13. REVIEW OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT-WEST BENGAL

One of the most remarkable features of Indian politics over the past three decades is the uninterrupted tenure in office of the Left Front (L.F.) Government in West Bengal. It is now more than 30 years since the Left Front was elected to run the State Government of West Bengal in 1977.

While a comprehensive assessment covering all aspects would be beyond the scope of any single study, we now have an important document assessing the current state of human development in West Bengal, namely, the West Bengal Human Development Report 2004 (WBHDR), published by the Development and Planning Department of the Government of West Bengal. Though the WBHDR has been published by a department of the State government, it has been put together by the collective efforts of officials and academics, many of them outside the Government. The overall task of coordination of the necessary research as well as the consultative process and writing was entrusted to an academic from outside the State, Professor Jayati Ghosh of the Jawaharlal Nehru University. This in itself is a refreshing departure from most of the State human development reports published so far. The Planning Commission and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have participated in and supported the preparation and publication of the WBHDR.
Unlike many other HDRs, the report under review has gone beyond the usual focus on health and education to look at issues of employment, asset equity, decentralised democratic governance, environment, inter-regional disparities and human security. The two key features of West Bengal's experience that distinguish it sharply from most other States (with the exception of Kerala, from which, however, West Bengal differs in many other respects) are the basic land reforms carried out in the State and the significant devolution of power as well as the regular holding of elections to local bodies. Both these have occurred during the tenure of the Left Front. It is only appropriate, as the WBHDR does, to focus on these two aspects in any assessment of the state of human development.

The other commendable feature of the report is that it seeks to assess human development not merely in terms of the present status but also in a historical perspective. It covers, in succession, the following aspects: land reforms, people's participation, material conditions, employment trends, health and nutrition, literacy and education, human security, environment, and problems of specific regions. In the final chapter, the possible strategies for coping with the challenges that human development in West Bengal faces are discussed.

Land reforms in West Bengal have helped the State's progress in terms of human development by expanding livelihood opportunities for the rural poor and empowering them vis-à-vis landlords and rich peasants. The reforms consisted of two key components: the provision of security to sharecropping tenants through a process of registration of tenants, popularly known as `Operation Barga' and the acquisition of ceiling-surplus lands as well as other lands vested with government and their distribution among landless labourers and poor peasants. Some idea of its achievement in land redistribution can be obtained from the fact that while the State accounts for only 3.5 per cent of the arable land in the country, it accounts for 20 per cent of the total land redistributed. The number of persons who benefited from land distribution was close to 2.75 million, accounting for 47 per cent of all beneficiaries of re-distributive land reform in the entire country.

Interestingly, even during the neo-liberal decade of the 1990s, 94,000 acres of land was distributed between 1993 and 1999, under the land reform programme. Operation Barga led to the registration of more than 1.7 million sharecroppers and their
protection against eviction. It covered more than 1.1 million acres. Overall, the land reforms, including both land redistribution and tenancy registration, covered more than 41 per cent of the State's rural population by 2002. In addition, 5.5 lakh persons, mostly agricultural labourers, fishermen and artisans received homestead land under various Acts.

The land reforms have also helped reduce social inequalities to some extent in as much as the pattern of land redistribution was weighted in favour of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, and poor peasants from the Muslim community. However, one major weakness of the land reform programme was that for a long time it did not address the issue of gender inequality in land ownership and control. Although gender inequality has received some attention recently, the issue remains substantially untouched.

The WBHDR notes that land reforms - in close, synergistic interaction with democratic decentralisation - have helped unleash productive forces and led to a remarkable expansion in agricultural output, breaking the agricultural stagnation that characterised the State up to the end of the 1970s. The rapid growth of agriculture, with its wide, small-farmer base, has in turn contributed to `... a substantial growth of small scale unorganised sector manufacturing and service activity in rural areas... ' (page 37). Land reforms have strengthened the rural poor, especially the small and marginal farmers and sharecroppers, both politically and economically, and have led to a significant reduction in rural poverty. However, the WBHDR recognises, despite the land reforms, `...the economic processes that generate inequality in the countryside still remain significant' (page 42).

Human development in West Bengal has been greatly facilitated by the importance attached to the elected local bodies and the significant devolution of finance to them by the Left Front. Over the decade of the 1990s, total funds received by panchayats increased fivefold in real terms, while the Plan funds made available to them increased sevenfold between 1993-94 and 2000-01. It must also be stressed that basic land reforms, achieved through a process of class-based mobilisation from below and use of the instruments of the state from above, have played a crucial role in making panchayats a weapon of the poor by weakening the economic and political power of the rural landed elite. This has made it possible for the poor to benefit from devolution of
power to elected local bodies, since otherwise such local bodies can become the opposite - the weapon of the rich - as is the experience in many parts of the country.

Various studies have shown that the class composition of rural elected bodies in West Bengal is weighted substantially in favour of sharecroppers and poor and small peasants. However, teachers are represented rather disproportionately, especially at block and district levels, but this is of course quite different from having landlords and rich peasants dominating these bodies. Along with devolution of power and finances to the elected local bodies, successive L.F. governments have also tried to promote planning from below, and to strengthen the process of district-level planning. These efforts have met with limited success. The early enthusiasm of the 1980s has not been sustained, but recently efforts have been initiated to revive meaningful local planning at panchayat, block and district levels.

Land reforms and decentralisation initiatives have made possible human development achievements by empowering the poor and the socially disadvantaged, promoting greater equity, contributing to communal harmony and increasing the productive capabilities of agriculture and rural small industry and services. However, significant lacunae remain in the human development scenario of West Bengal. Thus, while progress has been registered in both health and education in terms of some basic indicators such as infant mortality rates and literacy rates, its record is not very impressive in comparison with a State like Kerala. It also lags behind States such as Tamil Nadu, Punjab and Maharashtra or even Gujarat and Haryana in several aspects of human development. Health and educational indicators also show sizeable differences across gender, caste and region. Thus, while the male literacy rates for the districts of Kolkata, Medinipur, Haora, Hugli, the South and the North 24-Parganas, Barddhaman and Darjiling ranged between 79 per cent and 86 per cent in 2001, Uttar Dinajpur, Maldah and Murshidabad had male literacy rates of just around 60 per cent. Literacy rates among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are consistently and significantly lower than for the rest of the population, and, shockingly, low for females among these disadvantaged groups. Similarly, female literacy rates in general are below male literacy rates in all districts, and the gender differentials are often very large. Thus in Purulia, the
male literacy rate is 74.18 per cent and the female rate is practically half this figure at 37.15 per cent.

Rates of malnutrition remain unconscionably high for a State with a progressive Government, and are even more so for females and children. Some of this is of course attributable to unenviable historical legacy, but surely a great deal needs to be done, and done urgently in this regard, if West Bengal is to achieve levels of human development consistent with its impressive record in equity, democratic participation and communal harmony.

Another area of concern is the slow growth of employment in general, and the lack of adequate productive employment opportunities for women in particular. There is also evidence of increasing landlessness in some parts of rural Bengal. Substantial regional differences, again historically inherited, persist. Of course, these problems are also intimately related to the deflationary macroeconomic policies of successive Central Governments since 1991, and to the fact of the State government having to function within an increasingly centralised quasi-federal Union.

The WBHDR recognises these constraints even while being frankly critical of the deficiencies in West Bengal's human development picture. It notes the inherent difficulty of following an autonomous development path within a State under limited constitutional powers. It recognises the difficulties in mobilising resources and the impact of fiscal constraints on measures to promote human development.

But, quite rightly, the WBHDR also points to the importance of what can be done within these constraints. Thus, it recommends that decentralisation be carried further. It highlights the importance of involving the people in the delivery mechanisms for health and educational services. It argues that there is a strong case for giving panchayats and municipal bodies greater administrative and functional control over schools and health institutions in the public sector. It also calls for greater resource mobilisation by elected local bodies.

A major impediment to human development is poor infrastructure. West Bengal's road infrastructure has improved, especially through works carried out by local bodies. But it still remains woefully inadequate. The same is the case with other aspects of infrastructure such as telecommunications and finance as well as post-harvest
preservation, processing and marketing for agricultural produce. These issues need to be addressed urgently both through resource mobilisation and innovative institutional initiatives, such as production and marketing cooperatives in both agriculture and small industry and services.

Development in West Bengal has historically tended to be Kolkata-centric. The Left Front, with its stress on land reforms and decentralisation, sought to empower the rural poor and change this state of affairs. It has succeeded, but only to a limited extent. Kolkata still dominates, and human development indicators generally show a progressive decline in proportion to the radial distance from Kolkata, except for the Siliguri belt in Darjiling. There is clearly a need to address regional inequalities and promote a more broad-based urbanisation process. All-round infrastructure development - physical, financial and social - in the disadvantaged regions of North Bengal, Sunderbans and Paschimanchal is critical. A conscious and planned effort to develop new, well-distributed urban centres also needs to be made. All this will require resources, and the key here is greater devolution of resources from the Centre to the States. Will the Centre recognise its responsibility to West Bengal in the new political dispensation?

Overall, the West Bengal HDR is refreshingly different from many others of this genre, both in going beyond the traditional territory of human development and in being critical of lacunae even while recording the remarkable advances made by the people of the State in the past 29 years under Left Front Government.