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**141**

**SOCIAL CAPITAL IN  
MAKING DECENTRALISED  
GOVERNANCE EFFECTIVE:  
A STUDY IN WEST BENGAL**

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# **Social Capital in Making Decentralised Governance Effective: A Study in West Bengal**

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## ***Abstract***

*Social capital has begun to generate a remarkable consensus regarding the role and importance of social organisations in making decentralised governance effective. This paper proposes to understand the possible role of social capital in the context of a field study. The study shows that there is correlation between social capital and decentralised governance and suggests that the formation of social capital is necessary and can be done by extending aid to self-help groups, NGOs, and cooperative organisations.*

## **Prologue**

Decentralised governance (DG) has been conceived as an instrument in promoting development. It is expected to facilitate effective people's participation, enhance the degree of transparency and ensure greater accountability. Decentralised governance is also assumed to provide more effective and competitive delivery of services at the grass roots. Being closer to the people, decentralised governance is assumed to meet the needs and preferences of the people (Crook 2003:77; Braun and Grote 2002:90; Breton 2002:41; Bardhan and Mookherjee 2000; Aziz *et al*/2000).

The services provided by decentralised governance are considered to be cost effective besides helping mobilisation of local resources in the form of labour and material. However, some scholars have expressed reservations about the efficacy of decentralised governance (Prud'homme 1995:201; Tanzi 1995). Prud'homme argues that decentralised governance promotes inefficiency and provides scope for corruption owing to the influence of interest groups and discretion of local officials. The long tenure of officials at the same place makes it easier to establish unethical relationships with the local people. Tanzi also argues that decentralisation promotes personalism and reduces professionalism. Personalism breeds corruption as officials pay greater attention to individual citizens' needs and disregard the public interest, thereby defeating the philosophy of decentralised governance.

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Moreover, decentralised governance is based upon key factors like people's participation, accountability, transparency, and fiscal transfers (Braun and Grote 2002:89; Tanzi 2001:13; Romeo 1999:137; Crook and Manor 1998:2; Litvack *et al* 1998:7). These are interlinked and their effect on development cannot simply be measured. The critique of decentralisation is valid in those regions of the world where poverty and dysfunctional democracy are rampant. Much of the literature addresses issues of the quality of citizens' participation and broader questions of democratic control. The critical democratic theorists have noted that the predominant mode of social organisations is not a vertical relationship of authority between selfish individuals and the supra state, but a series of horizontal associations embodying groups of individuals capable of regulating and expressing themselves as members of a community, rather than as self-promoting individuals (RoyChowdhury 1996:2).

Decentralised governance may be effective in these parts of the world where people are active, vigilant, and participative. In such societies, civil society groups assume far greater roles in educating people and, consequently, people themselves seek greater accountability (fairness) from the elected members and officials in meeting their immediate needs. Added to this, in recent years, the theory of social capital has been receiving increasing attention and has begun to generate a remarkable consensus regarding the role and importance of communities and local organisations in making decentralised governance effective (Sundaram 1997:48; Putnam 1993:182; Slater and Watson 1993:124).

Social capital promotes development by making governance more effective. It is an effective means of achieving developmental vision (Uphoff 1999:215; Krishna 1999:72; Fukuyama 1995:356; Putnam 1993:182). It improves performance in services; increases participation in both the exchanges of information needed for effective plan formulation and legitimacy, viz., effective implementation, and encourages further participation. It enhances responsibility in governance by promoting accountability and functioning according to the rule of law and transparency. Social capital is a system of mutual trust that facilitates action. While physical capital is wholly tangible, being embodied in observable material form, human capital is less tangible, being embodied in the skills and knowledge acquired by an individual. Social capital is less tangible, yet, it exists in relations among persons. Social capital facilitates productive activity in the same manner that physical capital and human capital do. For example, a group within which there is extensive trust can accomplish much more than a comparable group that lacks trust.

Putnam (1993:176) has made a crucial contribution to the development field by drawing on his broader evaluation of performance of government across Italy's 20 regions. He concludes that effectiveness of regional governments hinges on patterns of social networks. Wealth and economic development cannot explain the entire success story of institutions. Norms and networks of civic engagement have fostered development. He defines social capital as a feature of social organisation, such as trust norms, and a network that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions. He also views social capital as a set of 'horizontal associations' among people who have an effect on the productivity of the community (1993:167).

In the Indian context, the study argues that social capital has a crowding effect on effective governance (Blair 2000:28; Mathew 1999:533; Bhattacharyya 1998; Bandyopadhyaya 1997:11-2; Heller 1996:1055). The 'synergy' of the state and 'class mobilisation' in Kerala have produced two forms of social capital that resulted in redistributive goods and class coordination. These ensure Kerala's successful development in various sectors like deepening grass roots democracy, education, health, rural infrastructure etc (Heller 1996:1066). Many studies also show that social capital is elixir to bring together a segment of society (different castes, classes, languages and ethnic groups) by interaction of both conflict and consensus, negotiation and bargaining, which also ensures responsible and democratic functioning of the panchayats (Pai 2001:654; Bhattacharyya 1998:135).

People's organisations, termed as social capital, have a powerful base, which can play a creative role in enhancing the ability of decentralised governance. Both in idea and action, this institution gives the lead and also extends support to the local bodies. The Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP) in Kerala, the People's Movement in Maharashtra, and the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) in Rajasthan are examples of successful organisations. They have been playing a significant role in strengthening local governance (John and Chathukulam 2002:1939; Mathew 1999:534; Jenkins and Goetz 1999:604; Roy 1998:204).

Some scholars argue that social capital is not always a successful universalistic outcome, but that it may produce negative effects for different purposes (Harriss 2002; Woolcock and Narayan 2000:243; Furstenberg and Hughes 1995:589). An important criticism is that the idea of social capital is mystified rather than clarified, and theorisation of social capital is weak. The notion of social capital confuses a number of distinct ideas such as interpersonal trust, generalised trust, and belief in

the legitimacy of institutional norms and confidence in their implementation and cultural traditions. Such a classification of social capital can have the characteristics of public good, but its fungibility is acknowledged to be constrained, and its 'value' obviously context-specific (Harriss 2002). The effectiveness of governance is less dependent on social capital. Despite a high degree of social capital in some villages, the villagers are not deriving the expected benefit (Krishna 2001:934; Mohapatra 2001:670; Mayer 2001:691).

In brief, social capital can be a useful theory to analyse the processes of effective decentralised governance. It is practicable because social capital not only brings back many of the theoretical insights from the classics like Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Simmel but also makes sense to link the micro with the macro level in social and political analysis (Blomkvist and Swain 2001:643). It may help policy makers to explain the social phenomenon in coherent and systematic form, which is more important before finalising any policy for the grass roots. Social capital may also promote development at the grass roots very fast. It is not merely a demand for institution building but also a reality to building "pro-poor institution" to reach the poor more effectively.

This paper focuses on the question of whether social capital plays a significant role in ensuring effective decentralised governance. If so, to what extent does social capital ensure effective governance and what factors motivate the formation of social capital and sustain it? More specifically, the paper attempts to examine the relationship between social capital and decentralised governance and to explore the factors determining social capital in the context of DG.

### **Analytical Framework and Methodology**

This paper aims at examining the effectiveness of decentralised governance and its implications for development, taking social capital as an external factor. It looks at social capital as both contributing to, and being reinforced by the process of decentralised governance and development. An attempt has been made here to understand the relationship between decentralised governance and its performance in the delivery of services at the grass roots. The paper also explores social capital by understanding two dimensions, viz., trust (a cognitive concept), and network (a structural concept) in the context of two GPs as conceptualised by Putnam in his study (1993). An attempt has been made to understand social capital through a relational network that can facilitate some tangible resources or capital which influence directly or

indirectly the process of decentralised governance for promoting development.<sup>1</sup>

Here, social capital is conceived as a bilateral and multilateral relationship between neighbours and a third person or an actor (organisation), which binds both the person, and the actor to meet the level of satisfaction of various dimensions of human need. It is understood in two dimensions — trust (cognitive) and network (structural or institutional). Trust is considered as a spontaneous relational tie between different actors in society, and network as a channel of relationships between different actors involved in different actions.

In-depth case studies of two GPs were carried out in Burdwan district, which was selected since it was considered to be typical in terms of social, political and economic features. Also, it was regarded as a representative unit, especially for field investigation. The district is an important administrative unit of West Bengal and is known for its various agricultural and industrial activities. It is one of the main rice-producing districts in the region and was the first district to be chosen for the Intensive Agricultural Development Programme in the state in 1962, thereby emerging as a forerunner in the green revolution (Webster 1992:37). It has also been successful in the cultivation of other important crops for the market including potatoes, sugarcane, oilseeds, onion, jute, pulses, and vegetables like brinjal and cabbages. The district is a net exporter of agricultural products, and occupies a strategic place in the economy of the state. Its history is quite old, and the district has taken its present shape after passing through various historical changes.

GPs were selected on the basis of their performance. It may be mentioned that the socio-political (level of education) and economic conditions of these two GPs are more or less similar. As for the selection of respondents, 60 household heads were selected purposively from each GP. The households were selected across the 3 villages in each GP. In addition, all the elected members from Bondul and Nadai GPs, 19 and 18 respectively, were selected. The respondents were interviewed (structured interview schedule used) to ascertain their awareness, perceptions and views on social capital and how social capital could be strengthened and sustained thereby promoting the effectiveness of the panchayat.

Data relating to social capital in terms of trust and network were collected from the respondents through a simple two-point scale consisting of different indicators. Trust and network are measured through the perception of respondents. Perception in this context is measured in

terms of the 'score' obtained by individuals on the scale used in the present study.<sup>2</sup> The scale was developed for social capital by using different indicators as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Indicators of Social Capital**

Social capital	Indicators
Trust	Density of relational ties among neighbours; density of mutual cooperation among neighbours
Network	Number of memberships in an organisation (formal or informal); number of memberships in a political party; number of organisation's/party's interactions over public issues with other actors (officials/representatives); number of newspaper readers/news listeners; and number of those who write letters to the editors on public issues.

### **Results of the Analysis**

As can be observed from Table 2, the density of the trust was higher (0.37) among the neighbouring households in Nadai GP as compared with Bondul (0.20) GP. Similarly, the elected members in Nadai GP obtained scores of 0.47 and 0.87 in trust and network, respectively, whereas Bondul GP scored 0.19 and 0.38, respectively. Further, the respondents of Nadai obtained the highest score, 0.45, in relational ties with neighbouring households whereas Bondul scored 0.33. Mutual co-operation like material support, exchange of personal services and advice, which played a significant role in keeping relational ties among the neighbours, was higher (0.65) in Nadai than in Bondul (0.30).

The respondents in Nadai admitted that they helped each other. This is because they perceived the neighbours as important and necessary, resources in social life. They also believed that relationships with neighbours were a public asset, which might be used when in need. The exchange of material aids helped the villagers of Nadai to significantly overcome economic crises during natural disasters like flood or drought. People who did not get such help from neighbours usually borrowed the money from moneylenders at higher rates of interest. If a person failed to return the money in time s/he had to pay double interest.

**Table 2: Distribution of Average Scores of Trust and Network Attained by the Household Heads and Elected Members of GPs**

	BONDUL GP		NADAI GP	
	Household heads N=60	Elected members N=19	Household heads N=60	Elected members N=18
Trust	0.20	0.19	0.37	0.47
Network	0.30	0.38	0.60	0.87

In Bondul there was a lack of relational ties among the neighbours. The respondents of Bondul stated that they usually depended on their kin and rarely on friends in critical situations. But they were not capable of helping each other since they were of the same economic level. Like the respondents of Nadai, they also felt that relational tie among neighbours made it easier to get relief during economic crises. Relational ties with friends and workmates were also strong in Nadai (0.38 and 0.28) respectively. Relational ties with kin were almost the same in both places. Most of them felt that it was a routine job to maintain relationships with the relatives.

Similarly, the respondents of Nadai obtained the higher score, 0.45, for the practice of inviting the neighbours to family events as compared with Bondul (0.33). However, a number of social events like sports, operas, dramas, concerts and, most importantly, religious plays such as Durga Pooja were organised in both the GPs. But the respondents of Bondul GP said that their relationship with the neighbours and involvement in organising social events had decreased over a period of time because of economic crises and political influences.

There is considerable competition in getting jobs and since people are usually motivated to earn more money, once they got the job they tended to migrate to the city from the village and were not interested in keeping relationships with their former neighbours or friends. It is surprising that primary school/high schoolteachers left their villages for the District City, which was 18 kms away, to provide better schooling facilities for their children. They used to come to their work place (school) in the same village from the city. The teaching method of the village school was thought to be below the standard by the teachers themselves.

Further, Table 2 shows that the density of network was higher (0.60) in Nadai GP as compared with Bondul GP (0.45). Similarly, the



density of memberships of samiti or association was higher (0.52) in Nadai GP as compared with that of Bondul GP (0.18). The interaction or negotiation of association with GP or other actors was higher in Nadai GP than in Bondul GP because each village in Nadai GP had its own formal and informal samitis or associations such as Krisok Samiti, Farmers' Association, Handloom Association, Fishermen Association etc. These associations conducted their monthly meetings regularly and paid the membership fees. They were mainly interest oriented. They did not engage in social activities towards the welfare of the whole society but were more concerned about their personal interests. For example, the farmers' association might act with the intention of fulfilling their needs such as timely irrigation, minikits, fertilisers etc. Similarly, the Handloom Association might focus on getting bank loans for business security, etc. However, they did not ignore social welfare altogether for they did show interest in arranging for better village roads, electricity, water supply, etc. This is because small-scale industries like handloom and agriculture depended on better infrastructure. Electricity is crucial for irrigation and storage of farm produce. Villagers know that it is easy to persuade the authorities to provide them with certain services and facilities if the formers are well organised. In some cases this was found to be true. To illustrate, as a retired primary schoolteacher put it:

"We have been asking for electricity and irrigation facilities for our village for the last decade but to no avail. The Pradhan promised to give us everything before the election but later forgot all that was said. So, during his present tenure, all the villagers came together and decided not to talk to him any more. Soon after that, we not only got electricity but also deep tube-wells for irrigation. This was possible partly because the samiti members contributed to the realisation of the plan implementation by giving money for electricity poles and meters, etc (a Respondent 2001)".

Similarly, a farmers' association in another village in Nadai GP influenced the authorities to supply them lift irrigation water from the nearest river. The authorities agreed to give lifting machines and a technical assistant provided the association looked after operation and maintenance. Since the organisation was interest oriented, the members of the organisation mostly benefited from the facility. Anyhow, the poor farmers and labourers also benefited to a certain extent because farmers could grow crops thrice a year with the help of irrigation without which they could not have done so. The farmers' association maintained a register

for t	Groups	Bondul GP Nadai GP							
		Household Heads		Elected Members		Household Heads		Elected Members	
		Trust	Network	Trust	Network	Trust	Network	Trust	Network

**Table 3: Group-wise Scores of Trust and Network Attained by Household Heads and Elected Members** 1112these nine schools and my friend also is appointed as a teacher in another school' (a Respondent 2001).

Thus, readership and concern enabled her to help the villagers as well as herself.

Table 3 shows the score of the respondents in terms of caste, sex, age, education and occupation relating to trust and network. These factors are considered important in determining social capital. The data show that scores were assigned to different caste groups in terms of trust and network. Trust and network were found to be higher among the non-Scheduled Castes in both the GPs. Political party-based mobilisations of Scheduled Castes strengthened the political ties among the supporters and members more than caste-based ties.

Another important observation made from Table 3 is that trust and network were higher among those household heads who had only primary education in Bondul GP, whereas in Nadai GP it was found among the graduate degree holders. Further, the highest score in trust and network was obtained by illiterate groups of elected members in Bondul GP, whereas in Nadai, different groups obtained the highest score. As can be observed from Table 3, degree holders scored the highest in network (1.00) followed by the illiterate respondents. In Bondul, when a person obtained a degree he would leave the village for a city in search of a job whereas, in Nadai, his counterpart tried to cultivate his own land or other lands on share basis using modern technology since irrigation facilities were available. When a person involved in cultivation became a member of the farmers' association, it helped him to strengthen his network with other members, which in turn increased his trust in his fellow members.

Occupation may be another important determinant in the formation of social capital. As Table 3 shows, network (0.85) and trust (0.50) were higher among the small peasant/small businessmen in Nadai, whereas both network and trust were higher (0.75) among semi-medium peasant/businessmen in Bondul. Besides, Table 3 shows that network was higher among the members who were teachers/other service holders in both the GPs. Network among small peasants/small businessmen was found to be highest with a score of 1.00 in Nadai GP. In both the GPs, the agricultural labourers obtained the highest scores of 0.40 and 0.60 in trust, respectively. Again, the agricultural labourers in Nadai obtained a score of 0.80 in network whereas it was 0.20 in Bondul GP.

STs	0.00	0.25	1.00	0.00	0.17	0.17	0.00	0.00
SCs	0.10	0.30	0.29	0.14	0.13	0.47	0.57	0.86
Non-sch.	0.26	0.29	0.00	0.71	0.52	0.76	0.43	1.00
OBC	0.00	0.50	0.00	0.00	0.33	0.50	-	
Illiterate	0.11	0.17	1.00	1.00	0.00	0.00	1.00	1.00
Literate	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.33	0.67	0.00	0.00
Primary	0.57	0.71	0.20	0.20	0.38	0.62	0.50	1.00
High School	0.23	0.31	0.25	0.25	0.40	0.60	0.50	0.75

political parties might help in a major way in situations where personal and individual interests were concerned while the common social welfare was left out. It is also understood that belonging to a particular political party sometimes led to social and cultural conflicts, chaos, and social disorganisation due to the incompatibility of ideas, opinions, morals and values that people held. Many respondents mentioned that the Communist Party of India, Marxist, CPI (M) leaders did many good works at the beginning when they were first appointed but later got preoccupied with their self-interests and neglected the common welfare of society. It is customary for the CPI (M) leaders to maintain a hierarchy of which, according to the respondents, the more senior leaders in earlier times used to visit the villages themselves and speak to the villagers, encouraging them to share the responsibilities and contribute to the common welfare of society. This is apparently not being done by the present-day senior leaders. Most of the respondents felt that this was due to the egocentric attitude of the senior cadres.

Newspaper readers or TV/radio news listeners in Nadai GP had a higher score (0.68) as compared with those of Bondul (0.50). However, it is interesting to find that in Nadai GP the respondents could write letters (.0033) to the editors, while in Bondul GP no one was found to be writing. In both the places the villagers expressed similar views on the interest or significance of reading the newspaper. An old person from Nadai GP said:

'I read the daily newspaper so that I get a lot of new information about the central or state governments, especially those related to STs/SCs, and old men or women which I can discuss with my fellow villagers. And I come across a lot of advertisements for job vacancies and inform about them to eligible youth in my village who can apply for those vacancies. We further discuss these matters with the panchayat officials/members to obtain the facilities available' (a Respondent 2001).

Similarly, as a woman from Bondul GP put it:

'I read the newspapers every day and listen to the radio through which I get to know about 'Anganwadi' schools for those who do not attend primary school. After listening to this I approached the Panchayat Samiti member who was also a senior political leader of CPI (M) and asked him to introduce this programme in our village too. He got nine such schools for our GP after discussing with the higher authorities. I am a teacher in one of

these nine schools and my friend also is appointed as a teacher in another school' (a Respondent 2001).

Thus, readership and concern enabled her to help the villagers as well as herself.

Table 3 shows the score of the respondents in terms of caste, sex, age, education and occupation relating to trust and network. These factors are considered important in determining social capital. The data show that scores were assigned to different caste groups in terms of trust and network. Trust and network were found to be higher among the non-Scheduled Castes in both the GPs. Political party-based mobilisations of Scheduled Castes strengthened the political ties among the supporters and members more than caste-based ties.

Another important observation made from Table 3 is that trust and network were higher among those household heads who had only primary education in Bondul GP, whereas in Nadai GP it was found among the graduate degree holders. Further, the highest score in trust and network was obtained by illiterate groups of elected members in Bondul GP, whereas in Nadai, different groups obtained the highest score. As can be observed from Table 3, degree holders scored the highest in network (1.00) followed by the illiterate respondents. In Bondul, when a person obtained a degree he would leave the village for a city in search of a job whereas, in Nadai, his counterpart tried to cultivate his own land or other lands on share basis using modern technology since irrigation facilities were available. When a person involved in cultivation became a member of the farmers' association, it helped him to strengthen his network with other members, which in turn increased his trust in his fellow members.

Occupation may be another important determinant in the formation of social capital. As Table 3 shows, network (0.85) and trust (0.50) were higher among the small peasant/small businessmen in Nadai, whereas both network and trust were higher (0.75) among semi-medium peasant/businessmen in Bondul. Besides, Table 3 shows that network was higher among the members who were teachers/other service holders in both the GPs. Network among small peasants/small businessmen was found to be highest with a score of 1.00 in Nadai GP. In both the GPs, the agricultural labourers obtained the highest scores of 0.40 and 0.60 in trust, respectively. Again, the agricultural labourers in Nadai obtained a score of 0.80 in network whereas it was 0.20 in Bondul GP.

**Table 3: Group-wise Scores of Trust and Network Attained by Household Heads and Elected Members**

Groups		Bondul GP				Nadai GP			
		Household Heads		Elected Members		Household Heads		Elected Members	
		Trust	Network	Trust	Network	Trust	Network	Trust	Network
Caste	STs	0.00	0.25	1.00	0.00	0.17	0.17	0.00	0.00
	SCs	0.10	0.30	0.29	0.14	0.13	0.47	0.57	0.86
	Non-sch.	0.26	0.29	0.00	0.71	0.52	0.76	0.43	1.00
	OBC	0.00	0.50	0.00	0.00	0.33	0.50	-	-
Education	Illiterate	0.11	0.17	1.00	1.00	0.00	0.00	1.00	1.00
	Literate	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.33	0.67	0.00	0.00
	Primary	0.57	0.71	0.20	0.20	0.38	0.62	0.50	1.00
	High School	0.23	0.31	0.25	0.25	0.40	0.60	0.50	0.75
	Pre-university	0.20	0.40	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.33	0.00	1.00
Occupation	Graduate	0.13	0.25	0.00	0.75	0.71	0.86	0.50	1.00
	Household worker	.0083	0.17	0.17	0.17	0.0076	0.31	0.50	0.75
	Agricultural labourer	0.19	0.31	0.40	0.20	0.36	0.36	0.60	0.80
	Small peasant/businessmen	0.30	0.40	0.00	0.50	0.50	0.85	0.40	1.00
	Semi-medium peasant/businessmen	0.75	0.75	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Schoolteacher/other	0.11	0.22	0.00	1.00	0.40	0.60	0.00	1.00
Age (in yrs.)	20-30	0.11	0.37	0.20	0.00	0.29	0.62	0.00	0.00
	31-40	0.19	0.31	0.13	0.63	0.44	0.56	0.57	0.86
	41-50	0.37	0.26	0.50	0.00	0.33	0.53	0.43	1.00
	50 Above	0.00	0.17	0.00	1.00	0.50	0.75	-	-
Sex	Female	0.0038	0.19	0.17	0.17	0.22	0.41	0.33	0.67
	Male	0.32	0.38	0.20	0.50	0.48	0.76	0.50	1.00

The highest score was found to have been obtained by the male household heads in trust and network in both the GPs. However, Table 3 shows that the female respondents obtained a considerably better score in Nadai GP as compared with Bondul GP. Similarly, the male members obtained the highest score in trust and network in both the GPs. The score of female members in Nadai GP was more encouraging

as 1516formation of local associations such as sports clubs, welfare associations, self-help organisations, etc. Therefore, in Bondul GP, there was a lack of such associations, whereas the situation was different in Nadai GP where schoolteachers were made members of the village committee or beneficiary committee, graduate degree holders were made members of the farmers' association or Krisok Samiti or handloom association, etc. They were at least involved with such organisations through which they could help their community.

### **Panchayats and Mass Mobilisation**

Lack of trust among neighbours, associations, and socially conscious youth resulted in the failure of the panchayat to mobilise villagers in Bondul through its activities. Only party based mobilisation took place. The rest of the community kept away from the panchayat's activities, which further increased social conflict. It may be noted here that the office of the GP was situated in a large village called Bandardihi where the villagers were segmented into different groups. A large number of people from the higher castes and lower castes were living in this village. Groups were formed not only among different castes or classes but also within the same caste and class. There were conflicts, clashes and fears among the groups. Two main reasons suggested by the field study for such a state of affairs were a) socio-economic and b) political in nature.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, the stronghold of the CPI (M) was the majority of landless, small and middle peasant class and school teachers who belonged to the lower and lower-middle castes. On the other hand, the CPI (M) controlled the panchayats and secured more benefits for their workers, supporters and sympathisers. Being close to the party, they enjoyed the socio-economic power of panchayats in spite of their lower class or caste background, which was not to the liking of the higher caste or higher class. Further, the respondents often expressed their dissatisfaction with their neighbours. They were also dissatisfied with the panchayat activities due to the bad condition of the roads, drainage, culvert, irrigation and primary school building. However, they did not express their views about the members or panchayats regarding ineffective performance. They did not visit the panchayat except in emergencies.

### **Denouement**

Theoretically it is expected that social capital ensures effective decentralised governance and development. The present study reveals that there is a correlation between social capital and decentralised governance. Social capital increased people's participation in planning and implementation and enhanced the accountability of elected members and officials as well as transparency in the management of development programmes. Unless people's participation, accountability and transparency are ensured, sustained development may not be possible. Correspondingly, studies reveal that sustainable development can occur only where active local support and participation exist (World Bank 1997; Ghai and Vivian 1992; WCED 1987:65). Further, correlation is also found between social capital and development. This evidence is generally supportive of other studies (World Bank 2003a: 44; World Bank 2003b: 24; Woolcock and Narayan 2000; Furstenberg and Hughes 1995). For example, basic services like health and education are inadequately accessible to the poor owing to their transaction-intensive nature. Their outcomes depend crucially on the judgement and behaviour of providers and beneficiaries (World Bank 2003a: 82). Both people's judgement and behaviour is difficult to measure, particularly, when providers try to claim

cultivation, leading to a better social and economic life for the villagers. In Bondul, whatever economic development was observed towards households was based only on personal effort.

The strength of membership in the political party in Bondul was not less than that in Nadai but owing to lack of self-help groups they were unable to get benefits like irrigation, better roads, culverts, etc. which could have brought the members together and sustained their relationship and cooperation among other members. As in Nadai GP, membership in a political party can be a path towards personal benefits, but it may not always help to secure group benefits as was the case in Bondul where social development like infrastructure development remained bad and the poor had less resources for employment owing to less land cultivation. Meanwhile, some villagers of Bondul were approaching the senior leader of CPI (M) to provide telephone connection in their homes, whereas people of Nadai were approaching their panchayat pradhan to provide tap water to their homes and more irrigation facilities for their lands.

### **Social Consciousness and Sense of Unity**

There was a lack of social consciousness and unity among the neighbours of Bondul GP. Yet, one cannot generalise this to all the villages in Bondul. There were some villages in Bondul where the villagers were socially conscious and united also had performed a number of social welfare activities like construction of road culvert, and school building, maintenance of tube-well for drinking water etc., through their social welfare organisations.

### **Schoolteachers and Educated Youth**

People who had higher education were found leaving the village for the District City, which was only 18 km. from the village of Bondul. Of course, a person may leave the village on getting a job in the city. Many respondents (graduate) did not trust any of their neighbours and never cast a vote for GP elections as they found that everyone was a cheat. Teachers of the village school were living in the city because they thought that the standard of the village school was not good and wanted to give their children better education. Since the effectiveness of teaching methods depended on teachers, the functionaries of panchayats and the Member of Parliament (MP) of this constituency requested them again and again to remain in the village and serve properly. However, they did not heed such pleas. While the educated people left the village and did not maintain any good relationship with the neighbours, there was no network of good communication and co-operation which determined the

formation of local associations such as sports clubs, welfare associations, self-help organisations, etc. Therefore, in Bondul GP, there was a lack of such associations, whereas the situation was different in Nadai GP where schoolteachers were made members of the village committee or beneficiary committee, graduate degree holders were made members of the farmers' association or Krisok Samiti or handloom association, etc. They were at least involved with such organisations through which they could help their community.

### **Panchayats and Mass Mobilisation**

Lack of trust among neighbours, associations, and socially conscious youth resulted in the failure of the panchayat to mobilise villagers in Bondul through its activities. Only party based mobilisation took place. The rest of the community kept away from the panchayat's activities, which further increased social conflict. It may be noted here that the office of the GP was situated in a large village called Bandardihi where the villagers were segmented into different groups. A large number of people from the higher castes and lower castes were living in this village. Groups were formed not only among different castes or classes but also within the same caste and class. There were conflicts, clashes and fears among the groups. Two main reasons suggested by the field study for such a state of affairs were a) socio-economic and b) political in nature.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, the stronghold of the CPI (M) was the majority of landless, small and middle peasant class and school teachers who belonged to the lower and lower-middle castes. On the other hand, the CPI (M) controlled the panchayats and secured more benefits for their workers, supporters and sympathisers. Being close to the party, they enjoyed the socio-economic power of panchayats in spite of their lower class or caste background, which was not to the liking of the higher caste or higher class. Further, the respondents often expressed their dissatisfaction with their neighbours. They were also dissatisfied with the panchayat activities due to the bad condition of the roads, drainage, culvert, irrigation and primary school building. However, they did not express their views about the members or panchayats regarding ineffective performance. They did not visit the panchayat except in emergencies.

### **Denouement**

Theoretically it is expected that social capital ensures effective decentralised governance and development. The present study reveals that there is a correlation between social capital and decentralised governance. Social capital increased people's participation in planning



and implementation and enhanced the accountability of elected members and officials as well as transparency in the management of development programmes. Unless people's participation, accountability and transparency are ensured, sustained development may not be possible. Correspondingly, studies reveal that sustainable development can occur only where active local support and participation exist (World Bank 1997; Ghai and Vivian 1992; WCED 1987:65). Further, correlation is also found between social capital and development. This evidence is generally supportive of other studies (World Bank 2003a: 44; World Bank 2003b: 24; Woolcock and Narayan 2000; Furstenberg and Hughes 1995). For example, basic services like health and education are inadequately accessible to the poor owing to their transaction-intensive nature. Their outcomes depend crucially on the judgement and behaviour of providers and beneficiaries (World Bank 2003a: 82). Both people's judgement and behaviour is difficult to measure, particularly, when providers try to claim credit for services and beneficiaries seek immediate benefits. Successful outcomes require the cooperation and support of beneficiaries and their homogeneous social and cultural norms and reciprocity. Owing to lack of social capital, basic services for people have deteriorated. But one cannot assume that social capital may always influence the pace and process of development. It may, in turn, result in a negative outcome.

The negative side of social capital can be noted from the field evidence that people who were not involved in such associations or self-help groups were not able to access more benefits than the people who belonged to any association or group. The positive side of social capital was that when a member of the association received some benefits from the GP, for example, a small bank loan, s/he utilised it judiciously. Again, it was found from the Nadai GP that the Farmers' Association succeeded in an irrigation project (river lifting water pump) to a great extent due to their organisational strength, which would not have been possible, by an individual or a GP alone. It is revealed from this micro study that GP could formulate social capital if it mobilised people by emphasising the importance of self-help groups and by securing economic benefits for them.

Even though many scholars did not lay much emphasis on the role of political party in the formulation of social capital (Heller 1996), this study reveals that the political party, especially the CPI (M), played a crucial role in formulating social capital by mobilising and sensitising its mass organisations at the grass roots. These mass organisations like Kishok Sabha, Land-less Organisation, Labourer Organisation, and Mohila

Samiti played a significant role in providing information about surplus land, waste land, and facilitating voluntary labour *i.e.*, gifting labour and kinds in various development activities. They extended support to the government plans and programmes, especially National Rural Employment Programme (NREP) and Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), literacy programmes, primary school building, irrigation projects and cultivating land. All these activities of mass organisation helped the government to promote faster development at the grass roots, on the one hand, and promoted socio-economic life of a person, on the other. This conclusion appears to be similar to Bhattacharya's findings (1998). However, Putnam's (1993) argument on social capital mainly refers to people's connection with the civic life of their communities, not strictly their politics. He believes that a grass roots movement is social capital, which can be regarded as an intensive form of political participation. Contrary to it, a contribution to a political party is a political act that does not always formulate social capital. As Atul Kohli argues, the CPI (M) might have provided support to its supporters, which met as an individual need, and the party might have gained a lot but the whole society might not have benefited since the political party was not a charitable organisation (1987:139).

Organisations, especially, village clubs, sports clubs, welfare associations and political parties might not be regarded as social capital, but they might be an important source of social capital. It is found that the density of village clubs and sports clubs in Bondul GP was not less than the Nadai GP but they did not involve themselves in development activities. In Nadai GP, the Farmers' Association, Fishermen and Handloom Association, which belonged to the political parties, had a great influence on the GP in providing more benefits for their members.

The study also reveals that caste played no role either in the formulation of social capital or in the segmentation of society. This finding is similar to a study by Pai (2001). This is because the left front party mobilised the people on class basis. However, it is found that the influence of political party segmented the society into groups, which, in turn, had an impact on social capital, as well as on the progress of development in Bondul. The elite of this GP was found isolated from the present trends of panchayats and their development activities. They held different ideas and views against the lower caste and lower class dominating panchayat. In a similar vein, an argument has been made by Mallick (1993: 133-4). However, such factional disputes of leadership have not taken place in every part of rural Bengal.

In the light of the experience drawn from the above research, some policy prescriptions have been made:

To ensure effective decentralised governance as well as development, formation of social capital is vital since micro evidence shows that local associations like self-help groups, co-operative farmers' association, handloom association, etc., have a positive impact on local development and decentralised governance.

Panchayats have an important role to play in the formation of social capital and their sustenance by mobilising NGOs and people through self-help groups like agriculture, poultry, dairy, handloom, food processing. Formation of social capital may also help to ensure successful *gram unnayan samiti*<sup>4</sup>, which have been taken up recently for mobilisation of local resources and people. The study reveals that people of the countryside of Bengal trust their neighbours to a great extent, they love associational life very much.

However, they have not helped one other in promoting development owing to their poor economic conditions. It may be recommended that state government can sustain such capital by extending financial support through the panchayats in collaboration with the local bank or cooperative bank and NGOs by emphasising self-help group lending. These will help the panchayats to sustain their development activities for a longer period. It may help in extending the relationship between people and the panchayats, which will ensure people's participation, accountability and transparency. Without such activities, the panchayats may lose people's trust. Study reveals that people were not interested in attending panchayat meetings owing to lack of economic development activities in the panchayats.

There is social capital in the countryside of Bengal. However, there is no proper mechanism for the promotion of social capital in all regions of Bengal. It is, therefore, time that the State initiated steps to create an environment for the promotion of social capital by extending financial support to self-help groups, NGOs, cooperative organisations. These should be made partners with panchayats for better governance at the local levels.

## Notes

1. For example, actor 'A' has a relationship with actor 'B' and 'B' has a relationship with 'C'; now 'A' has a relationship with 'C' through 'B'. These relationships make a network among 'A', 'B', and 'C'. How far does this network facilitate some resources such as knowledge, information, experience, material aids/support, motivation and incentives, which influence the process of decentralised governance?

2. The perception score depends on the nature of response (Positive/Negative) expressed by the respondents for different statements given in the scale. It has been estimated on the basis of a two-point scale from zero to one. To illustrate, those who had relations with others were awarded a score of one, and those who did not were given zero. Further, those who were members of the organisation got a score of one, and those who did not, got a zero. Similarly, for a given question when the answer was positive ('yes') one was awarded and when the answer was negative ('no') zero was assigned.

3. The Union Parishad of this village (previous system of local government in West Bengal) was controlled by the higher castes as well as higher classes who were benefited the most during the Congress Government. After the establishment of panchayats, the power of this institution shifted to the hands of CPI (M), which resulted in factional dispute with the traditionally dominated village leadership, which belonged to both higher caste and Congress Party. This factionalism in this village disrupted the formation of successful farmers' association since a large proportion of land belonged to them and they were not depending on any one. It is important to state that there was no such faction found between sharecroppers and the landowners. It is also found that some big landowners became sympathisers of CPI (M) to get some support from the panchayats like water pump, license etc., but there was lack of trust between the two (party and landed). These problems confronted several GPs though Bondul was an exception.

4. The Government of West Bengal amended the West Bengal Panchayat Act of 1973 recently by adding a *Gram Unnayan Samiti* at the gram sangsad level. This samiti is nothing but an adapted version of the Convergent Community Action (CCA) (Chatterjee 2003:4090). CCA is a

plan materialised by the villagers themselves with a view to meeting their needs. The aim of the CCA was to ensure synergy between community, community organisations and other local institutions, to enable them to act as part of the local governance and ensure people's participation. However, owing to lack of social capital, CCA had not succeeded in Bondul (Islam and Sangita 2003:14).

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