THE ISSUE OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: THE CASE OF WEST BENGAL

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Abstract
Education for sustainable development is a vision of education that seeks to balance human and economic well being with cultural traditions and respect for the earth's natural resources. In this respect what is aimed is an interrelation between notions of social equity, environmental policies and systems of governance. However, given the extremely heterogeneous character of a country, region, and locality it is also essential to examine the political economy of a particular state in adequate detail. The paper is an attempt at finding the strategies of development and an investigation of the means used for ascertaining sustainable development in the state of West Bengal over the period 1990-2010. The emerging consensus in development policies is that without expanding access to education and health services, it is not possible to pursue human development and social justice. The districts of West Bengal record significant differential in terms of Human Development Index (HDI). For instance, the HDI, 2001 for Kolkata was 0.78 with respect to the other districts recording 0.6 for South 24 Parganas, 0.44 for Malda, 0.47 for Birbhum, 0.45 for Purulia respectively (Database 431-33). Therefore, for making development sustainable the education and health promotion measures should be addressed on the basis of the requirements of a particular region and locality. The kind of development policies that are implemented depends on what social goals are being advocated by the development agencies and advisors (Pearce et al. 2-3). The interrelationship between policy makers, NGOs, local bodies like Panchayats and Municipalities in promoting education and health measures in West Bengal will provide an overview of the persisting problems towards sustainable education and social justice in the state.

Keywords: Governance, Education, Health Promotion, Regional disparity, Social equity.

Introduction: Ever since the First Earth Summit or Rio Summit (1992), an environmentally sustainable global economy has become an integral part of the concept of social justice. Environment protection, social equity and economic development are the necessary preconditions for sustainable development. Poverty reduction, environmental protection, promotion of health facilities, disaster risk reduction are primary objectives to make human development sustainable. However, as noted by David Pearce, Edward Barbier and Anil Markandya, "[w]hat constitutes development depends on what social goals are being advocated by the development agency, government, analyst or adviser" (*Sustainable* 2). The policy makers often face the problem of choosing the right strategies to ensure development. Amartya Sen in his *Development as Freedom* asserts that "Development can be seen as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. Focussing on human freedoms contrasts with narrower views of development, such as identifying development with the growth of Gross National Product or with the rise of personal incomes, or with industrialisation, or with technological advance, or with social mobilisation." He further stated that "Freedom depends on other determinants such as social and economic arrangements" (4). However, the underlying problem towards sustainable development lies not only in the proper formulation of strategies and policies undertaken by the government, but in their proper implementation as well. Political and cultural traditions, the inherent problems and priorities of a

particular region vary with respect to another region. Therefore an approach towards human development is likely to be based on a complex web of intertwined factors rooted in the political, cultural and economic prerequisites of a particular region.

Body

The state of West Bengal is endowed with heterogeneous physiographical conditions, immense environmental resources and diverse socio-political traditions. Social disparity with respect to literacy rates, high levels of urban atmospheric pollution and social exclusion engendered by dearth of employment and income generation characterise different districts of West Bengal. Amartya Sen examines that "Unfreedom links closely to the lack of public facilities and social care, such as epidemiological programmes, or of organised arrangements for health care or educational facilities, or of effective institutions for the maintenance of local peace and order" (*Development* 5).The Constitution of India recognises the right to protection of the child as one of the primary requirements of human development. In this regard, access to elementary education has always been a central issue of policy making. The National Policy of Education 1986, as revised in 1992 stresses on a substantial improvement in the quality of education to enable all children to achieve essential levels of learning. The 86th Amendment 2002 guarantees the Right to Education as a fundamental right for Indian citizens. Implementation of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Paschim Banga Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (PRMSA) has been primary objectives of the Government of West Bengal ever since the Left Front regime. But it can be observed with regard to the survey conducted by the Government of West Bengal Human Development Profile 2007 that for the districts of West Bengal there prevail significant differences across seven relatively developed districts namely, Kolkata, Howrah, Hooghly, Burdwan, North 24-Parganas, Nadia, Purba Medinipur and five relatively backward districts namely, Purulia, Birbhum, Bankura, Paschim Medinipur and South 24-Parganas in respect of Gender Development Index (GDI) that includes study of literacy rates, school enrolments and work participation rates. With regard to the study it can be observed that in 2001GDI was highest for Kolkata (0.59) followed by Howrah (0.56) with the lowest GDI being recorded in Maldah (0.39) (Sau, *Database* 431). Census 2001 identified 85 blocks in several districts of West Bengal as educationally backward. All the twenty blocks of Purulia; Saltora, Mejhia, Chhatna, Sonamukhi blocks of Bankura; Matiali, Nagarkata, Kalchini blocks of Jalpaiguri; Canning II, Jaynagar, Basanti of South 24-Parganas are some of the underdeveloped blocks of West Bengal (Sau, *Database* 429). A close examination of these blocks reveal that they are relatively backward with respect to the development of infrastructures like roads, railways, access to fresh water resources, health and sanitation measures.. However, not only equal opportunity but creation of conditions in which the disadvantaged sections of the society including girls, children as well as the minorities can avail the opportunities is required. Here in lies the necessity of the existence of an organised civil society. As it has been rightly stated

> In devising new policies for educational change, policy makers need to understand that policy is not so much implemented as it is reinvented at each level of the system. Beliefs, knowledge, leadership and motivations are some of the factors that produce what Richard Elmore (1983) has called 'the power of the bottom over the top'. (*International Handbook* 647)

For instance, West Bengal Tribal Development Cooperative Ltd. under the aegis of the Backward Classes Welfare Department was set up as an apex body of the Large Scale Multipurpose Cooperative Societies to initiate health, education and employment generation in the districts of Purulia, Bankura,

and Jalpaiguri. Quite significantly, The World Development Report 2003 asserts that "Civil society organizations often take initiative and provide voice for unheard interests-building the trust, legitimacy and knowledge needed" (40). The World Development Report 2003 also acknowledges the role of the Ramakrishna Mission in West Bengal for "undertaking needs assessments and helping to identify external support for social welfare and development projects" (40).

Therefore, in order to ensure sustainable development in the districts it is essential to recognise and address the local problems and diversities and implement policies accordingly. As we know, the word "sustainable" implies "to hold up" or "to support from below". Effective management of resources require participation by all stakeholders. At the local level, strengthening democratic institutions generally lead to better and more sustained management of natural resources. Decentralised planning and management of elementary education is a goal set by the National Policy of Education, 1986. The Panchayats and Municipalities in West Bengal have been associated with programs like Shishu Shiksha Karmasuchi to impart elementary education. The National Rural Health Mission (2005-12) was launched by the Government of India to provide effective health care to rural population under the supervision of the local bodies. But huge disparity is noticed among districts in terms of the utilisation of funds by the Panchayats. In terms of utilisation of funds by the Panchayats in the year 2001, the district of Darjeeling records 92.13%, followed by Hooghly 80.84%, and the lowest percentage being registered in Murshidabad 48.67% (Sau, *Database* 434). Amartya Sen, quite significantly, attempts to expand the basic interpretations of freedom by examining five elemental forms of instrumental freedoms- "political, economic, social, transparency guarantees, and protective security" (*Development* 10). However, corruption, mismanagement of allocated funds is contrary to the principles of 'transparency' and 'protective security'. Therefore, proper utilisation of the allocated funds and functioning of local bodies at micro level can ensure sustainable development and social equity.

As pointed out by Piyali Sengupta and Jaba Guha in their article "Enrolment, Dropout and Grade Completion of Girl Children in West Bengal", the "human capital theory (Schultz 1961) stipulated that education is an investment that yields returns for the individual and for society at large" (*Economic and Political Weekly* .XXXVII.17: 64-65). But ensuring better literacy rate does not always indicate growth. For instance, a survey carried out among urban and rural students reveal that several mental health issues like loneliness, depression, suicidal thoughts, drug addiction are affecting the children and youth in alarming proportion. Taking two schools, one urban (located in Kolkata) and another rural (located in Singur) as representative of their study, Amrita Samanta, Shuvankar Mukherjee, Santanu Ghosh, and Aparajita Dasgupta observed in their article "Mental Health, protective factors and violence among male adolescents: A comparison between urban and rural school students in West Bengal", that "Mental health issues like loneliness (17.3% vs 9.8%), worry (17.3% vs 10.7%) and suicidal thoughts (19.2% vs 14.1%) were higher among urban students" (*Indian Journal of Public Health* 56: 155-158).Thus it is imperative to evolve participatory mechanisms of governance involving citizen groups and local authorities which will ensure the promotion of an environment in which the children get a better chance of becoming healthy, responsible and productive adults. The gender gap in literacy rate in several districts of West Bengal reveals that mere legislations are not enough. As Krishna Guha has observed in *Human Rights And Child At Risk: A Study of Child Labour in India* that "In order to make schools more available, relevant and appealing , it is essential to know exactly what kind of problems children face in this regard, and what they expect from school" (64).

The Tenth Five Year Plan asserts that children are the supreme assets and the future human resource of the country. Therefore, the development of children should be the first priority of the country's development agenda. But "Malnutrition, hard work, poor access to medical facilities, low birth weight, lack of even basic education results backwardness and deviation of basic human rights of the child" (Guha *Human Rights*, 12). Several voluntary organisations and NGOs like All Bengal Mass Education and Development Association, Association for Social Health in West Bengal, Council for Social Development to name a few, help in promoting awareness and activism for ensuring healthy, protected, and educated child population. As regards the Human Development Profile 2007, there prevails significant difference among the districts of West Bengal with respect to public health promotion measures like immunization programmes, sanitation facilities, child care programmes. In 2007, the district of Bankura records 57.03% of malnourished children, followed by Dakshin Dinajpur which recorded 54.6% of malnourished children (Sau, *Database* 428). The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-14) was proposed and accepted at the World Summit of Sustainable Development in 2002. Education for Sustainable Development has several dimensions which include health education, human rights education, peace and human security, and rural development. Providing basic amenities to all households and ensuring social equity is fundamental to good governance, but the case of West Bengal reveals that the manifestation of sustainable development are rooted in local histories, political and cultural traditions. NGOs, social activists like academicians, artists, poets, students and others are often seen to address local problems efficiently. It has been rightly stated that "the concerns of the citizens and the voice of the people are reflected through the medium of civil society" (*Indian Journal of Political Science* LXXII.2: 365). The government too recognises the role of several NGOs, social activists and the media to ensure public wellbeing. This is quite evident from the state government's initiative to set up the 'Department of Self Help Group and Self Employment' with the objective to promote the activities of 'Self Help Groups' and to coordinate the activities of these groups with other departments of government, banks and NGOs. The Human Development Report 2005 states that "Deprived of public goods-such as information and legal rights- people are denied opportunities to contribute to growth." It has been further asserted that, "Where extreme inequalities based on wealth, gender or region leave a large section of society with insufficient assets and endowments, society as a whole suffers from the resulting inefficiency, and extreme inequalities [which] weaken political legitimacy and corrode institutions"(15). But the extent to which the public policies can truly bring about positive change varies from one region to another. Thus the World Development Report 2003 states that "Governments need to encourage open interactions among government, universities, business, and civil society" (81).

Conclusion

Mark Hertsgeard has stated, "The history of environmentalism is largely a story of ordinary people pushing for change, while governments, corporations, and other established interests reluctantly follow behind" (*Creating a Sustainable Society* IV: 13-14). The districts of West Bengal manifest peculiar regional diversities. For instance, the drought prone regions of the state, namely, Paschim Medinipur, Bankura, Purulia, Birbhum and Burdwan record low literacy rates. On the other hand, districts of South 24-Parganas, Hooghly, Maldah and Dinajpur record large scale decrease of flora and fauna, soil erosion, and regular instances of flood which have an adverse effect on agricultural productivity and health conditions. Kolkata and Howrah, however, show very high levels of urban atmospheric pollution, while several villages in the districts of Hooghly, Birbhum, Nadia, Jalpaiguri reveals high level of arsenic contamination of underground water. Therefore, to make development sustainable decentralised planning and infrastructural development is necessary since a large proportion of

Bengal's population still depend on public health and schooling facilities. Good governance, characterised by participation of people, transparency, accountability and effectiveness in assistance with a strong and viable civil society including voluntary organisations, NGOS and cooperative societies can ensure a proper coordination of different values and social equity. As Julius Nyerere, the first President of Tanzania observed, "A country, or a village, or a community cannot be developed; it can only develop itself" (*Freedom and Development* 25).

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