

## **The ‘Reality’ Of Participatory Planning: Evidences From Urban And Rural West Bengal, Eastern India**

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**Abstract:** Participation in decision making and planning is a prominent feature of the contemporary governance system, globally. However, there is an academic debate pertaining to the effectiveness of this approach. While some scholars point to the potentiality of this approach in reversing the problems of Top-down process of planning such as non-transparency of the formal institutions, others consider it ‘utopian’. This has encouraged the researcher to look into the question of variations in participatory performances in different settings. The operational scenario of participation has been studied here with reference to four representative sites in West Bengal, a state in eastern India, so that greater complexities in the phenomenon of participation can be captured at different levels: geographical, socio-political and economic. West Bengal’s case with its history of grass root level activities like the Joint Forest Management Programme or the unique experiments of the Panchayat system in the late seventies, makes this study relevant to the context. The case sites are representative of four distinct categories of participatory exercises within four distinct geographical contexts, at the rural and urban level. These are the Draft Development Plan in Haora city; the Panchayat Plan under the Strengthening Rural Decentralization Programme at Sonadanga village in Nadia district; the Annual Action Plan of the Panchayat system in Pipharaghabpur village in North 24 Parganas district; and finally the Microplan under Joint Forest Management in Chakadoba village in Bankura district. Since participation has multiple perspectives, it has been found necessary to address it from varied standpoints - the perspective of the formal institutions convening participation, the field officers executing it and the community members who participated in it. The study aims to understand the nature, extent and factors affecting participation in planning. The evaluation of the case studies were done through qualitative analyses of the data collected, content analyses of the plan documents, interviews and Focus Group Discussions. Insights on the reasons for the participatory initiatives, the role that each of the stakeholders played or the problems in preparing the plan, etc. have helped in understanding the ground reality of participation. The study concludes that collective decisions may be produced in a democratic manner under participatory planning, though implementation depends on the monitoring mechanism of the planning process. In some sites, for example, though participatory features appeared in theory, it was not functional at the ground level. The study reveals that while power structure tends to be vertical, participatory interventions in planning or governance attempts to make it horizontal.

*Key words: Annual Action Plan; Draft Development Plan; Microplan; Participation; Joint Forest Management Plan; Panchayat.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The notion of ‘participation’ and its association with the concept of planning and governance has increasingly become important. While there is a broad consensus on the effectiveness of this approach (Chambers, 1997; Singh, 2009), some scholars consider it utopian and point to the gap that exists between the theoretical and the operational scenario of participation (Cooke et al., 2001; Hickey et al., 2004). Critics who question participation as a ‘utopian’ concept, raises doubt on the meaningfulness of a process where each participant has a voice in the planning process, because of the multiplicity of actors involved, where each actor has a different point of view in conducting the process (Cooke et al., 2001). Some scholars point to the power struggle within participation (Gujit et al., 1998; Midgley et al, 1986). It has also been argued that during the course of participation, those who are better organized, economically, socially or politically, will tend to benefit more than those who are at the margins and require more assistance. The academic debate on participation has opened up a few dimensions that require in-depth investigation and understanding. Since the impact of participation has been variable in various situations, its implications are questioned from different viewpoints. The present study is an attempt to examine the participatory processes under varying situations directly emerging from the context of governance. The study considers this theme with reference to the state of West Bengal, a state in eastern India, which has made a significant impact in pursuing participatory initiatives. The

study aims to address the nature and extent of participation and the factors which have affected the outcome of participatory processes in representative case sites, within broader context of participatory governance.

## **II. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

### ***Academic Views on Participation***

According to the International Institute of Environment and Development (1995), traditionally under Top down planning, information gathering system took the form where the community had no say in the content or the type of information collected for a particular project or activity. Field experiences showed that in many instances pre-determined conclusions or restricted information have failed to answer the reality of problems faced by different sections of the community. This is particularly true for the vulnerable sections of societies whose voices are not heard and who are frequently left out of decision making. The participatory approaches were thus designed with the belief that these had the potential for eliminating many of the problems of Top-down approach of planning. It had the quality of being transparent, allowed cross-checking and provided space for the vulnerable to voice their opinions. However, the concept of participation and its potential to reverse the problem of expert oriented Top down planning is a contested approach as there are different perceptions of participation. The practices of participation both at the single project level as well as the wider policy level have not only increased the number of interpretations of the term, participation, but also brought criticisms of the participatory approaches. In contemporary times, broadly three schools of thoughts on participation have emerged.

The first school of thought led by Robert Chambers believes that the process of participation with its tools like Participatory Rural Appraisal, Participatory Learning and Action can reverse the problems of expert oriented decision making through Top-Down approaches of development. According to Chambers (1997), participatory methods promoted 'power-sharing in the research and planning phases of development' through the incorporation of the perspectives of local residents. (Chambers, 1997). The second school of thought is associated with development scholars like Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari (2001) who were of the opinion that the concept of participation is overrated. It has its own set of problems which can get 'tyrannical' at times. They were of the opinion that the theoretical ideals of participation often do not function as a tool for liberation and distribution of power. Instead, efforts towards participation often maintain existing power relationships of the bureaucrats, funders and multinational companies. Participatory techniques are masking the power behind the rhetoric and techniques of participation. This masking, therefore, represents the 'tyranny' of participation. (Cooke et al., 2001). The third school with scholars like Samuel Hickey, Giles Mohan offers a middle path on the future of participation. Their work extends from the debate of participation between Chambers (1983; 1997) and Cooke et al. (2001) and seeks to modify the process of participation. Participation, according to them can produce genuine transformation for the marginalized, if used properly (Hickey et al., 2004)

## **III. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

As discussed in the previous section, a debate on participation has developed from the 'attitudinal perspective of participation', i.e. what people say and the 'behavioural perspective of participation' i.e. what people do during participation. It is thus necessary to understand participation from observing its operation from the field level. The study basically uses two themes for analysis, to address the problem.

- i. The nature of participation, which will describe the geographical, socio-political and economic scenario of the setting and the participatory features within the institutional setting, there.
- ii. The extent of participation i.e. the depth and magnitude of participation reached in such a setting.

The study focusses on the interpretation of participation by the participants. It is basically qualitative in nature. Hence the study uses the case study method so that the phenomenon of participation can be understood within specified contexts.

The evaluation of the case studies were done through qualitative analyses of the data collected through content analyses of the plan documents and semi-structured and structured questionnaires for interviews and Focus Group Discussions. A single data was collected from multiple sources to increase the potential of verification. Multiple perspectives from different categories of respondents, on each issue under participation, were considered. Discussions were conducted in the study areas. Data was collected on specific themes of planning. The themes which received attention to understand the participatory processes operating in any area were

- i. Reason for participatory planning initiative in the study area
- ii. Differences of the existing participatory plan from the pre-existing system of planning in the area.
- iii. Role of individuals, institutions and organizations in preparing the plan.
- iv. Problems in participatory plan preparation.
- v. Impact of plan preparation and execution on the target population.

There were 388 respondents. Of these, 245 respondents were interviewed and 12 Focus Group Discussions were conducted in the four study areas. The data collected on various aspects of plan preparation and had three dimensions - Plan formulators' perspective, Field Officers perspective and the Community's perspective.

**Table 1. Summarised Plan of Data Collection**

Urban site	Data collection method	Number of interviews
<b>Haora</b>	<b>In-depth interviews</b> with KMDA Officers, Change Management Unit officers and academicians.	5
	<b>Semi Structured interviews</b> at HMC office of the Mayor, officers in charge of planning, engineering, slum development, education and local economic development.	7
	<b>Structured interviews</b> with community members	100
	<b>Focus Group Discussions</b> a. Community Development Society representatives; b. At each Borough of HMC, with the citizens of the wards, Community Development Society (CDS) members, Below Poverty Line (BPL) beneficiary groups, women of the particular Borough.	<b>6</b> 1 5
<b>Chakadoba</b>	<b>In-depth Interviews</b> with Conservator of Forests and academicians of Institute of Biosocial Research and Development (a NGO), facilitating Microplan preparation.	<b>4</b>
	<b>Structured interviews:-</b> a. Range Officer, Khatra Forest Range, Beat Officer, Chakadoba- Basudevpur, Divisional Forest Officer of Bankura (South) and Block Development Officer, Hirbunth Block b. with the community members	<b>47</b> 4 43
	<b>Focus Group Discussions</b> with the community members	2
<b>Pipharagh abpur</b>	<b>In-depth interviews</b> with the Block Development Officer, Hasnabad block and members of Institute of Social Science- Eastern India (a NGO)	4
	<b>Semi structured interviews</b> with the former Sabhapati of the Hasnabad Panchayat Samity the Gram Pradhan of Pipharaghapur and the Field Officers who executed the plan.	8
	<b>Structured interviews</b> with community members	35
	<b>Focus Group Discussions-</b> a. Community members b. Employees of the Department of Agriculture, Government of West Bengal and Panchayat and Rural Development Department, Government of West Bengal, who worked in the area	<b>3</b> 2 1 21
<b>Sonadanga</b>	<b>In-depth interviews</b> with the Head of the Strengthening Rural Decentralization Project, the Coordinator, SRD cell and members of Institute of Social Science Eastern India, (NGO)	5 4

	<b>Structured interviews-</b> a. At the office of Nadia Zilla Parishad b. At Sonadanga, with Gram Panchayat staff c. Community members	3 6 22
	<b>Focus Group Discussion</b> with community members	1

### 1.1. The Study Areas

West Bengal is a state in India where a number of decentralization programmes has been initiated ranging from the unique experiment of the Panchayat system in West Bengal in the late seventies to the social forestry schemes bringing in partnership between forest fringe dwellers and the forest department. The trend towards decentralization and participatory approaches in West Bengal can be categorized into three distinct groups: decentralization at the urban level, at the rural level, and the case of Joint Forest Management. For studying participatory planning in urban West Bengal the preparation process of Draft Development Plan has been considered. At the rural level, in the state, Panchayat Raj has been given a fresh lease of life by the Left Front Government even before the Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 (Thorlind, 2000; Chattopadhyay, 2005). Besides this, the case of participatory planning within Joint Forest Management structure is of interest because Joint Forest Management was first initiated in the state. Hence, Panchayat Plan under the Strengthening Rural Decentralization Programme at Sonadanga village in Nadia district; the Annual Action Plan of the Panchayat system in Pipharaghabpur village in North 24 Parganas district; and finally the Microplan under Joint Forest Management in Chakadoba village in Bankura district were selected.

**Table 2. Profile and Operating Participatory Plans in the Selected Study Sites**

Study area/ District	Main Occupation	Type of Plan	Operating Institution	Uniqueness of the Plans
Haora city, Haora District, W.B	Service and Industry	Draft Development Plan	Municipal Corporation	The Plans are first generation participatory plans  The Plans called for detailed local input collection.  Linkages of the Plans with higher level policy.
Sonadanga village, Nadia District, W.B	Agriculture	Panchayat Plan under Strengthening Rural Decentralization Programme	Sonadanga Gram Sansad under Bikrampur Gram Panchayat	
Pipharaghabpur village, North 24 Parganas District, W.B	Agriculture- Fishing	Panchayat system of Annual Action Plan	Pipharaghabpur Gram Sansad under Murarishah Gram Panchayat	
Chakadoba, village, Bankura District, WB	Forestry	Microplan under Joint Forest Management	Forest Department	

Source: Primary Survey, 2009

## 4. Results

It has already been mentioned in the beginning that the study focuses on the nature and extent of participation during participatory planning processes in West Bengal. In the present work, three important domains or critical issues related to participation have been addressed:

- a. The nature of participation
- b. The extent of participation
- c. The factors which have influenced participation

The nature of participation and the extent of participation are closely related to factors affecting participation, while the third domain draws itself from the first and the second domain.

### 4.1. Nature of Participation

With regard to the nature of participation, there are a few issues that need to be addressed:

- i. Why is participation taking place?
- ii. Who is participating?

- iii. Who is calling for participation?
- iv. How far the environment is supportive for participation

**4.1.1. Participants of the Participatory Planning Process**

In all the four study areas, the respondents were the representatives of the community, institutions which convened participation and those institutions which affect or would be affected by the plan. In all the four study areas, participation in the planning process had sometimes taken the form of passive consultation, sometimes information sharing and at other times interaction. Sometimes the community members have also formed externally initiated group to participate in plan preparation.

Participation in the planning process in each of the study areas began by an introductory orientation meeting of the participatory planning process. In Haora, fifty ward level DDP orientation meetings were held, one for each ward. The ward level DDP orientation meetings were attended by 23 percent of the community members, councillors of the respective wards, the representatives of the Draft Technical Group (Chief Engineer, Urban Planner, Health Officer, Education Officer, Town Project Officer) of HMC, and the Mayor or the Mayor in Council. In Chakadoba, the Forest Department officers in charge of preparing the Microplan and 74 percent of the community members participated in the introductory Microplanning meeting. In Pipharaghabpur, the *Gram Pradhan, Upapradhan*, Gram Panchayat members and 7 percent of the community members attended the Gram Sansad meeting where AAP proposals were discussed while in Sonadanga, 82 percent of community members, representatives of the Nadia Strengthening Rural Decentralization cell, Self Help Group members attended the introductory Participatory plan meeting with the *Gram Pradhan, Up Pradhan, Gram UnnayanSamity* (village development council) members.

**4.1.2. Convenors of Participatory Processes**

In Haora, the participatory planning meetings were convened by the Howrah Municipal Corporation while in Chakadoba, it was convened by the state Forest Department. In Pipharaghabpur and in Sonadanga it was convened by the Gram Panchayats.

**4.1.3. Participatory Environment**

To understand the nature of participation in the study areas, it is important to categorize participation. According to the International Institute for Environment and Development (1995), minimal participation occurs through 'Information sharing' (when the participants are asked to answer questions). Participation level gradually increases through 'consultation' when participants are consulted. This is followed by 'Functional Participation' when people participate by forming groups. Another step towards increasing participation is when participation is 'Interactive' (people participate in joint analysis). A list of participatory features may be identified in each of the plans namely DDP, Microplan, AAP and Participatory Plan, on the basis of field experiences. Content analyses of plan documents were also made.

**Table 3: Participatory Features of the Plan**

Sites	Participation by Consultation (community participate by being consulted)	Functional Participation (People participate by forming groups)	Interactive Participation (People participate in joint analysis)	Documented minutes and attendance lists of participatory meetings	Facilitators used	Public Validation done	PRA techniques used
Haora	▲	▲		▲	▲	▲	
Chakadoba	▲		▲				▲
Pipharaghabpur	▲			▲			
Sonadanga	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲

Source: Field Survey, 2009-12

It was observed during the field survey that wherever there was external funding of the participatory projects, the respondents during field survey pointed that periodic monitoring by the funding agencies on the progress of plan preparation, ensured timely completion of each stage of plan preparation. Well recorded documents (minutes of meetings, register etc.) also point towards an organized project. Wherever externally initiated community groups were formed (such as Haora, Chakadoba) these groups maintained cash books, bank pass books etc. It was observed that facilitators played a critical role in organizing the communities and acted as a bridge between the community and the institutions. Public validation of the plan increased the responsiveness of the institutions which were calling for participation in the study areas while Participatory Rural Appraisal techniques ensured interactive participation of the community members and better local input collection. All

these features, aiding participation, were taken into account and the results for each of the study areas were plotted against these factors to understand how proactive each of the areas were.

**4.1.4. Tools of participation used in the planning process** - Participation in planning aims to harmonize the views of all the participants in the planning process. Planning however needs a structure to allow meaningful input of the stakeholders. In order to make participation more meaningful, there is a shift away from the hierarchical model and various tools are used for effective participation. These tools sometimes rely on visualization techniques using illustration to ensure inclusion of people, while at other times it relies on interviewing and oral communication. In the four study areas, various types of tools had been used to ensure inclusion. Tools like matrices (information and ideas organized logically), timelines (showing presence, absence or intensity of certain phenomenon over time), mental maps etc, were combined according to the needs of the planning process, to prepare a plan which had a Bottom-up approach. The planning tools have been divided into situation analysis, planning and implementation stages illustrated in Table 4. The study areas where the highest numbers of planning tools were used during Situation Analysis was at Sonadanga followed by Haora and Chakadoba while the lowest was at Pipharaghabpur. The highest number of participatory tools used for Planning Stage was in Haora and Sonadanga. For Implementation Stage too, the highest number of participatory tools used was in Haora. Pipharaghabpur had been consistently low in usage of participatory tools in planning. Overall the largest number of participatory tools in planning had been used in Sonadanga and Haora, while the lowest was in Pipharaghabpur.

**Table 4. Tools of Participation used in Plans of the Study Areas**

Planning Tools		Haora	Chakadoba	Pipharaghabpur	Sonadanga
<b>Situation analysis</b>	Secondary Data Analysis	√		√	√
	Baseline survey	√	√		
	Daily activity chart		√		√
	Wealth Ranking	√	√		√
	Socio economic survey	√			√
	Livelihood profile	√	√		√
	Mental map		√		√
<b>Planning</b>	Problem Analysis	√	√	√	√
	Stakeholders Workshops	√	√	√	√
	Interviews	√			√
	Group Discussion	√	√		√
	Joint Field Visits	√	√	√	√
	Planning Matrix	√	√		√
<b>Implementation</b>	Stakeholders Workshops	√	√	√	√
	Questionn	√			

	aire Survey				
	Field visits	√	√	√	√

Source: Field Survey, 2009-12

As discussed, participation types and nature have varied in each of the study area. This can bring about differences in the outcome of participation, in the study areas. Differences in participatory outcomes can also be brought about if participatory methods are not executed properly at the field level. The table (Table 5) below points that there exists a gap between theory and practice of the participatory planning and this gap is narrowest in case of Sonadanga and highest in case of Pipharaghabpur. The reason for this gap may be the nature by which the plan processes have been conducted, the institutional framework, the monitoring mechanisms, the will of the authority and the formal and informal power tiers in the area. It is extremely context specific in nature.

**Table 5. Gap between Theory and Practice of Participatory Conditions**

	Creating dialogue between citizens and authority	Open to all stakeholders for participation	Collaboration between different levels of authority	Participants have the right to appeal
Haora	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Yes	Yes	No	No
Chakadoba	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Yes	No	No	Yes
Pipharaghabpur	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
	No	No	No	No
Sonadanga	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: Field survey (2009-12), DDP Guidelines Book

**KEY:**

**4.2. Extent of Participation**  Practice  Theory

Extent of participation is looked at from two standpoints

- Attitude of the institution or community towards participation
- Frequency of participatory events

These are analysed with the help of the following indicators. The indicators have been derived on the basis of field experiences. They are:

- Attendance in Meetings
- New structure and policy level changes in the institutions to facilitate participation
- Level of training given to the Field Officers to conduct the process of participation
- The commitment level of the institution convening participation
- Congenial attitude of the community i.e. if they are at all willing to participate.
- Creation of community groups to enable participation

For analysis and presentation of the data, a qualitative matrix has been used where the criterions of participation has been plotted against High, Medium and Low in each of the study areas. The grading from high to low is based on the responses of the relevant respondent to the questions, as answered in the interviews and FGDs of the study area. Table 6 reflects such a matrix on the basis of findings from the field.

The table reveals that Sonadanga has been reported with the most number of “High” in terms of attendance in meeting, creation of new structures and policies towards participation, commitment of the institutions convening participation or congenial attitude of the community. Chakadoba occupied the next position, was followed by Haora and then Pipharaghabpur.

**Table 6. Qualitative Matrix to Represent the Level of Participation in the Study Areas**

	Attendance in Meetings	Creation of Structure and Policies for Participation	Training given to Implementing Officers	Commitment of the Institution Convening Participation	Congenial Attitude of the Community towards Plan Preparation
Haora	Medium	Medium	Medium	High	Medium

<b>Chakadoba</b>	High	Medium	Low	High	High
<b>Pipharaghabpur</b>	Low	High	Low	Low	Low
<b>Sonadanga</b>	High	High	High	High	High

P.S-Grading from High to Low done on the basis of Respondents' Inputs in the Study Areas

To understand the level of participation in the study areas, the occurrence of the participatory events are placed against the frequency of its occurrence, in a specific area. The possible participatory events have been gathered from field experiences. The participatory events were:

1. High attendance in the meetings
2. Institutions convening participation took initiative to involve the community
3. Community had faith in institution which was convening participation
4. New structures and policies at the institutional level were created to facilitate participation
5. Facilitators were employed
6. Neutral volunteers, without any political party affiliation, were selected from the community to facilitate participation
7. PRA tools were used

In the Table 7, a matrix has been prepared where the frequency of these participatory events in each of the study areas has been found out. The occurrence of these participatory events in a participatory planning project can be Frequent, Sometimes, Rare or Never. It is assumed that higher the occurrence of a particular participatory event, greater would be the level of participation.

Table 3, 6 and 7 indicate that Sonadanga has reached the highest level of participation in planning both in terms of occurrences of participatory features and occurrences of participatory events. While Haora and Chakadoba have reached a mediocre position, Pipharaghabpur, on the other hand, did not have a single 'Frequent' participatory event.

Keeping this in mind, one can conclude that in those areas where participation has taken a project form with monitoring of external funding agencies, usage of Participatory Rural Appraisal techniques or facilitators, or where there was political will and adequate commitment of participation convening institution, participation was at its best. Participation takes off best where the ground is already set with a reasonably good understanding between the community and the institution.

Thus in all the above analyses on the nature and extent of participation in the study areas, Sonadanga has consistently been pointed out as being the most participant while Pipharaghabpur, the least. Haora and Chakadoba have consistently occupied a middle position.

**Table 7. Matrix Showing the Distribution of Participatory Events in the Study Areas**

<b>Events</b>	<b>Frequent</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Rare</b>	<b>Never</b>
Event 1- High Attendance in meetings	Chakadoba Sonadanga		Haora	Pipharaghabpur
Event 2- Institution took initiative for grass root level participation	Sonadanga	Chakadoba	Haora	Pipharaghabpur
Event 3-Community had faith on institutions initiative	Chakadoba	Sonadanga	Haora Pipharaghabpur	
Event 4- New Structures were created to facilitate Participation	Haora Sonadanga		Pipharaghabpur	
Event 5- Facilitators were employed to sensitize people on participation	Haora Sonadanga	Sonadanga		Chakadoba Pipharaghabpur
Event 6- Neutral volunteers were selected from the community for organizing community for asset maintenance		Haora Sonadanga Chakadoba	Chakadoba Haora	Pipharaghabpur
Event 7-PRA techniques used				Pipharaghabpur

Source: Field Survey, 2009-111

#### 4.3. Factors affecting Participation

Attempt was made to identify the occurrences of common factors associated with participation, in each of the study areas. The maximum occurrence of a factor related to participation indicate it as a commonality and



enhance its chance of being the dominant factor in controlling participation. However, some factors enhance (positive) participation while others constrain (diminish) participation.

**Table 8. Enhancing and Constraining Factors of Participation**

Sites	Enhancing Factors	Constraining Factors
<b>Haora</b>	Political will, funding from DFID, involvement of community volunteers of the plan, presence of facilitator	Shortage of manpower, absence of coordinators in the institution, mistrust of the stakeholders on the workings of the institutions convening participation.
<b>Chakadoba</b>	Good relationship with Forest Department, smaller scale of operation of plan, use of PRA techniques.	Absence of coordinators in the institution, differences amongst the volunteers (FDA) and the community
<b>Pipharaghabpur</b>	Smaller scale of operation of plan	Absence of coordinator , no facilitators, mistrust of the community about the institution
<b>Sonadanga</b>	Political will, external funding , employment of facilitators, PRA technique, Volunteers (Self Help Group members), smaller scale of operation.	Villagers not properly sensitized on PRA techniques

Source: Field Survey, 2009-12

It thus can be concluded that several factors also played an important roles in controlling the participation process. External funding and strict monitoring by funding agencies, political will, presence of volunteers from community to maintain assets and create peer pressure to participate, acted as positive factors for participation. The major negative factors of participation in the study areas were absence of coordinator to ensure smooth development of the participatory plan, mistrust of the participants on the institutions convening participation, absence of facilitators etc.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

Participation in planning and governance seeks to engage those who are affecting and who would be affected by the planning process.

##### 5.1. Nature of participation

In all the four study sites, the formal governing institutions (for example Urban Local Bodies, village Panchayats) and the community participated to create the development plan of the area. Participation took the form of beneficiary consultation in project planning to beneficiary involvement in the project implementation. In all the study sites, participatory planning aimed in building in the local community, a feeling of ownership of the development plan. During the study, it was observed that the participatory planning in the study sites incorporated several participatory features such as the use of facilitators to conduct stakeholders' consultation, formation of community groups for joint analysis of the identified problems of the area, public validation of the plan prepared, use of PRA techniques etc. Dialogues amongst stakeholders were encouraged. However all these features, together, were not found in any single study area. It was also observed that there was a methodological difference in participation procedure in the respective study sites and the way this procedure was applied, at the field. For example, in some sites, though the participatory features appeared in theory, in the guidelines of the plan, but at a ground level, it was not functional. For example in Haora, public validation of the plan was done. In case of public validation, even after the plan was prepared and kept at a central place (HMC Town Hall), less than 1 percent of the population of Haora city, attended to go through it. In Pipharaghabpur, though a loudspeaker was used to announce the meeting regarding plan preparation, but it was done in select *paras* or neighbourhood as decided by the village Pradhan. Thus the meeting did not invite general public participation. In Chakadoba, for example, though the researcher was informed that training was given to Field Officers on how to prepare a participatory plan, but at the field level, interviews with the officers revealed that they were only given guideline booklets and training on Microplan preparation was given to the officers in 1980s while the plan was prepared in 2003. So in reality a gap was evident within the theory and practise of participation.

##### 5.2. Extent of Participation

As understood from the literature reviews and later from the field studies, there is a difference between 'what people say about participation' or the attitude on participation and 'what people do about participation' or the behaviour towards participation. The extent of participation is understood from the attitude of the institution or community towards participation as well as the frequency of participatory events during plan preparation. During the study, to understand the extent of participation, the level of adherence to the participatory features of the plan, like the attendance in meetings, the use of facilitators, the structural changes created to facilitate participation, the training given to the officers or the frequency of participatory events, were observed. It was found that attendance level of the community members in the orientation meetings of the plans swayed from low (7 percent in Pipharaghabpur) to high (82 percent in Sonadanga). Again out of the four sites, only in two sites, training on facilitating participation was given to the officers. However the Field Officers pointed that it was not adequate. New structures and policies were created both at the institutional level as well as the community level, almost in all the study areas, to facilitate participation. It was observed that participation in the study sites were not restricted to only consultation with stakeholders. In all the study sites, communities participated either by providing information or doing joint analyses to find solutions to the local problems or by providing resources such as labour or other material incentives. There were instances of voluntary labour, to implement the plan, from the community in Chakadoba and Pipharaghabpur. Communities also participated by forming groups, which were externally initiated. Neutral volunteers were selected from the community in Haora where the community members formed the Bustee Management Works Committee (BWMC) to maintain assets created under DDP.

### **5.3. Factors affecting Participation**

It was found that there are some positive as well as negative factors affecting participation. It was found out that out of the three study sites where the scale of operation of the plan (in terms of spatial size of the area or population density) was low, in two sites (namely Chakadoba and Sonadanga) participation was interactive (stakeholders participated in joint analysis). Attendance level in the orientation meetings were also high in these study sites. However in Haora, where DDP operated on a large scale, participation was not interactive and the attendance level of the community members was moderately low (23 percent of the community members attended). However in Pipharaghabpur, a village with an area of just 2.25 sq km and the population density was 1151 persons/ sq km, even though the scale of operation of the plan was low, participation was restricted to only consultation and the attendance level of the community members, in the planning meeting was as low as 7 percent. Thus it may be pointed that there may have been other factors which controlled participation in planning process.

The factors may be categorized into positive factors and negative factors, enhancing or constraining participation. Amongst the positive factors, when the scale of operation of participatory plan preparation was low i.e. comparatively smaller area or population, participation was more meaningful. Besides this, external funding and strict monitoring of the participatory planning process by funding agencies, political will, presence of volunteers from the community (to help maintain assets, created under the plan and also to create peer pressure to participate) all helped in participation. The constraining factors affecting participation are for example, the absence of effective leaders to conduct the participatory projects, lack of skilled man power or lack of adequate training given to the Field Officers of the institutions convening participation etc. Besides this, sometimes the community members were reluctant to participate as they did not trust the motive of the institutions convening participation from the community. Absence of facilitators was another problem as no one was there to sensitize the community or organize them into groups, neutrally to conduct participation. Sometimes community volunteers also created problems and hurdles in participation as they were viewed as nodes of power and their dominance acted as an obstacle.

## **V. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This section discusses the key issues that the study calls into question where a gap has been observed between the theoretical concepts of participation, as pointed out in the existing literature and the actual picture of participation as noted by the researcher, during the study.

Theoretical Participation vis-a-vis ground level participation can be addressed from a variety of perspectives as the available literature has shown. While Robert Chambers in his work argues on the importance of 'putting the last first' scholars like Cooke et al. (2001) uses real life events to explain how participation is an utopian dream and can get 'tyrannical' at times.

The researcher would first like to focus on this divide and critically examine it from the standpoint whether participation can transform democracy, as claimed by Chambers, or whether participation has come with its own sets of problems, as claimed by Cooke et al. (2001), using the findings of the study.

Chambers examines the issue of participation at a greater length in his book *Whose Reality Counts?*. To be more specific his engagement with the issue may be traced back to a few decades more. He speaks of a new form of professionalism and the book is particularly written for academicians and professionals. In his book he argues

that participation has a great potential to transform democracy, and starting from a project level if it escalates into a policy level, the impact would be tremendous.

To examine the fact two questions may be raised. First, if given an ideal situation of pro- participatory environment, can participation transform the ills of the existing set up? Secondly, is it at all possible to create an ideal participatory set-up where both the institution is opening space for participation as well as the community is willing to participate voluntarily for the good of the society, in general.

According to Robert Chambers (1997), in many countries, urban and rural people alike have shown an astonishing ability to express and analyse their local, complex and diverse realities which are often at odds with the top-down realities imposed by professionals. This study has shown that amongst two of three case studies in rural areas, the participation level in planning for rural communities had been higher. While in urban areas, the communities viewed participatory planning with scepticism. The rural population were more involved in planning by participating in PRA techniques, and so on. Thus it may be true that both rural and urban communities have capacity to analyse and express their problem but other phenomenon, like mistrust, availability of greater options to improve quality of life, lesser social and community bonding, all play a role in controlling participation and producing a Plan. There is also a division between the nature of involvement of the rural and urban communities. While the urban population view their civic authorities, in charge of planning, in terms of improved service delivery, etc., their rural counterparts are extremely involved in the day to day business of the governing body. But how assertive these rural and urban folk are about their rights depends on how much space they can 'claim' for themselves or even how much they are 'empowered'. A politically learned 'community' will definitely perform better in a participatory governance system.

Robert Chambers in his book *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last* speaks of this new form of professionalism and steps down from the traditional form of valuing things over people and measurement over judgment. Even the West Bengal Panchayat and Rural Development Department (2006) in the document *Gram SansadBithik Gram Panchayat Porikolpona* stresses on similar points and gives an example that if a sluice gate is to be constructed by the Gram Panchayat on a dam's drainage channel, only local people can give information related to it, for example the flow of water in the channel over the last few years, its height, velocity, etc. Their knowledge and experience has to be included for planning the project. The present study also reflects a similar situation as in areas like Chakadoba and Sonadanga, the resource maps and mental maps have given information and intricate details which were previously not available.

This attention towards participation is also a result of the fact that 'democracy has entered', in the words of Andre Beteille, 'troubled waters' (Beteille, 2011). There is a widespread belief that today representative form of governance is not sufficient and must be complimented with or conjoined to direct form of participatory governance (Gaventa, 2004; Hawskley, 2009). Just as there is an agreed view that what can be decided by a community or neighbourhood should be decided upon by them (Chambers 1997; Pal, 2009). But this study shows that it is not necessary that if participation is pursued it will essentially address all the problems of democratic governance. There exists a power hierarchy and the society and community cannot be considered homogenous units. Considering the case of Chakadoba it emerged that even if resource maps and other tools were employed, the absence of facilitators led to the dominance of a section that were close to the authorities. Similar problems were reported at Haora where only those projects were put forward and only those members were heard at the meeting who were close to local councillors or the representatives of the Community Development Society. The researcher also observed that rural units function in a much more complicated way, where a parallel informal structure exists within it.

Another departure with the existing literature is on the issue of the capture of the participatory process. Participatory literature have always pointed to the problem of participation being subject to 'elite capture' (Migdley et al, 1986; Karl, 2000) and 'drawing a veil' over repressive power structures (Williams, 2004). One cannot deny the fact that often the local 'elite' or 'power brokers' or even the 'political parties' can be a vital link to organize the poorest section of the society in representing their needs. The interviews at Haora of the Field Officers revealed that the local party workers were able to organize a number of consultation workshops with the marginalized sections of the society, who otherwise could not be reached. Facilitation would have not been possible without the help of any organized local structure. Even experiences with other case studies in Bankura or North 24 Parganas revealed that poorer people also have no option but to take resort to local powerbrokers in representing their needs. These local powerbrokers or party workers can be a very useful resource to the facilitators and how best they can be used, shedding off the political and other interest biases depends on the skills of the facilitators.

Citizens can govern themselves by influencing decision-making processes that affect their lives, their livelihoods, their communities, their environments and their societies (United Nations, 2007). However this too is a contested issue. The study in Haora revealed that the engineers had to reject a score of proposals from the grassroots for improving infrastructure as these were not technically feasible. The interview revealed that the citizens always do not have a birds' eye view and was more concerned in improving their neighbourhood than

thinking of the city at large. So the argument that citizens can govern and decide themselves is also an issue that is contested.

Much of the existing literature (United Nations, 2007; Chambers, 1997) observes that participation leads to empowerment. The study however shows that this is not always the case. With empowerment comes the question of existence of power relations. During the study, it was observed in Chakadoba village, that the Forest Protection Committee members are entitled to 25 percent of the proceeds of the sale of the timber products. But the maintenance of the FPC account was not a transparent affair. In the Focus Group Discussion, it was revealed that this FPC was controlled by a few influential people who were close to the Forest Department officials. Another interesting feature was when the researcher conducted a discussion between the forest department officers and the villagers, the officers sat on the chair while *madur* or mat was rolled out for the villagers while the Executive body members of the JFMC sat on a *khatiya* or cot. This was an interesting example of the existing hierarchy of power, and for true participation to occur, immediate change and reversal in role, relationship and power has to take place.

Further, the involvement of women was also negligible in the affairs of the FPC. It was a male dominated committee. One Self Help Group, with women, was already formed but was not yet functional, when the survey was conducted. During the Focus Group Discussion too, the women sat at one corner and never commented spontaneously. Many participatory projects rests on the assumption that simply identifying different stakeholders and getting them around the table will reach a consensus that is 'fair' to all. Such an assumption only holds if all actors were deemed to have equal bargaining power, which they did not. In its absence the correct procedure is to change the behaviour and attitude of those who are used to dominating and give chance to the marginalized and disempowered to voice their opinion. This to a certain extent has taken place in Chakadoba. While preparing the Microplan, the Forest Department partially changed their authoritative attitude and came in contact with the community which had placed their demand. May be not all the demands were translated into action but the whole exercise had elevated the status of the villagers to become negotiators of their demands. This plan gave them increased bargaining power though as a whole, power geometry exists within the community in terms of wealth, education and so on. Facilitating measures may be important in negotiations but they are not enough to grant the marginalized the bargaining power required to overcome the structural dominance enjoyed by the more powerful groups. Participation requires a wider process of social transformation and structural change. This can be achieved through education, provision of better services and amenities and thus a better quality of life (Zerah, 2009; Mukherji, 2001)

## VI. CONCLUSION

This study has used field findings to understand the nature and extent of participation in the urban and rural communities of West Bengal. The study with its findings show that the current participatory policies in the study sites of West Bengal has however not made the anticipated impact. Further the impact has been different in differing participatory situations. There is also a need of policy review regarding the system by which the formal institutions convened participation of the stakeholders. Though the policies were made to prepare the plans, often ground realities did not allow full implementation of the conceived strategy. This was probably due to the fact that general policies were made keeping in mind the homogeneous situation. But communities often did not function as homogenous units and constituted members of different socio-economic profile, political affiliations etc. Participatory plans were made at local levels. However, the approach or methodology of plan preparation or rather the strategy of plan preparation should also have been contextualised as each has its own physical and socioeconomic identity and unique problems.

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