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Notes

9 pp
Memo from Gopal Dutia, PSC, New Delhi to distribution list attaching:
Second Report in the series of Community Action for Basic Services. This report is about the Sri Ramakrishna Mission in Narendrapur entre, near Calcutta. It details the Centre's work for social and economic change, including poverty alleviation, health, training, education, nutrition, sanitation,

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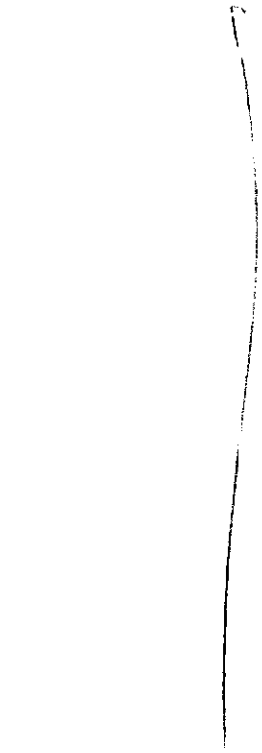

INTEROFFICE MEMORANDUM
UNICEF/SCAR, NEW DELHI

TO: * (See below)

DATE: 8 January 1981

FROM: Gopal Dutia, PSC Officer, New Delhi

REF. NO.: PSC/23

SUBJECT: Community Action for Basic Services

... Enclosed is the second report in the above series. It discusses the activities of the Ramakrishna Mission from their Narendrapur centre near Calcutta, West Bengal.

The first in the series -- on the Kerala programme for women and children -- was sent to you on 28 November 1980.

The two programmes are different in that the first followed a government initiative while, for the second, the effort is non-governmental. The first centres on Mahila Mandals (women's forums) while the second relies on youth centres. The similarity is that both represent, in essence, an intervention for immediate assistance to the needy as well as a practical long-term programme for training in participatory community action for self-reliance.

... A set of reasonably uptodate basic socio-economic statistics on the State of West Bengal is also enclosed.

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Community Action for Basic Services-II

A VISION AT WORK

Report of a visit to the Ramakrishna Mission's Loksiksha Parishad
at Narendrapur near Calcutta

by Thomas P Matthai

UNICEF, New Delhi
November 1980

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CONTENTS

Author : Thomas P Matthai, former editor of the political-economic weekly Democratic World, is a journalist with experience in government administration, specialising in development issues.

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PREFACE

The Ramakrishna Mission is more than a voluntary organization. It is a multi-faceted movement for human service spurred by a disciplined body of non-self-regarding persons. An essay in practical religion started in 1897, today it reaches out to 143 centres in India and abroad. The Narendrapur Ashram, half an hour's drive south-east of Calcutta, is one of the more significant examples among them.

The 300 acre campus of the Ashram is set amidst the half-awake villages of the Sonarpur block in the district of 24 Parganas. It has a college, a school, a blind boys' academy and technical and commercial institutes. And, as an even more purposeful expression of social conscience, there is the centre for community education and action—named the Loksiksha Parishad.

The constant focus of the Parishad, as indeed of the Ramakrishna Mission, is nothing less than the total human development patiently and by the people's own effort. It has a training wing which is equally concerned with field research and extension work. Its field wing functions through youth centres at the village level—86 at present—engaged in adult education, nutrition and health care, social services and economic programmes.

A four-day visit to Narendrapur in early September 1980 offered an opportunity to observe the working of the Parishad and to have discussions with its director, Professor S. S. Chakraborty and his colleagues. Trips were also made to the childrens' feeding centre at Arapanch a few kilometres away, the adjacent medical clinic and the destitute childrens' home farther in the rural interior, run by missionary women at Hotor. These are but a small cross-section of the manifold activity of the Narendrapur Ashram.

Based on the experience of the visit, the discussions during the stay and a reading of some stimulating background literature, this report attempts to convey a brief but coherent idea of the services for the community generated by Narendrapur, their nature and extent, the motivation that sustains the effort and the response it elicits from the people.

New Delhi
November 1980

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THE REPORT

It is impossible to appreciate what the Ramakrishna Mission is doing without understanding why it is at work unremittingly, if also with humility.

The Beginning

A hundred years ago, the order of ignorance and poverty was much the same as now. Vivekananda spoke of the cruel indifference of Indians towards the poor and the weak, some 300 million people in the India of that time held down by poverty, priestcraft and tyranny. The life of his master, Ramakrishna (1836-86) was, we learn, detached from the world yet he was constantly listening to the human story of worldly tribulations —naked Santhals dying of hunger, farm tenants reduced to indigence by elusive rains, and so on. Ramakrishna's message was: Don't speak of love for your brother, realize it. Religion is not for starving bellies, he said.

Ramakrishna left nothing behind for his few disciples to fall back upon—except the truths he preached and practised. 'Homesick for the Infinite', they remembered all the same that it was 'selfish to seek personal salvation'. They had a duty to translate the highest knowledge into the highest service of mankind.

By 1897, Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna Mission, the order of free men of God, 'sannyasins who would go down into hell, if need be, to save others'. They vowed poverty and chastity. They belonged to no sect but to India. They would promote brotherhood among the followers of different religions. They would train people to overcome ignorance and suffering—through manual and spiritual work, scientific research and service of men and women—a constructive synthesis of faith and science. The Mission was open to lay brethren as well.

A healthier forbear of the latter-day social worker, the Ramakrishna missionary's function was to assist his people to save themselves, body and soul, body first. 'What are we good for, if we cannot provide (the poor with) facilities for their food and clothing?' asked Vivekananda. This was no call to fight but to serve. The awakening of India was to be in relation, solely, to its service for humanity.

Material resources were scarce but human misery could not wait. In the very year of its birth, the Mission found itself organizing famine relief in Murshidabad, setting up a home at Mohula for abandoned children, opening another famine centre at Dinajpur. In 1898, when a plague broke out in Calcutta, the missionaries got busy disinfecting and cleansing the poor quarters of the city.

Vivekananda passed away 16 years after Ramakrishna, at the age of 39. But he bequeathed to the Mission the organizational strength to continue and expand its work, like Ramakrishna had lent the spiritual energy to sustain it.

The Philosophy

The Ramakrishna Mission has its foundation in India's timeless philosophy of Vedanta as expounded in the Upanishads. In its light, all religions are held true in their essence and the different orders of metaphysical thought are seen as stages on the way to the supreme truth. The infinite oneness of the Soul is the eternal sanction of all morality, Vivekananda explains. "You and I are not only brothers, but you and I are really one".

From this perception comes the Mission's doctrine of service. Humanity is one body and not much can be done by a body a limb of which is paralysed. What moves the heart to serve humankind is 'the contrast between the divinity in man and his present ignorant state with all the suffering it entails'. One serves God by serving human beings, in the first instance the humblest, the poorest and the most degraded among them. Ignorance and suffering cannot wait. Impatient of action, Vivekananda once said: 'Let the reading of Vedanta and the practice of meditation be done in the next life'.

If all living beings are God, there is no question of one person having *mercy* on another. The word *charity* would need redefinition as 'love of God in all men'. Even the condescension implied in the word *help* goes against the grain of Vedanta, the right concept would be '*to serve*'.

The implications of this doctrine of service are revolutionary for a social system such as the present. Freedom, equality and fraternity are enshrined in it in a more radical sense than is commonly ascribed to them. The activities of the Loksiksha Parishad are naturally conditioned by it. It has not been experimenting with basic approaches to social work but following a steady course in the pursuit of a clear vision, patiently trying to prepare the way for human development.

This does not however mean that the Parishad has ceased learning from practical experience or evolving its strategies and tactics to suit local conditions and stages of development.

Perceptions

The Ramakrishna Mission's perception of the process of social development is somewhat different from the more common notion that economic or material inputs, by themselves, can change the life of the people. India's development experience of the past 30 years is the story of impressive industrial and technological progress, but this has changed neither the outlook of the people nor the conditions of living of the majority. Lately, emphasis is being laid on social inputs for human resources—like education, health, sanitation, community involvement, etc.—but their realisation is a long way away.

The Ramakrishna Mission has no quarrel with the aims of human development as generally understood. Though it would lift the concept beyond the materialistic moorings to the ethical plane, it realises that the process of change moves in slow, patient stages. It recognises the decisiveness of the economic inputs, yet it would start deliberately with the socio-cultural inputs, as a pre-condition for a socially meaningful application of the economic inputs, indeed for their equitable absorption.

For self-reliant human development constructive programmes for the community's benefit must be preceded by education of the people and social preparation. In this sense, the sequence of the steps towards development is the converse of the purely materialistic approach.

This priority in timing, for socio-cultural inputs, has been an attribute common to India's central tradition of self-development: Gandhi, Tagore and Vivekananda shared this insight across the past nearly hundred years. It implies, above all, that the revolutionary consciousness necessary for social change cannot be injected from outside but has to sprout from within the mind.

Education in its broadest sense, embracing theory and practice, making for consciousness and confidence, social cohesiveness and action, is the first aim of the Loksiksha Parishad. Vivekananda defined education as the manifestation of perfection

already in man. He once said that he had no ambition beyond training individuals.

Has the Parishad been able to fulfil this mandate?

Apart from the college and schools and training institutes the Mission runs even at Narendrapur, the Parishad's activity essentially is teaching and training of community workers and through them the community members. The focus is on the child and the youth, the aim is the self-development of the individual through the preservation and promotion of the collective interest. This reflects the democratic dimension of the scheme.

Training

The training wing of the Parishad—called the Gramsevak Training Centre—imparts five categories of training: social work (youth organization, training in cottage industries, library management, leadership training); agriculture (crop husbandry); agricultural engineering; poultry; and dairy management —the duration varying from 2 to 3 months. There is also a two year integrated course for gramsevaks and a one year higher course for them, but there were no candidates sponsored by the State government in 1979. But a number of sponsoring agencies, including the state and central governments, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the Indian Council of Agricultural Research and the Lutheran World Service (besides the Loksiksha Parishad itself) enabled over a thousand participants to complete various courses during the year.

A recent evaluation made of the training programmes, especially of the youth workers sponsored by the Parishad itself, commends the relevance of the courses, but points to the difficulty faced by some of the trained youth to start worth-while projects on their own, to engage themselves in on going community-based projects. Among the suggestions in this evaluation study are selection of the trainees with greater attention to aptitude, greater assistance for timely financial support and better follow-up and consultancy services.

These problems are a consequence of the post-1976 diversification of the training activities and the dearth of time needed to firm them up. One way to solving them is through the association with professional bodies and the evaluation and research cell, both started in 1978 when the Parishad was recognised as a 'national resource centre.' Equally, the need for financial resources to put the trainees on their feet once the training is over, is obvious. Either the Parishad should be enabled to deploy larger funds or banks should come in with help more readily than at present.

The role of the Parishad as a practical educator is strengthened by two factors: — The multi-disciplinary expertise that is available to the Parishad as full-time staff and on an exchange or visiting arrangement. It would be worthwhile to promote a pattern of visiting teachers and trainers who subscribe broadly to the Ramakrishna Mission's doctrine of service.

Secondly, the institutional structure is well-designed for the Indian rural context for education to be translated into action: Thus at one end, the Parishad imparts the training and guidance. These are transmitted by the trained workers based in the village clubs (youth centres) to the rural community for cooperative action.

Participation

The Parishad works through a number of village youth clubs—86 presently—spread over about 250 villages in the districts of 24 Parganas, Midnapore and Howrah. These are registered societies and have no legal

link with the Parishad or the Ramakrishna Mission. Each club raises its own resources through membership subscriptions, private donations and government grants and manages its own affairs.

Sports clubs or cultural groups to start with, these youth clubs have evolved, on contact with the Ramakrishna Mission, into small rural development focii. The aims of these clubs include social justice, economic uplift, village communication, primary and adult education, public health and recreation, peace and security within the village.

Obviously, many of these aims remain as ambitions—for want of organized effort and financial resources. All the same, the youth clubs are engaged in some or all of the following activities:—balwadis, schools, adult education centres, rural libraries, book-banks for school children, bratachari (action songs), religious and cultural activities, mahila samitis, maternity centres, child feeding, farm forums, backyard gardening, poultry, fish-rearing, handloom weaving, paddy cultivation, farm cooperatives and construction and repair of rural roads.

What needs to be done is a gradual expansion of activity by the club to cover the needy segment of the population and secondly to increase the number of the clubs to reach more and more villages. Over time the village-centre-orientation will have to evolve into a community-based approach.

This process could be helped by the Parishad initiating more development projects, which in turn would need accretion to its physical and financial capabilities.

Also, the female participation in the youth clubs—in terms of membership or actua l involvement—appears to be negligible. Consequently, the organization of mahila samitis, which is an accepted aim, is proceeding tardily. Which is a pity, as these women's forums are the ideal means for promoting child care, nutrition, health and education as well as encouraging income-generating activities by housewiv s. The Parishad is in a position to address itself to these tasks, though a faster pace of action would call for additional help to it. Perhaps a long-range plan for organizing youth clubs and mahila samitis in the different districts could be drawn up and appropriate support invited.

Nutrition

The Parishad works its child feeding and nutrition programmes through the youth clubs. But the feeding centre in the Arapanch cluster of villages, a few miles away from Narendrapur, is an exception. It is sited on a farm owned by the Mission. The decision to run this feeding centre is influenced by several factors: the Mission has been at work in these villages for some years, knows its people, and has identified the poor families and their pre-school children. Financial help for the feeding is available from the "Save the Children" Fund. The foodstuff is locally available. The cooking is done by local women. A project officer and the balwadi teacher, both Mission employees, do the supervision.

The recipe consists of rice, potato, pumpkin, dal, leafy vegetables, groundnut and salt, boiled into a 'kichri.' Little children, 400 of them, have a meal of at least two helpings every day. Weight cards are maintained for each of them. Those needing medical attention are referred to the bi-weekly clinic, conducted by Mission doctors a kilometre away.

Romila Mondal (30) is the mother of two, Shefali, 5 and Deepali, just over a year. Their father is a landless farm labourer and earns around Rs. 75 a month on an average. As a rule, he is idle for half the

month. Shefali and Deepali have been coming regularly to the feeding centre since November 1978. The former had whooping cough but is doing fine—her weight improved from 9.5 kg. in December 1978 to 13 kg. by August 1980. Deepali is not all that well, she is taking treatment for boils; her weight, 2.7 kg. in February last has picked up only by 0.3 kg.

The children looked generally healthy, but nearly all were unwashed and ill-clad (to which extent they were a sharp contrast to the children at the CPWPC balwadis in Kerala). The plus points about the Arapanch pattern of feeding are that the food is local and the labour is voluntary. Its weaknesses are that it is dependent on foreign financial support and the number of children appear too many to foster any camaraderie among them. They are made to shout slogans together but they come, sit, eat and depart, en masse, almost mechanically, with little laughter or evident fun.

Sanitation

Quite a few development agents in and around Calcutta were talked to on this unglamorous topic, but the Arapanch feeding centre yielded the best instruction. At a corner of the farm there is a pit latrine. The rule is that children should use it but in practice they ease themselves wherever they like. A member of the Narendrapur faculty explained how the solution could be worse than the problem. Unless the latrines are deep, lined and water-sealed, they are a source of wide-spread pollution during floods, especially in densely populated areas with high water table. A latrine thus becomes a major source of insanitation.

The common explanation in West Bengal for the near-total neglect of rural sanitation even by development planners was that it was more a case of prohibitive cost than of deliberately low priority. But consider the cost in terms of production and productivity, of 54 per cent of the (sample) population having worms, as revealed by a medical survey in the district of Purulia. Low-cost technologies for rural sanitation have been successfully tried out in neighbouring Bangladesh. It is also established that children's needs are interrelated—nutrition, sanitation, health, education. It is thus an avoidable and costly folly to consider that sanitation can be taken up at a later stage. It can be tackled now, given the awareness of the need and the urgency

Health

The Ramakrishna Mission runs several hospitals. The affiliated youth clubs have their dispensaries. But village-wide medical care of the sick among the poor seems a distant goal.

A mobile medical unit, led by a monk-administrator and staffed by three doctors, comes to Arapanch every Tuesday and Friday. Some 400 persons, including about 150 children, attend this clinic. Functioning for the past three years, this unit of the Mission is independent of the Narendrapur Ashram.

There is Mission land to build proper facilities, but the government grant is still awaited. Strong medicines are administered. Bad cases are referred to hospitals in Calcutta. The pressure on the doctors is heavy. The resources available are inadequate. The impression is left that dedicated workers are making the best of a bad situation.

When the right people have got down to work and the crying need is there for all to see, must the physical facilities remain uniformly poor? The medical mission can certainly do with some help. This apart, there is scope for linking up health care

for little children with other child services around a community based balwadi. This is a function of the youth centre/mahila samiti, backed by the resources of the community and the moral energy of an organization like the Ramakrishna Mission.

Projects

The Loksiksha Parishad has initiated a number of rural development projects big and small. They are managed by committees of the youth clubs, on each of which there is a representative of the Parishad. Four of them, involving an investment of more than half a million rupees each, deserve mention. Two of these are in Midnapore (Muradpur and Bakcha about 100 km and 60 km from Calcutta) and the other two in 24 Parganas (Media and Sunderbans, about 50 km and 80 km from Calcutta.)

Muradpur will have an agricultural seed farm for production and demonstration. Fishery and poultry are the other major components. Diesel driven power tillers and lift irrigation pumps would be made available to the villagers. The youth club will develop marketing capability for farm and poultry products, with a view to eliminating middlemen.

A windmill being put up on an experimental basis, with the idea of supplementing diesel engines is an innovative move that merits support.

Bakcha cannot be reached by motorable road. The land is saline and its population of mostly Harijan weavers are harassed alternately by flood and drought. Weaving and fishing are to be promoted, as well as farming after effecting scientific measures for reducing the salinity.

Motorised boats both for ferry and fishing was mentioned as a certain accelerator of of the project's success.

Media is a sandy terrain of impoverished refugees who came in 1947-48 from what was East Pakistan. The strategy is to start a number of small agricultural projects, help adivasis rear poultry, promote pickle-making by women, start small industries like making ampules from glass tubes, grow flowers for the Calcutta market, and so on.

Sunderbans will have an agriculture project plus allied industries like bee-keeping.

A Home in Hotor

Hotor is a sleepy village, an hour's drive from Calcutta by narrow winding road along swaying fields of paddy On half an acre of land beside a sea-green pond, stands a sprawling two-storeyed structure of bamboo, rope and improvised thatch. The ashram houses some 56 formerly destitute children between 5 and 14 years, regular classes for them a homeo clinic for the villagers, and vocational training facilities for the grown-up children, inmates and unemployed youth from the village, in poultry, dyeing, weaving, tailoring and beekeeping. Women volunteers attached to the Ramakrishna Mission are very much in charge, guided by a missionary worker who seems well on the way to becoming a monk. He showed a hobby loom made in the carpentry room that cost less than a hundred rupees, compared to Rs. 500 for a similar one made in Santiniketan.

The 300 well-fed hens clucking away in the pen in one corner, help the children with eggs twice a week and the ashram with an appreciable regular income. Shawls, mufflers and sling bags produced by the weaving and tailoring units have a rugged attraction and ready buyers.

Behind this very rural ashram and its simple techniques, one could see the trained intelligence that distinguishes the Loksiksha Parishad. The ashram is a catalyst for poultry extension work in the neighbourhood which has a number of young men who have

received training at Narendrapur, and launched their own poultry farms.

The charitable homeo dispensary caters to around 40 patients, including about 10 new ones, each day. It is the only homeo dispensary in the vicinity and is apparently more popular than the allopathic clinics. For one thing the charge per visit was only 15 paise for a new patient and 10 paise for an old one. It just falls short of being financially self-supporting, the monthly expenses, including the doctor's honorarium, come to around Rs. 250.

The ashram is run by the Ramakrishna Mission and receives grants for children deputed by government authorities.

But the half-finished building for the medical unit (estimated cost about Rs. 26,000) tells its own story. Funds are needed and awaited to complete the building and to equip the dispensary.

What of rural Bengal's Achilles heel—drinking water and sanitation? The Hotor ashram has half a dozen water-sealed pour-flush toilets, but not yet a tube-well for safe water.

A townsman is struck by the creative contentment writ on every face in the ashram. There are no destitutes in this home, nor any visibly frustrated.

Problems

Notwithstanding his magnetic appeal, Vivekananda despaired of not having enough young persons to carry out the work he had identified.

A number of dedicated workers form the Mission today but one suspects the old problem remains. The answer perhaps lies in letting the public know of the quiet work the Mission is doing and to open up opportunities for people to work away their fears and frustrations by participating in the Mission's work, if not as monks, as householders.

There is a shortage of resources. At the same time remarks can be heard, especially from the economists of materialism, that the Ramakrishna Mission is affluent as well as commercial. This appears true in the sense the Mission has a big budget and seems careful in husbanding its resources; but it is wrong in that the resources are being applied for the poor, the sick and the needy, as part of a well-thought out social programme and not absorbed in the course of transmission.

However, the task the Mission has given itself, even within a single district like 24 Parganas, is so vast, varied and complex that it is impossible for it even to initiate action on a comprehensive enough scale. For instance, it is not easy to arrange for a goat per poor family but even if done, such help is totally inadequate in the present social structure. The task is lightened to the extent that the approach is not that of a benefactor or even helper but that of a servant, and the aim is to promote people's self-reliance. All the same, resources, material as well as human, seem to limit the Mission's capacity to serve.

There is then the tendency for public authorities to assume a "do-it-ourselves" attitude. It would serve no purpose to illustrate but examples are not wanting. Social work for human development needs the fostering of personal relationship, patient planning family by family and a cooperative approach that transcends individual self-interest. To imagine that governments—even if they be elected at the local level—could deliver such service, would be to ignore the costly mistakes o the past. Organizations like the Ramakrishna Mission, who have a record of service to their credit, deserve to be trusted and helped to the utmost as much by governments and public institutions as by the people.

Inferences

Certain inferences flow from a study of the Ramakrishna Mission's experience of rural reconstruction:

—The village people, including tribals—and especially the women—are heartening responsive to any honest effort at social work.

—it is possible to integrate scientific knowledge and modern technology with village life, without destroying the humanising attributes of the latter.

—every village needs a small people-oriented planning unit capable of guiding and helping family by poor family.

—before community-based activity becomes possible, motivated individuals have to be identified, trained and entrusted with responsibility; the next stage would be to make them formal, legal and accountable to the local community. A centre-based approach will have to precede a community-based approach.

—there seems to be a natural shift of the focus of responsibility for community action from the older generation to youth, from men to women.

—public education and social preparation are a precondition for constructive economic programmes for the benefit of the poor.

—there need to be no immutable model for community organization: it could vary as necessary—youth clubs, mahila samitis, cooperatives, panchayat organs etc; there is however the real danger of any of these being captured by powerful sectional interests.

—the effective integration of social and economic inputs can take place only at the family level.

The difference between the Ramakrishna Mission's approach to human development and that of conventional aspirations to social justice is not in the perception of the plain problem of exploitation and proverty but in the way to the solution. The confrontation between the rich and the poor is to be ethical rather than physical, reducing the room and need for the latter. The revolution, as Bernard Shaw would put it, is to be gentlemanly. But Vivekananda is clear on a basic premise: "The sannyasin should have nothing to do with the rich...his duty is with the poor."

Ideas do not come from above. Nor can guidelines for action be brought wholesale from abroad. These come from the people that social workers seek to serve. They should look up and listen to the community, to the poor in particular, for they are the means of change as well as its end.

WEST BENGAL - Some Indicators

Compared to its own past, the all round decline of West Bengal is evident. In relation to the other States, its ranking in most socio-economic indicators, seems to slip. The hope of recovery is yet not all lost.

The People

The population was 44.3 million by the 1971 census. Over the preceding decade, it grew by 26.87 per cent, faster than all India. Density at 504 persons per sq. km. is about three times the national average. About a fourth of the population consists of scheduled castes and tribes. A similar proportion of the population lives in urban areas, over 10 million in greater Calcutta alone. The 1979 population estimate is 53.64 million, which is 2.17 per cent more than in 1978.

Vital Statistics

The number of births per 1,000 population is estimated at 33.4 in 1976 (compared to 34.4 for India). This marks an increase from 28.7 the previous year in contrast to the national trend. The death rate was 12.2 (1976), lower than the all India figure of 15. (Figures relate to Sample Registration Scheme).

The number of females per 1000 males was only 891 in 1971, below the national figure of 930 - though this was an improvement from 876 in 1961.

The infant mortality rate for 1976 (Sample Registration Scheme) was 89.7, compared to 129 for all India.

The projected expectation of life (1975-80) is 55.1 years for males and 52.9 for females, which are in the neighbourhood of the national averages.

Literacy and Education

West Bengal is a little ahead of the all India figure — 38.86 per cent as against 34.45 per cent (1971 census, exclusive of the age group 0-4 years). The female rate of literacy in the rural areas is less than half the male rate, low in itself. The inter-district variation is sharp, Purulia bringing up the rear, with Malda, Cooch-Behar and Murshidabad faring only slightly better.

West Bengal is not among the more progressive states in education. The per capita expenditure on education in the (revenue) budget was only Rs. 38 for 1978-79, compared to Rs. 73 by Kerala, Rs. 65 by Punjab, Rs. 48 by Maharashtra and Rs. 44 by Tamil Nadu. The expenditure on education expressed as a percentage to the total revenue budget, at 24.8 is below the states average of 25.6 (1978-79).

The number of primary schools has grown from over 34,000 in 1968-69 to over 41,000 in 1978-79. The expansion of the number of junior high schools and of high and higher secondary schools has been at a slower pace. Drop-out rates are not precisely known but are apparently high.

Health

West Bengal has not been able to make good its headstart in medical education and public health facilities. The per capita expenditure on medical and public health departments was Rs. 12.31 compared to the all-India figure of Rs. 10.63 (1975-76). However, the doctor population ratio is 1:1732 compared to the all-India ratio 1:3132, as of 1977. The average population served by a hospital bed is 958, against the national figure of 1231 (1976-77). West Bengal is just attaining the target of one primary health centre for each of its 335 blocks.

Nutrition

No nutritional survey has been undertaken in the state, except for small pockets. But the high incidence of infectious diseases, like tuberculosis, is believed to be a consequence of the low resistance of the generality of the population on account of poor nutritional status.

Sanitation and Water

Insanitation is the rule in the villages and the slums. Subsoil water close to surface makes pit latrines an impossibility in many districts during the rainy season. And deep pits with proper lining are costly. In effect, sanitation receives the lowest priority even at the hands of development agents. Footwear is the exception in rural Bengal. Water-borne diseases are common. A survey in Purulia showed more than half the population suffered from worms.

Protected water supply is a problem even in Calcutta. Deep tubewells needed to bypass salinity are too costly to be quickly provided.

Domestic Product

The (quick) estimate of the State's domestic product (at current prices) was Rs. 67,570 million for 1978-79, giving a per capita figure of Rs. 1279. This is a shade better than the all-India average of Rs. 1249.

The 1978-79 domestic product marks an over three per cent increase over the previous year—though at constant (1970-71) prices, it represents, not a rise, but a marginal fall in per capita as well as aggregate terms.

The 1978 floods damaged much of the kharif crop and agriculture contributes about 40 per cent of the domestic product. The floods also affected production in the large and medium industry. This downtrend was countered by an increase in cropped area and improved production by the small scale sector during 1978-79. Construction activity improved during the year.

Power supply remains erratic, though the installed capacity rose during 1978-79 to 1865 MW. What is surprising is that, unlike the other industrial states, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, the per capita consumption of electricity has been falling, from 114 Kwh in 1965-66 to 110 Kwh in 1975-76.

Poverty

But for Bihar and Orissa, West Bengal has the highest proportion of population below the poverty line for any state in India. According to the Finance Commission's report of 1978, the submerged percentage for West Bengal is 62.28. That means, roughly 6 million children below 6 years live in West Bengal below the poverty line. Also, West Bengal's share of the number of persons in India below the poverty line is the third largest for any State, coming as it does after Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

Employment

The number of persons registered at the employment exchanges rose from 1.67 million in September 1978 to 2.04 million a year later.

The employment in the organised sector is about 2.5 million—1.44 million in the public sector and a little over a million in the private sector (1978 figures).

Politics

West Bengal has been politically alive. With Kerala and Tripura, it is one of the three states ruled by the Communist Party (Marxist). From 1947 to 1967, the state was ruled by the Congress party. Between 1967 and 1972, United Front governments of the non-Congress parties including CPM, alternated with direct rule by the central government. The Congress was back in power in 1972 and remained till 1977. The elections in 1977 brought to power a Left-front government led by CPM.

Social Change

Change is happening, if slowly—through land reform, power to the panchayats, etc. But political and ideological motivation is not the only factor at work. Bengal has a humanistic tradition founded on moral values. At least up to a point on the road to social transformation, these two sets of forces pull together, as they seem to do.

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