

WHOM DOES EMPOWERMENT DELIVER? A Study of Poverty Alleviation in Hooghly, West Bengal

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Abstract

It is widely believed that empowerment of the poor enables them to benefit from anti-poverty interventions. This paper examines this view by comparing the outcomes of two anti-poverty programmes in Hooghly district of West Bengal, India under situations of the 'absence' and the 'presence' of empowerment. It delineates the dichotomous trend in the distribution of benefits from the anti-poverty programme under empowerment. Though, on an average, the less privileged poor got higher coverage under the empowered situation, distribution of benefits among the assisted poor was inequitous. It was observed that for creating vote banks, panchayats distributed the assistance thinly among a large number of assistance seekers, particularly from the vulnerable section among the poor. At the same time, the logic of market resulted in greater benefit to a smaller section of relatively privileged poor.

Introduction

Studies suggest that anti-poverty programmes have not always been successful in reaching the poor (Guhan, 1990; Rath, 1990). This has happened as programmes for the poor generally operate in a situation where the poor have very little say in the agencies implementing them, and the non-poor control these agencies. To remedy the situation empowering the poor by organising them has been suggested. For instance, Anuradha Joshi and M. Moore (1999) observe:

There is a generic problem in anti-poverty interventions. The intended recipients- the poor- tend to be politically weak, in the broad sense of the term, in relation to public agencies and the non-poor. Anti-poverty intervention in poor countries will tend to work better if intended recipients can increase their influence over the implementation stage through collective action of various kinds.

Of late, these types of arguments have given way to a broader concept of 'empowerment'. While empowerment 'means different things to different persons' (Beteille, 1999), some of its important aspects may be identified as follows:

1. Empowerment primarily seeks to change society through a rearrangement of power (Ibid).
2. Empowerment is a process whereby people acquire more influence over factors that shape their lives. The concept tends to be primarily applied for disadvantaged groups of people, and is usually linked to a vision of more equal living conditions in the society (Dale, 2000).

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3. Empowerment involves strengthening the capacity of poor by organising them into informal groups and formal associations and promoting their participation (Mohanty, 2001).

This paper examines how the above attributes of empowerment influence poverty alleviation¹. It is based on a study undertaken in West Bengal, where, in 1977, a Left Front government led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI (M)] came to power. This government has become the longest-ruling democratically elected Communist government in world history, and it provides a unique example of a sustained effort at empowering the rural poor.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: Section II gives an idea of the study set-up. Section III presents an account of the shaping of anti-poverty programme before the reforms empowering the poor were initiated in West Bengal. Section IV gives an account of the measures undertaken to empower the poor. To comprehend the impact of empowerment, Section V undertakes a comparative analysis of the households assisted under the anti-poverty programmes in the 'empowered' and the 'non-empowered' situations. It also examines the nature of income generation from the anti-poverty programme under the empowered situation. Section VI explains the findings, and Section VII makes some concluding observations.

II. The Study Set-up

One of the ways of understanding the impact of the impact of anti-poverty programme is to undertake a comparative analysis of the outcomes of anti-poverty programmes under the empowered and the non-empowered situations. Such an experimental situation is often difficult to get. However, the author has conducted two empirical studies of poverty alleviation programmes, which, taken together, represent a situation close to such an experimental design. Below we describe this situation.

The pioneering attempt at alleviating rural poverty in India was made by the Small Farmers' Development Agency (hereafter SFDA) programme. This programme, meant for small farmers, marginal farmers and agricultural labourers – the main sections of the rural poor, was introduced in 1971, in some selected districts throughout the country, as a pilot project. On 2 October 1979, the SFDA programme was merged with the Integrated Rural Development Programme (hereafter IRDP), when all community development blocks were brought under the IRDP. Basically, both SFDA and IRDP sought to generate additional income among their respective clientele through asset-endowment - by providing easy institutional credit, capital subsidies and support in terms of extension services etc. The IRDP's target group mainly consisted of small and marginal farmers, agricultural labourers and rural artisans. The pattern of subsidy was 25 percent for small farmers, 33.33 percent for marginal farmers, agricultural labourers and rural artisans, and 50 percent for scheduled castes/tribes and physically handicapped persons among them (GOI, 1998). The subsidy given under the IRDP was similar to that of the SFDA programme. However, being extended to cover the non-agricultural poor, the criterion for identifying the poor changed from landholding to income. The households having income

below a defined poverty line became the clientele of the IRDP. Thus, the IRDP was considered as an extension and expansion of the SFDA programme (GOI 1981).

As part of his doctoral work, the author conducted a study of the SFDA programme in Hooghly district of West Bengal during 1977-78 (see Mandal 1981). Though around that time a CPI(M)-led Left Front government had just come to power in the state, the data collected in this study pertained to the implementation of the programme during the pre-Left Front government period. The implementation of the SFDA and other rural development programmes was then mainly dependent on the administrators (see Section III); there was no attempt at empowering the people. Thus, the SFDA is an instance of implementation of anti-poverty programme in the absence of empowerment of the poor.

Fourteen years after the SFDA study, the author conducted a study of the IRDP in Hooghly district using the data frame of the SFDA study (see Mandal 1995). These fourteen years also happen to be the period of Left Front rule in West Bengal, during which a series of reforms empowering the poor were undertaken in the rural areas of the state. Thus, our IRDP study represents an instance of the implementation of anti-poverty programme under the empowered situation for the poor. Taken together, these studies capture a unique near-experimental situation to examine the impact of empowerment on poverty alleviation.

III. Anti-poverty Programme Under Non-Empowered Situation

District was the area of operation of the SFDA. However, apart from the monitoring office located at the district headquarters, the SFDA did not have a separate administrative machinery of its own. The project office at the district headquarters had to get its work done through the existing administrative set-up of the district, that is, the various developmental functionaries of the district. In this, the block development office, the base of the developmental administration in India, played the crucial role.

For understanding how messages about the SFDA programme reached the villagers and how the programme implementation was initiated, it is important to look into the operation of the agricultural extension of the developmental blocks. In most parts of the country, the agricultural extension service of the developmental blocks was rendered through the Training and Visit (T&V) system proposed by the World Bank (Benor and Harrison, 1977) for faster introduction of modern technology. The key concept of the T&V system of extension was the 'imitable contact farmers', according to which 'The message of the extension service should be focused mainly on selected contact farmers who will assist in spreading the new practice to most farmers in the area quickly' (Ibid). The Village Level Worker (VLW) (the key grass roots level official of the block administration) selected such farmers as 'contact farmers' who could easily accept new methods. This required the selected farmers to be able to promptly meet the requirements of the new practice, and be able to take the risk of trying a new agricultural practice. Both of these presumed the economic soundness of the farmer. Thus, invariably the 'contact farmers' of the T&V system were better off farmers. Usually they were also the influential farmers of the locality. The VLWs found it prudent to keep them pleased.

Often they were the farmers through whom modern technology was propagated in the 1960s to increase agricultural production. Though in the 1970s the emphasis changed from 'growth' to 'growth-with-equity' and programmes like the SFDA were introduced, the same system of extension service was continued. As a result, the information about the SFDA programme reached the 'contact farmers', who usually were the better off farmers and not the farmers for whom a pro-poor programme like the SFDA was meant. This resulted in many non-poor appropriating the assistance meant for the poor. This was a situation devoid of any attempt at empowering the poor.

IV. Measures of Empowerment Supporting the IRDP

After coming to power in 1977, in the state (province) of West Bengal, the Left Front government undertook significant reform programmes in rural Bengal. The most important of these was the successful implementation of land reforms, including the redistribution of land held over the legal ceiling to the poor, legislation for higher crop-shares, and security of tenures of sharecroppers. For effective implementation of tenancy legislation, a campaign (Operation Barga) was launched for the registration of existing tenant leases (Gazdar and Sengupta, 1999).

Second, the Left Front government felt that the panchayati raj system, advocated by the central government and introduced in West Bengal, would provide a vehicle through which the poor could be empowered. Accordingly, the panchayats were reorganised and revived and center of power in development administration of the district moved from government officials to elected representatives of the panchayats.

Finally, the pro-poor reforms mentioned above were undertaken in the backdrop of increased political mobilisation of the rural poor by the All India Kisan Sabha (the peasant wing of the CPI [M]) (Dasgupta, 1984).

In brief, the IRDP in West Bengal, over the years, got the benefit of structural reforms of the rural areas in terms of land reforms and mobilisation of the poor, which, in turn, helped the process of strengthening the panchayats and devolving power to the people. Thus, the implementation of IRDP was backed by a very substantive attempt at empowering the poor, which was lacking under the SFDA. In the following section, we will examine the impact of this empowerment of the poor on the implementation of anti-poverty programmes like the IRDP.

V. Impact of Empowerment on Poverty Alleviation

In this section, we have analysed the impact of empowerment on benefit distribution from anti-poverty programmes through a two-stage analysis as follows.

Change in Socioeconomic Status of the Assisted Households

We have undertaken a comparative analysis of the socioeconomic status of the households assisted under the SFDA and the IRDP. These two comparable sets of data present the socioeconomic background of the households assisted under anti-poverty programmes under two different situations; in the ‘absence’ (the SFDA data) and the ‘presence’ (the IRDP data) of empowerment in West Bengal. This comparison captures the impact of empowerment on poverty alleviation.

Not everybody entitled to get assistance under anti-poverty programmes gets assistance. We have assumed that the chance of getting assistance is largely influenced by the socioeconomic status of the household. In our SFDA and IRDP studies, we have included caste, land holding, family type, family size, education and occupational status of the household as indicators of socioeconomic status of the household.² Table 1 presents the socio-economic status of the households assisted under anti-poverty programmes under non-empowered and empowered situations, as reflected in the SFDA and the IRDP data, respectively. It is seen that the lower-caste marginal farmers or agricultural labourer households, with small-size family and with lower educational and occupational status, improved their share most in getting assistance under the anti-poverty, programme under the empowered situation. On the other hand, the dominant caste households, having more than two hectares of land, with large families and with higher and medium educational and occupational status lost most. Thus, under the empowered situation, the assistance under the anti-poverty programme has gone to the less privileged sections of the poor in greater number. This validates the widely held belief that empowerment enables the less privileged to benefit more from anti-poverty programmes. Our contention is that the greater coverage of the less privileged under the IRDP has been possible largely due to empowered position of the poor in West Bengal, which was lacking under the SFDA. How could one be sure that the greater coverage of the less privileged poor under the IRDP was due to their empowerment? What about the IRDP in other states, where the poor were not empowered as in West Bengal? Were IRDP-assisted households in other states in any way different from their counterparts in West Bengal? The answer follows.

Table 1: Socioeconomic status of households assisted under anti poverty programmes

Indicators of socio-economic status	(1) Distribution of assisted households under <i>non-empowered situation</i> (N=83)	(2) Distribution of assisted households under empowered situation (N=142)	(3) Nature of change due to empowerment Gain(+) / Loss(-)
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CASTE	Higher	22	20	-2
	Dominant	59	34	-25
	Lower	10	40	+30
	Muslim	8	6	-2
LAND HOLDING	Above 2 hect.	44	10	-34
	1.1 to 2 hect.	26	16	-10
	Upto 1 hect.	20	42	+22
	Landless	9	32	+23
FAMILY TYPE	Joint	41	39	-3
	Nuclear	59	61	+3
FAMILY SIZE	More than 10	35	15	-25
	6 to 10	54	51	-3
	Upto 5	11	34	+23
EDUCATION	Higher	41	20	-21
	Medium	53	29	-24
	Lower	6	51	+45
OCCUPATION	Higher	31	13	-18
	Medium	57	34	-23
	Lower	12	53	+41

Under the SFDA in Hooghly, the administrative officers were mainly responsible for identifying the beneficiaries and providing assistance to them. This resulted in large-scale appropriation of assistance by better off sections. A similar thing happened under the IRDP in states where the administrative officers played the key role in implementing the programme. The Programme Evaluation Organisation of the Planning Commission has recorded that funds under the poverty alleviation programmes like the IRDP have been least misused in West Bengal, where the beneficiaries were identified by the panchayats. In other states, where the administrative officials were mainly responsible for dispensing IRDP funds, there has been widespread misuse. This was not the fault of the officials per se; they do not have local information and they relied on patwari or some influential villagers (Ghosh 1988).

Here I wish to recall some encounters during my fieldwork. While collecting data for the SFDA study, I interacted with an agricultural labourer who, though eligible, did not get assistance under the SFDA. He had employment as an agricultural labourer at the most for six months a year when there is rain-fed cultivation. When he did not have any employment, he did several things for survival, including gathering food from common property resources-like plucking edible green leaves, which grow in marshy land, or catching fish from ponds or other water bodies. He added,

...sometimes I steal fruits or vegetables from some villager's garden. Sometime I go to landlord's house and ask him to give me some work like fencing his garden or some other odd jobs. In return, I get something to eat and may be few rupees as wage. That is how I somehow survive in those days when I do not get any regular employment.

This was the situation when an anti-poverty programme like the SFDA was in operation, but was not backed by empowerment measures. The SFDA assistance in that village was given to better off farmers and to the exclusion of agricultural labourers. Has the situation changed in fourteen years since then, as anti-poverty programmes are now backed by empowerment measures? Do the poor villagers, like that agricultural labourer, still need to beg the landlord for work or steal from the neighbour's garden for survival? I do not have any direct answer to these questions. However, while collecting data for the IRDP study, I asked a villager, who was employed in the panchayat office and whom I found very informative: 'Could you tell me about any change you have noticed in the village due to the operation of IRDP?' After some thought, he said, 'One thing I can tell you, the incidents of theft have come down very much. Earlier, if anybody left any utensil (taken for washing) on the banks of the pond, in all likelihood that would get stolen. Now such incidents are rare.' Other villagers present there agreed.

Let me recall another such encounter that reflected the functioning of the SFDA in Hooghly. One day, when I was in the SFDA office at the district town of Chinsura, I met a marginal farmer who was visiting that office to follow up his application for assistance. He was a bit dissatisfied, as he could not meet the officer concerned. Pointing to the signboard of the SFDA office, he told me, 'You see the word "Small" written over there on the sign-board should be replaced by the word "Big". That would give a more realistic picture about this office.'

While collecting data about the IRDP, I often probed the villagers and officials about whom do they think got assisted under the programme. What I gathered is as follows: one cannot complain much on the ground that the IRDP assistance was given to the non-poor at the exclusion of the poor. The complaint was that the assistance was given to the poor who were closer to the ruling party. That is, the main accusation was no longer about appropriation of the assistance by the non-poor, but about political patronage in the distribution of assistance among the poor.

Data presented in Table 1 and our field experience substantiates the point that, in comparison with the SFDA programme, relatively less privileged among the poor got assistance under the IRDP in our study area. We attribute this positive outcome of the anti-poverty programme as a contribution of the sustained effort at empowerment of the poor by the Left Front government.

Our story could have ended here on a positive note on the role of empowerment in enabling the poor to benefit from anti-poverty programmes. After all, this is what is widely believed. However, as we came across a lacuna of target-group-oriented programmes for the poor, we probed further. As the earlier development efforts had

failed to benefit the poor, programmes specially designed to benefit them were introduced. Probably, out of concern with reaching the poor, emphasis was laid on delivering assistance to the target group, and it was naively assumed that just delivering assistance to the target group would automatically benefit them. Thus, ‘the recipients of assistance’ under the target-group-oriented programmes are commonly referred to as ‘beneficiaries’. During the SFDA study, it dawned upon us that getting assistance does not necessarily mean benefiting from assistance. Getting assistance is only the first step; assistance becomes meaningful only when it enables the assistance households to get income. Accordingly, in the IRDP study we collected data on who got how much income due to assistance. These data, which we discuss next, reveal an interesting dimension of the impact of empowerment on the distribution of benefit from anti-poverty programmes.

Socioeconomic Status and the Nature of Income Generation

In our IRDP study, data were collected on per annum income of the assisted households out of the IRDP schemes or activities. Based on their annual income from the IRDP as reported by the respondents, they were categorised into three groups: ‘no income’, ‘income up to Rs.3,000’, and ‘income above Rs.3,000’ (see Table 2). Significantly, Table 2 shows that 35 percent of the assisted households did not get any income out of assistance. That is, for more than one-third of the assisted households, the IRDP assistance was no more than a one-time dole.

Secondly, Table 2 shows that the predominant trend is, the higher the socioeconomic status, and the better the chance of getting income out of the IRDP assistance.

A significant finding emerges when we look at the data in Tables 1 and 2 together. In Table 1, we saw that, due to empowerment, relatively less privileged households of the poor could increase their representation in the IRDP assistance. The income generation data in Table 2 shows that it is the relatively privileged among them who could increase their income out of such assistance. The less privileged among the poor failed to gain much income out of assistance. Thus, under the empowered situation, assistance has gone more in favour of relatively less privileged households, in terms of number of households assisted, whereas the amount of increase in income has favoured relatively privileged households among the poor. Empowerment enabled the less privileged poor to get assistance more in number than in substance, which still remained the prerogative of the relatively privileged poor. As such, empowerment has operated here more as a tokenism for the less privileged.

Table 2: Socioeconomic status and income from IRDP Assistance under empowered situation

Indicators of socio-economic status	NO INCOME %	INCOME INCREASED UPTO Rs. 3000/- %	INCOME INCREASED ABOVE Rs.3000/- %	TOTAL N
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CASTE	Higher	48	38	14	29
	Dominant	23	35	42	48
	Lower	37	35	28	57
	Muslim	50	50	0	8
LAND HOLDING	Above 2 hect.	27	33	40	15
	1.1 to 2 hect.	17	31	52	23
	Upto 1 hect	39	41	20	59
	Landless	42	36	22	45
FAMILY TYPE	Joint	29	33	38	55
	Nuclear	39	39	22	87
FAMILY SIZE	More than 10	14	24	62	21
	6 to 10	36	42	22	72
	Upto 5	43	35	22	49
EDUCATION	Higher	39	25	36	28
	Medium	29	34	37	41
	Lower	37	42	21	73
OCCUPATION	Higher	11	33	56	18
	Medium	36	31	33	48
	Lower	41	41	18	76
Total		35	37	28	142

Similar dichotomous trends have been reported by other studies, too. For instance, Pranab Bardhan and Dilip Mookherjee (2004) examined poverty alleviation efforts of West Bengal panchayats during 1978-98, a period close to that of our study (1978-95), and concluded that anti-poverty interventions in West Bengal were, on the whole, well targeted; but, within the poor, the more vulnerable section got neglected and the relatively better off among the poor benefited. Incidentally, their report covered, besides the IRDP, other poverty alleviation efforts like agricultural mini-kits distribution, employment programmes, the financial performance of the panchayats, and the land reforms programme undertaken by panchayats.

In a different context, a somewhat similar point has been made for the Indian economy as a whole. After analysing the performance of Indian economy since 1980, R. Nagaraj (2000) concludes, 'It has been a period of growth with inequality.' He then observes, 'Interestingly, such an inequalising process of economic growth has occurred at a time when there is a distinct diffusion of political power towards the erstwhile-disenfranchised

classes and castes, which broadly represent those left-behind in economic development'. That is, what we have found in our micro-level study is endorsed by Nagaraj's macro-level analysis: that, despite empowerment, the poor were unable to duly benefit from the process of development. In the following section, we shall examine the reasons for the limited achievement of empowerment.

VI. Limited Achievement of Empowerment: An Explanation

Under the IRDP, problems of the poor households were assessed and, based on that assessment, an appropriate scheme was suggested to enable a household to increase its income. In allocating assistance to the target group, the prescribed guideline of the IRDP was the dictum of *antyodaya*, the principle of 'putting the last first'. However, Table 3 suggests that a diametrically opposite policy was practiced in allocating assistance even under the empowered situation. The distribution of assistance amount among the households corresponded to their socioeconomic status: the lower status households received lesser assistance, while the higher status households received higher assistance. Chi-square test showed this trend to be statistically significant.

When we look at this finding in conjunction with the findings of Table 2, the implication becomes clear. In Table 2, we have seen that income from the IRDP assistance accrued in accordance with socioeconomic status of the household. This was so, Table 3 suggests that, because the assistance amount was distributed corresponding to the socioeconomic status of the households. In other words, income accrued in accordance with the assistance provided under the IRDP. This is confirmed by Table 4, which shows that a lesser assistance amount is likely to generate less or no income, whereas a higher assistance amount is more likely to enable a household to have higher income. The association between assistance amount and income generation is found to be statistically significant. Thus, putting the findings of Table 2, 3 and 4 together, we may conclude that the IRDP assistance was distributed corresponding to the assisted households' socioeconomic status, and income followed accordingly. In other words, relatively privileged among the poor got higher assistance even under the empowered situation, and they derived higher income out of such assistance.

Thus, the finding that even under the empowered situation the relatively less privileged section among the poor got less assistance and less income seems little surprising, as empowerment is meant for the disadvantaged. A probable explanation for this may be found in the following observations of Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen:

Table 3: Socioeconomic status of the assisted households And the amount of assistance received by them

Indicators of socio-economic status	Assistance upto Rs. 5000	Assistance above	All assisted households
	N=80	Rs. 5000 N=62	N=142

CASTE	Higher	21	19	20
	Dominant	27	44	34
	Lower	44	35	40
	Muslim	8	2	6
		$X^2 = 6.9$	d.f.3	P< .05
LAND HOLDING	Above 2 hect.	5	18	10
	1.1 to 2 hect.	5	31	16
	Upto 1 hect.	51	29	42
	Landless	39	22	32
		$X^2 = 27.145$	d.f.3	P>.001
FAMILY TYPE	Joint	25	56	39
	Nuclear	75	44	61
		$X^2 = 14.557$	d.f.1	P>.001
FAMILY SIZE	More than 10	5	28	15
	6 to 10	49	53	51
	Upto 5	46	19	34
		$X^2 = 19.328$	d.f..2	P>.001
EDUCATION	Higher	11	31	20
	Medium	25	34	29
	Lower	64	35	51
		$X^2 = 14.555$	d.f.2	P>.001
OCCUPATION	Higher	2	26	13
	Medium	29	40	34
	Lower	69	34	53
		$X^2 = 24.289$	d.f.2	P>.001.

Table 4: Distribution of assisted households in terms of the amount of assistance received and income generated under IRDP

Amount of assistance received	Income derived from Assistance (per annum)			TOTAL N
	NO INCOME %	INCOME UPTO Rs 3000 %	INCOME ABOVE Rs. 3000 %	
Upto Rs. 5000/-	44	40	16	80
Above Rs. 5000/-	24	32	44	62
TOTAL	35	37	28	142

$$\chi^2 = 13.604; \quad df = 2; \quad P < .001 \text{ Level}$$

The extent of economic distress experienced by different individuals is, to a great extent, a matter of common knowledge within a given rural community. An apparent solution to the selection problem would take the form of making the selection process rely on local institutions to allocate public support according to individual needs.

Would this method work in practice? The leaders of a village community undoubtedly have a lot of information relevant for appropriate selection. In addition to the informational issue, there is also the question as to whether the community leaders have strong enough motivation-or incentives-to give adequately preferential treatment to vulnerable groups. Much will undoubtedly depend on the nature and functioning of political institutions at the local level and in particular on the power that the poor and the deprived have in the rural community. Where the poor are also powerless-as is frequently the case-the reliance on local institutions to allocate relief is problematic, and can end up being at best indiscriminate and a worst blatantly iniquitous, as numerous observers have noted in diverse countries (quoted in Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2004).

Bardhan and Mookherjee have validated this observation in their study on 'Poverty Alleviation Efforts of Panchayats in West Bengal':

We consistently found that targeting performance was poorer when the land distribution became less equal, the poor was less literate, when there were more low caste households, and local elections were less contested. From a normative standpoint, the opposite should have happened: poverty alleviation effort should have increased when there was greater poverty, illiteracy or inequality. This suggests that the outcomes reflected variations in government accountability owing to a decline in the political weight of the poor when they become more vulnerable (Ibid).

Based on the above observations, we may infer that empowerment becomes weaker as the degree of vulnerability of the poor increases. As a result, it is only the better off among the poor who gain from the limited operation of empowerment.

Let us now look at the operational part of the above outcome, which is probably in the domain of the market forces. Under the IRDP, a household was provided assistance in terms of asset and/or services. The IRDP operated mainly up to the point of providing assistance. After that, the assisted household was expected to utilise the assistance to increase its income by operating in the market. Whether a household was able to increase its income depended on its socioeconomic position and entrepreneurial skill, and on the market. Not every assisted household could be expected to have the required entrepreneurial competencies, and the market generally favoured those who had more resources. It seems that empowerment operated up to the point of whom to assist. Here, empowerment could tilt the balance in favour of the less privileged. However, who should be given how much assistance – a decision taken by the panchayat leaders, and

developmental and bank officials – was influenced by the market reality, which was not in favour of the less privileged poor. “Betting on the strong among the poor” appears to be the operational policy here, ignoring the dictum of *antyo daya*, even under the empowered situation. Thus, though empowerment was largely successful in checking the appropriation of assistance by the non-poor and enabling the poor to get assisted, in the allocation of assistance amount and deriving income from such assistance, the logic of market prevailed.

The process of empowerment itself has some inherent limitations. For instance, it may some times breed populism in the process of promoting participation. It was reported during the fieldwork that panchayat leaders used the IRDP assistance to nurture vote banks, which is natural under electoral politics. There was a tendency on the part of the panchayat members to please as many IRDP-assistance seekers as possible. This was reflected in the following trends in the distribution of IRDP assistance: First, though the IRDP envisaged the provision of assistance through a package of schemes to each family to enable it to cross the poverty line, generally only one scheme was financed to a beneficiary in each family. Second, for pleasing more people, with an eye on the vote bank, schemes requiring small funds were given priority. For instance, a scheme involving converting paddy to rice as an income generating activity, that requires little funding, alone accounted for 40.6 percent of the beneficiaries of the IRDP in Hooghly district during Seventh Five-Year Plan period (1985-90). Third, often the stipulated amount for a particular project was given to more than one assistance seeker by dividing the assistance amount for a scheme. This defeated the purpose of providing assistance: a poor household, with a fraction of an amount for a scheme, could not undertake the scheme because of shortage of funds. Obviously, such households failed to get any additional income from the IRDP assistance. Covering a large number of beneficiaries through thin spread of assistance suited not only the elected leaders (who could cultivate their vote banks), but also the officials (who could show a higher figure of households assisted under the IRDP). The process of empowerment, being a political process involving electoral politics, runs the risk of being misused for political patronage even without duly benefiting the poor.

VII. Conclusion

Our study suffers from some limitations. First, the findings of our study are drawn from a post facto quasi-experimental situation. Though the IRDP is considered as an extension and expansion of the SFDA programme, some of our findings may be a reflection of the differences between the two programmes. Findings from a full-fledged experimental study, controlling for the ‘presence’ and the ‘absence’ of empowerment and keeping other conditions identical, would have been more acceptable. Our database is very small. Hence, the significance of our findings is limited.

In spite of these limitations, the trend delineated in our study finds echo in some other studies as well, giving credence to our conclusion that empowerment improved targeting performance of anti-poverty programmes; but, at the same time, relatively better off among the poor got higher benefit from anti-poverty programmes and this benefit

reduced with increasing vulnerability of the poor. The limited operation of empowerment resulted in iniquitous poverty alleviation. If the limited operation of empowerment observed here is valid, it would be important to explore the corrective measures. Otherwise, the quest for growth-with-equity will remain elusive.

Notes

1. We use the term 'poverty alleviation' in a very narrow sense here, to mean the implementation of anti-poverty programmes.
2. The 'higher' caste category includes all castes other than the scheduled castes, tribes and dominant castes. In the area of our study, we found two agricultural castes- Mahishya and Sadgope- to be the dominant castes. The 'lower' caste category includes those who belong to the scheduled castes and tribes. There were some Muslim households in our samples. For convenience, we have shown them as a separate category under caste. Education refers to the average number of years of schooling of all adult members of the household, and is categorized as 'higher', 'medium' and 'lower'. Similarly, occupational status refers to the occupational prestige score (Pareek and Trivedi 1974) of all adult members of the household, and is categorized as 'higher', 'medium' and 'lower'.

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