Doing Development: Voluntary Agencies in the Sundarbans of West Bengal

Amites Mukhopadhyay

2003

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of London

Department of Anthropology
Goldsmiths College
University of London

CONTAINS A PULLOUT

Abstract

This study explores the working of voluntary agencies or NGOs in the Sundarbans delta of West Bengal. By focusing on the region and its problems the thesis attempts to address the ideology and practice of sustainable and participatory development. Accordingly, the thesis focuses on the activities of three organisations: a) the Tagore Society for Rural Development involved with embankment and flooding; b) the Ramakrishna Ashram Farm Science Centre engaged with 'sustainable' agriculture; and c) the Juktibadi Sanskritic Sangstha (Rationalist Cultural Association) involved in a campaign against the state government's proposed Nuclear Power Plant in the Sundarbans.

Through analysis of the specific problems of the region and the engagement of three grassroots development organisations with such problems the dynamics of local politics is revealed. A consideration of the processual dimension of NGO practices in a specific context reveals the complex ways in which these voluntary agencies negotiate with the local networks of power and with the state institutions at the local level. An attempt has also been made to document the contested views of sustainability and participation born of such negotiations. A focus on how NGOs do development also necessitates the deconstruction of 'people' as a meta-category. By focusing on people's perceptions and practices attention is drawn to the ways in which their multiple subject positions are often at odds with the unifying awareness-raising campaigns launched by the voluntary agencies studied in the thesis.

The thesis problematises, in the light of ethnographic evidence, the state-civil society duality, widely used in much NGO and development literature, demonstrating how it glosses over the complex ways in which the 'social' interpenetrates with the 'political'.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

List of Maps

List of Figures

List of Tables

List of Illustrations

Notes on Transliteration

The language spoken in the place where I carried my fieldwork is Bengali. Like most north Indian languages, Bengali is derived from Sanskrit, and is written in a version of the Devnagari script. Hindi, a related language, tends to transliterate into English the vowel 'a' whose sound in Bengali is, in most cases, closer to 'o'. However, the convention is that terms which are common to Hindi and Bengali tend to be written using 'a' as in *panchayat*, *dafadar*, *sarkar* etc. In this thesis, for regional and local terms like *mouja*, *chouko*, *ghog*, or *moule*, I have retained the 'o'. I have used all terms without diacritical marks in the text, and have added an English 's' to denote the plural.

Glossary of Local Terms

adivasi	tribal
babu	middle or upper class male elite
bagda	tiger prawn
bagda min	tiger prawn seeds
baidya	physician caste
bamun	Brahmin/priestly caste
bastu	house
baule	woodcutter
beldar	Irrigation Department's staff for maintaining embankments
bigha	unit of land measurement
bilan	marshy land where paddy grows
biliti	foreign/foreign liquor
bund	embankments
char	new land from silt deposits
chouko	square holes dug for adding earth to embankments
chowkey	police check post
dada	elder brother
dafadar	temporary supervisor
dakshin	south
dakshinpara	locality lying to the south
dharna	form of protest
didimoni	teacher and elder sister
durniti	corruption
ghat	jetty
ghog	hidden hole in embankments
gotra	sub-caste lineage
gram sabha	village meeting
gram sansad	village council
gunin	sorcerer
harijan	untouchable
jami	land

jati	caste group
jele	fishing community
jelepara	fishermen's locality
jotedar	big land holder
kalaj	poisonous snake
kalo	dark complexioned
kamot	shark
kayastha	caste with tradition of scribal livelihoods
kharif	monsoon crop
kissan sabha	peasant organisation
kota	fair skinned
krisak samity	peasant association
Krishi Vigyan Kendra	Farm Science Centre
Maharaj	great king (monk)
mahila samity	women's association
Mastermasai	revered teacher
mathor	sweeper
Mitti Bachao Abhiyan	Save the Soil Agitation
mouja	revenue village
moule	honey collecting community
muchi	cobbler
Narmada Bacahao Andolan	Save Narmada Movement
Panchayat	local self-government
pradhan	chairperson
pucca	concrete
purba	east
purbapara	locality lying to the east
rabi	winter crop
ruidas	cobbler
ruidaspara	locality inhabited by cobblers
sabhadhipati	chairperson

sabhapati	chairperson
sadgop	milkman caste
sahasabhapati	vice-chairperson
sahasabhadhipati	vice-chairperson
saheb	used in addressing one's superior
sangstha	association
sardar	tribals bearing surname *Sardar*
sardarpara	locality inhabited by *sardars*
sarkari	governmental
shakti	goddess of power
sudra	lowest in the fourfold *varna* scheme
Sundarban Bachao Andolan	Save the Sundarbans Movement
Swamiji	monk
tanti	weaving caste
tili	oilsmith caste
upapradhan	vice-chairperson
uttar	north
uttarpara	locality lying to the north
varna	colour/Hindu fourfold scheme of ranked human callings
zamindar	landlord

List of Acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AIAKS	All India Agragami Kissan Sabha
AIFBCC	All India Forward Bloc Central Committee
AIKS	All India Kissan Sabha
AIUKS	All India United Kissan Sabha
BDO	Block Development Office/Officer
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BLLRO	Block Land and Land Reforms Office/Officer
BMO	Block Medical Officer
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CAPART	Council for the Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology
CARE	Cooperative for American Relief Everywhere
CICR	Central Institute of Cotton Research
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPI-M	Communist Party of India-Marxist
DAE	Department of Atomic Energy
DB	Department of Biotechnology
DF	Department of Fisheries
DLCCVA	District Level Coordination Committee of Voluntary Agencies
DPD	Development and Planning Department
DPRD	Department of Panchayat and Rural Development
DST	Department of Science and Technology
FB	Forward Bloc
FPR	Farmer Participatory Research
GOI	Government of India
GOWB	Government of West Bengal
GRO	Grassroots Organisation
HYV	High-yielding Variety
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IPCL	Indian Petrochemicals Limited

IUD	Intra Uterine Device
IWW	Irrigation and Waterways
JSS	Juktibadi Sanskritic Sangstha
LRD	Land Reforms Department
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
MP	Member of Parliament
NC	National Conference/National Council
NGO	Non-government Organisation
NNEC	National Nuclear Energy Commission
NNINM	National Network on Integrated Nutrient Management
OBC	Other Backward Castes/Communities
OXFAM	Oxford Committee for Famine and Relief
PB	Polit Buro
PHE	Public Health and Engineering
PRA	Participatory Rural Apraisal
PSCs	Public Service Contractors
PWD	Public Works Department
RAKVK	Ramakrishna Ashram Krishi Vigyan Kendra
RCPI	Revolutionary Communist Party of India
RSP	Revolutionary Socialist Party
SAD	Sundarban Affairs Department
SC	Scheduled Caste
SDB	Sundarban Development Board
SDO	Sub-Divisional Officer
SFI	Student Federation of India
SHIS	Southern Health Improvement Society
SIPRD	State Institute of Panchayat and Rural Development
SLCAC	State Level Coordination Advisory Committee
SLCCVA	State Level Coordination Committee of Voluntary Agencies
SO	Section Officer
ST	Scheduled Tribe
SUCI	Socialist Unity Centre of India
TMC	Trinamool Congress

TSRD	Tagore Society for Rural Development
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
VIB	Vivekananda Institute of Biotechnology
WBSPB	West Bengal State Planning Board
WWF	World Wildlife Fund

AFGHANISTAN

INDIA

POSITION OF WEST BENGAL IN INDIA 2001

Boundary, International _____   Boundary, State/UT's _____

KILOMETRES
100 50 0   100 200 300 400 500

JAMMU AND KASHMIR

C   H   I   N   A

HIMACHAL
PRADESH

PUNJAB

CHANDIGARH

UTTARANCHAL

HARYANA

DELHI

N   E   P   A   L

B   H   U   T   A   N

SIKKIM

ARUNACHAL
PRADESH

BHUTAN

PAKISTAN

RAJASTHAN

UTTAR PRADESH

ASSAM

NAGALAND

BIHAR

MEGHALAYA

BANGLADESH

MANIPUR

JHARKHAND

TRIPURA

MIZORAM

GUJARAT

MADHYA PRADESH

I   N   D   I   A

WEST
BENGAL

MYANMAR
(BURMA)

DAMAN AND DIU

CHHATISGARH

DADRA & NAGAR HAVELI

ORISSA

New Moore I.
(India)

MAHARASHTRA

BAY
OF
BENGAL

ARABIAN
SEA

ANDHRA PRADESH

P

The interstate boundaries between Arunachal Pradesh,
Assam and Meghalaya shown on this map are as interpreted
from the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act, 1971
but have yet to be verified.

Coco Is. (Burma)

Narcondam I. (India)

Barren I. (India)

ANDAMAN AND NICOBAR ISLANDS (INDIA)

GOA

KARNATAKA

LAKSHADWEEP SEA

ANDAMAN SEA

P

PONDICHERRY

LAKSHADWEEP
(INDIA)

KERALA

TAMIL NADU

P

Map 1.1

P - PONDICHERRY

SRI
LANKA

Indira Point

I   N   D   I   A   N

O   C   E   A   N

72° East of Greenwich

WEST BENGAL
ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISIONS
2001
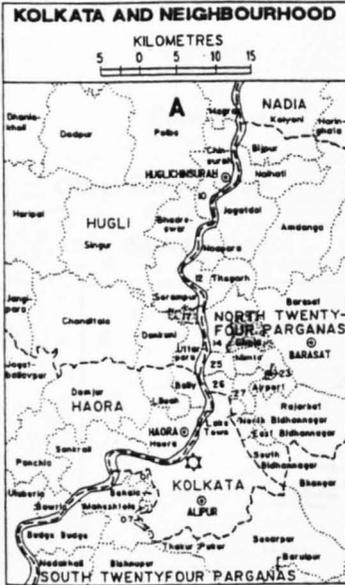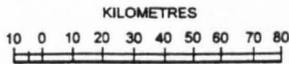
KILOMETRES
10 0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80

KOLKATA AND NEIGHBOURHOOD
KILOMETRES
5 0 5 10 15

BOUNDARIES:
INTERNATIONAL ———
STATE / U.T.
DISTRICT ———
POLICE STATION..........
STATE CAPITAL ✡
DISTRICT HEADQUARTERS ◉

Newly created Districts between 01.01.1990 to 01.01.2000.

Newly created Police Stations between 01.01.1990 to 01.01.2000.

KEY TO POLICE STATION
DARJILING
03 Darjiling
08 Jore Bungalow
09 Sukhiapokhri
14 Siliguri
JALPAIGURI
07 Madarihat
KOCH BIHAR
02 Kochibari
UTTAR DINAJPUR
07 Hemtabad
DAKSHIN DINAJPUR
02 Gangarampur
07 Sankhari
08 Harirampur
MALDAH
08 Englishbazar
MURSHIDABAD
01 Farraka
02 Shamsherganj
06 Raninalo
14 Jagaon
18 Berhampur Town
19 Daulatabad
20 Hariharpara
BIRBHUM
18 Kankralta
BARDDHAMAN
01 Cathar anjan
04 Asansol (North)
06 Hirapur
07 Asansol (South)
11 Pandabeswar
12 Durgapur
14 New Township
15 Coke Oven
29 Jamalpur
NADIA
01 Thanapara
04 Murutia
09 Dhubulia Investigation Centre
10 Nabadwip
NORTH TWENTYFOUR PARGANAS
03 Gopal Nagar
12 Barrackpur
14 Khardah
16 Barasat
17 Dapanga
23 Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose International Air Port
25 Belpharia
26 Baranagar
27 Dum Dum
HUGLI
03 Pursurah
04 Tarakeswar
08 Mogra
10 Chandernagore
11 Polba
17 Rishra
PURULIYA
03 Paradya Town
MEDINIPUR
40 Durgachak
HAORA
01 Udaynarayanpur
04 Jagatballavpur
17 Uluberia
18 Bagnan
SOUTH TWENTYFOUR PARGANAS
01 Metiabruz
05 Naddhal
07 Thakur Pukur
14 Bhangar
23 Mathurapur

B BIRBHUM
BD BANGLADESH
K KOCH BIHAR

NEW MOORE I.
(INDIA)

Map 1.2

BAY OF BENGAL

86° EAST OF GREENWICH

Based upon Survey of India map with the permission of the Surveyor General of India.

The territorial waters of India extend into the sea to a distance of twelve nautical miles measured from the appropriate base line

© Government of India copyright, 2004.

SUNDARBANS BIOSPHERE RESERVE

Core Area

Other Forest Area

Sanctuaries

Dampier Hodges Line

Dampier Hodges Line

WEST BENGAL

INDIA

BANGLADESH

SUNDARBAN BIOSPHERE RESERVE

BAY OF BENGAL

MATLA R.

THAKURAN R.

SAPTAMUKHI R.

 RAIMANGAL R.

BAY OF BENGAL
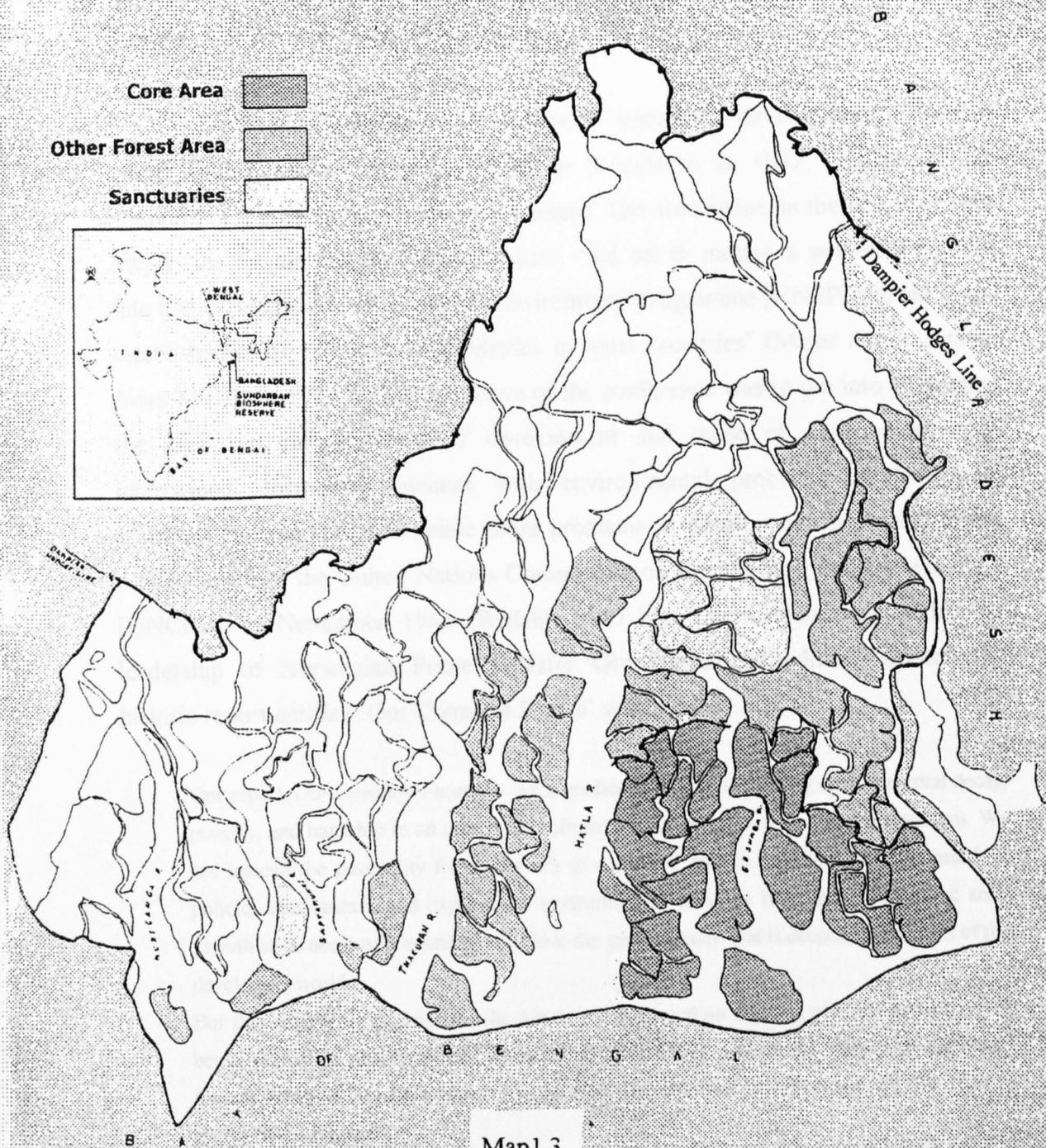
Map1.3

Chapter One

Introduction

Sustainable Development: The Concept

One of the catchphrases of our time is 'sustainable development'[1]. The first world environmental conference, held in Stockholm in 1972, emphasised the adoption of a global plan for the environment. The conference, in the words of John Major, the former British Prime Minister, 'did set in motion a powerful political tide that created the United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP] and led to the establishment of environment ministries in most countries' (Major *Earth Summit News* May/June 1992:7). The objective of the conference was to put into circulation the idea that the problems of development and those of environment were intertwined. Increasing concern with environmental problems in developing countries and the failure to relate these problems to development issues led to the establishment of the United Nations Commission on Environment and Development [UNCED] in November 1983 (Redclift 1987:12). The Commission, under the leadership of Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, drafted the historic report entitled 'Our Common Future' which stated:

> Our report, *Our Common Future*, is not a prediction of ever increasing environmental decay, poverty, and hardship in an ever more polluted world among ever decreasing resources. We see instead the possibility for a new era of economic growth, one that must be based on policies that sustain and expand the environmental resource base. And we believe such growth to be absolutely essential to relieve the great poverty that is deepening in much of the developing world.
>
> But the Commission's hope for the future is conditional on decisive political action now to begin managing environmental resources to ensure both sustainable human progress and human survival (World Commission on Environment and Development WCED 1987:1; italics in the original).

---

[1] Henceforth the terms sustainable development, sustainability, participation and civil society are mostly used without inverted commas. However, this does not mean that they have been used unproblematically.

The significance of the report lies in its ability to integrate the future of the rich with that of the poor. Development and conservation are considered as two sides of the same coin. Economic growth facilitated by innovations in technology is viewed as having as much of a negative impact on the earth's limited resource base as the poverty which is driving the poor to destroy forests or rivers or grazing land. 'Thus "sustainable development" becomes a goal not just for the "developing nations", but for industrial ones as well' (WCED 1987:4).

Fifteen years later when the United Nations' Earth Summit was held in Rio de Janeiro in pursuit of a sustainable world, Mostafa Tolba, the then Under-Secretary General of the United Nations (UN) and Executive Director of UNEP, stated that, 'People everywhere look to the Earth Summit as our best chance to save the Earth' (Tolba *Earth Summit News* May/June 1992:22). Accordingly, the Conference resolved that

> Indigenous people and their communities and other local communities have a vital role in environmental management and development because of their knowledge and traditional practices. States should ... enable their effective participation in the achievement of sustainable development (United Nations: 1993).

The use of the word 'indigenous' is significant. Although the Summit was viewed as having provided people everywhere with an opportunity to save the earth, responsibility for achieving sustainability was devolved on to the indigenous and localised communities of the Third World[2]. Sustainability as a global agenda was to be pursued by mobilising initiatives, especially those of the poor, at the local level. It was as if the Summit attempted to unite all nations, both developing and developed, in a global partnership that could be best achieved through securing people's participation in development at the local level. Concepts such as 'locality', 'indigeneity', 'common property', 'participation' and 'community' were considered as having a significant role to play in the building of this global partnership towards sustainability (Agrawal 1999).

---

[2] Various terms such as 'developing' and 'developed' or 'North' and 'South' or 'First World' and 'Third World' will be used interchangeably throughout the thesis to refer to the industrially rich and poor countries respectively. Their use to facilitate discussion does not mean their unqualified acceptance.

Ever since its invocation at various summits and conferences, sustainable development has become a contested idea as well. Redclift (1987) argues that the concept lacks analytical rigour and is founded upon a contradiction. On the one hand, the concept views nature as posing a limit to the human quest for material development and, on the other, it views the potential for material development as being locked up in nature. It is also argued that environment and development are means, not ends in themselves. The environmental thinking of the rich needs to be contrasted with the livelihood thinking of the poor (Chambers 1987). The Brundtland Report is viewed by some as yet another instance of how western science and rationality can be imposed on the rest of the world (Visvanathan 1991).

In 2002 when another Earth Summit was held in Johannesburg, it was viewed by many as another UN-sponsored farce (*India Today* 9.9.2002:5). Voices from the so-called Third World questioned the desirability of holding such a summit where corporate interests prevailed over genuine concern for the poor and their environment (Krishnakumar *Frontline* 27.9.2002:130). The critique above alerts us to the possibility of a threat posed by development with its renewed emphasis on sustainability. The new prefix 'sustainability' once again proves the unquestioned centrality of development as a language in which the relationship of Africa, Asia and Latin America to Europe and North America is often couched (Hobart 1993:1). Development continues to be a 'magical formula' in deciding the fate of the so-called less industrialised nations. Drawing on the Foucaultian notion of power, Escobar views development as a discursive field and a regime of representations by which the Third World and it problems are constructed (Escobar 1995). He argues that development has achieved the status of a certainty in the social imaginary (Escobar 1995:5). In more or less similar vein Sachs argues that as a concept development is vacuous, but 'it remains ineradicable because its diffusion appears benign. He who pronounces the word denotes nothing, but claims the best of intentions' (Sachs 1990:6). In reflecting on the career of sustainable development Sachs further argues that the new prefix 'sustainability' defuses the conflict between growth and environment and turns it into a managerial exercise (1990:25). In *The Anti-politics Machine* (1990), Ferguson deconstructs the idea of development in connection with his analysis of a rural development project in Lesotho. Ferguson shows that, despite the failure of this World Bank funded project, development remains central in offering insights into the ways social

relations are structured and power is deployed by the state and the international aid agencies.

Thus, according to these writers, development remains the pivot around which the Third World and its problems are continually made and unmade. No matter how one critiques development and in what terms, its centrality in constructing underdevelopment is unquestionable. With each prefix such as 'economic growth' or 'sustainability' comes a set of prescriptions for the developing or underdeveloped sectors of the world. Today, when another Earth Summit held in Johannesburg has evoked a variety of responses from developing countries concerning its desirability, we once again realise how invincible development discourse is. Development, viewed in this sense, becomes 'a construct rather than an objective state… a starkly political project of continued Northern dominance over the South' (Gardner and Lewis 1996:1).

In 1951 when the UN declared its policy for the economic development of the underdeveloped countries, it set a high premium on rapid economic progress, declaring that,

> Ancient philosophies have to be scrapped; old social institutions have to disintegrate; bonds of caste, creed and race have to be burst; and large numbers of persons who cannot keep up with progress have to have their expectations of a comfortable life frustrated (United Nations 1951:15).

In 1992 the same UN assigned primacy to indigenous people's traditions and practices in achieving sustainable development. Tradition, which was once considered inimical to progress, has been brought back onto the global agenda and currently valorised as the only way to achieving sustainable progress. The much talked about tradition-modernity dichotomy[3], implicit in the grand teleological theories of progress, cannot survive as a viable paradigm for understanding change. With tradition and indigenous practices coming to occupy a position of significance in the policy and discourses of development, a message is conveyed that theories of

---

[3] The tradition-modernity dichotomy is implicit in the writings of theorists like Durkheim (1933), Weber (1930, 1983), Rostow (1960), Parsons (1952, 1977) and others. The social and economic progress experienced in western societies led these writers to understand change in an evolutionary fashion. Accordingly, societies elsewhere are considered as traditional, mechanical, and less rational. Their assumed underdevelopment was attributed to their being traditional and, therefore, inimical to progress. These writers assumed that change could be brought about in non-western societies by breaking down their tradition and ushering in modern institutions and practices.

modernisation,[4] with their assumption that western modernisation is the only path available for the so-called traditional, poor and underdeveloped to follow, can no longer help us in understanding the specificity of development processes in non-western societies.

Under the influence of the turn to tradition and indigeneity, development thinking of the eighties and nineties has also contested the theories of dependency and underdevelopment of the late sixties and early seventies. Influenced by the Marxist notions of capitalism as inherently exploitative, neo-Marxists like A.G. Frank or I. Wallerstein argued that countries in the South had been deliberately underdeveloped[5] (Frank's famous thesis of the 'development of underdevelopment') by capitalist and post-imperialist exploitation. Wallerstein, with the help of his concept of world system (Wallerstein 1982), attempted to explain how structures of dependency are perpetuated and replicated at both national and international levels.

Yet even though dependency and modernisation theories are somewhat different from each other, both, it can be argued, view change in an essentially linear fashion, prescribing a capitalist stage as necessary for underdeveloped societies. Like modernisation theory, dependency theory assumes that change comes top-down from the state and thereby 'tends to underestimate locally motivated change and other kinds of relationships' (Hobart 1993:8). Both are based on 'the same fundamental rationalist epistemology' (Gardner and Lewis 1996:19) that allows them to treat the people in peripheral societies as passive, inert and oblivious of the structures that subordinate them. I turn now to some of the significant theoretical tenets that emerge out of an increasing concern with new problematics in development studies.

---

[4] Theories of modernisation here refer to a complex of theoretical approaches classically associated with the growth of capitalism and modernity in the West. By judging western modernity purely in its own terms these theories tend to globalise the western experience and prescribe it as a model for the development of non-western societies.

[5] In his book *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America*, Frank argues that the so-called Third World societies have been deliberately underdeveloped for the purposes of colonialism and capitalism. These societies, even in their postcolonial state, have been made to depend on the world capitalist system, which is essentially exploitative. For details see Frank (1969).

Anti top-downism

The state in the modernisation paradigm was looked upon as the sole initiator of planned change; thus ambitious five year plans launched by the governments of many newly independent countries were based on the assumption that state-centric development alone can help eradicate traces of underdevelopment (Gardner and Lewis 1996:13). Contemporary development thinking has sought to reverse this trend, focusing increasingly on grassroots development or development from below. The state in most of these post-colonial societies, it is argued, ensures that development initiatives trickle down (Poulton 1988) through bureaucratic planning, thereby sustaining an effective hiatus between the developers − 'specialists' or 'legislators'[6] − and those who are the passive recipients of what are considered to be the fruits of such development. Hobart uses the term 'ignorance' to describe the pitfalls of such statist or top-down development and to characterise the relation between the developers and developed. Here 'ignorance' does not refer to lack of knowledge but to a condition ascribed by the powerful (developers) to the powerless (those to be developed) (Hobart 1993:4-5).

Top-down development is also viewed as having led to the dominance of western science as the universal form of knowledge. Development is believed to be a 'contract between two major agents, between the modern nation-state and modern Western science' (Visvanathan 1991:378). The pursuit of this science in the name of development, it is argued, has colonised people's lifeworlds, led to the erosion of their indigenous practices and turned them into passive objects of development. Development is increasingly being seen as a crude manifestation of the reductionist science practised by the West (Shiva 1988, Nandy 1988, Alvares 1988, Shiva 1991)[7]. What goes by the name of development is the enterprise of this reductionist science that objectifies nature and dehumanises human labour.

---

[6] Modernity reserves 'the right to development' for those who are trained in the modernist science of development and thereby establishes a relation between power and knowledge. Bauman uses the term 'legislators' as a metaphor (Bauman 1992) to describe the profession of the intellectuals.
[7] Shiva and several others draw a close parallel between classical theories of development and the practice of modern science, which adopts an instrumentalist view of nature, thereby reducing it to an object to be manipulated and explored. Development, in so far as it incorporates these principles of modern science, reifies the experiences of non-western societies and imposes western notions of development on them.

The question of state and development has been looked at from some feminist perspectives as well. Some feminist scholarship views the state primarily as an agency carrying forward the patriarchal assumptions underlying the enterprise of modern science. The development narrative of the so-called Third World, some feminists argue, has not only denied women their agency but contributed to the wide-scale erosion of feminine principles in nature (Shiva 1988, Shiva 1991, Mies and Shiva 1993).

The postcolonial critique of science and reason has not gone unchallenged. Much against the grain of current theorising that sees Enlightenment reason as deeply implicated in destructive and top-down development in India, perspectives have emerged to salvage Enlightenment rationalism and its perceived relevance for the progress and development of India (Nanda 1998, 2001a, 2001b). As an unrepentant adherent of Enlightenment rationalism (Nanda 2001a:2564), Nanda reaffirms her faith in its emancipatory potential for evolving a critique of *dharmic* understanding of nature and society in India (2001a). According to Nanda, the precedence of *dharma* over everything else has not only found expression in the age-old superstitions, taboos and orthodoxies that continue to permeate the Indian consciousness, but it has facilitated the reactionary rightist Hindutva's rise to power.

Nanda holds responsible the postcolonial critics of science like Nandy, Shiva, Alvares and others for singularly ignoring the role of science in the critique of 'unreason' and having failed to break the spell of *dharma* in the Indian society. At a more generic level Nanda's views converge with those of theorists like Alan Sokal, Paul Gross, Norman Levitt and others (Gross, Levitt and Lewis 1996; Sokal and Bricmont 1998) who have launched a frontal attack on the 'constructivist theorists of science' (Nanda 1997a, 1997b, 2001a). The constructivist theorists, it is argued, in their attempt to critique modern science as an 'Eurocentric construct' have denied modern science a role in the progressive social critique of the status quo. By interpreting modern science as a form of western imperialism or part of political project of patriarchy, the social constructivists are believed to have contributed to the complete effacement of the distinction between the content of science and the practice of science (Nanda 1997a, 1997b, 2001a). According to Nanda, in the Indian context modern-science critics' stubborn defence of 'indigenous life-worlds' – as ethnosciences (Nanda 1998, 2001b) – against what

they consider as the onslaught of western science has led them to justify obscurantism, intolerance and oppression which persist in these much celebrated little traditions. By declaring modern science as the construct of the West, the hypercritics of science have not only encouraged extreme relativism, but denied the 'underprivileged' and the 'uneducated' access to a scientific knowledge which would enable them critically examine the commonly held assumptions of their life-worlds (Nanda 1998, 2001a, 2001b). For Nanda, science literacy movements in India are as important, if not more so, as environmental movements like Chipko or Narmada.

Thus, whereas writers like Nandy, Shiva and others view the Indian state as embodying an unreason whose genesis can be traced back to the western Enlightenment's obsessive concern with science and reason, the state, in Nanda's views, is an embodiment of *dharma* that draws its sustenance from traditions that function as pockets of parochial values and unreason. Building on Sen's analysis of the Enlightenment as a period in European history when critical reason not only characterised the age, but made itself the basis of philosophical investigation into the age (Sen 2000), Nanda argues that just as the Enlightenment emerged in Europe through protracted struggles against an order sanctified by church and traditions, several such struggles, aided by modern science and reason, are necessary to break the spell of *dharma* in the Indian society.

Concept of locale

In evolving a critique of top-downism, theorists have shown their concern with such concepts as 'local development' and 'local techniques' (Mair 1984, Friedman 1992, Gadgil and Guha 1992, Hobart 1993, Guha 1994). 'Modernisation strategies', in the words of Gardner and Lewis, 'rarely, if ever, pay heed to local knowledge. Indeed, local culture is generally either ignored by planners or treated as a constraint' (Gardner and Lewis 1996:15). Nor was the concept of 'local development' ever adequately developed in dependency theory. Such theories of underdevelopment, because of their undue emphasis on world capitalism and structures of dependency, remained blind to the endless negotiations and resistances which take place at the local level. Mair considers Anthropology's role as one of providing a significant link between the 'top-down developers' and the 'developed',

for anthropologists 'have the reputation of always seeking to preserve what is traditional' (Mair 1984:13). Therefore, it is through localised interventions or applied research in a specific rural context that anthropologists can rescue local voices and lives from the grand processes of top-down development.

Nevertheless, in certain cases, this concern with local life process and local knowledge, reflected in the writings of people like Nandy and Shiva, does amount to an unqualified romanticisation and valorisation of folk life. In their attempt to critique modern institutions and practices, they have effectively gone to the extent of suggesting a return to an autarchic community life (Nandy 1988, 1992; Shiva 1988, 1991). I have raised this issue here as part of my delineation of the main themes of the development discourse in recent times, but will return to it later in this chapter in connection with my examination of the problematic of the state-civil society duality embedded in NGO studies.

Development as empowerment

In the eighties and nineties development discourse has been criticised for applying the dominant western mode of development to the rest of the world. One arena in which the development paradigm has been contested is that of empowerment. We have noted above that one of the objectives behind the recent concern with 'local development' has been to engage local voices, agencies and resources in development. However, local development as a process, it is argued, can be effective only if it leads to people's empowerment.

Among the various perspectives that have gained ground, the feminist strand of thought is significant and the question of women's empowerment has been considered at a variety of levels. I have already mentioned the contribution of feminist ecologists like Shiva and Mies. Other feminist scholars have analysed women's identity and agency, indicating that feminist movements in the Third World have come a long way in fighting colonialism as well as defining themselves through various postcolonial political engagements. According to Rowlands, a feminist interpretation of empowerment is about much more than participation in decision-making. It must also include the processes that lead women to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions (Rowlands 1997:14). Kabeer conceives empowerment as a concept with both theoretical and practical content.

For her development policies should involve women as active agents rather than passive clients in need of enlightenment and uplifting (Kabeer 1994:235). Batliwala notes that in many development projects empowerment and development are used synonymously leading to a stress on economic strength (Batliwala 1994).

In the development context the term empowerment has also found expression in many ecological movements where the rights of the ecologically vulnerable and weak have been asserted. It is particularly in this field that the intervention of voluntary agencies and action groups has become significant in recent years. Thus, development is no longer viewed as planned social change engineered from above. The process of development has become increasingly eclectic stressing people's empowerment and indigenous social movements (Gardner and Lewis 1996:22) and involving the strategies of various voluntary agencies[8] and NGOs engaged with development at the local level. Various development programmes that NGOs have launched at the grassroots level aim at investing power in the people, helping them utilise their locally available resources and motivating them to tackle their own problems. Thus people are no longer viewed as participating in development as its beneficiaries but as its agents.

If the above theoretical tenets – 'anti top-downism', 'locality' and 'empowerment' – are distinct threads that determine the contours of the development discourse in recent times, 'participation' is the term that seeks to point them in a meaningful direction. The resolution at Rio de Janeiro mentioned earlier in this chapter invokes participation as the precondition for achieving sustainability. Participation is viewed as emerging from the recognition of the shortcomings of and an effective antidote to top-down development (Cooke and Kothari 2001). Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is increasingly used as a method to engage local people in development and enable them to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge and life conditions, to plan and act (Chambers 1994a, 1994b, 1994c). PRA, it is believed, provides people with an opportunity to share their knowledge amongst themselves and with outsiders who are prepared to reverse the consequences of top-down development and learn from the local people. As a method it envisages a shift in focus from 'top-down to bottom-up, from centralized

---

[8] Throughout the thesis I will use the terms voluntary agencies and NGOs interchangeably.

standardization to local diversity, and from blueprint to learning process' (Chambers 1994a:953).

'Participation' as a term has found its way into the policy discourses of international agencies like the World Bank. It has been defined as a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources that affect them (World Bank 1996; Rietbergen-McCracken 1996). Thus, various terms such as 'stakeholders', 'poorest of the poor' (Poulton 1988; Singh 1988; Clark 1991), 'locals' have surfaced to characterise those hitherto neglected recruits into development. Assuming that increasing participation of local groups and communities is the key to grassroots development, World Bank funded projects have been launched in the developing context. With the launching of these projects participation remains a widely debated issue, for such projects demonstrate not only the need to ensure people's participation, but also the need to evaluate such participation.

In recent years, there have emerged a number of studies reviewing and examining the nature and extent of participatory development (Mosse 1994, 2001; Nelson and Wright 1995; Chambers 1997; Jeffery and Sundar 1999; Baviskar 1999). The objective behind such reviews is, in the words of Chambers, to remain responsive to the reality of development practice which often lags behind the fast changing language of development (Chambers 1995:30). Therefore, what is needed is 'self-critical epistemological awareness' which would enable us to take account of the realities of participatory development. Henkel and Stirrat examine the assumed correspondence between participation and empowerment, arguing that empowerment of the so-called stakeholders, which the development practitioners seek to secure through 'participation', might not be so straightforwardly liberating as it appears, for participatory approaches, far from marking a radical shift away from an ethnocentric concept of modernity, are intimately part of the process of modernisation itself (Henkel and Stirrat 2001:178 and 183). Similarly, concepts such as community participation or 'community-in-conservation' (Agrawal 1999), which provide the ideological backbone to the participatory development initiatives of many international aid agencies, have also come under close scrutiny (see Li 1996; Jeffery and Sundar 1999; Agrawal 1999; Roy 2002). Participatory approaches have also been critiqued as being technical and managerial solutions to what are basically political issues (Gujit and Shah 1998:3).

With the above serving as a background, this thesis is an attempt to examine the question of sustainability and participation in a particular context i.e. the Sundarbans of West Bengal. If development is, as suggested by Gardner and Lewis, increasingly an eclectic experience, can sustainable development be viewed as an analytical tool that helps us in understanding diverse versions of sustainability as they unfold and surface in particular contexts? Or does the concept present us with yet another grand vision of progress that seeks to manage diversity by reifying tradition in exactly the same way as the model of economic and social growth of the earlier years reified modernity? When different approaches to participation critique each other in search of an authentic mode of people's participation, one wonders whether in fact there can be such an authentic model. Or can diverse forms of participation, encountered in particular contexts, be potential pointers to the ways in which people survive and make their lives sustainable? I propose to address these questions by looking into voluntary agencies' engagement with the processes of sustainable development in the Sundarbans. With this aim in mind I turn now to voluntary agencies or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who have found themselves increasingly at the heart of the ideology and practice of participatory development.

NGOs, Participatory Development and Civil Society

Clark, in his book, *Democratizing Development*, argues that the most exciting phenomenon in recent times has been the birth, growth and maturing of grassroots organisations throughout much of the Third World (Clark 1991:102). These organisations, according to him, have revolutionised the development process in the Third World. Grassroots organisations, with their local knowledge, are expected to generate conditions for participatory processes as opposed to centralised and top-down development. As agents of development they are viewed as having the ability to work with local people, involve them effectively in development and invest them with an agency that is likely to lead to their empowerment. Poulton defines NGOs' involvement in local development almost in the form of an equation: basic needs coupled with participatory development result in community development (Poulton 1988:24). Their ability to reach poor people in inaccessible areas, capacity for innovation and experimentation, skills in enabling participation

and, last but not least, their ability to serve as a response to the failures in the public and private sectors are all considered as essential prerequisites for participatory and sustainable development (Clark 1996).

Thus, a view has gained ground that voluntary agencies or NGOs occupy a third sector, a sector that lies beyond the confines of the state and the market represented by the first and second sectors respectively. NGOs are increasingly conceived of as groups or institutions that are independent from government, and have humanitarian or cooperative, rather than commercial interests (World Bank 1996:4). This sector has been identified in the current development lexicon as 'civil society'. Sustainable and participatory development, it is believed, can come about through the sustained localised efforts of voluntary agencies to organise and strengthen 'civil society'. Nowhere is this more clearly reflected than in the World Bank's view which states:

> There has been a sharp increase in the active membership of civil society organizations in the past two decades... [They] are particularly important for promoting environmentally sound development strategies. Environmental management often is about "downstream" spillover effects, and NGOs can often provide knowledge and links between geographically dispersed locations (World Bank 2003:40-41).

This shows that the idea of civil society has not only made a 'dramatic return' (Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001), but has come to occupy a secure place in the development arena. Its potency as a policy instrument and an intellectual construct is noteworthy. Civil society is increasingly viewed as a fomenter of democratic ideas and a site for grassroots development involving the vulnerable and voiceless (van Rooy 1998:15). Voluntary agencies or NGOs as occupants of civil society are viewed as being engaged in participatory and bottom-up development aiming to empower people.

A question that arises at this point is whether this recent emergence of civil society as an observable space and a prescribed reality, a 'good thing' (van Rooy 1998:30), obscures the multiple meanings of the concept within western philosophical tradition itself. There is no denying the fact that civil society is a contested concept in western tradition and there exist several versions of the idea

within that tradition[9]. But it is equally true that for an idea to become a potential policy measure there must be a limit to the diversity of its meanings. If the concept is to be used with a definite policy intention of justifying the global trend towards 'good governance' and a more 'responsive and less arbitrary state' (World Bank 1997), local development and strengthening of 'voluntary efforts for achieving sustainability' (World Bank 1988, 2003), it is necessary that potentially richer and more complex versions of the concept must recede to the background.

However, my intention here is not to dwell on these diverse perspectives on civil society. Rather, what I wish to suggest is that the reappearance of 'civil society', especially the form in which it has appeared today, necessarily encourages a dichotomous thinking that has its roots in western tradition. According to Kaviraj, civil society appears to be an idea strangely incapable of standing freely on its own: it needs always a distinctive support from contrary term (Kaviraj 2001:288). Kaviraj identifies three such dichotomous constructions embedded in western political tradition: civil society and natural society, civil society and state, and commercial society and civilization (2001:288). Following Kaviraj, I would argue that, regardless of the definitional differences internal to western tradition, civil society as a concept is always defined through its opposition to some other term and among the three dichotomies that Kaviraj has considered, state-civil society duality is the most widely circulated form in which the concept is exported for application to non-western contexts.

Here one must mention Putnam's 'civic community' (1993), a concept that has become influential among policy makers and development practitioners in recent times. On the basis of his study of the regions in north and south Italy, Putnam concludes that a civic community, where citizens are held together by horizontal ties of trust, collaboration and solidarity, is the necessary pre-condition for democracy. According to him, these ties which bind people are social capital. In his most recent and much publicised work (2000) Putnam pursues the concept of social capital, this time in North America. Noting the growing incidence of solitary bowling in the bowling leagues, whereas earlier bowling in groups was an occasion for close interaction among the bowlers, Putnam argues that in America – which

---

[9] Recently there have emerged writings that have attempted to delineate the diverse perspectives on civil society. For wider discussion of the concept see Chandoke (1995), Keane (1988, 1998), van Rooy (1998), Kaviraj and Khilnani (2001) and Rosenblum and Post (2002).

was always highlighted as the living example of civic democracy – over the years there has been a general decline in civic engagement in other spheres of civic life such as church going, parent-teacher associations and labour unions. This absence of civic engagement, according to Putnam, leads to a decline in 'generalized reciprocity' – the touchstone of social capital (Putnam 2000:134). In line with his earlier argument in the context of Italy (1993) Putnam maintains that civic society, a space suffused with 'reciprocity', 'honesty' and 'trust' is the basis for cementing the democratic ethos in social life. This ever increasing stock of social capital, built on what are perceived to be non-instrumental relations, is what makes the state relatively inconsequential in the management of civic life. This very notion of civic community as a site available outside the so-called instrumental confines of the state and market is what makes civil society a potent instrument in the hands of policy makers (Lewis 2002).

Putnam's concept of social capital has been criticised on a number of grounds. His conclusive statement regarding the presence of social capital in northern Italy and absence of it in the southern part is found wanting in the light of inadequate historical evidence (Tarrow 1996; Sabetti 1996). Critics have argued that Putnam has not considered the effect of state building on indigenous civic capacity. By showing how the semi-colonial status in which the south was held in relation to north of Italy helped suppress associational life, Tarrow argues that the operative cause of the performance of regional institutions in north and south is neither cultural nor associational but political (Tarrow 1996:394). Fried has argued that Putnam's observations about declining social capital in America have not been adequately contextualised (Fried 2002). While Putnam identifies factors such as increases in the watching of television, bowling alone, two career families, commuting time and urban sprawl etc. as being responsible for declining social capital (Putnam 2000:283, 201-2), he treats them as matters of individual choice, while no careful attention is paid to the wider structures and institutions that frame the choices individuals make (Fried 2002:35). In a more or less similar vein Schultz argues that Putnam lacks a structuralist perspective on democracy and conceives of social capital as an individual attitude and in so doing he fails to appreciate forces in the polity and economy that cause civic indifference (Schultz 2002:92).

At a more methodological level critiques – to which I will come back in the third chapter – levelled against Putnam's theory of social capital are more severe.

Here concerns expressed by the critics relate to extending and applying social capital to the problems of development of the Third World. For Levi, Putnam's romanticised image of community makes his theoretical analysis resolutely society-centred to the neglect of other important actors, most notably those in government (Levi 1996). Rebuilding communities cannot happen with an approach that refuse to take sides, engage the political issues of the day and address contentious questions of social justice (Ehrenberg 2002:71). In this context the critique offered by Harriss (2002) is significant. According to Harriss, Putnam's recent work on America, after the initial stimulus from *Making Democracy Work* (1993) has given currency to the idea that social capital holds the key to the resolution of all sorts of social problems (Harriss 2002:59). By depicting relations as essentially idealistic and non-instrumental and also prescribing a space where such relations can flourish the concept completely marginalises the significance of power in constituting social relations (ibid). No wonder, then, that the concept has become available for frequent use by development agencies such as the World Bank. By excluding power dimensions from its account social capital as a concept contributes to the dichotomisation of state and civil society (the realm of power versus the realm indicating absence of power). The potential danger of such a dichotomisation is that it tends to ignore the structures of power at work in the larger society and the fact that the state is often found implicated in these power structures.

Approaching the state as a trans-local entity, which is made visible in terms of its everyday bureaucratic practices or local power structures, has increasingly become a recognisable trend within anthropology and to this end there has emerged a significant body of literature. I will come back to a discussion of this literature in the third chapter as a background to the analysis of the activities of the government departments engaged in Sundarbans development. However, here it suffices to mention the recent most work of Fuller and Beneï (2001) in this direction. Fuller and Beneï's work on the state and society in the Indian context, where rich ethnographies document a wide range of issues such as policing (Hansen 2001), bureaucratic lies and corruption (Tarlo 2001), patron-clientism (Ruud 2001) and pedagogy and statecraft (Beneï 2001), tends to show how the state, from being a spectacular, mysterious and distant institution, has become something vast, overextended yet extremely familiar in its sordid everyday structures (Fuller and Harriss 2001:25). The diverse case studies dealing with the state at its variety of

levels not only render fuzzy the definitional boundaries of the state and society, but also make theorising the state as some kind of a 'discrete' and 'unified' entity problematic (Fuller and Harriss 2001:22). In other words, the state-civil society duality as a conceptual tool for understanding the domains of the 'political' and 'social' has come under closer scrutiny than ever before.

As stated earlier, the objective of this thesis is to examine the question of sustainability by looking into voluntary agencies' concern with development in the Sundarbans. This involves an ethnographic approach to the study of voluntary agencies' involvement with the process of development in the region. Following the lead provided by the critical reflections discussed above, I propose to move away from the state-civil society duality embedded in conventional NGO studies. This is because using this duality as a conceptual tool to understand the realities of development everywhere would allow the particular configuration of state and civil society arising from the specific historical experience of Europe to be naturalised and applied universally (Gupta 1995:376). The present thesis aims rather to provide an account of development highlighting the constant negotiations which take place between voluntary agencies, people and statist institutions at a variety of levels. In other words, it attempts an ethnography of voluntary practices, but such an ethnography, to be meaningful, needs also to be grounded in an ethnography of the state as well. Before I proceed to delineate three main directions in which the theorising of state and civil society as a duality has proceeded within NGO studies, I first consider some of the ways in which NGOs have been classified.

The classification of NGOs

It is difficult to suggest that NGOs comprise a well-knit community, given the complexity of their nature and the heterogeneity of their practices. While some voluntary agencies are directly associated with awareness generation at the local level, others are preoccupied with raising funds, and still others are busy channelling funds to grass-roots organisations (GROs). Often a particular NGO is also found to carry out more than one of the above functions, so that many of the NGOs involved with conscientisation may also be engaged in fund raising or technology transfer.

On the basis of their historical evolution Clark categorises NGOs into six types:

- Relief and welfare agencies such as Catholic Relief Services etc;
- Technological innovation organisations like the British Intermediate Technological Group or Grameen Bank in Bangladesh which pioneer new and improved approaches to development;
- Public Service Contractors (PSCs) like CARE funded by Northern governments but often contracted to implement programmes for Southern governments;
- Popular Development Agencies like Northern NGOs and their Southern intermediary counterparts [examples are Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and the units of OXFAM] concerned with social development and grass-roots democracy;
- Grassroots Development Organisations such as localised southern NGOs working among the local poor and oppressed;
- Advocacy Groups and networks like the Freedom from Debt Coalition in the Philippines who have no field projects but exist primarily for education and lobbying (Clark 1991:40-41).

A more comprehensive classification is the one offered by Farrington *et al.* (1993) in their study of NGOs' role in sustainable agricultural development in the countries of South and South-east Asia. They categorise NGOs on the basis of their location (North or South or North in the South), scale (grass-roots organisations or service grass-roots organisations), ownership (non-membership or membership), orientation (profit or value oriented), approach (enlightened top-down or functionally participatory or empowerment oriented) and operational dimensions (research innovation or implementation) (Farrington, Lewis, Satish and Miclat-Teves 1993).

In his study of non-governmental organisations and rural poverty alleviation in the Indian context, Robinson comes up with a classificatory scheme that divides voluntary agencies into six categories according to their scale of operations and location of head office:

- large indigenous NGOs working in several states in different parts of the country;
- large indigenous NGOs working in most districts of one state;

- medium-sized indigenous NGOs working in a large number of villages in one or two districts of one state;

- small indigenous NGOs working in a group of villages in one locality (the most common type);

- large international NGOs with in-country representation providing funding and support to indigenous NGOs;

- small international NGOs working directly in one or two localities (Riddell, Robinson, Coninck, Muir and White 1995:139).

According to Farrington *et al.*, the above classification also serves as a general guide to NGO typologies in Asia. Like all classificatory schemes, the ones described above aim to provide an exhaustive grouping of voluntary agencies on the basis of their perceived similarities or dissimilarities. Yet empirical realities are too diverse to fit into any such tidy schemes. Of course these different forms of classification employed do suggest that NGOs are diverse, but what needs qualification is their assumption that NGOs and GOs (state) are dichotomous entities, hermetically sealed off from one another. In fact, NGOs working at the grassroots level often operate as implementing agencies of government programmes and follow government directives. In so doing, as will be seen in the thesis, NGOs appear sometimes to replicate government structures. This then raises difficult questions of whose functions NGOs perform and whose hierarchies they replicate. Often the NGO sector is classified on the basis of the degree of autonomy voluntary agencies enjoy within a political regime (state). Therefore, according to the constraints imposed on NGOs, political regimes have been categorised into repressive, non-democratic and democratic (Farrington, Lewis, Satish and Miclat-Teves 1993). What goes unconsidered in such contexts is the possibility that a ruling regime, such as the left regime of West Bengal considered in this thesis, can have its own history of radical voluntarism. Therefore, when we seek to understand a voluntary group that was formerly part of the regime, such as one of those to be discussed in this thesis, it is necessary to separate the *discourse* of voluntarism that emphasises the distinctiveness of this group from the *practice* of voluntarism, for it is precisely the domain of praxis that often makes the boundary between regime (state) and non-regime (NGOs) fuzzy. We will see that this distinction between discourse and practice applies not simply to one case study (i.e. the Tagore Society),

but in some form or the other to all three voluntary agencies considered in the thesis.

Secondly, how we construct the state is also a significant question to be grappled with. The state, as will be revealed in the thesis, is not simply a complex of administrative departments, but manifests itself in its entrenched party and quasi-administrative structures (in this case units of self governance) at the 'grassroots' level. As a result the question of membership – of voluntary sector or the statist structures – at this level is not always found to be exclusive. This possibility of overlap even when NGO structures run parallel to state structures is what seems to blur the well-knit boundary often drawn between NGOs and the state. The problem is even more complex when we turn our attention to bodies such as local clubs or cultural centres which do not always qualify for classification as NGOs. Even the most useful or exhaustive classificatory scheme such as the one recommended by Robinson does not consider that such localised grassroots bodies are worthy of classification. Yet these local clubs, as will be seen later in this chapter, undertake development initiatives of various kinds and they also serve as fora where diverse local interests – voluntary, statist, party etc. – coalesce.

Thus, my aim here is not to provide yet another classificatory scheme that seeks to replace all of the above, but to anticipate certain problems that emerge when classifications are attempted, especially when such schemes are applied to the workings of NGOs at the grassroots level. Thus, in addition to classifying NGOs in terms of generic evolutionary principles or North-South divide or abstract principles such as scale, membership, and approach, it is necessary that the political specificities of the regime, the structure of the state or governance, the discourses and practices of voluntarism, the specifics of grassroots conditions and the nature and function of localised bodies should be taken into account. Neatly worked out theoretical terms such as 'enlightened top-down', 'functionally participatory' or 'empowerment oriented' – often deployed as criteria for classifying NGO and also invoked by voluntary agencies in justifying their varying degrees of engagement with 'grassroots' – often collapse into an untidy jumble of contradictions when we look at the practical domain of NGO acitivity. In other words, the criteria for classifying NGOs need to be grounded in the contextual specificities of state and voluntary politics.

State-Civil Society duality

Theorising state and civil society as a duality has proceeded in three major directions. Although there may be considerable overlap between these approaches, for analytical purposes I would separate them. First, the so-called 'trinity framework', reflected in the writings of theorists like Clark (1991) and Carroll (1992) produces a model that depicts state, market and civil society in the form of three relatively isolated circles, with the state being represented by the first sector, the market by the second and civil society by the third. Clark and Carroll argue that grassroots development is what determines the contour of NGO activity in recent times. Voluntary agencies are viewed as contributing to grassroots democracy with horizontal networks of civil engagement (Carroll 1992). Civil society is increasingly viewed as being located physically outside instrumental considerations of the state and market and is equated rather simplistically with cooperation, liberty, democracy and development. And by that logic NGOs are unproblematically located in the centre stage of this third sector, as harbingers of democracy and participatory social development (Trivedy and Acharya 1996:56).

Jorgensen (1996) too defines NGOs as civil society organisations that seek to democratise a social space that lies outside the purview of the state and market. Singh, in reflecting on NGOs' role in the African context, argues that these organisations, because of their voluntary nature, 'are not reducible to the administrative grasp of the state' (Singh 1993: 23). Lehmann (1990) and Friedman (1992) also associate concepts like alternative development and empowerment with the emergence and growth of grassroots organisations. For all of these writers, NGOs stand for bottom-up grassroots development and a movement towards a vibrant civil society. NGOs' knowledge about grassroots realities allows them to deliver appropriate services to the people and support local-level initiatives (Hulme and Edwards 1992). In sum, the perspective developed by these writers suggests that NGOs' involvement with development in the Third World has led to the building up of a viable civil society that serves as an effective guard against arbitrary actions on the part of the state. Thus, voluntary agencies' stress on grassroots development, knowledge of the local conditions and ability to deploy local resources for supporting local initiatives are all seen as symptomatic of civil societal movement.

The second direction in the theorising of state-civil society duality highlights the arguments of writers who are more sceptical. Holloway (1989), on the basis of his experiences in Asia, argues that any recognition of the growing contribution of NGOs to development should not be accompanied by the mistake of idealising them, for they are not the ultimate panacea to the contradictions and difficulties of planned change (Holloway 1989:217). Pretty and Scoones (1995) suggest that it is difficult for voluntary organisations to bypass government, create parallel structures and sustain them in the long run. Because they are not popularly elected bodies, NGOs are not in a position to carry out wide-scale development programmes. The writers who are more cautious in their evaluation also argue that the civil society-state nexus cannot be understood in terms of clear-cut 'circles', as there is a considerable overlap between the two and this has led them to emphasise the need for better interaction and collaboration between NGOs and government if the poor and powerless are going to be helped to become self-reliant (Holloway 1989:221).

An example of this approach is the one adopted by Farrington *et al.* (1993). In their analysis of NGOs' role in technology transfer and sustainable agricultural development in Asia, they approach NGO-government relations more from the point of view of their respective comparative advantage and describe how NGOs collaborate with government organisations in making sustainable development possible. Their study, in the words of Farrington *et al.*, 'was initiated with the objectives of exploring what institutional arrangements might be made for the wider implementation of FPR [Farmer Participatory Research] and what the scope for NGO-GO interaction might be in such arrangements' (Farrington, Lewis, Satish and Miclat-Teves 1993:9).

A perspective such as this is important, but it looks at state-NGO relations more from the administrative point of view and, thereby, reduces NGOs to mere service contractors that are supposed to collaborate with the government in times of need. This perspective proves problematic because the state in this formulation appears more as a trans-local and monolithic entity devoid of its bureaucracies and officials at the local level. Although Holloway does mention the activities of the lower-level government functionaries, he treats such activities more as obstacles to the noble intentions of the state. The perspective emphasising collaboration throws little light on how NGOs involved in local development negotiate with the local

networks of power and interests in carrying out their development programmes, an issue which will be examined in detail in this thesis.

NGOs, development and discourses of civil society in India

A third perspective concerning the state-civil society duality has emerged largely in the Indian context. In the past few decades voluntary agencies have become closely associated with development processes in India. There have emerged hundreds of NGOs and action groups engaged with development processes at various levels. In reflecting on the current development scenario in India, Agarwal argues that:

> [when] the UN Conference on the Human Environment [was] held in Stockholm in 1972 ... delegations from developing countries attending that Conference [still thought] that the solution to environmental problems lay in [further] economic development ... But exactly ten years later, when the UN organized a meeting to commemorate the Stockholm Conference, few non-governmental groups from the Third World were prepared to argue in favour of the development process as it is (Agarwal 1994: 349).

Poverty, it has been realised, is caused as much by a top-down development machinery that has failed to reach the poor as by an enterprise of science that has led to the erosion of nature, natural resources and also the impoverishment of the local users or stakeholders.

NGOs in India have become involved in various ecological movements that seek to contest powerful processes of destructive development. For example, over the past few years voluntary groups have been involved in the 'Save Narmada Agitation' (*Narmada Bachao Andolan*) against the construction of a dam on the Narmada river involving massive displacement of human settlements (Baviskar 1995). Voluntary groups have also successfully mobilised local people's support to protest against the Maharashtra government's attempt to build a multi-million dollar port at Vadhavan which will disturb the ecological balance of the region. The construction of dams like Silent Valley and Bedthi has already been stopped because of strong protests from local voluntary groups. There has also been the 'Save the Soil Agitation' (*Mitti Bachao Abhiyan*) to organise farmers against the water logging caused by faulty irrigation systems (Agarwal 1994).

In the Indian context, the proliferation of NGOs and their involvement with the development process from the 1980s onwards coincided with the revival of interest in civil society (Gupta 1997). By 'revival of interest' Dipankar Gupta refers to the way civil society as a concept has surfaced in the writings of authors like Kothari, Nandy, Visvanathan, Shiva etc. For Kothari, the path of development traversed by the state in India is deeply flawed: the focus on "market efficiency", "profitability", "development", and "national security" has rendered the Indian state both undemocratic and unresponsive (Kothari 1988: 1-2). Nandy argues that the Indian polity as it was conceived forty years ago has been redefined by recent history: the state has come to dominate, not serve, civil society (Nandy 2000: 64). Disillusionment with the state has also found expression in the writings of Visvanathan (1988), Shiva (1988) and Alvares (1988) who critique it for being bureaucratic and intrusionist and for usurping the basic rights and liberties of individuals. All these writers were reflecting on the post-Emergency state of the eighties and for all of them civil society is the domain for popular participation and empowerment of the people. For Kothari, civil society becomes a 'take-off point for human governance' (Kothari 1988: 3). Civil society also incorporates a 'network of voluntary and self-governing institutions in all walks of life' (Kothari 1988: 202). What brings these diverse organisations and associations together is their physical location outside the state and the possibility of their being an alternative to state-managed institutions (Mahajan 1999). According to Shiva, the ecological movements in postcolonial India, in which voluntary groups become involved, mark the arrival of a civil society based on a non-exploitative and counter-modernising ethos (Shiva 1986).

While I find Kothari, Nandy, Shiva and others' critique of the Indian state and its model of development convincing, I would argue that their solutions are theoretically untenable. Their disillusionment with the modern Indian state has led them to pit its reality against their notion of a traditional civil society. In their attempt to critique modern institutions and practices they have effectively suggested a return to pre-modern folk life. It seems that the only way they can salvage civil society is by resorting to a notion of 'pure' society outside the institutional and intellectual arena of modernity. Yet with the growth of modernity and the overarching power of the state as indicative of that modernity traditional institutions of civil society have been destroyed (Tandon 1994). It is this loss of traditional folk

life that these writers bemoan. For them, the solution to the problem of the modern state lies in reinventing the traditional institutions of civil society and assigning to NGOs the task of rebuilding them. They refuse to make the unique experiences of modernisation in the non-western context a constituent part of the exercise of rethinking modernity itself (Chatterjee 1998). What they fail to acknowledge is that concepts such as state and civil society are constituted by the specific experiences of modernisation in the non-western world. It is therefore necessary to make these experiences a part of the task of interrogating such concepts.

While the first approach looks upon voluntary agencies as unfolding an enlightened civic sphere, the third seeks to rescue civil society from a hegemonic Indian state that is viewed as blindly pursuing western science and modernity. The second approach comes somewhere in the middle. It emphasises the need for state-NGO collaboration, but tends to view both governments and non-governments as uniform and monolithic entities that can either collaborate or confront. What unites these otherwise diverse perspectives is their preoccupation with a state-civil society duality as a conceptual apparatus in understanding NGOs' engagement with development. This thesis, however, seeks to move away from such a dichotomous construction in search of a more situated and nuanced understanding of state-NGO relations as they unfold around the problem of sustainable development in the Sundarbans. Before I introduce the Sundarbans and the voluntary agencies considered it is necessary that I provide a brief account of the politics of West Bengal.

West Bengal: A Political Background

West Bengal is a state (province) of India (see map 1.1), which, prior to India's independence in 1947, was part of the undivided province of Bengal. After partition in 1947 Bengal became divided into West Bengal (India) and East Bengal (Pakistan). East Bengal later became Bangladesh after it declared its independence from Pakistan in 1971. West Bengal is situated in the eastern part of India and consists of seventeen districts. According to the 1991 Census, the total population

of West Bengal is 68,077,965. West Bengal is ruled by a Left-front[10] government consisting of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) and its main coalition partners, which include the Communist Party of India (CPI), the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and the Forward Bloc (FB). The CPI-M-led coalition has been in power for the last twenty-six years.

This long stay in power or what the former Chief Minister of the Left-front government described as an 'instance of unprecedented electoral success' (Basu 2000:1; translated from Bengali) can be largely attributed to the way it has mobilised its support base in the rural sector. Two significant policies that have helped the Left-front government to consolidate its support base were land reforms, aiming at land redistribution for the poor peasants in a democratic manner, and *panchayat*[11] an experiment in democratic decentralisation. Historically, the communists were engaged in various land struggles in the pre and post independence era when they chose a revolutionary path to assert the rights of the landless against the *zamindars* or *jotedars*. However, the communist party that came to power in 1977 was more reformist than revolutionary (Kohli 1990:367), aiming to radicalise the rural landscape through democratic and electoral means. According to Kohli, the emergence of the left as a reformist, but disciplined, government was seen as a welcome relief after years of political uncertainty and anarchy which people experienced as a result of the breakdown of political order during the erstwhile Congress rule (Kohli 1997). At this point we turn to a consideration of what the left is and how it functions.

The Left-front government in West Bengal

Understanding the Left-front government as a regime of power in West Bengal involves unpacking it at three levels. Firstly, we may look at the Left-front as a system of governance functioning through departments or directorates. These departments – such as those of Finance or Development and Planning or Home and Civil Defence etc. – are under the charge of ministers from the various parties

---

[10] In this thesis I use the term left with capital 'L' only when I refer to the Left-front government. In all other cases I shall be using left in lower case.

[11] The units of self-government reintroduced were the three-tier panchayat system composed of the *Zilla Parishad, Panchayat Samity* and *Gram Panchayat* at the district, block and village levels respectively. All the three tiers are constituted through elections (see fig. 1.1 on p.55). Henceforth I will not italicise the word as it is a widely used term in development literature on India.

which make up the Left-front. At the district and village level there also exists elaborate bureaucratic machinery together with its decentralised official apparatus to help with the everyday functioning of these departments. For the purpose of this thesis two such departments – those of Sundarban Affairs (SAD) and Irrigation and Waterways (IWW) – with their organisations and functions will be discussed in Chapter Three.

At the second level the Left-front can be seen as a system of self-governance institutionalised through the panchayat at three levels. The three-tier panchayat structure, as has been mentioned above, is composed of the Zilla Parishad (top tier), Panchayat Samity (middle tier) and Gram Panchayat (lower tier) at the district, block[12] and village levels respectively (see fig. 1.1 on p. 53) The panchayat structure is constituted through direct elections with elected representatives responsible for the running of each of these tiers. The Gram Panchayat is headed by a *Pradhan* (chairperson), usually chosen from among the elected representatives of the majority party (see fig 1.1 on p. 53). The *Pradhan* is assisted by an *Upapradhan* (vice-chairperson) either chosen from the same party or the elected members of other parties depending on the parties' relative strength in the panchayat. Similarly, the Panchayat Samity is headed by a *Sabhapati* (chairperson, see fig 1.1 on p. 53) and assisted by a *Sahasabhapati* (vice-chairperson) chosen in the same manner as in the case of Gram Panchayat. At the district level the Zilla Parishad is once again headed by a representative of the majority party known as *Sabhadhipati* (chairperson, see fig 1.1 on p. 53). The *Sabhadhipati* is assisted by a *Sahasabhadhipati* (vice-chairperson) usually chosen in the same way as deputies at the village and block level panchayats are chosen.

Of the three tiers the most crucial is the panchayat structure in the village, for it is at this level that a direct link is maintained with the people. The village panchayat operates through a number of village councils (*Gram Sansads*) where each council represents a constituency from which a member is elected to the village panchayat. The village panchayat is responsible for convening village council meetings (referred to as *Gram Sabha*) twice every year. It is in these meetings that the past year's accounts and proposals for future expenditure for

---

[12] A block is one of the units of administration. The State of India is divided into a number of provinces. A Province is divided into districts. A district is further divided into sub-divisions. A sub-division is divided into blocks, with each block consisting of a number of villages (see fig. 1.2 on p. 54).

development work are open to public discussion. The accounts and proposed budgets also have to be audited and passed by the block panchayat in whose jurisdiction the village panchayat lies. Similarly, the accounts and proposed budgets of the block panchayat have to be passed by the district level panchayat. Thus, the principles of accountability and decentralisation inform the workings of the panchayat structure. The entire panchayat structure is placed under the supervision of the Department of Panchayat and Rural Development headed by a cabinet minister and a state minister (see fig 1.1 on p. 53).

Apart from the elected representatives heading the department there also exists an elaborate bureaucratic structure composed of secretary, deputy and assistant secretaries and clerical staff to help with the working of the directorate. To ensure that the village panchayat functions as it should, the Department of Panchayat and Rural Development appoints to each a Panchayat Secretary, Job Assistant and Office Assistant (see fig 1.1 on p. 53). However, at the block and district levels no separate officials are provided by the directorate. At the block level, the Block Development Officer (BDO) is the ex-officio member of the Panchayat Samity and, along with other block level officials, implements decisions of the block panchayat's standing committee (see fig 1.1 on p. 53). Similarly, the District Magistrate and his subordinate officials provide the administrative support for and work with the elected representatives of the Zilla Parishad and its standing committee (see fig 1.1 on p. 53).

At the third level is the Left-front as political parties functioning through their elaborate party structures from the state down to the village level (see fig. 1.3 on p. 55). Although the Left-front is composed of four distinct parties (CPI-M, CPI, RSP and FB), in terms of party organisation and structure they bear a great degree of resemblance to each other. All four parties have their highest policy-making body working at the national level[13]. Each of these bodies has its Central Committee of elected members which function through their central secretariats. Below each Central Committee is the State Committee of the party responsible for its overall functioning in the state or province (see fig. 1.3 on p. 55). The State Committee operates through the State Secretariat responsible for implementing the programmes

---

[13] These central bodies are variously termed such as Polit Bureau for the CPI-M, National Council for the CPI, National Conference for the RSP and All India Forward Bloc Central Committee for the FB (see fig 1.3 on p. 55).

of the party in the province. Below the State Committee lies the District Committee responsible for conducting party activities in the district (see fig. 1.3 on p. 55). The District Committee devolves its functions further down to Local Committees[14], which operate at the block level (see fig. 1.3 on p. 55 and also fig. 1.4 on p 65). Each Local Committee is responsible for recruitment, education and training of new members. At the lowest level are the Branch Committees that maintain direct links with the people and also work in close collaboration with the Local Committees. Each Branch Committee, composed of a Secretary and fifteen party members, assigns specific duties to each member or group of members and guides them in their activities.

Thus, what we encounter here is an elaborate party structure from the national level down to the local level with each layer corresponding roughly to administrative units such as province, district, block and village. The working of this elaborate party structure is based on the principle of democratic centralism which means:

- all the committees from the lowest to the highest should be composed of elected representatives;

- prompt execution of decisions of the higher committees by the lower committees;

- observance of discipline and code of conduct by all members;

- majority decision of any committee at any level shall be binding on all party units and members under its jurisdiction.

Closely linked to the organisation and structure of the left parties are the *Kissan Sabhas* (peasant organisations in the rural areas; see fig. 1.3 on p. 55) composed of left peasant leaders responsible for pursuing the cause of small peasant cultivators and agricultural labourers. Each political party has its *Kissan Sabha* at the national level[15]. These organisations operate through their national level committees. There is the Provincial *Kissan Sabha* for the state with its state

---

[14] It is important to mention that only the CPI-M has introduced a Zonal Committee between District and Local Committees (see fig 1.3 on p. 55). There can be 15-20 such committees in a district and each Zonal Committee should be constituted by at least three local committees. In other words, generally two blocks with their Local Committees constitute a Zonal Committee (see also fig. 1.4 on p. 65).

[15] These *Kissan Sabhas* are variously termed: All India Kissan Sabha for the CPI and the CPI-M, All India United Kissan Sabha for the RSP and All India Agragami Kissan Sabha for the FB (see fig. 1.3 on p. 55).

committee being the main functioning organ (see fig. 1.3 on p. 55). The District *Kissan Sabha* comes after the Provincial *Kissan Sabha* and functions through its district committee composed of peasant leaders drawn from the district. The district level *Kissan Sabha* has under its jurisdiction the block and village level *Kissan Sabhas* known as *Krisak Samities* (local peasant bodies; see fig. 1.3 on p. 55). It is at this local committee level that a direct link is maintained with the peasantry.

In addition to its *Kissan Sabha* the CPI-M particularly has other mass front bodies such as a student organisation (the Student Federation of India, SFI) and women's organisation (*Mahila Samity*) whose structures resemble those of the party. The party and mass front organisational structures such as the *Kissan Sabha* closely parallel the panchayat structure in that the party asserts a strong control over its members and supporters, including those serving as members of the panchayats (Webster 1992:141). Thus, in terms of membership there is a considerable overlap between the party, its *Kissan Sabhas* and the panchayats. In other words, many of the local-level party leaders and cadres who are members of their *Kissan Sabhas* may also serve as elected representatives of the panchayats.

We have also noted that closely linked to the panchayat structure at three levels is the administrative machinery of the government such as the offices of the BDO or District Magistrate (see fig.1.1 on p. 53). This suggests that there exist an ongoing interaction between the administrative machinery of the government, the panchayat and the party. Therefore, the clearly discernible distinctions that exist between the structures of power (of government departments, panchayats and party each with its *Kissan Sabhas*) at the state or district level tend to blur increasingly as we move towards the lower levels. The thesis is not concerned with the Left-front's panchayat or party structure per se. Rather, it will reflect on panchayat and party practices in so far as they provide a broader arena for understanding voluntary activities at the local level.

Soon after it came to power in 1977 the Left-front instituted its own notion of civil society through the reintroduction of panchayats, elections to which had been irregular during the previous period of Congress rule. The panchayat bodies, according to Benoy Chowdhury, the first Minister for Panchayat and Rural Development, were meant to generate community efforts for the transformation of the socio-economic and cultural life of people in the villages (Chowdhury 1989-90). Here the panchayat is conceived of as the locus around which community life in the

The Working of the Department of Panchayat, the Three-tier Panchayat
and the Corresponding Administrative Bodies in West Bengal

Department of Panchayat
and Rural Development (DPRD)

Minister-in-Charge

Minister of State for DPRD

Secretary DPRD and his Office

Administrative
Structure

Elective Bodies

Adminsitrative Bodies

Zilla Parishad   (District Level)   ←——→   District Magistrate
Sabhadhipati, Elected members   and his Office
and Standing Committee

Panchayat Samity (Block Level) ←——→   Block Development Officer
Sabhapati, Elected members   and his Office
And Standing Committee

Gram Panchayat   (Village Level) ←——→   Panchayat Secretary,   ] All
Pradhan, Elected members   Job Assistant and | Appointed
And Gram Sansad   Office Assistant   ] by DPRD

Fig. 1.1

Administrative Organisation of the Indian State

State of India
|
|
Provinces or States
|
|
Districts
|
|
Sub-Divisions
|
|
Blocks
|
|
Villages

Fig. 1.2

55
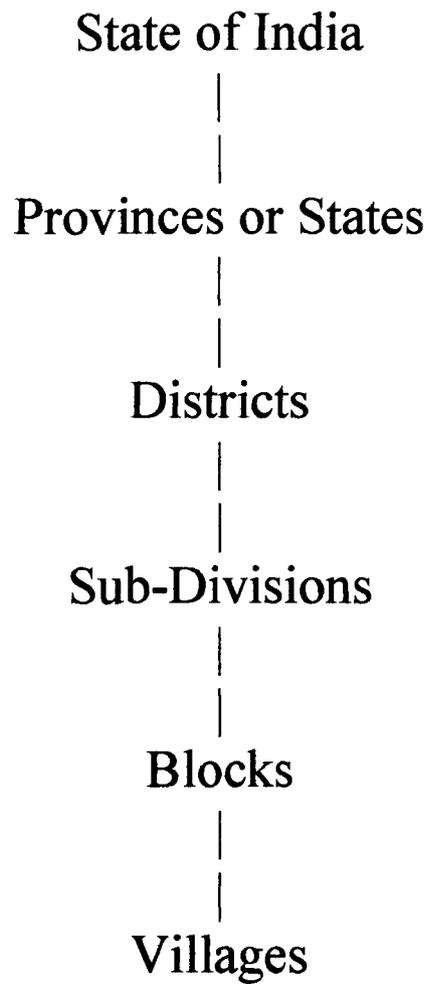
The Left-front's Party and Kissan Sabha Structures

National Body (PB, NC, NC, AIFBCC)* ←——→	National Level Body (AIKS, AIUKS, AIAKS)**
Central Committee ←——→	Central Kissan Sabha
State Committee ←——→	Provincial Kissan Sabha
District Committee ←——→	District Kissan Sabha
Zonal Committees ←——→ (only for the CPI-M)	Zonal Kissan Sabhas
Local Committees ←——→	Block Level Krisak Samities
Branch Committees ←——→	Village Level Krisak Samities
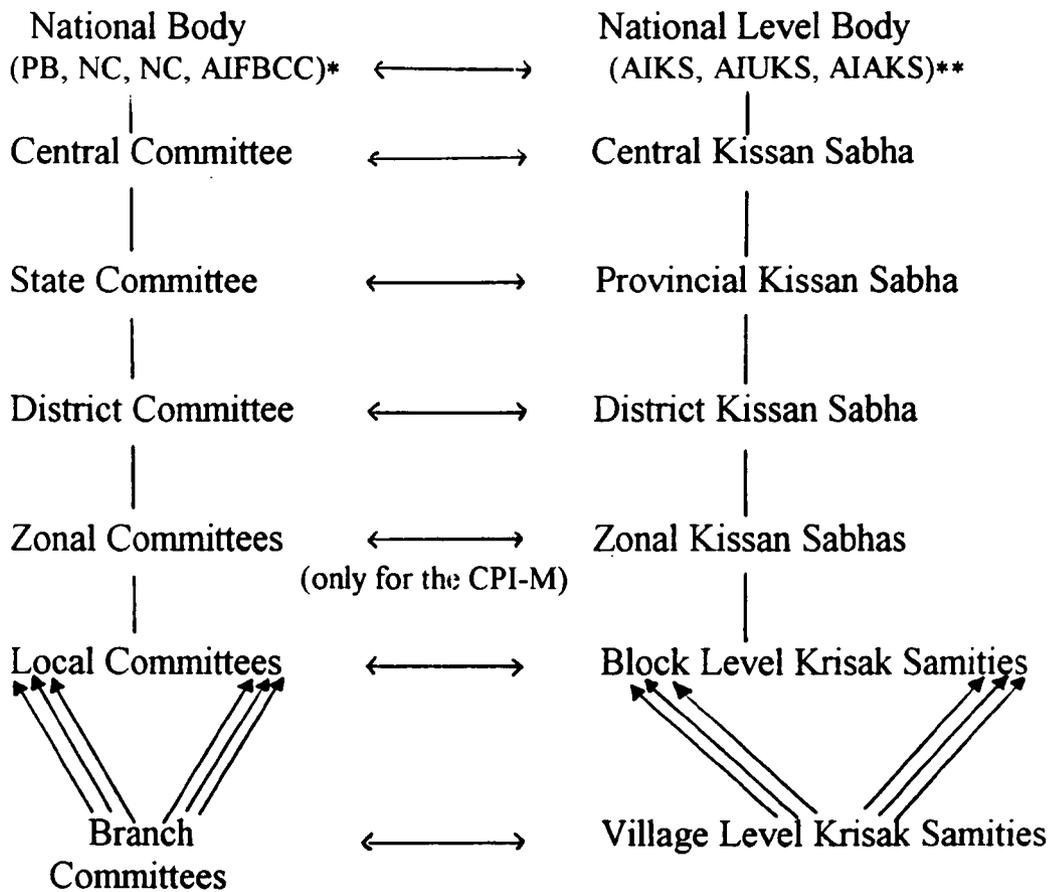
*PB – Polit Buro
NC – National Council
NC – National Conference
AIFBCC – All India Forward Bloc Central Committee

**AIKS – All India Kissan Sabha (both CPI and CPI-M)
AIUKS – All India United Kissan Sabha
AIAKS – All India Agragami Kissan Sabha

Fig. 1.3

village can be sustained. The Left-front government's intention behind the reintroduction of the panchayat bodies as instruments of development has been a) to utilise them as platforms for fighting against rural vested interests and raising the hopes of the people, b) to establish the power of the people and thereby curb that of the administrative officials and c) to make the people realise through the experience of participation the limitations inherent in the existing socio-economic structure and then to unleash the struggles for the implementation of an alternative development strategy (Webster 1992; Dutta 1997).

Thus, the panchayat structure was designed to ensure that people themselves participated fully in the decision-making process to tackle the issues at stake and the problems facing them. Subsequently the functioning of the panchayats has become a widely researched area in the development literature on West Bengal. Some writers have highlighted the panchayats as an instance of a highly successful devolution of power to the grassroots level (Lieten 1996) and an experiment in decentralised democracy (Prasad 1999). For others, more cautious in their evaluation, the panchayat, even when it has democratised the political structure in the villages, has also set in motion a process of 'political ossification' (Webster 1995:413) whereby parties rather than people dominate (Webster 1992) and the parties are engaged in building patronage networks and competing factions (Williams 1999). Still others have interpreted these units of self-governance as being instrumental in the consolidation of a middle class, composed of the patrons of the left, that sets limits to further radical redistribution in favour of the oppressed (Mallick 1993; Bhattacharyya 1999).

I will come back to some of the above interpretations in connection with my analysis of the issue of panchayat and voluntary politics in the Sundarbans in chapter seven. By raising the issue here I wish to suggest from the outset that through the introduction and restructuring of the panchayat system the leftist state upholds its own notion of society. However, the fact that the entire system of self-governance has been brought under the supervision of the Department of Panchayat and Rural Development together with its departmental bureaucracy at each level indicates the pervasive presence of the state in this society. Thus, here we are not only confronted with a state advancing its own notion of civil society, but also ensuring that the very constitution of that society contains the state.

The left and voluntary agencies in West Bengal

In 1984, when Prakash Karat, currently one of the Politburo members of the CPI-M, indicted voluntary agencies and action groups for their alleged role in the consolidation of imperialist networks in rural India, the left was trying to protect its version of civil society from possible usurpation by NGOs or voluntary organisations. Karat states:

> There is a sophisticated and comprehensive strategy worked out in imperialist quarters to harness the forces of voluntary agencies/action groups to their strategic design to penetrate the Indian society... By providing liberal funds to these groups, imperialism has [used voluntary] movement as a vehicle to counter and disrupt the potential of the left movement (Karat 1984:20).

In 1988 Karat further expressed his concern over the continuous proliferation of voluntary agencies, dubbing them imperialist agents to which petty bourgeois sections imbued with idealism are attracted (Karat 1988).

On a more theoretical plane, similar concerns are expressed by Prasad (1999). He uses the term 'NGO Anthropology' to discuss how this alliance between NGOs and anthropology has consolidated imperialist and neo-liberal designs. By bringing in the concept of community development the voluntary agencies have argued against class politics and the legitimacy of the left. Prasad draws attention to the panchayat experiment in West Bengal as an example of a 'grassroots ethos', 'socialist values of democratisation', 'popular participation in planning' and alternative development (Prasad 1999: 80). He finds in the panchayat institutions of West Bengal the possibility of countering the imperialist attempts to fetishize the ngo as the savior of the 'indigenous' (Prasad 1999).

Such a critique has helped an opinion gain currency in academic circles that the leftist government in West Bengal does not welcome NGOs because it sees in them a potential threat to its own role as a vanguard party. Following Karat, writers like Tandon and Sen (Tandon 1987; Sen 1999), in their analyses of state-NGO relations, have mentioned this element of hostility in the left's attitude towards voluntary agencies. But they have not discussed this point in any detail, nor have they enquired into the complexity of the relations on the ground between left and NGOs.

Similar observations can be found in the literature dealing with the Left-front government's panchayat experiment in rural Bengal. It is argued that in the Left-front's scheme of things, where the panchayat is both the initiator and implementer of development programmes, local-level initiatives (other than those of the panchayat) are viewed with suspicion (Webster 1995; Thorlind 2000). In fact the Left-front tends to view NGOs or voluntary groups as contenders for its rural support. The writers further argue that because the Left-front government tends to view any organised grassroots initiative in terms of its electoral impact and its party allegiance prior to its developmental potential it stifles any local development momentum (Webster 1995:420; Thorlind 2000:81). Webster cites the example of a local-level women's group in the Bankura district of West Bengal, which, with the help of the government, facilitated the emergence of a tribal women's cooperative. Webster attributes the formation of the cooperative to a successful collaboration between the state, voluntary groups and local grassroots initiatives, yet at the same time argues that such collaboration is difficult to achieve in rural Bengal. Therefore, for him, the Bankura experiment remains the exception rather than the rule in West Bengal (Webster 1995:417).

The above views, which draw their sustenance from Karat's indictment of voluntary agencies, look at left-NGO relations in terms of the twin principles of confrontation and collaboration. For writers like Tandon and Sen, these relations are not worthy of consideration because they are essentially hostile, whereas Webster's focus on the localised grassroots initiatives in Bankura leads him to conclude that such an initiative is a rarity, assuming that voluntary groups can continue only when there exists effective collaboration with the Left-front government. I find this essentialising of left-NGO relations as either collaborative or confrontational rather limiting, for neither throws light on the processual dimension of the voluntary activity. If the Left-front government's reintroduction of the panchayat has led to the building up of wider networks of power in rural West Bengal, it is interesting to see how voluntary agencies 'do development' in the context of these local networks of power. As this thesis will demonstrate, a consideration of the processual dimension of voluntary agencies and development in a specific context reveals both the complex ways in which agencies negotiate with the local networks of power and the ways in which contested views of development and sustainability are born of such negotiations.

Focusing on state-NGO relations from an a priori notion of collaboration or confrontation is also problematic because it treats both the state and voluntary agencies as monolithic entities collaborating with or confronting each other. Yet, as stated earlier, the society ushered in by the panchayat system does not imply the absence of the state in it. Rather, the leftist state is itself implicated in the functioning of the panchayat system at various levels. The present research is concerned with an ethnography of voluntary agencies working at the grassroots level. However, an ethnographic understanding of voluntary practices needs to be grounded in an ethnography of the state in terms of its implication in the local networks of power sustained by the system of panchayats. Similarly, it would be misleading to consider localised voluntary agencies as monolithic entities, for, as I will show, the voluntary agencies studied include people who are also involved in local politics at a variety of levels.

Karat's critique of voluntarism and the subsequent branding by theorists of left-NGO relations as potentially hostile or essentially non-collaborative is only a part of the left-NGO story as it unfolds in West Bengal. During my fieldwork in West Bengal in 2000 I found that the same left party, still in power, had floated the idea of a Joint Forum whereby NGOs could collaborate with panchayat bodies for successful rural development. It seemed that the view at the top had changed and that for the leftists, a viable civil society could now emerge through an effective collaboration between panchayat and voluntary agencies. Central to this idea of a Joint Forum and collaboration was the rhetoric of corruption and transparency. The NGOs I worked with felt that because voluntary agencies were transparent the Left-front government needed their help in revamping their panchayat bodies, which, according to them, had lost credibility. The left politicians and ministers in their turn believed that the only way NGOs could have a clean image or achieve transparency was by collaborating with panchayat institutions. Even when voluntary agencies joined the Joint Forum of the state government with the intention of collaborating with panchayat bodies (two of the three agencies studied did so) they had reservations about the Panchayat Department's functioning at the local level. By initiating the Joint Forum at the state level and inviting the voluntary agencies to collaborate, the left ideologues in their turn wanted to induce what they considered as 'transparency' in the localised initiatives of voluntary agencies.

In recent times international agencies like the World Bank's or Transparency International's on-going campaign for 'good government' has rendered corruption a significant issue in developing countries (World Bank 1997). Corruption has been viewed as dysfunctional, a pathology of underdevelopment and, therefore, needs to be controlled through building local efforts to strengthen civil society. The voluntary agencies have been assigned the task of mobilising local efforts towards building this civil society. My exploration of the development issues in the Sundarbans reveals instances of corruption at the local level. Different instances of corruption discussed in the subsequent chapters are significant in that they help us understand the workings of the power structure at the local level and the negotiations between state agents, party and panchayat leaders, NGOs and people engaged in local development. The Left-front proposed Joint Forum gives an impression that the era of hostility has given way to one of collaboration between government and NGOs. However, the local-level negotiations, in which corruption emerges as a recurrent theme, suggest that the relations between NGOs and the state are more complex and difficult to approach through the conventional rhetoric of confrontation followed by collaboration. It is with this aim in mind that I now turn to my locale, i.e. the Sundarbans for understanding the specificity of voluntary politics.

A brief description of the geography of the Sundarbans

The region known as the Sundarbans[16] forms the southern part of the Gangetic delta between the rivers Hooghly in the west of West Bengal and Meghna in the east, now in Bangladesh. Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove delta, is located between 21° 32'-22° 40' North and 88° 5'-89° 00' South. The swamps of the Sundarbans support one of the biggest tracts of estuarine forest in the world. The area consists of low, flat alluvial plains and is intersected by tidal rivers or estuaries from north to south and by innumerable tidal creeks from east to west. The derivation of the word 'Sundarban', in the words of Pargiter,

---

[16] I use the word Sundarbans. generally referred to in the plural, to denote the region composed of forests, inhabited mainland and islands and water bodies. However, the administrative departments such as the Sundarban Affairs or the Sundarban Development Board, discussed in subsequent chapters, refer to the area in the singular.

...is undecided. Several derivations have been suggested, but only two appear to me to deserve attention. One is *sundari*, "the sundari tree," [*Heritiera fomes*] and *ban*, "forest," the whole meaning "the sundari forests;" and the other *samudra* (through its corrupted and vulgar form *samundar*), "the sea," and *ban*, "forests," the whole meaning "the forests near the sea"... The second derivation seems to me the more probable (Pargiter 1934: 1).

The Sundarbans encompasses an area of over 25,500 square kilometres, two-thirds of which lie in Bangladesh and one-third in India. The Indian part, with which I am concerned in this thesis, is in the state of West Bengal and covers an area of 9630 square kilometres. This huge forest area is composed of mangroves, vast stretches of trees and bushes growing in brackish and saline swamps.

The Sundarbans of West Bengal is spread over the districts of North and South 24 Parganas[17]. The district of 24 Parganas, of which the Sundarbans is a part, remained a single entity until 1986 when, for administrative reasons, it was divided into North and South 24 Parganas (see map 1.2). As a result, out of the nineteen blocks that constitute the Sundarbans, six – Hasnabad, Haroa, Sandeshkhali I, Sandeshkhali II, Minakhan and Hingalganj – came under the jurisdiction of North 24 Parganas and the remaining thirteen blocks – Sagar, Namkhana, Joynagar I, Joynagar II, Mathurapur I, Mathurapur II, Patharpratima, Kakdwip, Canning I, Canning II, Kultali, Basanti and Gosaba - became part of South 24 Parganas. An imaginary line called the Dampier- Hodges line is what serves as the boundary of the Sundarbans and marks it off from the non-Sundarbans parts of the districts of North and South 24 Parganas. This line runs from the south-western part of what is now South 24 Parganas, goes through parts of North 24 Parganas and finally extends beyond West Bengal into Bangladesh (see map 1.3). William Dampier, the Sundarbans Commissioner, and Lieutenant Hodges, the Surveyor for the Sundarbans, defined and surveyed the line of dense forests in 1829-30. In their venture they were helped by Ensign Prinsep's line of dense forests already surveyed in 1822-23. In 1832-33 Dampier formally affirmed Prinsep's line in the 24 Parganas. Prinsep's line was renamed the Dampier-Hodges line which till today determines the limit of the Sundarbans region.

The West Bengal part of the Sundarbans has 102 islands of which fifty-four are inhabited and protected by 3,500 kilometres of earthen embankments and the

---

[17] Parganas here refers to revenue areas or villages.

rest are reserved for tigers. Of the 9,630 square kilometres area that constitutes the West Bengal Sundarbans 2,585 square kilometres was declared a Tiger Reserve in 1973. There are three sanctuaries in the forest area - Sajnekhali, Lothian and Halliday Islands. In 1989 the Sundarbans was declared a World Heritage Site for the following reasons: a) the Sundarbans is the largest mangrove delta in the world, b) it is the only mangrove land with tigers to be found anywhere, c) the Sundarbans possesses the greatest faunal and floral diversity among mangroves of the world and d) it serves as nursery for ninety per cent of the coastal and aquatic species of the Eastern Indian Ocean as well as the Bangladesh-Myanmar coast.

However, the people living in this heritage site continue to remain socially and economically neglected. According to the 1991 Census, the population of the Sundarbans is almost 3.4 million. These people living on the islands of the Sundarbans live in a state of perpetual anxiety and uncertainty: what if the embankment collapses? Settlement through clearing of forests took place before the natural process of siltation raised the land sufficiently above the water level. Therefore, high earthen embankments were constructed to protect these settlements against daily inundation during high tides. However, the embankments in the Sundarbans spell disaster for the people as breaches constantly occur. Once an embankment collapses, it leaves villages and vast tracts of agricultural land inundated for months before the Irrigation Department intervenes. When the water finally recedes it leaves behind death and destruction since saline water renders the fields unsuitable for agriculture for many years. The Irrigation engineers acquire people's land, houses, ponds[18] and paddy fields for the purpose of rebuilding the embankment, thereby rendering a sizeable portion of the population homeless and landless. The residents of the Sundarbans are equally vulnerable to cyclonic depressions in the Bay of Bengal. However, the government is yet to come up with any comprehensive disaster management strategy. Agriculture is equally uncertain since acre after acre of land remains uncultivated for lack of fresh water during winter.

---

[18] Individual ponds are the only source of fresh water in the Sundarbans.

panchayat politics in the region. Although the CPI-M has obtained an overall majority in most village and block panchayats in the Sundarbans (see Tables 1.2 and 1.3 on p. 67), in Gosaba and Basanti (RSP strongholds) the RSP has secured the maximum number of seats in the village panchayat and has formed the board in the two block panchayats (see Tables 1.2 and 1.3 on p. 67). It is also important to remember that at the village and block panchayat levels, the CPI-M and the RSP, instead of forming a united front, contest each other in extending their respective spheres of influence. It is only at the district panchayat level (Zilla Parishad) that the parties have formed a united Left-front to counter any potential threat from the non-left parties. Therefore, the fact that the RSP has not been able to obtain a majority in as many village panchayats in Basanti as it has done in Gosaba points to the CPI-M's presence and infiltration into the RSP stronghold in Basanti (see Table 1.2 on p. 67). Although the RSP has a very slender presence at the district panchayat level (Zilla Parishad; where the RSP secured 4 seats comprising Gosaba and Basanti out of a total of 66 seats compared to the CPI-M's 57 seats), its relative dominance in the village and block panchayats of Basanti and Gosaba makes it imperative that the *Sahasabhadhipati* (vice-chairperson) of the South 24 Parganas Zilla Parishad be appointed from among the elected RSP candidates.

Thus, unlike other districts of West Bengal, where the Left-front has often been identified with the CPI-M, the picture that emerges from South 24 Parganas and the Sundarbans suggests that the CPI-M does not feel completely secure as an electoral force and is constantly engaged in the process of seeking to expand its electoral base even when such expansion means infiltration into its partner's constituencies. This is what has made intra-left rivalry a significant phenomenon at the local level. A united front of the CPI-M and the RSP at the Assembly and district panchayat levels does not rule out the possibility of the CPI-M and the RSP being engaged in electoral skirmishes and seeking to encroach on each other's strongholds at the block and village levels. This phenomenon of intra-left rivalry, as will be seen, provides a further context for understanding voluntary politics as it unfolds in the Sundarbans.

An Illustration of the Working of the RSP and the CPI-M Party Structure in Gosaba and Basanti Blocks of the Sundarbans

South 24 Parganas District Committee

Zonal Committee
(Gosaba-Basanti Zonal Committee for the CPI-M)*
(Gosaba Zonal Committee and Basanti Zonal Committee for the RSP)**

Basanti Local Committees+   Gosaba Local Committees+

Branch   Branch
Committees•   Committees•

* Seventeen Zonal Committees for the CPI-M in the District of South 24 Parganas.

** The RSP has Zonal Committees, only in Gosaba and Basanti Blocks. Unlike the CPI-M, the party does not have Zonal Committees elsewhere in the district.

+ At least three Local Committees constitute a Zonal Committee. There are three to four Local Committees in each block.

• At least three Branch Committees constitute a Local Committee. There are fourteen to twenty Branch committees in each block. Each Committee consists of fifteen members and a Secretary.

Fig. 1.4

Table 1.1 showing the dominance of the RSP and the CPI-M in the Sundarbans Assembly constituencies (Election 2001)

Constituencies	No. of Seats	CPI-M	RSP	CPI	FB	TMC	SUCI
Gosaba	1	-	1	-	-	-	-
Basanti	1	-	1	-	-	-	-
Canning East	1	1	-	-	-	-	-
Canning West	1	-	-	-	-	1	-
Kultali	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
Joynagar	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
Mathurapur	1	1	-	-	-	-	-
Kakdwip	1	-	-	-	-	1	-
Patharpratima	1	1	-	-	-	-	-
Sagar	1	-	-	-	-	1	-
Total	10	3	2	-	-	3	2

Emboldened constituencies indicate the places where fieldwork was carried out.

Table 1.2 showing Village Panchayats where the RSP and the CPI-M are in majority*

Blocks	No.of Village Panchayats	CPI-M	RSP	SUCI	TMC	Cong(I)	TMC and Cong(I)	Hung
CanningI	10	5	-	-	2	1	-	2
CanningII	9	9	-	-	-	-	-	-
Basanti	13	5	6	-	1	-	-	1
Gosaba	14	-	11	-	1	-	-	2
JoynagarI	12	4	-	7	-	-	-	1
JoynagarII	10	1	-	6	1	-	-	2
Kultali	9	5	-	-	-	-	-	4
MathurapurI	10	3	-	-	1	-	4	2
MathurapurII	11	5	-	1	1	-	2	2
Kakdwip	11	9	-	-	-	-	2	-
Namkhana	7	2	-	-	1	1	2	1
Sagar	9	3	-	-	6	-	-	-
Patharpratima	15	6	-	-	2	-	4	3
Total	140	57	17	14	16	2	14	20

Emboldened areas indicate places where fieldwork was carried out

Table 1.3 showing dominance of the RSP and the CPI-M at the Block Panchayats*

Names of Block Panchayats	Block Panchayat Board formed by political party
Gosaba	RSP
Basanti	RSP
Canning I	CPI-M
Canning II	CPI-M
Kultali	CPI-M
Joynagar I	SUCI
Joynagar II	SUCI
Mathurapur I	CPI-M
Mathurapur II	CPI-M
Kakdwip	CPI-M
Sagar	CPI-M
Patharpratima	CPI-M
Namkhana	Congress(I) and TMC Alliance

Emboldened areas indicate places where fieldwork was carried out

*The tables showing dominance of the RSP and the CPI-M at the village and block panchayat levels are presented on the basis of the data of the recent panchayat election of 2003. I present this data because in terms of the dominance of the two parties at these two levels in the areas where fieldwork was carried out the result of the 2003 and the earlier panchayat election (1998) is pretty much the same.

Voluntary agencies in the Sundarbans

In West Bengal, where our experience suggests that over the years NGOs have proliferated in urban and rural areas, not much attempt has been made to document the nature and functions of these organisations[19]. In the absence of concrete figures or any district-wise directory containing details of NGOs it is difficult to provide an exhaustive account of all the voluntary agencies operating in South 24 Parganas and the Sundarbans. Furthermore, often organisations working in the rural sector may well be located in urban areas. One cannot rule out this possibility in the case of South 24 Parganas or the Sundarbans whose physical proximity to Calcutta makes it easy for organisations to work in the district but remain located in Calcutta. The Left-front government's proposed Joint Forum could have been an important source of information about the district-wise distribution of NGOs, for one of the objectives behind setting up this forum is to keep track of the expanding voluntary sector in West Bengal. But the list of participating NGOs that I managed to have access to during my interviews with the members of the State Planning Board only contained the names and addresses of organisations and threw little light on their size, nature and area of operation. Therefore, when I began my work in the Sundarbans I tended to rely on the information local people – villagers, workers of the agencies studied, panchayat heads etc. – gave about the organisations in their neighbourhood. Of the three organisations studied in the thesis, two are the oldest in the Sundarbans. The third one was studied because of its central role in the campaign against a nuclear power plant in the region. However, during the course of working on my specific case studies I collected some information – both first hand and second hand – about associations or organisations of various kinds such as local clubs, schools or education centres, orphanages, cooperative credit societies etc. located in areas of Gosaba, Basanti, Canning and Joynagar blocks.

In almost all these areas there exist organisations engaged in a variety of activities. It is difficult to quantify their numbers, as they vary in size, function and

---

[19] In this context it is important to mention the Indian Institute of Management's (Calcutta) project of documenting NGOs in West Bengal. Although the Institute's directory was not published when I carried out my fieldwork, the directory was said to have listed some 700 NGOs in West Bengal. However, during my correspondence with the person engaged in this project I was told that despite documentation no accurate information about how many NGOs operate in the rural sector was ascertained and the number could very well be in the range of six or seven thousand.

the level of formality of structures (for example whether registered or not) but the following account gives some idea of their activities. For example in Dayapur and Satjelia islands there are bodies like the Satjelia Vivekananda Milan Sangha and Satjelia Panchabati Ashram (located in Emilibari, Satjelia), Dayapur Sundarban Sangha and Dayapur Janabikash Sangha (located in Dayapur village). These clubs organise sports and football tournaments, dig ponds for fresh water, provide help to the handicapped and distribute books to poor students. On Rangabelia and Gosaba islands similar such local clubs like Vidyasagar Club, Azad Hind Club (Gosaba market), Pally Unnayan Sangha (North Pakhirala), Rangabelia Public Club (South Rangabelia), Nabadito Sangha (Bagbagan), Uttardanga Srabani Sangha (Uttardanga) exist which organise cultural activities, run public libraries and help women set up self-help groups etc. In Pakhirala and Bally islands of Gosaba block there are small-scale voluntary bodies such as the Sundarban Wildlife Development Society (Pakhirala) and the Bally Nature and Wildlife Conservation Society which are engaged in environmental issues.

In Basanti, Canning and Joynagar areas local clubs and small-scale organisations like the Balaka Sporting Club (Hiranmoypur village in Basanti), Janakalyan Sangha (Bharatgarh village in Basanti), Champa Mahila Samity (Shibganj village in Basanti), Canning Bandhu Mahal Club (Canning Town), Sabuj Sangha (Dakshinbidyadhari village in Canning block I), Sundarban Arthik Man Unnayan Samity (Taldi in Canning), Tulsighata Suktara Club (Tulsighata village in Joynagar II) and Yuvapalli Unnayan Samity (Beledurganagar village in Joynagar II) organise cultural festivals such as pujas and football tournaments and deal with diverse issues like children's and women's health, women's self-employment, literacy and blood donation. The Sundarbans Khadi and Village Industry (in Canning) helps women set up self-help groups and collaborates with the panchayat and government in providing sanitation ware to the villages. The Garanbose Shisu Bikash Kendra (Garanbose village in Basanti), which also has its unit located in Canning, provides health care services to children and organises the government's polio vaccination camp for children. In addition to these there also exist organisations providing help to the handicapped and orphans. The Bikalanga Seba Samity (at Mitrapara in Joynagar), which is set up on local initiative and depends mainly on donations and subscriptions, provides wheel chairs and crutches to the handicapped and funds to poor and disabled students. Mahespur village in Basanti

has an orphanage (unnamed) set up on an individual initiative. The Tiger Club at Bhubaneswari village on Kultali island, like its counterparts in Pakhirala and Bally islands (mentioned above) of Gosaba, is also engaged in wildlife conservation and related issues.

Apart from government-run primary, secondary and higher secondary schools on almost all the islands of the region where I carried out my fieldwork there are a few nursery and primary schools set up by individuals. For example the orphanage in Basanti also has a primary education centre attached to it. In Pakhirala village of Gosaba, a primary school (Banalata Siksha Niketan) has been set up by a local villager. Pakhirala has another primary school (Pakhirala Primary School) set up by a local CPI-M leader. This school is now partially funded by the government. There are also the non-formal education centres of the Tagore Society (the organisation studied) on the islands of Gosaba, Basanti, Canning and Kultali. These centres are run by individual teachers who come from these areas. Although these centres are run by a voluntary agency they are funded by the central government as part of its literacy programme for dropouts. At Nimpith in Joynagar most of the schools – primary, secondary and higher secondary – are run by the Nimpith Ramakrishna Ashram (the other voluntary organisation studied in the thesis). The Ramakrishna Krisak Samity in Kamalpur (Joynagar II block), set up on collective initiative, runs a primary education centre with funds given by the Mass Education (mentioned below), a big NGO which collaborates with the West Bengal government in the field of mass literacy. The Baikunthapur Tarun Sangha, an organisation at Baikunthapur village of Kultali block, runs a primary school (Patha Bhavan) up to the fourth standard.

There are also a few cooperative credit societies whose purpose is to give either small-scale agricultural loans to farmers or self-help loans to women in need. Examples are the Dayapur Samabay Krishi Unnayan Samity (on Satjelia island and partially funded by the government), Bagbagan Krishi Samabay Samity (on Rangabelia island and run by the local RSP leaders) and Rangabelia Agricultural Cooperative (run by the RSP leaders but no longer active). Another cooperative society, which is now defunct, is the Gosaba Rupayan in Uttardanga village of Rangabelia. In Basanti, the Garanbose Samabay Samity (at Garanbose village), run by the local CPI-M members, gives agricultural loans to farmers and at times small hardships loans to women. Apart from this, cooperative societies like Nafarganj

Samabay Samity and Masjidbati Samabay Samity (both in Basanti), funded by the government, also provide loans and implements to farmers. The Kamalpur Ramakrishna Krisak Samity, mentioned above, also serves as an agricultural resource centre providing implements and seeds on loan to farmers. The organisation collaborates with the Farm Science Centre of the Ramakrishna Ashram in transferring technologies. The Samity also collaborates with the government in the field of rural sanitation. The Baikunthapur Tarun Sangha of Kultali block, mentioned earlier, also runs an agricultural service centre supported by the state government which provides information to farmers about seeds, fertilisers and farming practices.

Apart from these organisations the big NGOs located and working in the Sundarbans are the Tagore Society and Ramakrishna Ashram whose activities are considered in detail in the thesis. Two other big NGOs, which work but are not located in the Sundarbans are the Mass Education and the Southern Health Improvement Society (SHIS). While the Mass Education is located in Calcutta, SHIS is located in Bhangar block of the district of South 24 Parganas. The Mass Education works in the fields of literacy and health whereas SHIS is concerned mostly with health care services for people suffering from tuberculosis. These organisations also collaborate with the government in extending services to the people.

Thus, the picture that emerges from the above discussion is somewhat complex. Apart from a few big organisations, there are many local clubs and medium and small scale associations undertaking development initiatives ranging from wildlife conservation to providing a variety of services to rural people. However, it is important to note that these localised bodies do not operate in a vacuum and in this respect it is necessary to observe the linkages between voluntary activities and those of locally based party, panchayat and government agencies. My observation of the working of some of these clubs such as those in Rangabelia and Canning suggests that these local bodies serve as fora where diverse local interests – voluntary, party and panchayat – coalesce. There are cooperative societies that provide short-term loans to the farmers or women in need, but they are funded by the government or set up on local party initiatives. Such party-led cooperatives (for example the RSP-led cooperative in Bagbagan, Rangabelia) serve as important venues for party activities. The wildlife conservation groups, described above, have

sprung up under the leadership of a forest ranger or local forest officials who serve as important office bearers in these fora. Sometimes the presence of the village panchayat in a local wildlife conservation club is quite strong as in the case of the Tiger Club on Kultali island. A school set up on the initiative of the local party leader may also serve as a centre for the party's activities in the neighbourhood. The running of the non-formal education centres of big NGOs like the Tagore Society shows that even when enterprising individuals run these education centres on different islands, they remain accountable to the Society and the continuance of such centres depends heavily on government funding. Similarly, small-scale organisations such as the Kamalpur Krisak Samity or Baikunthapur Tarun Sangha, which collaborate with big NGOs or the government in the field of agriculture or education, may well reflect the interests of these big organisations or the government. These diverse realities at the ground level make it difficult to draw a sharp boundary between purely voluntary and purely non-voluntary interests. It is against the above organisational context that I introduce my specific case studies.

Three voluntary agencies

This thesis concentrates on the activities of three agencies in order to understand three specific problems in the Sundarbans, namely embankment and flooding, agriculture and the proposed nuclear power plant. My selection of these three agencies was guided by a number of considerations. Firstly, as already mentioned, two of the three organisations (i.e. the Tagore Society and Ramakrishna Asharm) are the oldest and largest in the Sundarbans. Therefore, a focus on their activities, I thought, would help me understand the historical context in which they emerged and their subsequent development. Secondly, it was the issues that led me to the organisations I studied and not the other way round. Even before fieldwork it was through reading newspaper reports on the Tagore Society and its concern with the isssue of embankments that I became interested in the organisation and decided to start fieldwork in Rangabelia. But my experience of the problems of agriculture encountered in the field and subsequent interest in the proposed power plant led me to study the other two organisations.

By concentrating on these three organisations I wanted to study a set of problems peculiar to the region. However, such a focus was not meant to minimise

the significance of other more widespread issues such as health, education and gender empowerment, with which NGOs are concerned. While focusing on the specific problems of the region and the voluntary organisations' engagement with them I shall have the opportunity to address issues like health and gender empowerment with which organisations such as the Tagore Society and the Ramakrishna Ashram are also concerned. Thirdly, in terms of structure and functions these organisations are interesting case studies. Despite their rhetoric about ideal societies which frequently involves a critique of state administration and local politics, these organisations, as will be seen in the subsequent chapters, serve as fora where diverse interests – governmental, party and panchayat – coalesce. This makes it difficult to draw a line between the 'political' and the 'civil societal', the point I raised earlier in this chapter in problematising approaches to NGO studies. For example, the Tagore Society was set up by disillusioned leftists, yet has links with the local RSP faction of the left, an issue that the thesis will deal with. It politicises the embankment issue by drawing attention to governmental apathy and yet at the same time implements various government programmes. Similarly, the Farm Centre of the Ramakrishna Ashram is funded by the government and its agriculture-related activities are a reflection of the Left-front government's approach to Sundarbans development. It is important to mention that both these organisations are also participating in the Left-front government's proposed Joint Forum. On the other hand, the Rationalist Association is more like a local club whose members come from different walks of life. An exploration of its role in the anti-nuclear campaign will also show how diverse political interests creep into organisations largely viewed as civil societal. Thus, an analysis of the workings of these organisations would enable us to gain an insight into the complex organisational fabric of the Sundarbans described above. A brief overview of the organisations is given below.

a) *Tagore Society for Rural Development* (TSRD) is located on Rangabelia island of Gosaba block of the Sundarbans. The Tagore Society[20] started its agriculture-related voluntary activity in the Sundarbans in the 1970s and continued till 1988. But the cyclone of 1988 served as an eye opener for the Tagore Society and made its founder, Tushar Kanjilal, aware of the unsustainability of the organisation's

---

[20] In this thesis the Tagore Society will at times be referred to as the Society.

development efforts. The cyclone took only a few seconds to negate all of the organisation's development efforts over many years. Since then the Tagore Society has therefore been focusing on the problem of embankment and land erosion on the islands of the Sundarbans. Now in his mid-sixties, Kanjilal has been organising public meetings in the islands of the Sundarbans to draw attention to the problems of land erosion and embankments.

b) *Ramakrishna Ashram Farm Science Centre* (RAFSC) in Joynagar II block of the Sundarbans. The Ramakrishna Ashram at Nimpith started its activity under the leadership of the monk Swami Buddhananda who was moved by the poverty of the people of the Sundarbans to start this religious organisation's philanthropic activity in the early sixties. Soon agriculture found its way onto the agenda of the organisation. Buddhananda considered that the proper development of the Sundarbans lay in scientific and sustainable agriculture. As a result the Farm Science Centre was set up by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), an institution of the Government of India (GOI). Since the 1970s this Farm Science Centre[21] (*Krishi Vigyan Kendra*) has been emphasising the need for sustainable agricultural development in the region.

c) *Juktibadi Sanskritic Sangstha* (JSS) (Rationalist Cultural Association[22]) located in Canning I block of the Sundarbans. This organisation came into being in the late 1980s. It is a loose organisation of 'progressive people' who were initially engaged in making local people aware of the importance of science in everyday life. They organise science fairs and even occasional magic shows to popularise science in the public sphere. However, from 1999 onwards this association has also been publishing pamphlets and mobilising people's support to protest against the proposal by the state government for the building of a nuclear power plant in the Sundarbans.

Voluntary agencies do not operate in a vacuum. They function alongside other government departments. There exists an Irrigation Department for the maintenance of embankments. Similarly, there is also a government department for the development of the region. The working of these departments through their elaborate bureaucracy at the local level provides channels through which people negotiate with the state machinery.

---

[21] In this thesis the Farm Science Centre will at times be referred to as the Centre.
[22] The Rationalist Cultural Association will at times be referred to as the Association.

The voluntary agencies with their rhetoric of sustainability aim to influence the ways in which people perceive their problems, especially when the agencies are represented by locals. Added to this is the presence of panchayat institutions, which serve as a pivot around which local-level mobilisations take place. All this then makes participation in voluntary agencies' differing visions of sustainability an extremely complex but interesting issue. Under these circumstances can participation, encountered at a variety of levels, serve as a pointer to the ways in which people make their lives sustainable?

The Sundarbans is a World Heritage Site whose conservation has attracted global funding in recent years. We have also noted the uncertainty of people's lives due to frequent embankment collapse, flooding and gales. Therefore, a question that arises is: do the voluntary agencies' differing engagements with the uncertainty of people's lives in the region suggest differing notions of sustainability?

The present thesis is an attempt to understand these different notions of sustainability and participation. It does so by focusing on the continuous negotiations between the voluntary agencies, state, panchayat bodies and local people. These negotiations will be explored around the three issues of embankment, agriculture and the proposed nuclear power plant in the region. As stated earlier in this chapter, in understanding these negotiations I will situate the state and voluntary politics outside the conceptual confines of state-civil society duality. I will argue rather that an ethnography of voluntary practices needs to be grounded in an ethnography of the state, both in terms of its instantiation in the offices, institutions and practices of the local-level officials such as those of the Irrigation Department and also of its implication in the local networks of power engendered by self-governing institutions such as the village panchayats.

A Brief Outline of the Thesis

The second chapter links the theoretical arguments presented in the introductory chapter to the subsequent discussion in the remainder of the thesis by reflecting on the biography of the Sundarbans and its making as a World Heritage Site (in section I) and methodology of the research (in section II). To situate voluntary politics in its proper context we need to understand why the inhabitants have come to be considered as obstacles to conservation. This representation, in my

view, has a history which can be traced back to the beginning of colonial rule when the Sundarbans emerged as 'wasteland' over which conflict occurred between its landlords and the colonial state. However, I show how it was the same colonial rule that, through its project of gazetteer-making, also created an image of the Sundarbans which sowed the seeds of its future emergence as a site endowed with unique ecological properties. The second section deals with the methodology of the present research. I attempt a brief profile of the field sites followed by an account of the methods adopted for carrying out the research. I also discuss the ethical issues involved in a research of this kind.

I proceed in chapter three to examine the Government of West Bengal's (GOWB) approach to Sundarbans development by considering the activities of two government departments, namely Sundarban Affairs (SAD) and Irrigation and Waterways (IWW). I show how SAD and IWW have addressed the problems of agriculture and embankments respectively. I do this by contrasting their *rhetorics* as revealed in documents such as departmental budget speeches, annual reports and interviews with Ministers, state-level officials and bureaucrats on the one hand with the *practices* of the local-level engineers, officials and bureaucrats on the other. This link is necessary, not simply to know the policy intentions of the state as a trans-local entity, but also to see how that entity is made visible in the localised practices of its officials. Such disaggregation of the state's functions is also necessary to understand the different levels at which NGOs interact with the state machinery. In the subsequent chapters, through examining the problems of embankments and agriculture, I analyse the different levels of negotiation among the voluntary agencies and the state. Here the rhetoric of corruption and transparency becomes a relevant methodological tool that helps me explore the complexity of these negotiations in a specific context.

The fourth chapter focuses on the activities of the Tagore Society for Rural Development in Rangabelia, its aim being to understand how the Society addresses the problem of embankment and land erosion in the Sundarbans. Here I combine my ethnographic evidence with literature and newspaper reports published on the Society, to show how the organisation has been represented in the media. I also provide an account of the Society's activities to highlight how the organisation, despite its collaboration with the government in providing piecemeal development

programmes, politicises the issue of embankment and flooding by drawing people's attention to government apathy and corruption at the local level.

Chapter five focuses on science as a ritual of development and is divided into two sections. The first deals with the Farm Science Centre at Nimpith and its agriculture-related activities in the Sundarbans. In the second section I deal mainly with the Rationalist Association and its campaign against the Left-front government's proposed nuclear power plant in the Sundarbans. Here too I combine my ethnographic data with existing literature, newspaper reports and pamphlets to explore contested notions of science, development and sustainability. In this chapter we revisit the image of the Sundarbans as a wildlife sanctuary and see what implication this image has for understanding the nuclear episode as it unfolds in the Sundarbans.

Chapters six and seven deal with people's perceptions of issues such as embankments, agriculture and the proposed nuclear power plant. I break down the meta-category of 'people' into several local groupings. In chapter six I deal with a few of these local groupings such as *Dafadars* (temporary supervisors connected with embankment repair), *Beldars* (the Irrigation appointed functionaries who maintain embankments), labourers, fishermen and prawn catchers and farmers. By focusing on their perceptions and narratives, I draw attention to the disparate practices and diverse subject positions that are found to be at odds with the unifying awareness-raising campaigns launched by the NGOs. Here local responses to NGO campaigns will be described and discussed.

Chapter seven focuses on the perceptions and practices of the local panchayat leaders, panchayat functionaries and local party leaders and cadres against the background of the Left-front government's recent strategies to coordinate the activities of NGOs and panchayat bodies. The chapter starts by providing an account of the Joint Forum proposed by the Left-front government in which NGOs and panchayat bodies are expected to collaborate with each other and thereby concretise the government's rural development programmes. The chapter then proceeds to document instances of negotiations between voluntary agencies and local party and panchayat leaders around issues of development in the Sundarbans. The objective behind highlighting these local-level negotiations is to suggest that local-level endeavours may not necessarily correspond to the ways in which the ideologues and policy makers construct collaboration.

In the concluding chapter (chapter eight) I pull together the threads of arguments made in the earlier chapters and reflect on the state and voluntary agencies' role in sustainable and participatory development. I argue that the state-civil society duality used as a conceptual category in most current NGO literature tends to gloss over the complex ways in which the 'social' interpenetrates with the 'political'. The instances of negotiations between state, NGOs and people highlighted in the earlier chapters thus enable me to reveal competing perspectives on sustainability and participation.

Chapter Two

Background to the Area and Discussion of Research Methodology

Introduction

The first chapter has already introduced the Sundarbans as a World Heritage Site and described the life of its people as one of perpetual anxiety and uncertainty. What is it that makes people's lives so agonising and uncertain in a place that is globally famous? The answer partly lies in the question posed. The Sundarbans is the abode of tigers, deer, snakes, crocodiles, dolphins, turtles and a host of valuable plants and marine resources, whose protection and conservation has attracted considerable global funding in recent years. Such a conservation drive is based on the implicit assumption that the sustainable development of the Sundarbans is possible only if the natural habitat of the region is left to grow without hindrance. In other words people's settlement and pressure on the unique ecological system is a cause for concern among the conservationists. It is to this representation of the Sundarbans, as primarily a place of natural wilderness where humans occupy a position of secondary importance, that I turn in the first section of the present chapter.

This representation has a history, which can be traced back to the beginning of colonial rule when the Sundarbans emerged as wasteland over which conflict occurred between the landlords and the colonial state. However, I will show how it was the colonial rule that, through its project of gazetteer making, also presented an image of the Sundarbans within which lay the future prospect of the region emerging as a site endowed with unique ecological properties. I will also note how much of the literature on the postcolonial Sundarbans of West Bengal has perpetuated the representation of the Sundarbans as a wonderland. I will end the first section with a description of the Marichjhapi incident, a moment which consolidated the image of the delta as a tiger reserve. Turning to this history of

representation is significant, for to ignore it is to divorce the voluntary agencies under consideration from the context in which they operate.

The second section of this chapter concentrates on the methodology adopted for the present research and provides a brief account of the places where I conducted my fieldwork. By focusing on my methodology I will dwell on my encounter with the land and its people and show how doing fieldwork implies coming to terms with the terrain of the Sundarbans. I will discuss different methods adopted to interview or converse with members of the organisations, the village panchayats and other groups. It will be shown how using observation as a reflexive tool has helped me document people's perceptions and practices. Finally, some of the ethical issues surrounding my research will be considered, along with my experiences of working at the public records offices.

Section I

The Making of the Sundarbans

In this section I start with a brief account of the reclamation history of the Sundarbans under colonial rule, highlighting the process of colonial expansion in the region. In the absence of a clear-cut boundary of the Sundarbans forests there was a conflict between the zamindars who claimed ownership over large tracts of forest and the government claiming the same as state property. Thus the status of the Sundarbans presented the colonialists with a dual problem, namely how to wrest the entire forested area from the control of the zamindars and at the same time to lease the wetlands to wealthy individuals, peasants and entrepreneurs for the purposes of reclamation so as to make them suitable for agriculture and revenue generation. After briefly outlining the reclamation history I turn to the project of gazetteer writing whereby practicalities of colonial state-making went hand in hand with the representation made of the Sundarbans. It was in this representation, as

found in the gazetteers of Hunter (1875) or O'Malley (1814), that lay the future prospect of the Sundarbans emerging as a World Heritage Site, a site to whose conservation inhabitants became the obvious obstacles.

Here my focus on gazetteering or gazetteer writing can be situated in the broader context of the current trend towards conceptualising the epistemological dimensions of colonial rule in India (Cohn 1997, Bayly 1996, Chatterjee 1995, Dirks 2001). Colonial rule, as is more or less widely acknowledged, was sustained not merely by superior arms and brute force, but by constant attempts on the part of the coloniser to define and redefine an epistemological space for the colonised. Colonial rule, to be effective, relied on a complete and exhaustive knowledge about the society colonised. Not only did it entail a construction of India's pre-colonial past, but also an exhaustive survey of its colonial present. Cohn (1997) highlights the significance of surveys, gazetteers and censuses in connection with his discussion of the different 'modalities' of knowledge building in colonial India. Surveys and gazetteers as 'enumerative modalities' aimed at classifications of the land and its people and pigeonholing them on the basis of what the 'technologies of the colonial rule' (Dirks 1997, 2001) prescribed as 'scientific' criteria. 'India was an ideal *locus* for science' (Prakash 1992:155; italics in original); the rich diversity, which India offered was to be mined for knowledge and the convenient tool that aided this enterprise of science was one of classification. Thus the objective was not simply to codify law and bureaucratise governance, but to survey, classify and enumerate scientifically the geographical, geological, botanical and zoological properties of the natural environment and the archaeological, demographic, anthropological, linguistic and economic traits of the people (Chatterjee 1995; Grout 1996).

In his book *Castes of Mind* Dirks (2001) reflects on the career of the concept of caste in colonial India and minutely documents how caste was systematically wedded to the necessities of colonial rule. Not only was caste identified as the basic unit for classifying populations and organising population counts necessary for the project of the census and gazetteer, but caste, in its encounter with modern regime of power, became a convenient site for producing knowledge about the customs and traditions of India. On the question of nature of colonial knowledge production Bayly differs from others and registers his sense of discomfort with the term knowledge, for assimilation of power into knowledge, according to him, makes it

difficult to analyse the systems of communication and surveillance, or the gaps and contradictions within them (Bayly 1996:366). Instead he uses the term 'information' to show how the information order of the British, far from constituting a complete epistemological break with the pre-colonial order, actually relied heavily on it. However, what all the above authors agree, despite differences in their orientations, is the fact that after the 1857 rebellion there occurred a shift in the nature of colonial knowledge from textual to empirical and functional. The mutiny made it clear to the British that their knowledge about the colonised population was not only empirically inadequate, but far too unsystematic (Cohn 1997, Bayly 1996, Dirks 2001). In the wake of gazetteers and censuses as authentic institutional procedures information collected about the land and its people developed into an ever increasing pool of knowledge, disembodied, objective and carefully documented for future reference, transmission and reproduction.

Crook and the contributors in his book (1996) also address the question of transmission of knowledge and show, with the help of specific case studies from India, how transmission of knowledge – conceived in various forms such as story telling, print and media, pedagogy etc. – is inescapably linked to the issue of the production and reproduction of the perspectives of those responsible for transmission. Our discussion of gazetteers and surveys as modalities of knowledge production forms a backdrop against which I intend to trace briefly the history of how the Sundarbans was taxonomised into a world resource site. Here we are concerned with gazetteers not simply as instruments of colonial rule, but also as important vehicles for transmitting and reproducing the dominant image of the region in postcolonial India. In this section, I deal with the politics of ecology, which found its ultimate manifestation in the eviction of refugees from Marichjhapi island under Left-front rule in 1978.

Reclamation of the Sundarbans

The Sundarbans is a network of tidal rivers, creeks and islands. The whole region is a delta and exhibits the process of land-making in an unfinished state. According to Richards and Flint, Bengal offers a nearly endless frontier where land continues to be made afresh in the delta (Richards and Flint 1987:7). The region has been focused upon as being largely a forest, but human settlements are as much a

part of the landscape of the Sundarbans as the forests. These settlements have been grafted on to forests which were systematically cleared to make way for human habitation. Richard Eaton sums up the biography of the Sundarbans under colonial rule in the following words:

> At the advent of the British rule in 1765, the Sundarbans forests were double their present size... During early British rule, zamindars, or landholders, were allowed to continue reclaiming as much of the jungle bordering their plots as they had been doing under the Mughals. In 1828, however, the British assumed the proprietary right to the Sundarbans and, in 1830, began leasing out tracts of the forests... for undertaking the clearing operations preparatory to planting paddy. Then followed forty-five years of rapacious reclamation until 1875-76 when the government declared unleased forest reserved and placed it under the jurisdiction of the Forest Department (Eaton 1987:1).

Expansion of human settlement into the Sundarbans and reclamation of the wetlands accelerated under colonial rule. Reclamation during this period started with a conflict between the colonial state desirous of making inroads into these wetlands for the purposes of revenue earning and the landlords or cultivators exerting their proprietary right on the grounds that it belonged to them.

In the absence of a clear-cut boundary of the Sundarbans wetlands, landlords, in an attempt to extend their cultivated land, continued to 'encroach upon the forest'. The promulgation of the Permanent Settlement Act elsewhere in Bengal in 1793 did not change the Sundarbans scenario for the better. Under this Act the East India Company vested land ownership in a class of landlords who were required to pay to the colonial government a fixed tax proportionate to the size of their holding. In the event of their inability to pay the required revenue their land would be taken away and sold to another bidder. The Settlement did not resolve the status of those extensive "waste" lands or jungles, which in eighteenth century Bengal were not as yet cleared or cultivated.

A series of regulation acts were passed by the Company to tighten control over reclamation and revenue generation. With this aim in view Regulation IX of 1816 appointed a special Commissioner for the Sundarbans. A year later Regulation XXIII was passed, which vindicated the government's claim to the 'extensive tracts of land' in the Sundarbans on the grounds that these tracts had been 'waste' at the time of Permanent Settlement in 1793 and, therefore, not included in the Settlement

(Pargiter 1934:12). To counter the process of illegal land control the Commissioner had to embark upon a periodic survey and assessment of the lands mainly in the district of 24 Parganas where such encroachments on the forests were frequent.

Finally, to settle the matter once and for all the government passed Regulation III of 1828 declaring that, 'The uninhabited tract known by the name of the Sundarbans has ever been, and is hereby declared still to be, the property of the State' (Pargiter 1934:22). This was followed by an attempt on the part of the government to survey the Sundarbans boundary, which resulted in the establishment of the demarcating line of the Sundarbans region in 1832-33 by William Dampier, the Commissioner and Lieutenant Hodges, the Surveyor. As has been stated earlier in the introductory chapter, it is this Dampier-Hodges line that even today remains the authoritative demarcating line of the Sundarbans region.

Driven by the urge to earn more revenue from reclaimed wetlands the government came up with a new scheme in 1829, whereby lands free of any taxes to the government for twenty years were made available to wealthy individuals who had the means to carry out reclamation. Thus, the government's objective was two-fold: to attract new grantees and reduce the burden on the colonial exchequer of reclaiming the remote parts of the Sundarbans wetlands. Reclamation had been carried on by means of wood-cutters and coolies procured from Hazaribagh[1] in eastern India (Pargiter 1934:57). The promulgation of the Forest Act in the 1870s brought about a change in the colonial approach to reclamation, as the act prevented wholesale leasing of the remaining wetland forests of 24 Parganas and Khulna.

The reclamation history after the 1870s was replete with frequent changes in the rules of land grant to attract entrepreneurs or industrious peasants to undertake reclamation on behalf of the government. By the turn of the century it became apparent that reclamation in Bakarganj was more successful than that in Khulna (in Bangladesh) and 24 Parganas. In 1904 the Sundarbans Commissioner's report on the nature of lands leased in 24 Parganas showed that only forty per cent of wetlands had been reclaimed in the district (Ascoli 1921:122). The factor that inhibited extensive reclamation was the 24 Parganas' proximity to the sea and

---

[1] Hazaribagh is situated in what today is the newly formed state of Jharkhand in India. Tribals in the form of coolies were also hired from the Santhal Parganas. Both Hazaribagh and Santhal Parganas are parts of the Chotanagpur Plateau, a part of the erstwhile state of Bihar, which has one of the largest tribal populations in the country. The hiring of tribals as coolies is discussed in detail in chapter six.

exposure to abnormally high tides. Therefore, big embankments needed to be built for the purposes of reclamation, preventing the natural elevation of ground-level by a process of silt deposits (Ascoli 1921:121). This shows that from the early stages of reclamation embankments became an issue of considerable significance. In my subsequent discussions I will show how the question of premature embankment-building in the 24 Parganas is still a much discussed issue in the postcolonial development narrative of the West Bengal Sundarbans and used by ministers, administrators and developers as a pretext to justify present day human suffering. Thus, the reclamation history of the Sundarbans moved through various phases, demonstrating endless negotiations between colonial officials and landlords, investors and speculators.

Representations of the Sundarbans: from wasteland to wonderland

The primary and abiding interest of the colonial government in the agriculture of Bengal, or for that matter anywhere else in India, was the extraction of a part of the surplus in the form of land revenue (Chatterjee 1982:114). It is equally true that the Bengal forest rules came into force as late as the 1870s and in the period prior to that the East India Company in general viewed forests chiefly as limiting agriculture (Sivaramakrishnan 1997:75). However, exploitation and extortion were not the only ways in which the colonial authorities could engage with the landscape and resources of the colonised terrain. Even for the material needs of colonial rule complete and exhaustive knowledge about the land and its people was necessary. The colonial 'statemaking' (Sivaramakrishnan 1999) could successfully proceed only when the country was made available for knowledge through representations. To this end there emerged the new genre of writing in the form of gazetteers, statistical surveys and censuses.

The decade of the 1870s saw the publication of a series of gazetteers and statistical accounts of the areas, which came to be organised into districts. Such a task involved surveying topography, natural history, antiquities, taxation, local customs, diet and general living conditions. W. W. Hunter, a Bengal cadre of the I.C.S., responsible for compiling and surveying these district-level operations, in his preface to Volume I of the *Statistical Account of Bengal* quotes the Court of Directors as saying:

"We are of the opinion," wrote the Court of Directors in 1807 to their servants in Bengal, "that a Statistical Survey of the country would be attended with much utility: we therefore recommend proper steps to be taken for the execution of the same" (Hunter 1998 [1875]:xxiii).

Several years passed before the task of compiling the statistical survey of the districts was finally entrusted in 1869 to Hunter. Two years later, in 1871 Hunter became Director-General of Statistics and by 1875 his *Statistical Account of Bengal Volume 1* (Districts of the 24 Parganas and the Sundarbans) appeared along with several statistical accounts of different provinces in India. By 1881 the compilation of all the provinces was completed and this was followed by the publication of *The Imperial Gazetteer* in 1881 and *The Indian Empire: Its History, People and Products* in 1882.

The reason why I have touched on the colonial project of gazetteer writing is to show that the Sundarbans, just like other parts of the colonised land, was made available for statistical account and enumeration. As already mentioned, the objective behind such statistical accounts was to gain exhaustive knowledge about the land and deploy it for purposes of colonial rule. In realising this objective Hunter produced his first volume on the 24 Parganas and the Sundarbans. In attempting a statistical account of the Sundarbans Hunter tried to resolve the major dilemma that confronted the colonial administrators at various stages of the Sundarbans reclamation, namely, whether to convert the wasteland to a cropland through reclamation and settlement or deny people's claims to this land by declaring it a forested wasteland and therefore, the property of the state.

For Hunter, the Sundarbans was a drowned land, full of jungles and an abode of wild beasts. In short he portrayed the delta as a sodden wasteland (Greenough 1998:240). We already noted that from the beginning the Sundarbans emerged as a wasteland over which conflict arose between colonial state and the zamindars. By declaring the Sundarbans a wasteland Hunter placed renewed emphasis on the concept of 'waste'. This emphasis was placed in the mid 1870s when the terminology of 'waste' was being readied by colonial policy-makers to deflect native claims to the vast forests of India in order to move toward their exploitation (Guha 1990). In 1878 the Forest Act was promulgated and the heavily

wooded Sundarbans was also brought under the purview of the Forest Act (Greenough 1998:240). The Forest Act declared the unleased forest of the Sundarbans reserved and slowed down considerably the process of leasing out of forested lands for reclamation and agriculture. Thus, with the promulgation of the Forest Act the twin principles of exploitation and protection started, exploitation for the purposes of colonial rule and protection of the forests from the natives on the grounds that they did not know what scientific forestry was all about. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Sundarbans was depicted as a sodden wasteland and such depiction fitted well into the colonial project of gazetteer making and was geared towards the utilitarian purposes of colonial rule (Greenough 1998:240).

However, the question that remains is why Hunter chose to devote such attention to a place that was apparently so insignificant. Following Greenough, one could ask why Hunter chose to treat the Sundarbans as a single unit instead of incorporating it piecemeal into essays on the adjacent districts of 24 Parganas, Jessore and Bakarganj (Greenough 1998:247). There was more than the utilitarian need of gazetteer writing which was driving Hunter's account. According to Greenough, it was Hunter's Victorian sensibilities that led him to engage with the landscape and geography of the Sundarbans (Greenough: 240). To quote Hunter, 'The Southern portion of the Sunderbans, which comprises the jungle tract along the seashore, is entirely uninhabited, with the exception of few wandering gangs of woodcutters and fishermen. The whole population is insignificant' (Hunter 1998 [1875]:35). Thus, for Hunter, the humans were all 'immigrants' and the tigers and crocodiles were the only 'aboriginals' (Greenough: 247). Even when Hunter proceeded to catalogue human groups resident in the reclaimed areas, they appeared only after a longer list of snakes, birds and fish had been presented (Hunter 1998 [1875]:15). On the arduous task of reclaiming the land Hunter commented:

> So great is the *evil fertility of the soil*, that reclaimed land neglected for a single year will present to the next year's cultivator a forest of reeds (*nal*). He may cut it and burn it down, but it will spring up again almost as thick as ever (Hunter: 1998 [1875]:52; italics added).

For Hunter, the soil was fertile, but so awfully fertile that it was suitable for anything but cultivation and therefore, human habitation. Hunter's portrayal was equally powerful when it came to describing nature's fury:

> the inundation works cruel havoc among [the] low-lying isolated villages. The grain in their
> fields is spoiled; their houses are torn away... Liability to cyclones must put a practical limit
> to the extension of cultivation... the more the forest is cleared away, the smaller the barrier
> placed between the cultivator and devouring wave (Hunter: 1998 [1875]: 55-56).

In other words, Hunter seemed to be arguing that in a shifting terrain like this it was people who remained so to speak 'out of place', thus legitimising the attention he gave to wildlife. Where Hunter talked about nature the first thing that caught his attention was the tiger.

> Tigers are very numerous, and their ravages form one of the obstacles to the extension of
> cultivation... The depredations of a single fierce tiger have frequently forced an advanced
> colony of clearers to abandon their land, and allow it to relapse into jungle (Hunter 1998
> [1875]: 33).

Hunter did not mention in so many words that the Sundarbans was totally uninhabitable for humans, but his portrayal suggests that it was not very suitable. A few years later O'Malley described the Sundarbans as a region of total desolation where there was nothing to induce an influx of immigrants, and where even the fecundity of the inhabitants seemed to be sapped by endemic fevers and epidemic diseases (O'Malley 1913:26). A year later when O'Malley wrote his 24 Parganas District Gazetteer he opened his account with an exhaustive classification of the botanical and wildlife resources, assuming that a gazetteer of the 24 Parganas must start with a description of the flora and fauna of the wondrous Sundarbans (O'Malley 1998 [1914]).

The Sundarbans in postcolonial India

To present Hunter's account or O'Malley's views is not to suggest that they decided the status of the Sundarbans in definitive terms. However, in these portrayals lay the prospect of the emergence of the Sundarbans as a distinctive place in postcolonial India. In 1973 the Sundarbans forest was declared a tiger reserve because it is the only mangrove tiger land in the world. In 1984 the Sundarbans became a National Park. Soon after that in 1989 the Sundarbans was declared a

Biosphere Reserve in which large stretches of mangrove forest, containing sixty four mangrove species, the highest in a single area, had been conserved and wilderness maintained with its original ecosystem intact under the protective shelter of Project Tiger (Directorate of Forests undated:3). In the same year the Sundarbans was declared a World Heritage Site for its unique ecological endowments. Thus, the delta, which started its career as a wasteland under the colonial regime of reclamation, found its way onto the widely acclaimed list of World Heritage Sites.

If the decade of the eighties saw the Sundarbans attaining worldwide fame, the decade of the nineties witnessed the reprinting of colonial documents such as Hunter's statistical account and O'Malley's District Gazetteer by the Government of West Bengal. When the first volume of Hunter's statistical account of Bengal was reprinted in 1998 the section on the Sundarbans was reprinted separately. O'Malley's gazetteer was reprinted in the same year with the picture of tigers on the cover page indicating the importance of the tiger when talking about the District of 24 Parganas. When the West Bengal Government's Information and Cultural Department published its volume on the district of South 24 Parganas a tiger not only appeared on the cover page, but on virtually the first page of each article. The volume contains articles that discuss various aspects of the district, but the common theme that runs through them is the Sundarbans, its wild plant and animal life and the prospect of its conservation (West Bengal 2000).

Literature on the Sundarbans' ecology and tigers has been produced both at official and individual levels. Rathindranath De, the Forest and Tourism Secretary of the Government of West Bengal, promoting the Sundarbans to tourists, writes that the shimmering tidal waters bordered by mangrove trees are like a world of fantasy. The visitor suspends normal time and embarks on a slow and lazy cruise against the tide along estuaries (1990:1). In keeping with the needs of eco-tourism, a powerful concept in recent times, the Tourism Department has drawn up programmes involving the setting up of an interpretation centre at Sajnekhali Reserve Forest, a turtle breeding centre at Bhagbatpur and Bakkhali and watchtowers to view tigers at various places in the region (Directorate of Forests undated:18). Hunter's drowned land has thus been converted to suit the needs of tourism, an important source of revenue for the government. Others writing on the Sundarbans have also come up with equally powerful descriptions. Haraprasad Chattopadhyay in his *Mystery of the Sundarbans* describes the place as a peculiar

terrain where the man-eating Royal Bengal Tigers live as the jealous neighbours of the man-eating ferocious crocodiles, poisonous snakes, lizards, birds, sharks, honey-bees etc. Both the fury and beauty of the place has attracted the attention of tourists, ecologists and zoologists (Chattopadhayay 1999:6).

Similar portrayals can also be found in the writings of historians (Das, Muhkerjee and Chowdhuri 1981) and geographers (Guha and Biswas 1991; Banerjee 1998). Vernacular literature available on the Sundarbans has described the place in a more or less similar vein. However, this is not to suggest that writers have concentrated only on nature and natural beauty of the delta. Issues discussed include patterns of settlement, nature of population (Guha and Biswas 1991; Banerjee 1998; Das, *et al.* 1981), history of reclamation and of the people (Das, *et al.* 1981, Mondal 1995; Mondal 1997) and folklore and archaeological remains of the delta (Mondal 1999; Jalil 2000). Writers have also looked at the economic life and poverty of the people (Das, *et al.* 1981; Mondal 1995). The problem with the approaches adopted to the study of the Sundarbans is that the writers, in reflecting on the Sundarbans, have tended to treat the representation of the region as an abode of wildlife where human beings are secondary as given, and have not carefully analysed it.

In her book *Spell of the Tiger*, Montgomery describes her visit to the Sundarbans in the following manner:

> On the wide rivers you may see Gangetic dolphins rise, smooth as silk, their pink-gray dorsal fins rolling like soft waves along the water's surface. Dreamlike wonders: once, out near the Bay of Bengal, I glimpsed an olive ridley sea turtle as it surfaced for a breath of air... once you put your foot on the mud bank, you know: this is a strange place... a dangerous place... where you know, for the first time, that your body is made of meat (Montgomery 1995:2-3).

Montgomery provides a graphic description of a place where the tiger reigns supreme. But, what prompts her to write the book is the apprehension that the tiger is endangered. Her book, she believes, is an invitation to visit the land, a journey, she fears, people may soon be unable to make, for there may be no more tigers to attract people there. Montgomery refers to the poaching of tigers and overcrowding of the forest. It is the same apprehension that has led the state government to launch a programme for the protection of the tiger with funding from international conservation groups such as the World Wildlife Fund [WWF] (Mallick 1999). However, all this perpetuates the image that the tiger is of primary importance and

that people are secondary. Although the Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve was launched to strike a proper balance between the human and non-human inhabitants of what is considered as a unique eco-system, this balance is tilted in favour of the tiger.

When people entering the forest or creeks get killed by a tiger, it is justified by officials through recourse to the argument that the people have been 'intruders'. But when a tiger strays into inhabited islands, killing humans and livestock, it is believed the animal is hungry. Time and again concerns are raised over how starvation is causing the death of these supreme predators (Chaudhuri *The Statesman* 13.10.2002). Thus, people are portrayed as unauthorised occupants of a land whose exploitation of the forest resources endangers tigers. Catching tiger prawn seeds in the river causes depletion of marine resources. So the very presence of humans on the islands is a menace for the future conservation of the forested delta. Recently a volume entitled *Wilderness: Earth's Last Wild Places*, published by a team of over 200 international scientists, has identified the Sundarbans as one among thirty-seven of earth's most pristine areas critical to earth's survival and where over-exploitation of resources and human settlement are seen to be posing a threat to the place (*Hindustan Times* 5.12.2002).

It was to reflect on the biography of the Sundarbans that a conference entitled 'The Commons in South Asia: Societal Pressure and Environmental Integrity in the Sundarbans' was held in 1987 at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC. Although the focus was mainly on the Bangladesh Sundarbans, a number of papers presented dealt with the pre-partitioned Sundarbans of Bengal and its history of land reclamation. Some of the papers presented have been cited earlier in this section when the history of land reclamation was narrated. According to Herring, one of the contributors to the conference, the central dilemma in the Sundarbans development is that, unlike the tribal forests elsewhere in South Asia, where the conflict is between the utilisation of an existing habitat cum common-property resource and a historically novel statist claims to management, the remaining and shrinking mangrove forests have become an object of conflict between social forces seeking a livelihood and a state that seeks to limit that process (Herring 1987:9). Herring instructs us to revisit the biography of the Sundarbans during colonial times when the practicalities of colonial state-making went hand in hand with the representations made of the region. It is this representation of the

place as a natural wilderness that has implications for the way development of the region has been perceived in postcolonial India and explains why the view that the Sundarbans can be best developed if left to grow without hindrance has gained precedence. It is this development imperative that conceives of the place as suitable for tourists, visitors, botanists and zoologists, but not for its inhabitants, who are considered to be intruders.

The Marichjhapi incident: consolidating the image of wilderness

Nowhere was this development imperative more evident than in the Left-front government's policy towards the East Bengali refugees who settled on Marichjhapi island of the Sundarbans. Ever since the partition of India in 1947, refugee rehabilitation had been an issue that confronted the Government of India. Many East Bengali refugees who came to India from Bangladesh were settled by the central government in Dandyakaranya, a place that is part of Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. Before the Communist Party (CPI-M) came to power in West Bengal the refugees were given to understand that once the party came to power they would be settled in Bengal, a place where they would feel at home. During the B.C. Roy government of the 1950s and 60s, Jyoti Basu, the then opposition leader, presented their case in the Legislative Assembly and demanded later in a public meeting in 1974 that the Dandyakaranya refugees be settled in the Sundarbans (Mallick 1993:99).

In 1977 when the Left-front came to power they found that the refugees had taken them at their word and in 1978 some 150,000 refugees arrived from Dandyakaranya (Mallick 1993:100). The Left-front government saw these refugees as obstacles to the economic recovery of the state. They, therefore, went back on their earlier policy and most of these refugees were forcibly sent back. However, about 30,000 refugees managed to cross the riverine delta area and settle in Marichjhapi, an island lying to the northernmost forested part of the West Bengal Sundarbans. Within a short span of time the settlers set up a viable fishing industry, health centre and schools (Mallick 1993). However, the state government was not disposed to tolerate this. The Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu, who had once as opposition leader defended the refugees' case, now declared that the occupation of Marichjhapi was an illegal encroachment on Reserve Forest land, on the state and

on the World Wildlife Fund sponsored tiger protection project (Mallick 1999:115). The Chief Minister further stated that if the refugees did not stop cutting trees the government would take "strong" action. 'Enough is enough, they have gone too far' (Chatterjee 1992:298-99). When persuasion failed the government started an economic blockade. Thirty police launches were deployed to cut off their supplies. Their huts were razed, their fisheries and tube-wells destroyed. When the settlers tried crossing the river for food and water their boats were sunk. To clear the island the police opened fire killing thirty-six people. Forty-three more died of starvation, twenty-nine from disease and 128 from drowning when their boats were sunk by the police (Mallick 1993:101)[2].

The refugees were denied settlement and killed on the grounds that they occupied land meant for tigers. Mallick notes that there appears to be nothing on record indicating any pressure on the government for eviction from any environmental non-governmental organisations or non-state groups (Mallick 1999:115). Marichjhapi proves that people's needs are viewed as obstacles to Sundarbans development. During my fieldwork I found that Marichjhapi still survived in the public memory and the episode often came up in the course of my conversation with the villagers. According to them, the Marichjhapi incident was a reminder that in the Sundarbans, the tiger comes before humans. Reflecting on the killing of the refugees a villager once sarcastically asked me, 'So many human bodies in the rivers and creeks, it must have been a good treat for the tigers, what do you think?' His sarcasm was shared by many others who felt that living in the Sundarbans put them at the mercy of the tigers. But Marichjhapi had also taught them a lesson, namely that the government was not on their side and it was they who had to live with the tiger. Therefore, in a life that revolves around the forest, water and the narrow creeks, stories of human encounters with the tiger abound.

Life and Death in the Sundarbans

Most people living on the islands adjoining the forests live by fishing, honey-collecting and wood-cutting. The fishermen, wood-cutters and honey-

---

[2] For further discussion of the Marichjhapi massacre see N. Chatterjee (1992) *Midnight's Unwanted Children* pp 291-379 and also R. Mallick (1993) *Development Policy of a Communist Government* pp 97-103, and (1999) 'Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Marichjhapi Massacre' pp104-125.

collectors are referred to as the *Jeles*, *Moules* and *Baules* respectively. In the absence of industry, heavy or light, the forest is a major source of livelihood for the people. Almost every day people enter the forests in search of wood or honey or take their boats into the narrow creeks inside the forests in search of crabs or fish. As agriculture is quite uncertain in the Sundarbans catching crab or fish enables them to make some quick money.

Jeles go fishing in groups inside the forest. And often they lose colleagues or family members who fall prey to tigers. Gopal, a resident of Pakhirala, described how a tiger killed his brother-in-law. Gopal had accompanied his brother-in-law Arun and his father on one of their fishing expeditions to the forest. After they had crossed the river and anchored their boat near the forest bank, Arun was trying to throw the net into the water. Suddenly Gopal heard the villagers sitting on the opposite bank screaming at them. 'It seems', Gopal reminisced, 'they had been shouting to warn us for a long time. But we did not realise that a tiger was swimming towards us.' By the time they realised it was too late. All that Gopal could remember was that the tiger dragged Arun into the water and the water went red.

Mamata, a woman living in *Jelepara*[3] of Pakhirala, went with two of her neighbours to catch tiger prawns or *bagda*. Mamata was the one who was pulling the fishing net with her back to the forest. Suddenly two of her colleagues heard Mamata scream and could not see her any more. They went back to Pakhirala to inform their neighbours about what had happened and in the afternoon they returned to the forest in a bigger group. They all followed the trail of blood and finally found her body deep inside the forest lying naked, with one leg gone and her face disfigured beyond recognition. However, all these accidents do not prevent people from going into the forests in search of a livelihood.

Women and children catching tiger prawn seeds in the water are often attacked by sharks (*kamot*) that swim from the sea into the river during high tide. Baishakhi Sardar, a resident of Uttardanga, lost her right arm three years back. She was catching tiger prawns in waist-high water when a *kamot* attacked her. It caught hold of her right hand and dragged her down into the deep water. Baishakhi was brave enough to put up a valiant fight by hitting the shark with her left hand.

---

[3] *Para* refers to locality. Therefore, *Jelepara* means fishermen's locality

Ultimately the *kamot* gave up but in the process Baishakhi lost her limb. She confessed that she still goes to the river to catch tiger prawns.

The foregoing section has delved into the brief history of land reclamation in the delta and analysed the representation that has nurtured the Sundarbans' image as natural wilderness. Associated with this representation is a grand notion of sustainability that has put into circulation the view that the best way to develop the Sundarbans is to allow it to grow as the natural habitat of the tigers and crocodiles. It is this representation that most writers on the Sundarbans have treated as given and rarely analysed. Nowhere was this representation more brutally deployed than in the Left-front government's policy towards the settlers on Marichjhapi island. It is against this background that I proceed to look into people's concern with embankment and agriculture in the Sundarbans. If people's life around the forest and water is full of uncertainties, their life on the islands is not safe either. People are not sure when their houses will be blown away by a cyclone or their lands flooded with saline water. The soil is so erosion-prone that the river engulfs agricultural land, ponds and even houses. Agriculture on the islands of the Sundarbans is just as uncertain as people's life in the forests. Frequent embankment collapse and flooding destroy full-grown rice land during the monsoon. People's loss of land, ponds and houses due to embankment collapse has assumed menacing proportions in many parts of the Sundarbans. The subsequent chapters of the thesis will address these problems. However, before I concentrate on the problems of embankment and agriculture I turn to the second section of this chapter to discuss the methodology of my research.

Section II

Research Methodology

A distinctive and integral aspect of social research is its concern with the methods employed to gain knowledge about the problem under investigation.

Although there is an overlap between the 'what' (what to study) and 'how' (how to study) of social research, for analytical purposes I will try to separate the two and concentrate here on the method of studying the proposed research problem. My research method can be broadly divided into ethnographic fieldwork in different parts of the Sundarbans and archival research at the local and state level Public Records Offices.

Fieldwork in the Sundarbans and West Bengal

Gardner, in sharing her fieldwork experiences, cautions that fieldwork – usually in some far-flung location – is Anthropology's centrepiece, the ultimate transformative experience through which the students of the discipline must pass if they wish to call themselves anthropologists (Gardner 1999:49). For a person like me, who was born and has spent most of his life in Calcutta[4], the Sundarbans should not have appeared a far-flung place since Canning, the nearest port of entry into the Sundarbans, is only about two hours' journey from Calcutta. However, in the middle-class Calcuttan's world-view the Sundarbans always remains an enigma, a 'wonderland', where tigers stroll and crocodiles swim. In my teens I often came across people coming back disappointed from their winter visits to the Sundarbans and lamenting that they were unfortunate not to have had a single glimpse of a tiger. But this is not the only time when the urbanites encounter the Sundarbans. The people in Calcutta get to meet and perhaps hear the sad stories of poverty and sufferings of many Sundarbans islanders who arrive in the city in search of employment as domestics in urban households. We also meet such people at tea-stalls or roadside snack bar where they do odd jobs or run errands. It is through such interaction with them that we experience the Sundarbans in our everyday life. Their presence constantly reminds us how little we know about the land which we occasionally visit as tourists. Thus, the Sundarbans remains a remote place even when many of its inhabitants live right there in the city.

However, when it came to actually negotiating the terrain the Sundarbans became an even more far-flung place for me. The sheer size of the islands and the expanse of the rivers made me feel completely out of place. I remember the first

---

[4] Recently Calcutta has been renamed Kolkata. However, I have used the older name to avoid confusion.

time I crossed the river Matla at Canning. It was during low tide that I reached the ferry. The water had receded considerably leaving me with no other option but to wade through knee-deep mud. With two reasonably big bags I found myself struggling in the extremely slippery terrain, while people who had started behind walked past me and reached where the boats were anchored in no time. They kept looking back to catch a glimpse of what I was doing. I felt as if I was a stranger to the place; an alien to the people I intended to study. Although my destination was Rangabelia island, my fieldwork virtually started the moment I crossed the Matla. For me, then, carrying out fieldwork meant not only interviewing people and obtaining information, but also coming to terms with the topography and imitating what others did when they walked on the slopes of the riverbanks or got on or off the boats.

I carried out my fieldwork at three different places in the Sundarbans, namely Rangabelia, Nimpith and Canning Town in Gosaba, Joynagar II and Canning I blocks respectively (see map 2.4). It is important to note that this research is more of a regional than a village-based study, for the three development issues dealt with in the thesis are not the specific problems of a village or an island or two, but are central to the understanding of the entire region. Although these three issues have been analytically separated, by discussing them in terms of three different agencies in the Sundarbans, this does not mean that these issues are treated in complete isolation from each other.

I started my fieldwork in Rangabelia in August 2000 and continued to stay there until the middle of November when I moved to Nimpith to carry out research on the Farm Centre's project on sustainable agriculture. I conducted fieldwork in Nimpith between the middle of November 2000 and the end of January 2001. From February until the end of March 2001 I was at Canning town to interview the members of the Rationalist Association. As Canning is the port of entry into the Sundarbans one has to pass through it to reach Rangabelia or Gosaba. This gave me an opportunity to establish contact with the members of the Association long before I formally went and lived in Canning. After my fieldwork in Nimpith was over I frequently visited Rangabelia and Gosaba while carrying out field research in Canning because Rangabelia was the place where I had started my fieldwork and it was also the place where I was confronted with the problem of agriculture. It was my encounter with the farmers on these islands that led me to study the Farm

Centre's programme of sustainable agriculture. Similarly, it was while working on the islands of Gosaba that I became aware of the issue of the proposed nuclear power plant. Although Canning was the place where the anti-nuclear campaign of the rationalists started, yet the impact of the nuclear issue, as we will see, was by no means confined to Canning. Thus, from August 2000 to the beginning of April 2001 I carried out fieldwork in different parts of the Sundarbans.

During April and May 2001 I worked at the Public Records Offices in Calcutta. My objective here was twofold: looking at relevant documents regarding Sundarbans development and interviewing ministers, bureaucrats and a few influential left ideologues. However, I need to mention that while working at the Public Records Offices I continued to pay brief visits to Rangabelia, Gosaba and Canning as and when the need arose. I will discuss my fieldwork in these three places separately even though my visits to each overlapped in time. Therefore, I will provide a brief description of each place followed by an account of my fieldwork.

Rangabelia

Rangabelia island comes under Gosaba block, which is composed of ten islands separated from the mainland of West Bengal. Gosaba encompasses an area of 285.85 hectares. Rangabelia island is also a village panchayat that consists of four *moujas*[5] or revenue villages, namely Rangabelia, Bagbagan, Pakhirala and Uttardanga. A part of Rangabelia island is connected with the landmass of Gosaba island that comes under Gosaba block and constitutes a separate village panchayat. A road from Gosaba market leads to Rangabelia and then branches off into two directions, one going in the direction of Pakhirala and the other leading through South Rangabelia (*Dakshinpara*) to the Tagore's Society's main office on the island. From Calcutta it takes about five to six hours to reach Gosaba. A train service is available from Calcutta to Canning, which takes about two hours. At Canning, boat services are available across the river Matla to reach Dockghat in Basanti block of the Sundarbans. From Dockghat one goes by van to Sonakhali, from where it takes another two hours by boat to Gosaba island.

---

[5] *Mouja* or area here refers to a revenue village. A couple of such revenue villages constitute a village panchayat.

Rangabelia has the river Gomor flowing on its eastern and southern sides and the rivers Vidya and Melmel on the western and northern sides of the island respectively (see map 2.5). The problem of embankment erosion has hit Rangabelia very hard, especially North Rangabelia (*Uttarpara*)[6] and a part of Bagbagan village. Here a considerable stretch of landmass together with houses, ponds and agricultural lands have been encroached upon by the rivers Vidya on the western and Gomor on the eastern parts of the island (see map 2.6). The problem has become so acute that, according to the locals, the maximum width of land in North Rangabelia between the two rivers is 800 feet.

The inhabitants of Rangabelia island are mostly immigrants from Midnapore district of West Bengal, although there are settlers from Bangladesh in parts of Uttardanga and Pakhirala. Out of a total population of 12,211 (according to the 1991 Census), 5,332 are Scheduled Castes (SCs), 650 are Scheduled Tribes (STs) and the rest of the population identify themselves as backwards castes (OBCs)[7]. Although caste is not a significant factor in understanding individuals' location on the island, the location of a particular group at the edge or on the slope of the island is not entirely coincidental. *Harijan* (untouchables) pockets like *Ruidaspara* in Uttardanga are all situated close to the embankments. Formerly their profession was to make shoe leather out of the carcasses of cows. Because of the perceived polluting nature of their profession they were not allowed to stay in the centre of the island and were, therefore, pushed to the margins. Over the years interaction between the *Ruidas* families and the rest of the villagers has been on the increase, as the former are no longer engaged in their hereditary profession. During my interview with them I found that members of many families had moved to Calcutta to work in formal and informal sectors and those still living in the Sundarbans were engaged in farming and making products out of bamboo fibres. This change in profession was mainly due to the fact that cows were no longer plentifully available in the Sundarbans.

The social exclusion of the Ruidas is one example showing how caste consciousness permeates human relations in Bengali society. Similar such instances

---

[6] *Uttar* in Bengali denotes north and the word *para* refers to locality. Therefore, *Uttarpara* refers to a locality lying to the north of the island.

[7] OBC (other backward castes or communities) as a category for further reservation of jobs on a caste basis was recommended by the controversial Mondal Commission Report in India in the beginning of the nineties. This reservation policy exists to accommodate those who are considered as 'backward', but do not come under the category of scheduled castes and tribes.

of caste behaviour can be found in urban households of Calcutta. In her book (1999) Susan Bayly reflects on the subtleties of caste behaviour in the everyday life of modern India. Her examples of classified matrimonial columns in national dailies where caste often figures as a precondition for match making are as much a reality in Bengal as it is elsewhere in India[8]. The alliances advertised in the newspapers are generally arranged for educated sons or daughters of Bengali families. Therefore, caste is found to coexist with several other criteria on which the families put a high premium for selecting grooms or brides. In these columns much emphasis is given to the groom's profession. An entitlement to reside abroad has become much of an enticement (Bayly 1999:315). A doctor or an engineer or software professional settled in the USA is what makes a boy the most desirable candidate for the bride's family. In the case of a bride priority is given to her looks and complexion, and her ability to sing or dance are also considered as valued assets. Apart from skin colour and appearance, girls' education (preferably convent education) and family background are given utmost priority.

The issues discussed above clearly suggest the preponderance of several facets of modern urban life and their role in fixing marriages. However, these diverse factors do not necessarily make caste a less significant factor, for marriages, as noted earlier, are still arranged or negotiated along caste lines. Even when caste restrictions are diluted by phrases such as 'caste no bar' or 'open to inter-caste marriages', rarely, if ever, do alliances transgress the permissive boundaries of inter-caste marriage. In the so-called upper caste households inter-caste marriages take place mostly among Brahmin, Kayastha and Baidya and not beyond the confines of these castes. Here it is important to note the contextual specificity of Bengal where despite the continuance of the traditional *varna* hierarchy two caste groups, Baidya and Kayastha, enjoyed a very high social and political status along with the Brahmin (Mukherjee 1991). During colonial rule both Baidyas and Kayasthas had considerable access to education and held administrative posts or white-collar jobs along with the Brahmins. Thus, these three castes almost constitute a sub-elite in Bengali society (Mukherjee 1991:179)[9]. There is a view

---

[8] The Calcutta-based Sunday newspapers, English and vernacular, carry classified columns where marriage alliances are invited for Brahmin, Baidya, Kayastha, Sadgop (milkman), Tili (oilsmith), Tanti (weaver) and several other caste boys or girls. In most of the cases caste and *gotra* status (sub-caste) are specified to ensure marriage within the same caste, but outside the same *gotra*.
[9] For further discussion of the relation between the three caste groups see S. N. Mukherjee (1991).

prevalent in upper caste Bengali households that good-looking fair skinned brides and grooms are likely to be found only among the Baidyas, Kayasthas and twice-born castes[10].

In their recent books on caste both Nicholas Dirks and Susan Bayly (Bayly 1999; Dirks 2001) highlight caste violence in the wake of new reservation policies in India, especially following the Mondal Commission Report recommending further reservation of government jobs for backward castes. Immediately after the Mondal Commission Report was passed in the nineties there were instances of caste violence of various kinds in Northern India. University students and youths belonging to the upper-castes registered their protests against such government decisions by setting themselves on fire. People were also killed in the police firings and clashes that accompanied the widespread protest (Bayly 1999; Dirks 2001). It is possible that the implementation of the government policy also provoked Bengali caste sensibilities even though there were no instances of caste violence in Bengal. Here I am reminded of an incident that happened some years back in Calcutta. I was going with my friend to visit another friend in hospital. We were passing through one of the busiest thoroughfares in Calcutta and in haste my friend who was driving misjudged traffic policeman's signal. The traffic sergeant standing next to the constable stopped our car and asked my friend to show his driving licence. Having a look at it he suggested that instead of risking his life he should be more careful in future. The sergeant then asked him, 'But you know why I am letting you off without filing a case against you?' 'No, why?' my friend looked a bit surprised. The sergeant answered, 'Its because you are *Ganguly* and I am *Chatterjee*, both are Brahmins. In a world increasingly dominated by the *Mondals* and *OBCs* it is high time that *forward* castes should stand united.'

This invocation of a 'substantialised or homogenising imagined community' (Bayly 1999) of upper-castes – as reflected in the instances of violent self-immolation or the subtleties of caste behaviour of the traffic sergeant – can be experienced among peer groups as well. People of the same age group who are

---

[10] In this context one is reminded of a proverb that throws light on the ways the so-called upper caste Bengalis construct their caste identities. The proverb – *kalo bamun ebong kota sudra theke sabdhan* (beware of a dark skinned Brahmin and a fair Sudra) – states that one should avoid the company of a dark skinned Brahmin or a fair complexioned Sudra, for either is considered a rarity.

otherwise very friendly to each other can become conscious of their caste and caste identities may take precedence over friendship ties[11].

When we turn our attention away from the urban neighbourhoods to the Sundarbans we find that the government's reservation policy also has an impact on the way people construct their identities. The Mondals of Rangabelia island were migrants from Midnapore, a district of West Bengal, while the Mondals who live on Satjelia island were migrants from Bangladesh. The Mondals of Satjelia are scheduled castes whereas the Mondals of Rangabelia are not. I got this piece of information while talking to some of the Mondals of Rangabelia. In specifying their caste status they stated that unlike the Mondals of Satjelia they were not scheduled castes and their caste status was superior to that of their counterparts in Satjelia, but in the same breath many of them mentioned that they would be eligible for caste benefits under the new category of the *'OBCs'* (Other Backward Castes). The Rangabelia Mondals consider their culinary skills as superior to those of their counterparts in Satjelia. According to them, the Mondals of Satjelia do not use enough oil to cook or fry their food and therefore, the food remains bland, half-cooked and virtually inedible. In fact some of the Rangabelia Mondals, who are workers of the Tagore Society, wondered how I had managed to eat the Bangladeshi Mondals' food when I came back to Rangabelia from spending a few days at the house of a worker of the Society in Satjelia. Marriage relations exist between the two, but the Mondals of Midnapore (i.e. Rangabelia) are bride takers and do not give their daughters in marriage to the Bangladeshi Mondals whom the Midnapore people consider to be of lower caste status. Thus, contrary to the experience in the urban sector, where the reservation policy has rekindled a sense of community among the so-called upper-castes, in the Sundarbans, where there are very few members of the upper castes, there is a discourse which articulates that not all backward castes are the same, and that some consider themselves superior to others.

---

[11] Here once again I narrate an incident from my personal experience. I was in Delhi when the Mondal Commission Report was implemented. When I visited Calcutta later a friend of mine called Subodh, who lived in the same neighbourhood and was preparing for his civil services examination, came to me hoping that I could help him with some information about the examination. This infuriated my other friends who were equally friendly towards Subodh. They asked me not to help him with any information. They mentioned that Subodh had already got his engineering degree from the Indian Institute of Technology through the scheduled caste quota and now, by using the opportunities afforded by caste reservation he decided to walk into 'one of the prestigious services' in India. According to them, helping people like Subodh meant jeopardising 'our own' careers as members of the 'forward castes'. However, Subodh could not sit for the examination because a few months later he died from an incurable brain illness.

The exclusion of the Ruidas with which I started this discussion reveals the working of the *varna* hierarchy based on the twin principles of purity and pollution. Here the attitude of both the forward castes of urban areas and the backward castes of Rangabelia or Uttardanga (for example the Mondals) to *Harijans* is mediated by an awareness that treats them (for example the cobblers and sweepers) as essentially unclean or impure[12]. However, when we turn to the perceptions that the Mondals of Rangabelia have of their counterparts in Satjelia, we are reminded of Dipankar Gupta's thesis that, despite the prevalence of a continuous *varna* hierarchy built around a single criterion shared to a greater or lesser extent by all those that occupy the hierarchy, individual caste groups (*jatis*) exist as discrete categories (Gupta 1991). This is maintained by the enhanced valuation that members of a *jati* place on their customs and practices (Gupta 1991:138). For each *jati*, hierarchies also exist at the subjective level and hence there are as many hierarchies as there are *jatis*. In other words, members of backward *jatis* relate to each other in terms of their own hierarchies even though the *varna* hierarchy places them on the basis of abstract and generic principles. The case of the Mondals of Rangabelia shows how they respond to the opportunities afforded by the reservation policy of the government and also how they construct backwardness in their own terms. Gupta argues that a *jati* as a discrete group is able to sustain itself only in the presence another *jati* in a specific context (Gupta 1991:141). We can understand the Rangabelia Mondals and their imagined hierarchy when we see them in relation to their counterparts in Satjelia. Some of the Mondals of Satjelia are also members of the Tagore Society and there is constant interaction between the two. It is true that the Mondals of Rangabelia and Pakhirala do dominate the Society's activities. This is also due to the fact that the Society started its activities in Rangabelia and Pakhirala and therefore, in the initial years membership came mainly from these two areas.

Thus, caste does shape identities in a variety of ways even in a place like the Sundarbans whose inhabitants are primarily backward caste migrants from Bangladesh and south-western parts of West Bengal. However, this thesis, as has

---

[12] Bayly (1999) has discussed the urban dwellers' reliance on sweepers or the so-called untouchables for cleaning their toilets. Here it is worth mentioning the Bengali middle class households' attitude to sweeper (*mathor*) and cobbler (*muchi*). The sweeper is allowed inside the house, but every effort is made to avoid bodily contact with the person when cleaning gets underway. Similarly, if the cobbler, who comes to the urban apartments for shoe repairs or polish, ever asks for a glass of water he is served in a tumbler that is either identified as having fallen into disuse or not meant to be used by the members of the family.

been mentioned earlier, is not based on a village study, but rather concentrates on problems central to the understanding of the region. Accordingly, I have focussed mainly on aspects of identities that are found most relevant to the understanding of the problems considered in the thesis. By touching on the issue of representation of the Sundarbans in the first section I have shown how the islanders' identity as unlawful claimants to the place has implications for understanding the nature of the development policies pursued in the region. In the subsequent chapters my aim is to understand how the islanders in their various capacities – as voluntary workers, party leaders, panchayat members, *Beldars*, labourers, prawn catchers and farmers – respond to these central problems of the region. Thus while the thesis deals with the problem of agriculture, it does not approach the issue in terms of caste and differential landholding patterns. Rather, it views agriculture and embankment as constitutive of each other and therefore, seeks to understand the place of the former in a region prone to disaster and flooding. I now turn to the specifics of my fieldwork in Rangabelia.

On arrival in Rangabelia I found accommodation in a small room attached to what was known as the Society's training hall, which was on the ground floor of this two-storied building. My room on the first floor had plywood walls on two sides, asbestos on top and a wooden cot against the wall. I started my work during the monsoon. The roads and embankments were extremely slippery and muddy. It took me a couple of weeks before I could walk properly through the muddy terrain. People always came to my rescue whenever they found me struggling on narrow embankments. My precarious state worked at times to my advantage, as this allowed me opportunities to strike up conversation. Initially I spent time at two places in Rangabelia, namely the Society's office and the teashop adjacent to it and the embankment site in North Rangabelia where the labourers were engaged in embankment building and repair. These places were strategically important because going to the office and teashop allowed me to meet a number of people in one place. Since most of the workers of the Society lived in different parts of the island building contact with them, I thought, would enable me to have access to other villagers. Similarly, the embankment site in North Rangabelia was also a place where the villagers worked, shared gossip and talked to their neighbours who, would stop when passing by the site. Keeping in mind the question of people's

availability and privacy, I thought the best way forward was to hang around the construction site and get to know the villagers while they were at work.

Depending on people's availability amidst their other engagements and the physical constraints involved in working in a place like the Sundarbans, I often resorted to different methods of interviewing people. It ranged from interview to informal chat and sometimes I combined the two to make it less burdensome for my informants. I interviewed some core workers who occupied important positions in the Society's office in Rangabelia and at the health centre and women's unit of the organisation. I was also able to talk to some of the Society's field workers and village organisers from different islands of Gosaba block. In selecting field level workers for interview I ensured that I covered all those who were once or are now panchayat members. I interviewed Kanjilal, the founder of the Society in Rangabelia, on a number of occasions and at various stages of my research. I also recorded his public speeches delivered at the Society's meetings in the Sundarbans and consulted his writings in order to have a clearer idea about his views on the problems of the region.

I have already mentioned that I spent time talking to villagers who lived and worked as construction labourers in the vulnerable stretches of North Rangabelia and Bagbagan. About 150 families are likely to be uprooted in the event of another ring[13] embankment being constructed. About sixty families, anticipating this, have either built houses in the suburbs of Calcutta or are planning to move to other parts of the island where they own land on which they plan to build a new house. The rest of the families have no place to go to. Many of the individuals interviewed were also labourers engaged in repair and construction work in North Rangabelia. As these people were busy with various activities long interviews were not always possible. Since I specifically focussed on this vulnerable stretch of the island I kept revisiting this place and going back to my interviewees for further conversations.

I interviewed members of the tribal (Adivasi) population of Sardarpara[14] in Rangabelia. The Sardars I interviewed were Irrigation Department appointed Beldars who are entrusted with the task of maintaining embankments. I interviewed

---

[13] When a substantial stretch of embankment collapses the solution is to rebuild that stretch behind the old one that collapsed. This newly built stretch that is connected to the existing unbroken part of the embankment assumes the form of a semi-circle. The new stretch of embankment built behind the old one requires new land.

[14] Sardarpara refers to a locality inhabitated by tribals who bear the surname Sardar.

them both because their functions were relevant to my understanding of the problem of embankment and secondly, because the villagers often attribute the frequent embankment collapse to their inefficiency. After a few initial appointments had fallen through, the *Beldars* finally agreed to meet me in a group.

Here I must share a problem I faced in trying to interview people. In the early stages of my fieldwork I was a bit hesitant in taking out my note pad and jotting down the details of the conversation during the course of an interview. This problem was not so acute in the case of interviewing the workers of the Tagore Society because ever since the Society had grown into prominence, Rangabelia had become a happy hunting ground for media people and researchers. For the workers of the Society, at least those based at the organisation's office in Rangabelia, conversing with an outsider was more or less a routine affair. However, while conversing with the villagers I found it difficult to take notes. On the one hand, I wanted to capture 'the immediacy of the moment by jotting down words as they are spoken and details of scenes as they are enacted' (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995: 20); on the other, I thought that taking out pen and paper would upset the rhythm of the conversation and disturb the spontaneity of the interviewee's narration. Initially I relied more on my memory to take mental notes of the interviews and struggled throughout the day to preserve those 'headnotes' (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995: 19) until I got back to my room in the evening to finally put them down in some comprehensible form. As my fieldwork expanded this became an increasingly difficult proposition and finally I abandoned this in favour of a more convenient method of jotting down field notes at the time of an interview.

I visited *Ruidaspara* in Uttardanga, a settlement where the *Harijans* live. There are two *Ruidas* settlements in Uttardanga – *Dakshinpara* and *Purbapara*[15] lying to the south and east of Uttardanga respectively. I interviewed *Ruidas* families in both these localities. During our conversation they drew my attention to the way saline water was flowing through hidden holes in the embankment and contaminating the fresh water of their ponds. I spent time talking to the families who lived on the edge of vulnerable embankments and caught tiger prawn seedlings in the rivers, a major source of income for several families in the Sundarbans.

---

[15] *Dakshin* and *Purba* in Bengali refer to south and east respectively.

Interestingly, prawn seed catching is a profession pursued largely by women and this profession, as will be seen, has assumed significance over the years in the Sundarbans. Therefore, it was necessary that I talked to some of the women who caught prawn seeds. Prawn seed catching constitutes an important source of livelihood even though it is not viewed favourably either by the government departments or by organisations like the Tagore Society or Ramakrishna Ashram because of its perceived threat to the ecosystem of the region. This is not to suggest that prawn catching is the only issue affecting women's lives. There are other issues concerning women's self-employment and to this end the organisations like the Tagore Society and the Ramakrishna Ashram have set up women's centres to give training towards self-employment. I was able to converse with some of the trainees and those who were in charge of the centres both at Rangabelia and Nimpith. However, it was difficult for me as a male researcher to meet women in their houses or to discuss a range of gender issues – significant in terms of understanding women's position better – with which a woman would have felt more comfortable had the researcher been a female. Therefore, more often than not it proved convenient and strategically significant to talk to women at their work places and about issues related to their work. But I did try to address the question of women's health, especially their reproductive health, by examining the instance of a sterilisation clinic organised by the health workers of the Tagore Society (discussed in chapter four).

On the eastern side of Rangabelia right across the river Gomor is Satjelia island of Gosaba block. In 1999 the embankment collapsed in the village of Dayapur in Satjelia. The Irrigation Department issued an order for the building of a huge 1500 feet wide ring embankment, which rendered about ninety families landless. I managed to meet and interview some of these families. Their narratives were significant in that they threw light on the way the network of the panchayat leaders and Irrigation engineers operated in a particular instance.

I interviewed some of the thirteen panchayat members of the Rangabelia Village Panchayat, belonging to the RSP and members of Gosaba Village Panchayat which was controlled by the RSP, since out of 15 seats the RSP occupied 11, the CPI-M 3 and 1 seat belonged to the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party). Apart from interviewing some of the panchayat members I also interviewed the Sub-divisional Engineer and a Section Officer at the Gosaba Irrigation Office.

Interviewing these party and panchayat leaders was interesting. On most occasions appointments fell through because they were not to be found at the appointed time and place. Even when they made themselves available they were usually found surrounded by their party colleagues and cadres and would discuss several other things with their colleagues while conversing with me. Sometimes the leader answered my questions and then, turning to his colleagues and cadres, rhetorically asked whether what he said was correct or not.

Nimpith

Joynagar II, one of the thirteen blocks of the Sundarbans in the South 24 Parganas, encompasses an area of 175.18 hectares. However, unlike Rangabelia, Joynagar is not composed of islands and a railway connection exists between the block and the rest of West Bengal. The block has under its jurisdiction forty-nine *mouja* or revenue villages, which come under ten village panchayats. Nimpith, the second area of my fieldwork, is part of Futigoda Village Panchayat, which consists of six *moujas*: Futigoda, Nimpith, Srirampur, Banamalipur, Dosrabhagwanpur and Tulsighata. According to the 1991 Census, the population of Joynagar II is 177,355 and that of Futigoda Panchayat is 15,994.

From Joynagar-Majilpur station van-rickshaws are available to go to Nimpith. Although Nimpith is part of Futigoda Village Panchayat, it looks more like a town with a metalled road running from Joynagar station through Nimpith to Jamtala, at the other end of Joynagar (see map 2.7) from where one can cross the river Matla to gain access to the other parts of the Sundarbans. The Ramakrishna Ashram is a couple of yards away from the market place in Nimpith. It is along the metalled road that one can find not only the Ashram and its other units such as the Farm Science Centre and Vivekananda Institute of Biotechnology (VIB), but also the Futigoda Village Panchayat and Joynagar Block Development Office. The Farm Centre, a few metres away from the Ashram complex, has a demonstration farm (about forty hectares) where it grows vegetables or paddy and rears livestock on an experimental basis.

I informed the Ramakrishna Ashram about my intention to do research, but upon my arrival I realised that the authorities were so concerned with the reputation of the organisation and, therefore, wary of outsiders that they would not let me be

on my own. Sadananda, the monk heading the organisation, welcomed me and then pointing to a person standing next to me said, 'Amal (fictitious name) is on our staff and he will be there to help you. You are new to the area, so the best way forward is to rely on someone who knows it.'

The hint was quite clear. Amal was there to keep a close watch, lest I get the opportunity to talk to strangers. Under these circumstances fieldwork became something of a battle of wits for me. Under Sadananda's instruction I was lodged in the Ashram's guesthouse. Amal followed me like a shadow and I had to find opportunities to outwit him and strike up conversations with people who lived in the neighbourhood. All my meetings with the functionaries or scientists of the Farm Science Centre were prearranged and time bound. Once when I told Amal that I would like to talk to the villagers in and around Nimpith, he agreed and asked, 'When would you like to meet them? Is the day after tomorrow fine with you?' I nodded. 'Okay, then you come to my office around 9:30 in the morning', he said. When I reached his office in the morning to my surprise I found his office crowded with villagers sitting on the floor. 'Come in', said Amal. 'They are all waiting for you and more are likely to come.' There were already ten to twelve people in that small room. Two chairs were placed in one corner of the room, Amal occupied one and the other was kept for me. 'Some more! Where will they sit?' I could not contain my amazement. 'Don't worry we will manage', said Amal. 'That's why I removed my table.' Before I could recover from my surprise I heard Amal introducing me, 'This gentleman has come from London to do research on the Sundarbans. Tell him what your problems are and what KVK [Farm Science Centre] is doing for you.' And then looking at me he said, 'I told Maharaj [monk heading the organisation] that you wanted to talk to the villagers. I suggested him that its no point taking you to those far-flung areas, instead its better to have them come here. Maharaj agreed.' 'Don't worry', he assured me further. 'They are all grassroot people.'

Not only did Amal bring the villagers over to his office, but he steered the conversations that followed. It was obvious that Amal would choose people whom he and his organisation knew. Yet throughout my conversation with the villagers Amal remained active at two levels: to control and structure the villagers' responses he kept putting words in their mouth and at the same time in an attempt to filter the interviewees' responses he kept turning to me and explaining things on their behalf.

A situation such as this is the last thing that a fieldworker wants. But the way it was organised and the circumstances in which I interviewed the villagers threw light on the way an organisation tries to produce consensus among its clients or beneficiaries. The other thing that struck me was Amal's use of the word 'grassroots'. This usage here not only sensitises us to the way the discourses of development, sustainability, grassroots etc. have penetrated the rural sector, but also helps us understand how locals perceive and construct their locality. For Amal, Nimpith, together with its monastery and Farm Science Centre is no longer the 'grassroots'. The authenticity of 'grassroots' lies in its far-flungness, which the villagers' readiness to squat on the ground was supposed to represent. Although Amal himself hailed from Nimpith, he distanced himself from his neighbours in that he no longer occupied the 'grassroots', but effectively surveyed and managed it.

I interviewed the agricultural scientist of the Centre. My first meeting with the scientist was pre-arranged, but later I did manage to visit him for a second interview. He narrated in great detail how the Farm Centre had been attempting to make technologies suit the context in which it was operating. I also managed to talk to the scientist in charge of the Vivekananda Institute of Biotechnology. Among the monks, I interviewed Swami Sadananda, the Secretary heading the organisation at Nimpith, and Swami Kalyanananda, who was in charge of the Farm Science Centre. During my stay in Nimpith I also had occasion to attend farmers' training course organised by the Farm Centre where I met a few participant farmers and talked to them. I also interviewed some of the women working in the women's unit of the Ramakrishna Ashram. In addition to interviewing members of the organisation, I collected the Annual Reports of the Ramakrishna Ashram and the progress reports of the Farm Centre.

Once I finished interviewing most of members of the organisation I left the guesthouse of the Ramakrishna Ashram, as I realised that my presence there was no longer desirable. But I continued to visit Nimpith on my own to interview the panchayat members of Futigoda Village Panchayat and to complete my work there. I used to catch an early train from Sealdah station (in Calcutta) for Joynagar and spend the whole day in Nimpith and come back late to Calcutta. This continued for sometime, as the panchayat members were not always available for interview.

Canning Town and the Rationalist Association

Canning, situated on the bank of the river Matla, is a small sub-divisional town of the South 24 Parganas and is part of Canning I block of the Sundarbans. The Rationalist Association is an organisation in Canning town, whose office is just opposite the Canning railway station and situated on the road leading to the ferry where boat services connecting the islands of the delta are available. The members of the organisation mostly hail from Canning town. As the organisation does not have any access to government funds it subsists mainly on locally raised resources such as donations and subscriptions.

As already mentioned, I started my fieldwork in Canning in February 2001, but prior to that I had made contact with the members of the Association and informed them of my plan to conduct fieldwork. During my meetings with the members they suggested that I could stay at the house of one of their members called Bhakta. Bhakta is an artist by profession and runs an art school near Canning railway station. I stayed at Bhakta's house and conducted my fieldwork in Canning. I started by interviewing some of the members of the Association available in Canning. Members who had been associated with the organisation since its inception shared with me their past experiences. By throwing light on the organisation's early years and anti-nuclear campaign Bhakta also helped me considerably in my fieldwork.

In addition to interviewing the members I concentrated a lot on the pamphlets and leaflets of the Association. I obtained the Rationalist Association's pamphlet on the nuclear issue while I was in Rangabelia, but in Canning I came across posters and pamphlets that the Association published in support of its snake shows. From the Association's office I collected newspaper reports on the rationalists' involvement with the nuclear issue and also managed to pick up a few photographs of the demonstration organised in Calcutta to protest against the power plant. While carrying out fieldwork in Rangabelia and Gosaba, I interviewed the local RSP and CPI-M leaders to understand the local leadership's perceptions about the proposed plant. In Canning I met local CPI-M leaders in the party office and interviewed them in order to know their responses to the Rationalists Association's campaign against the proposed nuclear power plant.

Politics in the Sundarbans

At this point I provide a brief account of the electoral politics in the Sundarbans, highlighting the dominance of the left parties such as the CPI-M and the RSP in areas where I carried out my fieldwork. The CPI-M and the RSP party organisations in the district resemble more or less the Left-front's party structure described earlier in this chapter (see figs. 1.4 on p. 65 and also 1.3 on p 55). However, it is important to mention that the Local and Branch Committee structures are subject to modifications and improvisations depending on the parties' mass base in an area. In many ways the political scenario of the district of South 24 Parganas, of which Sundarbans is a part, is complex. The picture of the district that emerges at the Assembly level is interesting, for the CPI-M, the dominant partner in the ruling Left-front elsewhere in West Bengal, has not been able to obtain a majority of seats in the recent most Assembly Election even though it has dominance at the panchayat level. At the Assembly level the Trinamool Congress (TMC), formed by Mamata Banerjee in 1998 after her falling out with the Congress (I), has a slender majority (the TMC has won fourteen seats while the Left-front has twelve) over the Left-front in the district which is here constituted only by the CPI-M and the RSP. Out of the twelve seats won by the Left-front, the CPI-M has won in three constituencies of the Sundarbans (Canning East, Mathurapur and Patharpratima) and the two constituencies of Gosaba and Basanti belong to the RSP (see Table 1.1 on p. 66). The CPI-M's position is further weakened by the fact that in two Sundarbans constituencies (Joynagar and Kultali) the Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI), a left party, which is not part of the Left-front, is dominant (see Table 1.1 on p. 66). Thus, even when in constituencies of the Sundarbans the Left-front has an edge over the non-left parties (such as the TMC), it is important to remember that the RSP's continued dominance in Gosaba and Basanti has substantially contributed to the consolidation of this electoral edge (the Left-front together got five compared to the TMC's three seats; see Table 1.1 on p. 66).

The RSP's dominance in Gosaba and Basanti makes the party a strong electoral force to reckon with, so much so that at the parliamentary level the Joynagar constituency (which includes Gosaba, Basanti, Canning, Kultali and Joynagar) belongs to the RSP on the basis of seat sharing with the CPI-M. The RSP's dominance in these two areas has also had a significant impact on the

Interviews Conducted and Records Collected at Local and State Government Offices

Among the local public records offices I visited in Rangabelia, Gosaba and Nimpith were those of the village panchayats, Block Development (BDO), Block Land and Land Reforms (BLLRO) and Gosaba Irrigation. I collected block profiles and relevant data on Gosaba block from the BDO. Relevant information was also collected from Rangabelia and Gosaba Village Panchayats. From the BLLRO I collected the records of families owning more than three acres of land. At Nimpith I visited Futigoda Village Panchayat Office and Joynagar Block Development Office to obtain maps and relevant information.

Accessing records or documents at the local public records offices posed problems. The first office that I approached on my arrival in Rangabelia was the Block Development Office, which lay to the south of Gosaba island, about a kilometre and half away from Gosaba market. It was a double storied building, which also housed the office of the Gosaba Block Panchayat. I wanted to meet the Block Officer for which privilege I had to wait outside the office for quite some time. Seeing me waiting, one of the members of the staff asked why and, when I told him my intention to see the Block Officer, he said, 'What are you waiting for, go in.' 'How can I go in without his permission, he may be busy inside', I said. 'Well, in that case you will never be able to get in even if you wait here the whole day', he said and disappeared. When I did manage to get into the officer's room I found him encircled by a host of villagers and trying to settle a dispute. The officer did not pay much attention to my presence and continued dealing with them. When they finally left the room he turned towards me. I showed him my letter of identity and sought his permission to see the records. 'Nothing is possible today. You come next week and I will inform my staff', he said. When I met the concerned member of staff at the office the following week he looked extremely busy and, drawing my attention to a huge trunk on the floor, said, 'The records are all there, but you need to sort them. If you want to consult the records you have to come on a Tuesday or Wednesday. But I doubt if they would be authentic enough.'

After several unsuccessful visits, I finally managed to catch the Land Reforms Officer at his office just as he was ready to leave. He had a quick look at my letter of identity and said that he could allow me to consult the records, but that

there was not enough space in his office for an outsider to work as it was housed in a dilapidated building, with light barely penetrating into the rooms. Finally, I was allowed to work in a room meant for settling land disputes. As this was the room where people gathered to get the officers to act and settle their disputes, I got to witness land disputes while drawing settlement maps or collecting records.

Since this thesis involves an analysis of the government's approach to Sundarbans development I also visited Public Record Offices in Calcutta in search of plan documents and government records. I worked at the West Bengal State Legislative Assembly Library to consult budget speeches of three Departments: Irrigation and Waterways (IWW), Sundarban Affairs Department (SAD)[of which Sundarban Development Board (SDB) is a part] and Panchayat and Rural Development (PRD). The Sundarban and Irrigation Departments' budget speeches were consulted to see how the Sundarbans and its problems are represented in these documents. I managed to obtain copies of the Irrigation Newsletters from the department's office. The budget speeches of the Panchayat Department were consulted to see if there was any mention of the NGO sector in the left discourses on rural development.

I collected Administration Reports of the Sundarban Affairs Department from the departmental office in Calcutta. The State Planning Board and State Secretariat Library were two further government institutions that I visited in search of plan documents and government literature on the Sundarbans. I have used some of these documents in the first section of this chapter in my analysis of Pargiter and Ascoli's revenue history of the Sundarbans and of Hunter and O'Malley's gazetteers. The rest of the documents, such as the Government of West Bengal's departmental reports, have been used in my analyses in the third and seventh chapters.

The State Institute of Panchayat and Rural Development (SIPRD) had some information concerning recent attempts on the part of the Panchayat Department of the Government of West Bengal to coordinate the activities of voluntary agencies or NGOs. Although most of the documents on this issue had not yet been made public, I was allowed access to the proceedings of a workshop and a few newspaper reports on the issue (which I have used in connection with my discussion on relations between the Left and NGOs in the seventh chapter). The inadequacy of published materials on the issue was supplemented by interviews with the Minister-in-charge

of Panchayat and Rural Development and a member of the State Planning Board. The other relevant interviews with public officials included those with the Ministers of Irrigation and Sundarban Affairs at their offices in Calcutta. I also had the opportunity to interview Radhika Pramanik, a CPI-M Member of Parliament (MP) from the Sundarbans in connection with the nuclear power issue in the Sundarbans (discussed in chapter five).

Observation as a Method

Apart from interviewing and conversing with people, panchayat members and members of voluntary organisations in three different places, I also relied on observation as a tool for carrying out my research. In recent years the practice of observation as a method of recounting people's lives has come under close scrutiny (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Clifford 1988). Subsequently, this issue became a recurrent theme in the writings of anthropologists concerned about the objectivist nature of the discipline grounded in the tradition of observation (Thapan 1998). Concerns have also been expressed about the assumption of the natural superiority of fieldwork based on the sensory perception of the anthropologist (Gupta 1995; Gupta and Ferguson 1997) or observation as a way of abstracting an autonomous subject from a separate object (Hekman 1990). According to them, an act of observing people 'in the field' does not only contribute to the distancing of the anthropologist from the people and the resultant objectification of the 'other', but establishes an unproblematic correlation between the physical presence of the researcher 'in the field' and the generation of 'authentic' ethnographic data.

Without undermining the significance of this rethinking within the discipline what I wish to argue here is that ethnography is a process of intense engagement with people in the field enabling the researcher to learn and unlearn many things. Using observation as a reflexive tool does help the researcher come to terms with his or her self, and with the inadequacies of his or her biography. I mentioned earlier in this section how my urban middle class biography shaped my perceptions of the Sundarbans and how my urbanity came in my way when I crossed the river Matla. However, that was not the only time I realised the inadequacy of my biography. Time and again my fieldwork in the Sundarbans proved how important

it was to discard one's cultural baggage. In my view, one of the ways in which I could attempt to transcend my biographical limits was by observing people living their everyday lives. Observation was necessary not only to collect information, but also to come face to face with the nature and pattern of life in a place that once I, like many others in Calcutta, associated mainly with forests, tigers and crocodiles. I gained considerably by observing how people walked on the slippery embankment by transferring bodily balance to their toes, which they used as hooks to hold firmly on to the muddy surface, or how the workers ran up and down the slopes of the riverbanks during their construction activities. I observed the young boys and girls as they caught prawn seeds in the river and how their trained eyes could make out the seeds from the seaweed that stuck in their nets.

Observation as a method is also helpful when people prefer to remain silent or non-committal. On many occasions people's silence or my observation of their bodily gestures made me realise the limitations of the interview method. Since the present research is an attempt to understand the processual dimension of NGO activity I thought it would be useful to observe how activists or volunteers interacted with the local people or elicited their opinions and initiatives in an attempt to strategise their development programmes. To this end I attended some of the public meetings of the Tagore Society and a public meeting of the rationalists in Canning. I also attended farmers' training sessions organised by the Tagore Society and Farm Science Centre, Nimpith. I observed the labourers while they dealt with the contractors and Irrigation engineers.

Ethical Issues and Fieldwork

Just as the postmodern turn in the social sciences problematises the centrality of 'observation' as a tool of anthropological research, it also involves a rethinking around the ethical principles concerning fieldwork. With the subject-centred reason characteristic of Enlightenment modernity being challenged for its epistemic privilege over all other local, plural and often incommensurable knowledges (Chatterjee 1995), can there be a universal ethics guiding anthropological research? If there is one, whose interests does it serve? In other words, the question of ethics has come increasingly to be linked to the politics of knowledge and representation (Caplan in press). The ethics of anthropological

intervention for the purpose of preserving local voices and traditions (Mair 1984) is fraught with problems, for it raises the much contested question of who defines such tradition and in whose interest is such definition pursued? Scholars like Escobar hold anthropologists working in development responsible for making and marketing development anthropology which, according to them, has led to the reproduction of the dominant discourses of development. For Escobar, development anthropology masks anthropology's will to power. Each case of underdevelopment thus studied becomes a pretext for further development-oriented interventions leading to further objectification of the so-called developed (Escobar 1991).

The postmodern critique, although problematising the pursuit of ethics in the face of the inescapable problem - the objectification of the subjects of study - also requires us to re-examine our role as anthropologists; to ask who we are and what our intentions are before meaningful research can be undertaken. Escobar's anxiety as revealed in his critique of development anthropology concerns the stakes involved in anthropological research and the question of responsibility anthropologists have towards their informants, for anthropological research entails the possibility of destroying the autonomy of the individual, of providing more ammunition to those already in power (Barnes 1979:22). The problem of objectification often arises out of the constraints posed by time-bound and funded research projects. There occurs a tension between the research commitments of the ethnographers and their desire to engage authentically those people whose worlds they have entered (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995:20). In carrying out my fieldwork, at times I was less purposeful and gave my informants and myself more space and time for interaction. At other times, the instrumental imperatives of research tended to creep into my fieldwork.

During my fieldwork there occurred a cyclone and flooding in the Sundarbans. Shortly after the cyclone I accompanied some of the workers of the Tagore Society during their visit to the worst-affected areas of Hingalganj block. From the point of view of my research this was the most crucial time, for I could see in this an opportunity to record the immediacy of people's perceptions. But this was also the time when people's lives were in shambles. An intervention, no matter in what terms it is couched, raises an ethical dilemma. However hard one tries to remain sensitive to people's cause, the very act of learning about people's life

experiences at a time when they were suffering and the prospect of recovery looked bleak, inescapably turned them into objects of research.

Since the question of ethics is inextricably linked to the politics of knowledge and representation, research that seeks to approach development through voluntary initiatives raises the question of how to depict the organisations and their people who were also facilitators of my research. It was through these organisations that I gained an entry into these areas. Yet evaluating the organisational efforts both at the collective and individual levels involves a critique that tends to produce an uneasy relation between the results of the research and the path traversed to arrive at them. Here the end does not always justify the means. These individual members are also the people with whom I have developed friendships. To ensure that there is no breach of trust I have anonymised my informants while presenting their narratives. To ensure the autonomy of the narrators and maintain the confidentiality of their narratives I have in certain cases needed to alter or reconstruct the situations in which perceptions were articulated or practices encountered.

Different organisational activities presented in the thesis are analysed not with a view to discrediting the organisations, but to highlight the constraints within which they attempt to 'do development'. If I have presented corruption stories circulating in the locality to document villagers' perceptions about the organisations, I have also dwelt on the achievements of the organisations under study, especially their role in highlighting the problems of underdevelopment in the region. Moreover, the issue of corruption is also inescapably connected to the problem of funds. It is the need for funds which explains why these organisations are obliged to negotiate with government structures at a variety of levels and thereby compromise their positions. I have tried to achieve some sort of balance in highlighting both the achievements and predicaments of the organisations.

In this thesis, I have discussed corruption mainly as a discourse that informs the ways in which people accuse each other and perceive the activities of the state or voluntary agencies. I have used the term as a discursive concept primarily for two reasons. What I came across during my fieldwork were different stories where state agents, officials and political functionaries were depicted as being involved in allegedly illegal transactions of various kinds; stories the villagers narrated to accuse each other. However, it was also my identity as a researcher that proved to be an obstacle to my access to hard evidence of corruption, for transactions that are

perceived as illegal were not meant to be made in my presence. In other words I could hear stories of allegedly illegal transactions, but hearing these stories did not necessarily lead to me being a witness to corrupt practices or illegal transactions. Following the trail of these stories I often visited the local offices such as Irrigation or Land Records or Growth Centre of the Sundarban Affairs Department. While working at the land records office I often encountered land disputes being settled by the settlement officer, but nowhere could I possibly be a witness to illegal transactions. Rather, during my visit to these offices or conversation with officials I managed to collect the officials' narratives of how they found it difficult to function due to entrenched political and vested interests at the local level. The panchayat leaders in their turn attributed many of the problems concerning embankments and land loss to the alleged malpractices of the contractors, engineers and labourers.

Thus, my note-book was replete with corruption stories even when I could not lay my hands on hard evidence of corruption. Although I have highlighted specific instances of corruption – instance of large-scale felling of trees in Gosaba (see chapter seven) or of construction of huge embankments (see chapters three and seven) or of unlawful selling of oil seeds in the market (see chapter three) or of a voluntary agency collaborating with the government medical officer in organising large-scale sterilisation of women (see chapter four) or of illegal fish trading (see chapter six) – and mentioned how labourers deceive the contractors and engineers by not digging adequate amounts of earth (see chapter six) or how *Dafadars* appease engineers with a bottle of honey or two (see chapter three), my access to these incidents of corruption, in most cases, was via diverse stories or narratives woven around the issues[16]. Instead of looking for hard evidence of malpractice or illegal deals being struck in the local public offices, I choose to rely on these diverse stories as significant pointers to or differing perspectives on how development is carried out in the region. These stories or diverse accounts made corruption appear as if it were a blame game where people in various capacities – as state agents, political representatives, voluntary workers, farmers, labourers, *Beldars*, prawn-catchers – accused each other of indulging in corruption.

---

[16] There were a few exceptions when I witnessed the sterilisation camp or met a *Dafadar* waiting to give an engineer a bottle of honey or when the labourers explained to me how they deceive contractors by not digging sufficient earth.

Another reason why I analyse corruption largely as a discourse has to do with my intention to protect the interests of those who shared their perceptions with me or confided in me. Viewing corruption in this way enables me to focus not so much on specific instances of corruption, in which an individual or an official is implicated, as on the way it is talked about within the locality. This then allows me to discuss the issue without pointing the finger of blame at any particular organisation or individual or state official. Moreover in presenting corruption as a discourse or as a way of understanding the state at the local level, I have tried to look at the local-level officials from their point of view. As we will see, the lower-level officials have their own stories to share. With their jobs presenting them with little or no prospect for upward mobility they tend to make most of their present position. For fear of reprisals against those who were hesitant to share with me their experiences I decided not only to anonymise the narrators, but to tone down the accusatory tone in their narratives. I have done this because West Bengal is the place where I live and work and Sundarbans is where I would like to continue my research. There is always a possibility of some of the members of the organisations reading my thesis and concluding that I had tarnished their image. To ensure that there is no breach of trust between my informants and me and that the field remains congenial for future researchers, it has been necessary to tackle the corruption stories with the utmost care and consideration.

Thus, treating corruption as a discourse enables me to strike a semblance of balance between the question of representation of corruption and the ethics of social research. However, to treat corruption as a discourse is not to argue in support of corruption or lessen its significance as a problem. To say everyone accuses everyone else or is involved in corrupt practices is not suggest that corruption renders power differentials redundant. As we will see, the corruption narratives of the villagers clearly reveal their problems and also the constraints within which they enter into relations with those having power. The relations remain hierarchical and exploitative for the people. One cannot remain oblivious to the problems which the increasing experience of corruption poses for the process of democratisation of society. I shall address this in the next chapter and more specifically in the concluding chapter of the thesis.

Publication is another issue that the ethics of social research should concern itself with. In other words, should the production of knowledge, the central goal of

research, be pursued at all costs (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983:263)? As stated earlier, in providing accounts of the activities of voluntary agencies or presenting the narratives of different categories of people my aim has been not to discredit people or their organisations. Rather, my intention has been to depict them as realistically as possible, highlighting their achievements and predicaments. To depict them as apolitical entities would be to omit the contexts in which they are operating. They are as much embedded in local politics as the other agencies of development such as the state departments and panchayats. However, making these diverse stories and practices of development public or available in print involves a decision that can be taken only after consulting those who have a stake in the publication. I may need to discuss some parts of the thesis with the concerned members of the organisation to seek their opinion before I decide to publish. I have raised a few ethical dilemmas not to provide solutions to them, for the problems that ethics poses for social research are almost irresolvable. Ethical dilemmas are intrinsic parts of social research and to be able to share some of them is to learn to live with an uneasy conscience, to continue to be worried by them (Barnes 1981 as quoted in Akeroyd 1984).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed two issues: the making of the Sundarbans as a World Heritage Site and the methodology of the present research. The first section of the chapter focuses on the statist representation of the Sundarbans as a unique ecological site. When the Sundarbans reclamation started there existed a conflict between the colonial state desirous of making inroads into the wasteland and the larger society where the landlords played an equally significant role in advancing their claims over this land. I have discussed how colonial gazetteer writing and the Forest Act of 1878 won the battle on behalf of the colonial state. The excesses in Hunter's representation have determined to a considerable extent the status of the Sundarbans in postcolonial India. I have discussed how the Sundarbans has acquired fame and attracted global funding in the decades of the seventies, eighties and nineties. It is this global funding for conservation that has further contributed to the legitimating of the statist represenation of the Sundarbans. This is what makes writers like Mallick wonder why there was no dissenting voice raised by voluntary

groups when the state government unleashed violence against the settlers of Marichjhapi island.

As has already been mentioned, linked to this image is the grand narrative of sustainability raising concern about how to keep the integrity and wilderness of the place intact. At this broad level, sustainable development of the Sundarbans means preserving its integrity and wilderness and keeping people's needs at bay. However, our journey into the Sundarbans does not stop here. Rather, the thesis continues to look into how the state government departments concerned with people's development and embankment maintenance function, how voluntary agencies operate through recourse to what they consider to be the sustainable development of the region and last, but not least, how people make their lives sustainable in the delta. To visit these diverse notions of sustainability is not to ignore the image of the Sundarbans as a unique ecological site. Rather, my objective in the following chapters will be to see how this image is constantly revisited in the negotiations that unfold among these agencies around diverse development issues. It is with this aim in mind that I proceed in the next chapter to explore the working of the two state government departments, namely Sundarban Affairs and Irrigation.

In the second section I discussed different aspects of my fieldwork. I have shown how I gained access to members of the voluntary organisations, local political leaders, government officials and people in general. My visits to the local and state level public record offices enabled me to provide an account of how these offices functioned and what perceptions the officials had of their role in the generation of official statistics or data about the region. This brief description of the functioning of the state at the local level serves as a background to the subsequent enquiry into the workings of state departments at the local level. I have also discussed how using observation as a reflexive tool helped me document people's perceptions and practices. Research of this kind raises certain ethical issues some of which I have attempted to address in this section. My fieldwork exposed me to the kind of life people lead in this land of tigers. By focusing on my methodology I have attempted a brief depiction of that life, on which the subsequent chapters of the thesis will reflect at a variety of levels.

DISTRICT PLANNING MAP SERIES   SOUTH 24 PARGANAS

DISTRICT PLANNING MAP SERIES

SOUTH 24 PARGANAS
WEST BENGAL

NOTE
JADAVPUR PS
REGENT PARK PS
THAKURPUKUR - MAHESHTALA Block

NORTH 24 PARGANAS

HAORA

CALCUTTA
ALIPUR
BEHALA
THAKURPUKUR
MAHESTALA
SONARPUR
BISHNUPUR
NABAKHALI
BISHNUPUR
BARUIPUR
FALTA
KARANDANGA
DIAMOND HARBOUR
MAGRAHAT
MANDIRBAZAR
MANDIRBAZAR
BARUIPUR
JAYNAGAR
KULTALI
BASANTI
GOSABA
MATHURAPUR
KULPI
KULTALI
KAKDWIP
KAKDWIP
PATHARPRATIMA
NAMKHANA
SAGAR
BUDHAKHALI
BUDRANAGAR

MEDINIPUR

BANGLA DESH

HERUBHANGA R.F.
MARICHJHANPI
NETIDHOPANI R.F.
CHAMTA R.F.
SUNDARBANS RESERVED FOREST
GOSABA
HARIBHANGA RIVER
MATLA R.F.
MATLA RIVER
THAKURAN RIVER
SAPTAMUKHI RIVER
BIDYA RIVER
RAIMANGAL RIVER
DATTA RIVER

New Moore Island
(Purbasha)

BAY OF BENGAL   Map 2.4

Map of South 24 Parganas and the Sundarbans: The Squared and
Numbered Areas Indicate the Places of Fieldork

Scale 1 : 250,000

Kilometres 5   0   5   10   15   20   25 Kilometres

Note 1   District headquarters of South 24 Parganas is located in Alipur Calcutta, district hospital is in Regent
Park, Calcutta and district Veterinary hospital is in Behala, Calcutta.

Note 2   The territorial waters of India extend into the sea to a distance of twelve nautical miles
measured from the appropriate base line.

Sources : N.A.T.M.O., Survey of India , Census of India , aerial
photographs , I.R.S. satellite imagery , other government
agencies,field surveys

© GOVERNMENT OF INDIA 2000   First Edition 2000

REFERENCES

Boundaries : international
district , subdivision
police station , block
C.M.C , reserved forest jurisdiction
Names of headquarters : district   ALIPUR
subdivision   KAKDWIP
police station , block   KULPI BHASA
Names of settlements : urban , rural   RAJPUR Tone
Names : other important places, forest   Bakkhali MATLA R.F.
Roads : metalled according to importance
urmetalled, pack track
Broad gauge railways with station
Main power line , Telegraph & Telephone line
Bridge : road , railway
Rivers & streams : perennial , Canal , Lake
Settlements : urban , rural , Orchard
Arable land , Forest , Swamp
Temple , Mosque , Church
Market , Police station , Educational institution
Hospital , Dispensary , Veterinary hospital
Post office , Post & Telegraph office

Printed by N A T M O Printing Division, Cal 46

KACHUKHALI

CHOTO MOLLA KHALI

UTTAR DANGA

BAGBA GAN

RIVER BIDYA

BIPRADASPUR

RAN GABELIA

SAT JELIA

GOSABA

PAKHIRALA

RIVER GOMOR

RESERVE FOREST.
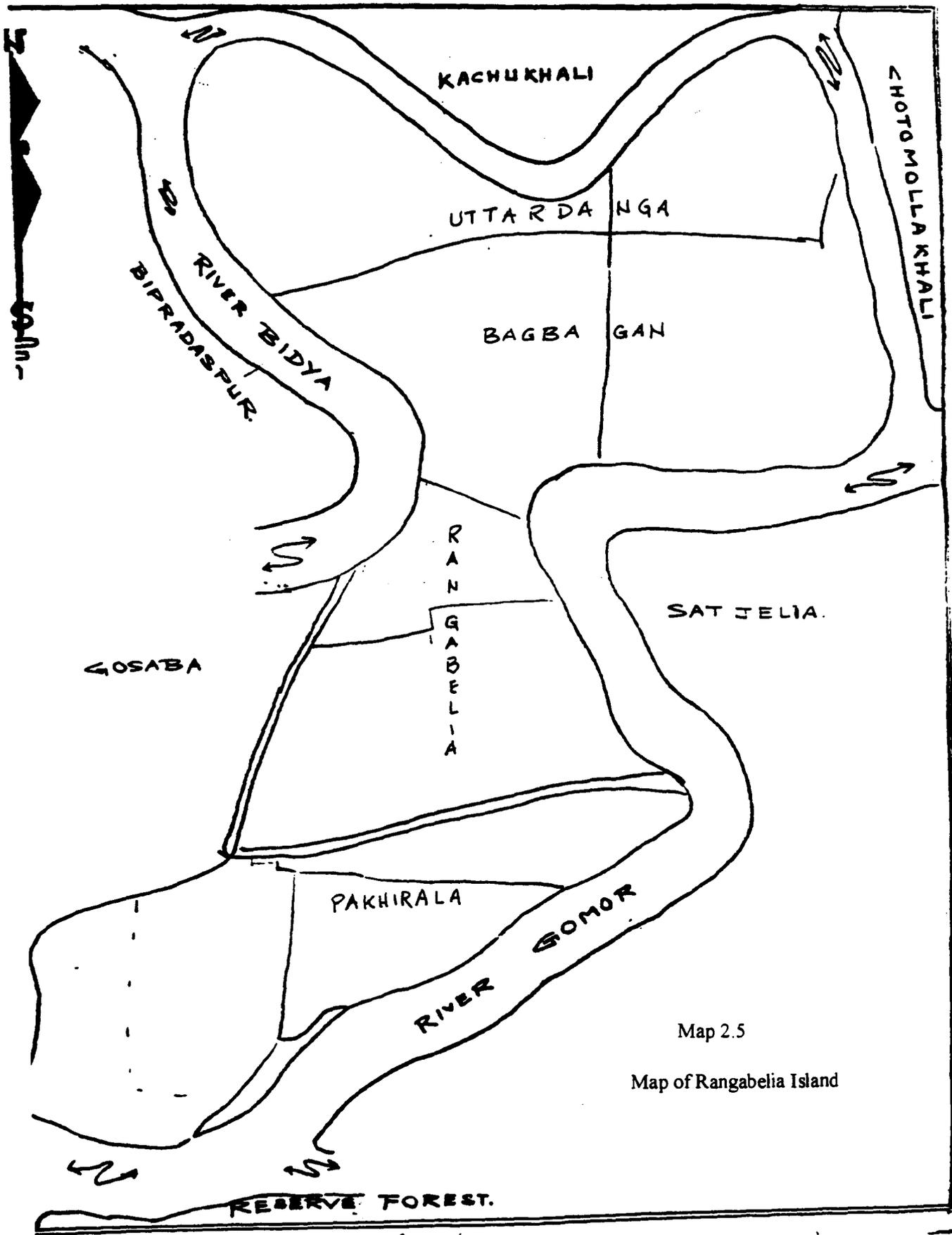
Map 2.5

Map of Rangabelia Island

RANGABALIA

গ্রাম জা - র্যাংগাবালিয়া নং ৯২ সিট নং৯

কোছিয়াং মাৰ্ড নং ×

থানা - সন্দেশখালী

জিলা ২৪ পরগণা
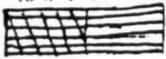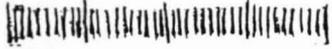
Rangabelia no 92 Sheet: 1
Police Station: Sandeshkhali (NOW GOSABA)
District: 24 Parganas (NOW S.24 PARGANAS)

(MANMATHA NAGAR)
মন্মথ নগর নং৪৫

(BAG BAGAN)
বাগবাগান নং ৯৩

(VIDYA RIVER)
বিদ্যা নদী

(GONOR RIVER)
গোনোর নদী

(SAT JELIA
সাতজেলিয়া
নং ৯১
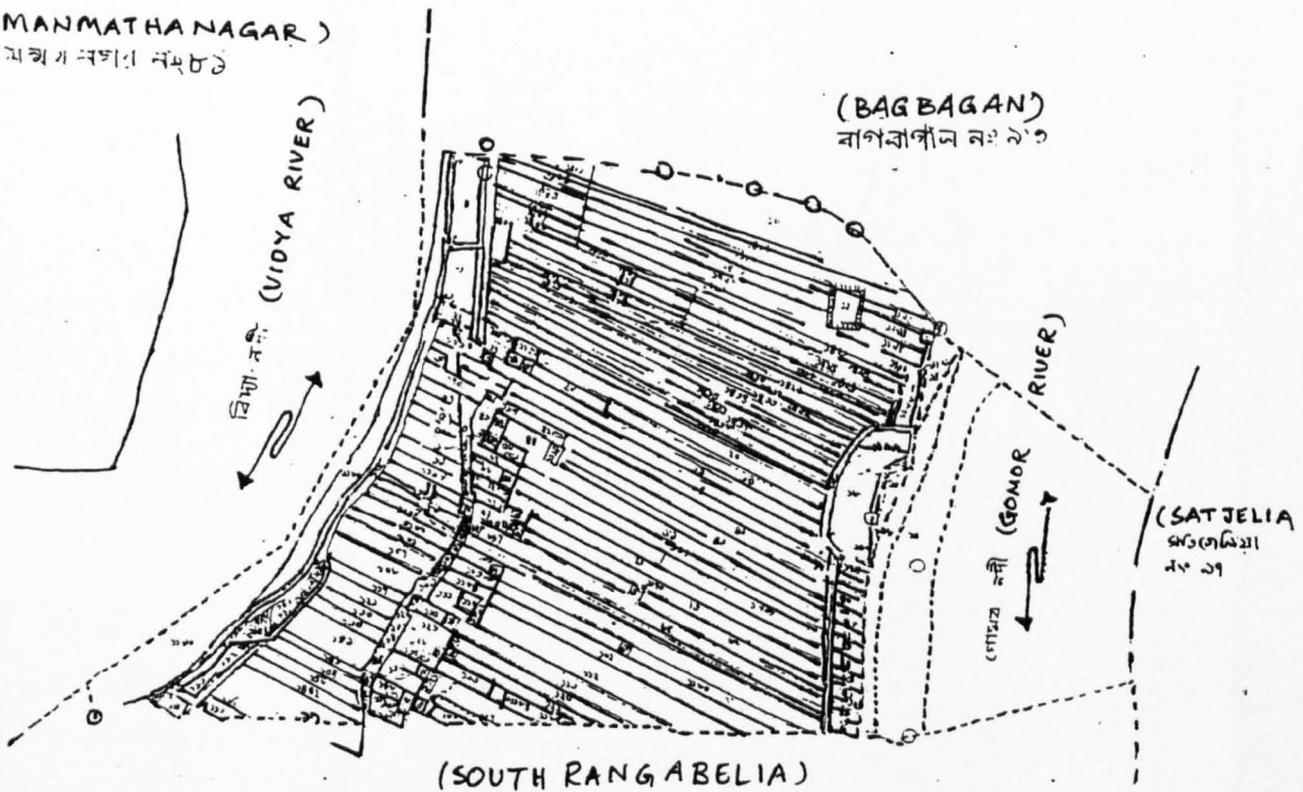
(SOUTH RANGABELIA)

Map 2.6

Map showing the erosion prone area North Rangabelia

Map 2.7

The Futigoda Village Panchayat Map showing Nimpith and a few relevant institutions
along the Joynagar-Jamtala metalled road

Chapter Three

Development in the Sundarbans: Two Government Departments

Introduction

While sitting on an embankment I started a dialogue with Bhagirath Patra, a resident of North Rangabelia, one of the most severely affected parts of Rangabelia island, where the rivers Gomor and Vidya are eroding banks on both the eastern and western sides. Bhagirath, one of the worst victims of land erosion, is now left with less than a *bigha*[1] of land where he has his house and tiny plot of paddy land. Before I could proceed to interview him he stopped me and tried to draw my attention to the vast tract of uninhabitated landmass of Manmathanagar island right across the river. Pointing towards the opposite bank, Bhagirath told me, 'You know we used to stay there. We had our *bilan jami*[2] where the river is flowing now. You can't make out where our house was, it was far beyond the new land that has surfaced and added to the landmass of Manmathanagar. This is the fourth ring embankment that we have seen during our lifetime. Everything is gone. The river and embankment are eating into our strength.'

It would be misleading to consider Bhagirath's narrative as unusual since he shares his agony with many other Sundarbans islanders. The shape and contour of Rangabelia are changing almost everyday. Standing on the embankment it is difficult for an outsider to visualise what the island looked like in the past when the landmass on its western side extended far beyond where the river Vidya is now flowing. It is even more difficult to imagine how the new land or *char* that has emerged out of the siltation process on the other side of the Vidya could once have belonged to the people of Rangabelia. But that is how people in Rangabelia

---

[1] *Bigha* denotes a local unit of measurement, which is roughly equal to a third of an acre. Although *bigha* does not constitute a part of the official system of measurement, people prefer to use this for calculating their cultivable land and other immovable property.

[2] *Jami* or land is mainly of two types: *bilan* and *bastu*. Whereas *bilan* refers to marshy land where paddy is grown, *bastu* denotes the land where one's house is situated.

perceive their lost land. They believe that the land that they lost due to continuous erosion and multiple ring embankments has contributed to the increasing landmass of Manmathanagar. But they cannot call this new land their own; they are denied access to it as it belongs to a different panchayat.

As Bhagirath was talking to me I saw Adhar Mondal, another resident of North Rangabelia walking towards us. He brought to our notice fresh breaches that had appeared in the embankment at *Uttarpara*. There were now two anxious faces. 'This part' – a huge chunk, almost twenty meters long and leaning towards the river – 'is definitely going to go tonight', said Chandan Mondal who lived in the same area and worked as a labourer at the embankment site. 'How can you be so sure?' I asked him. Chandan smiled and answered, 'I am thirty-three now, we have been living with these breaches since our boyhood.' 'You come to my house tonight', suggested Tapan Mondal whose house was quite close to where the breaches occurred. 'Nothing is going to happen during high tide as the water pressure will be too high now. Tonight low tide will be quite late. If you can stay awake we will come back to see how the river takes away this chunk in the course of its retreat during the ebb tide.' 'At this rate', continued Tapan, 'soon we will have the fifth ring embankment. But I am not sure if we can afford any more ring embankments. The Irrigation people told us that the maximum land available between the rivers on both sides is 800 feet.' 'We are about 150 families living in this narrow stretch of land', added Chandan. 'We do not know what fate has in store for us. We are fast losing the land beneath our feet.'

While the people of Rangabelia and the Sundarbans in general continue to lose the ground beneath their feet and are destined to see their paddy fields flooded with saline water or meet with the failure of their winter crops for lack of fresh water, Sundarbans development remains a widely debated issue, both in the public sphere as well as in government departments. Today such debates over the Sundarbans are intensified by the knowledge that this area is a World Heritage Site, primarily due, as already stated previously, to the presence of endangered species such as the Royal Bengal Tigers and to the fact that it is the largest mangrove swamp in the world. In 1996 the Directorate of Forests of the Government of West Bengal organised a seminar on the Sundarbans in Calcutta in memory of William Roxburgh who was not only the father of modern botany in India, but was the first Indian botanist to have made plant collections from the Sundarbans.

In 1999 the proceedings of the seminar were published in the form of a volume called *Sundarbans Mangal*.[3] Kiranmoy Nanda, the Minister-in-Charge of Fisheries, Government of West Bengal, spelt out the purpose of this specialists' meeting in the following manner:

> A million dollar question [that] peeps in our minds how Sundarbans is gradually losing her treasures. The Sundarbans, largest delta of the World, is the much talked about natural resource site and it is a privilege for the Indians to have such wonderful place of natural grooming and wildlife habitat. With the increasing population pressure the ecosystem of the Sundarbans is losing its balance slowly. The number of wildlives ... have gone down considerably owing to deforestation and the destruction of natural habitats. The occasional visit of "Royal Tigers" to the adjoining villages in search of food is a proof of the above statement (Nanda 1999:10).

The seminar provided an opportunity for botanists, zoologists, geologists and ecologists to update their knowledge. The issues debated ranged from ecological balance to sustainable mushroom spawn cultivation. Specialists even dwelt at length on the technicalities of embankment construction and their protection against the tidal waves. This was clearly an attempt by the specialists to make the Sundarbans part of the global discourses of conservation and sustainable development. In 2001 the Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve became part of Unesco's world network of biosphere reserves and as a result the state forest department now expects an initial grant of 3 million dollars from the UN Development Programme (UNDP) for the protection of the Sundarbans (*The Statesman* 4 April 2002). Today the World Heritage Site also attracts funding of Rs 3 crore (£428,571 approx.) from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to conduct research on the development of infrastructure, soil conservation and a livelihood programme for the people in the area. The Department of Sundarban Affairs will collaborate with the ADB on this. Thus deals are struck and development agendas are prepared in the government departments. Yet a development agenda such as this excludes the worries, anxieties and voices of Bhagirath, Tapan, Chandan and others because they are not deemed to be worth the attention of the community of scientists and policy makers.

---

[3] *Mangal* refers to mangrove. Since the seminar mainly revolved around the Sundarbans eco-system and mangrove vegetation, the volume was entitled *Sundarbans Mangal*.

Against this background the present chapter attempts to interrogate the rhetoric and practices of the two main government departments that are concerned with Sundarbans development, namely Sundarban Affairs and Irrigation and Waterways (IWW). I will also endeavour to examine how these two departments have addressed the problems of agriculture and embankments respectively. To this end I will analyse documents such as departmental budget speeches, annual reports and utilise interviews with ministers, departmental officials and bureaucrats, on the one hand, and focus on the practices of local-level engineers, field officials and functionaries, on the other. I will also supplement this with accounts of local people's perceptions about the activities of these two government departments in the Sundarbans. Thus, while this chapter is largely concerned with the state, it does not examine it at the level of policy or programme alone. Apart from looking at various official documents and policy resolutions, I will attempt an ethnography of the state's functions at the local level and show how the state is manifested in the activities of its lower or field-level officials.

In recent times there has emerged a vast body of literature approaching the state from the point of view of how it functions in the wider society (Handelman 1981; Abrams 1988; Brow 1988; Nugent 1994; Gupta 1995; Fuller and Beneï 2001). Thus, the state is no longer viewed from the point of view of the oppositional model of state-society relations, but from a perspective that encompasses dimensions of cooperation and conflict in state-society relations (Nugent 1994). Breman (2000), in his study of state policies for the welfare of the rural proletariat in Western India, has provided a rich and insightful ethnography of the activities of the government labour officer charged with surveying and documenting cases of underpayment among the rural labour force. The officer's dealings with the villagers – employed as agricultural labourers by big landholders – during his visit to the surveyed areas offers an insight into how the state operates through its officials and how its presence is felt in the wider society.

Similarly Hansen's (2001) study of the police checkposts (*Chowkeys*) in Muslim areas of Mumbai shows how policemen maintain law and order in the neighbourhood by striking deals with the politicians of the ruling party (rightist Shiv Sena) on the one hand and the Muslim underworld on the other. Hansen shows how the Shiv Sena, the police and the underworld – the real perpetrators of violence in the city (Hansen 2001:63) – have contributed to the growing segmentation of the

statist authority. In a more or less similar vein Ruud (2001) studies the role of politicians of the ruling CPI-M party in a village in West Bengal. These political leaders, according to Ruud, are the representatives of the state and their activities demonstrate the working of the state at the village level. By providing an ethnographic account of a village panchayat meeting convened to elect a village committee Ruud shows how the local leaders use their clients and cadres to manufacture the consent of the villagers, a consent that seems of crucial importance to the legitimacy of the leftist state. Tarlo (2002) reconstructs the Indian state during the period of national emergency between 1975 and 1977 by focusing on over three thousand personal files at a municipal office in Delhi and points to the banal bureaucratic workings of the state at the local level. She shows how people who were victims of slum clearance secured their housing rights by undergoing sterilisation or motivating someone else to do so. By uncovering this forgotten story of national emergency Tarlo tells us in minute detail how the clerks of the local municipal office manipulated records and concealed facts about slum clearance.

By highlighting the everyday practices of the lower-level officials and functionaries the writers have drawn attention to the ways in which the state is made visible at the local level. It is this body of literature that will provide the basis for my understanding of the state departments' approach to Sundarbans development.

Sundarban Development Board: Aims and Objectives

The Sundarban Development Board (SDB) was constituted in 1973 'for integrated and accelerated development' of the Sundarbans region. The functions entrusted to the Board at the time of its constitution were:

- Formulation of integrated programme for effective utilisation of local resources,
- Co-ordination and supervision of execution of plans and various projects for the development of the region,
- Review and evaluation of the progress of implementation and to make adjustment in policies and measures as the review may indicate (Sundarban Development Board 2000:4).

The Board in its formative stage came under the Development and Planning Department (DPD) of West Bengal with the Minister-in-Charge of the Sundarbans Area Branch of Development and Planning Department being the chairperson of the Directorate. Apart from the minister as Chairperson, the Vice-chairperson of the West Bengal State Planning Board (WBSPB) and three members of the State Legislative Assembly (MLAs) from the Sundarbans area were exofficio members of the Board. Although created for the very specific development needs of a region, the Board thrived almost incognito under the over-arching administrative structure of the Department of Development and Planning. Except for two short reports, both published in 1979, the Department published no major account of the development activities of the Board. For many years the Board remained simply an adjunct of the Department of Development and Planning and the situation did not change for the better even after the Left-front came to power in 1977. It took the Board almost twenty-three years to publish its first comprehensive development report in 1994. And it was only after the Directorate became part of the Department of Sundarbans Affairs (SAD) (see the organisational chart of the department in fig. 3.5) in 1994 that the report was published. No wonder that in his foreword to the first Report S. S. Chattopadhyay, the then Secretary to the Development and Planning Department, wrote, 'It is customary for a Government department to bring out an Annual Report regarding its functioning once a year. The custom has, however, become almost forgotten. It is, therefore, heartening that Sundarban Development Board has brought out an Annual Report on its own initiative' (Chattopadhyay 1994). In the preface to one of its administrative reports R. P. Samaddar, former Member Secretary to the Board, described SDB as a 'distinct development agency' (Samaddar 2000) catering to the needs of the deltaic region. Yet in fact, the early history of the Board shows that no sooner was the Directorate (Board) formed, than it lost its credibility and initiative as a distinct development agency.

The Department of Sundarban Affairs, of which the Board is now a part, has so far published four such *Administration Reports* covering a period from 1981 to 1999. A recurrent issue, which runs through all the administration reports, is that the Board since its inception has been plagued by scarcity of funds. The first development fund that came the Board's way was from the World Bank-sponsored International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). These funds came around

Organisational Chart

Sundarban Affairs Department

Minister-in-Charge (Sundarban Affairs Department)

Secretary (Sundarban Affairs Department)

Special Secretary (Sundarban Affairs Department)

Project Director
and
Member Secretary
(Sundarban Development Board)

Joint Secretary
(Sundarban Development
Board)

Engineering Circle
Headed by
Superintending
Engineer

Planning,
Monitoring and
Evaluation
Division

Social Forestry
Division

3 Range officers

Fisheries
Division

Accounts
Division

Administrative
Division

3 Project offices

27 Growth Centres

Division-I

3 Sub-divisions

13 Section Offices

Division-II

3 Sub-divisions

10 Section Offices

Division-III

2 Sub-divisions

8 Section Offices

Fig. 3.5

1981-82 and continued till 1989. Under the IFAD-assisted project the activities of the Board were "restricted" to:

- Creation of sweet [fresh] water reservoirs through re-excavation of silted channels/village ponds, and by closing minor tidal rivers and creeks;

- Improvement of drainage system by constructing a comprehensive drainage system consisting of master sluices, hume pipe sluices, excavation of main drains etc.;

- Improvement of village communication system through construction of brick paved roads, culverts, footbridges, small bridges and jetties;

- Creation of brackish water fish culture, social forestry including mangrove plantation and providing agricultural support service during *rabi*[4] season (Sundarban Development Board 1994:4; italics added).

For the implementation of the IFAD-assisted scheme the Board was strengthened by the creation of a few divisions such as engineering, social forestry, planning and evaluation, fisheries, finance and administration (Sundarban Development Board 1994:3). However, despite the creation of the above divisions the function of the Board remained one of coordinating the activities of several other specialised departments at work in the Sundarbans. One of the two short reports prepared in 1979, much in anticipation of the IFAD funds in 1981-82, stated that the needs of the Sundarbans are special, because it is one of the most backward regions of the state (Sundarban Development Board 1979:9). In the same breath the report also stated that the Board set up by an order of the state government is authorised to coordinate all development activities carried out in the Sundarbans by other state government departments (Sundarban Development Board 1979:74). It is perhaps somewhat surprising that the function of an agency created for dealing with the specific needs of the region is primarily one of delegating or coordinating development. Some years later in commenting on the need for such a Board S. S. Chattopadhyay, the then Secretary to the Development and Planning Department, states in his foreword to the first report of the Board and also of the Department of Sundarban Affairs:

> Sometimes questions are raised about the raison d'etre for a separate agency of development when normal development activities are being carried out by different Government

---

[4] *Rabi* refers to crops produced during winter whereas *kharif* denotes cultivation during monsoon.

departments in the Sundarban[s] region. Those who ask these questions are not perhaps always aware of the magnitude of the task confronting development agencies in the Sundarban[s] region... the terrain is very difficult – inhospitable and inaccessible; much of the area is covered by forest infested with the notorious Royal Bengal Tigers; ... The Sundarban Development Board also is a model for harmonious working between the so called bureaucrats and technocrats, for, in this organisation generalists are working side by side with engineers, forest officers, agricultural scientists and statisticians (Chattopadhyay 1994).

At the time of writing this foreword Chattopadhyay was perhaps not aware of the global discourses of 'people's participation' or 'stakeholders' rights', otherwise he might have added the people of the region to his long list of collaborators to make it sound exhaustive. The above official depiction tends to show that the problems of the Sundarbans cannot easily be compared with those of other regions of West Bengal. Therefore, a specialised agency in the form of the Board was necessary to address the specific problems of the Sundarbans. Later, in her preface to the third report in 1998, Mira Pande, Secretary to the Sundarban Affairs Department, reiterates Chattopadhyay's arguments in support of the Board. For Pande, the body is the result of special efforts on the part of the state government to bring about an 'appreciable and consistent improvement in the conditions of the region alongwith the *normal development activities* which are being carried out by different Government Departments in the region' (Pande, 1998 italics added).

Despite the arguments in support of the special significance of the Board, when one flips through the pages of these annual administration reports one gets the idea that SDB acts more as a supplementary body than a specialised agency. During its IFAD and post-IFAD days the Board continued to act as an agency that administers development. In one of his annual budget speeches the former CPI-M Minister heading the Department mentions: '...the Sundarban Development Board was set up for taking up some additional work programmes, in spite of the fact that *normal development activities* of the State Government had been continuing in Sundarbans. The plan proposal for the first year was of Rs. 1 lakh [£1428 approx.]. The Left-front government in their very first budget had allotted Rs. 120 lakh[£171,429 approx.] for Sundarban[s] Development' (Mollah 1998:1 italics added). Thus, the minister, administrators, departmental secretaries are all drawing

on the discourses of 'normal development' and 'special problems' of the Sundarbans to argue in support of the Board and its activities. However, their arguments fail to enlighten us about what constitutes the 'special activities' of the Board. Each of the development reports lists the schemes that the Board implements. This includes: a) providing infrastructure facilities like construction of brick-paved roads, culverts, jetties and bridges, sinking of tube-wells etc, b) social forestry and tree planting, c) setting up of small brackish water fish ponds and d) agricultural extension programme (mainly *rabi* and *kharif* seed distribution to small and marginal farmers).

However, in each of the above-mentioned domains the Board is merely duplicating the efforts and services offered by other government departments such as Public Works (PWD), Public Health and Engineering [(PHE) for infrastructure], the Forest Department (for social forestry and plantation), the Department of Fisheries (for brackish water fish and prawn cultivation) and the Department of Agriculture (for agriculture extension programme). No wonder that the Department's development reports are entitled 'Administration Reports'. When I interviewed Abdur Rezzak Mollah, the then Minister-in-Charge of the Department, he had no specific answer as to why they were so titled. The Joint Secretary of the department, sitting in the Minister's office, gave me a quick and precise reply, 'SDB collaborates with and coordinates the activities of various other departments such as Public Health and Engineering, Public Works, Fisheries etc. We examine the cost-effectiveness of different projects and delegate them to different departments. So essentially we administer development, don't we?'

Agriculture is one of the several spheres in which the Board implements its development programme. Every year in his budget speech the Minister of the Sundarban Affairs Department dwells at length on the geographical landscape and ecological niceties of the Sundarbans and reflects on the life and hardship of the people. According to him, one of the factors accounting for the hardship of the people is the lack of provision for agriculture. Thus, 'modernisation of agriculture' is an oft-quoted phrase in the Board's lexicon of development. It is to modernisation of agriculture that I now turn for an understanding of the Board's activities.

Extension of 'modern' agricultural practices is believed to constitute an integral part of SDB's development programmes in the Sundarbans. In his budget speeches Rezzak Mollah emphatically states that the modernisation of agriculture is

the key to the overall development of the region. In this regard SDB collaborates with the Ramakrishna Ashram Farm Science Centre (*Krishi Vigyan Kendra*), the NGO located at Nimpith in Joynagar II block. In fact it is the only NGO with which the SDB collaborates. During my interview with Rezzak Mollah, he categorically stated that the SDB is not usually ready to work with NGOs because they are thought to have a political bias and a tendency to destabilise the government. However there is an exception! 'The Farm Science Centre at Nimpith is doing development along modern scientific lines and hence their activities are transparent', said the Minister. Here the Minister was equating science with transparency and thereby justifying his collaboration with the Farm Centre, Nimpith. To promote mushroom cultivation as a second crop in the Sundarbans, the SDB has provided funds totalling Rs 238,265 (£34,037 approx.) to the Farm Centre for spawn production and knowledge dissemination. In 1997-98 SDB selected about fifty women from seven blocks of the Sundarbans for training in mushroom cultivation. However, the female workers who run the women's unit of the Ramakrishna Ashram at Nimpith cast doubt on the future of mushroom cultivation. According to them, those who have received training in mushroom cultivation are already facing problems in marketing their products. Despite the Minister's repeated emphasis in his budget on the popularity of mushrooms and their protein content (Mollah 1993, 1994) the crop is yet to become a part of the diet of the rural folk. In the absence of any demand for mushrooms in the region, its prospect as a second crop is unlikely to succeed in the long run (I will return to this issue of mushroom cultivation in connection with my discussion of the Nimpith Farm Centre in chapter five).

The popularisation and distribution of high yielding variety (HYV) seeds occupy a place of immense importance in the development agenda of the Board. Improved agricultural inputs such as seeds and fertilisers are distributed among selected small and marginal farmers during the winter cultivation season. The administrative reports of the Board state that these beneficiaries are selected in consultation with the local panchayat members. The scheme is executed through the twenty-seven Growth Centres of the Board that are part of the administrative division of the Sundarban Affairs Department. In the face of its limited financial resources the Sundarban Development Board's chief strategy is to utilise either non-fiscal resources or manpower, since it was considered that production could be

increased many times if people would utilise local possibilities. Thus, Growth Centres and the modernisation of agriculture could go hand in hand if only people would actively participate in the process of development. 'The pedestal of Growth Centre', as described in one of the two short reports of the Board published in 1979, 'is the quality of human participation' (Sundarban Development Board 1979:5).

Local Responses to Sundarban Development Board

During my fieldwork in the Sundarbans I had the opportunity to visit one such Growth Centre of the Board[5]. Around eleven o'clock in the morning I found that the office was still closed. The shopkeeper next door informed me that the office did not have fixed hours. I waited some more time and then left. I came back the very next day and this time found the Centre open and a person sitting inside. I explained to him the purpose of my visit. 'Haven't you visited our Calcutta office?' he asked me. 'Everything [official records] is available at our Calcutta office.' I assured him that I had come for a chat with him and not in search of those materials. He told me that he had been in this office for the last seven years. The person I met was the officer in charge of the Centre. He was assisted by a few other officials, a caretaker and a sweeper. However, other officials were not available when I visited the Centre. Only the caretaker was present in the office and ran errands for him.

The official informed me about the functions of the Centre. The Centre liaises with the farmers and cultivators. It distributes the winter and monsoon crop seeds among the farmers at subsidised rates. The official also specified that farmers already receiving seeds from their local Block Development Offices do not qualify for such entitlements under the Growth Centre's programme. According to the official, every farmer is entitled to six kilograms of high-yielding variety (HYV) seeds. 'But *Sir*, these days we give per person only two *kgs* [kilograms] of seeds, don't we?' The caretaker intervened. 'Why don't you finish the remainder of your work? I will be closing the office early today.' The official looked irritated. Pointing to the caretaker, he said, 'He is a local. In the absence of staff he has to do other work as well.' Getting back to the issue raised by the caretaker the official stated, 'Initially we used to distribute seeds at the rate of six *kgs* per person. But

---

[5] For the purposes of confidentiality the identity - location. officials and other details - of the Growth Centre has been withheld.

currently we are under pressure from the local panchayats to distribute six *kgs* of seeds amongst three persons.' The official then leaned forward and spoke quietly to ensure that only I could hear him, 'Two *kgs* per person is clearly inadequate, but then *party-panchayats* are out to create their vote banks. Today a party member comes and tells us to put two more names on the beneficiary list; tomorrow another panchayat [member] brings three more heads to add to the list. We have to comply with their wishes.' Our discussion did not continue further as the official was in a hurry to wind up his day's work and leave. 'Do you live here with your family?' I asked. 'No no, I have my house near Calcutta', the official promptly answered. 'How can you live here? There is no electricity in the evening and the mosquitoes drive you crazy. There is no one to talk to.' He further added, 'And on top of that, promotional prospects being bleak there is no incentive for work. For the past six or seven years I have been in this post. I work here from Tuesday to Thursday and spend the weekend at home.'

While the official gave me a rough idea about how the Centre functioned, the farmers and fishermen, who were the perceived beneficiaries of the Centre, had their own stories to share. They alleged that seeds, which were supposed to be given out, were often sold in the market. They narrated an incident, which involved what they described as the illegal sale of mustard seed packets. At the last distribution the farmers were not supplied with their quota of seeds yet the same packets were being sold in the market. 'But didn't you all lodge a complaint?' I asked. The farmers said that the officials at the Centre asked them to bring them a sample sold in the market, as only then would they be able to look into their complaint. 'That's being very clever,' one of the villagers commented. 'They have us believe that the packets are still sold in the market. They have disappeared long back.' According to the villagers I met, the officials working at the Centre had close links with the local market and maintained rapport with the local party and panchayat cadres to ensure that they would have the latters' assistance if a crisis developed. During the course of sharing these stories with me the villagers also were deciding amongst themselves to approach one of their local panchayat members to investigate the sale of the mustard seed packets.

The differing narratives of the official of the Growth Centre and those of the villagers present us with the conflicting realities as to the functioning of the Centre of the Board. The official pointed to the constraints within which the Centre

functioned, especially the pressure from the local panchayats to distribute small quantities of seeds among many people. Although this can be seen as an attempt on the part of the panchayats to ensure distributive justice, the official preferred to view it as a ploy of the local leaders and panchayat members to create their vote banks. The corruption stories that the villagers narrated suggest that the lower-level government functionaries in the same position with no prospect of upward mobility tend to usurp the resources that go with their offices. The officials are critical of the local power structures, but also maintain contact with local leaders and cadres to survive in the local political climate. Because their job presents them very few chances for upward mobility lower-level government officials tend to see in their transactions with people or clients an opportunity to use their offices to their advantage. These stories, even when they depict conflicting realities, suggest the inescapable presence of the state at the local level.

Apart from their dissatisfaction with the Centre these people also showed their concern over the widespread use of HYV seeds. Though the yield had considerably increased over the years, farmers were not fully satisfied with its use. They stated that the high yielding variety did not produce much hay for thatching roofs or consumption by livestock because of its short stalks. Because they now had to buy hay from the market at a high price, it was becoming increasingly difficult for them to maintain their livestock. Furthermore, due to the widespread use of HYV seeds, thatched houses were becoming a rarity in the villages. 'It used to keep our houses warm in the winter and cool in the summer', said Sukumar, a farmer whom I interviewed during my meeting with the farmers who provided information about the Growth Centre. He further added, 'Non-HYV seeds and hay thatched houses are the luxury of the rich. People like us who have very little land are switching over to tin or asbestos for making roofs. I myself have used tin, but it heats up the room so much that it is impossible to stay inside during the daytime. I am thinking of reverting to non-HYV paddy. As it is, the rice I grow does not see us through the whole year. To supplement it, we need to buy rice from the market. At least the old variety used to get me enough hay to maintain my cattle. And in the Sundarbans it hardly matters whether you use HYV or non-HYV paddy, when months of your effort can go down the drain in one hour. The condition of the embankment is such that it might go any time. The year before last my land was flooded for two months and I lost my entire harvest.' Sukumar sounded quite

fatalistic towards the end of the interview, scarcely surprising in the context of the perpetual state of uncertainty and anxiety in which he and others lived their lives. Every year farmers in some parts of the Sundarbans incur heavy losses due to cyclones and flooding and those who narrowly escape one year wait for their turn the next year.

I have already mentioned that the Sundarban Affairs Department popularises the use of HYV seeds as a mark of the government's programme for the 'modernisation of agriculture' in the Sundarbans. However, distributing seeds through the Growth Centres is one thing and justifying such distribution in the name of the 'modernisation of agriculture' is another thing. It seems as if the department, through its distribution of HYV seeds, has brought modernity to the farmers of the Sundarbans. If the use of HYV seeds is synonymous with modernisation of agriculture, the farmers' encounter with modernity is at least as old as the Green Revolution which popularised the use of such seeds in the mid-sixties. Akhil Gupta (1998) suggests that HYV seeds are an integral part of farmers' lives in North India. He states that when farmers in Alipur talked about wheat varieties the names of several high-yielding seeds rolled off their tongue. In this context the farmers of the Sundarbans are no exception.

Sukumar's narrative suggests not only the use HYV seeds, but also the problems associated with such use. During my interview with the farmers they narrated how it failed to produce adequate hay to maintain their livestock. Their conversation often revealed the constraints within which agriculture is practised in the Sundarbans. If the farmers use HYV rice, it is out of sheer necessity to produce as much as possible on a small plot of land. Its use in a place like the Sundarbans, where a second crop in the winter is uncertain, serves to remind us only of the compulsions under which agriculture is practised. Under these circumstances one wonders whose modernisation the department has on its agenda when the farmers' use of HYV rice and experiences associated with such use already indicate long-standing modernisation of farming practices in the Sundarbans.

In the light of all this one wonders what exactly constitutes the 'overall development of the Sundarbans', an oft-quoted phrase in the annual reports of the Board and one which permeates the development agenda of the department. The Minister in his budget speeches makes repeated mention of a fishery that his department has set up in Basanti. In the budget estimates of 2000-2001, the Minister

stated that in 1998-99 the department had earned about Rs 589,480.90 (£8,421 approx.) as revenue from the sale of its fish catch (Mollah 2000:4). The government also earns a huge amount of foreign currency from prawn cultivation in the Sundarbans. But the condition of those who catch them remains as deplorable as before (I will come back to prawn-catchers and their networks in chapter six).

A question that also remains unanswered is, why does the Board keep embankment erosion and the human suffering consequent upon it out of its purview? 'We don't do embankments, Irrigation is there to take care of it', answered the Minister of the Sundarban Affairs Department, when interviewed. 'But your department does coordinate the activities of many other departments at work in the Sundarbans', I said. 'Yes, we do', he answered, 'but irrigation is a *huge science*, the department is full of engineers and they are not going to listen to us. We also have our engineering division, which supervises construction of jetties, brick-paved roads etc. Why don't you talk to our engineers, they will explain things to you.' He further stated, 'Moreover, you must be knowing that people settled in the Sundarbans much before the siltation process was complete. If they had settled later they wouldn't have required the embankments. We have to suffer due to our predecessors' mistake.'

For the plan period 1996-2000, the Tenth Finance Commission (an agency of the Government of India) has recommended a grant of Rs 35 crore (£5 million approx.) for the *overall development of Sundarbans*, and the Sundarban Affairs Department has been authorised to act as a *Nodal Department* for the said grant (Annual Administrative Report 2000:3; italics added). Subsequently, the SDB has prepared an action plan for the utilisation of this grant. As a nodal agency it has clearly specified the departments that it is going to collaborate with. Paradoxically, the only department not mentioned in this report is Irrigation and Waterways, which seems to suggest that the department can continue to remain a nodal agency and attempt to do what it considers to be comprehensive development of the region without having to address an issue as endemic as embankment erosion and flooding. I turn now to a consideration of the ways in which government officials address these problems.

The Irrigation Department and Embankments in the Sundarbans

Fifty-four inhabited islands in the Sundarbans have 3,500 kilometres long earthen embankments surrounding and protecting them. Since 1960, soon after the abolition of the zamindari system, the protection and maintenance of the Sundarbans embankments has been the responsibility of the Department of Irrigation and Waterways which is under the charge of two Ministers: a fully-fledged Cabinet Minister heading this department and a Minister of State for Irrigation and Waterways. The Department of Irrigation and Waterways has an elaborate bureaucratic structure. A Secretary, who occupies a position subordinate to that of ministers and is responsible for the running of the entire Directorate, is the administrative head of the department. Then the whole Directorate is divided into a number of functional zones or circles. However, the show is actually run by a host of civil and mechanical engineers who form the backbone of the department. Embankments in the Sundarbans and their maintenance come under the Eastern Circle with a Superintendent Engineer in charge of each circle. A circle is further divided into a number of divisions. An Executive Engineer is in charge of each division. Rangabelia and Gosaba in the Sundarbans come under Joynagar Division. A division is then divided into a few sub-divisions with a Sub-divisional Engineer responsible for each sub-division. Finally a sub-division is divided into a number of sections and a Section Officer is appointed those sections (see fig. 3.6).

Embankments erode mainly due either to wave pressure or river currents causing breaches on the bed of the river. The protection of these embankments is financed by the 'flood control' sector of the departmental budget and under 'flood control' sector comes the 'urgent development work' in the Sundarbans. On paper 'urgent development work' includes the following:

- strengthening the embankment against wave pressure;
- laying bricks on the slopes of embankments and anti-erosion work;
- constructing new sluice gates and renovating existing ones to improve drainage conditions;
- building ring embankments (Irrigation and Waterways: undated; translated from Bengali).

Organisational Chart of the Department of Irrigation and
Waterways for Gosaba Block

Minister-in Charge
|
Minister of State for Irrigation
|
Secretary
|
Superintending Engineer
(Eastern Circle)
|
Executive Engineer
(Joynagar Division)
|
Sub-divisional Engineer
|
Section Officer
|

Gosaba Section	Satjelia Section	Chotomollakhali Section	Shambhunagar Section
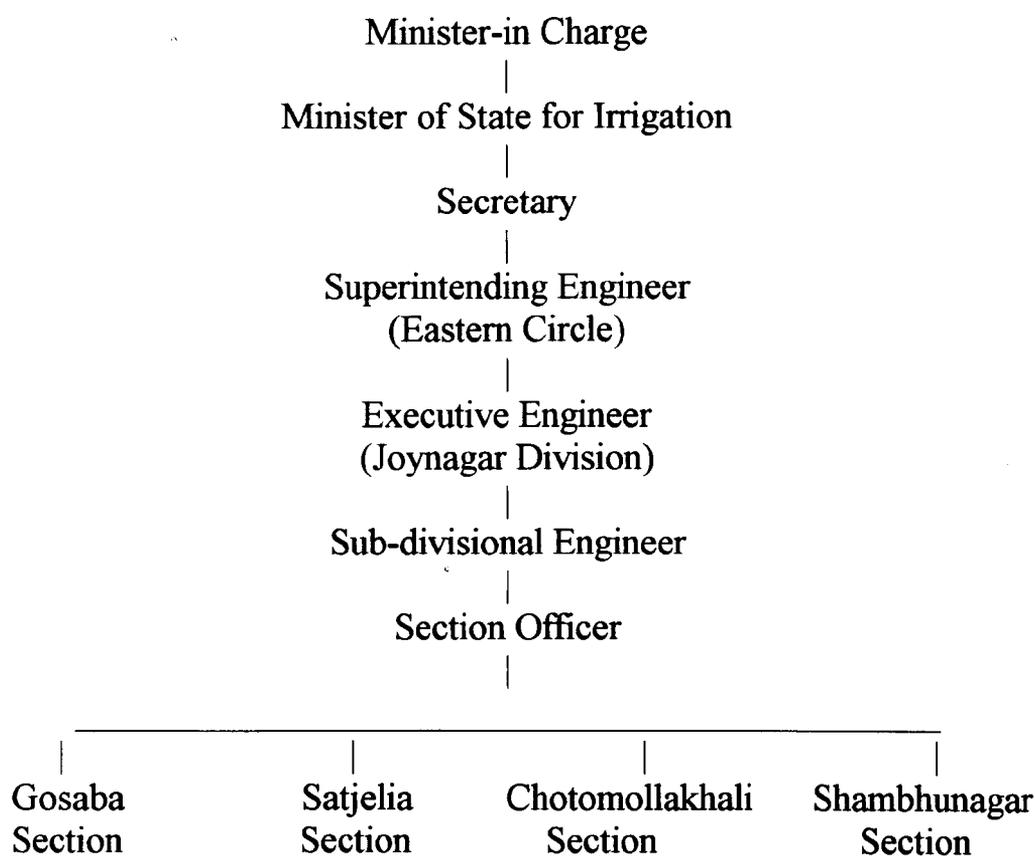
Fig 3.6

Embankments spell disaster for the people, since breaches occur all the time. Yet, as will be seen, what actually happens in the name of urgent development work is either indiscriminate land acquisition on the pretext of building ring embankments or hastily-done patchwork repair of breaches that is likely to lead to problems in future.

Although the Irrigation Department does anti-erosion work in the Sundarbans, in the department's discourses of development some kinds of erosion are seen as more menacing than others. In the departmental budget speeches (1989 to 2000-01) and the Annual State Plan Proposals (1997 and 1998) concerns have been expressed over the growing Ganga-Padma[6] erosion in Malda and Murshidabad[7]. A considerable section of the departmental budget proposal is devoted to an analysis of this problem. The Minister considers this problem menacing because it not only engulfs thickly populated villages and results in the loss of fertile agricultural land, but endangers national property like railway tracks, National Highway 34, the Feeder Canal at Farakka Barrage and many places of archaeological, historical and religious importance (Bandyopadhyay 1989, 1990 and 1994). Therefore, an Action Plan for the prevention of erosion estimated at Rs 355 crore (£50,714,285 approx.) was presented for consideration of the Ministry of Water Resources, Government of India and the Planning Commission in 1992 (Bandyopadhyay 1993). In 1998-1999, 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 Rs 60 crores (£11,428,571), 22.50 crores (£3,214,285 approx.) and 8 crores (£142,857 approx.) were earmarked to tackle the Ganga-Padma erosion (Bandyopadhyay 1998, 1999, 2000). Because the Ganga-Padma erosion is destroying national property, the Minister suggests that this erosion be given national importance. However, the same department remains silent over the problem of erosion in the Sundarbans. Even after the disastrous cyclone of 1988 the department did not bother to devote even a page of the budget proposal to the problem of land erosion in the Sundarbans. Because erosion here affects only the property of local people and not of the 'nation' it does not assume national importance.

---

[6] The Ganga is a major river of Northern India. It flows through Uttar Pradesh , Bihar and finally into West Bengal. Near Farakka in Murshidabad in West Bengal, the Ganga divides and flows in two directions: one into Bangladesh (called the Padma) and the other towards the south of Bengal (called the Hooghly).
[7] Malda and Murshidabad are two districts of West Bengal, both being situated on the banks of the Ganga.

Closely linked to these differing notions of erosion is also the question of land acquisition. Every year in the annual budget proposal the Minister-in-charge heading this department appeals to the state government to generate funds for the development and maintenance of big dams like the Teesta, Mahananda, Subarnarekha and Damodar Valley Projects. These dams, according to the Minister, are of national importance and therefore he suggests that adequate attention be given to them. With regard to the Teesta Barrage Project in North Bengal, the Minister repeatedly emphasises the need for land acquisition with suitable compensation (Bandyopadhyay 2000:8) to facilitate the speedy completion of the project. In this connection he requests the Panchayat and Land Reforms departments to cooperate with his department. A joint endeavour of these two departments, the Minister suggests, would aim to shorten the time-consuming land-acquisition process and create a sense of identification of people with the projects (Bandyopadhyay 2000:8).

In the Sundarbans, land acquisition also constitutes an integral aspect of embankment construction and maintenance. In the event of embankment collapse the Irrigation Department acquires land for the purpose of constructing a ring embankment. But in most cases the department unilaterally acquires land for the purpose of such embankment construction or even repair work. The Irrigation Department does not find it necessary to collaborate with the Panchayat and Land Reform departments to sort out the complex issues of land acquisition, compensation and rehabilitation. Here land is acquired on the pretext that such acquisition is necessary to provide a greater protection to the population.

Embankment Protection: A Context for Observing Government Action

Embankment maintenance can also be seen, to use Wade's phrase, as 'a specific context of governmental action in the countryside' (Wade 1982:287). To understand government action I will concentrate on Rangabelia and its neighbouring islands. As stated earlier in this chapter, the northern part of Rangabelia village is erosion-prone with the rivers eroding banks on both sides. Families living in this narrow stretch have survived four ring embankments. Each time a ring embankment is constructed it encroaches upon people's lands, ponds and even houses. When a considerable stretch of embankment collapses the obvious

solution lies in building a ring embankment, which is normally built behind the old one that has collapsed. Construction of such ring embankments provides the engineers and contractors with an opportunity to make money. Since land acquisition is necessary for building a new embankment, decisions about how much of land would be acquired or how far behind the existing embankment the new one would be built are left entirely to the discretion of the engineers. They justify such acquisition on the pretext that it is they who are better able to judge what is 'good' for the people. With the help of contractors, the engineers acquire land for the purposes of building such ring embankments. Many people in North Rangabelia have lost their lands and houses due to multiple ring embankments but none of them have received any compensation against their loss. 'One more ring embankment and we are all gone', said Haren Mondal, a resident of North Rangabelia. 'These engineers think too much of themselves. Most of the time they remain in Calcutta to spend time with their families and are never available in their Gosaba office. But this time we are going to fight it out and not let them do another ring embankment.'

On the eastern side of Rangabelia right across the river Gomor is Satjelia island of Gosaba block. In 1999 the embankment collapsed in Dayapur village of Satjelia, which was under water for a month. The Irrigation Department issued an order for building a 1500 feet wide ring embankment that rendered about ninety families landless. The villagers were virtually in tears when they narrated their experiences. Initially when the embankment collapsed the Tagore Society (on which my next chapter will focus) offered to help. After consulting the villagers the Society provided them with the plan of a ring embankment that would have required a much smaller area of land. However, when the villagers decided to build the embankment with the help of the Tagore Society, the Irrigation Department engineers accompanied by local panchayat leaders intervened, and consequently the Society was sidelined. 'It's a pact between the contractors and engineers', said Anath Mondal, an aggrieved resident of Dayapur, who lost all his land because of the new embankment. 'The contractor employed about one hundred labourers. Many of them haven't got their payments as yet, but the contractor has left with all his dues. The Irrigation has its own list of contractors. Contractors are selected on the basis of whether they are ready to give the officers a share of their profit. We pleaded with the engineers that such a huge ring embankment was not required, but they refused to listen to us. All the officers in the Irrigation Office had taken money

from the contractors.' Anath's narrative reveals people's suspicions about the intentions of the engineers and contractors. His views were shared by many others who lost their land due to similar such ring embankments. According to the villagers, the engineers decide to build the new ring embankment as far behind the existing one as suits them. Consequently, People's lands, ponds and even houses are annexed for this purpose. As I have said earlier, no compensation is ever paid to them.

The Irrigation Department operates through its many field offices in the Sundarbans, one of which is on Gosaba island. The engineers in charge are meant to provide emergency services in the event of a disaster, but when disaster strikes they are rarely to be found in their offices. According to the gossip doing the rounds at the tea-stalls of Gosaba, the engineers mostly remain on 'sick leave' and usually only a caretaker is there to look after the office. In the event of a disaster, people's suffering is heightened when they come all the way from a distant island of Gosaba block only to find that the engineers who are supposed to help them are away in Calcutta.

With much difficulty I finally managed to get hold of an engineer of the Gosaba Irrigation Office. When I reached the office it was 2:30 in the afternoon. The office was practically empty and I found the same person, whom I had encountered on my earlier visits to the place, sitting inside and dozing. He was from Rangabelia and worked in this office on a temporary basis. He woke up when I knocked on the door. Seeing me he smiled and before I could say anything he said, 'You must be looking for *Saheb*. Pointing in the direction of a house next to the office he said, 'He is in his house.' I found Dinu, a *Dafadar*[8] from North Rangabelia, sitting on the doorstep of the Section Officer's house. Seeing me he gave an embarrassed smile. 'Sir [Officer] is inside, should I go and call him?' Pointing to the bottle in his hand, I asked him, 'What is that?' 'I came to give Sir the honey he asked for', he answered. 'It is difficult to get honey at this time, but I managed some.'

Meanwhile the engineer came out and asked me to take a seat on the small wooden bed placed against the wall of the balcony, which served as an entrance to

---

[8] *Dafadars* are temporary labour supervisors recruited by the field offices of the Irrigation Department in the Sundarbans. Such recruitments are made from the local villages. But once a person is recruited as a *Dafadar* he continues in the post.

the inner part of the house. The bed was covered in files and papers. The engineer cleared them to make some space for both of us. It was easy to see that he rarely visited his office and had effectively turned his balcony into his office. I sat on the cot with my back to Dinu who squatted on the steps outside. Seeing Dinu with the bottle the engineer said, 'That's very little, get some more', and then turning to me said, 'My son loves honey. That is one reason why I wish I could stay here.' 'Why, are you leaving the Sundarbans?' I asked. 'Yes, after all this delay I finally got my transfer order,' he answered.

When I asked him about the Dayapur embankment he got irritated. 'See, this is the problem with these people. They do not appreciate what you do for them. It's because of me that today it is only 1500 feet, otherwise it would have been much more.' He then turned to Dinu and asked, 'Is it true or not?' and without waiting for his confirmation continued, 'I persuaded the divisional engineers and overseers not to encroach upon their land. They think that the *Project* [the Tagore Society] would have given them a better embankment. If the *Project* can do everything why do people need engineers and an Irrigation Department?' Turning again to Dinu he asked, 'Is what I have said true or not? Anyway I have had enough with the Sundarbans. I will be leaving soon. I was here for five years and let me tell you if you are here for more than two years you will end up having severe heart problems. Work here involves so much tension and anxiety...the less said the better', the engineer started shaking his head in utter disgruntlement.

During the conversation Dinu was being used as a sounding board. The engineer knew exactly what his responses would be. *Dafadars* are recruited for supervising repair or construction work. Since local irrigation engineers are the key factors in the appointment of a *Dafadar* they have to be assured of a constant flow of goods and services. It is the duty of a *Dafadar* to keep his superiors happy, lest he run the risk of losing his job. Therefore, Dinu's periodic visits with a bottle of honey and his preparedness to be at the beck and call of the engineers are indicative of the way state bureaucracy operates at the local level and also of the effects of the state on the everyday lives of the rural people. While I was in Rangabelia the Divisional Engineer of Joynagar Division[9] happened to pay a visit. I got the news

---

[9] Out of 3,500 kilometres long embankments in the Sundarbans. Gosaba block accounts for 372.5 kilometres. Joynagar Division is responsible for the protection of this particular stretch of the embankment.

while I was talking to a few workers near an embankment site in Rangabelia. 'How often do they visit?' I asked. 'Sometimes not even once a year,' answered Monoranjan, who was busy repairing the slopes of the embankment. I further asked, 'Why do you think he is coming?' 'God knows why he is coming', Monoranjan said, 'come tomorrow and see for yourself.'

Early the next morning I went to North Rangabelia. The monsoon had already set in and it was raining quite heavily. The roads and embankments were extremely slippery and muddy. Vilagers there had set up a makeshift tent on the embankment and were all waiting inside. I went into the tent and waited for the engineer, who was supposed to come at ten o'clock in the morning. It was a long wait and even by around two o'clock in the afternoon there was no sign of him. I skipped lunch thinking that if I went for my lunch I would miss him. People around me became restless and many went home. Around five o'clock in the evening we suddenly saw a launch approaching the jetty at Rangabelia. As the launch stopped at the jetty, the Section Officer got off and came up to the crowd and said, '*Saheb* has come all the way from Calcutta and is too tired to meet you all now. Tonight he will stay at the Irrigation Guest House at Gosaba and will come tomorrow morning for a visit.' The engineer was sitting on the launch deck and was happily chatting away with his colleagues. Next morning the launch came again and it was raining even more heavily than the day before. The engineer and his two subordinate staff (Overseer and Estimator) got off the launch but could not proceed further. They could not stand upright on the muddy slopes, let alone walk through the terrain. Ultimately they had to be lifted by the villagers and carried to the spots the villagers wanted them to visit. From their faces one could make out that they were in no mood to visit the site and desperately wanted to get back to the launch. The much-awaited inspection was over in five minutes. They told the Panchayat Secretary, 'We have seen the spots, they are really bad. We need to get back to the Gosaba office to discuss it amongst ourselves.'

The above incident points to a lack of concern on the part of the so-called developers who do development in circumstances with which they are not familiar and avoid situations that have the slightest potential for questioning their wisdom. This reminds us of Hobart's thesis: 'The idea of "underdevelopment" itself and the means to alleviate the perceived problem are formulated in the dominant powers' account of how the world is. The relationship of the developers and those to-be-

developed is constituted by the developers' knowledge and categories, be it the nation-state, the market or the institutions which are designed to give a semblance of control over these confections' (Hobart 1993:2). However, while considering the activities of developers as a category we should also keep in mind the practices of those officials or functionaries who are more localised than their seniors. For example, the Section Officers or the Sub-divisional Officers based at the Gosaba Irrigation Office, who accompanied their superior officers during their visit, walked through the muddy terrain with their trousers rolled up to their knees. While their superiors were lifted and carried to the spots for a visit, the field officers seemed well conversant with the muddy terrain. Unlike the Executive Engineers and Overseers of the Division they did not remain uninformed about the area they administered. On the contrary, just like the officials of the Sundarban Affairs Department's Growth Centre they also maintain contact with the local panchayat and party leaders and have locals like Dinu at their beck and call.

Equally significant are the activities of the *Beldars*, the functionaries occupying the lowest rung of the Irrigation bureaucracy in the Sundarbans whom I have already introduced in chapter two. The *Beldars* are recruited mainly from the local tribal population of the Sundarbans. Thus, they are the representatives of the state at the bottom, on the one hand, and part of the populace of the Sundarbans, on the other. They are the salaried staff of the department and like their own brethren they also own lands, ponds and houses in the Sundarbans. They are appointed by the department to maintain and protect the embankments. An outsider coming with the intention of studying embankments in the Sundarbans will, on his or her arrival, be confronted with a discourse that states that the *Beldars* do not work and embankments collapse due to negligence on their part (I will come back to this once again in chapter six of the thesis). Therefore, when embankments collapse *Beldars* are always the first to be attacked. However, all this does not suggest that the *Beldars* in the Sundarbans live in splendid isolation and there is no interaction between them and the other villagers. Negotiations of different kinds do occur between them.

I had an opportunity to witness one such negotiation during my chance meeting with a *Beldar* in Ranipur village of Uttardanga on Rangabelia island. He was playing cards with a few villagers in the shadow of a primary school building towards which I proceeded so as to strike up a conversation with them. When I

came to know that one of them was a *Beldar* I became more curious to ascertain his perception about the problem of embankments. Raghab conversed with me while he continued to play cards. He reflected on the problem, how it affected them in general and how they lived under constant threat from gales and flooding. Meanwhile, a villager came searching for Raghab. Seeing him he said, 'Oh, you are playing here. I have been looking for you since morning. You have to come with me to my house.' 'Why, what happened?' Raghab asked. 'There is a *ghog* [hidden hole] in the embankment near my house and water is seeping in through the *ghog*.' Raghab nonchalantly asked, 'Did you report this to the Irrigation? Report first and then I will see', he said and concentrated on the game. The man got hold of Raghab, nearly dragging him out of his game, 'I will report later, you first come with me. My pond and everything will be gone.' Trying to free himself from his grip Raghab said, 'I cannot go now, I will be able to go only in a couple of days.' 'Then it will be too late. Why are you acting pricey?' He smiled and again dragged Raghab. 'Okay, Okay, I can go tomorrow, but then what will you treat me to?' Raghab asked expectantly. The person said, 'I will take care of it, but you come first.' Raghab answered smiling, 'Nothing short of a *biliti* [foreign liquor] will do.'

The *Beldar's* encounter with the villager is interesting in that it shows how the state, to use Akhil Gupta's phrase, has become implicated in the minute texture of everyday life (Gupta 1995:375). The fact that the *Beldars* are objects of attack does not preclude the possibility of a negotiation between a villager and the *Beldar*. The conversation abruptly ends with Raghab asking for a bottle of liquor and the person hurrying back home on the understanding that Raghab would turn up soon for an inspection. The conversation shows that approaching a *Beldar* means approaching an office. Raghab apprised the villager of the rules involved in getting him to act. At the same time his presence and sheer accessibility, especially the way the person tried to drag him out of his game, shows the person's knowledge about who the *Beldar* is. The utterance of such a phrase as 'why are you acting pricey' indicates that for such a person a *Beldar* is one who lives next door. And this allows him to circumvent the lengthy bureaucratic procedure involved in approaching an Irrigation functionary. In the end Raghab used his position and knowledge to strike the deal. Here we are not concerned with whether the deal materialised or not. What is significant to note is that such a negotiation as described above shows how the state functionaries at the bottom are woven into the everyday life of the people.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the working of two major government departments that are entrusted with the development of the Sundarbans. I have examined the discourses of development of these two departments and also considered the working of the lower-level functionaries of these state departments. I have focused on the initial years of the Board's functioning when its status was ambiguous. Equally ambiguous is the term 'overall development of the region'. The department's activities show that an agenda for overall development can safely sidetrack the issue of embankment and flooding and continue to focus on agriculture in a region where viable agriculture is contingent upon the sustainability of the embankment. As a custodian of the development of the region, the department coordinates and duplicates the activities of many state departments such as public works, fisheries, agriculture etc., but when it comes to considering the activities of the Irrigation Department in the Sundarbans it does neither. Under these circumstances an agenda for modernising agriculture of the Sundarbans does not convey any meaning other than the desire of the department to construct the sustainability issue in its own terms.

When we turn our attention to the Irrigation Department's development discourses we find that erosion is not of the same significance everywhere. Erosion and the resultant land loss in the Sundarbans are considered far less significant than the Ganga erosion in upper Bengal. In the case of the Sundarbans, not only is there an absence of a comprehensive approach to the maintenance of the embankments, but what happens in the name of urgent development work is indiscriminate land acquisition for which no compensation is ever paid to the villagers. Linked to this is also the image of the Sundarbans as a World Heritage Site. The embankment erosion in settled islands is considered inconsequential from the point of view of its having any adverse impact on wildlife, the delta's real treasure.

As I move away from the policy arena to local-level activities of the state departments such as the Departments of Irrigation or Sundarban Affairs, I find corruption playing a significant role in helping us understand the way these departments function at the local level. Although 'corruption' or 'durniti' is not a frequently used word in people's vocabulary, they do refer to diverse networks of interests operating amongst the engineers, contractors, panchayat functionaries and

other officials attached to the local offices. The anthropological literature contains analyses of corruption. Illustrating specific instances of 'patron-clientism' and 'reciprocal exchanges', writers have shown how corruption is a site enabling people to negotiate their multiple social ties (Caplan 1971; Sethi and Visvanathan 1998; Smith 2001). In this context Wade's reflections on canal irrigation in South India are significant. Although Wade, whom I have already introduced earlier in this chapter, largely attributes underdevelopment to corruption among irrigation engineers, his analysis inescapably shows how corruption becomes a vehicle through which one can learn how government bureaucracy functions and canal irrigation operates in a particular context (Wade 1982).

However, despite such anthropological interpretations of corruption, a view that has gained ground in recent years in development thinking tends rather to view corruption as dysfunctional, for it involves the abuse of public power for private gain (World Bank 1997). Not only is corruption viewed as a pathology of underdevelopment, but 'as violating the public trust and corroding social capital' (World Bank 1997:102). Here we are once again reminded of Putnam's thesis: a vibrant civic community with adequate stock of social capital is what ensures development and democracy (Putnam 1993, 2000). We have already discussed Putnam's idea of social capital and the critiques levelled against the idea (see first chapter). The critique that seems most relevant here is that of Harriss (2002) who argues that Putnam's concept of social capital is methodologically faulty, for 'its application detracts from recognition of power' (Harriss 2002:98). Harriss has argued that the concept's potential for 'depoliticising development' is what makes it a convenient policy tool in the hands of international development agencies. It is not difficult to notice the relevance of this critique when we find that multilateral agencies such as the World Bank not only decry corruption as being corrosive of social capital, but also draw on Putnam's notion of civic community to successfully put into circulation the idea that corruption, an obstacle to development, can be controlled through building efforts to strengthen civil society (Gledhill forthcoming). What is striking about social capital is its ready acceptance as both analytical, empirical and policy panacea and also its ability to be an alternative that is also acceptable to the establishment (Fine 2001:189, 196).

My intention here is not to argue in support of corruption and diminish the significance of the World Bank's anti-corruption campaign in this regard. What I

wish to suggest is that the discourses and practices of corruption, as have been discussed in this chapter and will be seen in the subsequent chapters, are also a reflection of people's increasing negotiations with power structures operative at the societal level. What unites the wide variety of literature on state and bureaucratic practices (Gupta 1995; Breman 2000; Hansen 2001; Ruud 2001; Tarlo 2001), which I cited at the beginning of this chapter, is their common concern with the issue of corruption. It is by focusing on the discourses and practices of corruption that these writers have shown how state power operates in larger society. Focusing on corruption thus provides an insight into the expanded reach of the state (Parry 2000), the state that is available to people in its everyday structures (Fuller and Harriss 2001). The specific instances of corruption discussed in the thesis show how the state is woven into the societal processes. By highlighting corruption stories I wish to show the problems involved in approaching the problems of development with an a priori notion of social capital or in subscribing to the dominant view of social capital as a policy panacea and as the glue that holds society together (Fine 2001; Harriss 2002). As a theoretical concept, social capital precludes a proper consideration of how economic and political power structures and processes impinge upon, constrain and condition their social counterparts (Fine 2001:196). To dismiss these instances of corruption as being simply corrosive of trust and honesty would be to ignore how people's choices and strategies are framed by considerations of power and patronage; to ignore how development itself is negotiated around diverse and conflicting interests.

It is difficult to see how strengthening civil society can be the answer when the task of building a civil society, as will be revealed through our consideration of voluntary activities in the subsequent chapters, is itself a political act often performed by voluntary groups with a close eye to the shifting dynamics of local power structures. We will once again see how corruption remains central to unravelling these power structures and to the understanding of voluntary politics. I will show in the next chapter how the incidence of corrupt practices at the local level helps voluntary agencies to use corruption as a rhetorical strategy in criticising the lower-level state officials and local politicians, politicising development issues and gaining access to people. A notion of ideal society, often invoked at the discursive level, is what informs the organisations' anti-corruption agenda. But there exists, as will be seen, a gap between the discourse and practices. The

organisations are run by locals who also have various interests at stake in local politics.

Exploring corruption narratives, in so far as they provide a more embedded view of the state, enables me to displace the state-civil society duality and argue for a more nuanced understanding of the relation between the two. Gupta argues that a focus on the practices of the lower-level state officials is necessary, for their activities can be seen as blurring the distinction between state and civil society (Gupta 1995:384). I would not go so far as to argue that such practices cause the state to disappear into the larger society. But following Gupta (1995) and Gledhill (forthcoming), I would say that methodologically, focusing on the practices of the local-level bureaucracies points to the localised workings of a trans-local state and effectively displaces the state-civil society duality that looks upon both as dichotomous entities. To approach corruption in this particular way is not to suggest that it does not have a negative effect on state-society relations. Corruption narratives show how the powerful use their position to exercise control over the vulnerable and also reveal the constraints in which the villagers enter relations that are exploitative. I will return to this question of corruption vis-à-vis state-society relation in the concluding chapter of the thesis and consider some of the ways in which democracy can be extended to the grassroots. But before we do that it is necessary that I turn to the voluntary agencies and their activities in the Sundarbans.

Chapter Four

The Tagore Society: A Voluntary Agency

Introduction

This chapter provides an account of the Tagore Society's development activities in the Sundarbans. I will start with a brief history of the organisation, noting its early years of agrarian development programmes. Although a Gandhian notion of an autarchic village community is what informs the agricultural activities of the organisation, the Society's strategy of rural development represents a unique blending of Gandhian rural uplift and an agrarian radicalism of the Marxist variety. I will show how the Society's subdued radicalism in its formative years converged with the electoral politics of the RSP prior to the Left-front's coming to power in West Bengal in 1977. Having dealt with the genesis of the organisation in Rangabelia, I will focus on the Society's engagement with the issue of embankment and flooding. I will show how the cyclone of 1988 marked a watershed in the Tagore Society's activities and resulted in a shift from micro-level planning to wider issues of development and sustainability.

In addition to relying on my ethnographic notes and interviews I will also make use of such widely circulated cultural texts as newspapers, news magazines and periodical reports to argue my case in this chapter. I will focus on the way these documents represent the Tagore Society's engagement with the issues of cyclone and flooding in the Sundarbans and show how such representation has glorified the organisation and elevated its activities, much to the displeasure and discomfort of the left government in power. The previous chapter highlighted the practices of the local-level functionaries such as engineers and local state officials doing development in the Sundarbans. I also showed how corruption as a discourse informs the variety of ways in which these state functionaries address the issue of embankment and agriculture in the region. The discussion in the previous chapter serves as an entree in understanding how the Society positions itself in local

politics. On the one hand, there is the disgruntled left leadership in power at the state level and, on the other, the local RSP leadership in Basanti and Gosaba that tried to highjack the Tagore Society's 'Save the Sundarbans' agitation for electoral gains. I will concentrate on the voluntary agency's public meetings on the islands to show how the organisation's founder uses corruption as a discursive strategy in politicising the issue of embankment and flooding. I will also show how the organisation resorts to a notion of 'transparent' and 'good' society in its indictment of local networks of power and patronage. Finally, I will explore the career of the organisation beyond its transparency rhetoric and public meetings on the islands. At this level my intention is to problematise the notion of 'transparent' and 'pure' society floated by the organisation. I do this by deconstructing the organisational monolith, which is constructed at the public meetings and concentrating on the activities of the members and their nexus with local politics. By doing this I intend to show how an organisation that is trying hard to convince people about its transparent nature, is actually itself enmeshed in the network of local politics.

The History of the Rangabelia Project

In March 2000, the Voluntary Action Network in India (VANI), in one of its publications entitled *India's Living Legends*, described the engagement of the Tagore Society for Rural Development with the issue of embankments and flooding in the Sundarbans in the following manner:

> The same drama had been re-enacted, the same tale of misery and devastation. The cyclone had razed houses and trees to the ground in Satjelia island. Breached embankments had let in the saline water inundating cultivable land. The grim-faced farmers, caught in a vortex, faced uncertain future. They were not sure if they could grow crops anymore this year... all development efforts had been nullified... Now in his mid 60s Mr. Kanjilal has been spearheading a movement to save the Sunderbans. He has tried to bring to the fore the fundamental problems that endanger the very existence of the largest delta of the world (*VANI* 2000: 103).

Tushar Kanjilal, popularly known as *Mastermasai* (revered teacher), was the one under whose leadership the Tagore Society started its activities in Rangabelia. Kanjilal, an activist of the radical left movement of the late fifties and early sixties,

had grown disillusioned with left politics when the left parties joined the government in West Bengal in 1967. By joining parliamentary politics, Kanjilal felt, the left parties shattered all hope of a viable socialist revolution. In 1967 he came to Rangabelia as the headmaster of the Rangabelia High School.

The first story that I came across on my arrival in Rangabelia was about the genesis of his organisation there. Ganesh, an ageing worker of the Tagore Society, narrated how the Rangabelia Project started:

> It was during school hours that a boy requested of the headmaster half a day's leave because he was feeling unwell. *Kanjilalbabu* granted him leave but before the boy could walk away he fainted. Later it was discovered that the boy had not eaten anything for the past two days. Soon *Mastermasai* realised that this was not a stray incident and found this to be the usual situation for many of his students. *Mastermasai* then mobilised the teachers to start a kitchen to feed the school children. But in no time he realised that the setting up of a kitchen was no solution to the problem. The families that these children came from were extremely poor and had their lands mortgaged to a few wealthy peasant families in the villages. Even those who had some land did not have money to buy seeds and grow crops. *Mastermasai* started frequenting the villages of Rangabelia, Jatirampur and Pakhirala to talk to the poor peasants; he got the younger people to conduct a survey of the villages, he sought to persuade the rich peasants to release the mortgaged lands of the poor families etc. And thus began our *Project*.

What struck me was the relative fluency with which Ganesh narrated the beginning of the Rangabelia Comprehensive Rural Development Project, not pausing even for a moment during his entire narration. Ganesh recollected an event that had happened some twenty-five years ago and yet he narrated it with complete chronological accuracy. However, to my surprise I later found this story to be known to every household in Rangabelia. Every worker of the Society I met asked me if I knew how the Project started and the first thing they wanted to do before our conversation could proceed was to narrate this story. It was as if every time they shared this tale with an outsider they vindicated their identities as Project workers and reconfirmed their commitment to the Tagore Society scheme of things.

However, this story, apart from being in people's memories in Rangabelia, has also found its way into newspapers, periodicals and news magazines written about the Rangabelia Project from time to time. Thus, in its edition dated January 1986 *The Week* carried a report on Kanjilal and the Rangabelia Project:

Eighteen years ago, Rangabelia island in the Sunderbans had a guest from Calcutta. The high school on the island was going to have a new headmaster... As the boat cut across the waters of the Vidya river, the 32-year-old headmaster looked at Rangabelia. The island had not changed much since his last visit 11 years ago... Kanjilal settled down in the quiet village with his wife and children... For eight years Kanjilal lived the passive, eventless life, although aware of the poverty and deprivation of the people of the island, but not disturbed by the knowledge. Then one day in 1975 he encountered a situation that most teachers in India have faced. It was so ordinary but it shook the innards of Kanjilal *(The Week* 29 December–4 January 1986: 16).

After this dramatic beginning the report then goes on to describe the same incident that many residents of Rangabelia or the workers of the Tagore Society loved to narrate. Not only this particular news article, but each and every news item on the Rangabelia Project that I managed to lay my hands on started with the same story. These news magazines and news reports serve as the repositories of a cultural text that delocalises these otherwise local narratives and allows them to thrive in the larger public sphere.

As soon as I arrived in Rangabelia for my fieldwork two things, relatively trivial, struck me. One was, as stated above, the story of the beginning of the Rangabelia Project. The other had to do with the way the word 'project' has found its way into people's lifeworlds. Any unknown face that I encountered at a tea stall in Gosaba market or elsewhere on the island would give me a stare and then the usual question that would follow concerned my whereabouts. If I had said that I was from Calcutta that would have been far from satisfying. The person would then continue, 'No what I meant was -Where are you based at the moment?' And the moment I uttered the word 'Rangabelia' he would conclude by saying, 'Oh, say that you have come to the *Project.*' Thus, Rangabelia and Rangabelia Project are synonymous. Similarly, the Gosaba van-rickshaw stand was always a crowded place with rickshaw drivers shouting and jostling each other trying to grab their customers. Anticipating a prospective customer in me they used to shout out, 'Where, the *P(r)oject Office?*' The absence of 'r' in the utterance reflects the person's lack of finesse in pronunciation. But it also indicates people's ability to domesticate a word that is alien and make it part of their daily life, colloquial speech and utterances.

The Rangabelia Comprehensive Rural Development Project started its work in the Sundarbans in 1975. Initially it was a rural reconstruction activity centering on agriculture. From 1975 till 1988 the Society was concerned with agricultural regeneration. Three villages, namely Rangabelia, Pakhirala and Jatirampur, were selected for launching the Tagore Society's agricultural development programmes. Kanjilal got some of his senior students and a few interested local youths to undertake a survey of these villages, which revealed the feudal character of the land holding pattern. About 15 families owned more than ten acres of land each while the number of families owning less than an acre ranged from 250 to 270. The members of the Society could not furnish the actual number, as the organisation no longer had these initial survey reports in its office in Rangabelia. The workers even called on some of the older people of Rangabelia and Jatirampur, who had been involved with the Society in its initial years, to see if they could recollect these statistical details. But no one remembered exactly what the number was.

It was much later that I managed to have access to a few more statistical details documented in the report on the Rangabelia Project published in the same magazine *The Week* (1986) mentioned above. The report states that the survey conducted in 1975 showed that only twenty-five per cent of the villagers were physically fit for work and the total debt burden of the 671 families in the three villages was Rs 156,053 (£2,229 approx.), out of which Rs 107,900 (£1,541 approx.) was owed by 163 families. Three hundred families were found to be entirely without food for an average of thirty-seven days a year, while about 150 families 'starved' for seventy-eight days in the same period. Those engaged in daily labour got work for only sixty-three days a year and the wage rate was Rs 4 (5 pence approx.) per day. Fifty-seven per cent of the villagers suffered from malnutrition, sixty-one per cent from intestinal disorders and there was only one doctor in an area of twenty square miles (51.80 square kilometres) (*The Week* 29 December –4 January 1986:17).

After presenting the statistical details the report goes on to say, 'That was the condition of these villages, just 130 km from the then prosperous Calcutta, 28 years after Independence, 20 years after the launching of block development projects and 11 years after the establishment of panchayat raj in West Bengal. What could an ordinary headmaster do where the resourceful machinery of the government had failed?' (*The Week* 29 December –4 January 1986:17). However,

the report answers the question it raised above by providing an account of what an ordinary headmaster had actually done when the government machinery had failed. It is an eight page-long report that details the initial years of the Rangabelia Project.

During an interview with Radhakrishna Mondal, currently the Coordinator of the Society, he narrated how *Mastermasai* went out of his way to plead with the big landlords to release the mortgaged lands of the poor cultivators. The rich families did not cultivate their lands during the winter because of lack of fresh water. Therefore, they were persuaded to let the landless peasants use their lands for winter or *rabi* cultivation. Even when these ventures became partially successful it was found that most of the farmers, who had not been cultivating their lands for some time did not have adequate tools for cultivation.

According to Kanjilal, raising money for development activity of this kind was a major problem, since it involved a huge investment. It was at this time that he came into contact with Pannalal Dasgupta, a Gandhian and former left wing revolutionary, who was then a member of the State Planning Board. From the mid 1960s onwards Dasgupta, with the help of Loknayak Jayprakash Narayan, another Gandhian, had been running a voluntary organisation called the Tagore Society for Rural Development[1] in the Birbhum district of West Bengal. Kanjilal discussed the problems of agriculture with him and apprised him of his plans for agricultural development in the Sundarbans. Dasgupta agreed to release an initial fund of Rs 5 lakhs (£7,142 approx.) from his organisation to facilitate the Rangabelia Project's work in the Sundarbans. But to access this fund it was necessary that the Rangabelia Project became part of the Tagore Society for Rural Development. Hence from 1976 onwards the Rangabelia Project became part of the Tagore Society.

With this money tractors and power-tillers were bought to solve the problem of agricultural implements for the poor cultivators, but these were not given to the individual peasants. Rather, the Tagore Society served as a mutual benefit organisation that would lend these implements, as well as fertilisers and pesticides, to the peasants. The rental for these goods and services would only be recovered after the harvest. Kanjilal still remembers how difficult it was to convince the

---

[1] Rabindranath Tagore, a poet and humanist, born in 1860 in Bengal is also known for his ideas on village regeneration and self-sufficiency. It was the revolutionary turned Gandhian Pannalal Dasgupta, who first set up the organisation named after Tagore in Birbhum district of West Bengal in the 1960s. Birbhum was also the place where Tagore set up an education centre he named Visva Bharati, a non-instutionalised approach to education and learning. Today Visva Bharati is one of the central universities in India.

villagers about the utility of an organisation that would protect their properties. The idea behind the mutual benefit organisation was to break the vicious link between the marginal farmers and big landlords and moneylenders. To solve the problem of a winter crop the Society encouraged the farmers to start the cultivation of green chillies, and this soon became popular with the farmers in the region. The Tagore Society also started acting as a marketing unit for the benefit of the farmers, who, after the harvest, would store their green chillies in the Society's warehouse and sell their product only when the price of chillies was sufficiently high in the market.

In recollecting those early days Robin Mondal, a student and early associate of Kanjilal observed, 'Never before had the farmers been so exultant. It was as if they had been given a new lease of life. They started their work with new vigour and with greater passion. With the help of lanterns and pressure lamps the farmers started driving tractors and ploughing the field even at night. There were discussion groups formed in every village under the leadership of a village organiser. The village organisers of the Tagore Society were the main links between the farmers and their *Project.*'

In 1978 the health unit of Rangabelia Project was set up. Ramkrishna Khatua, a health worker of the Society, who has been associated with the health unit since its inception, recollected how the health centre started.

> It all started in a makeshift one-roomed house whose walls were made up of bamboos and bamboo fibres and the roof covered with tin. In summer the room was like a furnace. Our first doctor was Dr. Dutta. He was very sincere and committed. Patients came mainly from Rangabelia and its surrounding villages. Apart from his official hours he visited houses in the villages on his bicycle.

A wealthy resident of Rangabelia donated the land on which now stands the double-storied hospital building. The hospital has about thirty beds to accommodate patients. Next to it is the workers' hostel where the workers stay overnight and where various meetings of the Tagore Society are organised. An X-ray machine of the hospital has been installed on the ground floor of this hostel building. Over the last two years the Society has been implementing a mobile health programme, managed by the state government with World Bank funds, which provides health care services to the distant islands of the Sundarbans. At present the organisation is running seventy-two clinics in fifty-four villages of Gosaba and Basanti blocks.

The third component of the Rangabelia Project is its *Mahila Samity* or women's group. The women's unit was set up by Kanjilal's wife Bina Kanjilal, better known as *Didimoni* (denoting teacher and beloved elder sister), to educate women in various trades like weaving, tailoring, mat-making, poultry, fishery, gardening etc. '*Didimoni* was a lady of high spirits and great activity', reminisced Gouri Khatua, who had been a student of Bina Kanjilal and currently was in charge of the women's group since her death in 1997. According to Gouri, '*Didimoni* used to think deeply about women's condition in our villages. She managed to get some funds from business organisations in Calcutta to start the weaving, tailoring and knitting sections of the *Mahila Samity*. She took special care to train destitute, deserted and widowed women in these crafts. You know she was more a doer than a preacher. She made it a point to wear sarees woven only by the women of her *Samity*.' Gouri sounded nostalgic towards the end.

Looking at the early years of the Tagore Society in Rangabelia, a question that arises is what inspired Pannalal Dasgupta and Tushar Kanjilal to launch their kind of voluntarism. Was there any common ground between them? Pannalal Dasgupta, one of the founding members of the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI), spent the early years of his life involved in communist activities aiming to organise the peasant and factory workers in Calcutta and its neighbourhood. The RCPI emerged due to its ideological differences with the Communist Party over the question of radicalising workers and peasants' movement. In one of his writings, Dasgupta mentions that after its initial rejection of the Congress-led independence movement of 1930-32 [the Civil Disobedience Movement], the Communist Party reversed its strategy in 1935 and provided support to the Congress as the only 'viable political forum', thereby sacrificing peasants and workers' interests at the altar of the 'bourgeois-led' independence movement (Dasgupta 1999; translated from Bengali). His involvement with revolutionary communist activities put him behind bars. Released from prison after fourteen years in 1962, Dasgupta decided to take up rural development in a peaceful and orthodox manner (Franda 1983:268). This shift occurred due to his ambivalence about the efficacy of the communist movement because by the mid 1960s the communists had already become part of mainstream parliamentary politics. At another level, the shift in his approach resulted largely from his reading of Gandhi and Tagore. In his work on Gandhi (1986), Dasgupta points to a common ground

between Gandhi and Tagore despite their differences. According to Dasgupta, what unites them is their joint concern for rural or village development.

As stated earlier, it was Kanjilal's contact with Dasgupta that led to the setting up of a branch of the Tagore Society in Rangabelia. What drew Kanjilal close to Dasgupta was their mutual admiration for Gandhi and Tagore. Both grew disillusioned with their earlier communist roots and became ambivalent about the possibility of human liberation through socialist revolution. On the question of revolution Kanjilal once commented, 'It was just a mirage that we were chasing' (*VANI* 2000:106). In one of Kanjilal's interviews with me he said that as party workers they were indoctrinated and made to believe that Tagore was a bourgeois poet and Gandhi a stooge of the imperialist forces. According to him, both were far from the truth. Like Dasgupta, he was equally influenced by their ideals of village development. When one goes through Kanjilal's writings, what recurs is the concern expressed over how the village is losing its vitality in the face of a growing trend towards consumerism and urbanisation (Kanjilal 1999).

Therefore, it was to rescue village life and restore its assumed distinctiveness that the Society's Rangabelia Project started. Initially the Society's scope of activity was confined to agriculture. It was poverty, malnutrition and exploitation that led Kanjilal to start the Society's agrarian development programme. The programme envisaged a vibrant rural society whose needs would be met from within. For Kanjilal, the autarchic village community was the model around which he based his agrarian regeneration. All this happened at a time when the left party coalition was coming to power in West Bengal. Thus, a question that arises at this point is how did Kanjilal get on with his programme of rural uplift when parallel efforts were underway at the local level to facilitate the left parties' capture of state power?

I raise this question to understand the nature of people's participation in the Society's rural development programme. The Society aimed at ameliorating the condition of poor peasants and restructuring the pattern of land distribution in the villages. In his venture Kanjilal was supported by the villagers many of whom were his students, RSP activists and cadres. It was no accident that all the core members who had joined Kanjilal since the inception of the Project were and still are RSP cadres and sympathisers. And during the course of my work at Gosaba Land Records Office I found that the majority of the core members owned substantial

amounts of land in Rangabelia and the surrounding villages. In other words, it was a rural development programme in which not only the poor participated in their own interests, but the wealthy also participated to improve the condition of the poor. There is no denying the fact that Kanjilal's initiatives influenced the people of Rangabelia. While conversing with me many core members stated how strongly they felt about improving the condition of their fellow villagers. Yet the question that still remains is why the landed RSP leaders, activists and cadres of Gosaba and Rangabelia joined a programme of development that seemed to have the potential to challenge their own interests. In answering this question I will argue that two factors were important.

First, it is important to remember Kanjilal's erstwhile RSP links. It is true that Kanjilal had quit politics before he came to Rangabelia. But he came to teach at a place that was and still continues to be an RSP stronghold. Equally significant, perhaps a missing link in the stories concerning the genesis of the Rangabelia Project, was the fact that it was on the insistence of two prominent RSP leaders in Gosaba that Kanjilal came to take up the teaching post in Rangabelia. I happened to gather this piece of information from two elderly persons during my usual visit to Gosaba market, where one of them runs a grocery shop and the other a tea stall. Their narratives were as follows:

> Before Kanjilal came to Rangabelia to teach at the school he had been once in the 1950s to Rangabelia and Gosaba to attend an RSP party meeting. At that time he came into contact with two important RSP leaders of the region, namely Gajen Maity and Sevak Das. Later when the headmaster's post at Rangabelia School was lying vacant Maity and Das made contact with Kanjilal and requested him to come to Ranagabelia and take up that post. Because *Mastermasai* belonged to their party, both thought it was safe to bring him here in Rangabelia.

Therefore, when Kanjilal first came to Rangabelia he was not seen as an outsider and not considered a threat to the RSP's political fortunes even though he had formally quit politics.

The second factor, which played a significant role, had to do with the nature of the agrarian development programme that Kanjilal conceived. Despite his intellectual proximity to Gandhi and Tagore, Kanjilal was actually carrying out a social revolution of the Marxist variety. For him, the prospect of a socialist

revolution was bleak, but Rangabelia provided him with an opportunity to experiment with his revolutionary skills. However, he was careful in chalking out the path the revolution would follow. Of course it was not a dictatorship of the have-nots that Kanjilal was aiming at, but rather a revolution of a subdued variety. His kind of voluntarism lay not in radicalising the agrarian structure of Rangabelia, but rather containing radicalism within limits. He requested the big landlords to lend the land they held on mortgage to debtors. He pleaded with the rich cultivators and moneylenders to allow the debtor families to cultivate their land in winter when the creditors were not using it. He ensured that it was a revolution that would not prove too costly to the interests of the big landholders.

All of this was happening in 1976, a time when the left parties, in order to come to power, needed the support of the landed classes as well as the landless. A programme such as this thus suited the interests of RSP leaders and cadres who were at that time trying to convince the poor about the relevance of left politics. They found in this development programme an opportunity to expand their political support among the wider sections of the population. A year later the left coalition partners came to power in West Bengal.

Following Bhattacharyya (1999), I call this the 'politics of middleness', a term he uses in a different context to describe the politics of Left-front, especially that of the CPI-M, in West Bengal. For him, it is a consensus-evoking unifying politics of mediation between several sectional interests (1999:292). The organisational penetration of the Left-front is informed by its ability to manoeuvre local issues pragmatically. By that logic the party's electoral success can be attributed to its capacity to accommodate various versions of politics which otherwise fall outside the ambit of its ideological proclivity. I draw on Bhattacharyya's notion of 'middleness' to show that it was this deradicalised nature of the Tagore Society's so-called radical agrarian development programme that coincided with the interests of the RSP as one of the constituents of the Left-front government. The Left-front, despite its ideological proximity to the agricultural proletariat or landless, was keen, for electoral purposes, on expanding their political bases among wider sections of the Society. From that point of view, the ripples that the Society created in the agrarian sector did not constitute a threat to the electoral fortunes of the Left-front, for the programme did not disrupt class relations in

Rangabelia. Neither did it attempt to put the have-nots at the helm of affairs, nor did it entail a radical redistribution of surplus land in favour of the oppressed.

The Cyclone, the Tagore Society and Its Representation by the Media

In the month of November 1988, a cyclone hit the islands of the Sundarbans. It was a severe storm with a wind speed of 250 kilometres per hour. In March the following year, while presenting the annual budget at the West Bengal Legislative Assembly, the Minister of the State Irrigation and Waterways Department reflected on this incident:

> [Honourable] Members of the house are aware that a severe cyclone hit West Bengal coastal areas on 28th November 1988... As a result, there has been extensive damage to flood protecting embankments and structures in the estuarine areas of South 24-Parganas and parts of North 24-Parganas and Midnapore district due to wave action.
>
> The extent of damage to embankment sluices and structures under my Department has been estimated at Rs. 604.00 lakhs [£862,862 approx.]. Repair works at vulnerable areas have been completed with available fund amounting to Rs. 55 lakhs [£78,571 approx.]. The residual portions of the repair and restoration works are in progress with target of completion by March 1989 (Bandyopadhyay 1989: 12-13).

His words were hardly indicative of what the islanders actually experienced on the day of the cyclone. The Minister estimated the damage the cyclone caused to his department's property such as sluices, embankments etc., but there was no mention of how many people actually died. Those who survived the disaster had horrifying stories to share.

Jaba, a worker of the Tagore Society and part of the women's group, found her house completely razed to the ground. It was located on low-lying land along the canal, which the people of Rangabelia had built to stop the river Vidya from flowing diagonally through the island from the western side into the river Gomor on the east. She related what happened on that day, noting that since morning it had been cloudy and gloomy. By afternoon it had become dark. Because Jaba's house was close to the canal she could hear the sound of the water. 'It was awful', said Jaba.

Around one o'clock in the afternoon I went to the riverside. By then wind had already started and the Vidya was looking dangerous. Every time a wave hit the embankment water spilled over. The people of *Uttarpara* [North Rangabelia] and Bagbagan, already standing on the embankment, were shouting instructions to each other and some, it seemed, were rushing to evacuate their houses. I started rushing towards my house in *Dakshinpara* [South Rangabelia]. Suddenly strong winds blew dust all around. I felt as though I would be thrown off the road into the nearby paddy field. I started crawling to withstand the impact of the wind. I crawled blindly, for I could see nothing through the haze of dust. Suddenly something hit me. Later I found myself in the Tagore Society's office. One of the workers - I think it was Ratan – had rescued me unconscious from the doorstep of the panchayat office. I saw my husband and two sons. My husband managed to get our sons out of the house and about five minutes later a huge mango tree fell on it and the cow in the shed could not be saved. Outside the wind was still roaring like a lion.

Basudeb Mondal of Uttardanga lost his son during the cyclone; but I preferred not to bring up the subject as his neighbours had advised me against it. To this day he blames himself for the loss of his son. His neighbour_Rampada told me how it happened. Basudeb was trying to leave his house when the cyclone started. As Basudeb lived close to the embankment he had run to find a safer place inside the village. He held his wife with one hand and his four-year-old son with the other. His wife was carrying their baby daughter. They were running across the field to his brother's house for shelter. Basudeb was literally dragging his son and wife along as they failed to keep pace with him. Suddenly his wife tripped. As Basudeb stopped and stooped down to pick up his wife and daughter, the grip of his other hand, which was firmly holding his son, loosened. Basudeb heard him scream, but could not see him any more. He took his wife and daughter to his brother's house, and then went back looking for his son. He frantically looked for him but he could not be traced. Because of the storm and the dust clouds, which it raised nothing was visible. Next morning his son's body was retrieved from a nearby pond. Basudeb went mad. He could not understand what had actually happened. Rampada and a few of Basudeb's neighbours guessed that, as his son slipped out of his grasp, the wind blew him away from his parents and threw him into the pond. A few more casualties of this kind occurred in other parts of the Sundarbans islands as well.

The incident was an eye-opener for the Tagore Society. The after-effects of the devastating cyclone are still fresh in Kanjilal's memory. He said, 'Next morning when I went out I could only see devastated paddy fields. Most of the houses had

collapsed and the river Vidya was carrying only dead bodies and the corpses of cows, goats and pigs.' The cyclone had occurred during the harvesting season when the plants were fully-grown. The storm lasted for eight hours and sealed the fate of the farmers. The cyclone also made the Tagore Society people realise the unsustainability of their programmes. Years of efforts went down the drain in eight hours. Kanjilal, along with his compatriots, realised that, unless the basic problems of the Sundarbans were addressed, all piece-meal development efforts would prove meaningless.

Soon after this disaster the newsmagazine *The Week* in its edition dated February 1989, carried a report on the cyclone and its effects on life in the Sundarbans. This news report was significant in that it criticised government initiatives and relief efforts and simultaneously elevated and glorified the contribution of the Tagore Society in the Sundarbans. The report said:

> Last year's cyclone of November 29, blowing at 250 km an hour... was one of the fiercest that hit southern Bengal in recent times. The cyclone, which killed 500 people and damaged crops worth Rs 83 crore [£11,857,142 approx.], was the harshest in South 24-Parganas district where 400 people perished and the Gosaba block was ravaged...Half a dozen state government ministers had made a whirlwind tour of the region devastated by the cyclone. A Central study team led by Union Minister Shyam Lal Yadav, too, made a survey, but the villagers got nothing out of these exercises. For the starving people of the Sundarbans, the only ray of hope is their "Master Masai" Tushar Kanjilal... Kanjilal is preparing a blueprint for saving the Sundarbans as, according to him, the authorities have done little to improve the 3,500-km-long earthen embankment... To save the 35 lakh [3,500,000] people of the Sundarbans from natural calamities, Kanjilal wants to strengthen the embankment, deepen the cross channels for drainage of saline water from the islands, store rain water for irrigation by digging a pond for every three and half acres of land... (*The Week* 5-11 February 1989:36-39).

Not only did the report praise the activities of the Society in the Sundarbans, but it glorified, nearly deified its founder, Tushar Kanjilal. The report made him into a cult figure and tried to convey the message that his interventions had the potential to surpass governmental reform. The report went on to describe how the Society saved about fifty women from twenty-five villages on that fateful day. No wonder it was entitled, 'A Storm and a Messiah'. This particular reportage and similar such reports in subsequent years in other newspapers, in both the vernacular and English, have

put into circulation the idea of the Tagore Society as a messianic organisation under whose leadership the people of the Sundarbans could seek a redress for their long-standing grievances.

The cyclone made the Tagore Society shift its focus away from micro-level social planning to what Kanjilal calls 'larger existential issues affecting people's lives in the delta' (interview with Kanjilal). After the disaster he and his colleagues travelled to the remote islands of the Sundarbans to share with the people their agonies and anxieties. The Society embarked upon a variety of disaster management schemes and started collaborating with CAPART (Council for the Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology), an NGO that disburses Government of India funds to grassroots organisations, for building cyclone relief centres in the Sundarbans. The Tagore Society planned on renovating and converting single-storied school buildings on the islands into double-storied ones, the rationale being that as most school buildings were located in the middle of the islands they would serve as relief centres during natural calamities or disasters. The Society started providing money to the local school authorities to carry out this task. The organisation also used CAPART's money to build cyclone-proof hexagonal houses, which, because of their shape, are better suited to such a cyclone-prone area. Apart from building houses and cyclone relief centres the Society also started planting big trees such as mango, coconut and eucalyptus along the roads in the villages and on the embankments to protect the houses against whirlwinds while *Bani* (generic name *Avicennia*) trees, which are salt resistant and have stilted roots that protect them against inundation, were planted on the banks of the rivers to protect their embankments against strong waves.

It was around this time that Kanjilal was trying to tap the resources of a Dutch organisation called the Inter-Church Organisation for Development Cooperation of Holland. In fact Kanjilal had first sought the organisation's technical and financial assistance for a solution to the problem of the embankments in the Sundarbans way back in 1989. To this end, he also approached the Irrigation Department of the Government of West Bengal for help. Initially the department prepared a Rs 400 crore (£57,142,857 approx.) scheme, which was submitted to the Dutch organisation for approval and necessary action (*The Statesman* 17.6.1995). But when the organisation sent an expert to India in 1991 to gather first-hand knowledge of the problem there was lack of cooperation from the government

department. Kanjilal said, 'Governmental non-cooperation led to the death of the project and initiative. The engineers' lobby in the department was an influential factor in subverting the project. The department failed to provide the data on the behaviour of the rivers necessary for the organisation to conduct its preliminary survey.'

The Statesman, a Calcutta-based newspaper, in its edition dated 17 June 1995, published a report on this incident and concluded that government apathy was the main reason for the erosion of the Sundarbans embankments. The report noted:

> Years of experience have taught [the residents of the Sundarbans] to live with fragile embankments that crumble at the slightest pressure. They know that just after the floods, when the water receded, the engineers would arrive and ask contractors to pour some earth at one point and some at the other before disappearing. This has been a yearly ritual for them... [The state government] recently let slip a golden opportunity of financial and technical assistance from a Holland-based organization. The scheme fizzled out as it reportedly failed to satisfy the vested interests of a section of engineers and officers of the Irrigation Department... The mysterious silence can hardly be explained but there is a large scale belief that the Government's backtracking was mostly due to pressure from the powerful engineering lobby, which saw its prospects dampening in the Sunderbans, [which is] considered a goldmine by contractors (*The Statesman* 17.5.1995).

The report concluded by quoting Tushar Kanjilal, chief of the Tagore Society in Rangabelia as saying, 'If there is no organized and wholehearted effort from the government to solve the embankment problem immediately, the region will be wiped out of West Bengal's map within the next 15 years.' The report made explicit references to the existence of an unholy alliance between engineers and contractors and identified corruption which exists in the government departments as being the major obstacle to finding a solution to the problem. The mention of the name of Kanjilal in the report might have conveyed to the government departments an impression that he was using the press to expose governmental corruption.

Indeed, such representation of the Society in the media, especially in newspapers and magazines, made the organisation an easy target of attack by the left regime in power. The dissatisfaction of the left parties was first manifested in their boycott of the meeting called by Kanjilal in Calcutta. At the beginning of the 1990s Kanjilal, on behalf of the Tagore Society, invited the members of the left parties to a meeting organised in Calcutta to throw wide open to them the problems

of the Sundarbans. However, the meeting did not take place as the left parties boycotted it. During a conversation with Kanjilal he told me, 'The party high command instructed these leaders not to attend the meeting.' According to Kanjilal, the left parties misunderstood his intentions. The objective behind this meeting was to apprise the government about the problems in the region and explore the possibility of the government making use of the knowledge and field experiences of an organisation like the Tagore Society. But the government felt itself threatened.

Development, Corruption and the Tagore Society

In their book *Foul Play* (1998) Sethi and Visvanathan express their dissatisfaction with the word corruption. According to them:

> The English word corruption sounds too provincial, too puritan, too restricted, too knee-jerk reaction. It has a sense of arid prose that cannot capture the labyrinthine quality of this world... There is the piety of social science implicit in the English word corruption. "It is bad." "It is not me alone." "It is others who do it." "It is something transient that you stop doing as the economy grows." "It is a Third World fixation." And if you mention Italy, you are told that it is the Third World of Europe (Sethi and Visvanathan 1998:3).

Sethi and Visvanathan insist that to understand the career of corruption in a particular cultural context one needs to comprehend it as a conversation, a ritual. In other words, for them, corruption is a complex of culturally nuanced practices and one needs an ethnographer's approach to understand corruption as it is practiced and to unravel its different layers.

Their argument is insightful in so far as they point to the embeddedness of the concept. It is true that corruption is not a sign of inadequate modernity. Nor does it signify an insufficient crystallisation of a rational public sphere. One has to study its cultural variants and diverse practices to grapple with the complexity of the phenomenon. But equally important is the word corruption itself. Corruption, in the words of Gupta, 'is also a discursive field that enables the phenomenon to be labeled, discussed, practised, decried and denounced' (Gupta 1995:385). The news report in *The Statesman* cited above is a significant case in point. The report attributes the fizzling out of a golden opportunity of financial and technical assistance from a Dutch organisation to the prevalence of vested interests among the

Irrigation Department officials or more specifically the engineers. The mention of the 'department' in the report clearly suggests that corruption is not simply confined to the lower levels of bureaucracy. It extends beyond the lower officials and engulfs the activities of the higher officials as well. In fact the higher-level officials depend to a large extent on the transactions carried out at the lower level. Wade, in his study of irrigation practices in South India, shows how lower officials are only a part of the hierarchy of corrupt practices that goes right to the top of the state bureaucracy and extends into electoral politics (Wade 1982, 84, 85). A network of power and patronage links politicians, senior bureaucrats and their subordinates or the lower-level functionaries to each other. Compared to their bosses, the lower-level functionaries get to interact with a relatively large number of people and, therefore, their activities are much more visible at the local level.

Here it is important to note that this visibility allows NGO functionaries to discuss government corruption, which was an issue that kept cropping up during my conversation and interviews with them. They said that government programmes regularly fail due to the entrenched corruption and vested interests of the officials at the lower levels. The widespread visibility of corruption at the local level also enables them to explain why the voluntary agencies' help is increasingly being sought by the government in the implementation of its programmes. The prospect of funds is what makes the agencies collaborate with the government even when they are critical of its lower tiers. Therefore, it is interesting to see how an organisation like the Tagore Society uses corruption as a discursive strategy to position itself in local politics. What could be more appropriate than to focus on the Society's public meetings organised on the islands to politicise the issue of embankment and flooding. In this context Kanjilal's public speeches are worth considering. After the cyclone in 1988, in a pamphlet published by the Society, Kanjilal said:

> For the last two decades as a worker of the Tagore Society I have been involved with the development of the Sundarbans. However, the cyclone of 1988 made us realise that unless the basic problems of the region are addressed, all piece-meal development initiatives would be meaningless... Therefore, I appeal to the people of the Sundarbans to launch a movement to save the Sundarbans... The need of the hour is to evolve a forum that should be purely *non-political* in nature and above all *partisan* and *vested* interests. The Tagore Society will be there to support all your positive and non-politicised initiatives (Kanjilal undated 3; translated from Bengali; italics added).

The above clearly indicates that an autarchic village community is no longer the model of development. Now the organisation's stress is on evolving a transparent society where politics will have very little role to play. To this end the Society started organising meetings in different parts of the Sundarbans, at which dissociation from the local politics and the corrupt practices of the local bureaucracies became a recurrent theme. An excerpt from his speech, delivered at a public meeting on Rupamari island of the Sundarbans in October 2000, is indicative of this.

> I have come here to share with you some of the pressing problems of the Sundarbans. Not because I have land or landed properties here. I have lived here for the past twenty-five years and I consider you all as my own. I do not belong to any political party. Nor have I come here to hold an election meeting... The problems of the Sundarbans are numerous and the prospect for their solution is bleak because of the prevalence of vested interests and the absence of a clear vision. When embankments collapse it is you who suffer but the profits earned from the repair work helps the contractors and engineers to convert their single storied houses in Calcutta into double storied ones... There has been a large-scale deforestation of the Sundarbans forest and every day forest products are being stolen. You know who is behind all these... Its time for the people of the Sundarbans to launch a social movement. This movement is not to be directed against any person or group or authority. You should be able to fight inappropriate practices (translated from Bengali; recorded while present at the meeting).

Kanjilal is both vocal and cautious. He is cautious in choosing his words. He uses a variety of terms such as 'political party', 'election meeting', 'vested' and 'partisan' interests to refer to the incidence of corruption. His use of phrases such as 'I do not belong to any political party' or 'nor have I come to hold an election meeting' is a deliberate attempt to convince people about the transparent nature of his organisation. Transparency here means dissociating the organisation from local politics and severing all connections with the RSP. Equally interesting is the way Kanjilal constructs the 'enemy' against whom people should launch their movement. He castigates the engineers for their corrupt practices and implicitly holds the panchayat and local leadership responsible for bailing out those instrumental in the large-scale deforestation of the Sundarbans. But when it comes to launching a movement the enemy appears disembodied. This points to the way an organisation positions itself in local politics. To generate funds the organisation

collaborates with the government on a variety of other fronts, but is obliged to mince its words to keep away from the wrath of the government representatives at the local level. The organisation prepares people for a movement to end their suffering, but at the same time by not specifying who they should direct their movement against it takes the sting out of the movement.

Meanwhile the RSP leaders in Basanti started campaigning against Kanjilal and the Tagore Society. They thought that Kanjilal was masterminding a secessionist movement in the Sundarbans and that he was inciting people to go against the local RSP party machinery. They became apprehensive about their political future. In the mid 1990s, prior to an Assembly Election, the South 24 Parganas District Committee of the RSP started a 'Save the Sundarbans' campaign of its own. In June 1994 the Committee organised a *dharna*[2] in front of the District Magistrate's Office and put forward its charter of demands. The charter listed all the major problems facing the region, namely embankments and land erosion, natural disasters, large-scale deforestation etc., but did not even bother to acknowledge the Tagore Society's contribution in this regard. The Committee did not acknowledge the fact that saving the Sundarbans had been on the agenda of the Tagore Society since 1988. The RSP started conventions and meetings on different islands of the delta to mobilise people. However, the party was alleged to have by-passed the issue of prawn seed catching and its impact on land erosion, an issue which the Tagore Society claimed it had been addressing for a long time.

On the basis of my conversations with Kanjilal and other members of the Society and my participation in some of the meetings of the Society, I gathered that the Society had been drawing attention to the negative impact prawn seed catching had on embankments. The movement of the prawn catchers along the banks of the rivers is believed to severely disrupt silt deposition at the base of the embankments, thereby weakening them. Kanjilal had raised this issue in his writings to warn the islanders against the negative implications of their trade (Kanjilal 1999; 2000). The members of the Society were of the opinion that the reasons for the RSP bypassing this issue were fairly clear. They wanted a movement, but not at the cost of their electoral fortunes. They did not want to lose their vote bank. Soon after the RSP sidetracked the tiger prawn issue the Society pointed out how populist politics for

---

[2] *Dharna* refers to a form of protest where protestors sit or stand in front of a public office shouting slogans.

short-term gains endangered the future of the region. In one of its meetings on an island in the Sundarbans, Kanjilal reflected on the issue:

> Today those who talk about the need to save the Sundarbans are looking at the issue from the point of view of their electoral gain. I personally do not subscribe to this view. This does not mean that I am against the *Bagda min* [prawn seeds] catchers. I know it helps many families make ends meet... I have not come here to take away your earnings from you. I am here to make you aware of the negative implications of your trade. This practice may be lucrative to many as it fetches quick money, but it endangers your very existence. It weakens the base of embankments. You all know that the the Tagore Society has started *Sundarban Bachao Andolan* [Save the Sundarbans Movement] long back. But it has not had recourse to populist politics for short-term gains (translated from Bengali; transcribed from a audio cassette undated).

Kanjilal stated in clear terms that the organisation would not subscribe to the populist strategies of electoral politics. According to him, a transparent and 'morally good' society is what his organisation aims at. He represented the organisation as if it were an embodiment of transparency and a monolith of homogeneous interests and practices. However, it is this representation that I would like to examine, by interrogating a little more carefully the organisation's career beyond its transparency rhetoric and public meetings on the islands. I do this by dismantling this monolith and concentrating on the activities of the members of the organisation. Here I will document two instances which not only show how enmeshed the organisation is in the networks of local politics, but also problematise the NGO's notion of a 'morally good' or 'depoliticised transparent society'.

Kanjilal's campaign against prawn catching antagonised certain sections of the population on a nearby island, who planned to sabotage one of his meetings on the island. A village organiser of the Society, who is also a panchayat member of the RSP, narrated how he, along with some other core workers of the Society, thwarted their plan.

> Through my contacts in the village I came to know about the plot a week before *Mastermasai's* meeting on the island. The plot was hatched by two groups - one was CPI-M and the other was RSP-led - of the tiger prawn sellers. I informed the *Project* people in Rangabelia about this plot. I had a close-door meeting with some of the core workers of the Society, where I divulged my *scheme* to divide these groups and divert their attention away

from the meeting. I knew that the groups were in conflict over a piece of land, which they both wanted to turn into a fishery. I suggested that we could try and convince one group that the other was trying to convert the land into a fishery and thereby play one group against the other. While they were busy fighting over the fishery we would have the meeting in peace. The *Project* workers accepted my plan but we also decided that we would go prepared to retaliate should the plan fail.

Needless to say the village organiser's strategy was successful in dividing these two factions. The Society worker was congratulating himself when he reached the end of his fairly long narrative. When I asked him why they did not cancel the meeting he responded by saying, 'Cancelling the meeting, you must be crazy. You must be prepared to employ the right strategy when you are doing *grassroot* development.'

The above incident tends to show that the organisation is embroiled in the same local politics, which it otherwise views with much disdain. The way the village organiser handled the incident shows that grassroots development, for him, turns out to be a site enabling him to negotiate his multiple subject positions. As an elected member of the village panchayat he represents his electorate. As a village organiser of the Tagore Society he organises its public meetings. To ensure that the meeting goes well he splits up the electorate he otherwise represents, and plays one against the other. And in the end the same village organiser participates in the Society's 'Save the Sundarbans' campaign to ventilate the grievances of the people in general and end their suffering. A focus on these apparently insignificant practices allows us to retrieve multiple and disparate subject positions from a grander narrative of movement and protest. Retrieving them then enables one to problematise the over-arching representation of the organisation as a morally good society.

I heard the above story for the first time from two women health workers of the Society when I met them near their houses on the island. They were returning from catching tiger prawn in the river. The story came up in the course of our conversation. They could not narrate the story satisfactorily; there was a sense of inadequacy in their narration. This was what led me to approach the village organiser concerned in search of the entire story. Later when I compared the women workers' narrative with that of the village organiser I found that only a part of the story had percolated down to those who occupied the base of the organisation's hierarchy. When I asked these women if they knew the Society's stand on prawn

catching in the Sundarbans, they admitted that they were aware of Kanjilal's views on the issue. 'We attend *Mastermasai's* meetings as much as others do, but then we cannot do without prawn catching. We earn very little compared to the *office* workers of the *Project*. Those who earn more can do without it, but we need to catch prawn to supplement our income from the *Project*', one of them said. 'But don't you think it weakens the bottom of the embankment when you draw nets along the shore?' I further asked. Illustrating the case of North Rangabelia, one of the health workers asked in return, 'The people of *Uttarpara* have stopped prawn catching on both sides of their river banks, but has this lessened the problem of erosion there?'

The women health workers' narratives are significant in that they make us aware that NGOs are also hierarchical organisations with members having differential access to their resources. While the organisation in its public meetings makes a case against prawn catching, the voices from within the organisation suggest that it continues to remain one of the major sources of income for the poor families in the Sundarbans. The women workers' arguments seem to challenge the perceived correspondence between prawn catching and the erosion of the bases of the embankments.

The Irrigation engineers are clearly the objects of attack at the public meetings of the Society on the islands. However, the Irrigation offices can also be seen as sources of livelihood for the people. Apart from the engineers posted at the Gosaba Irrigation Office, there were a few locals working in the office. One of them was Khagen, a resident of Rangabelia, who worked there as an assistant on a temporary basis. Although we met on a number of occasions during my stay in Rangabelia, I happened to converse with him during my frequent but futile visits to the office to fix appointments with the engineers. Khagen's father was a local RSP leader and closely associated with the Rangabelia Project in its formative years. Khagen is also actively involved in the Society's activities. During the Society's public meetings on the island I had found him busy preparing the ground for the meeting and trying to manage the crowd while the meeting was on.

After his father's death Khagen needed a better job, as working for the Society was not enough for him to maintain his family. With the help of Kanjilal he approached the local RSP leaders and persuaded them to get him a job in the Gosaba Irrigation Office. But Khagen was unhappy with his status as a temporary

worker. He seemed dejected when he said, 'For the past several years I have been working as a non-permanent employee. I get paid for the days I work. I have been pleading with the officers here as well as the party people to make me permanent, but nothing seems to be coming my way.'

Khagen's case is significant in that it once again shows how an organisation positions itself in local politics. Concentrating on the public meetings of the Society is necessary as it helps one to understand how the organisation constructs its vision of an ideal society. However, the various incidents mentioned above also help us to see the career of the organisation beyond such construction. It is true that for Khagen the job was necessary to survive and maintain his family. But, the fact that the Gosaba office is frequently criticised at the Society's public meetings for its alleged apathy and corruption does not preclude the possibility that it can be used to the advantage of an individual member of the organisation.

What I have found during my fieldwork is that an organisation like the Tagore Society, which frequently makes use of the rhetoric of corruption to keep alive its clean image in the public sphere, also resorts to a variety of practices or what Sethi and Visvanathan (1998) would call 'rituals' to stay in the race. As stated earlier, currently the Tagore Society is implementing a World Bank sponsored health scheme in Basanti and Gosaba blocks of the Sundarbans. The West Bengal Government is the main coordinator of this scheme and, therefore, the Society has to carry out the scheme under the close watch of the Block Medical Officers (BMOs). At the end of every year the Society's health report needs to be signed by the concerned BMOs before it can be routed to the state government for further funds. Inevitably the workers of the Society go out of their way to appease the BMO of Gosaba block, which they do by organising a mass sterilisation clinic in Rangabelia every year. I witnessed one such sterilisation programme during my stay in Rangabelia.

The sterilisation programme is part of the government's family planning programme. The government pays Rs 130 (about £2) as incentive to each married woman participating in this programme. As a government official, the Medical Officer of the block is responsible for organising these clinics. 'It is an opportunity for the *BMO* to update his CV', one of the doctors of the Tagore Society commented during an informal chat. 'At least at the end of the year he can show the

government how many family planning clinics he has managed amidst his busy schedule.'

A week before the forthcoming sterilisation programme in Rangabelia I happened to enter the Society's office in search of some old newspaper clippings. I found the workers engrossed in a heated discussion and some of them looked agitated. Seeing me they stopped their discussion. It seemed as if I had stumbled in on a discussion to which as an outsider I was not welcome. I apologised and went out of the room. Later I heard the story from Ramesh, a worker of the Society with whom I had developed some affinity. It seemed that this year Gosaba block had lagged behind the other blocks and so to keep pace with the other blocks it had to fulfil its annual quota of 600 sterilisations. The workers were a bit upset because this time the BMO had sent an instruction to the workers of the Tagore Society asking them to organise a sterilisation programme to complete at least half the quota. I was extremely shocked when I heard this. 'Three hundred in a day, how is that possible?' I asked in surprise. Ramesh answered, 'The doctor who comes from the government's Family Planning Department is quite an expert at it. So far the maximum that he has done in a day is 500.'

On the day of the sterilisation camp I reached the Society's training hall around 7:30 in the morning. I found that women were already queued up in front of the training hall. They were waiting to be called by two of the Society's workers who were sitting in the corridor leading to the hall. One of them was registering the women and the other sticking serial numbers on their foreheads. The training hall had been converted into a makeshift operating theatre with two beds being placed in the centre of the hall. Each of these beds had been made by placing a wooden bench in a slanting position against a table with two legs of the bench tied firmly to the base of the table. Around ten o'clock in the morning the doctor arrived with the BMO. On their arrival they were taken to the nearby dinning hall where a sumptuous lunch was awaiting them. By eleven o'clock the queue in front of the hall had become even longer. When I entered the hall I found the women, who had already registered, lying semi-conscious or unconscious on the floor. One of the members of the health staff of the Society told me that anaesthesia had been administered to prepare them for the sterilisation. At eleven o'clock the doctor finally arrived in the hall. He barely took a minute or two to dispose of each case. He dealt with two patients at a time. After the completion of each sterilisation the

patient was carried out of the hall to the adjoining corridor and made to lie on the floor. The doctor was sometimes seen chatting with the BMO while dealing with his cases. The BMO was busy taking photos of the proceedings. Soon the corridor became filled with patients lying next to each other, some returning to consciousness and complaining of pain in their abdomen, while the others were still unconscious. The Society's workers started using the back yard of the training hall to put the patients when no more space in the corridor was available. In this open back yard the women lay for hours till they were ready to return home. This process continued till seven in the evening. By the end of the day the doctor had not only crossed the magic figure but completed 322 sterilisations.

After the clinic was over I met a few health workers of the Society at a teashop in Rangabelia. They were discussing how a clinic, held last year on one of the neighbouring islands, had resulted in the death of a woman. From their conversations I gathered that the woman developed complications at night, long after the clinic was over. By the time she was brought to the Rangabelia Health Centre she died from excessive bleeding. 'Why didn't you note down the participants' individual case histories or medical problems because it appeared that some women who came for sterilisation were already pregnant?' I intervened. 'It is impossible to take note of individual problems of three hundred odd participants', Shyamal, a health worker, who had registered women participants in the morning, answered. 'But don't you think that the *Project's* women health staff who were responsible for informing the women about the clinic would be blamed by the families should anything happen to any of the participants?' I asked. Both Shyamal and Ramen, another health worker, replied, 'That's why this time we have asked our workers to be in touch with the women, and inform the *Project* if any of the participants develop post-operative complications.' 'But will that be a feasible idea, given the fact that most of the workers live in distant islands'? I further asked. Ramen replied, 'Yes I agree that it is easier said than done, but we have asked the *Project* office to have the launch ready so that we could attend the problem as early as possible.' When I asked them why the Society complied with the whims of the BMO they responded by saying, 'The *BMO* signs all our project reports, without his signature nothing is passed by the government. If he sends an adverse report our organisation's reputation will be in peril.'

Figures on sterilisation in India reflect a rapid change in gender focus. Female sterilisations, which accounted for 46 per cent of all sterilisations in 1975-76 and fell to 25 per cent in 1976-77, rose to 80 per cent in 1977-78 (Ravindran 1993:30). Throughout the 1980s they accounted for about 85 per cent of all sterilisations, and in 1989-90, 91.8 per cent (1993:30). Historically, male sterilisation or vasectomy lost its appeal following the excesses of the internal Emergency during 1975-77 when large numbers of men were victims of compulsory sterilisation (Iyengar and Iyengar 2000; Ravindran 1993) and in certain cases made to undergo sterilisation in exchange for benefits such as housing rights (Tarlo 2001). In addition to this broader context in which there has been a shift in gender bias in family planning, I also gathered the responses of the men who accompanied their wives to the sterilisation clinic at Rangabelia. The male members of the households who congregated at the tea stall opposite the training hall of the Society expressed their reservations about male sterilisation, saying that they were engaged in activities that involved hard physical labour and that male sterilisation (vasectomy) was believed to be at odds with the work they performed. Some also said that vasectomy was not a foolproof method of family planning and that they had heard from neighbours whose wives had conceived even after they underwent the operation.

The above responses are also a reflection of the position assigned to women within the family. Either they are considered as 'natural' dependents on their male counterparts or their activities, even when they are believed to be supportive to the household, are considered less hazardous or involving less physical labour. By that logic they are considered as physically better suited for undergoing sterilisation. Thus, it is not only the broader discourse of vasectomy, together with its associated memories of forced sterilisation during emergency, which accounts for a shift in the gender bias of the family planning programme, but at the macro level this is sustained by views emanating from within the households. Indeed the question as to when a woman would undergo sterilisation is usually taken by her husband or other members of the family (Kumar and Vlassoff 1997:146).

Furthermore, the availability of laparoscopic sterilisation since the early 1980s in India has made female sterilisation popular as it is thought to be more convenient and less time consuming (Ramanathan, Dilip and Padmadas 1995). The argument in favour of laparoscopic sterilisation given by the service providers −

such as health officials, state or voluntary health workers – is that it is a permanent solution to the problem of childbearing and permits women to continue with their daily chores in a routine way. The argument about the beneficial effects of this technology on women together with the responses of the men present at the Society's sterilisation clinic seems to explain why women are increasingly identified as being the targets of the family planning programme.

What is equally significant is the way sterilisation is carried out. The maximum number of laparoscopic sterilisation that can be carried out by a single team using two laparoscopes in a period of two hours is six and by that logic the maximum number of sterilisations that can be performed on a working day of approximately eight hours is twenty-four (Ramanathan, Dilip and Padmadas 1995:84). However, what we witnessed here were 300 odd sterilisations within a span of six or seven hours. What merits attention is the performative aspect of the programme. As a government servant the BMO is responsible for implementing the government's family planning programme at the local level. In an attempt to realise his target the medical officer transformed the implementation of the programme into a public spectacle of pain and suffering. In a study undertaken on routine intra-uterine device (IUD) insertion in Tamil Nadu, Hollen (1998) observes that hospital staff did not give a second thought to the fact that they were inserting IUDs without the women's consent as they simply viewed their job as one of meeting targets laid down for them. In a study of a laparoscopic sterilisation clinic in Kerala, Ramanathan, Dilip and Padmadas (1995) observe that not only were forty-eight sterilisations carried in less than two hours, but very little information about sterilisation was given to the women being sterilised. Similarly, the sterilisation clinic in Rangabelia gave women very little information about sterilisation, and no effort was made by the health staff to note down their individual medical histories. Nor were urine tests for sugar and albumen performed as is normally done before sterilisations (Ramanathan, Dilip and Padmadas1995). These prior urine tests were crucial for some women who had come for sterilisation without knowing they were pregnant. Their pregnancy was confirmed only when the doctor sterilised them.

If women were not given any pre-operative advice, post-operative care was also conspicuous by its absence. The women, as has already been mentioned, were left in the back yard before they were able to go home. This was particularly dehumanising considering the fact that these women living in the remote islands of

the Sundarbans would struggle to find a doctor should they develop any post-operative complications. All this raises serious questions about whose interests these clinics serve. In effect the so-called beneficiaries of the programme became its victims. The story of family planning programmes then is not one of providing responsive services to women, but rather of subjecting them to a gruesome sterilisation programme that places a high premium on meeting targets with no consideration for women and their health related problems.

The health workers of the Society were entrusted with the task of convincing these women and their family members about the efficacy of the laparoscopic sterilisation and getting them to attend the clinic. The health staff realised the potential danger involved in such mass-scale sterilisation. But they complied with the directives of the medical officer. What was equally significant was the absence of the workers who ran the Society's women's unit. This particular unit of the Society that dealt with women's problems and self-employment was completely absent when such massive sterilisation was conducted. When I later asked some of them about why they were not to be found during the sterilisation clinic they responded by saying that their presence was not mandatory as the clinic belonged to the health unit of the Society. It seems as if there can be compartmentalisation of women's needs and priorities. The sterilisation clinic clearly shows that the problems women face are gender specific. Women's economic empowerment is closely connected with their reproductive health and one cannot proceed without the other. However, the lack of participation of the members of the women's unit shows that the members who were in principle committed to the cause of women could remain oblivious to women's reproductive needs simply because the sterilisation clinic fell under the jurisdiction of the Society's health centre.

The event also points to the complicity of an organisation, which is so much concerned with achieving a morally good society, in a morally questionable act. Despite their dissatisfaction, the workers of the organisation complied with the directives of the medical officer on the pretext that it was of prime importance to maintain the reputation of the organisation. In order to highlight its transparent nature, it seemed that the organisation disempowered the very people for whose empowerment it stood at its public meetings in the region. The constraints of funds and, more importantly, the need to be in the good books of the BMOs were what forced them to carry out the programme. In fact the programme caused a temporary

rift between the health workers and those working in the other units of the Society. Despite opposition from non-health workers, the health workers organised the programme on the grounds that they were the ones who had to be in touch with the medical officers to get their progress evaluated and reports signed.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered the working of the Tagore Society in the Sundarbans. Instead of proceeding from an essentialist notion of civil society, I have tried to examine the efficacy of different notions of 'good' or 'ideal' societies that the organisation constructed in its attempts to do development in the region. The idea of village autarchy nurtured by the organisation in its initial years proved unsustainable after the cyclone hit the region. Thus, in the organisation's scheme of things, notions of 'ideal societies' change with time. In many respects the Society has done a commendable job, especially in drawing public attention to issues of embankments and flooding. Closely linked to these diverse visions of society are differing notions of sustainability. I have noted how the Society's conflict with the local RSP leadership on the question of prawn-seed catching led the organisation to label local party politics as being driven by narrow electoral interests. Further at the Society's public meetings, engineers and contractors are criticised for their alleged involvement in unjustified embankment construction. A focus on the Society's public meetings on the islands thus shows how the organisation positions itself in local politics through recourse to an anti-corruption rhetoric and promise of a sustainable future which will evolve through people's 'conscious' participation in a campaign for saving the Sundarbans.

Finally, I have attempted to move beyond this grand vision of a sustainable society and approached the organisation from the point of view of its individual members to focus on what sustainability and participation mean to them. It is at this level that I have tried to dismantle the organisational monolith to show how members' disparate practices are reflections of their differing levels of negotiations with the same local politics that the organisation otherwise views with much disdain. Underlying these practices are different rationalities that help us understand why and how individuals participate in the Society's scheme of things. The sterilisation clinic organised by the Society reveals a tendency on the part of the

organisation to approach women's issues in instrumental terms (Jackson 1998) and also points to the problems associated with NGOs' function as service providers. I shall consider this issue once again in connection with my discussion of the Farm Centre's approach to mushroom cultivation in the next chapter.

Chapter Five

Contested Views of Science and Development: The Farm Science Centre and the Juktibadi Sanskritic Sangstha

Introduction

This chapter provides an account of the activities of two further voluntary agencies in the Sundarbans. The first section deals with the Farm Science Centre of the Ramakrishna Ashram engaged with the issue of sustainable agriculture in the region, while the second section will concentrate on the Juktibadi Sanskritic Sangstha (Rationalist Cultural Association) and its campaign against the proposed nuclear power plant.

Although I separated three development issues analytically and related them to three organisations based in three different places in the Sundarbans, I do not mean to address these issues in complete isolation from each other. The problem of agriculture in the region confronted me as soon as I began my fieldwork in Rangabelia. With the islanders fast losing their ponds, agricultural lands and even the land beneath their feet, agriculture appears to be integrally connected to the question of embankment. When in October 2000 embankments collapsed on Bally island of Gosaba block, agricutltural fields were flooded with saline water. The paddy in the fields was nearly full-grown, yet the farmers had to destroy the plants as they dug up their fields for earth to create temporary embankments to prevent the saline water from flooding the other parts of the island. Around the same time, a cyclone hit the Sundarbans and many villages were devastated. The houses in Hingalganj block were completely razed to the ground and villagers lived in makeshift tents set up on the main brick-paved road cutting across the villages. The paddy in the fields had gone red and according to the farmers, this was due to saline water flooding the fields.

Therefore, when I met the farmers from Kultali and other neighbouring islands of the region during their participation in a training course on agronomy at

the Farm Centre in Nimpith their experiences did not seem completely alien to me (I will come back to these experiences in the next chapter). They narrated the same stories of erosion, land loss and the premature death of their paddy plants. In line with the previous chapter on the Tagore Society and its development efforts in the Sundarbans, the first section of this chapter provides an account of the emergence and development of the Ashram and its Farm Science Centre, highlighting how they indigenise and domesticate 'western science' through recourse to the term 'Bare-foot Scientists', a term coined by the organisation's founder. I will then focus on the Farm Centre's agricutlture-related activities, specifying its diverse approaches to sustainable agriculture. These activities will be discussed with special reference to the on-going collaboration in the domain of agriculture between the Farm Centre and the Sundarban Affairs Department of the Government of West Bengal. I will show how this collaboration is based on the image of the Farm Centre as an organisation committed to the scientific development of the region. In other words, I will show how 'doing science' or pursuit of science can at times be seen as politically less threatening and troublesome for those in power. At the end of this section I will examine how bare-foot the 'bare-foot scientists' actually are by concentrating on the practices of the scientists and the workers who staff the organisational structure of the Farm Centre.

In the second section I will examine the activities of the rationalists in Canning with special reference to the Rationalist Association's campaign against the state government proposed nuclear power plant in the Sundarbans. According to the rationalists, when existential issues such as land erosion, flooding, uncertain agriculture, absence of fresh water remain largely unaddressed, a proposal for a nuclear power plant in the Sundarbans on the grounds of generating electricity only aggravates people's anxiety.

I will begin with a brief history of the Rationalist Association, highlighting the nature of its activities since its inception. By providing an account of their 'snake shows' I will demonstrate how, for the rationalists, the show, where magic is performed, becomes an important vehicle for promoting science. I will then move on to an analysis of the organisation's campaign against the proposed nuclear power plant in the Sundarbans.

Section I

The Farm Science Centre and Sustainable Agriculture

Genesis of the Ashram and Farm Centre

The Ramakrishna Ashram at Nimpith is the handiwork of Swami Buddhananda, a monk from the Ramakrishna Mission[1]. The poverty of the people of the Sundarbans led him to start philanthropic activities in Nimpith and in 1960 he established the Ramakrishna Ashram. Initial funding came from the Gujarati community of Calcutta. Soon Buddhananda realised that without a proper educational infrastructure no development would be possible. So he started schools in Nimpith for educating the rural people of the Sundarbans. The organisation's educational activities started with a pre-basic and a junior basic school in 1963. Later junior high schools and high schools for boys and girls were also set up. The decade of the sixties also saw the setting up of a women's group (*Mahila Samity*) with a view to imparting vocational training in tailoring, embroidery and needlework to deserted or destitute women.

At the beginning of the seventies agriculture found its way onto the agenda of the organisation since Buddhananda came to believe that the proper development of the Sundarbans lay in promulgating scientific and sustainable agriculture. As a part of the agricultural development programme, an Agro-Development Centre was set up with a few pump sets and tractors. This equipment was lent out to the farmers in times of need. In 1979 Buddhananda's notion of 'positive science' led to the setting up of a Farm Science Centre sponsored by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), an organisation of the Government of India, which

---

[1] Ramakrishna Paramhansa. born in Bengal in 1836, was a worshipper of *Shakti* or *Kali* and the priest of the Dakshineswar *Kali* Temple (a little away from Calcutta). Despite having no formal education, Ramakrishna's discourses on god and religion, delivered mostly in a sort of half delirious state, had such a dramatic effect on the middle class literati that even sceptics became his disciples. After Ramakrishna's death, Swami Vivekananda, his celebrated disciple, set up the Ramakrishna Mission to propagate Ramakrishna's religious ideas and to carry out philanthropic activities. Since then the people in charge of the Mission have been monks practising celibacy and leading austere lives. The organisation under study is also a monastic organisation, but has broken away from the original Ramakrishna Mission (for an analytical discussion of Ramakrishna see Partha Chatterjee's *The Nation and Its Fragments* 1995 chapter three).

was attached to the Ramakrishna Ashram. The Farm Science Centre, in Buddhananda's view, would be the abode of 'bare-foot scientists' who would learn from and work with local farmers in developing appropriate technologies.

I heard a part of the above story while in the office of the present Secretary to the organisation on the ground floor of the two-storey building, which also served as the private residence of the monks. The building was situated in the same campus where the organisation had its Ramakrishna temple. Sadananda, the monk currently heading the organisation, was narrating the above story amidst his other official responsibilities. He dealt with at least fifteen telephone calls during his narrative, which he and several other workers of the organisation preferred to call an 'orientation', a must for every new visitor. On receiving his fifteenth telephone call, Sadananda finally delegated to one of the members of the staff the sacred duty of giving me the 'orientation' necessary before I could start my formal fieldwork. I thus gathered the 'orientation' story in bits and pieces from different members of the staff and workers and have woven them together into a more or less meaningful narrative.

What struck me was the term 'bare-foot scientists'. Sadananda used the term in the course of his narration and later I found it to be widely used by the staff of the Farm Science Centre. I also found mention of the term in a report of the Farm Centre.

> The Swami [Buddhananda] visualised "bare-foot" scientists who would learn from, and work with, the people in developing appropriate technologies... A visit by a team led by Dr. M S Swaminathan, the then Director-General of ICAR, heralded new vistas... the ICAR selected Nimpith for establishing a KVK [*Krishi Vigyan Kendra*: Farm Science Centre] centre which started functioning in 1979 (Nimpith Farm Science Centre 1991:3).

'We are not against modern science', said Sadananda during my interview with him. 'But we are against a science that defies the inner qualities of man. In other words, doing science should be a spiritual experience.' He handed me the commemorative volume published on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the organisation and then drawing my attention to a speech of Swami Vivekananda – 'If a ploughman's boy cannot come to education, why not meet him at the plough, at the factory, just wherever he is? Go along with him, like his shadow' (Sri Ramakrishna Ashram Nimpith 1986:18) – Sadananda said that the organisation's

development agenda is based on this guiding principle. He further added that 'Swamiji [Buddhananda] had this notion of science on his mind when he approached the question of rural development through the setting up of the KVK [Farm Science Centre].'

Prakash (1992), in his analysis of the pursuit of science in colonial India, offers an insight into the ways in which western science was encountered and negotiated by the colonial elites. In support of his argument Prakash singles out two important arenas where such negotiations took place, namely museums and science exhibitions in colonial India. The historiography on colonial India is replete with instances of such negotiations and domestication whereby the Indian elites not only narrated their encounter with western science, but voiced their discontent with the hegemony of western science and civilisation (Roychoudhury 1987; Chatterjee 1995; Kaviraj 1995). In this context it is not difficult to see how the term 'bare-foot scientists' is integrally connected to Vivekananda'a views on ploughman's boy's education, for Vivekananda was also among the nationalists to have registered his discomfort with western science which he associated with the West's 'civilisational' impulse[2]. Vivekananda not only emphasised the ploughman's boy's education but also stipulated that such an education could be meaningful only when those doing the educating would be ready to learn from him as well. From this point of view, scientists, as practitioners of development, would be the new monks ready to mix with people without reservations and share their knowledge with them. Development, viewed in this sense, then becomes an enterprise of science shorn of the latter's pitfalls and an arena where scientists in the east establish their distinctiveness from their western counterparts. Unlike the pursuit of science, as understood in the western context, with its assumed link to fame and power, scientists in the east would be the new ascetics who would both heighten the communicative power of science and make it more humane.

The use of the term 'bare-foot' scientist is significant. It not only suggests a happy marriage between religion and science, but also offers an approach to 'indigenising' science. Thus, the ideology of the Farm Centre at Nimpith provides

---

[2] Vivekananda not only voiced his discontent against western science and civilisation, but had a definite vision of rural uplift. His Ramakrishna Mission, with its emphasis on village centred action, was a step in that direction. For an analysis of Vivekananda's views on western science and civilisation see the section on Vivekananda in Tapan Roychoudhury's *Three Views of Europe From Nineteenth Century Bengal* (1987).

an instance of how western science and modernity can be redefined to suit what are considered to be the needs of the East, but in actuality to suit more specifically the needs of a religious organisation operating in a non-western context.

The Farm Science Centre and Its Experiment in Sustainable Agriculture

In 1979 the Farm Science Centre was set up and attached to the Ramakrishna Ashram by ICAR. The principles on which ICAR founded its Farm Science Centre are:

- Collaboration with subject matter specialists of the State Agricultural Universities, Scientists at Regional Research Stations and State Extension Personnel in "On Farm Testing"; refining and documenting technologies for developing regionally specific sustainable land use systems;

- Organisation of training to update on a regular basis the Extension [outreach] Personnel in the area of operation with emerging advances in agricultural research;

- Organisation of long term vocational training courses in agriculture and allied vocations for rural youth with an emphasis on "Learning by doing" for generating self employment through institutional financing and on and off campus training courses for farmers with a view to increased production on their farms;

- Organisation of Front-Line Demonstrations in various crops/livestock to generate production data and feedback information (Nimpith Farm Science Centre 2000: 3).

According to the scientific and technical staff of the Centre, the above are the mandates or guidelines that the organisation has to follow while carrying out its development activities in the Sundarbans. Today the Centre has expanded to accommodate one scientist and by eight technical professionals supported one administrator, two support and two auxiliary staff. If we carefully examine the ICAR mandates mentioned above we see that the Centre is expected to liaise between the scientists or specialists engaged in different government departments and the people or beneficiaries of development. Research, training and knowledge transfer are, therefore, integral to the functioning of the Centre.

Research for the purpose of training and technology transfer has centred on two main problems: poor drainage and salinity during the monsoon and non-availability of fresh ground water during the winter or dry season. Agriculture in the Sundarbans is plagued by these two problems. Due to the high level of salinity in the soil, growing paddy is a major problem and the situation worsens when embankments collapse and paddy fields get flooded with saline water. Similarly, during the winter agriculture comes practically to a halt because of lack of fresh ground water. Since underground water is saline to a depth of twenty to twenty-five feet, shallow pumps have proved ineffective in reaching it. Thus, the Farm Science Centre has identified poor drainage, inundation, water logging, salinity and lack of irrigation as being the major obstacles to sustainable agriculture and more specifically to the growth of a viable second crop during the winter in the Sundarbans. Unless the water is drained off completely the land cannot be made available for a second crop. According to the drainage conditions the Centre has classified the Sundarbans land into three types:

- Type A: land free of stagnant water in October-November
- Type B: land free of stagnant water in December
- Type C: land free of stagnant water in January.

Type A lands are on relatively high ground where there is a possibility of water draining off in October-November, so here the Centre's research focuses on horticultural crops. According to the scientist based at the Centre this particular research programme has been launched with the objective of: a) finding suitable varieties of fruit, flowers and vegetables; b) standardising nutritional status and c) salinity management. Salinity management is key to the success of this technology, and this has stimulated research into 'poly-mulch' techniques. To this end, the Centre has received poly film from the Indian Petro-Chemicals Limited (IPCL), a public sector undertaking. Such poly film serves as a cover to protect the plants against both dew and also the strong sunlight that dries up the moisture in the soil. During the course of my conversation with the technical staff of the Centre some of them mentioned that a lot more research is required concerning the colour of the mulch, gauge of the film and crop management practices before it is ready as a package for dissemination.

Type B lands are hardly suitable for vegetable cultivation, because of the high temperatures from January onwards and because of its salinity. For a crop to grow on Type B land it must have long roots to exploit residual moisture in the soil. In addition the crop should be able to withstand temperatures of up to 90°F and crop duration should not exceed 150 days on the field. Research at the Farm Science Centre concluded that cotton is one of the few crops that grow under high salinity conditions, but it takes a long time (six to eight months) to grow and be ready for harvest. Therefore, if crops are sown in December, it is unlikely that the harvest would be complete before the onset of the monsoon in June. To restrict the growing time in the field to six months the Centre has adopted the strategy of growing the seedlings for one to two months in nurseries before transplanting them. This research has been in progress since the mid 1980s and the Central Institute of Cotton Research (CICR), Nagpur, a constituent of ICAR, has supplied the Farm Science Centre with seventy-five different varieties of cotton for research, as well as extending necessary expertise to the Centre to test the staple strength. The Farm Centre's experiment with cotton as a second crop in the Sundarbans has also been supported by the Government of West Bengal.

With regard to Type C lands, the Centre's suggestion is in favour of a re-profiling or what the scientists at the Farm Centre call a 'land-shaping programme'. Here the solution lies in raising a major part (about ¾) of the low-lying land so that it remains permanently above water. This can be done by digging earth from the remaining quarter of the low land, which can then be turned into a pond. As a result of this re-profiling a farmer can grow high yielding rice on the raised land, use ponds for aquaculture and grow fruit and vegetables along the elevated areas that surround the excavated pond. The scientist to whom I talked was enthusiastic about the Farm Centre's achievements while explaining the land-shaping programme to me. He had all the requisite software loaded on to his computer and explained everything at the click of a mouse. According to the information I received both from him and the other members of staff in his office, the Nimpith Farm Centre is the first to have introduced such a land-shaping programme to the people of the Sundarbans. Not only has this programme increased the number of ponds in the villages, but it has resulted in an increase in farmers' income from Rs. 1200-1800

(£17-25 approx.) to Rs. 8000-20,000 (£114-285 approx.) per acre per year (Nimpith Farm Science Centre 1991: 12).

Apart from agricultural development complementary research was conducted into aquaculture. A survey undertaken initially to assess this resource revealed that twelve villages were found to have 1200 ponds and 92% of them were of the size less than 0.1 hectare (Nimpith Farm Science Centre 2000: 15). Villagers used their ponds for breeding fish, but their use of the ponds was considered unscientific and this led the scientists to embark upon what they viewed as a scientific aquaculture programme. Training and demonstrations are also organised to teach villagers to identify the most beneficial species. Important aquaculture programmes undertaken by the Centre include intensive fish farming with freshwater carp, prawn farming in brackish water impoundments and catfish farming in captivity.

The Nimpith Farm Science Centre organises vocational training programmes for practising farmers, rural youth and outreach workers. Such courses identify the level of skill and knowledge of the trainees and assess their needs. The Centre has a research demonstration farm of forty hectares, a soil testing laboratory and a hostel and training facilities for farmers. Apart from organising need-based training, the scientists and experts at the Centre counsel farmers on individual and group problems related to crop production, animal husbandry, fisheries etc. Village meetings and agricultural fairs are also organised by the Centre for disseminating various technologies to the people of the Sundarbans.

The Farm Centre of Nimpith has also initiated mushroom spawn cultivation with the intention of providing an additional source of income for the women of the Sundarbans. In the early 1990s, the Vivekananda Institute of Biotechnology (VIB) was attached to the Ramakrishna Ashram under the core support programme of the Department of Science and Technology (DST), Government of India. Mushroom spawn is produced in the laboratory and sold for cultivation to the women trainees. In the year 2000 the Institute organised twenty-two training programmes for propagating this technology to the people and about 10,000 mushroom spawn packets were supplied either directly to the farmers or to the mushroom growers through the Sundarban Development Board (Sri Ramakrishna Ashram 1999-2000: 29).

The Institute of Biotechnology has embarked upon the programme of popularisation of biofertilisers like Azolla, Rhizobium and Azotobactor, with the objective of lessening farmers' dependence on chemical fertilisers and pesticides. At the moment the Institute is carrying out two projects in this field. The first, the National Network on Integrated Nutrient Management (NNINM) and the second, the development of a model for Azolla Technology for the deep-water rice system of the Sundarbans, are funded by the Indian Government's Departments of Biotechnology (DB) and Science and Technology respectively. In the year 1999-2000 a total of 285 soil samples from farmers' fields were analysed for the purpose of transferring biofertiliser technology and three courses were organised in Namkhana, Jamtala and Sagar for disseminating this knowledge (Sri Ramakrishna Ashram 1999-2000: 28). The biofertilisers are grown on the demonstration farm of the Institute before they are ready for supply. In 2000 the Institute supplied about 2300 packets of Rhizobium through the Sundarban Development Board.

What we encounter here is a gigantic enterprise of science based on experiment and results. When we go through the ICAR guidelines it becomes clear that specialists are given primacy of place in the Centre's scheme of things. The Centre has the responsibility of liaising with agricultural universities and specialist institutes to engage them in helping to solve the agricultural problems that confront people in the Sundarbans. Yet, how do scientists and specialists solve people's problems without first analysing and systematising them? A successful science of development lies in the comprehensive and exhaustive classification of the problems under consideration. What we have discussed above are various attempts at classifying the land and the problems associated with each type of land. This is what Visvanathan would call development as a technocratic project (1988:259) where systematisation and classification is made on the assumption that problems become objects of experiment.

According to Nader, the irony of science is that its pursuit is based on the faith that experiments are believed to lead to positive and predictable results (Nader 1996). It is this assumption that has led to the setting up of laboratories for biotechnology and tissue culture in spite of the fact that many ecologists have expressed concern over the use of biotechnology in agriculture. Shiva warns against the possible biotechnological revolution (1991; 1992). According to her, biotechnologies are opening up new areas for corporate profit (1991: 218), for they

prevent regeneration of plants and seeds by destroying their natural genetic diversity. For Shiva, biotechnology leads to 'colonization' and 'commoditization' of seeds (1992:6). More or less similar views were expressed by Aerni and Rieder (2000) who conducted a survey on the level of acceptance of modern biotechnology in a developing country like the Philippines. During their survey many NGOs and farmer organisations cast doubts on the significant potential for genetic engineering in agriculture and anticipated that this technology would be accompanied by high risks and low benefits (2000:129). Despite these concerns raised by the ecologists the Nimpith Farm Science Centre's experiments in biotechnology, tissue culture and mushroom spawn production continue unabated. However, my intention here is not to dwell on the pitfalls of biotechnology, rather, it is to interrogate the organisation's grand project of science and sustainability in the Sundarbans, an area where agriculture is increasingly of peripheral importance. I will interrogate this in the next chapter with the help of people's own perceptions of their problems, but first I turn to the so-called 'bare-foot scientists' to see how bare-foot they are.

How Bare-foot are the 'Bare-foot Scientists'?

Over the years the Nimpith Farm Science Centre has evolved into an establishment with its elaborate organisational structure and bureaucracy (see figure 5.7). While reflecting on the growth of the Centre, Sadananda said that when in 1979 the Centre came into being it had twelve villages under its purview. Today this figure has risen to ninety-three. And about 350 villages are indirectly affected by the Farm Centre's agricultural experiments. Bureaucracy seems integral to the functioning of the Centre. Firstly, the Ashram being a monastic organisation has monks at the helm of affairs. Every department is headed by a monk with the other members of the organisation and the technical staff working under him. These monks in charge of their respective departments are answerable to the Secretary of the organisation. Secondly, the Farm Centre, being a unit of ICAR and the Government of India, functions through a bureaucratic structure. What strikes one on a first visit to the Centre is that it is as if one is visiting a government office or department. On entering through the main gate one finds oneself in a huge corridor of the multi-storied building where each scientist or technician is allocated a

Organisational Structure of the Farm Science Centre, Nimpith
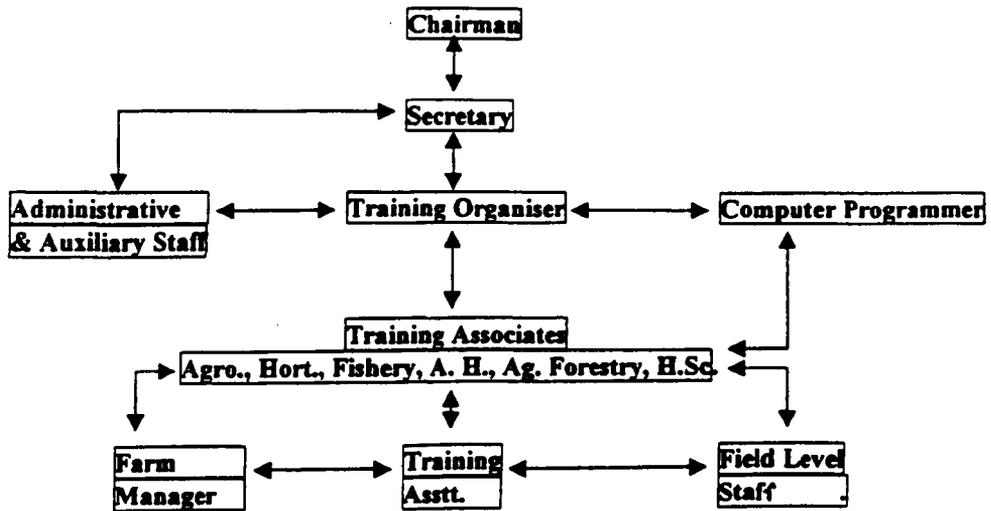
Fig. 5.7

separate office with his or her name and designation written on the door. Each is busy working on a computer.

'The fulcrum around which our organisation and activity revolves is the expansion of grassroots', explained the scientist at the Centre during the course of my interview with him. 'We are getting government funds for newer and newer projects and experiments and the benefits of these projects need to be extended to the wider areas of the Sundarbans. If we remain fixed in one place, the government would tend to view us as having developed vested interests. One cannot mess around with government money and compromise the transparent nature of one's organisation.' Under such circumstances experiment and innovation become ends in themselves. Furthermore, the scientists and technical professionals appear preoccupied with the minute details of the projects that they handle which also involve them in mountains of paper work. In order to manage the workload, scientists tend to delegate duties to their subordinate staff. While the scientific and technical staff are recruited from outside Nimpith, the members of the non-technical staff or staff who work under the supervision of the scientific personnel are mainly locals and residents of Nimpith.

Normally duties delegated by the scientists to the subordinate staff are carried out. However, once I happened to witness a dispute that arose over the delegation of responsibility to a subordinate. The incident took place during one of my visits to the Farm Centre for the purposes of interview. As I entered through the main gate of the Centre I saw a technical staff of the Centre admonishing a worker for his alleged non-compliance. As I was not privy to the heated conversation I pretended not to have noticed anything and proceeded towards the main office of the Centre.

An hour later when I finished my work at the Centre and reached the Joynagar Block Office across the road to fix an appointment with a block official I found the same worker engrossed in a heated conversation with another block office worker outside the office gate. They both stopped talking on seeing me and then drawing the block office worker's attention to me, the worker from the Centre said, 'Ask him, he was there.' The Centre worker then turned to me and asked, 'Didn't you see how he [the technical staff] insulted me?' 'I did see, but I really don't know what happened', I answered. The worker explained that the technician had given him a task to do, which was not strictly within his job description, but nonetheless

he promised to do it. Since he had to complete the assignment amidst his other responsibilities it took him some time. The technical staff reprimanded him for the delay. 'These scientists, think they know everything; they pose as if they are running the *KVK* [Farm Centre]. Let me tell you that without the help of the locals they couldn't do a thing.' The worker looked quite upset. The block office worker who had remained silent all this while now joined him saying, 'These scientists' high-handedness is at times irritating. It is the locals who do the leg work while they sit and give orders.'

The scientist at the Vivekananda Institute of Biotechnology was so busy with his paper work that I could manage to talk to him only once. He was either doing an audit report of the project he was handling or making arrangements for the government study team's visit to the Institute. Whenever I went to the Institute in search of him I found him sitting in the computing room or engaged in some urgent paper work. I remember having asked him once if he could show me the mushroom spawn laboratory of the Institute. The scientist delegated the responsibility to a person who was watering the garden of the Institute and then turned to me and said, 'Don't worry, he knows everything. Nimpith *KVK* trains its people well.'

The scientists are experimenting with different varieties of cotton and mushroom and publishing research papers in collaboration with other research institutes in India. However, when I asked the man, who showed me the Institute's mushroom laboratory, if his family ate mushrooms, he answered in the negative. Not only did they not eat mushroom, they did not even grow them because there was no market for mushroom in the Sundarbans. His response threw light on the question of a market for these products, which has largely remained unattended in the Centre's scheme of things. However, it is misleading to think that the laboratory assistant was the only person who answered in the negative. Some of the women workers of the organisation also stated that they did not grow or eat mushroom. Mushrooms have not become part of the diet of the people of the Sundarbans, but that does not prevent the scientists from experimenting, collaborating and networking with the other research institutes.

Scientists thus find themselves engaged primarily in networking with other research institutes for the publication of their research findings. For example, recently the Institute of Biotechnology has launched a programme on plant tissue culture. The aim is to supply large numbers of banana plantlets of selected varieties,

a programme funded by the Department of Science and Technology. The Institute had already collaborated with the Bose Institute in Calcutta for the publication of its research paper on tissue culture (Sri Ramakrishna Ashram 1999-2000: 29). Thus, research and experiment become the main objectives for the scientists and the cause of the people takes a back seat. This becomes apparent when we browse through the research publications of the organisation. Not only are they turgid and jargonised, but they are published in a language that is beyond the comprehension of the ordinary people of the Sundarbans. Thus, people's development is couched in the language of the elites. Not only are these research papers published in English, but all other literature on the organisation is also published in English, a language with which the vast majority of those living in the Sundarbans are not familiar.

Another important issue that caught my attention was the dissatisfaction of the technical and research staff with their jobs at the Centre. Buddhananda's 'bare-foot scientists' expressed their resentment at the Centre's relative isolation from urban areas and from the wider scientific community. The other thing that worried them was the question of the irregular release of funds from the ICAR. The ICAR drastically cut down the number of technical staff for lack of funds. Farrington *et al.* also drew attention to this problem in their study of the Farm Centre as a part of their broader project of studying government-NGO collaboration around sustainable agriculture in India (Farrington, Lewis, Satish and Miclat-Teves 1993:181). In 1995-96 the total number of technical staff sanctioned by the ICAR was thirteen but by 1999-2000 this number had fallen to eight. So the technical staff were worried about the permanence of their jobs at the Centre and conversation mostly revolved around these material issues. In fact one of the staff said that if one did not feel secure in a job after acquiring all the requisite qualifications and expertise then one's motivation for work was lost.

The Farm Centre's training sessions throw further light on the process of dissemination and extension of technologies. During my stay I had the opportunity to witness a training course on agriculture. Trainees were selected only after they had been subjected to an administrative screening procedure. First, the trainees had been required to fill out an application form, which needed to be countersigned by the respective heads of their village panchayats or local government offices who acted as the referee of the concerned applicant. Then the scientist of the Farm Centre in his administrative capacity as training organiser evaluated these

applications before he selected the trainees for the workshop. Training courses are organised throughout the year, so the scientist and technical staff spend a considerable amount of time screening and selecting applicants.

The physical space of the training room was so organised that it was not difficult to make out who sat where. It looked like a conventional classroom where the trainers sat on a podium with their backs to the huge blackboard on the wall and the rest of the room was filled with benches and tables occupied by the trainees. The trainers were specialists drawn from different government institutes and regional universities. Before each training session the technical staff of the Centre gave handouts, prepared in the vernacular, to the trainees. Each session was meant for a particular trainer who spoke at length on a particular aspect of horticulture. At the end of each training session the participants were given about ten minutes to seek clarifications, but under no circumstances could a trainee contradict his or her trainer. According to the admission rules, a trainee had to accept the views of the trainer. The application form, which the trainees fill out, clearly states that, in the case of any difference of opinion, the trainers' views would be considered as final.

An evaluation of the organisation also needs a consideration of the issue of mushroom spawn production because of the implications it has for women's self-employment which is increasingly a buzzword in the discourses of development. The problems women said they faced in marketing mushroom raises serious concerns about the limitations of the self-employment programmes. It is here that we need to critically reflect on the training programmes undertaken by NGOs like the Society or the Nimpith Ashram for women's self-employment. The problem of marketing expertise or products also came up in the course of my conversation with some of the women trainees at Rangabelia. The trainees, especially those who lived in the remoter islands, expressed anxieties about the future of their newly acquired expertise, since living in remote islands, for them, meant travelling to market places which were not only enormously time consuming, but also prohibitive in cost. There is a tendency towards promoting gender issues in instrumentalist terms i.e. stressing synergy with environment, child welfare and family planning rather than in their own right (Jackson 1998; Mayoux 1998).

The Farm Centre's approach to mushroom spawn production and its role in technology transfer reflect the West Bengal government's (the Sundarban Affairs Department) interest in promoting a second crop for the Sundarbans. We have seen

how the Minister of Sundarbans Affairs Department repeatedly emphasises the protein content in mushroom (see chapter three) and how the Farm Centre's endeavour in this regard is funded by the state government. Rarely considered are the problems women face when they are encouraged and trained to grow mushroom because here the gender issue is subsumed under the dominant problem of a second crop. Similar such training programmes towards women's self-employment that the Tagore Society undertakes are also funded by the state and central governments. However, in carrying out these training programmes the organisations function merely as service providers (Silliman 1999:156) rather than consciously addressing problems that are gender-specific. Although there are women workers present in both these organisations, their activities nonetheless demonstrate a lack of gender awareness. Nowhere was this more evident than in the sterilisation clinic organised by the Society, which clearly suggest that women's problems are complex and contentious (Mayoux 1998:179) and that one cannot compartmentalise gender problems. Nor can gender issues remain subservient to something more immediate and contingent.

In the above section I have attempted to address the question of how bare-foot the 'bare-foot scientists' are. In other words, I have tried to examine the gap between the discourse of 'bare-foot scientists' serving as a philosophical backbone of the organisation and the pursuit of science as reflected in the practices of the scientists and members of the organisation. I have examined this by highlighting the bureaucratic nature of the organisation and the esoteric practices of the scientists. In the course of my discussion I have also highlighted three different incidents. To be more specific, I have narrated my encounter with the members of the organisation at three different levels. I have drawn attention to a dispute, which occurred between a worker and a scientist of the Farm Centre over the carrying out of an assigned task and the resentment the worker shared with a fellow villager working in the local block office. The incident, apparently insignificant, shows that there exists tension between the locals and non-locals, between the scientists and non-scientists. This is not to suggest that the relation is inherently difficult, but that it is often a source of conflict. It also indicates that an organisation based on an idealised notion of science does not hesitate to assume an extreme hierarchical form.

I have also narrated my encounter with the laboratory assistant of the mushroom laboratory. His views, together with those of the women workers on

mushroom production, show that the Centre continues with its mushroom experiments and generates funds for future production, even as voices from within the organisation cast doubts on mushrooms' economic viability in the Sundarbans. At the third level I have described the scientists' perceptions of their jobs at the Farm Centre and their annoyance over their relative isolation from the wider scientific community. This once again shows that the scientists consider that they can become 'bare-foot' only when their emoluments and conditions of service remain commensurate with their qualifications. In my view, these three apparently unrelated narratives signify moments when the organisation appears disaggregated rather than constituting a monolith of unitary practices and also suggests something of a gap between rhetoric and reality.

The Farm Science Centre and the Government of West Bengal

The relation between the Nimpith Farm Centre and the Left-front government of West Bengal has been one of collaboration and cooperation. In 1982 the state government transferred its nineteen acre Block Seed Farm to the Ashram for the purposes of seed production, demonstration and training. Although the Centre's action research project funded by the ICAR to popularise cotton cultivation started at the beginning of the 1990s, its research in the field of cotton cultivation has been in progress since 1984 when the initial funding for cotton technology came from the West Bengal Government.

In 1986 a soil-testing laboratory financed by the state government was set up for the purpose of testing farmers' soil and water samples. The Sundarban Development Board was instrumental in setting up the laboratory and Rs 13.02 lakhs (about £20,000) had been provided by the Board for the purpose of meeting recurring expenditure. A sum of Rs 3.50 lakhs (about £5,000) had also been sanctioned for the construction of staff quarters for the scientists of the Centre.

For a long time there was no fish seed centre in the Sundarbans and fish seeds had to be procured from Calcutta. The seeds supplied by private firms was of poor quality due to high inbreeding. In 1989 the Department of Fisheries, Government of West Bengal provided funds to the Farm Centre to set up a fish seed hatchery. In 1992 the Sundarban Development Board also provided funds to the Farm Centre to start a mushroom spawn production centre. In addition the Board

also provided funds to the tune of Rs 238,265 (just under £3,500) for the purposes of training and dissemination of knowledge. Apart from funding various projects of the Nimpith Farm Science Centre, the Board also liaises with the Centre in connection with the training of the Board's field staff.

The Annual Administration Reports of the Sundarban Development Board clearly state that the Nimpith Farm Centre is the only non-governmental organisation it collaborates with as far as development in the Sundarbans is concerned. I wondered why the Farm Centre has been identified as being the only non-governmental organisation worthy of consideration. The former Minister of the Department of Sundarban Affairs provided an answer when I interviewed him: 'It is not difficult to see why we collaborate with Nimpith', said the CPI-M Minister. 'NGOs are mostly politically biased and have a tendency to destabilise the government. The organisation at Nimpith is doing development along *scientific* lines. Unlike other NGOs, they do not chant slogans. They are doing *real* development.'

What makes the Nimpith Farm Centre worthy of attention by and collaboration with the Sundarban Development Board and the Left-front government is the organisation's ability to turn science into an indispensable ritual of development. According to the Minister, doing 'scientific development' is the only form of 'real development'. Not only does the Minister seek to establish a relation between science and realism, but he also puts science in opposition to politics. For him, the NGO's scientific character is its 'true' character. The Minister also linked the pursuit of science to the question of transparency. In other words, the more an organisation is engaged with science, the more 'transparent' it becomes and thus the less threatening to established power.

When we turn to the Farm Centre we find that members of the organisation also have their own reasons to collaborate with the government. During our conversation the staff of the Centre referred to corruption among the local-level government functionaries as one of the main factors accounting for the failure of the government's development programmes. In this context the comment of a scientist at the Farm Centre was noteworthy: 'About government corruption at the local level, the less said the better. If the government sends one hundred blankets as part of its relief work chances are that only fifty will reach the people. No wonder these days government calls upon NGOs to provide services.' Thus, according to the

scientist, corruption at the local level is also an important factor explaining why the government increasingly depends on NGOs to provide services. However, the statement made here is also significant in that it throws light on the way NGO functionaries' perceptions deconstruct the state. For the voluntary agencies, the state does not appear to be simply a monolithic trans-local entity, but an entity that is made visible in the activities of its local-level officials and functionaries. I had raised this issue in the introductory chapter and also in the fourth chapter in connection with my analysis of the Tagore Society's public meetings on the islands. The comment of the scientist of the Farm Centre once again proves how important it is to focus on the practices of the lower-level government officials and see what the state does in the wider society.

In the first section of this chapter I have considered the working of the Nimpith Farm Science Centre and its programme for sustainable agriculture in the Sundarbans. I have opened the section with an analysis of the notion of 'bare-foot scientists', which serves as ideological backbone of the organisation. This was followed by an account of the agriculture-related activities of the Centre. I have also shown how ecologists have expressed concern over the use of biotechnology in agriculture. I have interrogated the idea of bare-foot scientists by focusing on the voices and practices of the members of the organisation.

With the setting up of Farm Science Centre the organisation at Nimpith, that started its career as a philanthropic body, eventually became an organisation that not only collaborates with the government, but effectively functions as a part of the government structure in the Sundarbans, since the mandates of the ICAR are the organising principles of the Farm Centre. The scientists who work on behalf of the Ramakrishna Ashram are also employees of the ICAR. The very presence of the state in the form of a Farm Centre makes the distinction between state and civil society fuzzy.

Here I must revisit the dispute that occurred between the technical and non-technical staff of the Farm Centre over the carrying out of a task to show how it informs our understanding of the state and its functionaries at the local level. Although the dispute occurred at the Farm Centre, the local person working for the organisation went to the block office worker, also a fellow villager, to voice his resentment against his superior. As stated earlier, the Farm Centre was only a few meters away from the block office with just a road separating the two. It was this

physical proximity that enabled the worker to find his friend at the state office and ventilate his grievances against a member of the voluntary organisation. Thus, the use of the physical space of the state office to reflect on the performance of a voluntary organisation helps us see how the state insinuates itself at the local level and thereby blurs the formal boundary between state and civil society.

Section II

The Juktibadi Sangstha, Science and the Nuclear Issue

Genesis of the Association and the Magic Show

The Juktibadi Sanskritic Sangstha is an association located in Canning town, which is part of Canning I block of the Sundarbans. At the moment the Sangstha consists of about forty-five members, majority of whom come from Canning and its neighbourhood. In terms of its size and coverage the Association is nowhere near as big as the Tagore Society or the Ramakrishna Ashram, Nimpith. Furthermore, unlike the other two organisations, it does not enjoy government patronage but relies on subscriptions and donations, which constitute important sources of funding. The office of the Association is housed in a small shop just opposite the main entrance to Canning Railway Station. This small office cum shop is stuffed with saplings and plant and vegetable seeds, which the members sell to fund their organisation and publications. Most of the members are part-time volunteers coming from almost all walks of life, including some who work in the government offices in Canning.

The organisation came into being in the 1980s since when it has been engaged in popularising scientific knowledge among the people of the region. *Juktibadi*, in common parlance, refers to those who eschew emotion in favour of reason in matters concerning everyday life. Therefore, *juktibadi* or rationalists are those who respond only to the call of science and reason and nothing else. However,

here the organisation in question is not simply a Rationalist Association (Juktibadi Sangstha), but added a cultural (*Sanskritic*) dimension to its otherwise scientific nature. When I asked the members of the Association why, they said they added the word 'cultural' because their scientific activities pertained to a specific cultural milieu i.e. the Sundarbans. Their intention was to popularise the use of science and reason to address the specific problems of the Sundarbans. Thus, by using the word 'cultural' the members thought that they attempted to particularise their pursuit of science and reason, making it suit the context in which they worked.

The Juktibadi Sangstha or Rationalist Association in Canning is part of a wider network of such associations elsewhere in West Bengal. The purpose behind the emergence of these rationalist groups is to popularise science and expose the so-called 'con-men'[3] who deceive people or cast a spell through their magical practices. Sameer a member of the Association, said, 'When our *Sangstha* came into being our intention was to cleanse the society of taboos and superstitious practices. The first and foremost popular misconception that we wanted to debunk was about snakebites, a chronic problem in the Sundarbans. In most cases death from snakebite occurs due to lack of awareness on the part of the victim's family. More often than not the victim is rushed to a sorcerer (*Gunin*). A sorcerer's treatment hastens death.' Sameer continued, 'To prevent and reduce the number of deaths we organise science fairs in different parts of the Sundarbans. The objective is to help people identify snakes that are poisonous. We often conduct magic shows where one of our members plays a sorcerer and enacts what he does when he treats a victim of snakebite. Our intention is to expose them and their malicious practices.' While talking to Sameer, Bhakta, another member of the Association, handed me a leaflet, in which it was written – "We carry snakes although we don't know how to charm them; we are not sorcerers, yet we are not afraid of snakes" (translated from Bengali). 'This was the slogan of one of our workshops held in 1994', said Bhakta and Sameer. 'People are afraid of snakes because they rely on sorcerers.'

Thus, in the Association's scheme of things conducting snake shows, where members perform magic, becomes a vehicle for promoting 'rational' and 'scientific' thinking among the people. As rationalists, they are opposed to the magical

---

[3] Illustrated references to the rationalist movement exposing 'con-men' can be found in T. Shah's *Sorcerer's Apprentice* (1998). Although the book recounts mainly the author's experiences as an apprentice to a sorcerer, it does touch on the inescapable issue of the rationalist movement (see pp 213-14).

practices of the 'con-men', but they conduct magic shows to expose them. 'Without magic shows people won't listen to us', says Gopal who is a van rickshaw driver and member of the Association. Initially the members hired Gopal's van for organising magic or snake shows in Canning. Gopal enjoyed their magic shows and gradually his contact with the Association deepened and he became a member. But Gopal confessed that originally it was his encounter with magic shows that drew him to the organisation.

I had the opportunity to attend a snake show of the rationalists while in Canning. The show was organised in a village a little away from the town. In addition to organising it as part of their awareness programme the members also used it as a forum to voice their dissent against the proposed power plant and distribute the pamphlets they had published on the issue. There were about ten members who travelled to the village on van-rickshaws for about half an hour. As soon as we arrived a member of the Association switched on the microphone and informed the villagers about our arrival and the proposed magic show. The microphone was connected to a liquid cell battery kept inside a wooden box and placed on the van-rickshaw. Seeing us entering the village children started running behind the van-rickshaws. They looked enthusiastic, as if they knew what the organisation's arrival in the village meant. The members started unloading their equipment, including the bottles full of snakes. Soon the place where the van-rickshaws had stopped became crowded with villagers. The members of the Juktibadi Sangstha made their way through the crowd into a nearby field where they decided to start their show. The crowd followed them and formed a huge circle, some sitting and others standing, with the members in the middle unpacking their stuff. Carefully positioning myself in the crowd I too waited for the show to begin.

Holding one of the most poisonous snakes (*Kalaj*), a member of the organisation gave a brief introductory talk on snakes in the Sundarbans and then carefully placed the snake on the ground to start the show. It started with the snake 'biting' another member standing nearby. He acted like a naïve villager who had inadvertently stepped on the snake, which bit him in retaliation. The person fell to the ground and pretended to collapse in pain and fear. Seeing the victim in pain two other members, acting as neighbours of the victim, called a *Gunin* (sorcerer). The *Gunin*, another member of the organisation in disguise, entered the scene with a huge broomstick in his hand and started jumping around and chanting

incomprehensible mantras. The crowd burst into wild laughter and enjoyed every bit of what was going on. The *Gunin's* antics continued for sometime till all his efforts at curing the patient failed and the victim 'died'. Now the person who conducted the show asked the crowd to come and check if the victim was really dead. A few adults and enthusiastic children came up to the victim and confirmed that he was indeed 'dead'. Addressing the crowd the person said, 'Now that you have seen what a *Gunin* is, you must not count on him any longer. You must go to a doctor.' Soon the *Gunin*, who had so far stood there with his head hung in shame, came back as a doctor and pretended to administer the anti-venom injection to the victim already declared dead. The injection brought the victim back to life, he opened his eyes, got to his feet and smiled at the crowd which clapped enthusiastically. At the end the conductor of the show asked the crowd, 'Who do you think has brought the victim back to life, the *Gunin* or the doctor?' 'The doctor', the crowd answered. The person further asked, 'What do you think has brought the victim back to life, magic or science?' The crowd answered, 'Magic'. The person corrected them saying, 'There you are wrong, it is science that has brought him back to life and not magic.'

The snake show was thus a site where science and magic contested each other and vied for supremacy. However, such contestations as that described here did not sharpen but rather blurred the boundaries between science and magic. For the rationalists, the magic shows are organised so as to prioritise science and heighten people's awareness. But at the end the villagers' response failed to satisfy the organisers of the show. The organisers of the magic show wanted to associate magic with the obscurantist practices of quacks or sorcerers. But far from associating magic with tradition and science with modernity, the show not only blurred their boundaries, but provided a clue to how these categories are discursively constituted in a specific context.

Immediately after the rationalists' magic show was over I had the opportunity to talk to some of the people who had gathered around the place. Many had watched the magic show on previous occasions and said that they enjoyed it every time they watched. According to some, the victim never died. Others stated that the snake was not real, since if it were a real snake the person would have died. They narrated an incident when a boy in their village had died of a poisonous snakebite. When I asked if the victim was taken to a sorcerer they said that the

members of his family did not get the time to consult a sorcerer. The snakebite proved fatal for the young boy who, according to the villagers, was barely in his teens. The villagers acknowledged the *Gunin's* help in cases of snakebites. They further added that for them, the nearest hospital was Canning but for those living in remote islands *Gunin* turned out to be the only source of help. While talking about the *Gunins*, the villagers stated that in recent times the *Gunins'* help was increasingly being sought by the local hospitals to identify the nature and kind of snakebite.

The villagers' views tell us a great a deal about the problem of snakebite. Not only were they aware of the different aspects of the problem, but their observations revealed that the *Gunin* was more than a 'con-man' and occupied a significant place in the village life (I will come back to a *Gunin's* perceptions about the problem in chapter six). The villagers enjoyed the magic show not because it taught them a lesson. Even when they participated in the show they were not oblivious of the problems that confronted them in everyday life.

The civilising mission of the rationalists remind us of Malinowski's provocative essay (1925) where he questioned the assumption that the 'primitive world' is largely undifferentiated and its members cannot distinguish between magic, religion and science. Malinowski argued that the problem of primitive knowledge had been singularly ignored by anthropology and he proceeded to show how beliefs in both natural and supernatural forces coexisted among the Tobriand islanders. Several years later Leach in his reflection (1957) on Malinowski's observations on science and magic, reversed Malinowski's arguments saying,

> In seeking to break down the dichotomy between savagery and civilization Malinowski argued that primitives were just as capable as Europeans of making such distinctions...He would have had a much better case if he had insisted that Europeans are ordinarily just as incapable as Tobrianders of distinguishing the two categories (1957:129).

Leach criticised Malinowski for imposing rationality on the 'savages'. Today we are in the midst of debates and arguments where attention is focussed not so much on the question of whether the so-called 'civilised' or 'primitive' can distinguish between magic and science as on the epistemological certainty of science as an authentic and desirable knowledge. Science, in so far as it can proclaim laws and

predict results, is assumed to be the most highly certified form of knowledge that must replace all other ways of knowing and doing. Social scientists, ecologists and philosophers have critiqued this assumption and argued against the tyranny of a science that continues in the name of development, progress, and reason (Feyerabend 1978; Shiva and Bandyopadhyay 1986; Shiva 1988; Nandy 1988; Franklin 1995; Croissant and Restivo 1995; Nader 1996). Theorists have successfully challenged the divide between rationality and irrationality. In the context of environmental anxieties in developing societies the pursuit of science thus comes to be construed as a myth that needs to be interrogated (Scott 1996).

The expensive mushroom laboratory set up at Nimpith Farm Centre provides the scientists with a sense of certainty that mushrooms would solve the problem of a second crop. It is the same certainty that enthuses the rationalists in their attempt to discipline and systematise people's consciousnesses. In trying to modernise people's thinking the rationalists not only took people's participation in the science show for granted, but tended to confuse people's responses with their ignorance. The rationalists approached the question of people's awareness with a certainty that the villagers, if exposed to the power of modern science and the assumed hypocrisy of the 'con-men', would thenceforth become enlightened citizens free from the clutches of obscurantist practices. When people's responses ran contrary to the expectations of the custodians of science they thought that the problem lay with the people and not with science. The organisation's science show suggests science's inability to produce predictable results, for science is much more like the messy world of social and political intercourse than working scientists care to believe, or are willing to concede (Young 1972:104).

The Association in its formative years faced stiff opposition from the left parties, especially the Student Federation of India (SFI), the student wing of the CPI-M. The SFI cadres sabotaged many of their public meetings in Canning. The rationalists shared their experiences with me at the house of one of their members in Canning. Gokul, a member, narrated how the SFI cadres had sabotaged their meeting at a local school in Canning.

When plague broke out in 1989 we decided to have a three-day long awareness camp at a local school. On the first day our camp was scheduled to start at 2:15 in the afternoon. But before we reached the school, the SFI cadres along with the Block Medical Officer [BMO]

went and apprised the students about the precautionary measures they needed to take to counter plague. Immediately after the BMO left the school the cadres asked the school authorities to let the students off and shut the school. When we reached the school at two o'clock in the afternoon the school was deserted.

Gokul's narrative drew the other members present into the conversation. They also recounted how the cadres had sabotaged many of their camps and snake shows. The cadres went about inciting people against the rationalists by preaching that they were atheists and hence ready at the slightest opportunity to strike at the root of people's religion and beliefs. As a result, the Association initially found it difficult to reach out to people. Another member reminisced how he was once encircled and threatened by a group of SFI and left leaders on his way back from Sonakhali to Canning. Here it is interesting to observe how a left party, which is ideologically equally dismissive of religion or the so-called 'irrationalities' guiding people's action, nonetheless used religion as a rhetorical device in its assault on the rationalists. If there was anything that could unite the leftists and the rationalists it was their joint disdain for anything 'religious', 'mythical' and unscientific, for, according to them, people's faith is a reflection of their ignorance, false consciousness and lack of exposure to science. This rhetorical use of religion to the advantage of a party that is otherwise dismissive of anything religious shows how ideologies and agendas are negotiated for the purposes of political mobilisation.

Equally interesting was the way in which the rationalists countered the hostility of the local left cadres. Members like Sameer and Bhakta , who had been with the organisation in its initial years, started recruiting CPI-M activists favourably disposed towards the rationalists and their activities. They hoped that the presence of these leftists would serve to protect the organisation against the possible interference from the local party leadership. Bhakta admitted that choosing the right people for inclusion within the organisational fold was not an easy task. Drawing my attention to a few members who joined our conversation later Sameer said, 'They are CPI-M workers and sympathisers and they have been with us for many years now; their presence within the organisation bears testimony to the fact that they are equally committed to our organisation and its activities.' Satyen, currently Secretary to the organisation, added, 'Therefore, confronting the ruling political party was not entirely a new experience for us when we started our campaign

against the proposed nuclear power plant. In fact our sixteen years' organisational history is replete with instances of confrontation with the local power brokers and cadres. Even so, we were a bit hesitant about starting our campaign against the power plant. Initially the members were far from unanimous. The prospect of a political battle against the government put some of our members, who were in government service, in a quandary. We spent hours convincing each other before we finally resolved in favour of our campaign.'

The Nuclear Issue in West Bengal

In July 2000, *The Statesman*, a national daily, published a report in its Calcutta edition on the Juktibadi Sanskritic Sangstha in Canning and its campaign against the setting up of a proposed nuclear power plant in the Sundarbans. The report said,

> Two years ago the state's Left-Front government had come down heavily on the Centre for conducting nuclear tests at Pokhran. Now they plan to set up a nuclear power plant in the Sunderbans in South 24 Parganas. The CPI-M district committee is promoting the theory that the plant will help develop the poverty-ridden area...Juktibadi Sanskritic Sangstha, Canning, who held a convention with several others [organisations]... apprehend radiation and that's the worst kind of development that this area could do with... The Sunderbans, they say, do not need N-power to light up their huts. They could do with non-conventional power options (*The Statesman* 10.7.2000).

However, this was not the first time a nuclear power plant had been proposed for West Bengal. I found that earlier Annual State Plan Proposals also contained references to the possibility of such a power plant in West Bengal (State Plan Proposal 1986, 1987). The State Plan Proposal of 1988-89 stated that, after the Department of Atomic Energy of the Government of India rejected the earlier two sites selected by the state government in the district of Midnapore, two alternative further sites were identified by the state government in Midnapore and Bankura districts. Presuming that an uninterrupted water supply, one of the pre-requisites for a nuclear power plant, would be available at the alternative sites, the state government urged the Department of Atomic Energy to give its decision in favour of a power plant in West Bengal. In 1988 a State Council of Science and

Technology was constituted with the Chief Minister as the Chair and the Minister-in-Charge of Finance and Development and Planning as the Vice-chairperson of the Council (State Plan Proposal 1988). Several specialists from universities and institutes of science and technology were drawn together to form thirteen advisory groups to deliberate on fields such as agricultural technology, electronics, energy, environment, industrial technology, rural technology etc. By the end of 1988, four of the thirteen such advisory groups had been created and energy was identified as one among the four fields needing immediate specialist attention.

All this seems to suggest that what has united the different ruling regimes – the right, left and the centre –is their admiration for science as an indispensable constituent of the process of development unleashed in postcolonial India. No wonder 'science' has been declared 'a reason of the state' (Nandy 1988) that cuts across all political divisions and ideologies. If the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) coalition at the centre conducted nuclear tests in Rajasthan to show the country's military might, the Left-front government of West Bengal decided to settle once and for all the problems of the region by proposing a nuclear power plant in the Sundarbans. The Left-front objected to the BJP's nuclear tests because the party involved was the BJP and the tests involved the use of nuclear weapons. However, according to left protagonists, a nuclear plant for the purpose of generating electricity meant putting such technology to positive use. This became clear when I interviewed Radhika Pramanik, a CPI-M Member of Parliament (MP) from the Sundarbans and one of the brains behind the proposed power plant. According to Pramanik, those protesting against the power plant can hardly distinguish between nuclear power and the nuclear bomb. He sounded quite patronising when he attributed much of the anti-nuclear turmoil in the Sundarbans to the unbridled enthusiasm of the youth in the region. In reflecting on the Rationalist Association's involvement with the issue, Pramanik stated that it was out of sheer ignorance that the organisation started to campaign against the proposed nuclear power plant.

Therefore, the proposed power plant in the Sundarbans can be seen as a continuation of the earlier initiatives on the part of the Left-front government to use this technology for the development of West Bengal. However, what makes the present proposal particularly significant is that this time the place considered for the setting up of such a plant is the Sundarbans, which ranks among the select few heritage sites. The government, which once declared refugee resettlement in the

Sundarbans illegal and did not hesitate to evict the refugees in the name of protecting the forest reserves[4], now seemed to be ready to install a power plant and risk the much vaunted resources of the Sundarbans. In their anti-nuclear campaign the rationalists portrayed a bleak picture for the people of the Sundarbans, indicating that while most of their existential problems remained unresolved, a nuclear power plant would constitute a further burden on them.

However, a movement against a nuclear power plant in the Sundarbans could not be confined to the Sundarbans alone. The organisation had to reinvent the popular image of the Sundarbans as wonderland to reach out to the wider public living outside and remind them of the disastrous future that awaited the heritage site in the event of a nuclear plant in the region. For the movement to become successful it had to play upon the ecological sensibilities of the middle class literati of Calcutta. The only way the urbanites' sensibilities could be provoked was to present them with the image that the proposed power plant was putting in peril their world famous wildlife sanctuary. The next section is not concerned with the success or failure of the anti-nuclear campaign. Rather, my aim here is to understand the politics of pro-science and anti-science campaigns.

Juktibadi Sangstha's Campaign Against the Nuclear Power Plant

In July 2000 the Juktibadi Sangstha published its pamphlet against the proposed nuclear power plant entitled 'Nuclear Power Plant in the Sundarbans: We Don't Want this Development [translated from Bengali].' Its cover page was quite suggestive, as it portrayed a tree without a single leaf on it, standing in a barren land. The tree, a victim of radiation, had a bat flying over it, symbolising death. The pamphlet highlighted the problem in the following manner:

> Have you all heard that our West Bengal Government has decided to set up a nuclear power plant in the Sundarbans? The government says that this move will bring electricity to Sundarbans and help develop the region. For the past ten to fifteen years we have been trying to make the government aware of the need for the development of the region. The 3,500 kilometres long embankment in the Sundarbans is in bad shape. The forest resources of the mangrove delta are fast depleting. People going into the forests in search of honey, fish or wood often get killed by tigers. In the absence of fresh water agriculture suffers and in many

---

[4]For details of the Marichjhapi incident see section I of chapter 2.

places the pond is still the only source of drinking water. And it seems that the government has finally heard us. The good news is that people will soon have light in their huts. The nuclear power plant will provide people with jobs, trigger industrialisation in the delta and soon there will be no more problems in the region! (Juktibadi Sanskritic Sangstha 2000:1; translated from Bengali)

The organisation had couched its anti-nuclear campaign in a language that was sarcastic and provocative. It started by congratulating the government for its decision but then went on to remind people:

Are you all happy that the Sundarbans will have a nuclear plant? If you are, then you are in for a big shock. The prospect of electricity in the Sundarbans is hardly encouraging. We all know that a nuclear power plant is another name for disaster. The Sundarbans future is in peril! A nuclear power plant is required not for power generation but for making nuclear bombs... Therefore, by setting up a power plant the government wants to sow the seeds of destruction. If we do not contest the government's decision to set up this plant we will have disaster in store for us. We will not only die of radiation but will become crippled, maimed and handicapped. So protest before it is too late! (Juktibadi Sanskritic Sangstha 2000:1-8; translated from Bengali)

The pamphlet questions the very basis of the government's decision in a place like that of the Sundarbans where so many problems have remained unaddressed. The organisation's carefully chosen words also accuse the government of not being transparent in its decision. Not only is a nuclear plant essentially disastrous, but in the name of development such a plant facilitates the making of nuclear bombs.

It is at this point that we turn our attention to the broad discursive field opened up by the possibility of a nuclear plant in the Sundarbans. In other words, I will focus on newspaper reports to show how arguments have been made for and against the proposed power plant. However, to do this is not to undermine the importance of the rationalists' role in the anti-nuclear campaign. Rather, by focusing on the newspaper reports I intend to situate the rationalists and their campaign in the larger debate centering on the nuclear plant.

Much before the publication of the pamphlet the rationalists collaborated with other organisations elsewhere in West Bengal who were equally opposed to the proposed power plant. The Rationalist Association held a meeting in Canning with these organisations to draw public attention to the issue. The Bengali newspaper

Aajkaal had a headline, 'Nuclear Power Plant in the State: Different Science Organisations Campaigning against It' (*Aajkaal* 11.5.2000). The newspaper highlighted the Association's contribution in initiating a campaign against the power plant. It is interesting to note that the science organisations, which had a firm belief in the potential of science to refine the consciousness of the people, were averse to the pursuit of science legitimated by a nuclear discourse. When I asked the rationalists if their campaign against the proposed power plant amounted to compromising their faith in modern science as a higher form of knowledge, their answer was brief and categorical: 'One cannot accept anything in the name of science, one has to distinguish between good science and bad science.' They further substantiated their argument by saying that the scientists who attended their meetings in Canning repeatedly mentioned that using a nuclear power plant for the purposes of electricity generation was an outdated science of the West. Thus, the anti-nuclear campaign of the rationalists indicates two contradictory issues. On the one hand, they can continue with snake shows and can put their faith in the emancipatory potential of science and its formal logic and, on the other hand, their anti-nuclear campaign can lead them to a position whereby they dismantle the monolith of science by arguing in favour of a distinction between good and bad science.

The Calcutta-based newspapers had headlines such as 'Nuclear Power in a State: A Menace for All' (*Anandabazar Patrika* 6.5.2000), 'By Applying Abandoned Technology of West Left-front Government Wants to Set up a Nuclear Power Plant' (*Bartaman* 12.5.2000), 'Nuclear Power Plant in the Sundarbans: No, Never' (*Aajkaal* 6.5.2000) etc. The scientists who were based in different universities and educational institutions voiced their opposition to the power plant. Some of the scientists who attended the meetings organised by the Association in Canning expressed their discontent in the newspapers as well. The crux of the arguments presented in these different news reports was that such a power plant would be a disastrous decision on the part of the Left-front government. The instance of Chernobyl was cited as an example to bolster misgivings about nuclear energy. It was reported that when the nuclear power plant was set up at Chernobyl in the erstwhile Soviet Union it was considered so safe that it could even have been installed inside the Kremlin (Bandyopadhyay *Anandabazar Patrika* 4.5.2000). Yet when the rate of radiation escalated after the nuclear disaster in 1986, within ten

days about 135,000 people living in the vicinity had been asked to evacuate their homes. But by then they had already become victims of radiation (Dutta *Anandabazar Patrika* 26.4.2000).

In the news reports attention was drawn to the plentiful water resources available in north-eastern India. Given the prospect of producing hydroelectric power for the whole of north-eastern India scientists wondered why there was so much enthusiasm for nuclear power in the state (Dutta *Bartaman* 15.9.2000). Another issue pointed out by the scientists was that of the secrecy in which nuclear policies are pursued by the government of a country. Public attention was drawn to the Indian Nuclear Energy Act of 1962 whereby the government was given absolute power to deny people's access to the nuclear activities of the state in the name of security and integrity of the country. However, such secrecy was questioned on the grounds that it violated the basic postulates of democracy. Since it is the common people who suffer and bear the brunt of any disaster, they have the right to be informed about the policies and activities of the state (Basu *Anandabazar Patrika* 25.5.2000). In sum, the Left-front government was blamed for its insensitivity and populist electoral strategy. By promising people electricity and using the power plant as a ploy to gain the confidence of the electorate the Left-front government was alleged to have led people into an uncertain and dark future.

The articles and news reports mentioned above suggest that in the public sphere there existed an organised anti-nuclear discourse that had an impact on the way the rationalists approached their anti-nuclear movement. The rationalists drew heavily on this discourse to prepare their pamphlet and launch their campaign against the proposed power plant. The newspapers also provided the protagonists of nuclear energy with an opportunity to argue their case for the proposed power plant. Radhika Pramanik, the CPI-M MP from the Sundarbans, argued in the newspaper in support of the power plant asking people not to feel threatened or pay heed to rumours (Pramanik *Anandabazar Patrika* 28.3.2000; translated from Bengali). By comparing the cost effectiveness of thermal, hydroelectric and nuclear energy sources, Pramanik demonstrated that in the long run nuclear energy was the safest and least expensive. In the light of India's fast depleting coal reserves nuclear energy seemed to Pramanik the most sustainable source of power generation (Pramanik *Anandabazar Patrika* 28.3.2000; translated from Bengali). The newspapers also carried reports based on interviews with the nuclear energy experts

from different atomic energy research centres in India during their participation at a workshop organised by the National Nuclear Energy Commission (NNEC) on safety in nuclear energy research in Calcutta. According to these experts, a nuclear reactor is not only the safest of the sources of energy production, but also ecologically viable and sustainable (*Anandabazar Patrika* 18.5.2000, *Ganashakti* 18.5.2000; translated from Bengali).

However, the press was doing more than merely ventilating arguments for and against the proposed power plant and thereby constructing competing notions of safety and sustainability. The newspapers also drew attention to the district of South 24 Parganas and carried reports indicating that the CPI-M District Committee was instrumental in generating enthusiasm among the people for the proposed power plant. A report published in a Bengali newspaper was significant:

> The CPI-M South 24 Parganas District Committee is involved in a campaign in favour of the power plant. There has already been protest against the proposed power plant, but anticipating further opposition from within the party the CPI-M District Committee is mobilising the local party machinery to finalise a suitable site for the power plant. Therefore, a site selection unit has been set up under the leadership of leaders like Radhika Pramanik, Sujan Chakraborty, Kanti Ganguly... The District Committee Secretary feels that those protesting against the power plant want to prevent the development of the region (*Aajkaal* 28.4.2000; translated from Bengali).

The District Committee's local endeavours need also to be understood in the context of the secretariat-level activities of the government in Calcutta. A Calcutta daily quoted the Nodal Officer – a bureaucrat heading the Department of Power of the Government of West Bengal – of the secretariat level task force set up for selecting sites in other districts of West Bengal as saying that priority would be given to South 24 Parganas in view of the long-standing demand for a power plant from that region (*Bartaman* 9.5.2000; translated from Bengali). Thus, although the proposal for the setting up of the power plant came from the state government, the main initiative, it seems, always rested with the local district CPI-M leadership. Nowhere was this more clearly highlighted than in a news report that stated:

> Last Wednesday the District Committee convened a meeting in support of the power plant in Canning... A local CPI-M leader Dulal Ghosh said that the place [most] suitable for the nuclear power plant is Sagar island. But we might have to ask people to evacuate the island

before such a power plant can be set up. The members of the Canning Juktibadi Sanskritic Sangstha present at the meeting expressed strong dissent against the statement made by Ghosh (*Aajkaal* 18.5.2000; translated from Bengali).

If the regional newspapers based in Calcutta drew attention to the local-level mobilisations and the way in which these influenced the secretariat-level resolution for a power plant in the region, reports published in the local newspapers in April and May 2000 gave a further twist to the nuclear power episode. The reports were significant in that they came out in a local fortnightly newsletter called *Ba-Dweep Barta* published by members of the Rationalist Association in Canning. The first report, published in its April edition, stated that although the state government had not yet finalised the site for the power plant in the Sundarbans, it was learnt from reliable sources that members of the site selection unit of the District Committee had Basanti in mind, for there was plenty of government land and water available in that block (*Ba-dweep Barta* 16-30 April 2000; translated from Bengali). The next edition of the newsletter in May carried another report, which sought to explain why Basanti was considered suitable for setting up a power plant.

> Although the CPI-M district committee is still silent about the possible sites for the installation of the plant, among the areas considered in the coastal Sundarbans, Basanti is of crucial importance. Jharkhali in Basanti Block has a vast tract of government land under the control of the RSP. On the pretext of setting up a power plant the CPI-M will now wrest this land from the RSP and will realise their long cherished dream (*Ba-dweep Barta* 1-15 May 2000; translated from Bengali).

The report reveals that the considerations involved in the setting up of a power plant were many and more than mere electricity generation. When we read the local newspaper reports in conjunction with the regional press reports focusing on the activities of the District Committee we realise how the nuclear issue offers insights into the way the state is represented at the local level. The state constructed in these reports is no longer the unified monolithic state imposing a nuclear power plant on the rest of the society. Rather, by focusing on the local-level considerations driving the government decision in favour of the power plant, the news reports break down the state to show that the CPI-M and RSP, which together constitute the government at the state level, were found to be working at cross purposes at the

local level (I will discuss the RSP's campaign against the power plant in chapter seven).

Amidst all this it is interesting to see how the rationalists position themselves in local politics and also embark on their anti-nuclear campaign at the broader level. It was through some of their colleagues who happened to be CPI-M sympathisers that they came to know how the local CPI-M leadership was using the power plant issue as a ploy to wrest land from the RSP. By publishing this in their local newsletters the rationalists antagonised a section of the local CPI-M leaders and cadres. During my conversation with members of the organisation they said that the hostility of the local leadership was apparent when the rationalists attended a public meeting organised by the District Committee in support of the power plant. The party cadres present at the meeting ridiculed the rationalists when the latter expressed their dissent. 'This infuriated us', said Sameer. 'Our decision to publish this pamphlet came after we attended a meeting in Canning. We thought it was high time that we exposed the hypocrisy of these leaders.'

At one level the Association's campaign against the power plant arose out of a sense of resentment against the local leadership and the insensitivity reflected in the leadership's determination to install a power plant even when it would involve massive displacement of people. Therefore, in their newsletters and pamphlets, the Association attempted to expose the hypocrisy of the local leadership to the islanders. However, at another level, the rationalists' success appeared to lie in drawing the matter to the attention of the wider public in Calcutta. To this end the Rationalist Association held a convention in Calcutta with several organisations concerned, notable among which were Gana Vigyan Samannyay Kendra (People's Science and Coordination Centre) and Ganatantrik Nagarik Samity (Association of Democratic Citizens).

Through networking with these organisations the Rationalist Association mobilised people's support against the power plant. This was reflected in the urban middle class's protest against the proposed plant. Members of the urban literati, including those with leftist sympathies, voiced their protest. However, the question that arises here is what made these intellectuals protest against the government decision to set up a power plant in the Sundarbans. Was the rationalists' portrayal of the everyday problems confronting the people of the Sundarbans enough to evoke positive responses from the urban literati or was it something more than the mere

depiction of people's suffering? While going through the pamphlet published by the rationalists as a part of their anti-nuclear campaign, two cartoons caught my attention. The first shows a man coming out of a shop which is having a sale and the banner on top reads 'Outdated foreign technology sold here' (see illustration 5.1 on p.229). The attire of the man indicates that he is an urbanite and he looks content, as he has been able to buy something no longer used by the developed West. The message was that villagers have to pay the price for the urbanites' craze for outdated foreign stuff. The second cartoon depicts a tiger sitting cross-legged and looking worried as he reads a news report about the proposed power plant in the Sundarbans (see illustration 5.2 on p.229). One wonders to whom this image of the worried tiger was directed. Obviously, it was not meant for the woodcutters and fishermen of the delta who enter the forest and encounter the tiger on a regular basis. If the first cartoon was to indict the urbanites for their alleged insensitivity, the second was to play upon the ecological sensibilities of the middle class in Calcutta and remind them that the power plant was to be set up in a place none other than the Sundarbans, famous all over the world for its tiger reserve. Things became even clearer when the rationalists showed me the photographs of their anti-nuclear demonstration in Calcutta. Children dressed up as monkeys, deer and tigers joined the demonstration to sensitise Calcuttans to the adverse effects of the power plant on wildlife in the Sundarbans. Thus, the rationalists' invocation of the image of a worried tiger shows how difficult it is to disentangle and retrieve the Sundarbans of the people from a more hegemonic image of the Sundarbans as a wildlife sanctuary.

At this point let us turn to an event in Canning and see how this shaped the orientation of the rationalists involved in their anti-nuclear campaign. Gopal, the van-rickshaw driver and a member of the Rationalist Association, paid a price for his membership by being denied access to the Canning van rickshaw stand, situated near the Canning ferry, which van rickshaws connect to Canning railway station. Gopal said, 'Early in the morning when I went to the ferry *ghat* in search of passengers, other van drivers already present told me not to park my van there. I asked them why not. They said they do not know the reason. One of the drivers came near me and asked me to meet him in the evening.' When Gopal met him later he said that on the day before, one of the local CPI-M leaders had come to the stand and instructed the drivers not to allow Gopal to park his van. The man tried to

reassure Gopal saying, 'Do not make a fuss. Soon everything will be back to normal.'

Gopal soon informed the other members of organisation, who were also CPI-M activists, of this incident and sought their help in this matter. According to Gopal, the only way he could regain his place in the van-rickshaw stand was to contact people who wielded clout in the local CPI-M leadership circle. What followed then was a series of negotiations between the local influential CPI-M leaders and those rationalists who also belonged to the party circle. At the insistence of his colleagues who were negotiating on his behalf, Gopal had to visit the local leaders several times to pursue his case, and to run errands for the leaders to please them before he could retrieve his lost place in the van-rickshaw stand.

When I asked some of the rationalists, who were acting on behalf of Gopal, how they dealt with his case they seemed to take pride in narrating the tricks they used to tackle the problem. When Gopal came and informed them about the incident they did not go straight to the leader who had denied Gopal access to the van park. Instead they made contact with a more powerful leader who was in close contact with members of the party's District Committee. They also made contact with a few veteran CPI-M leaders in Canning hoping that they would cut down to size the leader who had tried to throw his weight around. They had meetings with these leaders where they clearly stated their purpose and tried convincing them about their credentials as CPI-M party workers. To quote the rationalists, 'We are as much a part of the party leadership in Canning as the other leaders and members are. We launched our anti-nuclear campaign against the state government. Let us assure you that we are not against the party leaders in Canning. Therefore, why trouble a van-rickshaw driver when we all know him?'

The incident described above throws light on the need to disentangle and retrieve fragmentary and peripheral events from the grand narratives of protest and participation. Gopal was an integral part of the Rationalist Association's anti-nuclear campaign. However, apart from his experience as an anti- nuclear campaigner Gopal had other stories to share, stories that seemed of peripheral importance to a more compelling narrative of campaign and protest. While the organisation was protesting against the proposed power plant Gopal struggled to regain his lost place in the van-rickshaw park. For him, his claim to a place in the van-rickshaw stand was as important, if not more, as his participation in a

movement that envisaged a radiation-free and a sustainable future for the Sundarbans.

Equally significant were the negotiations between those whose help Gopal had sought and the local CPI-M leaders. The way the rationalists dealt with Gopal's case and convinced their mentors about their credentials as party cadres points to their ability to negotiate their diverse identities even when their anti-nuclear campaign had a unified goal; it also demonstrates how they changed the course of their campaign in response to the shifting dynamics of local politics. From the beginning the rationalists' protest against the state government decision to set up a power plant was based on a close observance of the local considerations at stake. They focussed on the activities of the local leaders, highlighted local party considerations in favour of the power plant and their resentment against the local leadership to show how the state's decision for a power plant was actually manufactured at the local level. From that point of view their campaign was also against a state whose presence could be felt in the local political processes. However, the incident involving Gopal resulted in a shift in the focus of the rationalist campaign from a state that was implicated in local politics to a more abstract notion of the trans-local state as the initiator of a nuclear power plant. This tightrope walk helped the rationalists in two ways. On the one hand, by invoking the notion of a distant state as the implementer of such a decision, the rationalists continued with their campaign against the power plant; on the other, by utilising their identities as party sympathisers, they attempted to forge a semblance of solidarity with the local leaders, a solidarity that was necessary for their survival in local politics.

The proposed nuclear power plant and the rationalists' campaign against it highlighted a number of issues at stake in the recent debates around science and knowledge construction in the human sciences. I raised this issue earlier in this section in connection with my discussion of the magic shows put on by the rationalists. The nuclear power episode is certainly a link in the growing chain of ecological movements in India in recent times and points to the ways in which science and anti-science movements are constructed in the public domain. However, the story of the nuclear power plant in the Sundarbans also enables us to examine the frequent characterisation of such movements as essentially giving rise to a vibrant society against a state that does violence in the name of development. A

result of this dualistic thinking is the emergence of concepts like 'public interest science' (Shiva and Bandyopadhyay 1986) and 'lifeworld-system' (Habermas 1983). 'Public interest science' is considered as people's science that has not only informed the rise of several ecological movements in the developing world context, but has served as a vehicle of protest against the vested interest science pursued by the state and statist institutions. The former is viewed as regenerative and belonging to civil society whereas the latter is seen as statist and destructive of people's interests.

I find problematic this construction of the state as a monolithic entity imposing its will on the rest of society. When we turn to the Sundarbans it is not the case of a state imposing unilaterally a power plant on the region. I have shown how the District Committee of the CPI-M not only mobilised people's support for the power plant, but even became the main pivot around which much of the enthusiasm for the power plant revolved. I have also analysed the newspaper reports to show that electricity generation is one among many objectives that prompted the supporters to set up a power plant. The reports in the newspapers also showed how the District Committee's prime objective behind the installation of the plant came into conflict with the interests of the RSP, one of the constituents of state power in West Bengal. This conflict of interest between the constituents at the local level makes it difficult to characterise state and civil society as monolithic entities.

The notion of 'public interest science' also encourages dualistic thinking at another level. 'Public interest science' is considered to be devoid of any vested interests whereas science pursued by the state reflects the latter's vested interests. I have shown through my analysis that the rationalists' campaign against the power plant was not devoid of its own vested interests which became manifest in a myriad of ways they carried out their anti-nuclear campaign. What I wish to suggest is that, if the protagonists had vested and diverse interests in the setting up of the power plant, the campaigners against the power plant also had their own interests at stake.

Similarly, the concepts of 'lifeworld' and 'system' advanced by Habermas in an attempt to understand ecological movements in recent times is fraught with problems. The systemic needs of the state, according to Habermas, have colonised the lifeworld of the people. Therefore, contemporary environmental, ethnic and civil liberty movements are expressions of continuous attempts on the part of that lifeworld to emancipate itself from the clutches of the system. However, the

problem with his theory lies in his considering lifeworld and system as dichotomous entities existing outside of each other. My discussion of the nuclear episode in the Sundarbans suggests that there is not only an overlap between the two, but that there are always systemic elements at work within the so-called lifeworld.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered the working of two voluntary agencies in the Sundarbans. In the first section, I have looked at the activities of the Nimpith Farm Centre. The Centre's coinage of the term 'bare-foot scientists' is significant in that it opens up a broad discursive field and allows the monks, scientists, technicians and other functionaries of the organisation to nativise and domesticate science. By funding such an initiative at the grassroots level the State of India becomes a subscriber to the idea of science as floated by the organisation. This also explains why the former left minister heading the Sundarban Development Board considers the Nimpith Farm Centre as an authentic organisation doing 'real' development. The setting up of the Farm Centre in Nimpith indicates that the organisation not only collaborates with the government, but effectively functions as a part of the government structure in the Sundarbans. The very presence of the state in the form of a Farm Centre makes the boundary between the state and society difficult to sustain.

I have also looked into the Centre's programmes for sustainable agriculture and shown how ecologists have expressed concern over the use of biotechnology in agriculture. The concerns raised by the ecologists provide a critique of the activities of the Centre. The Farm Centre and Ashram workers' narratives show that workers themselves are sceptical about the cultivation of mushrooms as a second crop in the Sundarbans. Thus, we are confronted with an organisation that aims to promote sustainable agriculture in the Sundarbans, but constructs sustainability in its own terms. The organisation's sophisticated laboratories and expensive experiments, together with an elaborate bureaucracy for translating principles into action, prove problematic in the light of increasing peripherality of agriculture in the Sundarbans, a point to which I return in the next chapter.

In the second section I have highlighted the rationalists' campaign against the nuclear power plant. However, I have looked at the organisation's activities at

two levels. I started with an account of their magic show to argue that the rationalists' engagement with science to discipline people's consciousness proves problematic. People's responses are quite at odds with the objective and purpose of the magic show. According to the practitioners of science, people are mistaken in confusing the purposes of science with those of magic. But such confusion hardly reflects people's ignorance. Rather, it calls into question the assumptions under which the rationalists pursue science.

Through an analysis of the rationalists' campaign against the nuclear power plant I have attempted to disaggregate local left politics. Thus, I have moved away from the dominant characterisation of the contemporary environmental movements as essentially giving rise to a vibrant civil society against an interventionist state that seeks to repress people's science and ecology. I have shown how the CPI-M and the RSP, who constitute the leftist state, are found engaged in a conflict over the power plant .I have also shown how the rationalists were instrumental in pitting the local CPI-M leadership against the RSP. Therefore, it is no longer the case of a trans-local state imposing its power plant on the Sundarbans. Rather, the nuclear issue in the Sundarbans shows how consent for the power plant is also manufactured at the local level.

Linked to all this are different notions of sustainability. For the rationalists the power plant is unsustainable for a variety of reasons. For the people of the Sundarbans the power plant is unsustainable because it puts their lives in peril. whereas for the non-Sundarbans people the plant is unsustainable because a possible disaster might put wildlife at stake. After having concentrated on the voluntary agencies and their development agenda in the Sundarbans I now turn to the 'people' for whom these organisations 'do development'.

Illustration 5.1

Illustration 5.2

Chapter Six

Local People's Perception of Development Issues in the Sundarbans

Introduction

In the preceding two chapters I have concentrated on the activities of voluntary agencies in the Sundarbans. Having examined and analysed the activities of these development agencies I now turn my attention to the people of the Sundarbans. As development thinking has moved from 'thing-oriented' to 'people-oriented' paradigm (Chambers 1995), it has thrown up a number of terms such as 'poor' (World Bank 1996), 'poorest of the poor' (Harris 1988; Singh 1988), 'indigenous people' or 'communities' (United Nations 1993), 'beneficiaries' (Paul 1987; World Bank 1996) 'stakeholders' (World Bank 1996; Nelson and Wright 1995; Jeffery and Sundar 1999; Vedeld 2001) etc. to refer to people. The 'poor' are defined as people living in remote and impoverished areas (World Bank 1996:7). The term 'stakeholders' has been further classified into 'primary stakeholders' referring to people or direct beneficiaries and 'secondary stakeholders' including government agencies and NGOs (Vedeld 2001:6). Voluntary agencies or NGOs are increasingly expected to play a significant role in involving 'local communities' in the preparation and implementation of development projects (World Bank 1988).

A question that arises is who these 'stakeholders' or 'poorest of the poor' are. How does one understand these meta-categories in a particular context? It is to find an answer to these questions that the present chapter attempts to deconstruct the category of people into several local categories such as *Beldars*, *Dafadars*, fishermen, prawn catchers, farmers, construction labourers etc. each of whom has a different perception of development. I will begin by focusing on the agency and practices of *Beldars*, *Dafadars*, fishermen, prawn catchers and then problematise the notion of participation by juxtaposing their diverse practices with the ideology and rhetoric of the voluntary agencies. This enables me to expose people's divergent practices and perceptions that are often found to be at odds with the unifying awareness-raising campaigns launched by the voluntary agencies studied.

The Issue of Embankments as Perceived by Different Categories of Locals

When repair work for a particular stretch of embankment is undertaken, the construction site becomes a space filled with routine activities. Most of the construction and repair work is undertaken by the Irrigation Department during the monsoon months when embankments are particularly vulnerable and prone to collapse. During my stay in Rangabelia I was a regular visitor to the construction sites in North Rangabelia or the southern tip of Pakhirala. Carefully maintaining my balance on the slippery and muddy embankment, whenever I reached the construction sites in the morning, I would find people already engaged in their day's work. There were some working on the slopes of the damaged stretch of the old embankment, some digging earth from the nearby fields or riverbanks, some carrying earth to add to the new embankment under construction behind the damaged one and yet others trying to steal time away from their work to smoke.

On one such day I reached the construction site along the bank of the river Vidya in North Rangabelia (*Uttarpara*) to find the workers waiting for some bamboo poles to arrive on the Irrigation Department boat. When finally they did come a number of disputes arose with respect to their quality. One of the labourers ran down the slippery slopes of the embankment to where the boat was anchored and then shouted to his colleagues at work, 'These bamboos are no good, they will not last long.' Those standing on the embankment judging the quality of the bamboos from a distance shouted back, 'It seems that they have not sent the number we have asked for. How many bamboos are there?' They asked the *Beldar* standing on the deck of the boat. 'There are about seventy bamboos here', he answered. 'But we asked for at least one hundred bamboos, what are we going to do with seventy?' They discussed the matter with each other and then, turning to the *Beldar*, said, 'Take the bamboos back and tell the Irrigation people that we are not going to work with seventy bamboos.' The *Beldar* promptly answered, 'This is what we have managed to get. If you cannot work with these it's your problem. You all know that the price of bamboo is very high in the market.' He then turned to Srinath, the *Dafadar* sitting next to the workers, and asked him, 'Why don't you explain it to them?' Srinath tried to reason with the workers saying, 'Start your work with seventy bamboos and we can ask for more later. But if you send this consignment back then the work will be stopped. The Irrigation *SO* [Section Officer], *SDO* [Sub-

divisional Officer] and panchayat will then intervene and the situation will go beyond our control.' He spoke quietly to ensure that only the workers could hear him and not the *Beldar* standing at a distance. Srinath patted the shoulder of one of the workers who was the most vocal of all and said in a patronising way, 'Why ask for trouble?' It took Srinath some time before the workers finally agreed to work with only seventy bamboos.

Soon after the bamboos were unloaded and the Irrigation boat had disappeared round the bend of the river, Srinath heaved a sigh of relief and took a second look at the bamboos. Smiling at me he said, 'The bottoms are okay but towards the top the bamboos are weak.' A villager, who was carrying earth from the riverbank, said scathingly, 'If you use up all the money in buying good quality bamboos, how will you make any profit?' I asked Srinath about the use to which these bamboos would be put. Pointing to a pond behind a stretch of the newly built embankment, Srinath said that the bamboos would be required for reclaiming a portion of the pond by providing support to the new embankment. It would protect the embankment against water pressure during high tide and would prevent the pond from destroying the bottom of the new embankment. If the pond were not adequately reclaimed there would be a possibility of the earth of the embankment melting away into the pond.

At the insistence of Srinath, the labourers started cutting each of the twenty feet long bamboos into two equal halves of about ten feet each. While this was happening two workers went into the pond and started positioning a couple of them across its breadth at regular intervals. One held each piece of bamboo in an upright position and the other hammered it into the bed of the pond to ensure that half the bamboo went under the water and the rest remained above the water surface. After the requisite number of bamboos had been placed in a row, a long piece of bamboo was vertically sliced into two halves, which were then nailed laterally onto both sides of the bamboo pieces half immersed into the water, in such a way as to keep the bamboos in a single alignment. The remaining bamboo poles were then carefully positioned next to each other inside the channel and hammered down firmly into the bed of the pond. Thus the structure now looked like a wall made up of bamboos half immersed in water. Finally, a huge sheet made of bamboo fibres was placed against this wall to plug whatever gaps existed between the bamboos so as to prevent water seepage from the non-reclaimed part of the pond into the

reclaimed part. Once the structure was complete, reclamation started. The labourers poured earth into the portion of the pond demarcated by the structure.

Dafadars

During the entire process of reclamation, Srinath, the *Dafadar*, was supervising the labourers while chatting with me. I remembered my first meeting with Srinath. It was one of those days when I had spent my time in the company of the villagers while they were at work in North Rangabelia and Srinath got his first assignment as a *Dafadar*. It was nearly time for high tide and the labourers were winding up the day's work. We decided to go back to Srinath's place for lunch as he had invited me. On the way he told me, 'You know initially I thought you were a government officer in *plain dress* [disguise] but later I realised I was wrong.' 'So what made you change your mind?' I asked jokingly. Srinath paused for a moment and replied, 'I don't think a government officer would have spent so much time with us, would he?' 'Perhaps not', I replied.

Like many others he lived in the narrow stretch of land between the Vidya and Gomor rivers. Srinath's house was in bad shape and severe cracks had appeared on the mud walls. Pointing to the cracks I asked him, 'Are these due to the salinity in the soil?' 'Partly due to salinity and partly due to lack of maintenance, no money.' 'Why, now as a *Dafadar* you must be earning a lot?' I asked. 'Well I needed this job', he replied and continued, 'But you know how I got it? First in order to get a certificate from the *party-panchayat* I had to give them a bottle of foreign liquor [whisky] and two chickens for dinner. Then I had to go to the Irrigation Office at Gosaba for their approval. There they asked for two bottles, as one was not enough. And on top of all this I had to run errands for the engineers for a month. I used to go to Gosaba Irrigation Office at ten in the morning, sit there and be at their beck and call the whole day and come back to Ranagabelia at six in the evening.' 'Why did you take so much trouble, when you could have worked as a labourer and earned even more?' I asked in surprise. 'Oh no, you have not understood how labourers are paid', Srinath replied. He tried to explain, 'The money that labourers get is shared amongst ten, fifteen or may be twenty of them whereas whatever I get is mine. I need this money. I lost all my land due to an

earlier *ring-bund* [ring embankments] construction. These engineers, contractors, *party-panchayats* are all making money. What's the harm if I make some too?'

Srinath's narrative makes it clear why he tried to pacify the labourers when they complained about the quality of the bamboos. Srinath desperately wanted the supervisor's job and he would seek to retain it at any cost. The way he handled the dispute shows that he was cautious and wanted to play safe in his dealings with the Irrigation people. Under no circumstances would he antagonise the Irrigation engineers and contractors, lest he run the risk of losing his job. However, this does not mean that Srinath was not sympathetic to the cause of his fellow workers who were also his neighbours. With them he had shared many anxious moments and survived four ring embankments. Like many others he too lost a substantial tract of agricultural land. In fact Srinath told me how sorry he felt for Judhistir, whose pond was the one being reclaimed. Like Srinath, Judhistir had also lost land due to earlier ring embankments. His agricultural land of less than a *bigha* included this pond as well. He constituted a part of the labour force and ironically he himself carried earth from the riverbank the whole day to reclaim his own pond. Judhistir had no alternative but to accept his fate.

Labourers

Ponds are the only source of fresh water on the islands of the Sundarbans and life becomes a misery when one is lost. Every time land erodes or an embankment collapses it amounts to loss of private space, a space the villagers call their own. However, this sense of loss does not condemn them to a state of utter despair. Rather, it imbues them with a sense of agency that has found expression in a variety of subversive acts. If contractors cheat labourers by not giving them their due payments or make profits by supplying bamboos or bricks of inferior quality, the latter in turn make up for their loss by selling the contractor's property such as bamboos, bricks etc. They even deceive the contractors by not digging the amount of earth proportionate to their wages. Quite often in the Tagore Society's office, I found myself in the midst of discussions or gossip revolving around these stories of mutual deception. Even some of the workers of the Tagore Society asked me, 'It seems you have been spending a lot of your time with the labourers, but have you

noticed how they *steal earth*?' '*Steal earth*, how does one do that?' I could not contain my amazement. They suggested that I should go and ask the labourers.

Although I spent a considerable amount of time in the company of the labourers trying to interact with them while they were at work, I felt hesitant to pose this question. Finally, I decided to single out Kalyan and Shankar, both residents of North Rangabelia, with whom I had developed good relations. On posing the question I noticed frowns on their foreheads, which soon disappeared when both started laughing and asked me in return, 'Tell us something, is that also relevant for your research?' 'Yes, to a certain extent, but then I am also curious to know how earth is stolen. But if you don't want to tell me, I won't press you', I assured them further. To my surprise both drew near me and said, 'It is not a question of us divulging a deep secret. We all do it. But do not tell others that we showed you.'

They took me to the riverside. Pointing to the square holes (*chouko*) on the riverbank one of them said, 'We make these holes to dig up earth for the *bund* [embankment]. Each of these square holes has to be ten feet in length, breadth and depth. We are paid per thousand cubic feet of earth dug up. Now most of these holes are inundated during high tide and remain filled with water even when the water recedes during low tide. When the construction work is undertaken afresh by the contractors we simply increase the length and breadth of the existing holes but we do not do them that deep. Because they are filled with water one cannot measure the actual depth of these holes.' Shankar looked at me and smiled. 'If they can cheat us why can't we cheat them?' 'But don't you think by deceiving the contractors and engineers you are weakening the embankments and endangering your own existence?' I asked Shankar. He replied, 'In any case there is not much to lose. We don't have much ground left beneath our feet, do we, having survived four ring *bunds* [embankments]. It hardly matters if there is one more. Everybody makes money, what's the harm if we make some too?'

Fishermen

Equally aggrieved are the fishermen of Pakhirala village, which lies to the south of Rangabelia island. The area where the fishermen live is locally referred to as *Jelepara* (fishermen's colony), situated at the southern tip of Pakhirala. I remember my first interaction with the people of the colony. I was on my way to

Dayapur village on Satjelia island. I had Gour Mondal, a village organiser of the Tagore Society, accompanying me. Because Gour belonged to Dayapur, he thought he would be able to guide me on my visit to the village. We were passing through the fishermen's colony as the road that leads to the Pakhirala ferry passes through *Jelepara*. It was early in the morning. There was an awful smell of night soil pervading the air of the whole area. 'You must be feeling uncomfortable?' Gour asked me. 'This place is always smelly. It's horrible and nauseating', he spat twice in sheer disgust. 'These people have not set up individual toilets and still use the open air.'

Seeing some of the residents of the colony in front of a tea stall near the Pakhirala ferry, Gour suddenly embarked upon his awareness campaign. He went up to them and asked, 'This place is so horribly smelly, why don't you all set up your own individual toilets?' And without waiting for their reply he continued further, 'It's a lot more hygienic to have your own toilets. You must know that the *Project* is currently making sanitary ware available with the help of the government [in collaboration with the Government of West Bengal]. Why don't you buy sanitary ware from the *Project*?' 'It's very simple. Each item costs about Rs 450 [about £6]. As a beneficiary you have to contribute Rs 200 [about £3] and the rest will be borne by the government.' While Gour was presenting his case I could make out that the residents of the colony were fuming with anger. Before he could finish they attacked him saying, 'Go and tell this to those who would listen to you.' Drawing our attention to the broken embankment near the ferry they asked, 'Can you see any embankment there? Those mounds, do you call them embankments?' Turning to Gour one of them said, 'You have said enough and now just shut up and listen to what I say. For the past six or seven years no engineer has ever come here to check how we are living. We even forgot who the *Beldars* are and you have come to teach us the basics of sanitation. We will not set up individual toilets. The government does nothing for us and you think we are going to buy sanitary ware from the government? This place will remain smelly and we will do nothing to improve it.' Fearing that things could go beyond our control we headed towards the ferry but as we proceeded Gour kept looking back to catch a glimpse of the person who was still venting his wrath on him. He looked crestfallen and after a while told me, 'It is no point explaining things to them. Without their cooperation you cannot do much.'

What we see here are different strategies for survival in a place like the Sundarbans where living exposes Srinath, Kalyan, Shankar to the enormous risk of flooding and land erosion. What makes their experience more painful is when their own land is taken in the name of maintaining embankments and providing security to them. I have already discussed how the engineers and contractors operated in alliance with the local party and panchayat members to take land when a ring embankment was constructed at Dayapur on Satjelia island (see chapter three). I have also discussed how the Irrigation Department spends huge sums to prevent erosion by the Ganga and Padma rivers in upper Bengal (see also chapter three), whereas in the case of the Sundarbans the department merely does either patchwork repairs or else builds huge ring embankments to allay people's anxiety. Therefore, every time land or ponds are taken it is a reminder to the inhabitants that maintaining the Sundarbans embankment is actually more hazardous than not maintaining it.

It is against this background that we need to understand the survival strategies of Kalyan, Shankar, Srinath and the fishermen of Pakhirala, all of whom adopted different ways of articulating their dissent. Srinath, the *Dafadar*, wanted to survive within the system and make the most of it, while the labourers, Kalyan, Shankar and several others, preferred to outwit the engineers and contractors at their own game. The fishermen of Pakhirala, on the other hand, subverted the government sanitation programme by deciding to keep their neighbourhood dirty. Not only did they not subscribe to the West Bengal Government's rural sanitation programme, but they questioned the very legitimacy of such piecemeal development when more fundamental development issues remain unaddressed.

Looking at these different modes of protest or dissent one is tempted to use Scott's much celebrated thesis on the forms of resistance (Scott 1985). On the basis of his study, Scott argues that showing disrespect or using slander, gossip, theft etc. are various ways in which the poor or subordinates resist the dominance of the powerful. According to Scott, the dissent registered in most cases is mainly symbolic, but such symbolic dissent continually presses against the limit of what is permitted on stage, much as a body of water might press against a dam. In this pressure, for Scott, lies the desire to give unbridled expression to the sentiments voiced in the hidden transcript directly to the dominant (Scott 1990:196). Thus, the weapons, the so-called weak use, initiate a process whereby the limits of the order

established by the powerful is constantly tested. Scott observes this process in a peasant society where dominance of the rich is often subverted by recourse to such strategies as mentioned above. Later Scott's perspective was used by Haynes and Prakash (1991) to understand the 'everydayness' (1991:16) of resistance not only in production relations but also with regard to popular culture and gender in South Asia. Their volume contains reflections on the lifestyle of the courtesans of Lucknow in India (Oldenburg 1991) and on gambling in public spaces in colonial Sri Lanka (Rogers 1991), which clearly reveal everyday strategies of resistance.

Scott's perspective is significant in that it helps us understand Kalyan, Srinath, Shankar and the fishermen of Pakhirala and their ways of living and surviving in the Sundarbans. Here too we are confronted with theft and non-compliance reflected respectively in the stealing of bamboos or bricks or the rejection of sanitation. These are the rituals practised to ventilate grievances, earn a living and find a breathing space in a life that otherwise looks bleak. However, Scott's approach has not gone unchallenged. His theory of passive or symbolic resistance is criticised on the grounds that such acts of subversion do not alter the balance of power in favour of the oppressed. In other words symbolic resistances as described above do not turn the existing order established by the powerful upside down. Some have also argued that Scott's formulation does not help us understand why certain forms of petty thieving are looked down upon universally regardless of class differences, whereas people have no problem in romanticising a Robin Hood who steals from the rich or powerful to give to the poor (Gupta 1997:116).

Apart from these criticisms, Scott's theory is also problematic at another level. Linked to his notion of subversion or resistance is the implicit notion of solidarity. If the powerful dominate their subordinates as a group, the latter are also made to appear as if they subvert as an organised force, even when their resistance is sporadic and eclectic. Scott suggests that an act of insubordination, when not rebuked or punished, is likely to encourage others to venture further and the process can then escalate rapidly (Scott 1990:196). Therefore, the success of a subversive act lies, to a considerable extent, in its being a shared reality and to the extent it is shared it can organise the practitioners into a collectivity. It is in this sense, the weak or poor or subordinate, for Scott, form a homogeneous group. The successful use of a weapon and the advantages derived from such use is what brings and keeps them together

However, our experience in the Sundarbans suggests that subordinates do not form a homogeneous category. On the one hand, the workers do engage in a variety of subversive acts, yet, on the other, they compete with each other and, if necessary, discredit each other in trying to be in the good books of the contractors, engineers or panchayat leaders during the latters' visits to construction sites. As a result of this the more successful ones get recruited as supervisors or *Dafadars*, as happened in the case of Dinu or Srinath. Srinath's story of how he became a *Dafadar* explains why labourers want to be in the good books of the Irrigation or panchayat functionaries. As a *Dafadar* one wields power in supervising one's colleagues. He is part of the labour force yet also a representative of the Irrigation Office in Gosaba. He feigns ignorance when labourers sell the Irrigation's property, but is equally alert to the task of not letting such activities assume proportions where his position as a *Dafadar* is threatened. There is also keen competition between Srinath and Dinu for equitable distribution of supervisory responsibilities. Both are watchful of each other and pay frequent visits to the Gosaba Irrigation office so as not to lose out in the competition. When the embankment in the southern part of Pakhirala village caved in and the Irrigation engineers and contractors employed labourers to carry out the construction work, some of the fishermen of *Jelepara* in Pakhirala, who had once expressed their strong resentment against the government-sponsored sanitation programme in Rangabelia, were also found to have joined the Irrigation employed labour force. This shows that the fishermen could survive as a collectivity when it came to rejecting the government-sponsored sanitation programme, but they had no qualms in participating in Irrigation's construction work. In a terrain like this, where people constantly shift their subject positions, practices necessarily alter before they can ossify.

Prawn catchers

As mentioned earlier, prawn catching constitutes a significant source of income for the people of the Sundarbans. While travelling down the river one cannot help but notice women and children wading through chest or waist-deep water dragging nets to catch prawn seeds. They haul their nets along the riverbanks in the opposite direction of the currents to catch these seeds that come with the tide. In recent times, prawn seed catching has become a matter of much concern among

the policy makers for its perceived contribution to environmental degradation in the region. The catching of tiger prawn in great numbers is viewed as causing damage to marine resources and mangrove plantations (Directorate of Forests undated:4). The Sundarban Affairs Department has been funding the Nimpith Farm Centre's experiment in aquaculture to encourage people to rely more on produce from their own individual ponds and less on the rivers. We have also seen how the Tagore Society has provided another dimension to the issue by drawing attention to the adverse impact that prawn catching has on embankments. All this seems in line with the increasing global concern about conserving biodiversity (Wilson 1995) and characterisation of biodiversity as a global public good (World Bank 2003).

The issue of prawn catching reminds me of my encounter with the two women workers of the Tagore Society whose views in favour of prawn catching make us aware of the poor families' very different perspectives on the issue. Their views are shared by many other women in the Sundarbans. I met Maya, a prawn catcher and a resident of Pakhirala, in a belligerent mood cursing her neighbour for the latter's allegedly adverse comments on prawn catching in the Sundarbans. The man worked in a government office in Calcutta, but was a resident of Pakhirala where he owned land and a house. In fact, it was during my conversation with him that Maya intervened. The man was talking to me while we took a stroll down the village road. He seemed in agreement with Kanjilal about the menace that prawn catching posed to the embankments and felt strongly that the problem of erosion could have been controlled substantially if fishing along the banks were stopped.

While he was expressing his views Maya came from behind and asked him, 'What did you say?' Caught unawares the man was at a loss for words. She had a net in her hand and her soaked clothes suggested that she had just returned from catching prawns. Pointing to me she told him, 'Just because this man is new to the village, you are telling him about the problems of prawn catching. Go and check if erosion has stopped in places where fishing has been stopped. Will *Kanjilalbabu* [Kanjilal] feed me and my family if I stop catching *bagda*?' 'But you have not heard what I said,' the man tried to say in his defence, but could not proceed further. Maya stopped him and asked, 'You earn a lot of money, but did I ask you to feed me? The next time you open your mouth, the consequences will be serious.' She was almost threatening in her demeanour.

The above incident portrays the Sundarbans as if it were divided into prawn catchers and non-catchers which is not the case. Those who catch prawn seeds in the rivers are supported by a wide network of secondary collectors who buy and sell them elsewhere. Primary catchers like Maya sell their catches either to owners of private fisheries where the seeds grow before they are ready for export or to networks of secondary collectors who sell them illegally in Bangladesh. Niranjan, a resident of Rangabelia and part of a network of prawn sellers once told me that they buy seeds from the women who catch and sell the seeds in Bangladesh by bribing the security personnel at the border between India and Bangladesh. Niranjan started his career as a primary catcher, but later found his way into a network operating in the region. According to him, by joining these networks one can earn more.

The elaborate network of interests around prawn catching and collecting suggests that it is an established source of income for many families in the region. It is because these networks exist that women like Maya or the health workers of the Society survive in the Sundarbans. An interesting part of this tale is that while the Left-front government funds initiatives to stop people's dependence on the rivers, the private fisheries are themselves often owned or maintained by party cadres in the region. Intra or inter-party rivalries over the ownership of these fisheries are part and parcel of everyday life in the Sundarbans. Similar networks are found to exist around fish or prawn seed cultivation in Bangladesh as well (Lewis, Gregory and Wood 1993; Ito 2002). Ito has also noted the increasing participation of women in the activities around prawn farming in Bangladesh (Ito 2002:63-65).

In view of the increasing involvement of women in the trade a question that assumes significance is how do we construct women's role as primary catchers? This question is important because a dominant perspective on South Asia – advanced by ecologists like Shiva and Mies – suggests that women should be viewed as contributing to nature or the environment (Shiva 1988, Mies and Shiva 1993). According to Shiva, a characteristic feature of Indian cosmology is the presence of feminine principles in nature (Shiva 1988:38). Women are not only viewed as an intimate part of nature, but seen as relating to nature in an essentially non-exploitative way. According to Shiva, this relation had been destroyed by the onslaught of western modernity. Western science and modernity, manifested in their institutional forms such as state and market, are viewed as having caused violence to nature in the name of development. The experience of women's participation in

contemporary ecological movements in India has led Shiva to argue that because women embody nature, one can see in their protests a critique of destructive development processes and a possible return to India's pre-modern past where the problematic relations between sustenance and conservation would be resolved (Shiva 1986, 1988).

The depiction of women as closer to nature appears problematic, for it essentialises woman and nature. Such essentialised conceptions of woman have been critiqued in anthropology (Ortner 1974; Gillison 1980; Ortner and Whitehead 1981). Gender and sexuality are viewed as cultural and symbolic constructs rather than natural facts (Ortner and Whithead 1981). Woman, it is argued, is not any closer to or further from nature than man (Ortner 1974:87). Sinha *et al.* have questioned the perspective developed by Shiva as well as writers like Nandy, Visvanathan, and Alvares (see chapter one) for essentialising Indian tradition (Sinha, Gururani and Greenberg 1997). It is argued that Shiva's and others' depiction of pre-colonial Indian society as marked by harmonious social relations and absence of gender and environmental exploitation is unacceptable in the face of inadequate historical evidence (ibid). However, despite their critiques, they acknowledge that Shiva's approach has gained considerable tactical leverage in its struggle against modernity. Her portrayal of poor peasant women embracing trees to prevent their felling has become a global icon of popular protest against the degradation and exploitation of nature (ibid:66). A representation of this kind has also led multilateral agencies like the World Bank, which clamour for sustainable resource use, to portray women as natural conservers of resources because of their deep concern for the quality of the ecosystem (World Bank 1994:28).

The question of whether women are closer to nature needs to be understood in the context of wider social processes of which women are part. In this respect it is worth considering the views of Agarwal and Jackson who locate women's agency and their relation to nature in the context of domestic and agricultural divisions of labour (Agarwal 1988, 1989, 1994; Jackson 1993a, 1993b, 1998). However, in doing this both move away from the ecofeminist perspective that sees women as the 'natural constituency' for conservation activities (Jackson 1993a, 1993b, 1993c) since it hinges on biological determinism (Jackson 1993b:396; Agarwal 1992:123, 1994:37). According to Agarwal, the discourse that traces the connection between women and environment to female biology or symbolically identifies women with

nature tends to neglect the material basis of the connections in the gender divisions of labour, property and power (Agarwal 1992:126). To this end she problematises the view of household as a unit of congruent and unitary practices (Agarwal 1988:83) and argues that the question of women's land rights has not been addressed in the literature dealing with women in poverty and development policies pursued by the Indian state. In this regard the example of West Bengal is hardly encouraging, for under the Left-front government's land reforms programme tenants registered for land tenure were primarily men (Agarwal 1994:9). In addition to the absence of land rights for women there are intra-household gender inequalities in the division of labour and in access to food and health care. In the case of poorer households the burden of poverty falls unequally on women, for linked to unequal economic status are inequalities in food intake resulting in low nutritional status, morbidity and mortality (Agarwal 1986, 1988, 1994).

Given the gender divisions of labour prevalent in the household it is difficult to assume that women's practices reflect their choices or priorities. In this respect Agarwal's views converge with those of Jackson both of whom argue that women's concern for natural resource management is integrally connected to their livelihood strategies, especially the ways they are expected to function within the household. Thus, if women are adversely affected by large scale deforestation and environmental degradation, it is because they depend on the forests for procuring the fuel and firewood necessary for cooking and feeding the family members, activities that are defined as 'naturally' suitable for women to perform. Jackson further argues that women's preference for dry and dead wood for fuel should not, as has been done by the ecofeminists like Shiva, be viewed as a reflection of their 'natural' concern for environment and forests, but rather is because dead or dry wood is lighter and easier to carry (Jackson 1993a:1948). Those valorising women's natural flair for nature conservation seem to ignore the fact that environmentally-friendly management practices by women can often be explained in terms of pragmatic short term interests, the roots of which can be traced back to women's position as defined within the household (Jackson 1993b; Agarwal 1992). Even on the agricultural front there is a need to distinguish between the land farmed by women on their own account and that farmed as a part of household responsibilities when women are expected to supplement more as dependents than as autonomous individual actors. Under these circumstances one needs to be cautious in asserting

complementarities of women's gender interests and environmental interests (Jackson 1993c:672) or interpreting women's engagement with land and forests as evidence of their enthusiasm for environmental conservation (Jackson 1993b:407).

When we turn to the Sundarbans in the light of the analyses of Agarwal and Jackson we find that women are engaged in similar activities for feeding and nurturing their household members. They too procure firewood from the forests and catch fish or crabs in the narrow creeks to cook for family members. Here we are reminded of the sterilisation camp (in chapter four) when the husbands of the women being sterilised expressed their opposition to vasectomy. The views expressed by the men can also be seen as a reflection of the position assigned to women in the household. Agarwal's argument about the absence of land rights for women also applies to the women of the Sundarbans. While working at the local land records office rarely did I come across a land deed being registered in the name of a woman member of the family.

During my conversation with some of the women trainees at the Tagore Society and Nimpith Ramakrishna Ashram I came across narratives of land deprivation. Sabitri, a widow in her late thirties and resident of Amlamethi island of Gosaba, was receiving her training in batik when I had the opportunity to talk to her. Sabitri's husband had been killed by a tiger some three years earlier but her husband's brothers did not want to part with the portion of the land due to her husband on the grounds that Sabitri's husband had hardly farmed the land and was mostly engaged in honey collecting and construction work. Although Sabitri did acknowledge that the land was not too big and had it been divided, support generated would not have been enough for two families, still her husband's share would have been something to call her own. Instead her brothers-in-law wanted Sabitri to stay within the same family so that she and her two children could be maintained by them. Sabitri's condition is similar to that of many widows whose husbands are killed by tigers. In fact Sabitri talked about some of her friends with whom she catches prawn seeds in the rivers. Not only did these friends of hers have no land but they lived separately as they could not stay with their in-laws and relied on prawn catching to maintain their children. Sabitri came to the training course in the hope that batik training would help her supplement earnings made from prawn catching.

Uma, a widow who worked for the women's unit of the Ramakrishna Ashram, narrated a more or less similar story. At the time of her marriage Uma's parents gave their son-in-law a piece of land as dowry. As the land was in Uma's husband's name her in-laws claimed that the land belonged to the family. Uma's parents' death and her own brothers' indifference contributed to her helpnessness. With one of her brothers-in-law exercising considerable clout in the local panchayat and party circle nothing really worked in her favour. Her earning from tailoring was what enabled her to maintain her two sons and a daughter.

In many ways Agarwal's and Jackson's accounts transcend the simplistic equation established between women and nature and help us understand the complexity of women's position and agency within the household. The argument that women's relation to nature needs to be grounded in material processes and immediate livelihood strategies seems particularly relevant when we turn to women's engagement with prawn catching in the Sundarbans. Prawn catching is predominantly a woman's occupation in the Sundarbans, for three to four hours of prawn catching is believed to fit in well with the other domestic chores of women. Women catch prawns in various capacities, either as 'natural' dependents, when their role is one of supplementing family income, or as heads of households where the husband is dead, or as temporary heads when husbands are away from home. However, in each case the overriding concern seems to be one of caring, nurturing and feeding the family, a role whose roots seem to lie in the way woman's position is defined within the household. It is not simply absence of land rights, but also factors such as domestic power relations, early widowhood, levels of support from offspring and kin which account for women's hardship (Jackson 1998:46) and also mediate their relation to nature.

Yet the significance of prawn catching also lies in the way it has provided women with the chance to move out of the impasses created by the absence of their rights to land on the one hand and the peripheral position agriculture occupies in the life of the Sundarbans on the other. Unlike agriculture, prawn seed catching is not seasonal, for with every high tide come thousands of prawn seeds. Women catching prawn seeds do not have to think about the market because immediately after the seeds are collected, the owners of private fisheries wait to buy the catch from the primary catchers and take them to the fisheries where they will be reared. Women thus emerge as constrained, but competent social actors capable of articulating their

priorities (Kabeer 1994). Baisakhi Sardar's story narrated in the second chapter shows that despite losing her right limb she still draws net along the riverbanks to catch prawn seeds to maintain her family. Baisakhi and Maya make it clear that prawn seed catching, despite the Tagore Society's stand against it, will continue to be a source of livelihood for women and their families in the Sundarbans.

Beldars

Another important segment of the Sundarbans is the group of *Beldars* who are the Irrigation Department's staff entrusted with the task of protecting and maintaining the embankments. These *Beldars* mostly belong to the Santhal and Bhumij tribes whose ancestors were brought to the Sundarbans by their colonial masters at the time of the Sundarbans reclamation (see section I of chapter two). The *Beldars* took considerable pride in narrating the heroic deeds of their ancestors. Their eyes moistened as they described how their ancestors risked their lives, fought the tigers, cleared the jungles, and made the Sundarbans habitable.

The Sundarbans reclamation was done by the tribals indentured from Chotanagpur (Mukherjee 1981:90). It was their bodily strength and physical prowess that attracted the attention of the colonial administrators and revenue collectors. Here it is interesting to note how demand for indentured labour or coolies fetishized aboriginality and physical prowess as significant elements in the colonial representation of the 'tribal'. Prakash (1992) makes an interesting observation about the perceived relation between aboriginality and cooliehood in the context of exhibitions on aborigines held in colonial India to institutionalise the pursuit of Anthropology as the science of races. At these exhibitions, members of different 'races' were assembled for presentation as living exhibits, suitably framed in classified stalls for the instruction of the wider public (Prakash 1992:158). Prakash further states that the feasibility of such exhibitions of the aborigines was justified on the ground that the exhibits themselves served as excellent labourers or coolies who would put in order the exhibition ground at certain times, while at others they would take their seats in the stalls serving as functioning objects (1992:158).

No wonder the aborigines were procured as coolies for the commercial purposes of colonial rule. But what is significant to observe is how the demand for

labour in the colonial market not only produced and consumed primitivism, but led to the classification of degrees of aboriginality (Ghosh 1999:35). Ghosh argues how the plantation economy in Assam in Eastern India proceeded by using 'aboriginality' as a new language of classifying Indians as labour for plantation work (1999:32). Thus a classificatory scheme arose whereby first class coolies included Bhumij, Santhal, Uraon, Munda, Kol etc., who were Chotanagpur hill people, the second class included all the other castes including Bengal coolies and the third class was composed of Khettris from Bihar and other castes from Bihar and North-West Provinces (1999:32). It was clear from this classification system that first class coolies should be 'pure' aborigines or 'primitives' followed by other classes of indentured labourers (1999:32)[1]. It was because of this construction of aborigines as 'better' coolies that the prices fetched by an aboriginal coolie were more than those fetched by others (1999:34). Following the lead given by Prakash and Ghosh, I suggest that it was no accident that coolies brought in for the purpose of Sundarbans reclamation were also members of the Santhal and Bhumij tribes of the Chotanagpur region.

Thus, it is the distinctiveness of the Santhals, Bhumijs and Mundas which allowed them an entry in the colonial labour market. The market, which was supposed to be an erasure of cultural differences, actually operated through upholding a distinctive cultural identity. It is also no coincidence that majority of the Beldars were recruited from the remnants of the Santhal and Bhumij tribes in the Sundarbans. After independence, when protecting and maintaining the Sundarbans embankments came under the purview of the Irrigation Department, the latter created the post of Beldars. The rationale behind such recruitment was not only to employ local resources to maintain embankments, but also to pursue a wider government policy of uplifting 'socially backward' communities. Therefore, the obvious choice for these posts were the tribals (Sardars) of the Sundarbans. For the tribals with their assumed aboriginality, physical prowess and historically defined role in the Sundarbans reclamation, qualified for the label 'indigenous people', an oft-quoted phrase in the government discourses on development.

---

[1] This classification was found in E.N. Baker's letter to the Chief Commissioner of Chotanagpur (in *Report of the Commission on the Labour Districts Emigration Act 1880 p 253*). I have mentioned the classification as used by Ghosh in his essay on indentured labour in tea plantation in colonial Assam. For a detailed discussion of this issue see K. Ghosh's 'A Market for Aboriginality: Primitivism and Race Classification in the Indentured Labour Market of Colonial India' 1999 pp 8-48.

This link between aboriginality and physical prowess is also central to an understanding of non-tribals' perceptions of tribals in the Sundarbans. Although there has been interaction between the tribals and non-tribals at various levels, in the eyes of the latter, the former remain a distinct category of people. Their distinctiveness lies in their bodily strength and courage and their ability to work hard. Stories canonising the distinctiveness of *Sardars*' bodily strength abound in Rangabelia, with the most frequently heard story being about how a tribal *Sardar* once killed a tiger. I heard the story for the first time as it was told by the workers of the Tagore Society when one evening some of them congregated at the tea stall next to the Society's office after their day's work. The workers were sharing tiger stories amongst themselves: stories of tigers killing people and instances when people escaped death at the fangs of the tiger. Suddenly Ratan, one of the workers of the Society, said, 'But nothing beats the story of Biru Sardar.' 'There you are', everyone present in the shop instantaneously agreed with him. Turning to me, Biren, another worker of the Society, said, 'You might like to hear this story, as you seemed interested in knowing about the tribals in *Sardarpara*.' Then Biren and others in the shop asked Ratan to narrate the story.

Ratan happened to be the first narrator but later I heard the story from other villagers. They had all heard the story from their fathers and grandfathers. According to the villagers, the incident happened when Rangabelia had already become inhabited. The story goes like this:

> Once, on a warm and sultry night, Biru Sardar, an aged tribal of *Sardarpara*, was sleeping outside his house. Because of the mosquitoes he had covered himself with a sheet. Biru was in a deep sleep when a tiger came. As Biru was fully covered the tiger could not make out if it was a human being, but continued towards him. Meanwhile Biru's sleep had been broken by the smell of the tiger, but he pretended to be still asleep. The tiger came near Biru and, in an attempt to know what it was, finally had him between its four legs. Realising that he was lying under the tiger, Biru, in a state of shock, suddenly embraced the tiger, held it hard against him and shouted "tiger" "tiger". Hearing Biru screaming his neighbours came running to his house and found him in that state. Initially they found it extremely difficult to separate the two. But when they did so eventually, the tiger was found to be dead. Biru embraced the tiger so hard that it was suffocated to death.

After the story one of the villagers asked me, 'Do you think a normal human being could do that?' Bankim, another worker of the Tagore Society, exclaimed, 'Such

strength, my goodness! Only tribals are capable of that. They have that strength and ability to toil in their blood.' After a while Ratan said, 'Yet once *Sardars* become government *Beldars* they do nothing to maintain the embankment.' 'Why do you say that?' I asked him. Ratan answered, 'You don't need to ask me, you ask anybody, he will say the same thing. If you intend to meet the *Beldars*, my advice is don't meet them at the beginning of the month', Ratan cautioned. 'Why?' I asked. 'That's the time they get their salary and they are busy boozing and blowing away their money.' Bankim intervened, 'Most of the time they remain drunk and do nothing worthwhile. Over these years the condition of the embankments has worsened due to their laxity and negligence.'

Later I found that the villagers were in general angry with the *Beldars* and attributed the frequent embankment collapses or the poor condition of the embankments to their callousness. According to the villagers, the *Beldars* enjoyed their government salary and did nothing to repair the embankments. I decided to interview some of the *Beldars* at *Sardarpara* of Rangabelia. To this end I made contact with them beforehand and informed them of my intention to visit them for a chat. Some of the *Beldars* I met earlier decided that they would meet me at Bimal Sardar's house at *Sardarpara* in Rangablia.

The day I went to Bimal's house I found that they were discussing something amongst themselves. Seeing me they told each other, 'Oh, he has come.' Then Babulal, one of the *Beldars*, asked me, 'How long do you think you are going to take?' 'That depends on the time that you think you can spare.' I answered. Babulal gave an awkward smile and said, 'Actually a problem has cropped up.' Then pointing to a chap sitting at a distance he told me, 'His father was a *Beldar* who died recently. Since he died while in service his son has a legitimate claim to his father's job now. But the Irrigation Department is creating a problem on technical grounds. We have decided to take this boy to the Gosaba office and sort it out. Therefore, you need to let us off in an hour and a half.' The boy sitting with a stick in his hand and clad in two pieces of cloth[2], one to cover the lower part of his body and another piece wrapped around his bare chest, looked to me like someone whose father's formal funeral rites were not yet over. I told Babulal, 'An hour and a

---

[2] Two pieces of cloth refers to a ritual cloth that one dons to mourn a parent's death. The cloth is a symbol of austerity for the period between one's parent's death and the formal rites of passage of the deceased.

half is okay, but it seems that his father's death rituals are not yet over.' Babulal promptly replied, 'That's precisely the reason why we want to take him now to the office and convince the officials about his bonafide claim.'

With the hour and a half at my disposal I started conversing with the six *Beldars*. Except for Girin Sardar, the other five *Beldars* had all inherited their father's occupation. Initially our discussion centred on their fathers and forefathers and their deeds during the time of the reclamation of the Sundarbans. They described the odds their great grandfathers and others who came with them faced in clearing forests during the early stages of settlement. Girin said, 'They felt so insecure after the day's work that they spent nights sitting on trees.' While we were chatting Bimal Sardar kept drinking rice alcohol and nodding his head as a mark of his tacit support to what his colleagues were saying. He was drinking and at times passing his tumbler around to others for a sip. As soon as his tumbler was empty his wife came to replenish it.

The moment I asked them about the allegations against them Bimal turned grave. Suddenly he got up as if the question shook him out of his inertia and asked, 'Who told you this? Do these people know what our job and duties are?' He did not bother to wait for my response and continued, 'We are not merely government labourers meant to repair embankments. We have special expertise because of which our fathers were recruited by the government. As *Beldars* our job is to detect hidden holes [*ghog*] in the embankment. Detecting these holes is not everybody's cup of tea, you need to have trained eyes and ears to detect such holes.' Pointing to the distant field dotted with houses and the horizon beyond he said, 'These people [the villagers] think that anybody can become a *Beldar*.' Bimal paused a while, as he was short of breath.

Babulal went up to pacify him and made him sit on the ground. He turned to me and said, 'Believe it or not our job is to detect the hidden holes that are not visible to a layman's eyes.' He then turned to Girin and asked him to explain things to me. Girin said that such holes are made by crabs that come from the sea during high tide. The saline water often flows through these holes and contaminates paddy fields or fresh water ponds. 'You must have seen us move around with huge sticks?' Girin asked me. 'No I haven't', I answered. 'Well, we use these sticks to inspect if there are any such holes. It is only during high tide that we can inspect such holes because it is when the water rises that you can make out if seepage is taking place

or not. Sometimes your eyes fail to locate them. Then you need to kneel down and use your ears to make out from the nature and sound of water flow whether holes have developed in the embankments. Holes can be detected only during high tide, but must be plugged when the water recedes. Unlike *Irrigation labourers*, we do not repair or build ring embankments. It is because of our expertise that the government has employed us.'

Bimal, who had kept quiet for some time, suddenly intervened, 'It is only because of our ancestors that people could settle in the Sundarbans. It is surprising that they think that we are answerable to them. But we are accountable only to the government and not to the villagers.' To my surprise Bimal's wife came out of the house and joined Bimal in pouring out her wrath. She said, 'I know who these people are. The *Project people* think that they can criticise anybody. When I requested them to get my son a job at the *Project* they refused. *Kanjilalbabu* [Kanjilal] went on record as saying that the *Project* belongs to everybody; it is for the people of the Sundarbans. But today those who sit in the office control the *Project*.' All the while Bimal tried to restrain her and asked her to go inside the house, but she did not budge before she had completed what she wanted to say.

As I stated earlier, the *Beldars* occupy a significant place in the social map of the Sundarbans (see chapter three). On the one hand, they live there and, like every other resident, are vulnerable to the dangers of flooding and land erosion. When their agricultural fields are flooded with saline water they remain as helpless as any other villager. On the other hand, as *Beldars* they occupy the lower rungs of the state machinery and in this capacity they claim their difference from the other segments of the population in the Sundarbans because of the special expertise and knowledge which they think that the others lack. As agents of the state, the *Beldars* see themselves as protecting its interests. Not only did Bimal make it clear that he remained answerable to the Irrigation Department but the other *Beldars* present there agreed with him. In fact among the *Beldars* was also present the man whom I recognised had brought bamboos for the purposes of reclaiming the pond in North Rangabelia. When Bimal was abusing the villagers he reminded me of the incident in North Rangabelia when the workers threw tantrums over the seventy bamboos. He told me, 'The workers always create trouble at the drop of a hat. For them seventy bamboos were inadequate. But we deliberately brought seventy. Because if we had brought a hundred bamboos then they would have used only seventy and the

rest would have been sold to make money.' The use of the word 'we' in this instance indicates the *Beldars*' level of identification with the state and shows that they would try to prevent misuse of the state's property.

However, the way they decided that they would pursue the case of the son of their deceased colleague and establish his claim to his father's job indicates that their sense of identification with the state does not make them oblivious of their own rights and privileges. Their lack of familiarity with the detailed rules and regulations of the Irrigation Office is not a handicap. Their determination to present the deceased *Beldar's* son in person to the officials of the Irrigation Department proves that they are ready to counter any such technical problem with the strategies they have at their disposal.

When I asked the *Beldars* about the much talked about Dayapur ring embankment, they were quite critical about such land acquisition. They came down heavily against the contractor who had made a profit from such a huge ring embankment. They stated that such land acquisition was unjustified and as owners of land themselves they could feel for those who lost whatever little they had. However, at the same time they did not want to comment on the details of such land acquisition. To quote one of the *Beldars*, 'Ring *bund making* [building of ring embankment] is a *high-level office* matter to which we are not privy.' The way in which they attempted to convey the message that they were not part of this official process makes the *Beldars'* identity complex and interesting. Their familiarity with official procedures and also the ways of circumventing them is clearly reflected in their desire to sort out the case of the deceased *Beldar's* son. As *Beldars*, they are often involved in carrying out the orders of the engineers of the Gosaba office, such as bringing bamboos or bricks to a site or measuring the holes dug up by the labourers for the purposes of their payment etc. quite as much as in helping the officials with inspections during their visits to a site. Yet with respect to the question of land acquisition they preferred not to comment on the details of such land acquisition.

Rhetoric of the Organisations Versus People's Perceptions and Participation

The preceding discussion points to the disparate practices and shifting positions of *Dafadars*, labourers, fishermen, prawn catchers and *Beldars*. It is in the

context of these disparate practices and divergent modes of articulating dissent that the Tagore Society's call to 'Save the Sundarbans' and its notion of the creation of a unified and transparent society appears problematic. In all its public meetings in the Sundarbans the Society emphasised the need for raising public consciousness. They argued that people should be made sufficiently aware so that they would be committed to a transparent society and would support the setting up of an a-political forum like the 'Save the Sundarbans Society'. For the Society, if the islanders were armed with such consciousness, they would be able to surrender their own narrow vested interests and fight against inappropriate practices. It was as if people's participation in the forum would enable them to overcome their irrational ideas and false consciousness and be guided in the direction of what the Society considers as 'true consciousness'. In other words, the *Beldars*, *Dafadars* and labourers should eschew their apparently contradictory self-interests and wholeheartedly participate in the Tagore Society's awareness generation campaigns. However, this kind of conscious-raising programme launched by the Tagore Society is untenable as it not only treats people as naïve and ignorant, but also seeks to impose its own notion of a 'good society' on the multiple practices and perceptions of the people. Such an imposition tends to gloss over the different contexts in which people engage in diverse practices and articulate divergent subject positions.

The Society's 'Save the Sundarbans' campaign is also fraught with problems at another level. The Society politicises the embankment issue by drawing the islanders' attention to government apathy and corruption, yet at the same time it also collaborates with the government in providing piecemeal development facilities to the people. Needless to say, government funds are the major reason for such collaboration. Kanjilal made it very clear in several of my interviews with him that funds are necessary ingredients of development. To quote him, "'Save the Sundarbans' or not you need money to do development, convince people about why you are there. If funds dry up you cannot do development."

For this reason, the various government-sponsored programmes such as rural sanitation, mobile health or family planning form the centrepiece of the Society's everyday activities. In Rangabelia, early in the morning on my way to the nearby teashop, I often ran into van-rickshaws either full of Society workers heading towards different islands for their polio vaccine awareness camps or else laden with sanitary ware to be loaded on to the boats for distribution to different

places in the Sundarbans. Therefore, workers spend most of their time making people aware about the benefits of government packages such as subsidised sanitary ware or polio vaccines or preparing reports on the success of such government sponsored programmes so that further funds can be generated. In the conduct of this day-to-day business, the wider 'Save the Sundarbans' campaign inevitably takes a back seat. As a result of this, a response such as the one that Gour, the worker of the Society, encountered in the fishermen's colony in Pakhirala village, left him completely perplexed. Yet what he met with here was the fishermen's strong sense of resentment against their vulnerable existence. One could find in their rejection of the government sanitation programmes a protest against government apathy and lack of positive intervention. But workers like Gour, who spend their time convincing people about the utility of government packages and making them available to the people, misread such resentment as a lack of initiative and cooperation on the part of the people.

Linked to all this is the question of the image of the Tagore Society in Rangabelia. Just as the workers of the Society gossip about how the labourers steal earth to deceive the contractors, similarly, there are stories in circulation that pertain to corruption within the Society itself. Ever since that incident in *Jelepara* in Pakhirala I wanted to revisit the place and meet some of the people for an interview. As soon as I entered *Jelepara* the smell of night soil again hit my nostrils. When I reached the shop near the ferry where the incident had occurred last time, I found some of the residents of the locality chatting in front of the shop. Among those present was the same person who had poured his wrath on Gour. Seeing me he asked, 'Have you come to the *Project*?' 'No, I am not part of the *Project*, but at the moment I am in Rangabelia to do research on the embankment', I answered. 'Embankment!' he exclaimed and then, pointing to it, said, 'See the condition of the embankment yourself.' Going on to refer to the incident which happened when Gour was with me he added, 'I don't know why the chap who was with you the other day gave us unsolicited advice and picked a quarrel unnecessarily.' The shop owner said, 'The chap works for the *Project*, his name is Gour.' Then hinting at alleged malpractices among the workers of the Society he said, 'What development can the *Project* do when its workers are busy stealing its property?' 'What do you mean by that?' I asked him. 'Haven't you heard of an expensive generator being stolen from the *Project office*? Who do you think could have stolen that when the

keys to the office are with the workers? Recently *Kanjilalbabu* has also closed down the *Project's Model Farm* [Animal Husbandry Unit] because of the embezzlement of funds. Ever since *Kanjilalbabu* left Rangabelia after his retirement from the school, the workers are busy feathering their own nests.'

The shop owner of Pakhirala was not the only person from whom I came to know about the incidents of theft since later I found that the majority of the people in the surrounding villages knew about them too. In addition to these incidents, the villagers also mentioned that almost all the core workers of the Society were themselves on the verge of leaving the Sundarbans as they had built houses in safer places in the vicinity of Calcutta.

While in Rangabelia I attended the Tagore Society's annual meeting, whose objective was to address the fundamental problems of the Sundarbans and to call for a 'Save the Sundarbans' movement. The meeting was organised in the huge playground in front of the Society's main office. While the preparations for the meeting were under way and a large bamboo structure was being built in the middle of the playground to accommodate the crowd, I found two villagers, Bhabani and Manoj setting up make-shift tents on one side of the playground. Seeing me, they both smiled and said, 'Preparations for tomorrow. We will sell tea and snacks to the crowd.' 'Instead of participating in the meeting you will be selling tea', I said jokingly. Bhabani replied, 'Who says we are not participating? We will participate. But before the Sundarbans is saved we need to save ourselves.' The next day when I met them after the meeting they both asked me, 'Did you hear them [the workers of the Society] speak?' I replied that I had and wanted to know why they asked. Their reply was, 'All those who spoke about the need to save the Sundarbans have their houses built on the outskirts of Calcutta and the one who spoke last already has a *pucca* [concrete] house in Rangabelia. So whether the Sundarbans can be saved or not, the *comrades* are ready to leave the Sundarbans.'

When public meetings of the Society are organised, workers like Gour, who otherwise spend time implementing a variety of government programmes, become involved in trying to convince people about the usefulness of attendance in the light of the problems that the meeting would address. Workers' everyday responsibilities are shelved for the time being and each worker is required to bring a certain number of people from his or her village. The workers who occupy different levels – some as core workers, some as sanitary advisors and extension workers, others as health

staff – of the organisational hierarchy become involved in a process that seeks to remind them and the wider public of the necessity for the 'Save the Sundarbans' campaign.

The success of the organisation's programmes depends on people's participation, but there are different ways in which people participate in the organisation's programme. For the workers of the Society, participation in meetings or in the 'Save the Sundarbans' campaign means participation in events that are otherwise only remotely connected to their everyday life in which they implement different programmes on behalf of the Society. Manoj and Bhabani participated in the meeting as they found in this an opportunity to make money. However, they were not an exception as many did exactly the same thing.

In the last two decades several World Bank-funded and project-based studies have been undertaken to evaluate people's participation in development. Paul (1987) classifies participation as information sharing, consultation, decision-making and initiating action where each stage is an improvement upon the previous one in terms of people's empowerment and agency. Apart from classifying, participation, attempts have been made to remove arbitrariness in the concepts of participation (Rietbergen-McCracken 1996) and render it methodologically sound (Cernea 1992). Attempts have also been made to distinguish between an instrumental view of participation linked to improving quality and sustainability of the projects, and the intrinsic value of participation linked to empowerment (Vedeld 2001).

Apart from discussing the issue of participation in this section, I had raised the issue when I concentrated on the voluntary agencies in earlier chapters. When considering the participatory ideology of the organisations, I had discussed the issue of participation at the individual level to see what participation meant to the members. For example, there was the case of the local who worked at the mushroom spawn laboratory at Nimpith, but did not eat mushrooms (see section I of chapter five) and the case of the van driver of the Rationalist Association who, despite his participation in the Association's anti-nuclear campaign, had other stories to tell (see section II of chapter five). All this makes participation an extremely complex concept, for the question of who participates and in what and for what remains highly variable (Jeffery and Sundar 1999:44). Thus the different frameworks suggested above for measuring and evaluating participation prove

inadequate as they fail to consider both the contexts of action and the very diverse immediate interests which people have when they participate.

The people of Rangabelia and its surroundings look upon the Tagore Society as an organisation that can generate employment. Bimal Sardar's wife made allegations against the organisation when her appeal to find a job for her son was turned down by the members of the Society. According to her, Kanjilal had said that the organisation belonged to the people of the Sundarbans. So she questioned its representative character when it refused to provide a job for her son.

I found this particular notion of the organisation as a repository of employment opportunities for the local people to be prevalent in Nimpith as well. As stated earlier in chapter two, the organisation at Nimpith was wary about outsiders and ensured that I worked under their surveillance. However, on a couple of occasions I managed to strike up conversations with outsiders on my own. It was quite early in the morning when I met an elderly gentleman at the market place. Seeing me alone the man approached me, saying, 'Have you come to the Ashram?' 'Yes, I have come to do research', I said. 'Research?' he looked surprised. 'The way Amal was *guarding* [keeping watch] you I thought you had come for an inspection or audit.' 'You know Amal?' I asked. 'Of course', he answered. 'He lives in Nimpith, about ten minutes walk away from me. But these days they don't seem to want to recognise us. Like Amal, many others from Nimpith got jobs there. I requested Amal to find a job for my son in the *KVK* (Farm Science Centre), but he doesn't seem to listen to me. They all have become *sarkari babus* [government officials]. The organisation is also not what it used to be in the days of *Buddhanandaji*' [Swami Buddhananda, the monk who started this philanthropic organisation].

This person was quite critical about the organisation. From his narrative one could guess that government officials and inspectors often visit the organisation for inspections or audit purposes, and that workers like Amal were there to keep these officials away from the local people so as to ensure that the organisation's reputation was not tarnished. Therefore, the man was surprised when he heard that I was a researcher. At the same time he also looked upon the Ramakrishna Ashram as an organisation that could provide employment for his son and in this regard he considered Amal as a good contact. But he felt disappointed when Amal did not acquiese in his request.

It is interesting to note that the locals, who once supported such organisations, now look upon them primarily as important sources of employment. Over time, such organisations develop into establishments with their own rules and bureaucracies. As a result, in the eyes of the locals, people already recruited into the organisation are considered as having access to its resources. Although these organisations seek to popularise such concepts as people's participation, people's involvement or people's development, for the people themselves participation or involvement becomes meaningful only when it results in some concrete benefits flowing to them.

While I was in Nimpith I met some farmers during a training course organised by the Farm Science Centre. There were about thirty farmers who attended the course. Most of them came from the distant islands of Kultali block in the Sundarbans. On the last day of the training course I was waiting in the back yard of the Farm Centre for the trainees to come back from their lunch so that I could talk to some of them before they finally departed that evening. Suddenly a young trainee came up to me and asked, 'Do you work here? Do you know anybody who works here?' His repeated queries took me by surprise and every time he posed a question he looked around to see if there was anybody watching him. I answered, 'Yes, I know some of the employees of the Centre. But then what's the matter with you? Don't you like the course you are attending?' The man answered, 'To be honest I didn't come for the course. I came to look for a job in the organisation.' 'Why do you think you need a job here?' I asked. The man said, 'This course is not going to be of any help to me because I don't have much land. But I do have a couple of mouths to feed. I studied up to *higher secondary level*[3] but didn't get a job. I approached the panchayat people in my village for a job. They suggested that I should come for the training course of the Nimpith *KVK* and establish contacts to find a job for myself. Initially I tried approaching the panchayat leaders but unless you belong to their party they won't get you a job. And even if they get you one you have to pay money for that.'

The above narrative shows that the man was desperate to get a job. In fact his desperation throws into doubt the legitimacy of such workshops on agronomy in the Sundarbans. As per the rules of the Farm Centre, before the start of the Centre's

---

[3] Higher Secondary means two years' of high school after school leaving as per the Indian education system.

training courses on agriculture the prospective trainee has to fill out an application-cum questionnaire. In doing this one is required to answer questions like

- Have you attended any of the training courses of the Centre in the recent past? Yes/No
- If yes, have you been applying such trained knowledge to any field? Yes/No
- If No what is the reason for non-application?
- If you are interested in the training course of the Centre, in which of the following fields do you like to apply your trained knowledge? Tick the appropriate: a) mono-cropped or double-cropped land; b) animal husbandry; c) pond for irrigation or aquaculture; d) land for horticulture; or e) your ability to work for something which does not include the above and your financial solvency.

Like all other trainees this person must have answered all the above questions satisfactorily in order to be recruited onto the Centre's training course. Yet his frustration and lack of interest in the workshop prove that his biography was far too complicated to be caught accurately in a questionnaire like the above.

Farmers' participation in the Farm Centre's training workshops is what allows the scientists to construct them as potential beneficiaries. The farmers' participation bears testimony to the success of the Centre's technological innovation. At the end of the year tables, charts and other representational forms are used to turn people into figures; their participation rate is considered as having the potential for building a community of sustainable developers (see the table 6.4). Reports of successful training courses are prepared in order to generate funds for similar such training courses in future. All this is done on the basis of an assumption that people's participation can be understood as the collective attitude of individuals towards some innovation (Aerni and Rieder 2000:115).

However, it is necessary to look at this attitude of the participants a little more carefully and disentangle individual concerns and anxieties from more compelling narratives of training, sustainability, participation and awareness generation. For example, Niranjan, a farmer from Kultali block, attended a farmer-training workshop at the Farm Centre. However, this was not the first time Niranjan had attended the Centre's training workshops. For the past three years Niranjan's land had produced nothing since before the paddy plants had matured they had

Table showing farmers and rural youths participation in different training programmes of the Farm Science Centre, Nimptih

Practising Farmers:

Year	Agronomy		Horiculture		Fishery		Animal Sc.		Agril. Engineering		Agril. Extn. Education		Home Sc.		Agroforestry		Crop Sc.		Total	
	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W
1979-80	288	124	40	16	66	28	103	44	5	-	-	-							502	212
1980-81	418	178	186	79	70	11	227	75	25	-	94	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1020	343
1981-82	169	42	163	40	30	10	80	24	14	-	210	40	-	-	-	-	-	-	666	156
1982-83	322	80	345	60	105	10	391	130	92	-	405	40	-	-	-	-	-	-	1660	320
1983-84	308	76	160	39	96	18	105	26	84	-	63	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	816	159
1984-85	503	29	90	21	102	11	305	49	84	-	350	46	-	-	-	-	-	-	1434	156
1985-86	412	58	203	20	160	35	260	41	113	-	720	152	-	311	-	-	-	-	1864	621
1986-87	605	46	140	19	277	10	230	67	39	-	203	32	-	420	-	-	1	-	1495	594
1987-88	750	43	220	27	257	19	301	30	49	-	92	-	-	110	-	-	120	20	1789	249
1988-89	770	45	190	10	280	20	290	60	55	-	250	50	-	-	-	-	150	55	1985	240
1989-90	1486	650	305	42	507	80	301	57	151	-	565	63	-	-	-	-	105	201	3420	1093
1990-91	845	106	202	29	862	340	305	60	101	-	670	116	-	-	-	-	260	403	3245	1054
1991-92	780	190	203	25	465	85	175	40	178	-	445	93	-	-	-	-	50	201	2296	634
1992-93	602	97	150	44	303	50	175	68	90	-	210	99	-	-	-	-	50	61	1580	419
1993-94	604	195	302	40	250	56	445	150	105	-	250	73	-	-	-	-	85	206	2041	720
1994-95	656	210	105	62	303	72	274	130	176	-	150	59	-	-	-	-	95	227	1759	760
1996	408	55	342	25	101	17	9	35	106	-	58	13	-	-	-	-	80	-	1104	145
1997	467	21	124	7	148	29	212	23	50	-	42	6	-	-	-	-	70	-	1113	86
1998	360	-	51	26	143	37	145	62	-	-	-	-	-	-	31	1	-	-	729	126
1999	589	10	278	57	188	18	74	63	-	-	-	-	-	-	70	38	-	-	1199	186
2000(Sept)	460	23	77	3	154	25	11	64	-	-	-	-	-	-	8	12	-	-	710	127

Rural Youths:

Year	Agronomy		Horiculture		Fishery		Animal Sc.		Agril. Engineering		Agril. Extn. Education		Home Sc.		Agroforestry		Crop Sc.		Total	
	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W
1996	10	-	31	15	167	16	21	48	48	-	91	36	-	-	-	-	43	-	411	115
1997	-	-	17	-	212	75	25	-	9	-	45	15	-	-	-	-	38	-	340	90
1998	-	-	13	-	192	46	145	125	-	-	-	-	-	-	62	32	-	-	412	203
1999	-	-	45	17	295	42	25	41	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	401	124
2000(Sept)	15	7	9	1	161	42	75	19	-	-	-	-	-	-	35	25	-	-	295	94

Table 6.4

turned red. Niranjan had brought a sample of dead paddy plant to a training workshop of the Centre last year to share his problem with the scientists. They suspected this to be a case of salinity and told him to wait and see if it happened next year. According to Niranjan, the same thing had happened this year. He had once again come with a sample of dead paddy plant. The scientists of the Centre sent Niranjan's sample for a test in the laboratory. But Niranjan thought he had waited long enough and he was contemplating turning his land into a fishery for leasing to a private owner who would give him hard cash.

Niranjan's plans reminded me of the case of Dayapur ring embankment (for details see chapter 3) on Satjelia island in Gosaba. The embankment in Dayapur collapsed and a ring embankment robbed about ninety people of their lands. However, according to many who lost land, the embankment did not collapse because of a natural disaster. Some of the farmers who had lands near the river wanted to convert their lands into fisheries. When this was resisted by others, the farmers deliberately broke the embankment and allowed saline water into the agricultural lands. Interesting enough, the farmers who broke the embankment were said to have joined the labour force employed the Irrigation Department for building the new embankment. And when the new embankment robbed them of their lands the farmers responsible for breaking the embankments criticised the engineers and contractors for their unjustified land acquisition. The event shows farmers' desperation to turn their land into fisheries. When a plot of land yields low return or when crops are affected by the growing salinity in the soil the farmers are left with no other option but to sell their land to a private fishery owner for hard cash.

Jagat, another villager who attended the training course from a neighbouring island, felt that the programmes were meant for farmers with substantial plots of land where they could afford to experiment. The previous year had been disastrous for him because the yield from his land was very low. To make matters worse, a seepage of saline water through the embankment had contaminated his pond and produced cracks in the mud walls of his house. The burden of a large family forced him to be part of a network of prawn-collectors who sold prawn seeds illegally in Bangladesh. Since he was a recent recruit into the network he was not sure if he could fall back on his small plot of land to feed his family or become permanently engaged in the illegal fish trade.

It would be misleading to consider Jagat's story as an isolated case. His participation in the illegal prawn trade confirms the presence of several such networks throughout the Sundarbans. These networks survive on the efforts of the primary catchers who spend hours in rivers catching prawn seeds. In order to sell the prawn seeds illegally they enter Bangladesh by bribing the security personnel at the check posts. Thus, the illegal prawn trade becomes a source of sustainable livelihood.

There is no doubt that Niranjan and Jagat would be listed as successful participants in the Centre's training programme. And if the farmers of Dayapur or prawn traders had attended the Centre's awareness programmes they too would have become part of the 'community of sustainable developers'. Such participation adds to the success stories of the organisations doing development. But what it excludes are people's anxieties and life stories. The above stories not only enlighten us about the situated practices of the people, but also point to the increasing peripherality of agriculture in the Sundarbans.

The question of participation also becomes significant when we consider the magic shows of the rationalists. People's responses, even when they ran contrary to the expectations of the members of the Association, gave the rationalists enough reasons to think that their mission was not yet complete and only with time people would understand the true significance of their awareness programmes. As stated earlier in chapter five, people's participation was not an expression of their acceptance or rejection of the rationalists' agenda. Nor was their dependence on the *Gunins* a reflection of their ignorance. Rather, the villagers were as much aware of the magnitude of the problem of snakebites as they were about the services, which the *Gunins* rendered in the event of a snakebite.

Sorcerers are an integral part of the Sundarbans. In the absence of hospitals in the remote islands sorcerers are the only sources of hope. Once I met a *Gunin* in Rangabelia who was quite vocal against the rationalists and their campaign. According to him, the rationalists should spend their time setting up hospitals in the remote islands of the Sundarbans rather than attacking *Gunins*. He further stated that these days local hospitals were relying on them to treat cases of snakebites. In fact from the person I came to know that in recent times the sorcerers had often been summoned to hospitals to identify the nature of snakebites. Although he had never been called, he knew others whose services were sought by the hospitals. He

also stated that knowledge of plants alone did not make a *Gunin*. Such knowledge was only effective when combined with the chanting of the right mantras to produce the desired results. The *Gunin's* narrative shows that the reality is more complex than the rationalists could perceive or portray. As neighbours, *Gunin*s help villagers in times of need. However, at the same time the community of *Gunins* is not a uniform monolith, as some believe that not everyone in the profession can effectively master the secrets of the trade. Instances of *Gunins* being called upon by the hospitals indicate that there exists a possibility of their expertise being available to the wider public and therefore, they increasingly come to occupy an intermediate status, serving as an effective link between the hospitals and the people.

Conclusion

The practices and perceptions discussed above suggest that people have a multiplicity of overlapping subject positions that lead them to engage in a variety of disparate acts, each with its own rationality and sustainability. This gives rise to a fragmented and contingent notion of group identity (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Mouffe 1992, 1995). Although practices link an individual to a group identity, such practices tend to alter before they can ossify, thereby prompting a constant renegotiation of forms of solidarity and identity (Ellison 1997:698). We have seen how the locals differ from and at times are opposed to each other in terms of their agency and practices. However, despite their differing practices, the position one occupies, as a *Dafadar* or labourer, is by no means fixed. The primary prawn catchers' negotiations with prawn sellers' networks are what enable them to eventually become parts of these networks and earn more. *Beldars'* position as state functionaries does not preclude the possibility of their having other subject positions. Their involvement with various aspects of embankment-construction activities does not rule out the possibility of their being critical about the activities of the contractors and engineers. *Beldars'* hostility towards the villagers, as revealed in Bimal's fit of anger, does not mean they live in complete isolation as negotiations and interactions of various kinds occur between them (see in this context chapter three). *Gunins'* positions – as fellow villagers, as ones not willing to divulge the secrets of their trade and also as ones offering their services to government hospitals – make us aware of the plurality of subject positions. It is in

the light of these diverse practices and subject positions that I problematise the homogenising nature of the campaigns launched by the NGOs.

The voluntary agencies' rhetorics of participation and visions of ideal societies are problematic at two levels. The awareness-raising campaigns of the NGOs – 'Save the Sundarbans' of the Tagore Society or the training courses of the Farm Centre or magic shows and anti-nuclear campaign of the Juktibadi Sangstha – seek to give the disparate practices and perceptions of the people a semblance of homogeneity by eliminating their situatedness. In other words, people's practices are found to be incommensurable with the ways in which the organisations construct their notions of what sustainable development should be. Furthermore, even when people do participate in NGOs' awareness-generating campaigns or programmes, it is necessary to know why and how they participate. Only then can we disentangle apparently less significant stories and anxieties from grander narratives of progress and development and reveal the diverse ways in which people perceive what is sustainable for them.

In this chapter I have attempted a narrative of the ways in which sustainability is perceived by the people for whom organisations do development. I have broken down the category of 'people' and concentrated on the practices of the prawn catchers, labourers, *Beldars* etc. In the next chapter I turn to perceptions and practices of panchayat members and local party leaders and cadres.

Chapter Seven

Left Politics, NGOs and Local Development: Collaboration or Confrontation?

Introduction

In this chapter I wish to deconstruct the category of 'people' further and focus on the activities of the panchayat representatives, functionaries and local political leaders. Through highlighting the perceptions and practices of the local political functionaries I wish to understand the role of voluntary agencies in local politics. First, however, to broaden our understanding of local politics and NGO activity I start by reflecting on the Left-front government's recent strategies to coordinate the activities of NGOs and panchayat bodies. As mentioned in my introductory chapter, the hostile attitude of the Left-front government in its early years towards voluntary organisations and action groups was manifest in the documents published by Prakash Karat,[1] one of the influential leftist ideologues and now a member of the Politburo of the Communist Party of India. But it seems that around the turn of the century i.e. in 1999-2000 this view changed and some of the ministers (for example the CPI-M Minister for Panchayat and Rural Development, Government of West Bengal) and leftist ideologues became instrumental in setting up a Joint Forum, whereby NGOs would collaborate with panchayat bodies for successful rural development. All this happened at the time when I began my fieldwork on the NGOs in the Sundarbans. Therefore, I begin this chapter with a note on the recent moves for reconciliation on the part of the leftist ideologues before I proceed towards a more nuanced understanding of NGO-Panchayat relations in the Sundarbans. The aim of this chapter, therefore, is both to consider the strategies of coordination at the state level and also look specifically into local politics against the background of these broader policy decisions.

---

[1] This point was raised in the introductory chapter when attention was drawn to Karat's indictment of voluntary agencies' role in development.

NGO-Panchayat Coordination

I start my discussion with a report published in the Calcutta edition of *The Statesman*, on the Left-front's efforts to coordinate the activities of NGOs and panchayat bodies:

> Non-government organisations and voluntary agencies will no longer be allowed by the state government to work independently in West Bengal. If NGOs are to undertake development activities in the state, they will have to work in collaboration with panchayats and zilla parishads [the upper-most tier of the three-tier Panchayat system]... The government's decision is being viewed as a blow to the functional freedom of NGOs and a step towards ultimate control of all voluntary agencies by the state machinery (*The Statesman* 26.10.1999).

This report antagonised many leftist stalwarts, especially those instrumental in floating the idea of a Joint Forum for collaboration between Panchayat and NGOs. In fact the Secretary to the State Level Coordination Advisory Committee (SLCAC) was suspicious when I interviewed him. He stated that this report had been published at a time when the process of negotiation with NGO activists had just begun under the overall guidance of the Department of Panchayat and Rural Development of the Government of West Bengal. By drawing my attention to the report, the Secretary, who is also a member of the State Planning Board, said that it was the doing of some malicious NGOs who had supplied the press with baseless information. To quote him, 'The government left it entirely optional for the NGOs to join the Forum and work with the panchayat. Still I don't know why the organisations collaborated to put into circulation the idea of the government as a control freak. This is the reason why we are suspicious about the intentions of the voluntary organisations.'

The above controversial report, together with the equally significant comments of the Secretary to the Coordination Committee, made panchayat-NGO collaboration quite a useful issue for me to investigate, especially in the light of my on-going research on NGOs in the Sundarbans. The issue also seemed relevant because two of the three NGOs studied (i.e. the Tagore Society and the Nimpith Ramakrishna Ashram) were already party to the state level deliberations. According to the Secretary to the SLCAC and the then Minister-in-Charge for Panchayat and

Rural Development, the efforts on the part of the government to involve the voluntary agencies were still in an embryonic stage and no final policy resolution had yet been made on the issue. For this reason, I had to rely more on interviews with the Minister and people involved and less on formal documents.

In late 1998 and early 1999 a few state-level negotiations and meetings with the NGOs and voluntary agencies were held. The purpose of such meetings, according to the Secretary to SLCAC, was to elicit voluntary agencies' responses to such issues as the institutionalisation of voluntary organisations, relations between panchayat bodies and government agencies, the involvement of NGOs in grassroots planning and collaboration between panchayat bodies and voluntary agencies in implementing central and state sponsored development programmes. On the basis of their responses certain tentative guidelines were issued with a view to forging a collaborative link between panchayats and NGOs. These guidelines were as follows:

- The process of institutionalisation of collaboration between voluntary agencies and the panchayat bodies should begin with the setting up of coordination committees at the state and district levels.

- The Department of Panchayat and Rural Development would help in setting up the State Level Coordination Committee of Voluntary Organisations (SLCCVA) with initial funds from the government. Subsequently the members of the SLCCVA would be expected to raise their own funds to meet organisational requirements.

- Similarly, at the district level the Zilla Parishad should host a workshop or two for an initial assessment of NGOs working at the district level before it agreed to the setting up of a District Level Coordination Committee of Voluntary Agencies (DLCCVA) working in the districts.

- Apart from state and district level coordination committees, a registered forum may be constituted with the representatives of state and district level voluntary agencies and those of panchayat bodies and government departments. Such a forum would be apolitical in nature and stand for the integration of the activities of voluntary agencies with the programmes of the panchayat bodies (Interview with Secretary to SLCAC).

The above guidelines were further qualified by certain eligibility criteria, which the voluntary agencies would be expected to fulfil before they could be considered for membership of SLCCVA or DLCCVA. The criteria laid down were:

- The concerned voluntary agency should be registered under the West Bengal Societies Registration Act of 1961 or Indian Trust Act of 1882 or Charitable and Religious Trust Act of 1920;

- The agencies considered for such membership should have one or more operating bank or post office accounts for the last three years;

- They should disclose in their application for membership the source(s) of their funding and manner in which funds received by them are utilised. They should also undertake to publicly disclose all incomes and expenditures after obtaining membership of the forum;

- Voluntary agencies should be willing to intimate their future plan of action to the coordination committees well in advance and should also be agreeable to such modifications as may be necessary for proper coordination of their activities and optimum utilisation of their resources; and

- It is necessary that no criminal proceeding has been initiated or is pending against organisations considered for such membership under any court of law in India or abroad. If such proceeding was at any stage initiated against any of the organisation(s) they must have been acquitted of all charges at the time of seeking membership of the committees (Interviews with the Secretary to SLCAC and Minister for Panchayat and Rural Development).

Apart from these essential eligibility criteria, certain other qualifications, such as voluntary agencies' involvement with a recognisable rural community, their proven ability in handling development projects, their role in awareness generation and the resultant participation and empowerment of the people, were all stipulated as necessary conditions for NGOs' participation in the forum for coordination.

The qualifications mentioned above indicate a tightening of governmental control over NGO activity. This control is justified by recourse to the rhetoric of 'transparency'. During my interview with the Secretary and later the Minister for Panchayat and Rural Development, both expressed their reservations about what they considered to be the secretive nature of NGO activity. The foreign funding of much voluntary activity was a cause of concern for both of them. The purpose of

this coordination, according to both, was to make voluntary agencies more financially independent since linking them to panchayat bodies would lessen their dependence on unaccounted-for funds from unidentified quarters. The coordination was based on the assumption that by electing to work with the panchayats at different levels the voluntary agencies would share their expertise with these democratic bodies, on the one hand, and learn to raise funds at the local level, on the other.

Despite the participation of the NGOs in the workshops and at the state-level deliberations, the issue of panchayat-NGO collaboration did not go unchallenged. This was clearly revealed in a journal published by an NGO called Academy of Development Science based in the South 24 Parganas. The journal contained observations by some NGO activists who made a scathing critique of this government forum. According to them, the forum was constituted primarily for two reasons: to divide the NGO movement and cause it to disintegrate and to control voluntary organisations through the panchayat (Sanyal and Halim 1999: 26; translated from Bengali). According to these activists, by floating the idea of a Joint Forum and co-opting some voluntary agencies the Left-front government had fulfilled its 'hidden agenda' of countering the possibility of an independent forum of NGOs in West Bengal. The journal makes it clear why the Secretary to the SLCAC said that the report published in *The Statesman* (see above) was the handiwork of some of the malicious NGOs. On reading the journal it becomes apparent who, in the Secretary's views, these 'malicious' organisations were.

After the publication of the newspaper report, the Government of West Bengal convened another meeting of voluntary agencies in July 2000. According to the Secretary to the advisory committee, this meeting cum workshop was convened to allay the anxieties of the organisations. Representatives of about forty-five organisations, at both state and district level, participated in the workshop. The Minister for Panchayat and Rural Development, reiterated the need for collaborative relations between the panchayat and NGOs saying:

> The objective of such coordination, let me clarify once again, is not to exercise control over voluntary agencies. The government has no such intention of using panchayat as an instrument of control. Rather, the purpose of such coordination is to cultivate a healthy relation between voluntary agencies and the panchayat bodies... I would suggest that this

forum be viewed as a part of the on-going process of decentralisation.... The voluntary agencies, at least some of them, have transparent and crystal clear views about social development. Still I wonder why we cannot arrive at a consensus on certain elementary aspects of social development (Mishra 2000; translated from Bengali).

Thus, 'transparency' becomes a central idea around which divergent views on collaboration and coordination are articulated. Government representatives such as the Panchayat Minister or the Secretary to the state level committee were keen on forging a collaborative link between NGOs and the panchayat bodies. But they approached the whole issue of collaboration and coordination with a view to inducing 'transparency' in NGO activities. Time and again the Panchayat Minister in his interview emphasised the need for transparency in voluntary activities. According to him, foreign funding has led to the mushrooming of NGOs and enabled them to bypass government structures. The Minister's views on the issue make it clear why the Panchayat Department laid down detailed eligibility criteria, which required the participating NGOs to disclose their funding and expenditure. According to the Minister, NGOs should be able to present audited accounts of their income and expenditure in much the same way as democratic bodies such as panchayats do.

When the Panchayat Department reconvened a meeting with voluntary agencies after the publication of the controversial report in the newspaper, its intention was to convince the participating organisations about the noble intentions of the government. However, at the meeting the Minister subtly brought back the issue of transparency by passing the onus back to the organisations to arrive at a consensus with the government or panchayat bodies. For the Minister, consensus reflects transparency in the activities of the bodies arriving at such a consensus. By such a comment as 'still I wonder why we cannot arrive at a consensus' what the Minister perhaps meant to say was that if the consensus was unavailable he thought that organisations were to blame, for they were not what they appeared to be. Similarly, the NGO activists who expressed their views in the journal published by the Academy of Development Science criticised the government Forum for its lack of transparency. They viewed the government's collaboration with the voluntary agencies as having a 'hidden agenda'. Interestingly, this journal also contained excerpts from an interview with Tushar Kanjilal, the founder of the Tagore Society

in Rangabelia. Despite his participation in the government workshops and meetings for the setting up of the proposed forum, Kanjilal went on record as saying that if this collaboration resulted in the control of voluntary agencies by the panchayat bodies, then he would no longer be part of the Forum (Kanjilal 1999: 38; translated from Bengali).

The organisations participating in the Forum had their own opinions. I interviewed Kanjilal and some NGO activists who attended the Forum while I was in Calcutta. According to them, the reason why the government had been insisting on a Joint Forum was its apprehension about the fate of its own panchayat institutions because of the dismal rate of people's participation in the periodic meetings (*Gram Sansad*) of the village panchayat. The participation rate was reported to have sunk to a low of seventeen percent. Therefore the government needed the NGOs' help in revamping its panchayat bodies. The workers of the Nimpith Ramakrishna Ashram who participated in the Forum felt that the failure of village panchayat meetings pointed to the prevalence of 'vested' interests in the panchayat bodies at the local level. Thus, for the organisations participating in the Forum, it was an opportunity to influence government decisions and structures. The participating NGOs felt that because they were transparent the government needed their help in revamping their panchayat bodies. In their turn the left politicians and ministers believed that the only way the voluntary agencies could have a clean image or achieve transparency was by collaborating with the panchayat institutions.

The floating of a Joint Forum by the government once again shows how policies serve as instruments of governance and also as ideological vehicles seeking to organise people within systems of power and authority (Shore and Wright 1997:35). It is clear from the above discussion that 'transparency' is the language in which the Left-front government seeks to craft its new principles of governance. In the introductory chapter I drew attention to Prasad's arguments which glorify the Left-front's panchayat experiment in West Bengal as an effective antidote to NGO-sponsored neo-liberalism (Prasad 1999). What Prasad fails to consider is that when the Left-front comes up with the idea of a Joint Forum and sustains it through recourse to the rhetoric of 'transparency', it is actually drawing on neo-liberal discourses of power and governance. The above discussion shows how deliberations are couched in a language to enforce closure or silence on other ways of talking and thinking (Shore and Wright 1997:3). It invites the voluntary agencies

to collaborate but the terms of collaboration are already set in advance. Therefore, if the agencies cannot arrive at a consensus with the government, it is they who are to blame for their lack of transparency.

At one level, the Joint Forum represents an attempt on the part of the Left-front to tighten control over the voluntary agencies. However, at another level, the idea of a Joint Forum can also be seen as a pragmatic realisation on the part of the Left-front government to access global funds increasingly being routed through NGOs for participatory and sustainable development. In the introductory chapter I discussed how the rise of civil society is increasingly being associated with grassroots democracy and bottom-up development. Here it is interesting to note the views of Chabal and Daloz whose study in Africa has shown how western donor countries' concern with civil society has led to a shift of resources towards local NGOs who are increasingly viewed as constituting that civil society in a developing context (Chabal and Daloz 1999). Following the lead provided by Chabal and Daloz, one could argue that the initiation of a Joint Forum demonstrates a tendency on the part of the Left-front to associate panchayats with voluntary bodies, especially when involvement of NGOs in development projects is increasingly being stipulated by foreign donors as a necessary precondition for the release of development funds.

Another important issue emerging out of this policy arena has to do with the way policy constructs its subjects as objects of power (Shore and Wright 1997:3). According to the voluntary agencies participating in the Forum, the government needs the NGOs' help in revamping its panchayat bodies. What is interesting to observe is how the government attributes the panchayats lack of credibility to lack of awareness on the part of the people. Therefore, the obvious rhetorical device is an awareness campaign at the local level to enlighten 'people', i.e. panchayat members, functionaries and people in general, about the utility of the panchayat. Thus, 'people' are not only treated as naïve and ignorant, but they are robbed of their agency and perception.

I have mentioned in the introductory chapter that the Left-front government's panchayat institution, an experiment in decentralisation and devolution of power, is a widely researched area in the development literature on West Bengal. Not only was it conceived of as a means to merely democratise rural power structure, but its significance lay in its challenge to 'pockets of vested

interests' within the rural economy (Williams 1999; Webster 1990, 1992). This was clearly reflected in the Left-front's election slogan: 'Bastoo Ghoogooder Basa Bhango' (demolish the entrenched nests of the wily doves) (Dutta 1997:17). By 'pockets of vested interests' they referred to the erstwhile established landed interests, which had proved obstacles to radicalisation of the power structure in favour of the marginalized, landless and oppressed. While reflecting on the achievements of the Left-front in the agrarian sector, writers have also noted a process of 'political ossification' (Webster 1992, 1993) whereby the panchayat system is believed to have ceased to possess the character of a political movement. For Webster, over the years panchayat has become a programme that serves the electoral needs of the Left-front government (Webster 1992:413). Although Webster uses the term 'ossification' to refer to what he considers to be a problem constraining the Left-front's panchayat movement, such problems have also been tackled by other writers. The patron-client networks of the pre-left era are considered to have been replaced by new networks of power, which also enable the party and panchayat leaders to patronise their party cadres (Williams 1999; Westergaard 1987). Mallick attributes the failure of panchayat reform to the entrenched party interests that prevail at the local level (Mallick 1993).

However, if the Left-front has been able to restructure the micro-politics of rural Bengal through its panchayats (Williams 1999), and if the introduction of panchayats has led to the consolidation of the Left-front's electoral support from the rural areas (Ruud 1994), it is difficult to see how panchayat functions without the presence of parties or party interests in it. My ethnography suggests that at the local level party and panchayat are synonymous. People use these two terms interchangeably to refer to their negotiations with the panchayat members and party leaders at a variety of levels.

People, Panchayats and Local Issues

At this stage I turn my attention away from the policy arena to a more nuanced understanding of panchayat-NGO relations existing at the local or micro level. I will deal with this relation at two levels. One of the issues at stake in the state level negotiations between voluntary agencies and the panchayat is the dismally low rate of people's attendance at village panchayat meetings. Therefore, I

start by looking into people's perceptions about their participation in the panchayat bodies. It is against this background that I address the NGO-panchayat relation in the Sundarbans.

When I juxtapose the perceived low rate of attendance at village panchayat meetings with the narratives I heard from the villagers, I see that government policies seek to reify and prioritise a certain notion of participation to the exclusion of others. The narratives that I often came across stated how villagers were hesitant to go to the panchayat office to finalise a short-term loan, fearing that they would have to part with a portion as a kickback; how the farmers had to offer money or at least a bottle of liquor to settle their land disputes at the panchayat or block land records office; how a villager had to treat the panchayat people to food and drink in order to be recommended for recruitment as *Dafadar* by the Irrigation Office at Gosaba; stories of those who could not pursue their land compensation files which remained shelved at the panchayat office because of their inability to pay bribes. These are diverse stories of people's encounters with the system of governance at the bottom level. Although corruption is a recurrent theme in each of these accounts, the villagers use interchangeable terms such as 'party-panchayat', 'party-politics', and 'money-politics' to ventilate their opinions about public offices.

Whereas the government holds people's lack of consciousness responsible for their low level of participation in panchayat meetings and calls upon voluntary agencies to rescue people from their state of ignorance, the stories from below reveal people's conscious participation in the power structures. These diverse and disparate perceptions may not correspond to the ideological forms in which the policy makers at a more generic level perceive consciousness. In the preceding chapter, we have seen how people's disparate practices and perceptions problematise the unifying consciousness-raising programmes launched by the NGOs. With the help of ethnographic evidence this chapter will show how the horizon of the NGO-panchayat relation extends far beyond the ways in which the policy makers perceive what this relation ought to be.

I draw attention to a report published in the Calcutta edition of *The Statesman*. The report says:

Timber smugglers have chopped down several trees planted by the forest department in the Gosaba area of the Sunderbans... Forest officials say hundreds of trees... had been cut down

by smugglers backed by local political leaders... Gosaba block BDO [Block Development Officer] said: "I was informed about the incident by [the] local BJP leaders. I have asked the police to investigate"... "We went to the spot but the logs had been smuggled out by then. It is impossible to stop the crime without the help of the locals", said a Gosaba police officer... [The] Canning social forest ranger said smuggling... is a "profession" for some in the Sunderbans and most of them enjoy political patronage... The Sunderbans Development Board... forest officer preferred to pass the buck onto the police and panchayats... [The] minister of state for Sunderbans development affairs, seemed to agree with board officials but stressed on creating awareness to check smuggling. He denied knowledge regarding political patronage to smugglers. Asked what action could be taken to trace the culprits, he said: "...Local politicians must come forward and help save wildlife on these islands. Panchayats will have to be more active as the administration can do little on its own." (*The Statesman* 4.3.2002).

The report once again highlights the significance of 'awareness programmes' as the last resort for the policy makers. When everybody passes the buck onto others, 'creating awareness' becomes a convenient rhetorical device. No wonder the Minister emphasises the need for awareness among 'locals' to check smuggling. Through a series of rhetorical statements the Minister provides an interesting picture of local politics. The Minister denies knowledge about local political patronage, but instantaneously creates an amorphous category of 'local politicians' in an attempt to find a solution to the problem. By commenting on the predicaments of the administration and asking the panchayat to be more active he conflates the administrative machinery of his department with other local units of state administrative machinery such as police, forest offices, block development offices etc. together under the generic rubric of 'administration', on the one hand, and keeps panchayat out of the realm of the state administration, on the other. However, by creating the category of 'local politicians' he not only distinguishes between panchayat representatives and local politicians but also considers panchayat as having a status over and above local politics.

The above report is a significant pointer to the way in which local politics is represented around the issue of timber smuggling by the policy makers and also by the different units of administration at a variety of levels. Even before the publication of the report I had come face to face with the issue soon after I started my fieldwork in Rangabelia. It was during the sultry summer month of August that I travelled for the first time on a road that went through Pakhirala village to the

Pakhirala ferry lying to the south of Rangabelia island. It was a long road and one of the major thoroughfares that connected the villages in Rangabelia and Pakhirala to this ferry. A two-kilometre stretch of the otherwise winding road suddenly ran straight through agricultural fields on either side till it finally ended near the ferry. I was travelling with a couple of other passengers on a van-rickshaw and our travel through this particular stretch became unbearable as the late morning sun burned our skins. The two-kilometre stretch looked totally barren with not a single tree on the road. When I asked the driver about it he drew my attention to the stumps of trees at regular intervals along the road and said, 'Those are all that remain here. There were about one hundred trees along this road. Some were planted by the Forest Department and some by the *Project* and overnight the trees were chopped down.' 'By whom?' I asked. 'Now by posing this question you put me into trouble. I can't tell you who these people were.' One of the passengers intervened saying, 'These are all matters relating to *party and panchayat*. All this happened with the connivance of the political *Dadas*[2] (leaders). Those who cut down and smuggled the trees went scot-free because they had *party and panchayat* behind them.' The van driver who had so far remained silent seemed in agreement with what the passenger said and drew the discussion to a close by saying, 'You are an educated person. You should understand how everything revolves around *party-politics*.'

The connection drawn between my education and my ability to better understand local politics was deliberate to ensure that no more discussion on the issue could take place. But it was apparent from their comments that for both the passenger and the driver, party and panchayat were one and the same. The issue once again came up during my conversations with the members of the Tagore Society. According to them, those who cut down the trees were patronised by local leaders. 'Otherwise tell us how was it possible for the police, especially when Gosaba police station was so nearby, to come only after the logs were smuggled out?' 'So do you mean to say that these loggers were backed by the political leaders?' I asked them. They replied, 'What else, the loggers were all locals. The local leaders and panchayat members used them for their political campaigns. In return, therefore, the leaders had to give them opportunities to earn their living. The

---

[2] *Dada* in common Bengali parlance denotes an elder brother. The term is also used to address political leaders and refer to their practices, for they are believed to often throw their weight around in much the same way as an elder brother does in relation to his younger ones in the family.

police do what they are asked to do by the leaders.' The workers reminded me how Kanjilal had raised this issue time and again in the Society's meetings in different islands of the region. In fact for the workers of the Society, the purpose of such meetings, as stated in the chapter on the Society's activities, is to expose the hypocrisy of the local politicians. Not only on the issue of large scale felling of trees, but also in connection with tiger prawn catching (for details see chapter 4), the workers of the Society and the local RSP leaders found themselves at loggerheads. In the chapter on the Society's activities we considered how the Society viewed tiger prawn seed catching and held the local RSP leaders responsible for politicising the issue and making a vote bank out of it. Here I now consider the local panchayat and RSP leaders' views on the issue.

On one occasion, I met some of the RSP panchayat members and leaders after a party meeting. They were enthusiastic about telling me what they did during their 'Save Sundarbans' agitation. Some even suggested that I should go to the Basanti RSP office to have a word with the leaders based there. However, when I asked them about the tiger prawn issue I got a variety of responses. Some of the panchayat leaders sounded very sympathetic to the people. They made statements like – 'This is one of the major sources of income for many poor families. How can you snatch away their livelihood from them?' Some looked a bit agitated – 'You think it is that easy to solve a problem? If I go and tell people not to fish along the banks, will the embankment cease eroding? See, you have to understand the root of the problem. *Irrigation* does very little to maintain embankments. The contractors and labourers deceive each other and the engineers benefit from this.' One very influential panchayat leader of Rangabelia who is also a contractor by profession stopped the others and summed up the whole issue in three short sentences, 'All these tiger prawn issues are bogus. The main problem is *they* [engineers] have theoretical knowledge and *we* [people in general] have practical knowledge. And the gap is too wide you see.' He radiated authority in his bearing and gestures, and acted in a manner that ensured that no more discussion on that issue could take place.

It was quite clear from the way he intervened that the leader was not interested in explaining the constitutive elements that construct the domains of such 'theoretical' and 'practical' knowledge. Rather, by using the term 'we' he created a unified category of local people. He invested the category with practical knowledge

and pitted such knowledge against the theoretical knowledge of the Irrigation Department engineers. By creating these polarised categories and invoking the term 'we' he instantly empathised with the locals, on the one hand, and showed his disdain for the Tagore Society's handling of the issue, on the other. All the other leaders who were present and had earlier voiced their individual views on the issue suddenly succumbed to his influence and became completely silent. By 'individual views' I do not mean that the other leaders articulated views contrary to those of their political superior or that they sympathised with the views of the Tagore Society on the issue. But their enthusiasm was rigorously disciplined by the local party boss, lest they allow an outsider greater access to their party secrets.

Through recourse to the rhetoric of a dichotomy between 'theoretical' and 'practical' the world was portrayed as if it was sharply divided into engineers, on the one hand, and the vast majority of villagers, on the other. Yet in the previous chapter we saw how the situated practices of villagers like *Dafadars*, *Beldars*, farmers, labourers and fishermen problematise any such bi-polar construction. The practices of the local panchayat and party leaders can also be seen as blurring the boundaries of such a sharply divided world as portrayed above. At any given time, there would at least be a couple of the local panchayat or party leaders at the Gosaba Irrigation Office involved in transactions with the engineers, if they were around, or engaged in friendly chats with the caretaker in the office. Local leaders would always be seen in the company of the engineers during their inspection of an embankment site. A van-rickshaw carrying the engineers and heading towards the Gosaba Irrigation Office or any inspection site would always have panchayat leaders/members engrossed in conversation with the engineers. On a couple of occasions I had also seen the RSP leader, who polarised the world into engineers and hapless villagers, standing on the deck of the launch conversing with the engineers during their visit to sites in Rangabelia and Pakhirala. When I asked the labourers present during one such inspection, why the leader was always seen in the company of engineers, their response was: 'The boat belongs to him. He owns two such motorboats and earns a lot of money from leasing them to the engineers. At the beginning of every month you will find him at the Gosaba office waiting for his monthly payment.'

The workers of the Tagore Society vividly narrated their experiences when the Dayapur ring embankment was built. When it was decided that the villagers of

Dayapur and the Society would jointly build a much smaller ring embankment, the engineers, escorted by the panchayat leaders of Gosaba Block Panchayat and some local RSP leaders of Gosaba and Rangabelia, intervened and constructed a fifteen feet wide ring embankment. According to the workers of the Society, initially the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) panchayat representatives of the Dayapur Village Panchayat had agreed to provide the Society with the necessary resources, but when the RSP leaders of the Block Panchayat arrived on the spot, the BJP panchayat representatives maintained a low profile apprehending that any possible help to the Society might complicate their relation with the Block Panchayat. Some of the workers of the Tagore Society felt that the BJP members of the Dayapur Village Panchayat had been persuaded by influential RSP leaders not to provide much help to the Society in matters concerning embankments. This perceived highhandedness on the part of the political leaders antagonised the workers of the Society.

The RSP leaders are aware that the Society organises meetings in the Sundarbans where the finger of blame is often pointed at local politicians. Over the years this factor has worsened relations between the organisation and the local RSP leadership. The local panchayat representatives and party cadres believe that today the Society disregards the party from which it once drew its sustenance. Thus, here is an NGO-panchayat relationship that is characterised by mistrust and mutual suspicion and, therefore, needs to be repaired along the lines suggested by the policy makers deliberating on the collaboration between NGOs and panchayat bodies at the state level. The NGO's mistrust of and lack of respect for local politics and politicians is clearly manifested in the Society's stress on evolving a transparent and depoliticised society as a solution to the problems of embankments and flooding.

Rethinking NGO-Panchayat Collaboration: Reflections From Rangabelia and Nimpith

The conflict of interests between the Tagore Society and the local RSP leadership over the issue of Dayapur ring embankment or prawn seed catching is only a part of the reality of NGO-panchayat relation as it unfolds at the local level. I will show that this relation is far more complex than the policy makers think it is. In support of my evidence I will start with a brief description of an RSP party meeting

in Gosaba. The final phase of my fieldwork coincided with the Assembly Elections in West Bengal. Two months before the election the RSP convened a meeting, which was to be held at the Gosaba playground next to Gosaba market. Huge posters were stuck on the outer walls of the shops in the market. There were also a couple of posters on the walls of the Village Panchayat and the Tagore Society's offices in Rangabelia. The issues to be addressed at this pre-election meeting were the maintenance of 3,500 kilometres of embankments, the possibility of a second crop in winter and the protection of the forests. For about a week the party cadres were seen travelling on van-rickshaws in and around the villages and making announcements to inform people about the forthcoming meeting.

The meeting was scheduled to begin at four in the afternoon. I reached the venue a little ahead of schedule. On arrival, I found that the ground still looked deserted with a few party cadres spreading out tarpaulin sheets on the ground. The dais was set up at the far end of this huge field, while red flags, with a shovel and a spade crossed in the middle, the insignia of the RSP, were fluttering all around the ground. Gradually people started pouring in and around four o'clock one of the members of the party went up to the dais to make an announcement highlighting the importance of the meeting, the issues to be addressed and the role the RSP had played in the development of the Sundarbans. Immediately after the announcement I saw a procession of cyclists entering the ground and proceeding towards the dais, followed by a group of men and women with long sticks in their hands, dancing all the way from the Gosaba market to where the dais was set up. To my surprise I recognised the majority of the cyclists taking part in the procession as members of the Tagore Society. Each of them was carrying an RSP flag. They stopped in front of the dais for a while and then, as if to complete a ritual before the show could formally begin, they cycled around the dais three times before finally dispersing into the crowd.

The next day, I met the cyclists at the Tagore Society's office in Rangabelia. Seeing me they sounded quite casual, 'We didn't see you yesterday, didn't you go for the meeting?' 'How could you see me, you were engaged in cycling.' I answered. 'Oh yes, yesterday was a hectic day for us. We started at around three in the afternoon and stayed in Gosaba till the meeting was over.' 'Tell me something, was your participation in the meeting pre-arranged?' I asked. 'Yes', they answered. 'A couple of days before the meeting the heads of the Rangabelia and Gosaba

Village Panchayats and a few other RSP leaders asked us to attend the meeting.' They went on to explain that the RSP's position was quite vulnerable in Gosaba. Although it was already allied with the CPI-M at the Assembly level, the RSP was worried about two local CPI-M leaders who were trying to consolidate their networks in Gosaba. These two CPI-M leaders, according to members of the Society, were 'mercenaries'. To quote them, 'If these goons are able to penetrate Gosaba and Rangabelia, it will be impossible for the Society to survive on these islands. The Rangabelia Village Panchayat is controlled by the RSP and they are also in majority in the Gosaba Village Panchayat. We have to maintain this at all costs. There was a chance that these two leaders would sabotage the RSP meeting, so we went along to ensure that it went well.'

This was not the only instance when members of the Society were involved with RSP party activities and local politics. The villagers of North Rangabelia had their stories to share in this respect. According to them, the following incident had happened during the last panchayat election. A week before the election, the villagers of North Rangabelia were persuaded by some members of the Tagore Society to boycott the forthcoming election on the grounds of the failure of the party to do anything about the issue of vulnerable embankments in North Rangabelia. The villagers agreed in principle with the workers of the Society who had called for a boycott. However, a day before the election, the workers of the Society instrumental in this boycott plan were won over by the party and panchayat leaders. The next morning the workers went and cast their vote leaving the rest of the villagers of North Rangabelia dumbfounded. Not only did they feel betrayed and cheated, but they were also ostracised and stigmatised by the RSP leaders and cadres in Rangabelia.

The incidents above depict how enmeshed an organisation, which is trying hard to convince people about its transparent nature, is in the network of local politics. The incidents also reveal the fragmented nature of left politics. Although the meeting, which I attended, was organised to campaign for the Left-front supported RSP candidate from the Gosaba Assembly constituency, the Society's workers did not go to the meeting to campaign for the candidate. Rather, their participation was aimed at strengthening the RSP in Gosaba against the possible interference by the local CPI-M leadership. Thus, while the RSP was allied with the CPI-M and others at the state level to form a united Left-front government, at the

local level both the parties were engaged in political skirmishes to encroach upon each other's territories. It is against the background of this fragmented politics that a voluntary agency's negotiations with the local networks of power need to be understood. On both the occasions the members of the Society collaborated with the local RSP leadership to protect the party's stronghold in Gosaba even though such collaboration effectively amounted to the betrayal of the people for whom the Society undertook development. By citing these two instances, what I seek to argue is that local level negotiations may well assume a form that does not correspond to the ways in which the left policy makers perceive it.

If we turn to the example of the Nimpith Ramakrishna Ashram, we find that it is among the organisations that have participated in the state-level deliberations on NGO-Panchayat collaboration. However, cooperation with the government is nothing new for this organisation since its Farm Science Centre already collaborates with various departments of the state and central governments. The members of the Farm Science Centre viewed the proposal for a Joint Forum as a welcome move on the part of the Left-front government to counter malpractices at the local level. From the point of view of the government, the Ramakrishna Ashram, as a philanthropic organisation, was believed to be outside the ambit of local politics. Therefore, it was no wonder that an organisation of such repute had been called upon by the government to help revamp its panchayat institutions.

Nimpith is a part of Joynagar Assembly constituency that has long been an SUCI (Socialist Unity Centre) stronghold. The SUCI is an independent left party that is not part of the Left-front in West Bengal. However, the Futigoda Village Panchayat, of which Nimpith is a part, has an interesting political composition. Here the CPI-M has a slender plurality. Out of sixteen panchayat seats the CPI-M has six and the remaining ten seats are shared amongst the SUCI, the BJP and the TMC (Trinamool Congress). Although the Assembly seat does not belong to the CPI-M or any of the partners of the Left-front, the CPI-M has extended its influence at the village panchayat level.

Here it is interesting to note my encounter with the panchayat officials at Nimpith. Both the Futigoda Village Panchayat and the Joynagar Block Panchayat Office are in Nimpith, a couple of yards away from the Nimpith Farm Science Centre. I went to the panchayat office at 12:30 in the afternoon to find it still locked. The office building looked deserted and as if it had not been in use for quite some

time. The route to the Village Panchayat Office passed by the Block Panchayat and Development Office. On my way back I asked a person sitting outside the Block Office about the whereabouts of the panchayat officials and he replied that they were not available before one o'clock in the afternoon. Then drawing my attention to a tea shop across the road, he asked me to enquire if the office assistant was there. The person also asked me the reason for my visit. When I told him that I had come in search of documents on the villages he said, 'I doubt if your visit will be successful. For all this Nimpith *KVK* is a better place to go to. The panchayat office hardly has anything. Still you may try and see if the office assistant is available at the tea-stall. He is tall, dark and heftily built.'

The description of the office assistant was perfect and it helped me considerably in locating him in the shop. But even without this description it would not have been difficult to find who he was since when I met him at the teashop he was encircled by villagers making him sign their papers. One could surmise that he spent some time in the shop every day before he went to his office. For all these local officials the teashop becomes their temporary office where they sit, chat and often sign papers, documents and applications of the villagers. Before I could introduce myself and ask if I could talk to him he told me to meet him in his office in half an hour, but when I did so he had completely forgotten that I had met him some thirty minutes ago. He was once again engaged in transactions with his clients. When I told him the purpose of my visit he sounded dismissive, 'At the moment I am too busy and the Secretary has not come as yet. If you like you can wait for him outside. But if you are looking for research materials I suggest you go to the Nimpith *KVK*. They will be able to help you better as they have all the relevant information about the villages.'

When I discussed the problem with the members of the Farm Science Centre their reaction was pretty casual. They sounded as if they were prepared for this response and helped me with whatever materials they had at their disposal. Although such a lack of cooperation on the part of the state and panchayat institutions caused me some trouble, it gave me an opportunity to reflect on the question of collaboration, which was central to the Left-front's current policies towards NGOs and panchayats. Here in Nimpith we are presented with the case of an NGO-panchayat relation where the unwritten rules of collaboration had already existed prior to the formalisation of collaboration by the Department of Panchayat

at the state level. For the panchayat institutions or the Block Development Office, the Nimpith Farm Science Centre serves as a storehouse of information that is supposed to facilitate the working of these state bodies by providing information on what ostensibly is the domain of state administration. This provides state officials with an opportunity to get rid of unwanted clients such as myself with whom dealing is unlikely to bring them any immediate benefits.

Similar unwritten rules of collaboration apply in terms of job opportunities. The issue of NGOs as potential job providers came up in the course of the interviews I had with some CPI-M panchayat leaders at Nimpith. When I raised the issue of the state government's policy towards NGOs and panchayats, one of the CPI-M panchayat members in return asked me if that would enable the NGOs to create more job opportunities for the locals. Throughout the conversation he kept telling me about instances where he had found jobs for the locals in the organisation at Nimpith. This reminded me of my encounter with the trainee who came to the Nimpith Farm Centre in search of a job. The trainee had said how he was advised by the panchayat leaders of his village to come and look for a job at the organisation in Nimpith. Now when I reflect on that incident, in the light of the CPI-M panchayat member's fond reminiscences about how he used his power to find jobs for locals in the organisation, I cannot but conclude that over the years, informal collaboration between a voluntary agency like the organisation at Nimpith and the local panchayat institution already existed.

Revisiting the Nuclear Episode: Politicisation of the Rationalists and Its Implications for Local Politics

While in Rangabelia I managed to get hold of the pamphlet published by the Rationalist Association protesting against the proposed nuclear power plant. A shop in Gosaba market sold these pamphlets for Rs 4 (about 5 pence). While I was purchasing the pamphlet another huge poster pasted on the outer wall of the shop caught my attention. It was that of the RSP, which read: 'Join us in our fight against the proposed nuclear power plant; RSP a symbol of healthy and radiation free Sundarbans.' Seeing me reading the poster the shop owner said, 'That's the RSP's campaign against the power plant.'

Two days later, I went to the RSP office in Gosaba and found a few local leaders and panchayat representatives there, together with the head of the Rangabelia Panchayat. Pointing to the posters I told the head of Rangabelia Panchayat, 'Your posters brought me here.' He smiled and introduced me to the other party leaders whom I had not met before. I asked them, 'How is it that you all have launched a campaign against your own government's decision for a power plant?' One of the senior leaders said, 'Just because we are part of the coalition government, does it mean we should accept all the decisions of the CPI-M? In the past we launched a 'Save the Sundarbans Movement' and now it is time for us to link this anti-nuclear issue to other issues that have remained unaddressed.' 'Do you have any plans to join with the Juktibadi Sangstha in Canning protesting against the power plant?' I asked. The leader and others present there reacted very strongly saying, 'This issue is part of our wider movement, we have been addressing bigger issues like embankment, agriculture etc. So the possibility of linking it with the agenda of some *local clubs* or *associations* does not arise.'

I have mentioned in chapter five how the reports that the rationalists published in their local newspaper added a new dimension to the nuclear episode as it unfolded in the Sundarbans. Having raised the issue of the RSP-controlled land at Jharkhali in Basanti the rationalists exposed the CPI-M District Committee's intention behind the setting up of the power plant. A question that may be raised here is why control of Jharkhali was so significant from the point of view of both the CPI-M and RSP. As we know, land formation is as much a reality in the Sundarbans as land erosion. In chapter three we have seen that the residents of erosion-prone North Rangabelia narrated how the land they lost surfaced and contributed to the landmass of the island across the river. However, the residents of North Rangabelia cannot own this new land (*char*) because it is government property.

If the Left-front government had evicted the refugees of Marichjhapi island on the grounds that their settlement had violated the Forest Act, the parties constituting that government have also forcibly settled people on the newly formed land in order to create vote banks. Just as there is politics around the lost land, there is politics around new land. Both the CPI-M and the RSP are found engaged in this politics. Jharkhali is a newly-formed island in Basanti block, a stronghold of the RSP. While I was in Rangabelia, I heard about Jharkhali island. Some of the

residents of North Rangabelia contemplated moving to Jharkhali because the price of land was still affordable there and to this end they had already made contact with the RSP leaders of Basanti and Gosaba Block Panchayats. But the RSP's dominance in Jharkhali posed a threat to the local CPI-M leadership. Although the CPI-M was keen on establishing its control over Jharkhali, it could not make much headway because Basanti was the electoral base of the RSP. Political skirmishes often took place between the two over the control of their respective territories.

The possibility of a nuclear power plant in the Sundarbans provided the CPI-M with an opportunity to wrest Jharkhali from the RSP. During my conversation with the rationalists in Canning they told me that the District Committee of the CPI-M realised that this was their last chance to gain control over Jharkhali. The CPI-M would grab this land on the pretext that the newly formed land was government property and the RSP, being part of the same government, would not be able to object to the acquisition of the land for the purpose of installing a nuclear power plant. When I asked the rationalists why the RSP was reluctant to become part of their anti-nuclear campaign they said it was because the RSP had to couch their protest in generic terms even when their real intention was mainly to protect Jharkhali. Thus, if the RSP had joined the rationalist camp it would have conveyed the message that it was desperate to protect Jharkhali. The rationalists further added that the RSP's protest would continue until the next Assembly elections when they would realign with the CPI-M and conveniently forget about the power plant.

When I asked the cadres of the CPI-M party office in Gosaba they ridiculed the RSP's decision to fight against the power plant. A party leader said, 'The Assembly election is round the corner. We will see how long the RSP continues with its fight against the power plant. Just because the CPI-M has decided to bring electricity to the Sundarbans, the RSP has to oppose it. The RSP leaders fear that if the CPI-M continues with their good work then soon the RSP will lose Gosaba and Basanti constituencies to the CPI-M.' When I asked the CPI-M leader about the Juktibadi Sangstha and its campaign, the leader said in a very patronising way, 'They are a group of misdirected youth, who brought out the pamphlet in a flush of over-enthusiasm. They will soon realise their mistake.'

Although both the rationalists and the local RSP leadership were opposed to the CPI-M's District Committee's campaign for the power plant, they differed from each other in terms of their specific interests. In his celebrated work *Science in a*

Free Society, Feyerabend argues that in a free society people pursue science or knowledge without being dictated by specialists. Intellectuals in a free society are just one tradition and they solve their problems in accordance with the ideas they value and procedures they consider appropriate (Feyerabend 1978:9-10). However, Feyerabend's notion – somewhat akin to the concept of 'public interest science' proposed by Shiva and Bandyopadhyay (1986) (discussed earlier) in so far as both the approaches construct 'people' or 'public' more as a uniform and monolithic category – appears problematic in the light of our understanding of the nuclear episode in the Sundarbans. Can we think of people as belonging to one single 'tradition', especially when my analysis of the anti and pro-nuclear campaigns suggests that we increasingly encounter situations where plurality of perspectives rules out the possibility of a 'consensus'?

Conclusion

The voluntary agencies and their engagement with issues such as embankment, agriculture and nuclear power plant in the Sundarbans enable us to explore the different dimensions of local politics. However, to say this is not to suggest that these organisations themselves are divorced from local politics. In fact our understanding of voluntary activities in the Sundarbans helps us explore the organisations' own role as a constituent part of local politics engendered by the parties and panchayats. Similarly, it would be misleading to view panchayat as an independent forum standing over and above local party politics. Writers like Webster use the term 'political ossification' to suggest that party interests and leader-cadre or patron-client relations increasingly frustrate the activities of the panchayat as an independent forum designed to democratise rural power structure. The voluntary agencies participating in the Left-front government-initiated Joint Forum justified their participation on the grounds that the panchayat had lost credibility. While a blueprint for collaboration between panchayat and voluntary bodies was formulated at the policy level, the lessons gleaned from the local-level negotiations between the two suggest that it is difficult to characterise this relation as collaborative or confrontational. The negotiations that I have highlighted here and in earlier chapters suggest that the left itself is not a monolithic entity and is deeply fragmented at the local level. Whereas writers like Webster, Mallick and

others suggest that panchayat should have a career beyond party interests operating at the local level, my research suggests that the career of panchayat is constantly shaped by local party considerations. To view local party leaders' and cadres' 'vested' interests as obstacles to the independent functioning of the panchayat bodies would be to ignore the agency and perspectives of those representing the panchayat bodies at the local level.

It is in the context of this disaggregated left politics that we need to understand NGOs' role in local development. Voluntary agencies are critical of local leaderships, yet at the same time forge links with them at a variety of levels. The shifting dynamics of local politics shows how difficult it is to approach NGO-panchayat relation through the conventional rhetoric of collaboration or confrontation. I have highlighted instances of local-level negotiations – for example, the Tagore Society quarrelled with the local RSP leadership over the issue of prawn catching or Dayapur embankment and at the same time its members attended the party's pre-election meeting to consolidate the RSP's base in Gosaba or the Rationalist Association protested against the local CPI-M leadership, yet at the same time the members used their contacts at the local party level to help Gopal secure his lost place in the van-rickshaw stand (discussed in chapter five) – to suggest that participation is an extremely complex and negotiated concept. The question of who participates and in what and for what remains highly variable.

Chapter Eight

Conclusion

My aim in this chapter is to pull together the threads of arguments made in earlier chapters and to conclude the thesis with some observations on the state, voluntary agencies, people and development. I will start by presenting a brief summary of the arguments around the issues of sustainability and participation. This will be followed by an attempt to see what implications differing notions of these concepts have for the understanding of the state, civil society, development and democracy. I will then identify areas where further research is needed and conclude with some suggestions for policy changes in approaches to development of this region.

Summarising the Thesis: Sustainability and Participation

Since sustainable, participatory development has increasingly become a stated policy in developing countries, how should we treat this global trend? Is it an instrument of governance aimed at reducing diversity or are there conditions of multiple sustainabilities that make it increasingly difficult to understand development as a unitary process? The current discourse of sustainable development, as mentioned earlier in the thesis, involves a critique of both the modernisation theories of the post war period and the models of development born of their assumptions. The consequence of such a critique is the increasing incorporation of such concepts as 'tradition' and 'indigenous knowledge' into the lexicon of development.

However, such an incorporation is based on an unproblematic assumption that these concepts are potentially more fruitful than earlier ideas because they allow their holders to exist in harmony with nature (Agrawal 1995). In her book *In the Belly of the River* (1995) Baviskar questions such assumptions on the part of contemporary environmental movements in India. She argues that their criticism of top-down and destructive development is based on a claim that this critique is writ

large in the actions of those marginalized by development (Baviskar 1995:vii). In other words, the praxis of the 'indigenous people', who once lived 'in harmony' with nature, appears in itself to offer a counterview of the top-down development practices of the state. However, Baviskar asks whether today's lived reality of so-called indigenous people really allows for such a formulation (Baviskar 1995:vii). To her comments I would also add the question of whether, by celebrating 'tradition' and 'indigenous knowledge', we risk bringing the old tradition-modernity dichotomy back on to the agenda. In this regard Nanda's (1998, 2001) arguments about modernity, though significant in so far as they critique Shiva and others for valorising tradition, do not contribute much to the furtherance of anthropological knowledge. Nanda's case for the rationalisation of tradition tends to displace people from the centre stage of development, since it is dismissive of their negotiations with the institutions and structures of modernity on the grounds that an authentic modernity is yet to arrive in India. Such a view deprives people of their agency, especially when their lived realities, as seen in this thesis, relate more to questions of livelihood than those of *dharma*.

This thesis has attempted to move beyond such views towards a more situated understanding of development processes. Here an examination of the ways in which people – as state functionaries, NGO personnel, 'trainee-farmers' or 'stakeholders' – behave offers insights into an understanding of sustainability and participation at a variety of levels. By analysing the specific problems of the delta and the development endeavours of voluntary agencies', the thesis has focused on the politics of development in the West Bengal Sundarbans, still largely an under-researched area.

The local-level negotiations and mobilisations which have been presented here around the issues of embankments, agriculture and nuclear power have also to be understood in the context of the much larger sustainable development policies pursued by the state government and international aid agencies towards the Sundarbans. Paradoxically, at this broader level, the sustainable development of the region appears to require that people should be excluded from the development process, because their needs are perceived as obstacles to the successful conservation of the wildlife habitat. One consequence of this conservation drive was the eviction of the refugees from Marichjhapi island (see section I of chapter two) by the Left-front government. This action demonstrated the need for the

government to abide by the stipulations of international bodies like the WWF, which have been funding wildlife conservation in the Sundarbans. However, the Marichjhapi incident is only one aspect of the reality as it unfolds in the Sundarbans since the same left parties constituting the government have also on occasion been instrumental in settling refugees on new land or *char* (Mallick 1993) in order to turn them into vote banks (see chapters five and seven).

The threat of land erosion and flooding raises the question of how to secure a sustainable life for the people living in this deltaic region. When we look at the Irrigation Department's discourses of embankment maintenance we see that the sustainability of the Sundarbans embankments comes low down on its priority list, since land erosion elsewhere (for example the Ganga-Padma erosion discussed in chapter three) is considered to have more significance. Further, an opinion which has gained ground in the official rhetoric is that the Sundarbans embankments are unsustainable largely because people originally settled in a place primarily meant for wildlife and, more importantly, did so before the land was sufficiently elevated by the natural process of silt deposits (Mondal 1997:6). This view has powerfully shaped the orientation of bureaucrats and administrators carrying out development in the Sundarbans. Similarly, when we turn to agriculture, we see that the Sundarban Affairs Department concentrates on the development of agriculture by separating it from the question of embankments, whereas in fact agriculture and embankments are intimately related. Hence the department's programme of 'sustainable agriculture' largely consists of distributing seeds and fertilisers without addressing the more endemic problems of land loss and flooding in the region (see chapter three).

As we move beyond the rhetoric of embankment protection or sustainable agriculture to specific instances of embankment construction or agricultural services being provided by these departments, we cannot understand the sustainability debate by keeping it confined only to the policy arena. The Irrigation Department's embankment building also throws light on the activities of the department's lower-level officials and shows how the locals are involved with the department's activities at a variety of levels. Land is acquired, embankments constructed and 'sustainable' development pursued via networks of interest among the field-based engineers, contractors and political leaders (discussed in chapter three). Similarly the workings of the Growth Centre of the SAD also reveals the presence of local

party or panchayat leaders in it. The functioning of the Centre is intertwined with local party interests, with the officials being compelled to toe the line dictated by the local panchayat and party leaders (see chapter three).

While people suffer from loss of farmland, flooding, and construction of frequent and often huge ring embankments, their participation in embankment-related activities and interaction with the engineers, contractors and party and panchayat leaders makes sustainability and participation a complex issue at the local level. Paradoxically, embankments, which are a major cause of villagers' suffering, also provide them with an opportunity to earn their livelihood. Earlier in the thesis I discussed how people, in their capacities as labourers and *Dafadars*, are engaged in diverse activities to deceive the engineers and contractors and make up for their land loss. *Dafadars* also try to outbid each other in appeasing Irrigation officials and seizing any opportunities that come their way (see chapter six). The activities of *Beldars* are equally interesting. *Beldars* function as state agents, yet remain just as vulnerable to flooding and disaster as do their fellow villagers. As subordinate staff of the Irrigation department they carry out the orders of the engineers and are engaged in embankment construction activities, but at the same time they pretend not to be involved when huge embankments are constructed for the purposes of profit (see chapter six). Furthermore, while frequent embankment collapse is often attributed to *Beldars'* negligence, the fact that they are targeted for attack on such occasions does not rule out the possibility of interactions between them and others on a day to day basis (chapter three).

The wide network of relations that exists around prawn catching and collecting suggests that the islanders' own interests in water and land are diverse. In chapter six I discussed how prawn catching is viewed by the policy makers and NGOs like the Tagore Society or Farm Centre as having a negative impact on the Sundarbans' ecology. However, given the uncertainty of agriculture in the region, prawn catching provides women with an opportunity to support their families. Moreover, women, as primary catchers, are supported by a variety of buyers and sellers who are engaged with the trade at various levels. Here is another paradox: although the Left-front government's policy is to conserve this marine resource, most of the owners of the private fisheries are either party cadres or patrons of the RSP or CPI-M and conflicts between party activists over the control of these fisheries are well-known aspects of life in the region. Furthermore, instances are not

unknown of farmers breaking down embankments deliberately in order to transform lands into fisheries for prawn cultivation. This is because the frequent failure of crops due to flooding, compulsory land acquisition or salinity in the soil motivate farmers to inundate their lands so as to be able to lease them to businessmen for prawn cultivation (see chapter six). All this seems to suggest not only the peripherality of agriculture, but different and contradictory versions of sustainability at work. Thus the various survival strategies adopted by people in fact diverge considerably from the environmental 'awareness-generating' rhetoric of the voluntary agencies.

As I have shown in chapters four and five, at the heart of voluntary activities are constructions of 'ideal' or 'sustainable' societies. The Tagore's Society's shift in focus over time demonstrates the organisation's awareness of the near impossibility of pursuing sustainable agriculture in a region that is disaster prone. In contrast, the Farm Centre's reliance on scientific agriculture, together with its rhetoric of 'bare-foot scientists', suggests that agriculture is key to the sustainable development of the region. The rationalists' agenda demonstrates their faith in the role of science to free society of taboos yet, at the same time their own romanticised vision of society and ecology revealed in their campaign against the proposed nuclear plant demonstrates a critique of science and modernity. Thus, by organising public meetings, training courses, snake shows and public demonstrations these agencies encourage people's participation, invest them with what they consider a 'new vision' or 'scientific knowledge', and seek to instil a sense of common identity and purpose. Underlying this is a variety of pictures: a society of responsible islanders up against official neglect, apathy and corruption; trained farmers putting their lands and ponds to 'rational' use; enlightened villagers eschewing their 'irrational' practices, or concerned villagers protesting against the possibility of a nuclear power plant (in chapters four and five). Hence, in each of these cases, the voluntary agencies seek to establish an unproblematic correspondence between people's participation and engagement with the ideologies and practices of the organisations, and their resultant empowerment and transformation into a community of developers with a clear vision and 'scientific' outlook.

Yet people's diverse needs and disparate practices, as discussed above and earlier in chapters six and seven render such idealised notions of community or society problematic. In my earlier discussion of the villagers' participation in the

Society's meetings or Farm Centre's training workshops, I showed how different considerations lead people to participate in such NGO programmes. I highlighted different instances of participation to show how important it is to disentangle participants' specific problems or interests from the organisations' more compelling narratives of sustainability or grander visions of 'ideal societies' (see chapter six). For example, the anti-nuclear campaign of the rationalists discussed in chapters five and seven reveals the different considerations for and against the power plant which militate against the rationalists' campaign to make people more environmentally aware. While the rationalists continue to network with many science organisations in Calcutta and stir up the urban intellectuals to take action against the proposed power plant, its electorate in the Sundarbans remains largely fragmented in the face of too many campaigns running parallel to each other.

In this thesis I have also analysed the careers of the organisations beyond their constructions of ideal societies. In other words, I have attempted to separate the discourses of development from the actual practices of the members at both individual and collective levels. I have attempted to unpack the apparent organisational monolith of each NGO by focusing on the practices of its members. Through highlighting specific events or incidents (in chapters four, five and also seven) I tried to show how individual members, in pursuit of their own visions of development, negotiate their multiple subject positions or engage in complex relations with the local networks of power. Such discrepancies between rhetoric and reality arise largely because the organisations are run by locals who have a variety of interests in both the organisations and in local power structures engendered by party, panchayat and government departments. Furthermore, I suggest that, in order to access government funds, the organisations have to compromise their idealised visions of society, as in the example of the Tagore Society's sterilisation campaign (in chapter four) or the Farm Centre's tissue culture or mushroom spawn production (in chapter five).

Sustainability, Participation, State and Civil Society

As mentioned earlier, the role of voluntary agencies needs to be understood against the backdrop of left politics in West Bengal where the Left-front government has been identified as being hostile to NGOs (Tandon 1989; Webster

1995; Sen 1999; Thorlind 2000). The recent creation of the Left-front's Joint Forum (see chapters one and seven) gives an impression that the era of hostility has given way to one of collaboration between government and NGOs. However, my research has revealed negotiations in the Sundarbans between the state and NGOs at a variety of levels, which do not seem to correspond to such a periodised notion of confrontation followed by collaboration, but a more fluid situation shifting over time and according to context. The thesis has also sought to gain an insight into left politics by linking it to the ecological specificities of this particular region. In so doing, the thesis has deconstructed the state by revealing leftist disunity (the CPI-M and RSP in this case) around local issues. Such factional politics form an important broader context for understanding voluntary politics. Therefore, what I have documented throughout the thesis has been a situation of considerable complexity: state policies, local state officials' activities and their relations with party and panchayat, intra-left rivalry, NGO workers' linkages with the different factions of the left and local people's interactions with different agencies of development. All these tend to render issues such as embankments, agriculture and nuclear power politically contentious and demonstrate diverse and opposing views on sustainability and development.

The thesis has also problematised the concept of 'participation' by showing that at all levels participation is driven by self-interest, the need for funds or resources and the consolidation of power. The grand rhetoric of participatory development, upheld by the voluntary agencies, often fails to recognise how changing and multiple identities of individuals, whether as members or beneficiaries, impact upon their choices about whether and how to participate (Cleaver 2001). This is what Cooke and Kothari describe as 'the tyranny of participation' (Cooke and Kothari 2001). In other words, individuals construct participation and sustainability in their own terms and their individual perceptions may not always correspond to the ways in which the organisation glorifies and idealises such concepts. Participation does not necessarily mean subscribing to such higher ideals of development, but rather considerations of survival and self-interest.

In the process of deconstructing such monolithic constructions as the state, NGOs and 'stakeholders' or 'the people', I found it necessary to move away from a dualistic view of the state and civil society. Rather I argued for a position that carefully interrogates the current widely-held view of civil society as a panacea for

all the problems of development. In so doing I criticised the perspective developed by Shiva and others, where building civil society appears to be equated with reinventing tradition (Alvares 1988; Mies and Shiva 1993; Shiva 1986, 1988, 1993; Nandy 1988; Visvanthan 1988). As I have shown, it is difficult to sustain this correlation in the light of people's lived practices.

My empirical evidence also makes it difficult to subscribe to Putnam's view of civic community as a site for generating cooperation, trust, honesty and integrity (Putnam 1993, 2000). The notion of civic community developed in Putnam's work has been influential in informing the treatment of civil society as an unproblematic entity in NGO studies; it also renders the concept a potent policy tool in the hands of international development agencies (Lewis 2002). Yet the various corruption stories narrated in the thesis reveal that this too is an important issue in the understanding of development. They show how difficult it is to build trust, honesty and cooperation in a place where distrust prevails and interests constantly diverge or converge in a shifting pattern. The discourse of corruption also throws light on how structures of power and patronage operate at the local level and how they frame people's decisions on how they deal with each other, and with the state and NGOs at various levels. It is difficult to see how negotiations based primarily on instrumental considerations can provide a basis for the emergence of a non-instrumental civic community or civil society built on an ever-increasing stock of social capital.

Furthermore, the corruption stories are significant in that they are also indicative of the expanded reach of the state (Parry 2000), which is available to people in 'its sordid everyday structures' (Fuller and Harriss 2001:25). In the case of West Bengal these structures are even more entrenched, for the state, as seen in the thesis, is manifested not simply in its decentralised departmental bureaucracy, but in its deep-rooted panchayat and party structures. The working of these elaborate structures, where the party has penetrated virtually every social sphere or public institution (Chakrabarti 2001) and where local leaders serve as intermediaries between the state and the villagers (Ruud 2001), makes it difficult, if not impossible, to divorce the realm of the 'social' from that of the 'political' and to understand 'social' or civil societal relations as being devoid of considerations of power, a point emphasised by commentators like Fine (2001) and Harriss (2002) in their critiques of Putnam. From our account of the voluntary activities it is also

fairly clear that diverse interests – government, panchayat and party – do creep into organisations seen as voluntary or civil societal. The intra-left rivalry or disunity around local issues, which fractures a monolithic view of left politics, also enables an understanding of how the voluntary agencies position themselves at the local level. All this raises problems with Putnam's notion of social capital and with the view of civil society as a 'good thing' (van Rooy 1998:30) or as the repository of all that is good (Chakrabarti 2001:51).

Corruption, development and democracy

Hierarchical relations and exploitative deals are antithetical to democracy, if we are to understand 'development' as a process of building democracy at the grassroots. What does the widening experience of corruption discussed in this thesis signify? Both for methodological and ethical reasons, I have dealt with this issue largely as a discourse, representing it as a blame game in which everyone accuses everyone else. I focused on such corruption stories because they helped me gain an insight into the workings of the state and unravel power structures at the local level. However, my treatment of corruption as a discourse and a site for understanding development initiatives at the local level was obviously not meant to lend support to such practices or to minimise their significance as a genuine problem. Neither did I aim to view corruption as a prospective site for realising 'cultural relativist fantasies' (Parry 2000). The power and patronage networks that corruption reveals are certainly not beneficial for the poor. I found that even when the villagers did have access to some immediate or short-term benefits, the relations they had to enter into with those having power were hierarchical or the deals they struck remained exploitative. We have also seen that the sporadic instances of resistance were hardly significant in altering the balance of power in favour of the poor or oppressed.

To approach corruption in a particular way is not to suggest that it does not have a negative effect on state-society relations. In his accounts of corruption based on research in Bhilai Steel Plant in India, Parry (2000) argues that all-pervasive corruption maintains the power and expanded reach of the state, but destroys the process of democratisation that links the state to the larger society. Parry's observations appear significant when we see that corruption in the form of vested

interests and lack of accountability is increasingly an integral part of a top-down development machinery. No matter how decentralised the state machinery is or how deep down its structures extend into the society the growing decentralisation process is also marked by a lack of accountability on the part of the state functionaries who are ostensibly doing development for the people. This is revealed as much in the activities of the local-level functionaries as in the dictates of the higher-level officials and politicians. The proposal for a nuclear power plant, the construction of a ring embankment or the running of a sterilisation clinic are all expressions of vested interests at work. At the level of policy the difference may be one of scale and degree, but in all the cases it is the common people who suffer[1].

Corruption is certainly an obstacle to democracy, but it is difficult to see how solution lies in social capital. In other words, building democracy at the 'grassroots' level cannot simply be a civil societal process. This is primarily for two reasons. Firstly, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, my case studies reveal that statist and quasi-statist structures are minutely interwoven with civil societal structures. In this context it is important to mention the research undertaken by Chakrabarti in Calcutta (Chakrabarti 2001). On the basis of work in the slums in two municipal wards, where the CPI-M, the dominant partner of the left regime, is found to play a pivotal role in fostering and shaping the orientation of the so-called civil society organisations existing at the ward level, Chakrabarti has questioned the currently dominant representation of civil society as autonomous and opposed to the state (Chakrabarti 2001:312). The attraction of the concept of social capital lies in its ability to have taken the state off the agenda and put anything other than it in the role of social provider usually at a local level (Fine 2001:196-7). But it is difficult to see how concepts such as civic community or social capital render the state inconsequential when people's interaction with the state on an everyday basis reveals that it is still a significant factor in local development.

Secondly, building democracy can itself be viewed as a political act. If patronage networks and hierarchical and exploitative relations resulting from such networks are antithetical to democracy, extending democracy to the 'grassroots' means confronting those asymmetrical structures of power. This is as much a

---

[1] The BJP government's nuclear tests at Pokhran in Rajasthan testified to the country's nuclear preparedness, but what went unconsidered was the fact that the impact of the nuclear explosion was such that the houses in the vicinity of Pokhran showed signs of irreparable and permanent damage.

responsibility of the NGOs as it is of the state. Yet the dominant paradigm within which NGOs work defines them primarily as service providers (Silliman 1999) working towards socially safe agendas, and refraining from getting involved in politically contentious issues (Jackson 1993a:1953). Herein lies an important paradox: NGOs remain service providers and yet talk about the problem of empowerment; however, empowering people is not simply about providing them with services, but also addressing the obstacles that stand in the way of their empowerment. Democracy should mean rights and justice for the deprived and this involves the use of power for progressive social change (Ehrenberg 2002). Here once again we are reminded of the charges Harriss (2002) has levelled against Putnam for depoliticising the ideology and practice of development. One of the aims of Harriss' critique is to reassert the primacy of the political in the progressive social transformation (Harriss 2002:112) and to reverse the current trend towards emptying the 'social' of all its political content.

Future Research and Suggestions for Policy Changes

In the light of the above discussion I would like to make some suggestions to generate some rethinking around the issues at stake in Sundarbans development. Before I turn to that it is necessary that I consider areas where further research is needed. As already mentioned, the West Bengal Sundarbans is an under-researched area and the present study has looked at some of the issues surrounding the inhabited islands of the region. A contentious issue at stake in Sundarbans development, on which the thesis has touched but not dwelt at length, is that of the Sundarbans forests and livelihood around the forests. Further research on this topic seems necessary in view of the high premium being placed on forests and wildlife conservation. It is equally important to uncover islanders' perceptions about their relation to the forests and contrast these with conservation policies of the state[2].

Secondly, there is the question of further work on the various voluntary organisations and NGOs in the Sundarbans. In the introductory chapter I attempted to provide a synoptic view of the nature and complexity of the organisational fabric

---

[2] Here mention should be made of the doctoral research being pursued by Annu Jalais at the London School of Economics. Jalais' research concerns the Sundarbans forests reflecting on the ways people conceive forests, tiger and the relation they have with each other.

of this region with a brief description of local clubs, education centres, cooperative credit societies etc. This served as a background against which I introduced my three case studies that reflected in some way or the other the complex organisational fabric of the Sundarbans. However, the thesis could not consider these diverse local organisations in detail and further research into localised small-sized organisations such as clubs, education centres and cooperative credit societies could well provide insight into the workings of local political or statist bodies.

Thirdly, there is the question of caste and village studies. The present thesis, as mentioned earlier, set out to be a regional rather than a village study and therefore looked at some of the issues central to the understanding of the region. The Sundarbans islands are primarily regarded as a relatively homogeneous 'backward caste' region. However, in the course of describing Rangabelia, one of my field sites, I had the occasion to discuss how caste identities crystallised in a particular village (see second chapter). Future village-based research may reveal more of the ways in which caste plays a role in constituting relations around land and forests.

Fourthly, the thesis has considered gender issues and raised some of the problems women face in the Sundarbans such as those around prawn catching, mushroom production, women's self-help groups and sterilisation. All of these issues revealed that women have specific problems and that they are disadvantaged both by the policies and practices of the state officials as well as the power relations existing within households. However, I also pointed out how the identity of a male researcher poses difficulties in understanding women's issues in greater depth. More research, probably by a female researcher, is needed to identify more clearly the obstacles that inhibit women's empowerment and access to sustainable livelihoods.

On the basis of the present research I would like to put forward some tentative proposals for policy changes with respect to some of the issues explored in the thesis. First of all, at the epistemological level a democratic restructuring of what is meant by Sundarbans development seems necessary. People's needs and desires are often found subsumed to the dominant needs of Sundarbans conservation and it is difficult to salvage a notion of people's Sundarbans from the more hegemonic representation of the delta as a wildlife sanctuary. For example, the Rationalist Association had to invoke the image of a troubled tiger to convince

people of the menace posed by a nuclear power plant in its campaign against people's displacement. Similarly, the Tagore Society's stand against prawn seed catching also reflected an anxiety to conserve the fast depleting marine resource of the delta. It is thus necessary to disentangle people's own needs and priorities from the grand narratives of Sundarbans conservation and to allow the former to inform the policies and initiatives of both government and non-governmental agencies.

Secondly, compensation against land lost due to the building of multiple embankments is one of the issues that voluntary agencies need to address. We know that the Sundarbans is a disaster-prone area and that ensuring sustainable embankments and life for the people is deeply problematic. But compensating villagers against their lost land is surely one of the ways in which justice could be done to those who had lost their legally owned lands and for whom cash compensation was not forthcoming due to lengthy bureaucratic procedures. Closely linked to the question of compensation is that of the settlement of villagers who are no longer safe in their present settlement. Earlier we saw that the villagers of North Rangabelia, living on a narrow stretch of land, narrated how the land they lost contributed to the landmass of the island across the river Vidya. However, the Tagore Society is silent on the issue of settlement of these people on new land across the river. This silence is largely due to the fact that any further settlement or resettlement of people in the Sundarbans is considered at odds with the government's conservation policy. Yet, as we have seen, left parties had settled migrants on new lands in order to create vote banks. The Tagore Society's public meetings on the islands would be a lot more meaningful if the organisation pursued the issue of compensation and relocation of people to new land as some sort of an interim measure until the victims get their cash compensation. Of course this will not be an easy task, as this would mean confronting the bureaucratic structures of power. In this regard the Society could cultivate its long-standing relations with the local RSP leaders and panchayat members. The Society should try and convince the leaders about the need for pursuing the compensation files of the villagers and also the question of relocation of people to new land.

It should also be possible for the Save the Sundarbans campaigns of the Society and the RSP, though dissimilar in many respects, to converge around the issue of compensation. This would provide the Society with an opportunity to prove its credibility to the villagers and for the RSP to ensure justice to its electorate.

Organisations like the Rationalist Association, which also have some clout in local CPI-M circles in Canning, could undertake similar such initiatives. All this means a much more politically active role for NGOs, and for them to put into practice their frequently repeated rhetoric about empowerment and entitlement.

Instead of looking at NGO-panchayat relations from the top-down, the Left-front ideologues intending to set up a Joint Forum should take into account the locational significance of each panchayat and NGOs and explore the possibility of collaboration around specific issues. This requires comprehensive knowledge of the problems of the region as well as the specific configuration of the left there. Without such knowledge the success of the Joint Forum is likely to remain wishful thinking on the part of the left leaders.

Thirdly, can the problem of agriculture be treated in isolation from the more endemic ones of disaster, flooding and soil erosion? A consideration of the Farm Centre's sophisticated experiments and innovations demonstrate the organisation's reliance on managerial solutions to problems that are deeply existential. The Centre's aquaculture programme, that aims to encourage people's dependence on their own individual ponds, is fraught with problems given that many families do not own individual ponds and that even when they do these are often requisitioned for the purpose of building ring embankments. The problem is even more acute when we turn to prawn seed catching. The Farm Centre's programmes and the Tagore Society's stand against prawn catching reflect the government's interest in conserving biodiversity. Yet prawn catching needs to be looked at from women's point of view. Perhaps the voluntary agencies should encourage women to form groups either to engage in new income-generating projects or at least to set aside a part of their income from the sale of prawn seeds in order to set up a collective fund for their future safety and security.

Moreover, it is also necessary that the left parties should look after the interests of women prawn catchers. We know that both the CPI-M and RSP have their respective mass front organisations such as *Kissan Sabha* which are supposed to represent the interests of small and marginal farmers. But these mass front organisations should also be made more responsive to the interests of the women prawn catchers. Prawn catchers' groups are yet to appear as a significant mass front organisation of the left parties and women continue to fish largely on their own with little bargaining power vis-à-vis secondary collectors or owners of private fisheries.

We have seen that the government views prawn catching in negative terms, while the left parties operating at the local level provide tacit support for its continuance. So long as the private fisheries and the secondary prawn catchers' networks continue to flourish in the region, women will find buyers for their catches. In the absence of alternative and sustainable forms of livelihood prawn catching will remain a source of living for women and their families. Women catch these seeds, but often sell them at a price dictated by the fishery owners or secondary catchers. The situation of women might improve if their interests as primary catchers could be integrated into the agenda of the *Kissan Sabhas*. Prawn catching exposes women to the risk of attack by sharks and crocodiles. In this regard efforts from local panchayats towards compensating women in the event of mishaps might give women a sense of security especially in cases where women catchers are the sole earners for their families. The CPI-M's women organisations at the district and block levels could also play a significant role in representing the interests of the primary catchers.

Another issue I discussed during the course of the thesis is women's self-employment and income-generating activities. We have seen that in this domain the voluntary agencies have performed their role mainly as service providers with little attention to the post-training period when women struggle to market their newly acquired expertise. The Farm Centre's mushroom spawn production and the Tagore Society's training sessions in batik or knitting are examples of the problems associated with such empowerment programmes.

Empowerment is indeed a gender issue (Rowlands 1997) and nowhere was this more clearly evident than in the Society's sterilisation programme. The clinic shows that NGOs concerned with women's social and economic empowerment cannot remain oblivious to their health needs. The clinic is indicative of how power structures both within and outside the household work to the disadvantage of women. The clinic also points to the limitations of NGOs' function as mere service providers offering technical solutions to what are basically political issues (Gujit and Shah 1998). In trying to provide services to women the clinic contributed to their further victimisation. NGOs need government funds, but that does not mean that agencies should comply with all the prescriptions of the state officials especially when such compliance is morally questionable. NGOs like the Tagore

Society or Ramakrishna Ashram which have established health centres should adopt a more comprehensive approach to family planning.

NGOs concerned with empowerment should be able to perceive their role as more than mere service providers. There should be increasing gender accountability on the part of the NGO workers making them not only responsive to women's needs, but to gender inequalities (Mayoux 1998:180). Organisations like the Tagore Society or the Ramakrishna Ashram have their respective women units. However, gender awareness is not about 'adding women' but approaching women's problems through a gender lens (Jackson 1998:43). The organisations should not view their function as one of simply organising successful training programmes for women's self employment. Any attempt to improve women's condition requires a change in the position they occupy within the household. This means confronting structures of power at the household level and a more situated understanding women' needs and priorities.

What I have considered above are a few suggestions, by no means exhaustive or conclusive, for changes in approaches to Sundarbans development. Some initiatives along the above lines may demonstrate a clearer recognition on the part of the state and NGOs that people will continue living in the Sundarbans and their needs cannot remain subservient to those of wildlife.

Bibliography and Sources

Abrams, P. (1988) 'Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 1 (1): 58-89.

Aerni, P. and Rieder, P. (2000) 'Acceptance of Modern Biotechnology in Developing Countries: A Case Study of the Phillippines', *International Journal of Biotechnology*, 2 (1/2/3): 115-31.

Agarwal, A. (1994) 'An Indian Environmentalist's Credo' in R. Guha (ed.) *Social Ecology*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Agarwal, B (1986) 'Women, Poverty and Agricultural Growth in India' *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 13 (4) 165-220

_____(1988) 'Neither Sustenance Nor Sustainability: Agricultural Strategies, Ecological Degradation and Indian Women in Poverty', in B. Agarwal (ed.) *Structures of Patriarchy: The State, the Community and the Household*, London: Zed Books.

_____(1989) 'Women, Land and Ideology in India' in H. Afshar and B. Agarwal (eds.) *Women, Poverty and Ideology in Asia: Contradictory Pressures, Uneasy Resolutions*, London: Macmillan.

_____(1992) 'The Gender and Environment Debate: Lessons From India' *Feminist Studies*, 18 (1) 119-58.

_____(1994) *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Agrawal, A. (1995) 'Dismantling the Divide Between Indigenous and Scientific Knowledge', *Development and Change*, 26: 413-39.

_____ (1999) 'Community-in-Conservation: Tracing the Outlines of an Enchanting Concept' in R. Jeffery and N. Sundar (eds.) *A New Moral Economy for India's Forests?: Discourses of Community and Participation*, New Delhi London: Sage Publications.

Akeroyd, V. (1984) 'Ethics in Relation to Informants: the Profession and Governments' in R. F. Ellen (ed.) *Ethnographic Research: A Guide to General Conduct*, London SanDiego: Academic Press.

Alvares, C. (1988) 'Science, Colonialism and Violence: A Luddite View', in A. Nandy (ed.) *Science, Hegemony and Violence: A Requiem for Modernity*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Ascoli, F.D. (1921) *A Revenue History of the Sundarbans: From 1870 to 1920*, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot.

Bandyopadhyay, D. (1989) *Budget Speech of the Minister-in-charge of Irrigation and Waterways Department 1989-90*, Calcutta: Government of West Bengal.

_____ (1990) *Budget Speech of the Minister-in-charge of Irrigation and Waterways Department 1990-91*, Calcutta: Government of West Bengal.

_____ (1993) *Budget Speech of the Minister-in-charge of Irrigation and Waterways Department 1993-94*, Calcutta: Government of West Bengal.

_____ (1994) *Budget Speech of the Minister-in-charge of Irrigation and Waterways Department 1994-95*, Calcutta: Government of West Bengal.

_____ (1998) *Budget Speech of the Minister-in-charge of Irrigation and Waterways Department 1998-99*, Calcutta: Government of West Bengal.

_____ (1999) *Budget Speech of the Minister-in-charge of Irrigation and Waterways Department 1999-2000*, Calcutta: Government of West Bengal.

_____ (2000) *Budget Speech of the Minister-in-charge of Irrigation and Waterways Department 2000-2001*, Calcutta: Government of West Bengal.

Banerjee, A. (1998) *Environment, Population and Human Settlements in Sundarban Delta*, New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.

Barnes, J. A. (1979) *Who Should Know What?: Social Science, Privacy and Ethics*, Middlesex New York: Penguin Books.

Batliwala, S. (1994) 'The Meaning of Women's Empowerment: New Concepts from Action' in G. Sen *et al.* (eds.) *Population Policies Reconsidered*, Cambridge: Havard University Press.

Bauman, Z. (1992) *Intimations of Postmodernity*, London: Routledge.

Baviskar, A. (1995) *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

_____ (1999) 'Participating in Ecodevelopment: The Case of the Great Himalayan National Park' in R. Jeffery and N. Sundar (eds.) *A New Moral Economy for India's Forests?: Discourses of Community and Participation*, New Delhi London: Sage Publications.

Bayly, C. A. (1996) *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bayly, S. (1999) *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Beneï, V. (2001) 'Teaching Nationalism in Maharashtra Schools' in C. J. Fuller and V. Beneï (eds.) *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India*, London: Hurst and Company.

Bhattacharyya, D. (1999) 'Politics of Middleness: The Changing Character of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in Rural West Bengal (1977-90)' in B. Rogaly, B. Harris-White and S. Bose (eds.) *Sonar Bangla?: Agricutltural Growth and Agrarian Change in West Bengal and Bangladesh*, New Delhi London: Sage Publications.

Breman, J. (2000) '"I am the Government Labour Officer...': State Protection for the Rural Proletariat of South Gujarat" in Z. Hassan (ed.) *Politics and the State in India*, Delhi: Sage Publications.

Brow, J. (1988) 'In Pursuit of Hegemony: Representations of Authority and Justice in a Sri Lankan Village', *American Ethnologist*, 15 (2): 311-27.

Caplan, L. (1971) "Cash and Kind: Two Media of 'Bribery' in Nepal" in *Man* 6 (2) pp 266-278.

Caplan, P. (in Press) 'Anthropology and Ethics: the Ethics of Anthropology', in P. Caplan (ed.) *Anthropology and Ethics: Debates and Dilemmas*, London New York: Routldge.

Carroll, T. F. (1992) *Intermediate NGOs: The Supporting Links in Grassroots Development*, West Hartford Connecticut: Kumarian Press.

Cernea, M. M. (1992) *The Building Blocks of Participation: Testing Bottom-up Planning*, World Bank Discussion Paper 166, Washington DC: World Bank.

Chabal, P. and Daloz J. P. (1999) *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*, Oxford Bloomington and Indianapolis: The International African Institute with James Curry and Indiana University Press.

Chakrabarti, I. (2001) *Local Governance in Calcutta: Bureaucratic Performance and Health Care Delivery* PhD thesis, London: University of London.

Chambers, R. (1987) *Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: A Strategy for People, Environment and Development*, An Overview Paper for Only One Earth: Conference on Sustainable Development, organised by The International Institute for Environment and Development, London, Regent's College, 28-30 April 1987, Sussex: Institute of Development Studies

_____ (1994a) 'The Origins and Practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal', *World Development*, 22 (7): 953-69.

_____ (1994b) 'Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA): An Analysis of Experience', *World Development*, 22 (9): 1253-68.

_____ (1994c) 'Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA): Challenges, Potentials and Paradigm', *World Development*, 22 (10): 1437-54.

_____ (1995) 'Paradigm Shifts and the Practice of Participatory Research and Development' in N. Nelson and S. Wright (eds.) *Power and Participatory Development: Theory and Practice*, London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

_____ (1997) *Whose Reality Counts?: Putting the First Last*, London: ITDG Publishing.

Chandhoke, N. (1995) *State and Civil Society: Explorations in Political Theory*, New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Chattapadhyay, S. B. (1981) 'Problems and Prospects of Economic Development' in A. K. Das, S. Mukherji and M. K. Chowdhuri (eds.) *A Focus on Sundarban*, Calcutta: Editions Indian.

Chattapadhyay, T. K. (1981) 'Dakshinrai Cult' in A. K. Das, S. Mukherji and M. K. Chowdhuri (eds.) *A Focus on Sundarban*, Calcutta: Editions Indian.

Chatterjee, N. (1992) *Midnight's Unwanted Children: East Bengali Refugees and the Politics of Rehabilitation*, Ph.D. thesis, USA: Brown University.

Chatterjee, P. (1982) 'Agrarian Structure in Pre-Partitioned Bengal' in *Perspectives in Social Sciences: Three Studies on the Agrarian Structure in Bengal 1850-1947*, Calcutta: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences.

_____ (1995) *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

_____ (1998) 'Community in the East', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33 (6): 277-82.

Chattopadhyay, H. (1999) *The Mystery of the Sundarbans*, Calcutta: A. Mukherjee and Co. Private Limited.

Chattopadhyay, S. S. (1994) 'Foreword', *Annual Administration Report 1981-82 to 1991-92*, Department of Sundarban Affairs, Calcutta: Government of West Bengal.

Chaudhuri, D. (1981) 'Folk Religion' in A. K. Das, S. Mukherji and M. K. Chowdhuri (eds.) *A Focus on Sundarban*, Calcutta: Editions Indian.

Chowdhuri, M. K. (1981) 'Economic Profile' in A. K. Das, S. Mukherji and M. K. Chowdhuri (eds.) *A Focus on Sundarban*, Calcutta: Editions Indian.

Chowdhury, B. (1989) *Budget Speech of the Minister-in-charge of the Department of Panchayat and Rural Development, 1989-90*, Calcutta: Government of West Bengal.

Clark, J. D. (1991) *Democratizing Development*, London: Earthscan Publications.

_____ (1996) 'The State, Popular Participation, and the Voluntary Sector' in J. Rietbergen-McCracken (ed.) *Participation in Practice: The Experience of the*

World Bank and Other Stakeholders, World Bank Discussion Paper No. 333, Washington D.C.: The World Bank.

Cleaver, F. (2001) 'Institutions, Agency and Limitations of Participatory Approaches to Development' in B. Cooke and U. Kothari (eds.) *Participation: The New Tyranny?*, London: Zed Books.

Clifford, J. and Marcus, G. E. (1986) *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley London: University of California Press.

Clifford, J. (1988) *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Cohn, B. S. (1997) *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, Delhi: Oxford university Press.

Cooke, B. and Kothari, U. (2001) 'The Case for Participation as Tyranny' in B. Cooke and U. Kothari (eds.) *Participation: The New Tyranny?*, New York London: Zed Books.

Croissant, J. and Restivo, S. (1995) 'Science, Social Problems, and Progressive Thought: Essays on the Tyranny of Science' in S. L. Star (ed.) *Ecologies of Knowledge*, Albany: State University of New York Press.

Crook, N. (1996) (ed.) *The Transmission of Knowledge in South Asia: Essays on Education, Religion, History, and Politics*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Das, A. K. (1981) 'Trend of Population' in A. K. Das, S. Mukherji and M. K. Chowdhuri (eds.) *A Focus on Sundarban*, Calcutta: Editions Indian.

Dasgupta, P. (1986) *Gandhi-Gobeshona* (Research on Gandhi), Calcutta: Nabapatra Prokashan.

_____ (1999) *Rachanasangraha* (Collection of Essays), Calcutta: Nabapatra Prokashan.

De, R. (1990) *The Sundarbans*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Directorate of Forests (undated) *Sundarban Biosphere Reserve*, Calcutta: Government of West Bengal.

Dirks, N. B. (1997) 'Foreword' in B. S. Cohn *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British India*, Delhi: Oxford university Press.

_____(2001) *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Durkheim, E. (1933 [1893]) (translated by G. Simpson) *The Division of Labour in Society*, London: Collier Macmillan Publishers.

Dutta, P. (1997) 'Panchayats in West Bengal', *West Bengal*, 39 (12): 15-22.

Eaton, R. (1987) 'Human Settlements and Colonization in the Sundarbans 1200-1750', *The Commons in South Asia: Societal Pressures and The Environmental Integrity in the Sundarbans*, A workshop held at Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, November 20-21 1987,
(website: www.smartoffice.com/Tiger/Eaton.html).

Ehrenberg, J. (2002) 'Equality, Democracy, and Community from Tocqueville to Putnam' in S. L. McLean, D. A. Schultz and M. B. Steger (eds.) *Social Capital: Critical Perspectives on Community and "Bowling Alone"*, New York: New York University Press.

Ellison, N. (1997) 'Towards a New Social Politics: Citizenship and Reflexivity in Late Modernity', *Sociology* 31 (4): 697-717.

Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., Shaw, L. L. (1995) *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Escobar, A. (1991) 'Anthropology and The Development Encounter: The Making and Marketing of Development Anthropology', *American Ethnologist*, 18 (4): 658-82.

_____ (1995) *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Farrington, J. and Lewis, D.J. with Satish, S. and Miclat-Teves, A. (eds.) (1993) *Non-governmental Organisations and the State in Asia: Rethinking Roles in Sustainable Agricultural Development*, London: Routledge.

Ferguson, J. (1990) *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development," Depoliticisation and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Feyerabend, P. (1978) *Science in a Free Society*, London: NLB.

Fine, B (2001) *Social Capital Versus Social Theory: Political Economy and Social Science at the Turn of the Millennium*, London: Routledge.

Franda, M. (1983) *Voluntary Associations and Local Government in India: The Janata Phase*, New Delhi: Young Asia Publications.

Frank, A. G. (1969) *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical Studies of Chile and Brazil*, New York: Monthly Review Press.

Franklin, S. (1995) 'Science as Culture, Cultures of Science', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24: 163-84.

Fried, A. (2002) 'The Strange Disappearance of Alexis de Tocqueville in Putnam's Analysis of Social Capital' in S. L. McLean, D. A. Schultz and M. B. Steger (eds.)

Social Capital: Critical Perspectives on Community and "Bowling Alone", New York: New York University Press.

Friedman, J. (1992) *Empowerment: The Politics of Alternative Development*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Gadgil, M. and Guha, R. (1992) *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Gardner, K. and Lewis, D. (1996) *Anthropology, Development and the Post-modern Challenge*, London: Pluto Press.

Gardner, K. (1999) 'Location and Relocation: Home, "the Field" and Anthropological Ethics (Sylhet, Bangladesh)', in C. W. Watson (ed.) *Being There: Fieldwork in Anthropology*, London: Pluto Press.

Ghosh, K. (1999) 'A Market for Aboriginality: Primitivism and Race Classification in the Indentured Labour Market of Colonial India' in G. Bhadra, G. Prakash and S. Tharu (eds.) *Subaltern Studies Vol. 10*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Gillison, G. (1980) 'Images of Nature in Gimi Thought' in C. P. MacCormack and M. Strathern (eds.) *Nature, Culture and Gender*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gledhill, J. (forthcoming) 'Corruption as the Mirror of the State in Latin America' in I. Prado (ed.) *Corruption: Between Morality and Law*, Oxford: Berghahn.

Government of West Bengal (1986) *State Plan Proposal Vol. 1 1987-88*, Calcutta: Development and Planning Department.

_____(1987) *State Plan Proposal Vol. 1 1988-89*, Calcutta: Development and Planning Department.

_____ (1988) *State Plan Proposal Vol. 1 1989-90*, Calcutta: Development and Planning Department.

Greenough, P. (1998) 'Hunter's Drowned Land: An Environmental Fantasy of the Victorian Sunderbans' in R. H. Grove, V. Damodaran, and S. Sangwan (eds.) *Nature and the Orient: The Environmental History of South and Southeast Asia*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Gross, P. R. (1996) 'Introduction' in P. R. Gross, N. Levitt and M. W. Lewis (eds.) *The Flight From Science and Reason*, New York: The New York Academy of Sciences.

Grout, A (1996) 'Possessing the Earth: Geological Collections, Information and Education in India, 1800-1850' in N. Crook (ed.) *The Transmission of Knowledge in South Asia: Essays on Education, Religion, History, and Politics*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Guha, B. and Biswas, A. (1991) 'Lessons From a Study of Some Riverbank Settlements in Sundarban, West Bengal', *Transactions of the Institute of Indian Geographers*, 13 (1): 53-64.

Guha, R. (1990) 'An Early Environmental Debate: The Making of the 1878 Forest Act', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 27 (1): 65-84.

_____ (1994) 'Colonialism and Conflict in the Himalayan Forest' in R. Guha (ed.) *Social Ecology*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Gujit, I. and Shah, M. K. (1998) 'Waking up to Power, Conflict and Process' in I. Gujit and M. K. Shah (ed.) *The Myth of Community: Gender Issues in Participatory Development*, London: IT Publications.

Gupta, A. (1995) 'Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State', *American Ethnologist* 22 (2): 375-402.

_____ (1998) *Postcolonial Developments: Agriculture in the Making of Modern India*, Durham London: Duke University Press.

Gupta, A. and Ferguson, J. (1997) 'Discipline and Practice: "The Field" as Site, Method, and Location in Anthropology' in A. Gupta and J. Ferguson (eds.) *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Gupta, D. (1991) 'Continuous Hierarchies and Discrete Castes' in D. Gupta (ed) *Social Stratification*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

_____ (1997) 'Civil Society in the Indian Context: Letting the State off the Hook', *Contemporary Sociology*, 26 (3): 305-7.

_____ (1997) *Rivalry and Brotherhood: Politics in the Life of Farmers in Northern India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Habermas, J. (translated by Thomas McCarthy) (1983) *The Theory of Communicative Action: The Critique of Functionalist Reason Vol. 2*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, P. (1983) *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*, London: Routledge.

Handelman, D. (1981) 'Introduction: The Idea of Bureaucratic Organization', *Social Analysis* 9: 5-23.

Hansen, T. B. (2001) 'Governance and Myths of State in Mumbai' in C. J. Fuller and V. Beneï (eds.) *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India*, London: Hurst and Company.

Harriss, J. (2002) *Depoliticizing Development: The World Bank and Social Capital*, Lonodn: Anthem Press.

Harris, M. (1988) 'On Charities and NGOs' in R. Poulton and M. Harris (eds.) *Putting People First: Voluntary Organisations and Third World Development*, London: Macmillan.

Haynes, D. and Prakash, G. (1991) (eds.) *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*, Berkeley Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Hekman, S. J. (1990) *Gender and Knowledge: Elements of a Postmodern Feminism*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Henkel, H. and Stirrat, R. (2001) 'Participation as Spiritual Duty; Empowerment as Secular Subjection' in B. Cooke and U. Kothari (eds.) *Participation: The New Tyranny?*, New York London: Zed Books.

Herring, R. (1987) 'The Commons and Its "Tragedy" as Analytical Framework: Understanding Environmental Degradation in South Asia', *The Commons in South Asia: Societal Pressures and The Environmental Integrity in the Sundarbans*, a workshop held at Smithsonian Institution, Washington D. C. November 20-21 1987 (website: www.smartoffice.com/Tiger/Herring.html).

Hobart, M. (1993) 'Introduction: The Growth of Ignorance?' in M. Hobart (ed.) *An Anthropological Critique of Development: The Growth of Ignorance*, London: Routledge.

Hollen, V. C. (1998) 'Moving Targets: Routine IUD Insertions in Maternity Wards in Tamil Nadu, India' *Reproductive Health Matters*, 6 (11), 98-106.

Holloway, R. (1989) 'Afterword Where to Next?: Government, NGOs, and Development Practitioners' in R. Holloway (ed.) *Doing Development: Government, NGOs and the Rural Poor in Asia*, London: Earthscan.

Hulme, D. and Edwards, M.D. (1992) 'Scaling-up the Development Impact of NGOs: Concepts and Experiences' in D. Hulme and M. D. Edwards(eds.) *Making a Difference? NGOs and Development in a Changing World*, London: Earthscan.

Hunter, W. W. (1998 [1875]) *A Statistical Account of Bengal: Districts of 24 Parganas and Sundarbans*, Calcutta: West Bengal District Gazetteers.

Irrigation and Waterways Department (undated) *Sundarbaner Bhumikshoy o Nadibund Rakshanabekshane Sech o Jalapath Bibhagh* (The Irrigation and Waterways Department in Matters Concerning Land Erosion and Maintenance of Embankments), Calcutta: Government of West Bengal.

Ito, S. (2002) 'From Rice to Prawns: Economic Transformation and Agrarian Structure in Rural Bangladesh', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 29 (2): 47-70.

Iyengar, K. and Iyengar, S. D. (2000) 'The Copper-T 380A IUD: A Ten-Year Alternative to Female Sterilisation in India' *Reproductive Health Matters*, 8 (16), 125-33.

Jackson, C. (1993a) 'Doing What Comes Naturally?: Women and Environment in Development' *World Development*, 21 (12) 1947-63.

_____ (1993b) "Women/Nature or Gender/History?: A Critique of Ecofeminist 'Development'" *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 20 (3) 389-419.

_____ (1993c) 'Environmentalisms and Gender Interests in the Third World' *Development and Change*, 24 (4) 649-77.

_____ (1998) 'Rescuing Gender From the Poverty Trap' in C. Jackson and R. Pearson (eds.) *Feminist Visions of Development: Gender, Analysis and Policy*, London: Routledge.

Jalil, A. F. M. A. (2000) *Sundarbaner Itihas* (A History of the Sundarbans), Calcutta: Naya Udyog.

Jeffery, R. and Sundar, N. (1999) 'Introduction' in R. Jeffery and N. Sundar (eds.) *A New Moral Economy for India's Forests?: Discourses of Community and Participation*, New Delhi London: Sage Publications.

Jorgensen, L. (1996) 'What are NGOs Doing in Civil Society?' in A. Clayton (ed.) *NGOs, Civil Society and the State: Building Democracy in Transitional Societies*, Oxford: INTRAC.

Kabeer, N. (1994) *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought*, London New York: Verso.

Kanjilal, T. (1999) *Pathey Prantarey* (Down the Roads and the Fields) Calcutta: Projanma.

_____ (1999) 'Panchayat NGO Ke Niyontron Korte Chailey Ami Sei Sarkari Forum-e Thakbo Na' (I will not be a Party to the Forum if it amounts to the Panchayats controlling NGOs), *Development Science Journal*, 6: 38-46.

_____ ((2000) *Who Killed the Sundarbans?*, Calcutta: Tagore Society for Rural Development.

Karat, P. (1984) 'Action Groups/Voluntary Organisations: A Factor in Imperialist Strategy', *The Marxist* 2: 51-63.

_____ (1988) *Foreign Funding and the Philosophy of Voluntary Organisations: A Factor in Imperialist Strategy*, New Delhi: National Book Centre.

Kaviraj, S. (1995) *Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and The Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

_____ (2001) 'In search of Civil Society' in S. Kaviraj and S. Khilnani (eds.) *Civil Society: History and Possibilites*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kaviraj, S. and Khilnani, S. (2001) 'Introduction: Ideas of Civil Society', in S. Kaviraj and S. Khilnani (eds.) *Civil Society: History and Possibilites*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Keane, J. (1988) 'Introduction', in J. Keane (ed.) *Civil Society and the State*, London New York: Verso.

_____ (1998) *Civil Society: Old Images, New Visions*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Kohli, A. (1990) 'From Elite Activism to Democratic Consolidation: The Rise of Reform Communism in West Bengal' in F.R. Frankel and M.S.A. Rao (eds.) *Dominance and State Power in Modern India: Decline of Social Order Vol. 2*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

_____ (1997) 'From Breakdown to Order: West Bengal' in P. Chatterjee (ed.) *State and Politics in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Kothari, R. (1988) *State Against Democracy*, Delhi: Ajanta.

Kumar, A. and Vlassoff, C. (1997) 'Gender Relations and Education of Girls in Two Indian Communities: Implications for Decisions about Child Bearing' *Reproductive Health Matters*, No.10, 139-153.

Laclau, E. and Mouffe, C. (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London: Verso.

Leach, E. R. (1957) 'The Epistemological Background to Malinowski's Empiricism' in R. Firth (ed.) *Man and Culture*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Lehman, A.D. (1990) *Democracy and Development in Latin America: Economics, Politics and Religion in the Post-war Period*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Levi, M. (1996) 'Social and Unsocial Capital: A Review Essay of Robert Putnam's *Making Democracy Work*' *Politics and Society* 24 (1) 45-55.

Lewis, D. (2002) 'Civil Society in African Context: Reflections on the Usefulness of a Concept' *Development and Change* 33 (4) 569-86.

Lewis, D. J., Gregory, R. and Wood, G. D. (1993) 'Indigenising Extension: Farmers, Fish-Seed Traders and Poverty-Focused Aquaculture in Bangladesh', *Development Policy Review*, 11: 185-94.

Li, T. M. (1996) 'Images of Community: Discourse and Strategy in Property Relations', *Development and Change*, 27 (3): 501-27.

Lieten, G.K. (1996) *Development, Devolution and Democracy: Village Discourse in West Bengal*, New Delhi: Sage.

Mahajan, G. (1999) 'Civil Society and Its Avtars: What Happened to Freedom and Democracy', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 34 (20): 1188-96.

Mair, L. (1984) *Anthropology and Development*, London: Macmillan.

Malinowski, B. (1948 [1925]) *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books.

Mallick, R. (1993) *Development Policy of a Communist Government: West Bengal Since 1977*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

_____ (1999) 'Refugee Settlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Marichjhapi Massacre', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 58 (1): 104-25.

Marcus, G. E. and Fischer, M. M. J. (1986) *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Mayoux, L (1998) 'Gender Accountability and NGOs: Avoiding the Black Hole' in C. Miller and S. Razavi (eds.) *Missionaries and Mandarins: Feminist Engagement with Development Institutions*, London: Intermediate Technology Publications in Association with the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.

Mies, M. and Shiva, V. (1993) *Ecofeminism*, London: Zed Books.

Misra, S. K. (2000) *Proceedings of a Workshop on Collaboration Between Voluntary Agencies and Panchayat Bodies* held on 16 July 2000, Calcutta: Unpublished.

Mollah, A. R. (1993) *Budget Speech of the Minister-in-charge of Sundarban Affairs Branch, Development and Planning Department* 1993-94, Calcutta: Government of West Bengal.

_____ (1994) *Budget Speech of the Minister-in-charge of Sundarban Affairs Department* 1994-95, Calcutta: Government of West Bengal.

_____ (1998) *Budget Speech of the Minister-in-charge of Sundarban Affairs Department* 1998-99, Calcutta: Government of West Bengal.

_____ (2000) *Budget Speech of the Minister-in-charge of Sundarban Affairs Department* 2000-2001, Calcutta: Government of West Bengal.

Mondal, K. (1997) *Dakshin Chabbis Parganar Anchalik Itihaser Upakaran* (The Ingredients of the Local History of the South 24 Parganas), Calcutta: Nabachalantika.

_____ (1999) *Dakshin Chabbis Parganar Bismrita Adhyay* (A Forgotten Chapter in the History of South 24 Parganas), Calcutta: Nabachalantika.

Mondal, S. (1995) *British Rajotye Sundarban* (The Sundarbans During the British Rule) Calcutta: Punascha.

Montgomery, S. (1995) *Spell of the Tiger: The Man-Eaters of Sundarbans*, Boston New York: Houghton Mifflin Company

Mosse, D. (1994) 'Authority, Gender and Knowledge: Theoretical Reflections on the Practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal', *Development and Change*, 25: 497-526.

_____ (2001) '"People's Knowledge', Participation and Patronage: Operations and Representations in Rural Development" in B. Cooke and U. Kothari (eds.) *Participation: The New Tyranny?*, New York London: Zed Books.

Mouffe, C. (1992) 'Democratic Citizenship and the Political Community' in C. Mouffe (ed.) *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship and Community*, London New York: Verso.

_____ (1995) 'Democratic Politics and the Question of Identity', in J. Rajchman (ed.) *The Identity in Question*, New York: Routledge.

Mukherjee, S. N. (1991) *'Bhadraloks* of Bengal' in D. Gupta (ed) *Social Stratification*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Mukherji, S. (1981) 'Peasant Uprising' in A. K. Das, S. Mukherji and M. K. Chowdhuri (eds.) *A Focus on Sundarban*, Calcutta: Editions Indian.

_____ (1981) 'Historical and Geographical Background' in A. K. Das, S. Mukherji and M. K. Chowdhuri (eds.) *A Focus on Sundarban*, Calcutta: Editions Indian.

Nader, L. (1996) 'The Three-Cornered Constellation: Magic, Science, and Religion Revisited' in L. Nader (ed.) *Naked Science*, New York London: Routledge.

Nanda, K. (1999) 'Sundarbans – A Unique Ecosystem: Now it is Threatened' in D. N. Guha Bakshi, P. Sanyal, and K. R. Naskar (eds.) *Sundarbans Mangal*, Calcutta: Naya Prokash.

Nanda, M (1997a) 'Restoring the Real: Rethinking Social Constructivist Theories of Science' *Socialist Register* 302-352.

_____(1997b) 'Against Social De(con)struction of Science: Cautionary Tales Form The Third World' in E. M. Wood and J. B. Foster (eds.) *In Defense of History: Marxism and The Postmodern Agenda*, New York: Monthly Review Press.

_____(1998) 'Reclaiming Modern Science for Third World Progressive Social Movements' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33 (16) 915-22.

_____(2001a) 'We are All Hybrids Now: The Dangerous Epistemology of Post-Colonial Populism' *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 28 (2) 162-86.

_____(2001b) 'Breaking the Spell of Dharma: Case for Indian Enlightenment' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 36 (7) 2551-66.

Nandy, A. (1988) 'Science as the Reason of the State' in A. Nandy (ed.) *Science, Hegemony and Violence: A Requiem for Modernity*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

_____ (1992) *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias: Essays in Political Awareness*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

_____ (2000) 'The Political Culture of the Indian State' in Z. Hasan (ed.) *Politics and the State in India*, New Delhi London: Sage Publications.

Nelson, N. and Wright, S. (1995) 'Introduction: Participation and Power' in N. Nelson and S. Wright (eds.) *Power and Participatory Development: Theory and Practice*, London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

Nimpith Farm Science Centre (1991) 'GO-NGO Collaboration and Natural Resources Management: A Case Study of ICAR Sponsored Nimpith KVK, Sunderbans, West Bengal', paper presented at Asia Regional Workshop on *NGOs, Natural Resources Management and Linkages with the Public Sector* on 16-20 September 1991, at ASCI, Hyderabad, India.

Nimpith KVK (2000) *Extension Magnitude in Sundarbans: Status Paper and Memorandum* (Submitted to the Study Group- I of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Agriculture during On the Spot Study Visit at Sri Ramakrishna Ashram and its KVK (Farm Science Centre) on 18th October 2000, Nimpith: RAKVK.

Nugent, D. (1994) 'Building the State, Making the Nation: The Bases and Limits of State Centralisation in "Modern" Peru', *American Anthropologist*, 96 (2): 333-69.

Oldenburg, V. T. (1991) 'Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow' in D. Haynes and G. Prakash (eds.) *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*, Berkeley Los Angeles: University of California Press.

O'Malley, L. S. S. (1913) *The Census of India 1911: Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Sikkim*, Vol. 5, Part I, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot

_____ (1998 [1914]) *Bengal District Gazetteers: 24 Parganas*, Calcutta: West Bengal District Gazetteers.

Ortner, S. B. (1974) 'Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?' in M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (eds.) *Woman, Culture, and Society*, California: Stanford University Press.

Ortner, S. B. and Whitehead, H. (1981) 'Introduction: Accounting for Sexual Meanings' in S. B. Ortner and H. Whitehead (eds.) *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Sexuality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pande, M. (1998) 'Foreword', *Annual Administrative Reports 1996-97, 1997-98, 1998-99*, Department of Sundarban Affairs, Calcutta: Government of West Bengal.

Pargiter, F. E. (1934) *A Revenue History of the Sundarbans: From 1765 to 1870*, Bengal: Bengal Government Press.

Parry, J. P. (2000) "The 'Crisis of Corruption' And 'The Idea of India': A Worm's Eye View" in I. Pardo (ed.) *The Morals of Legitimacy*, Oxford: Berghahn Publishers.

Parsons, T. (1952) *The Social System*, London: Tavistock Publications.

_____ (1977) *The Evolution of Societies* (edited with an Introduction by J. Toby) New Jersey: Prentice Englewood Cliffs.

Paul, S. (1987) *Community Particaption in Development Projects*, World Bank Discussion Paper no. 6, Washington DC: World Bank.

Poulton, R. (1988) 'On Theories and Strategies' in R. Poulton and M. Harris (eds.) *Putting People First: Voluntary Organisations and Third World Development*, London: Macmillan Publishers.

Prakash, G. (1992) 'Science "Gone Native" in Colonial India', *Representations* 40: 153-77.

Prasad, V. (1999) 'NGO Anthropology', *Left Curve*, No23: 72-81.

Pretty, N. J. and Scoones, I. (1995) 'Institutionalizing Adaptive Planning and Local Level Concerns: Looking to the Future' in N. Nelson and S. Wright (eds.) *Power and Participatory Development: Theory and Practice*, London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

Putnam, R. D. (1993) *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press.

_____ (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Touchstone Simon and Schuster.

Ramanathan, M., Dilip, T. R. and Padmadas, S. S. (1995) 'Quality of Care in Laparoscopic Sterilisation Camps: Observations From Kerala, India' *Reproductive Health Matters*, No. 6, 84-93.

Ravindran, T. K. S. (1993) 'Women and the Politics of Population and Development in India' *Reproductive Health Matters*, No. 1, 26-38.

Raychaudhuri, T. (1987) *Three Views of Europe from Nineteenth Century Bengal*, Calcutta: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences.

Redclift, M. (1987) *Sustainable Development: Exploring the Contradictions*, London and New York: Routledge.

Richards, J. F. and Flint, E. P. (1987) 'Long Term Transformations in The Sundarbans Wetlands Forests of Bengal', *The Commons in South Asia: Societal*

Pressures and The Environmental Integrity in the Sundarbans a workshop programme held at Smithsonian Institution, Washington D. C. November 20-21, 1987 (website: www.smartoffice.com/Tiger/Richards.html).

Riddell, R. C., Robinson, M., Coninck, J. D., Muir, A. and White, S. (1995) *Non-Governmental Organizations and Rural Poverty Alleviation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Rietbergen-McCracken, J. (1996) 'Introduction and Overview', in J. Rietbergen-McCracken (ed.) *Participation in Practice: The Experience of the World Bank and Other Stakeholders*, World Bank Discussion Paper No. 333, Washington D.C.: The World Bank.

Rogers, J. D. (1991) 'Cultural and Social Resistance: Gambling in Colonial Sri Lanka in D. Haynes and G. Prakash (eds.) *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*, Berkeley Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Rosenblum, N. L. and Post, R. C. (eds.) (2002) *Civil Society and Government*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Rostow, W. W. (1960) *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-communist Manifesto*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rowlands, J. (1997) *Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras*, UK: Oxfam.

Roy, I. (2002) 'Community, Organisation and Representation: Implications for Development', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37 (35): 3591-95.

Ruud, A. E. (1994) 'Land and Power: The Marxist Conquest of Rural Bengal', *Modern Asian Studies*, 28 (2): 357-80.

_____(2001) 'Talking Dirty About Politics: A View From a Bengali Village' in C. J. Fuller and V. Beneï (eds.) *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India*, London: Hurst and Company.

Sachs, W. (1990) 'The Archaeology of the Development Idea', *Interculture*, 23 (4):1-37.

Sabetti, F. (1996) Path Dependency and Civic Culture: Some Lessons From Italy About Interpreting Social Experiments *Politics and Society*, 24 (1) 19-44.

Samaddar, R. P. (2000) 'Introduction', *Annual Administrative Reports 1996-97, 1997-98, 1998-99*, Department of Sundarban Affairs, Calcutta: Government of West Bengal.

Sanyal, S. and Halim, B. (1999) 'Panchayat Diye NGO Ke Niyontroner Janyai Sarkari Forum Hoyecche', (The Sole Aim of the Government Forum is to Control NGOs Through Panchayat), *Development Science Journal*, 6: 38-46.

Schultz, D. A. (2002) 'The Phenomenology of Democracy: Putnam, Pluralism, and Voluntary Associations' in S. L. McLean, D. A. Schultz and M. B. Steger (eds.) *Social Capital: Critical Perspectives on Community and "Bowling Alone"*, New York: New York University Press.

Scott, C. (1996) 'Science for the West, Myth for the Rest?: The Case of James Bay Cree Knowledge Construction' in L. Nader (ed.) *Naked Science*, London New York: Routledge.

Scott, J. C. (1985) *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

_____ (1990) *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Sen, A. (2000) 'East and West: The Reach of Reason' *New York Review of Books*, 47 (12) 33-38.

Sen, S. (1999) 'Some Aspects of State-NGO Relationships in India in the Post-Independence Era', *Development and Change*, 30 (2): 327-55.

Sethi, H. and Visvanathan, S. (1998) 'By way of a Beginning' in S. Visvanathan and H. Sethi (eds.) *Foul Play: Chronicles of Corruption*, New Delhi:Banyan Books.

Shah, T. (1998) *Sorcerer's Apprentice*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

Shiva, V. (1986) 'Ecology Movements in India', *Alternatives*, 11 (2): 255-73.

_____ (1988) *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, London: Zed Press.

_____ (1991) *The Violence of the Green Revolution*, London: Zed Books.

_____ (1992) 'The Seed and the Earth: Women, Ecology and Biotechnology', *The Ecologist*, 22 (1): 4-7.

Shiva, V. and Bandyopadhyay, J. (1986) 'Environmental Conflicts and Public Interest Science', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21 (2): 84-90.

Shore, C. and Wright, S. (1997) 'Policy: A New Field of Anthropology' in C. Shore and S. Wright (eds.) *Anthropology of Policy: Critical Perspectives on Governance and Power*, London: Routledge.

Silliman, J. (1999) 'Expanding Civil Society, Shrinking Political Spaces: The Case of Women's Nongovernmental Organisations' in J. Silliman and Y. King (eds.) *Dangerous Intersections: Feminism, Population and the Environment*, London: Zed Books.

Singh, M. (1993) 'The Role of Civil Society in Promoting Democratic Development: Some Aspects of the South African Debate' in A. McKinstry and B.

Landsnaes (eds.) *The Role of Voluntary Organisations in Emerging Democracies*, Denmark: Danish Centre for Human Rights/ Institute of International Education.

Singh, R. K. (1988) 'How Can We Help the Poorest of the Poor?: The Impact of Local Elites in Some NGO Community Development Programmes in Nepal and Bangladesh' in R. Poulton and M. Harris (eds.) *Putting People First: Voluntary Organisations and Third World Development*, London: Macmillan Publishers.

Sinha, S., Gururani, S. and Greenberg, B. (1997) "The 'New Traditionalist' Discourse of Indian Environmentalism", *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 24 (3) 65-99.

Sivaramakrishnan, K. (1997) 'A Limited Forest Conservancy in Southwest Bengal, 1864-1912', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 56 (1): 75-112.

_____ (1999) *Modern Forests: Statemaking and Environmental Change in Colonial Eastern India*, New York New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Smith, D. J. (2001) 'Kinship and Corruption in Contemporary Nigeria', *Ethnos* 66:(3) pp 344-364.

Sokal, A and Bricmont, J. (1998) *Fashionable Nonsense: Post modern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science*, New York: Picador.

Sri Ramakrishna Ashram Nimpith (1986) *25 Years of Rural Development*, Nimpith: Sri Ramakrishna Ashram.

_____ (2000) *Annual Report 1999-2000*, Nimpith: Sri Ramakrishna Ashram.

Sundarban Development Board (1979) *A Project Report Prepared by the Sundarban Development Board and the Working Group of Government of West Bengal in collaboration with Central Project Preparation and Monitoring Cell Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation, Government of India*, Calcutta: Sundarban Development Board.

_____ (1979) *Sundarban Region - Development Activities Carried out by the Sundarban Development Board: A Profile*, Calcutta: Sundarban Development Board.

_____ (1994) *Annual Administration Reports 1981-82 to 1991-92*, Department of Sundarban Affairs, Calcutta: Government of West Bengal.

_____ (2000) *Annual Administrative Reports 1996-97, 1997-98, 1998-99*, Department of Sundarban Affairs, Calcutta: Government of West Bengal.

Tandon, R. (1989) *NGO-Government Relations: A Source of Life or Kiss of Death?* New Delhi: PRIA.

_____ (1994) 'NGO-State Relation in South Asia: A Research Agenda' Prepared for the Meeting called by AKFC at Dhaka during March 6-10, 1994 for Planning a South Asian Study, New Delhi: PRIA.

Tarlo, E. (2001) 'Paper Truths: The Emergency and Slum Clearance Through Forgotten Files' in C. J. Fuller and V. Beneï (eds.) *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India*, London: Hurst and Company.

Tarrow, S. (1996) 'Making Social Science Work Across Space and Time: A Critical Reflection on Robert Putnam's Making Democracy Work' *American Political Science Review*, 90 (2) 389-97.

Thapan, M. (1998) 'Rethinking Anthroplogy Anew' in M. Thapan (ed.) *Anthropological Journeys: Reflections on Fieldwork*, New Delhi: Orient Longman.

Thorlind, R. (2000) *Development, Decentralization and Democracy: Exploring Social Capital and Politicization in the Bengal Region*, NIAS Report Series No.42, Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies.

Trivedy, R. and Acharya, J. (1996) 'Constructing the Case for an Alternative Framework for Understanding Civil Society, the State and the Role of NGOs' in A. Clayton (ed.) *NGOs, Civil Society and the State: Building Democracy in Transitional Societies*, Oxford: INTRAC.

United Nations (1951) *Measures for the Economic Development of Under-developed Countries*, UN Department of Economic Affairs, New York: United Nations.

_____ (1993) *Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development at Rio de Janeiro, June 3-14, 1992), Vol.1*, New York: United Nations.

VANI (2000) 'Tushar Kanjilal' in *India's Living Legends: Savants of Voluntary Action*, New Delhi: VANI.

van Rooy, A. (1998) 'Civil Society as Idea: An Analytical Hatstand', in A. van Rooy (ed.) *Civil Society and Aid Industry*, London: Earthscan.

Vedeld, T. (2001) *Partcipation in Project Preparation: Lessons from World Bank-Assisted Projects in India*, Discussion Paper no 423, Washington DC: World Bank.

Visvanathan, S. (1988) 'On the Annals of the Laboratory State' in A. Nandy (ed.) *Science, Hegemony and Violence: A Requiem for Modernity*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.
_____ (1991) 'Mrs Brundtland's Disenchanted Cosmos', *Alternatives*, 16 (3): 377-84.

Wade, R. (1982) 'The System of Administrative and Political Corruption: Canal Irrigation in South India', *Journal of Development Studies*, 18 (3): 287-328.

_____ (1984) 'Irrigation Reform in Conditions of Populist Anarchy: An Indian Case', *Journal of Development Economics*, 14 (3): 285-303.

_____ (1985) 'The Market for Public Office: Why the Indian State is Not Better at Development', *World Development*, 13 (4): 467-97.

Wallerstein, I. (1982) 'The Rise and Future Demise of World Capitalist Systems: Concept for Comparative Analysis' in H.Alavi and T. Shanin (eds.) *Introduction to the Sociology of "Developing Societies"*, London: Macmillan.

WCED (1987) *Our Common Future*, Oxford New York: Oxford University Press.

Weber, M. (1930) (translated by Talcott Parsons) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, London: George Allen and Unwin.

_____ (1983) (translated by Stanislav Andreski) *On Capital, Bureaucracy and Religion: A Selection of Texts*, London: George Allen and Unwin.

Webster, N. (1990) 'Agrarian Relations in Burdwan District, West Bengal: From the Economics of Green Revolution to the Politics of Panchayati Raj', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 20 (2): 177-211.

_____ (1992) 'Panchayati Raj in West Bengal: Popular Participation for the People or the Party?', *Development and Change*, 23 (4): 129-63.

_____ (1995) 'The Role of NGDOs in Indian Rural Development: Some Lessons from West Bengal and Karnataka', *The European Journal of Development Research*, 7 (2): 407-33.

West Bengal (2000) *Paschimbanga: Jela Dakshin Chabbis Paragana* (West Bengal: The District of South 24 Parganas), Vol. 33, No. 32-36, February-March 2000, Calcutta: Department of Information and Culture, West Bengal Government.

Westergaard, K. (1987) 'Marxist Government and People's Participation: The Case of West Bengal', *Journal of Social Studies*, 38: 95-113.

Williams, G. (1999) 'Panchayati Raj and the Changing Micro Politics of West Bengal' in B. Rogaly, B. Harriss-White and S. Bose (eds.) *Sonar Bangla?: Agricultural Growth and Agrarian Change in West Bengal and Bangladesh*, New Delhi: Sage.

Wilson, E. O. (1995) 'Loss of Biodiversity' in *Meeting the Challenges of Population, Environment and Resources: the Costs of Inaction*, A Report of the Senior Scientists' Panel, Third World Bank Conference on Environmentally Sustainable Development (ESD proceeding series no. 14), October 4-9 1995, Washington DC: World Bank.

World Bank (1988) *Environment and Development: Implementing the World Bank New Policies*, No 17, Development Committee, Washington DC: The World Bank.

_____ (1994) *Enhancing Women's Participation in Economic Development: A World Bank Policy Paper*, Washington DC: World Bank.

_____ (1996) *The World Bank's Partnership with Nongovernmental Organizations*, Participation and NGO Group, Poverty and Social Policy Department (PSP), Washington DC: The World Bank.

_____ (1996) *The World Bank Participation Source-Book* (Environmentally Sustainable Development (ESD), Washington DC: World Bank.

_____ (1997) 'The State in a Changing World', *World Development Report*, Washington DC and New York: The World Bank and Oxford University Press.

_____ (2003) 'Sustainable Development in a Dynamic World: Transforming Institutions, Growth, and Quality of Life', *World Development Report*, Washington DC and New York: The World Bank and Oxford University Press.

Young, R. (1972) 'The Anthropology of Science', *New Humanist*, 88 (3): 102-5.

Newspapers, News Articles and Pamphlets

Aajkaal (28.4.2000) 'Paramanu Bidyut Kendrer Samarthane CPM-er Jela Netrittwa' (The CPM District Leadership in Support of the Nuclear Power Plant).

Aajkaal (6.5.2000) 'Sundarbane Paramanu Bidyut Kendra: Kichutei Na' (Nuclear Power Plant in the Sundarbans: No, Never).

Aajkaal (11.5.2000) 'Rajye Paramanu Kendra: Andolone Namchhe Bibhinno Bigyan Sangathan' (Nuclear Plant in the State: Different Science Organisations Campaigning Against it).

Aajkaal (18.5.2000) 'Paramanu Kendrer Jaiga Nei Sundarbane' (No Place for the Nuclear Plant in the Sundarbans).

Anandabazar Patrika (6.5.2000) 'Rajye Paramanu Bidyut: Amar Apnar Bipad' (Nuclear Power in the State: A Menace for All).

Anandabazar Patrika (18.5.2000) 'Paramanu Bidyut Kendrer Tejoskriyota Pratirodher Assas Dilen Bishesagga' (Expert Gives Assurance about Prevention of Radiation from Nuclear Power Plant).

Ba-dweep Barta (16-30 April 2000) 'Sundarbaner Paromanabik Bidyut Kendra Basanti-te?' (Will the Nuclear Power Plant of the Sundarbans be in Basanti?).

Ba-dweep Barta (1-15 May 2000) 'Paramanu Bidyut Kendrer Sabuj Sanket' (Green Signal for the Nuclear Power Plant).

Bandyopadhyay, A. (4.5.2000) 'Paramanu Bidyut: Sabai Siksha Niyechhe: Amra Bipad Deke Anchhi' (Nuclear Power: Everybody Has Learnt Lessons, We Are Asking for Trouble) in *Anandabazar Patrika*.

Bartaman (9.5.2000) 'Paramanu Bidyut Kendrer Janyo Maria Rajya: Aaj Baithak', (State Desparate for a Nuclear Power Plant: Today is the Meeting).

Bartaman (12.5.2000) Paschimer Parittakta Prajukti Diye Paramanu Bidyut Kendra Garte Chaichhe Bamfront Sarkar (By Applying Abandoned Technology of the West, the Left-front Government Wants to Set up a Nuclear Power Plant).

Basu, S (25.5.2000) 'Paramanu Bidyut Nirapad? Bastab Sampurno Anya Katha Bole' (Nuclear Energy Safe?: Reality Proves Contrary) in *Anandabazar Patrika*.

Basu, J. (2000) 'Bamfront Sarkarer Teyish Bachar' (Twenty-three Years of the Left-front Government), Information and Culture Department: West Bengal Government.

Chaudhuri, K. (13.10.2002) 'The Vanishing Tiger' in *The Statesman*.

Dutta, C. (15.9.2000) 'Bharater Uttar-Purbanchale Eto Bidyut er Charachari, Tabu Paramanu Bidyut Keno?' (Given the Prospect of Abundant Power Resources in North-Eastern India, One Wonders Why Still Nuclear Power?) in *Bartaman.*

Dutta, P. (26.4.2000) 'Paschimbange Paramanu Bidyut: Chernobyl Keno Prasangik' (Nuclear Power in West Bengal: Why Chernobyl is Relevant) in *Anandabazar Patrika.*

Ganashakti (18.5.2000) 'Paramanu Bidyut Kendrer Sapakshe Bollen Bishesaggara', (Experts Talked in favour of the Nuclear Power Plant).

Hindustan Times (5.12.2000) "Sundarbans among 37 pristine areas 'critical to Earth's survival'".

India Today (9.9.2002) 'The Patient Earth: The summit in Johannesburg is just another expensive UN-sponsored farce'.

Juktibadi Sanskritic Sangstha (July 2000) *Sundarban Elakaye Paramanu Bidyutkendra: E Unnayan Chai Na* (Nuclear Power Plant in the Sundarbans Region: We Don't Want this Development), Canning: Juktibadi Sanskritic Sangstha.

Krishnakumar, A. (27.9.2002) 'A Lost Opportunity' in *Frontline.*

Major, J. (May/June 1992) 'A World Fit for our Children to Live in' in *Earth Summit News,* London: United Nations Association.

Mondal, G. (1997) 'Sundarbaner Nadi O Samasya' (Sundarbans' Rivers and Problems) in *Sechpatra,* Year 3 no.1, January-March 1997.

Pramanik, R. R. (28.3.2000) 'Paschimbange Paramanu Bidyut: Akarone Bhoy Paben Na' (Nuclear Power in West Bengal: Don't Panic Unnecessarily) in *Anandabazar Patrika.*

Tagore Society for Rural Development (undated) *Sundarban Basir Kache Sri Tushar Kanjilaler Nibedan* (Sri Tushar Kanjilal's Appeal to the People of the Sundarbans), Gosaba: Tagore Society for Rural Development.

The Statesman (17.6.1995) 'Apathy eats into Sunderbans embankments'.

The Statesman (26.10.1999) 'NGOs will not be allowed a free hand'.

The Statesman (10.7.2000.) 'Nuclear Troubles'.

The Statesman (4.3.2002) 'Timber smugglers make hay after CM sermon'.

The Statesman (4.4.2002) 'Indo-Bangla effort to save the Sunderbans'.

The Week (29 December-4 January 1986) 'The Master Masai: He came to teach, he stayed to serve'.

The Week (5-11 February 1989) 'A storm and a messiah: The heroic struggle of a social worker and a people'.

Tolba, M. (May/June 1992) 'Two Vital Reasons for Rescuing Diversity', in *Earth Summit News* London: United Nations Association.