewhere or the other...we have nothing at all. It’s the same situation for the twelve families that you see living close to us here.”

As I saw no sign of a shelter of any kind at all, I asked her how long these families have been living like this.

“It has been three years now...they came and told us that we must move away from here as the whole road will get repaired. We got a lot of time to plan what to do...almost one and a half to two months. After that our homes were torn down...but we had nowhere to go...we just lingered on here. The police tried various methods to remove us. Once they came and snatched away the only pot I have for making rice. Our temporary shelter was burnt down...the police came and harassed us every now and then. One day they came and sawed off the wheel of the cycle-rickshaw van that my husband drives and beat him up...the children got scared and then they took him to the police lock-up.”

She pointed to the man who seemed to be sleeping so deeply on his rickshaw van, that the sight alone could make the word ‘insomnia’ extinct.

“Have you been living like this for the last three years ?”

“Yes....just look at the condition of my children. I have three daughters and one son. Don't we wish to feed and clothe our children well too...to give them a good education, let them grow up like human beings ?...I get tears in my eyes when I think of them.”

Her eyes had indeed moistened at these words and her voice choked, but her ever-present calm smile remained. Her two daughters who had been standing close to us for a while were, however, in a rather different mood. They looked at me with wide open eyes and a very amusing expression on their faces. They smiled brightly. The elder was about ten years old and the younger was four.

“What is your name?”, I asked the elder one.

“Gulab Jaan Khatoun”, said she.

“Oh my! What a grand name ! Like a Mughal princess !”

The girls almost dissolved in their own blushing and giggling, and the mother smiled brighter than ever. And I was feeling genuinely warm and relaxed in their company too. I found out that the younger daughter had an equally pretty name – Yasmeen. And the mother was called Shaheeda (the feminine form of the arabic word – martyr).

When I saw the children my curiosity about how they tackled the monsoon in their present condition increased. Also, it would be worthwhile to mention here that my first attempted visit to the area two days earlier got foiled at Maniktala crossing itself due to a massive thunderstorm. Strokes of lightening streaked all over the sky and booming bolts of thunder seemed to strike just a few meters above my head. Rather than visiting the field, my prime mission on that day turned into reaching home before getting struck down by one of the lightening-bombs or turning deaf from the noise or simply becoming a nervous wreck with a PhD largely incomplete.

Shaheeda's reply, on the other hand, had none of the panic that is reflected from my own description above.

“It is a big problem during rain and storm. Sometime ago there was a wonderful watchman in one of the factory units across the road...he was like a God. One night when the rains started, he came and told us, that though he wouldn't be able to give all of us shelter, he couldn't bear the thought of the children being left in the open. He let the children stay with him in his little room. He took their wet clothes off and wrapped them in his own blanket. The children survived because of him. But he doesn't work here anymore...may God watch over him wherever he is. At other times we just have to create some cover using our vans and polythene sheets or just use any shelter that's available.”

“Did you get any kind of compensation at all? Has there been any talk of resettling you somewhere else?”

“We had heard some talk”, she replied. “When we were being removed from this place, we heard that the Government is going to give 2000 rupees to every family. The families that had registered their names on the list got the money...but we were so confused...we didn't know where to register and when. But it is true that many families got the money before they left to their homes in the village. We had also heard that we would be given land in Salt Lake. But we don't know what happened to those plans afterwards. We don't hear anything anymore.”

“What did the local ward councilor do regarding all this ?”

“The local councilor here is Dr. Subodh ...‘chhee pee en’⁴. To tell you the truth, it is because of him that we are still able to live here on the canal bank. He speaks for us and prevents us from being totally removed. But he can't do more than that. And yet...we have been voting all the years that we have lived here. Even during the last three years after being homeless. We still have our voter's cards.”

⁴Most of the canal bank squatters I interviewed had their own ways of pronouncing CPM (Communist Party of India-Marxist). This was Shaheeda's version.

“Did any other organization come forward to offer help ?”

“One kind man...he lives on the other side of the canal...his name is Krishna Babu...he helped us a lot, sat down and listened to our problems. He said very clearly that he does not belong to any political party. Lot of people came on 15th August, the Independence Day, to listen to us about our problems and to speak for us. Krishna *da*⁵ gave me a phone number also!”

Just when my curiosity was rising, hearing about the committed Krishna da, Shaheeda said,

“But I think I have lost that phone number now...I have no contact with him any more. It would have been nice to meet him again.”

I wondered what was so difficult in meeting a person who lived just on the other bank of the canal, but there was a clear tone of resignation in Shaheeda’s voice and I didn’t feel like disbelieving her. After all, it had already been proved to me many times over in the course of the conversation, that what was totally obvious in my world in the suburbs of Kolkata, was not at all obvious in the world of Shaheeda. Considering that, I was thankful enough that we could continue speaking like old friends.

During the conversation I had become a bit curious about the role played by the scores of ‘motor-parts’ and ‘motor-servicing’ units and sheds that lined the Canal East Road, which employed most of the men of the canal bank families as contract-labourers. I asked Shaheeda about this.

“No ! No !...they didn’t help us in any way at all ! On top of that, they have fired most of our men. They told us ‘You folks have been evicted now. You don’t have a home. What if we hire your men to transport the machine parts by your vans and then you just

⁵ *da* is a short form of *dada* which means elder brother in Bengali.

run away and disappear with them !’...Just imagine ! This is what they said ! Where on earth can we run ? That’s precisely what our problem is! We have no place to run !”

“How long have you studied ?”, I asked Shaheeda.

“Till class three.”, she replied and then added quickly, “But my children go to school regularly...they are studying in the Government school nearby.”

I looked around at their demolished, marginal world on an environmentally upgraded foot-path and somehow tried to grasp the fact that had just been given to me by a proud mother. In the midst of *this* two girls were regularly setting out to school every morning. I couldn’t help remembering a discussion I had with a friend and researcher in the Faculty of Anthropology in my University in Norway, who told me in one of our chats that there was some discussion going on in Norwegian schools about banning ‘home-work’, because it was felt to be a violation of the human rights of the children. Did the bull-dozer just wink at me ?

Once again the wise Shaheeda brought my erratic thoughts back in focus.

“Yasmeen, my dear, why don’t you recite the rhymes that you learnt in school ?”

And then it started. The little Yasmeen stood on top of a cycle-van, with her mother, sister and the proud members of the twelve homeless families looking on, and started reciting one rhyme after another...as if digging and pulling them out of my own childhood memory. ‘*Noton-noton Payraguli*’, ‘*Baburam Shapure...kotha jaash bapure...*’ and some other poems of Sukumar Ray⁶.

⁶ The noted poet, author and humorist, and father of film maker Satyajit Ray, who founded the ‘Nonsense Club’ in Kolkata and founded the style of nonsense rhymes in Bengali. In addition to that he wrote a fantastic Bengali version of ‘Alice in Wonderland’.

Not once did her memory slip. Not once did the smile disappear from her face. Within a few minutes the gathering had turned into a veritable poetry recitation session with requests coming in from the other families and me, and the little talented girl just going on and on. At the end we clapped and cheered at this performer, while she dissolved from her cycle-van stage into the arms of her mother.

Now with two children in her arms, Shaheeda asked me if I could do something to help these families. There was not a streak of begging, complaining or sympathy-dragging in her voice. Just a very basic and humane request.

“I am not involved with the project...I can only write about this now. I am studying about the project.”

“So much has been written already *Babu*...what good is writing anymore.”

I thought rapidly and tried to find out if after having studied urban planning for six years, and undertaking a PhD in a northern University, there was anything convincing and worthwhile I could do for this family at that moment. Apparently, it seemed to be my lucky day.

“Would you like me to photograph you !”

It seemed, that I could finally say something that excited the twelve families on the footpath. There was a sudden stir and people got up, got in order and started lining up for a joint-family photo shoot. On my part, I replied with as much seriousness and professionalism as I could. A fourteen year old labourer boy, obviously stoned and dressed only in torn shorts and a sooty scarf round his neck, decided to turn the scarf into a turban. The sisters held hands and Shaheeda reorganized her sari to cover up the patches. The lady who had been crushing spices and listening to our interviews critically, suddenly jumped in joy and frantically looked for water to clean her hands, which is no easy task despite living along an almost thirty meters wide canal. Yet, despite all the enthusiasm this ‘joint’ family seemed to be hesitant about something.

The stoned boy staggered close to me and asked,

“Dada...takata ki ekhuni dite hobe ?”

(Big brother...are we supposed to pay you right away ?)

Shaheeda with her own and her neighbour’s children



(Photograph taken by author)

I assured that they don’t have to pay at all. This assurance led first to disbelief, and then such an outburst of joy that it seemed mysterious that any project authority could have any possible difficulty in accommodating the needs and demands of such incredibly easy-to-please people.

I promised to Shaheeda and the rest, that I would come back and return the photos so they can cherish the time we spent together, and have at least one decent photo of their children and themselves. After a little while I bid farewell and started walking away from the canal and towards my world in the planned, upper-middle class suburbs of

Kolkata. I felt much better though. The promise to return the photographs seemed like a very credible resettlement and rehabilitation plan for families at that moment, and it certainly seemed to satisfy the requirements of citizen participation and enthusiastic involvement.

After a few days, I went to return the photos to Shaheeda. I went at around ten in the morning and found none of the familiar faces in the area. The cycle vans were still silent but the bull-dozers, trucks and cement mixers had woken up. I saw another Muslim family standing around a cycle-van on the other side of the road and asked them if they knew Shaheeda. They smiled and welcomed me and said that they knew Shaheeda very well. But it would be impossible to find her now because she had gone to the market to work. They had a lot of fun seeing the photos and recognising the various people in the photo. I continued with the good work and took their photos too, which again produced a wave of excitement and joy.

Then I asked them, “What if I can’t come back to you before I go back to Norway ? It would then take at least one year, before I come back and give you the photos.”

The old man of the family replied with a laugh, “Worry not *Babu* ! We have been evicted before ! We will handle it. *Inshallah* we will hold on to our land.”

9.7 Leads from Shaheeda’s Account

Many interesting and informative points came out of that conversation. The first noticeable thing was that even after three years of the massive eviction drive, quite a few informal settlers still lived on the Canal East Road, albeit in an even more vulnerable situation than before. Secondly, Shaheeda didn’t feel that the eviction drive happened out of the blue, without giving adequate time between the announcement and the actual eviction. Despite all the hardships her family was suffering from, she demonstrated an incredible fortitude and maturity by understanding the limitations of the Government also.

Thirdly, the informal settlers have responded in diverse ways to the eviction drive. Many of the residents had the rest of their extended families in the countryside. After the eviction, these people moved back to their respective villages and waited for a better opportunity to return. In my later interviews in the same area I learnt that many of the residents on Canal east road have their ancestral homes in the Sundarbans area. Some of the families shifted to other parts of the city. The third category is of people like Shaheeda, for whom the canal bank is the only home, and moving to a different location is not a feasible option considering the necessary tasks of earning a living and getting their children educated. To prioritise the education of their children in such extreme circumstances itself was a remarkable characteristic of Shaheeda's family.

Regarding support structures in times of distress, Shaheeda mentioned the important role played by the local councillor (municipal ward number 29), Subodh Kumar Dey, of the All India Forward Bloc (a member of the Left Front coalition), and the compassionate acts of individuals such as the watchman and Krishna da. Neither Shaheeda nor any of the other people present during the conversation mentioned anything about the Uchhed Birodhi Mancha or the Association for Protection of Democratic Rights.

There was considerable solidarity among the families still staying on that stretch of the canal east road. This was evident from the behaviour of the families towards one another during my interactions with them and from the way in which Shaheeda's canal bank neighbour recognised her and her children when I showed him the photographs on my second visit. A very important observation was the joyful and confident manner in which this same man said, that the people would continue to live on the canal bank in the years to come.

Certainly this showed a more complex picture than what I had gathered from the secondary sources. Rather than the project happening in clear stages, the various stages of the project seemed to overlap. Ideally, according to the plan of the project authorities, the canal banks should be completely cleared of all encroachments before initiating the dredging process. Following the dredging, the beautification of the green belt along the

canal and the widening of Canal East and Canal West roads was to be undertaken. However, in reality the dredging process was going on while a substantial number of informal settlers continued to reside on various stretches of the canal system, and, as I was to discover subsequently in through my investigations, the green belt beautification, road widening and even the trial run of launches was initiated without the full eviction of informal settlers and even without the completion of the dredging.

Family in informal settlement along Circular canal



(Photograph taken by author)

In order to undertake my detailed field observations and interviews I decided to focus on a particular section of the Bagh Bazar canal system - the stretch of the Keshtopur canal which flows along the northern edge of the township of Salt Lake. It was not just due to the limitations of time and man-power that I decided to narrow the study area. Though the severest evictions of informal canal bank settlers had not happened in this stretch of the Keshtopur canal, the processes happening here are more revealing than the overt and violent confrontations between the settlers and the police along the Circular canal.

It is along this stretch of Keshtopur canal that the new ferry route connecting the Chitpur lock in the west and the emerging mega-city of 'New Town' in the east has been proposed. This section of the Bagh Bazaar system passes through that west-east axis of the city of Kolkata where most of the planned interventions in the recent past have occurred (e.g. development of Salt Lake township and the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass) and are going to occur in the future (e.g. development of IT industries in the eastern sectors of Salt Lake and the development of the 'New Town'). The spatial manifestation of the emerging development trends and priorities in the city of Kolkata shall happen most strongly and visibly along this axis of the city. Focussing on this stretch, therefore, provides a good opportunity to study such trends at the time when they are emerging.

The field interactions mainly took the form of open-ended interviews and group discussions with residents of the informal settlements along the canal, residents of the middle-class neighbourhoods bordering the canal and officials and elected councilors of the municipal wards bordering the canal.

9.8 Counter-Eviction Strategies of the Informal Settlers along Keshtopur Canal

Despite involuntary evictions being such an intrinsic component of the canal improvement projects, the informal settlers living on the banks of these canals have always had to live with the perennial fear of eviction. In fact, their whole mode of living and working is shaped by this sword of Damocles. Yet, the nature of evictions being undertaken as part of the canal improvement projects are bound to be different from the typical and continual eviction drives that the informal settlers are used to. In this section the various counter-eviction strategies used by the informal settlers living along the Baghbazar canal system shall be described.

The first thing I noticed in my interviews with the informal settlers, was the casual manner in which they described the many eviction drives that they have lived through over the years. Undoubtedly such eviction and demolition drives are incredibly ruthless

by their very nature, but the descriptions by the settlers themselves contained none of the despair, agony and bursting anger which colour much of the accounts of such drives in the mainstream media and in the websites and blogs of human rights agencies.

The informal settlers are acutely aware of the paradoxical relationship they have with the bureaucratic line departments (who are often the owners of the land which they occupy for setting up their shanties), the local government, the local ward office and the upper- and middle-class residents who live a stone's throw away. The green belt along the Keshtopur canal, for example, is jointly owned by the Department of Forestry and the Irrigation and Waterways Department. This paradoxical relationship that binds them to the very urban actors who seek to directly or indirectly evict them from their homes, actually provides the informal settlers the many strategies with which to out-smart the eviction drives. The nature of the counter-eviction strategies depends on a number of factors, such as the location of the informal settlement, size and density of the settlement, the degree to which the formal residential settlements adjacent to it have been developed in a planned way (the better planned they are, the easier for the informal settlements to be spotted and also easier for the bulldozers and the police to find their way to carry out the demolitions), the occupational composition of the informal settlers and, of course, the particular external opportunity available at the local level.

Interestingly, after the well planned (at least by Kolkata standards) township of Salt Lake was established, the main offices of many of the government departments, which are associated with the canal improvement projects, were shifted here. The officials employed by these departments took up residence in the residential zones of the township. To the informal settlers living along Keshtopur canal, many of whom work as household helpers and cleaners, this meant a unique opportunity to have a direct access to the very kitchens, living rooms and even bed-rooms of those very officers who were drawing up the plans and working out the details of the improvement projects and the eviction drives. This opportunity was used by many informal settlers to gather prior information about planned eviction drives and also as a way to arrange a kind of informal security of tenure. Along a 1.5 kilometre stretch of the Keshtopur canal, bordering the northern edge of the Salt Lake township, the informal settlers have

constructed their shanties by attaching them to the rear walls of the houses of a particular residential block which houses the surveyors and engineers of the urban development department who were involved with the planning and construction of the township itself. The informal settlers work as household helpers for the families living in this block, and the latter, in turn, use their official contacts to ensure that the former don't get evicted from the canal bank. Attaching the shanty to the rear wall of the houses also gives an impression, that these are a kind of servant quarters attached to the main building.

This is how Lathika Sarkar, one of the informal settlers who lives on the canal bank according to this arrangement, described the situation,

“The babu⁷ who owns the house in front has arranged everything for me. I have just arrived here three months back from my village. My sister had come earlier and works as a construction worker. It was she who built a cement plinth for my hut...otherwise it would have been difficult to stay here. The babu told the local police right on the first day not to threaten or bother me in any way.” (Interview with Lathika Sarkar, July, 2005).

The other way of arranging such informal security of tenure is through direct or indirect negotiations with the political party of the councillor in power in the particular ward. The residents of the *Baisakhi Kheyapar* informal settlement, (located along the Keshtopur canal almost at the middle of the northern edge of the Salt lake township) live on the canal bank based on such an arrangement. The population of this cluster has a mixed Hindu and Muslim population, the latter comprising of extremely poor seasonal migrants from Bangladesh who stay in the cluster few months at a time and work with garbage collection and segregation. Another important occupation of the men and women of the cluster is to set up mobile, road-side tea and snacks stalls. Though the

⁷ A term in the Bengali language used for an educated person of good social standing, but used by the informal settlers both with a tinge of sarcasm and contempt and with genuine respect, depending on the nature of interaction with the upper- and middle-class residents.

cluster itself is located on the northern bank of the Keshtopur canal, many of the stalls are located on the southern bank. This effectively means that the place of living and working of these people lies in two different municipal areas, viz. the Rajarhat-Gopalpur Municipality to the north and the Salt Lake municipality to the south. The place of residence i.e. the informal settlement itself is protected through an arrangement with a local neighbourhood club, called the Shiv-Kali club, which is strongly affiliated to the CPM.

Baisakhi Kheyapar Informal Settlement



(Photograph taken by author)

The arrangement with the club is not discussed openly by the residents. After a long conversation, a resident of the settlement called Meena Ghosh gave me a description of the arrangement,

“To tell you the truth, all the residents have to pay a one time fee to the Shiv-Kali club, which is located in the Keshtopur neighbourhood in the Rajarhat-Gopalpur

municipality. When I settled here four years back, I had to pay Rs. 3000. The fee must have increased to about Rs. 5000 - 6000. The club works for the CPM. We are all very active during the elections to vote for the party.” (Interview with Meena Ghosh, Oct., 2004)

Initially, the residents had been given the hope, that if they stayed politically active in favour of the CPM, then their settlement would be granted formal recognition. Meena had herself been very active politically till some years back. She said,

“I encouraged the residents to vote. In the last elections we voted like hell ! We cast as many proxy votes as we could...sometimes 20 to 25 votes per person on a single day. But after the elections nothing really happened. Now my neighbours make fun of me. They laugh and say...What happened Meena? You are not campaigning for the party anymore?” (ibid.)

Despite all the problems of such an informal arrangement, Meena also mentioned the positive aspects.

“It is a hard life without any kind of civic amenities. But we don’t have to pay any rent at all. Moreover, so many people in the settlement are involved with garbage collection and segregation...how can they possibly do that inside a decent neighbourhood ? Do you think they would be allowed to do this kind of work, if they rented a room in a formal neighbourhood?” (ibid.)

The role played by the CPM in providing informal security has a history going back to the days, when the party was in the opposition and championing the cause of refugees from Bangladesh living in Kolkata in abject conditions in the informal settlements. It was due to the intervention of the CPM in the early 1980s, that many of the poor construction workers involved in the creation of the Salt Lake township could get their slum settlements registered and continue to live within the township.

Most of the informal residents I interviewed, still saw the CPM and the Left Front as an ally, albeit an increasingly disappointing one. Lathika Sarkar told me,

“I used to be a strong supporter of CPM earlier. But now everyone has become just the same. They run to us before the elections shouting....My sister, my sister ! Oh, you are living in such difficulty ! We feel so sorry for you !... and the moment the elections are over...give dear sister a smack on the head !” (Interview with Lathika Sarkar, July, 2005).

The similarity in the tone and content of Lathika’s impression of CPM bears a strong resemblance to the impressions of the workers of the jute mills interviewed by Nandini Gooptu, which I quoted in the previous chapter.

Although the arrangement with the Shiv-Kali club protects the settlement from demolition, this security doesn’t extend across the canal to protect the road-side stalls lying in Salt Lake, which are an important source of livelihood for the residents. Seema, a neighbour of Meena Ghosh, runs a tea and snacks stall of her own. In an interview she told me that her stall had been broken and confiscated by the demolition squads of the Salt Lake Municipality and the local police many times in the 20 years that she has lived and worked in the area.

“After such demolitions, the stall owners have to start from the scratch again...first by setting up the stall on the foot path, then to construct a fixed stand made of bamboo...and when enough money has been saved...to procure a mobile stall operated from a cycle-van.” (Interview with Seema, Oct., 2004)

However, the stall owners do have a mechanism for avoiding demolition. Seema told me, that when a demolition drive takes place in Salt Lake it doesn’t happen in all the residential blocks at the same time. When it begins in a certain block, a little kid or a teen-ager from the informal settlements there runs to us and informs us of the drive. On receiving the information the stall owners quickly move their stalls across the bamboo

bridge across the Keshtopur canal into their settlement. If they receive the information well in advance and are able to respond quickly then they are able to save their stalls.

A cycle-van on the canal bank. Baisakhi Kheyapar informal settlement in the background



(Photograph taken by author)

Most of the informal settlers seemed pretty confident about handling the various local actors, which they have to deal with in order to live on the canal bank. The policemen of the Salt Lake East police station, which is itself located along the Keshtopur canal have a monthly arrangement with most of the informal settlers. This is how, Azad, an informal settler who lives on the canal bank with his wife and five children, described the arrangement he has with the local police,

“The police never bothers me at all ! I have a monthly arrangement with them. I give them Rs. 50 or 60 every month and that settles it.” (Interview with Azad, July, 2005)

Some other residents like Lathika dealt with the police in more direct ways by appealing to the latter's humanity. Despite being informed by Lathika's employer, the police came to demolish her hut once. In the argument that ensued Lathika told the policeman,

“Why would you demolish my home ? What have I done to you that you wish to torment a poor and lonely woman like me ? What kind of a human being are you ?” (Interview with Lathika Sarkar, July, 2005)

The policeman not only changed his mind, but also developed a deep respect for Lathika and started addressing her as *mashi* (the Bengali word for aunt).

“Nowadays that policeman behaves very nicely with me. He visits me often to ask how I am and to have a chat. Sometimes I cook lunch for him. He eats and then takes a nice long nap in the very home he had intended to demolish !”, Lathika said with a laugh (ibid.).

I must admit, that while I was having this conversation with Lathika I myself was stuffing myself with delicious food consisting of rice, lentils and vegetable curry cooked by her. Like many canal bank settlers she grows green vegetables outside her shanty. My refusals to have lunch were totally brushed aside with a very motherly affection. This is something I witnessed every time I went out to interview these extremely poor canal bank residents. It was impossible to interview them, without being offered a full meal, or some snacks or at least a tea. After I had eaten Lathika's food, I could well imagine that the policeman went straight for a nap rather than report back for duty.

Just like the police, the informal settlers were also confident and comfortable in dealing with the local municipal councilors. The role played by the municipal councillors during the improvement project shall be discussed in the next section. The informal settlers, however, were more worried about dealing with extra-local agencies and departments, such as the Irrigation and Waterways Department. This is exactly what they had to encounter in the canal improvement project. This is what Azad said regarding the threat of extra-local agencies,

Figure 7 Informal Settlements along the Keshtopur Canal



(Map drafted by author)

“We are not afraid of the police. But when people come from outside to demolish our shanties, then we have a problem. For example, when the canal dredging was going on some time back, we decided to vacate our home and shifted to another spot on the canal bank. The workers came and told us that they are going to dredge the canal and we should move out. We dismantled our home and then set it up after the workers left.”

(Interview with Azad, July, 2005)

Most of the settlers construct their huts with temporary material on top of a cement plinth. This way it is easier to dismantle and set it up again. This temporary relocation along the canal bank is another way in which many settlers avoided eviction. However, despite all these methods, many informal settlers had no choice but to move out of the canal bank, once the canal dredging began and their homes were demolished.

Even for the rest of the settlers, who managed to survive the whole dredging process of the canal improvement project, the remaining days of living on the canal bank may be numbered. One of the reasons why the informal settlements have still remained along the canal bank is the realisation by the project authorities and financiers, that if all the settlers are evicted right after the dredging they may come back before the second phase of the project is completed. The first phase of the improvement project, which involved the dredging of the canal, could at worst lead to a temporary eviction. But the second phase, which involves land use reclamation and transformation, contains a real threat of dispossession.

According to G.P. Bagree, Chief Manager of IWIN,

“The rest of the encroachers on the canal bank have not been removed because if we remove them before the works on the canal bank starts then more of them will settle down there. So we will clean the canal and as and when we find some possibility for development, we will evict them.” (interview with G.P. Bagree, July, 2005).

However, it is obvious that the inability or reluctance to evict all the informal settlers from the canal bank had an effect on the dredging process itself. A resident of Keshtopur (a neighbourhood in the Rajarhat-Gopalpur municipality), who refused to give his name, told me in an interview that,

“While dredging the canal the project authorities could not evict the informal settlers which were affiliated to the ruling party. They didn’t even dismantle the many bamboo bridges that are built across the Keshtopur canal. If you check the canal, you will see,

that even after the dredging, some parts of it are still quite shallow !” (Interview with citizen from Keshtopur, July, 2005)

That our man was telling the truth got confirmed when the trial launches got stuck in the Keshtopur canal and the IWD was blamed for not completing the dredging process completely.

9.9 Informal settlers and the Middle Class - Bound in eternal love-hate

The upper- and middle-income residents of canal bank neighbourhoods like Salt Lake, South Dum Dum, Keshtopur are referred to by the informal settlers as *babus*. The informal settlers know fully well, that no matter how vocal the *babus* are regarding the menace of having dense informal settlements on the canal banks and the various environmental problems they generate, they are reliant on these very settlers for a number of services ranging from brooming and washing their multi-storied homes, cooking their food, collecting their garbage, cleaning the streets and providing them with conveniently located tea and snacks stalls.

Despite some extremely energetic persons demanding a quick restoration of the Keshtopur canal, most of the middle-class residents have not been able to organise themselves into a pressure group to ask the local government and the government departments to do something about the canal. One of the most persistent and influential voices demanding environmental improvement of the canal has been that of Bhagabati Prosad Banerjee, a retired judge of the Kolkata High Court, who lives in Salt Lake. In the year 2003, he assisted the residents welfare associations of AA, AB and AC blocks (all of which lie adjacent to the canal) to file complaints to the West Bengal Pollution Control Board (WBPCB) regarding the delay in dredging the canal. This is how he viewed the governmental response to the canal cleaning and the measures that should be taken against the informal settlers.

“Nothing is going to be done about the canal. I have personally petitioned the WBPCB two times. The moment you try to evict the informal residents it becomes a political

issue. If you and me occupy an inch of land we would be thrown out...but nobody touches them ! Just because they are poor ! These encroachers have to be thrown out !”
(Interview with Bhagabati Prosad Banerji, June, 2005).

Middle-class residence in Salt Lake along the Keshtopur canal



(Photograph taken by author)

Whenever the prominent and respectable voices from within the middle-classes spoke, the attitude toward the informal settlers remained the same. The residents of Salt Lake, further, had strange and unsubstantiated impressions about the identity and character of the informal settlers. There was an impression that most of the informal settlers were Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh and that they were involved with all kinds of

illegal activities. The role of the Left Front in general, and the CPM in particular was seen just in terms of the political benefits that came from protecting the informal settlers from eviction. This is how Sudhir Dey, the editor of *Laban Hrad Sambad*, the most important Bengali local newspaper of Salt Lake viewed the situation,

“Well what can you do about these informal settlers ? Ideally there shouldn’t be any informal settlements in a planned township like Salt Lake. But ever since CPM came to power, these people have been able to stay on. All these people living along the canal come from Bangladesh. They live and work here and vote for the CPM:” (Interview with Sudhir Dey, July, 2005)

When I asked Lathika Sarkar’s opinion about such impressions she said,

“What a thing to say ? Aren’t half the people of this city originally from East Bengal ? How can only the canal bank residents be categorised as outsiders then?” (Interview with Lathika, July, 2005)

The paradoxical position of the middle-classes in the context of the canal improvement project and the plight of the informal settlers can be summarised in the following points

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1. Eager to see the canal get cleaned, but largely ineffective in creating effective pressure groups.
2. Vocal about the need to evict the informal settlers, convinced about the rampant criminality breeding in these settlements, but completely bound with the residents of these very settlers for their day to day needs and often assisting sections of the settlers to stay on the canal bank (as seen in the case of Lathika).
3. Largely unaware of the details of the canal improvement projects happening along the Keshtopur canal and the larger Baghbazar Canal System.
4. Largely unaware of the role and responsibility of the local government institution regarding such development projects in the locality.

Though far better than the informal settlers in terms of material resources, the middle-class residents of Salt Lake are poor in the sense of being alienated from and ignorant of both the working of such an important development project in their area and also from the functioning of local democratic institutions. The very precarious position, that the informal settlers are in, forces them to connect strongly with all local actors, and particularly the local ward councilors, and also to be aware about the details of the improvement projects. The middle-class residents, though praying for the canal do get cleaned, have no personal involvement or engagement in the project.

Informal Settler along Keshtopur Canal



(Photograph taken by author)

It is interesting to note, that just as the middle-class residents have their impressions about the informal settlers, the latter too have certain unsubstantiated notions about the *babus*. To create stereotypes about the *babus*, just as the *babus* create stereotypes about them is a way for the informal settlers to assert their dignity and pride while living in obviously demeaning material circumstances. This is how Lathika expressed her views about the eating habits of the *babus* who employ her as a household-helper,

“The babus often wish to give me their left-over food knowing that I am a poor person. But I always refuse...I don’t like the taste of the babus’ food. Their food has a diluted, watererd down taste. Moreover, they like to store everything in the refrigerator, whereas we always eat our food fresh cooked. The babus will cook once and then keep on eating small portions for days together. We don’t prefer that system. We have to do hard labour you see...it is better for us to cook properly and eat properly.” (Interview with Lathika, July, 2005).

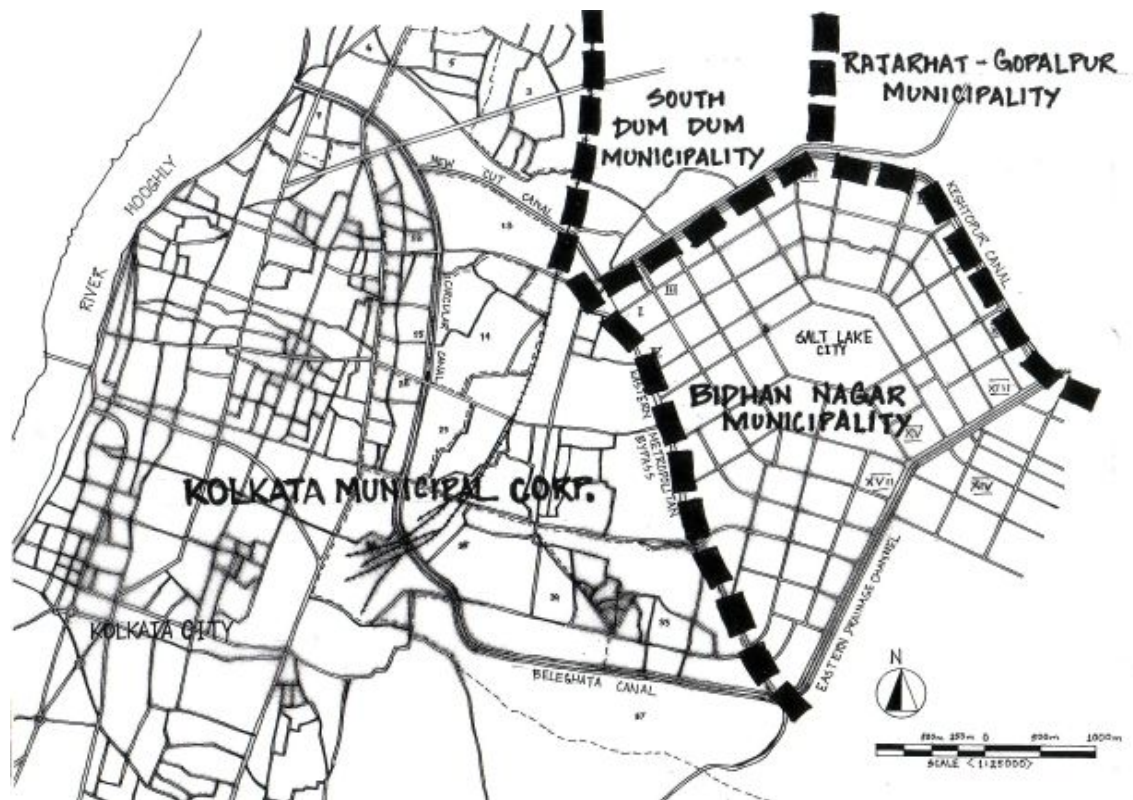
Other stereotypes about the middle-classes are regarding their general laziness, their general contempt for the canal bank informal settlers and their sheer dependence on the informal settlers for doing the most basic of household tasks. Though this dependence is the very source of the economic survival of the informal settlers, it also provides them with a possibility of asserting their superiority over the *babus* from below.

9.10 Role of the Local Government and the Democratic Planning Structure

Though the local government played an important role in every major meeting and the in the overall decision making process for the canal improvement projects, it was hard to find any trace of the bottom-up-bottom planning process of the democratised planning structure of the city. The situation becomes more tragic when one discovers that as one moves lower down the hierarchy of the local government structure, from the level of the Mayor’s office to the level of the ward office, the ability of these institutions of local government to comprehend and grapple with the realities of such large development projects becomes lesser and lesser.

While the Mayor of the KMC sat down and discussed the logistics of the projects with the officials of the various line departments and even demanded quick action from them, the local ward councilors, who were closest to the people considered the improvement projects to be quite beyond their capacity or role to deal with. Such an attitude was common to the councilors belonging to the Left Front and the opposition political parties.

Figure 8 The different local government areas the Bagh Bazaar Canal System flows through



(Map drafted by author)

Due to the inconvenience caused to the residents of the canal side blocks of Salt Lake due to the polluted canal, the councilors of all political parties had been requesting the Irrigation and Waterways Department to dredge the canal. Tulsi Sinha Roy, the councillor of Ward number 12 of Salt Lake (Bidhan Nagar Municipality) and a member of the Trinamool Congress Party, told me in an interview,

“Some years back we stepped into the dirty waters of the canal, collected the water hyacinth and the garbage that floats on it and barged into the office of the Minister of State for Irrigation to give him a present. This was a desperate move by us, as a reaction to the apathy of the irrigation department.” (Interview with Tulsi Sinha Roy, November, 2004)

However, when the canal improvement project finally started, the councilors didn't consider it necessary to involve themselves in the project any further. According to Nandagopal Bhattacharya, the Left Front councillor of Ward number 9,

“The municipality is not involved with the canal improvement project in any way - neither financially nor managerially.” (Interview with Nandagopal Bhattacharya, August, 2005)

According to Anita Mondol of the Trinamool Congress, who was the councillor of Ward number 11 before the municipal elections of 2005,

“The councilors hardly have any say at all in this project. It is a state government project and it is they who decide and do everything. The irrigation department asks for our help only when they have to evict the encroachers living on the canal banks...to go to the canal bank with the police, demolish the shanties etc. We do that...but the encroachers keep trickling in all the time.” (Interview with Anita Mondol, November, 2004).

Not only were the councilors left out of the decision making process, at some points of time during the dredging process they even protested against it for causing substantial inconvenience to the residents living in blocks bordering the canal. According to Debojyoti Raychowdhuri, who works as an assistant in the office of ward number 9 in Salt Lake,

“The contractors of the irrigation department started using heavy trucks for removing the silt dredged from the canal. This caused extensive damage to the road bordering the

canal. Also, when they dumped the silt on the canal banks, it caused damage to the fences and small parks located in some of the neighbourhoods along the canal. They never informed our councillor about any of these things in advance. Finally we protested and forced the works to be stopped till the fences and the parks were repaired.” (Interview with Debojyoti Raychowdhuri, Aug., 2005)

None of the councilors openly said anything in favour of the informal settlers in any of the interviews. All of them were of the opinion that the settlers cannot continue to live on the canal bank indefinitely. According to the Sudhanshu Shekhar Ganguly, the Left Front supported independent councillor of Ward 13 and the Vice-Chairman of Bidhan Nagar municipality before the elections of 2005,

“The encroachers have to move out. There is no alternative to that...resettlement may or may not work out. Where should we resettle them? Where is the land? Even if there is a resettlement planning process, it is the responsibility of the state government. It is completely out of our scope. But why should even the state government do it? After all, they didn’t invite the encroachers to come and stay here !” (Interview with Sudhanshu Shekhar Ganguly, Nov., 2004)

When seen in the context of the municipal elections that were held in Kolkata and Salt Lake (Bidhan Nagar Municipality), in the summer of 2005, such rhetoric made sense. It has already been noted in the previous chapter that the tremendous victory of the Left Front in both the Kolkata Municipal Corporation and the Bidhan Nagar Municipality was due to their strategic re-orientation towards a development policy favouring urban development and industrialisation. The councilors of the Left Front were eager to show that they have finally started addressing issues of urban infrastructure improvement seriously and were absolutely not going to repeat the anti-infrastructure rhetoric of the past.

However, the actions of the councilors on the ground were very different from the answers given to me in the interviews. The Left Front had developed strong mutual links with the informal settlers along the canal, most of whom had their settlements

within wards under the control of the Left Front. Nandagopal Bhattacharya gave me a good idea of the dilemma facing many conscientious councilors in the difficult task of balancing the strategic re-orientation of the Left Front and the working relationship with the informal settlers at the local level.

“Eventually they would have to move out. It will not be possible...you see...to carry on living like this on land belonging to the irrigation department. Anyway, most of them have family and some land in the country-side too. They can go back to the village in the worst case. Moreover, this township of Salt Lake is the only place in the whole of Kolkata which you can consider to be a slightly planned area. After some years the planned ‘New Town’ at Rajarhat would get developed too. Under these circumstances, we just can’t delay the improvement of the canals for the sake of the informal settlers.” (Interview with Nandagopal Bhattacharya, August, 2005).

Immediately after having given the reason for the removal of the settlers, he smiled and said, *“But you see...the trouble is, that, it is in our very homes that these settlers work. The residents of Salt Lake want both the improvement of the canal and also the cheap services of the informal settlers.”* (ibid.)

At the end of the interview, he told me, without being asked directly,

“But we don’t wish to be too hard on the settlers. We try our best not to evict them in a ruthless manner. Sometimes we ask them to move out and undertake an eviction drive...after a while they come back again. Regarding those informal settlers who have some sort of an identification document such as the voter’s identification card, we would not ask them to move out permanently. They can try to find some other area within the ward to re-build their home.” (ibid.)

This account provided by Nandagopal showed clearly the macro-economic and extra-local processes in front of which both the elected leaders and the informal settlers were helpless to a substantial extent. Many of the informal settlers themselves described the

situation in a very similar manner. This is how Sukumar and Parboti, a couple living in one of the settlements along Keshtopur canal described the situation,

“We would have to move out. I have stayed here many years, but now it seems that the canal and its banks are to be developed properly. If we really have to move out then we will go back to our village in the Sundarbans. Normally, when there is an eviction drive, then they give us a prior warning...sometime one month in advance, sometimes just a week. But we still have a couple of months more for sure...we know that we will not be evicted before the autumn festival.” (Interview with Sukumar and Parboti, August, 2005).

Given this state of affairs at the local level, it is evident that the political strengthening of the local government institutions has not evolved into an increased ability to understand spatial planning and development processes. Most of the ward councilors were unaware of the requirement for preparing the five-year draft development plans, which were supposed to consider the annual needs statements of the various wards, and amalgamated to form perspective plans at the metropolitan level. The councilors saw the limit of their involvement in the democratised planning structure in the preparation and submission of annual needs statements, focussing on mundane repair and maintenance issues such as road repair, street lighting, garbage collection etc., for which an annual ‘councillor-fund’ of Rs. 5 lakhs (approx.) is allotted to the individual wards.

The few councilors who were aware of the overall bottom-up-bottom planning process confessed that preparation of draft development plans and their amalgamation had not been attempted due to lack of finances and availability of technical and human resources for planning. According to Sudhanshu Shekhar Ganguly :

“The planning process has been discontinued by the municipality There aren’t enough finances for making a comprehensive development plan. As you know, finance is the life of a plan.” (Interview with Sudhanshu Shekhar Ganguly, Nov, 2005)

Thus, despite all the wisdom involved in the creation of the new planning structure, in reality, it remained a top-down structure, albeit constituted of locally elected leaders rather than technocrats. The only plan that was created after the Kolkata Metropolitan Planning Committee came into being was the perspective plan for the Kolkata Metropolitan Area, prepared by its technical secretariat, the Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority.

Though the councilors were acutely aware of the various issues affecting their individual wards and, in general, could feel the pulse of the people, they had no resources for any kind of spatial analysis in their offices. During my field work, I did not find a single ward office in Salt Lake which had a proper map of the township. This, despite the fact, that the office of the National Atlas and Thematic Mapping Organisation, which sells a 1: 10000 scale map of the Salt Lake township (showing the different wards, existing land-use and clear plot boundaries) for a paltry Rs. 25, is located bang in the centre of the township at an average distance of just a couple of kilometres from all the ward offices in the area. When I showed the councilors the map during my interviews, they were delighted to refer to it to have a better spatial understanding of their own ward vis-à-vis the neighbouring wards and the Keshtopur canal.

In an ideal situation, the plight of the Keshtopur canal and what could be done about it, should have been addressed in the various needs statements prepared by the individual wards of the various municipalities bordering the canal. The issue of the environmental degradation of the canal and the plight of the informal settlers, should then have been discussed at a cross-municipality discussion in the process of the amalgamation of the needs statements in the preparation of the municipal level draft development plan. The available schemes, programmes and finances of the various line departments and special agencies could then have been evaluated or developed in the light of the amalgamated plan prepared after inter-municipal deliberations. The case of the canal could have even formed a component deserving of special attention within this deliberative planning process.

Needless to say, the real planning and implementation of the canal improvement project on the Keshtopur canal had no resemblance to such a democratic planning structure. It may be argued in favour of the new planning structure, that the metropolitan planning committee has been set up just a few years back, and it would need more time to fully activate such a democratic planning structure. However, it is not the time required, but the manner of work itself, which must distinguish such a democratic planning body such as the Kolkata Metropolitan Planning Committee from the technocratic line departments and functional agencies. The main advantage of the democratic and deliberative planning process should be its ability to plunge into a planning and development process at any point of time and let the discursive process take over. The experience of the canal improvement project does not show a tendency towards such a democratic and deliberative planning process operating at the local level.

9.11 For whom is this project ?

This question inevitably arises in the course of studying and analysing the various environmental improvement projects being undertaken on the various stretches of the Bagh Bazaar canal. Despite the many problems that beset the planning and implementation process and the highly undemocratic and non-participatory nature of in which the informal settlers were dealt with, this is not an easy question to answer. It is clear that, on the whole, the project reflects the second major strategic re-orientation of the Left Front, which is primarily aimed towards attracting industrial investment back to the state of West Bengal. Improvement of transport infrastructure, city beautification and environmental upgradation are all necessary components of inter-urban competition in the context of neoliberal socio-economic policy. Yet, it is also clear that these canals did perform a vital environmental function for the city in the past and provides unique opportunities for generating environment friendly transport options for this severely polluted and severely congested city. The initial focus of the Left Front government on rural areas had led to a neglect of the socio-economic and environmental problems of the city of Kolkata.

Although, the middle-class population of the various neighbourhoods and townships bordering the canal system were also excluded from any consultative or participatory

process, it could be argued that the overall developmental intervention comes as a response to such basic and long-ignored concerns of the middle-class residents of Kolkata, in general, and these neighbourhoods, in particular, that the support of this class to such environmental improvement projects is almost guaranteed. In fact, such a support from the middle-class was clearly demonstrated in the over-whelming victory which the Left Front had in the civic elections and state assembly elections in 2005 and 2006 respectively. At the same time, it must also be considered, that it was not just a narrow interest in holding on to political power in the state that prompted the Left Front to initiate such a strategic re-orientation. Despite being one of the most consistent opponents and critics of neoliberal policies in the Indian political scene, the Left Front realised that its pro-poor policies based on land-reform would run out of steam if the achievements in the agricultural sector were not quickly followed up with the development of a robust industrial sector.

The urgency to undertake infrastructure upgradation and environmental improvement with their consequent negative effects on the poorest strata of the urban poor, have to be understood in the light of this economic necessity faced by the Left Front government (where it is compelled to revive its industrial base precisely at a time when neoliberal economic policies are at their strongest in India) and not by a simplistic and mechanical understanding based on the model of a corrupt and anti-poor state tormenting the urban poor with apolitical NGOs and civil society organisations as the only possible saviours. Though such a simplistic model is part of the received wisdom in many academic departments focussing on planning and development studies, it has been seen in the context of the present case, that anytime the civil society got into action, it did so as a front organisation of the opposition political party (as in the case of the *Uchhed Birodhi Mancha*) or as a voice of the upper- and middle-classes which had no empathy or compassion for the plight of the informal settlers.

Part VI

Findings and Conclusions

10. Findings and Conclusions

The final part of the thesis is essentially made up three parts, though it is not presented as three distinct portions, visibly separated from each other. The first part deals with the way in which the findings of this research answer the three research questions. The second part describes the way in which such findings re-structure and re-orient existing communicative planning theory. The third part uses this re-structured and re-oriented communicative planning theory to point out some avenues for practice which could contribute to the strengthening of the democratic planning process set in motion in Kolkata.

10.1 Answering the Questions..or Questioning the Questions

The findings ended up serving two purposes vis-à-vis the research questions by the time the research process was coming to an end. One of the purposes was definitely to find answers to the questions. But the answers, in turn, substantially questioned and altered the very intention that underlay the research questions. Though this may sound complicated at first, it was actually an inevitable process and shall be elaborated in this section. Let us take, for example, the first research question - *Has the creation of the democratic planning structure in the city of Kolkata made the local planning and development process in the city more communicative ?*

From the description and analysis of the West Bengal democratic decentralisation experiment presented in the preceding chapters it can be concluded that a genuine effort was made in the state to democratise the planning structure and make the overall development process pro-poor using the twin strategies of democratic decentralisation and land reform. As has already been explained, due to a variety of reasons, such a development process could not reach out to the poorest sections of the population in both the urban and rural areas. But it did initiate a strong process to bring the planning and development process under local democratic control and as close to the lowest groups as possible.

The experiment attacked the age old colonial legacy of top-down, centralised and expert dominated dominated planning structure, largely operating independent of local democratic control, and replaced it with a planning structure which was not only under the control of the newly empowered local government institutions but also driven by a deliberative and discursive planning process. This move away from centralised planning to decentralised planning; from a process controlled by bureaucrats, technocrats and experts to a process controlled by the municipalities and panchayats, therefore, also meant a move away from instrumental rationality and toward communicative rationality as the basis for guiding planning practice.

So much, for the first part of the question. The second part of the research question is more tricky to answer. It would have been simple if the research merely sought to analyse the real democratic decentralisation experiment in West Bengal, based on the given ideals of communicative planning theory. However, what was attempted in this research was exactly the opposite of that - to de-idealise and de-mystify communicative planning theory based on the real, historical experience of the democratic decentralisation experiment. Therefore, the extent to which the experiment has made the planning and development process in Kolkata communicative depends on the manner in which this experiment has altered the very meaning, assumptions and ambitions of communicative planning theory as it stands today.

Thus, in order to fully answer the second part of the first question, it becomes necessary to ask the second research question - *What was the historical process involved in the creation of such a planning structure ?*

One of the first important points that emerges out of a historical analysis of the struggles for democratic decentralisation in India, in general, and in West Bengal, in particular, is that of the democratic heritage. Contrary to communicative planning theorists such as Healey, who seek the democratic heritage of communicative planning in the ideals of the Enlightenment, the activists of the democratic decentralisation process in India seek it in the process of the nationalist freedom struggle launched against the British imperialists. Indian freedom fighters fully respected the importance of European

democratic ideals, but they had to wrest it by demanding genuine democracy from the most advanced capitalist and imperialist nation of Europe. The nationalist struggle, thus, found an expression in the conflict between the political demand for devolution of power and responsibilities to the lower tiers of the government, which the Indians could control, and the emphasis put by the British administrators on greater centralisation and bureaucratisation of planning and development functions.

This conflict between the proponents of democratic decentralisation and the proponents of centralised and bureaucratic planning did not end with the political freedom of India. The conflict, in the initial decades after freedom, was between the bourgeois-landlord classes on the one hand and the masses of tenant and landless farmers, agricultural labourers, lower castes and the urban poor on the other hand. The political representative of the former was the powerful Congress Party, which was in control of the central government (championing the interests of the bourgeois-landlord classes), and that of the latter were the emerging left-of-centre political parties, which did not always champion the cause of the rural and urban poor, but nonetheless, launched a struggle for democratic decentralisation mainly to oppose the centralising tendencies of the Congress party.

The most progressive of all these left-of-centre political parties was the CPM, which formed its political and developmental vision based on the understanding that a transformation of the existing material relations in the city and the countryside was essential to face the challenges of poverty and under-development.

During the 1960s, the strategies of the CPM and its leftist allies was based on launching and encouraging open class struggle against the industrial capitalists in the city and landlords in the countryside after having assumed democratic control of the state government. The experience of the first communist government in Kerala under the chief ministership of E.M.S. Namboodiripad and of the two United Front governments in West Bengal showed the leftists the enormous difficulties of such a strategy of organising open class struggle by assuming democratic control of a couple of states within the Indian union. The reactions of the central government and the problems of

economic decline forced the new Left Front government, which was elected in West Bengal in 1977 to continue its programmes of land reform and altering the property relations in the urban and rural areas through a process of democratic decentralisation rather than open class confrontation. The more the Left Front attempted to retain its political power and implement its pro-poor development policies within the overall democratic-capitalist set up of the Indian state, the more it had to tone down its confrontational and militant nature and engage in processes of collaboration, negotiation and communication with the industrial and financial interests on whom the economy of the state desperately depended.

In the light of such observations it is hard to say whether the communicative turn in the planning and development process in West Bengal is a progressive or a regressive turn. Perhaps it is easier to answer the question if one specifies the question a bit more and asks - Progressive or regressive for whom ? For the industrialists and investors who would want to make use of the political stability of the state and the necessity driven compliance of the Left Front; for the middle-class residents of the city of Kolkata who would benefit from the employment opportunities generated by industrial development and the consequent improvements in urban environment and infrastructure; and even for the residents of the hundreds of registered slums in the city, who would benefit from the environmental upgradation projects, such a turn would appear advantageous and progressive. However, to the traditional allies of the Left Front, from within the formal labour force and the residents of the informal settlements, the turn is definitely a painful and regressive one.

This understanding provides an answer to the third research question - Does the process of creating a more communicative planning process through a democratisation of the planning structure increase the capacity of the poor citizens of the city to resist the trends of neoliberal urbanisation in Kolkata ?

Addressing issues of poverty and under-development was central to the democratic decentralisation experiment in West Bengal. The whole move towards democratisation from below was geared towards the overall goals of creating greater social and

economic equality in the state. However, as we have seen, the process has had diverse effects on the condition of the poor depending on their geographical location (the city or the countryside) or the specific labour sector they belong to (formal or informal).

This also shows, rather than the obsolescence of class based struggles, as is assumed by theorists like Healey, a combination of economic compulsions faced by the Left Front government led to a substantial weakening of the resistance capacity of industrial workers in the formal sector and increasing uncertainty for the workers of the informal sector. There is a resurgence of class oppression from above and a dissolution of class resistance from below. This points to an intensification of class based antagonism and contradiction rather than its obsolescence.

10.2 Turning Communicative Planning Theory on its Head

Such is the nature of the communicative turn in the planning and development process in the state of West Bengal and in its capital city of Kolkata, which emerged out of a paradoxical situation of not being guided and inspired by communicative planning theory at all.

Such an understanding of the communicative turn in Kolkata provides us with a historical materialist understanding of communicative planning theory in general. Rather than succumbing to the idealistic fetters that besets the literature on communicative planning theory [such as a romantic search for the roots of the democratic planning tradition of the west within the ideals of the European Enlightenment, while completely overlooking the perversion of such ideals by the rising capitalist class and the role of colonial transfers and European imperialism in creating the economic conditions favourable for the fostering of liberal democracy in West Europe; the subtle corruption of the Marxist understanding of the relationship between the economic base and the super-structure by using Giddens' theory of structuration; and the assumption of the historical dissolution of class-based politics and the irrelevance of class struggle], the West Bengal experiment shows, that the communicative turn in planning and development was not a result of the ingenuity, wisdom and pragmatism of individual planners or of communicative planning theorists,

but was a contextually determined and conjunctural phenomenon based on particular historical circumstances.

In such a situation, the focus of communicative planning theory on an extended political society (including all possible urban stakeholders), the role of the individual planner, the micro-processes of day to day life and the fine grain of taken for granted assumptions lend it the characteristics of a counter-revolutionary theory as described by Harvey. It appears 'logically coherent, easily manipulable, aesthetically pleasing...new and fashionable' and yet, at the same time, remains 'a perfect device for non-decision making.' (Harvey: 1988, p - 151).

By basing our understanding of the communicative turn in planning on the concrete historical experience of the particular context in which it has arisen; by seeing it as a product of historical compulsions and not as a creation of the brains of individual practitioners or theorists, we take a significant step forward in understanding and applying communicative planning theory for what it truly should be - a theorisation of a planning situation that came into being as a result of historical processes and will definitely go out of being when those historical processes change.

There is a particular irony in the history of the communicative turn in the West Bengal experiment, which, on closer inspection, provides communicative planning theory with an opportunity to turn into a truly revolutionary theory. We have seen that it was the regression of the progressive class based forces in West Bengal which led to the communicative turn. However, once the communicative turn has begun, a correct appraisal of it can provide us with effective weapons with which to tackle some of the extreme consequences of neoliberalism at the local level till the overall macro-economic context changes. If properly channelised and theorised, the communicative turn can, in fact, become an innovative strategy for class-struggle in contemporary urban environments.

The Left Front in West Bengal certainly showed wisdom by quickly opting for democratic decentralisation, when they realised that conventional class confrontation

was bound to end in failure. Rather than relying on civil society organisations and a prioritisation of local governance over local government the West Bengal leftists opted to improve upon the existing structure of representative democracy by making it more responsive, accountable and involving it directly with the larger political-economic programs aimed at social change.

One example of this can be seen in the near absence of religious-fundamentalist trends in Kolkata, which often emerge as a result of the breaking up of working class movements and organisations and advance side by side with the rise of neoliberal economic trends. It is not a mere co-incidence, that the most violent religious riots in the recent years in India have happened in the states where right-wing Hindu-chauvinist political parties with their usual championing of neoliberalism and intense love for big business have been in power.

Based on such a historical materialist analysis of the West Bengal experiment, one can now list the main features of a new communicative planning theory, derived out of the contextual experience of this third-world region and not out of that of West Europe and North America alone.

1. The communicative turn in the planning and development process does not get created by focussing on processes aimed at generating inter-subjective understanding and consensus or through a focus on the role of the individual planner.
2. The communicative turn is a contextually determined and conjunctural phenomenon based on the particular historical circumstances of the city or region in which it has emerged.
3. It is quite possible that a process of radical structural reform based on class-struggle and class-confrontation, rather than one based on fostering inter-subjective understanding, can, over time, evolve into a more dialogical and communicative planning system.
4. Rather than being an outcome of or a popular barricade against the forces of neoliberal urbanisation, the communicative turn is intrinsically bound with the process of the increase in power and influence of the upper classes (the capitalist class and its

allies) vis-à-vis the power and influence of organised movements of the lower classes (the formal and informal work-force in the city and the share-cropper, landless farmer and agricultural labourer in the country-side).

5. As long as the power and influence of the upper classes remains strong (i.e. as long as neoliberal economic policies dominate the macro-economic context), a historical materialist understanding of the communicative turn can provide progressive social forces with an effective weapon to resist the worst consequences of neoliberal urbanisation and contribute to the withdrawal of upper-class power by working at the local level. Rather than being based on the understanding that class-struggle has become obsolete and irrelevant, communicative planning becomes a new and innovative instrument of class struggle in current times. By analysing and informing this new strategy of class struggle, communicative planning theory stands a better chance of informing and guiding radical planning practice, and goes closer to becoming a revolutionary theory.

11. The Way Ahead

Ideally, this research should not end with a typical section on recommendations and prescriptive policies. The dialectical nature of the analysis and the very theme of the research i.e. communicative and democratic planning processes, automatically imply that ideas for future action should not emerge out of the head of the individual researcher but should be generated socially through a communicative process. Rather than suggesting ideal solutions for improving planning practice, this section attempts to see the possible avenues, which the democratisation experiment of Kolkata can be channelised into, based on the concrete analysis of its successes and failures that has been attempted in this research.

The West Bengal experiment has certainly succeeded in creating a firm institutional and legal structure for democratic planning in the state and also used it to a considerable degree in undertaking its structural reform programmes. At the same time, it is also true, that in the face of the economic realities that the state faces in the current times, the same democratic structure is failing to protect the rights of the poorest groups and is actually reverting back to the top-down and expert driven planning process. As the low-

er tiers within the local government structure are failing to get adequately involved with the planning process only the 'up' part of the bottom-up-bottom planning structure is operating. One of the common reasons cited for the inability to prepare the plans at the municipal and sub-municipal levels is the lack of financial and technical resources.

Due to this reason, in a way, this innovative planning structure is falling victim to the very same chicken and egg problem of earlier times, when the lack of planning capacity was used as an argument by the opponents of decentralisation to postpone the devolution of finances and functions indefinitely. The problem of the prevention of financial and functional devolution doesn't exist anymore. However, the total finances available are bound to be low and the exercise of the bottom-up-bottom planning function has to be initiated somehow using other creative means. The revival of the planning process from below has to be based on the understanding that a democratic planning process cannot be initiated just with the help of increased finances. First and foremost, it demands an engagement by the local people themselves and an eagerness on their part to take ownership of the planning process.

The answer to this problem lies in the history of the democratic decentralisation experiments of West Bengal and Kerala itself. In both these experiments, the proponents of decentralisation didn't wait indefinitely for the local government institutions to get sufficiently trained and experienced. A chunk of the plan funds were transferred to these bodies and, at the same time, they were plunged into the crucial tasks of managing and implementing the various pro-poor policies and programmes of the state governments. A very similar strategy can be adopted, with minor modifications, to activate the democratic planning structure in Kolkata.

11.1 Turning Crisis to Opportunity - Revitalising the Local Level

Just as a crisis can create widespread misery and suffering among people, it can also become a vehicle for quick learning and empowerment if people organise themselves with the will and creativity to face it. It is worthwhile to remember, that when the newly empowered panchayats in West Bengal were in their infancy, they managed to not only pull through a massive development programme such as Operation Barga, but also

succeeded in planning and executing successful relief measures in the aftermath of the massive floods in 1978. The immensity of the challenges that they were forced to face empowered them at a pace much faster than in normal times.

In the same way projects like the environmental improvement of the Baghbazar canal system can be turned from crisis generating situations to training grounds for the democratic planning process. The largely non-functional ward committees could be mobilised by giving them the tasks of collecting and disseminating relevant information about such large development projects affecting the area. Public hearings, citizen consultations and joint meetings of the representatives of the informal settlements and middle-class groups could be held. The idea is to channelise the energy and activities of diverse organisations, individuals and civil society groups operating within a spatial unit (e.g. the ward) and rally them around the elected local bodies to generate a process of mass participation.

In a way, this is similar to the first of the three aspects of decentralised planning listed by Jayati Ghosh -

1. Mobilisation of the common people.
2. Organisation or Institution Building.
3. Planning

(Ghosh: 2004, p - 57)

The aspect of citizen mobilisation, being based on human initiative and creativity, would not necessarily require extra funding. The vibrant cultural milieu of the city of Kolkata with its numerous voluntary theatre groups and cultural associations could also be used in such a citizen mobilisation process. Though a bit harder to track and identify, the wise citizens of the streets, such as Mastaan Baba, could also be indispensable resource persons for such a process. In fact, the ideas for revitalising the local level discussed in this chapter draw on Mastaan's own notion of 'setting the beds of sleeping people on fire'. Of course, in the case of the canal projects, the 'fire' has already been set by the forces of neoliberal urbanisation.

These processes of mobilisation can begin in those wards, where the councilors have already shown an initiative to cooperate with the informal settlers in trying to mitigate the negative consequence of the project on their lives. Such a process may not radically alter the manner in which such a development process is undertaken or lead to elaborate resettlement programmes for the informal settlers who have been evicted and/or those who are facing eviction, but it would give the local population a taste for involvement in a direct democratic process and also break the general apathy and alienation of the middle class groups. In time, the spirit of one ward would influence other neighbouring wards. Such a process would also go a long way in breaking the barrier of misinformation and mis-understanding that exists between the middle-class population and the informal settlers.

The experience of the people's campaign for decentralised planning, undertaken in the state of Kerala during the 1990s provides us with a very innovative strategy to enhance the technical capacity of the local government institutions to undertake local area level planning. Rather than hiring professional consultants, the architects of the Kerala decentralised planning process, decided to create a 'Voluntary Technical Corpse (VTC)' comprised of 'retired technical experts and professionals' (Isaac: 2000, p - 18). Any retired person with 'a professional or post-graduate degree or officer level experience in a development sector' could become a member of the VTC and commit 'himself/herself to spending at least one day a week giving technical assistance' to the ward committees and municipalities (ibid.). Given the scores of retired persons with splendid professional backgrounds in diverse fields, living in the township of Salt Lake, there is a splendid opportunity to create a VTC that could assist enlightened and progressive ward councilors to generate alternative plans for the management and development of the canal bank land in coordination with surrounding wards. The VTC could also assist in the process of identification of available land within the various wards where the most vulnerable sections of the informal settlers could be relocated.

One can well imagine the role such VTCs can play in giving these retired people (many of whom are eager to get back into the field of practice again) an opportunity to engage in an extremely satisfying, meaningful and socially relevant work and also enabling

them to get over the alienation that forces them to always remain on the receiving end of the planning and development process.

The second aspect of decentralised planning, i.e. organisation or institution building has already been accomplished to a large extent. The process could be improved further by extending the existing institutions further downwards within a single ward by creating provisions for neighbourhood councils.

Regarding the third aspect, the building up of and refining of the experience gained from opposing, involving with and interacting with a large and difficult development project like the canal improvement one, is necessary. The goal of the democratic decentralised planning should be to use the involvement with such a project to set in motion a discursive planning process which would be completely ready to face the challenge of such interventions of neoliberal urbanisation the next time they appear. In time, the ward committees and the planning wings of the various panchayats and local government could become so accustomed to such a process of deliberative planning that the possibility of such top-down interventions would be eliminated completely. Just as neoliberal urbanisation has the tendency to replace socio-economic and spatial planning with large urban development projects as the key strategic instruments to re-shape urban areas, democratic planning would be able to do exactly the opposite, i.e. re-instate the primary position of democratic, bottom-up planning as the key strategic instrument to guide the process of urbanisation in a more egalitarian way.

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