

Local Democracy and Clientelism: Implications for Political Stability in Rural West Bengal

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This paper examines factors underlying the unusual stability of political power in rural West Bengal, using data pertaining to the functioning of local democracy from a household survey conducted by the authors during 2003-05. It examines patterns of political awareness, participation, distribution of benefits by gram panchayats, and voting across households of varying socio-economic characteristics. The main findings are that (i) political participation was high on average; (ii) within villages panchayat benefits flowed to poor and scheduled caste/scheduled tribe groups on par or better, compared with the rest of the population; (iii) distribution of benefits across villages was biased against those with more landless households; and (iv) the lasting political success of the Left owed partly to a clientelist relationship of the party with the voters, and partly to the gratitude of voters of low socio-economic status arising out of broad-based changes.

Amongst all Indian states, West Bengal is the only one in which a single political party has uninterruptedly been in power at state and local levels of government over the past three decades. With some moderate fluctuations, the political supremacy of the Left Front has been maintained in both panchayat and assembly elections throughout the period 1977-2006. This is clear from Figures 1 and 2 (p 47). The seat shares of the Left reached a peak around 1987-88 and trended downward for three consecutive elections thereafter. But in the 2003 panchayat elections and 2006 assembly elections they picked up again so that no discernable downward (or upward) trend was present for the period as a whole. The purpose of the present paper is to understand and explain this unusual political stability on the basis of a household survey conducted by the authors during 2003-05.

1 Introduction

The long lasting political supremacy of the Left in West Bengal received a jolt in the recently-held panchayat elections of 2008. In 2003, 71% gram panchayats, 86% panchayat samitis and 88% zilla parishads were controlled by the Left. In 2008, these proportions were reduced to 49% for gram panchayats, 69% for panchayat samitis and 76% for zilla parishads. But, as Figures 1 and 2 would testify, there was no indication of this decline before 2006. In other words, this decline in Left supremacy has been sudden rather than gradual. Events after 2006 must have prompted this abrupt change: the most obvious and noticeable event likely to have been responsible for this transformation of public sentiment is the attempt of the government to acquire agricultural land for industrialisation. However, our survey, which was conducted before 2006 cannot capture the effects of this event. Our purpose, therefore, is to explain the long political supremacy of the Left in West Bengal during 1977-2006. However, we make some very brief comments about the change in voting pattern in 2008 in the concluding section of the paper.

This supremacy is difficult to explain on the basis of economic performance alone. The performance of West Bengal on the economic front has hardly been extraordinary compared to other Indian states since the late 1970s, when the Left Front government first began to dominate the political landscape. It is, of course, true that during the 1980s the state witnessed a spectacular growth in agricultural production, particularly in foodgrains, which raised incomes and spread prosperity in rural areas. But for various reasons this upward trend started tapering off from the beginning of the 1990s. At the beginning of the new century, the level of living in rural West Bengal stood in the neighbourhood of

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that of the average Indian village. The 2001 National Human Development Report of Indian states reveal that by some indicators the state was below the all India average, while by some others it was above. But in neither case was the divergence significant.¹ To this one may add the steady decline of the formal

Figure 1: Seat Share of Left Front in Three-Tier Panchayat Elections (1978-2003)

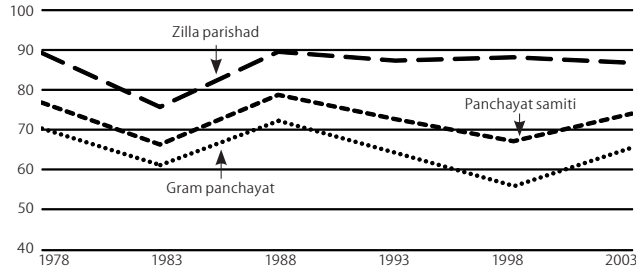
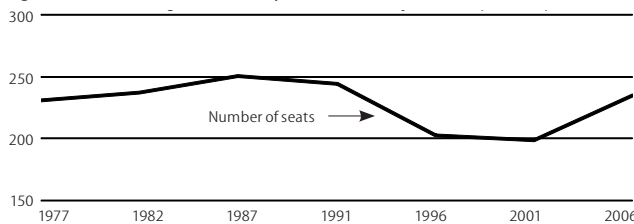


Figure 2: Left Front Seats in Assembly Elections (1978-2003)



industrial sector in West Bengal during the 1980s and the 1990s. So one is faced with the non-trivial task of explaining the unusual political durability of the Left Front in the state. Of course, there may have been important distributional changes favouring the large majority of the rural population composed of the poor: e.g., gratitude for the land reforms implemented mainly in the 1980s may have played a positive role in the Left Front winning elections. The agricultural growth of that period may also have been credited to the ruling party, which, in turn, could have given rise to a feeling of gratitude that survived the stagnation of the 1990s. But these hypotheses deserve careful scrutiny.

One particular achievement often attributed to the Left Front is that it introduced and subsequently maintained a genuine grass roots democracy in rural West Bengal. This involved decentralisation of rural power through a well functioning panchayat raj, well in advance of most other Indian states. It is frequently claimed that the hierarchical power structure existing prior to the advent of Left Front rule in rural areas was replaced by a more democratic structure where the poor and the underprivileged were enabled to play an active role in local decision-making within villages. As a consequence, they acquired a life of dignity hitherto unknown to them, and a form of economic security not reflected in aggregate measures of economic well-being for the state. Clearly, if this claim turns out to be correct, it could explain the political success of the Left Front in terms of good governance and a well functioning grass roots level democracy. Is the hypothesis of good governance supported by actual data?

The present paper examines the functioning of local democracy in rural West Bengal under Left Front rule. A well functioning democracy entails, on the one hand, political awareness and political participation of the poor

and the underprivileged. On the other hand, it requires a proper targeting of government benefits, through the panchayat system, towards the socially disadvantaged. On the basis of a survey conducted in 2003-05 of 2,400 households in 88 villages of West Bengal, we investigate the extent to which this was the case. We investigate, for example, the roles of wealth, caste, education and gender in determining political participation at the local level. In particular, we check if the poor or the socially disadvantaged in rural West Bengal were less aware of government actions or political realities in comparison with more privileged counterparts. We also examine how political participation (ranging from participation in elections, village meetings, political campaigns, to direct financial contributions to political parties and placing demands in village panchayat meetings) varied significantly with economic or social status. Finally, we examine both inter-village and intra-village benefit delivery patterns to discover how local governments distributed benefits in various developmental programmes across diverse economic and social classes, and whether these distributions reflected political partisanship in any manner.

We find high average levels of political participation in elections, village meetings and political campaigns, exposure to the media, political awareness and awareness of programmes administered by the gram panchayats (GP). These results are consistent with findings for other Indian states (e.g., by Krishna (2006) for Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh) or for many Latin American countries (e.g., Gaviria et al (2002)). But more importantly, apart from education, gender and immigration status, socio-economically weaker sections of the population were at least as likely to participate in local politics compared to others. Indeed, after controlling for household land, education and immigrant status, households belonging to SC and ST communities exhibited significantly higher levels of attendance and active participation in gram sabhas, as well as in contributions to political campaigns.

Our study also reveals that the distribution of benefits within a village exhibited a bias in favour of SC/ST groups and those with less education, and no bias with respect to either more or less land owned. However, comparisons across villages show that villages with a higher proportions of landless households received lower benefits per household. These results suggest greater accountability to the poor within the lowest level of local governments, compared with higher levels of government (i.e., at the block or district levels) that allocate programmes across different gram panchayats. These results are consistent with the findings in Bardhan and Mookherjee (2006) which were based on village panel data collected directly from official records of local

Table 1: Characteristics of Sample Households

Agricultural Landownership	% in Sample	Age	% Male	Maximum Education in Household	% SC	% ST	% Agriculture Occupation	% Immigrants
Landless	50.54	45	88	6.6	35	2.4	26	40
0 to 1.5 acres	27.39	48	88	7.8	34	4.9	65	17
1.5 to 2.5 acres	3.96	56	92	10.8	15	7.4	82	19
2.5 to 5 acres	10.74	58	93	11.1	24	3.1	72	10
5 to 10 acres	6.16	60	89	12.5	22	4.1	66	12
10 acres and above	1.21	59	100	13.9	24	6.9	72	14
All	100	49	89	8.0	32	3.4	47	28

governments. Finally, our study indicates that village meetings may have provided a channel of accountability of GPs to the poor and low caste groups. However, it does not necessarily indicate a causal impact of village meetings on targeting of benefits: the results are equally consistent with the hypothesis that village meeting participation and targeting both reflected the effect of deeper unobserved characteristics of the community such as social capital.

Can we infer that the pattern of benefit distribution was consistent with good governance? Relative to several other states and relative to what the situation was in West Bengal before, the distribution of benefits *within* a village (or GP) did not show any significant bias against the poor or the socially disadvantaged. In this sense West Bengal is marked by a remarkable absence of “local capture” by the elite which is one of the persistent problems in decentralisation experiences all over the world. But at the *inter-village level* there seems to be an effective anti-poor bias in the actual allocation of benefits. It is not clear if this is a problem in the implementation of the criteria laid down for inter-GP allotments in the State Finance Commission reports. These criteria and the methods of their implementation are not widely known, nor even to panchayat officials. Lack

Table 3: Awareness of GP Programmes (% of households)

Agricultural Landownership	Current GP Prog	Past Loan Prog	Seed Prog	Employment Prog
Landless	8.8	16.2	4.7	10.4
0 to 1.5 acres	11.5	25.5	20.2	13.8
1.5 to 2.5 acres	12.6	25.2	30.5	8.4
2.5 to 5 acres	12.4	18.6	18.8	8.1
5 to 10 acres	11.4	10.8	16.9	14.8
10 acres and above	13.8	27.6	24.1	17.2
All	10.30	19.16	12.46	11.35

of local information on the inter-village allocation may have minimised the loss of political support that the inter-village bias may have potentially entailed.

Can we explain the unusual political stability in West Bengal by the lack of capture of local governments by local elites alone? In fact, a section of the media ascribes the success of the Left Front instead to coercion and malpractices during elections. It is frequently alleged that the formidable election machinery of the Left has been primarily responsible for winning elections, and this was largely achieved through unscrupulous means. For the entire population in our survey about 5% reported disturbance during elections and another 8% chose to remain silent on the issue. Only four households in the entire sample reported not being able to cast their vote because of fear of disturbances, or because they discovered their vote had already been cast by someone else, or because they had to wait too long at the polling booth. Our survey results suggest that while there may be some substance to the allegations made in the media, they do not support the claim that elections were won primarily owing to these malpractices. For instance, the polling disturbances were reported (or the respondents refused to comment) disproportionately among poorer, landless households, who typically vote in favour of the Left. Thus we have to look for other explanations.

In Sarkar (2006) it was suggested that the overall economic stagnation in West Bengal had actually helped the ruling Left Front to remain in power. Economic stagnation has severely limited the economic opportunities open to the citizens making many of them crucially dependent on the ruling party for small favours giving rise to a *political society* (a concept developed by Chatterjee (2004) in a somewhat different context) where politics is an integral part of the survival strategy of the members. This dependence, in turn, is argued by Sarkar to have induced a sizeable chunk of the population to vote for the Left. This hypothesis suggests therefore that had there been more economic growth (especially more expansion in the formal industrial sector), the extent of this dependence would have been much less and the chances of the ruling Left to remain in power would have been substantially reduced.

Some of the services that the ruling party could potentially distribute as political favours were precisely the kind of benefits that are usually distributed through the panchayats. We examine whether the data is consistent with the claim that the Left Front received consistent support from voters by distributing these benefits to its politically loyal clients. In this context we can think of three levels of political clientelism-cum-loyalty of households towards the Left. The weakest involves voting behaviour alone, whereby favours received from the GP are returned by voting for the party locally in power. This hypothesis of course has the problem of explaining how voters signal their allegiance in a secret ballot. In light of this, it is perhaps unsurprising that our survey reveals that households voting Left without any other political involvement did not get any extra benefits from Left-dominated panchayats.

A more visible form of political loyalty involves attendance in political meetings. We discovered in our survey that within a village the households regularly attending political meetings got more benefits on an average than others that did not attend these meetings regularly. This finding certainly suggests the presence of clientelism. But surprisingly, a higher form of political involvement, namely, taking an active part in political campaigns, showed a negative and significant correlation with getting benefits. Anecdotes picked up in the field suggest that those campaigning actively for the locally dominant party may have received fewer benefits partly because they wanted to project a clean image of the party and partly because benefits distributed through panchayats were small in comparison with other hidden rewards offered to them outside the ambit of the panchayat-administered programmes.

Finally, attendance in gram sabha (GS) meetings displayed a significant positive association with receipt of benefits. This by itself may signal good governance. But it is open to alternative interpretations, given the fact that GS attendance was positively correlated with voting Left. One possible interpretation could be that GSS were dominated by Left supporters who used them as a platform to get more benefits. Others did not attend GSS because they knew that their demands would not be

entertained. On the other hand, the evidence is also consistent with the explanation that the Left were particularly successful in organising and persuading their supporters to attend GSS where they placed demands and received benefits subsequently.

To obtain a better clue to the political stability puzzle, at the end of our survey we conducted a secret ballot where respondents indicated their preferences across political parties active in the local area. Voting patterns among the surveyed households reveal several statistically significant tendencies. First, there is a clear and positive statistical association between voting for the Left and having less land, less education or belonging to SC or ST groups. In other words, less wealthy, less educated and socially disadvantaged groups exhibited a greater inclination to vote for the Left.

Second, the likelihood of voting for the Left increased with benefits received from programmes administered by previous Left dominated local governments. But not all benefits mattered equally in this respect. We found that receipt of recurring benefits like Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), credit, minikits, employment and relief programmes had a positive correlation with voting for the Left. On the other hand, one-time benefits like housing, supply of water, building of roads or provision of ration cards were not associated in any systematic manner with voting patterns. In addition to recurring benefits, help provided by GPs in overcoming difficulties faced in one's occupation, and in times of personal emergency in Left dominated local governments were positively associated with voting in favour of the Left.

Third, improvement in agricultural fortunes over the period 1978-2004 were significantly associated with a higher likelihood of voting Left in Left Front dominated panchayats. It is possible this reflected the role of favours granted by local governments, either through land reforms, distribution of minikits, or improvements in irrigation facilities. The latter largely involved building of shallow and deep tube wells through private initiative. However during periods of peak demand the panchayat played a role in the distribution of water and in resolution of related conflicts. Moreover, we collected stories about private owners with permits for installing shallow tube wells actually installing deep tube wells and the panchayat looking the other way. In short, building irrigation facilities and distribution of irrigation water involved direct and indirect panchayat help and may have been treated as recurring benefits and political favour.

What can we infer from all this? We have seen above that those who regularly attended political meetings on average got more benefits than others who did not. The former were not small in number. In our sample, election meetings were attended by approximately 48% of the population. Presumably a large fraction of them voted for the Left coalition. The fact that only recurring

benefits (and not one-time benefits) mattered in getting votes points further to the possibility that the pattern reflected clientelism rather than voter gratitude arising out of good governance.

On the other hand, gratitude did play a role at different levels. Controlling for all other effects, the incidence of belonging to SC/ST and having less land or education increased the probability of voting Left. Most probably, this picks up the effects of broad-based social changes implemented during the Left rule. Especially with regard to the opportunity to participate in local democracy and lead a more dignified life under the Left Front, especially compared with what they had been historically accustomed to before the Left came to power. In fact we found that almost one half of the total population, comprising predominantly of SC/ST groups and the landless, constituted a secure vote bank for the Left, having voted in their favour consistently over the past quarter century.

Given this, the Left needed to secure only a fraction of the remaining swing voters in order to win an absolute majority. Hence, everything taken together, the survey results indicate the political success of the Left reflects a combination of clientelism as well as gratitude among poor and vulnerable sections arising out of broad-based social and economic changes.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. We give a general description of our survey and the data in Section 2. Section 3 examines political participation and awareness of the citizens, and how they were related to measures of socio-economic status. Section 4 studies targeting of benefits disbursed by local governments and Section 5 examines voting patterns. Finally, Section 6 concludes the paper.

2 Survey and Household Characteristics

Our results are based on a survey of 2,400 rural households in a sample of 85 villages in West Bengal. The survey was carried out in 2003-05. Our village sample is actually a sub-sample of a larger stratified sample of villages selected from all districts of the state except Kolkata and Darjeeling. The original sample was drawn by the Socio-Economic Evaluation Branch of the Department of Agriculture, Government of West Bengal, for the purpose of calculating cost of cultivation of major crops in the state between 1981 and 1996. A more detailed description of this sample can be found in Bardhan and Mookherjee (2004, 2006).

A random sample of blocks within each district was selected, and within each block one village was selected randomly. This was followed by a random selection of another village within an 8 km radius. Our survey teams visited these villages between 2003 and 2005 and as a first step carried out a listing of landholdings of every household. Next, households were stratified according to their landholdings and on the basis of this stratification, a stratified random sample was selected of 25 households per village on an average. Selected households were then administered a survey questionnaire. The questions pertained to demographic,

Table 4: Sources of Information Regarding GP Programmes (%)

Agricultural Land-ownership	Panchayat Members	Political Activists	Friends and Relatives
Landless	43	22	34
0 to 1.5 acres	43	26	29
1.5 to 2.5 acres	48	18	32
2.5 to 5 acres	43	23	33
5 to 10 acres	40	21	38
10 acres and above	61	23	23

Table 5: Political Participation (% of households)

Agricultural Land-ownership	Attending Political Meetings	Participating in Campaigns	Making Financial Contributions
Landless	43	23	61
0 to 1.5 acres	55	30	74
1.5 to 2.5 acres	49	23	77
2.5 to 5 acres	53	32	79
5 to 10 acres	49	29	84
10 acres and above	65	38	93
All	48	26	69

economic and political characteristics of the respondents. Apart from caste, age distribution, landholding and asset holding of the households, we collected data on the benefits received by them from the panchayat. We also asked questions related to media exposure, political awareness and participation, and voting behaviour. Finally, at the end of the survey we gave the respondents mock ballot papers with imprinted symbols of political parties and asked them to indicate their political preference.

Our survey is distinctive in two different ways. First, the National Election Surveys in India use household surveys to measure political participation, attitude and preference, but with

Table 6: Political Activity Regressions: Attendance, Participation and Contribution
(Conditional Logits)

	Attendance (Village Fixed Effects)	Participation (Village Fixed Effects)	Contribution to Political Campaigns (No Village Fixed Effects)	Contribution to Political Campaigns (Village Fixed Effects)
Agricultural land	-.076*** (.028)	-.038 (.026)	.049 (.032)	.065* (.038)
Other land	.141 (.101)	-.031 (.089)	.458** (.216)	.231 (.171)
Agriculture-occupation	.240** (.105)	.139 (.114)	.150 (.101)	-.044 (.123)
Immigrant	-.274** (.111)	-.344*** (.125)	.102 (.106)	.028 (.129)
Max education in hh	.044*** (.013)	.067*** (.014)	.096*** (.012)	.103*** (.015)
ST	1.237*** (.374)	-.492 (.355)	.781** (.309)	.206 (.407)
SC	.567*** (.134)	.208* (.124)	.601*** (.124)	.079 (.152)
Male	.407** (.185)	.448** (.192)	.371** (.152)	.435** (.196)
Age	.010 (.019)	-.006 (.021)	-.001 (.003)	.065** (.022)
Other land* North Bengal dummy	-.187 (.238)	.219 (.322)	-.747** (.324)	-.701* (.374)
SC* North Bengal dummy			-.605*** (.224)	-.138 (.296)
Male* North Bengal dummy			-2.145*** (.615)	-1.297 (.846)
Agriculture land* North Bengal dummy			.206*** (.070)	.120 (.085)
No of observations	2384/87	2353/84	2400	
Pseudo-R ² /p-value			.06/0.00	

Std errors are reported in parentheses. ***, **, * denotes significant at 1%, 5%, 10%, respectively.

very few exceptions political behaviour is not usually related to socio-economic characteristics of the household.² Our survey fills this gap. Second, the National Election Surveys focus on national level elections rather than on processes of local governance. In contrast, the purpose of our survey is to understand politico-economic forces in local governance at the grass roots level.

Studies of political participation in local governments have been carried out for three different districts each of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh by Krishna (2006), and two Karnataka districts by Crook and Manor (1998). Ghatak and Ghatak (2002) have studied participation in village meetings (gram sansads) in a sample of 20 villages in Birbhum district of West Bengal. Our survey complements these studies. In addition, it becomes especially relevant because it helps us analyse and understand political stability in West Bengal.

A summary of sample characteristics is presented in Table 1 (p 47). Landownership seems to be the most natural criterion on the basis of which these rural households can be classified into different wealth categories. Accordingly we classify the households into six categories: landless, marginal (0 to 1.5 acres), small (1.5 to 2.5 acres), medium (2.5 to 5 acres), large (5 to 10 acres) and big (above 10 acres). In our sample, landless households along with small and marginal farmers constitute more than 80% of the total households. Again, scs and sts together account for about 35% of households and the percentage is significantly higher among the landless and the marginal farmers. Finally, 47% of the households have agriculture as their primary occupation. Maximum education in a household refers to the maximum completed years in school across all members of the household. As expected, this maximum increased with the size of landownership. Age and sex refer to those of the household head who was the usual respondent of the interview. Finally, we classify a household as immigrant if it migrated into the village after 1967. Again, as expected, incidence of migration is the highest among the landless.

3 Political Awareness and Participation

We examined two different measures of general political awareness among the surveyed households. First, the respondents were asked a few questions³ about the general political environment the answers to which could be correct or incorrect. On the basis of the number of correct answers given, a composite score of general political awareness was calculated for each household in a 6-point scale. A second measure of political awareness that we looked at was media exposure. We asked the respondents whether they watched political and economic news on the television on a regular basis. Similar questions were asked about the radio. The results regarding political awareness are reported in Table 2 (p 48). As one might expect, political awareness by all the three measures increased with the size of landholding. General political awareness, as is evident from the second column, was quite high. As for media exposure, exposure to radio was less dispersed across various size classes than exposure to television. Finally, except for the marginal farmers, exposure to television was higher in all the other categories than exposure to television.

Apart from general political awareness, we investigated the extent to which households of different classes were aware of various development or antipoverty programmes administered by the GPs. As Table 3 (p 48) reveals, awareness about GP development programmes was quite low on an average. Taking raw averages for each group, we see that except for big landowners, information about an average programme is available to less than 20% households in each group and for big landlords the figure is just above 20%. On the other hand, none of the programmes was known, on an average, to more than 20% households.

We shall see below that for most programmes administered by the GPs, only a very small proportion of households reported receiving benefits under that programme. Indeed the average proportion of households that reported to have received benefits from any single programme did not exceed 4% and only in a small number of programmes reported benefit rates exceeded 1%. The low level of awareness about GP programmes may have

been caused by the low level of coverage of the development programmes. Equally likely, low levels of awareness caused development programmes remain limited in coverage and scale. Finally, a two-way causation with low awareness limiting development programmes and limited programmes causing low awareness cannot be ruled out either.

Table 3 reveals that awareness of anti-poverty development schemes was uniformly higher in the highest strata of landholding, compared to the landless. In the middle tiers awareness was more for some programmes and less for others and in general across different programmes awareness varied with need and/or entitlement. Landless households were more aware of loan and employment programmes, marginal landowners more aware of loan and seed programmes that they only will find useful.

Sources of information concerning GP activities varied little across landowning groups as Table 4 (p 49) illustrates. For all classes except the highest landholding class, panchayat members were an important source of information, closely followed by friends and relatives. On the other hand, big landowners, comprising of top 1% of the landowning class, seemed to depend a lot more on panchayat members than on peer groups. This points to an extraordinary closeness between panchayat members and the top landowning class and somewhat contradicts the popular perception about the plebeian character of West Bengal panchayats. Finally, political activists have also been instrumental in disseminating information, but their role in this respect has been more or less uniform across all classes including the topmost.

Next, we consider political participation. We looked at three types of political activities: attending political rallies and meetings, taking an active part in political campaigns, and making financial contribution to political parties. The profile of political participation is presented in Table 5 (p 49).

On average, political participation was high. This is most pronounced in the inclination for making financial contributions to political parties. An astounding 69% of all households reported making financial contributions to political parties, the proportion increasing uniformly with landholding. Even within the landless, a proportion as high as 61% made financial contributions and the number rose to 93% for the highest strata. Anecdotes suggest that a significant part of these financial contributions is made to buy political protection against unforeseen emergencies. A general perception is that situations like illness in the family requiring hospitalisation or a dispute with a neighbour requiring mediation can be handled more smoothly if some political help is available.

A more active form of political participation is taking part in political campaigns. Approximately 26% of all households were actively involved in campaigns and the proportions were more evenly distributed across different land classes than the distribution of financial contributions. However, the difference in involvement in political campaigns appears to be sharper if one compares the landless with big landowners. The contrast suggests that West Bengal grass root politics is yet to be completely free from elitist domination. It may be mentioned that the proportion of households involved in political campaigns in

West Bengal is similar to that in Karnataka districts studied by Crook and Manor (1998) (where it was 23%), but lower than that in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh districts studied by Krishna (2006) (where it was 43%).

Finally, attendance in political meetings was quite high, averaging 48% across the population, and much higher than the corresponding attendance rate of 33% reported for Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh by Krishna (2006).

Attendance rates were higher than 40% for all landowning groups and like the proportion of participation in political campaigns did not exhibit any monotonic increase with the size of landholding. However, similar to campaign participation patterns, there is a significant difference in attendance rates between the landless and the top 1% of the landowning class, suggesting once again that rural politics in West Bengal is not quite free from the influence of the big landowning class as yet. Perhaps superior education plays a crucial part in assigning the landed a key role in rural politics.

But if we control for other characteristics like education, landholding, age and gender of respondent, we find that the probability of political participation (by all the three measures) significantly increased if the household belonged to the SC or ST category. This is clear from the regressions we run for explaining political activity. The detailed regression results are reported in Table 6 (p 50). Our findings of the involvement of the SC and ST groups in rural politics corroborates accounts by Ruud (1999, 2003) of increasingly active role played by some SC groups in the village politics in some districts of West Bengal. Similarly, our regressions reveal that education significantly increased the chance of active political involvement, controlling for other household characteristics. Moreover, political participation showed a distinct gender bias; being a male clearly increased the probability of political participation, other things remaining the same. Finally, if we control for education and other characteristics, the chance of attending political meetings decreases and that of making political contribution increases with the size of

Table 7: Gram Sabha Attendance and Participation
(% of households)

Agricultural Land-ownership	Attending Gram Sabha	Participating in Gram Sabha
Landless	33	6.5
0 to 1.5 acres	44	13.8
1.5 to 2.5 acres	50	19.8
2.5 to 5 acres	38	18.7
5 to 10 acres	35	15.5
10 acres and above	44	37.9
All	37	11.3

Table 8: Percentages of Households Receiving Different Benefits

	House	Water	Employment	Minikits	IRDP	Road	Relief	Ration Card
% HH recd benefits (1978-1997)	1.29	23.78	1.67	2.42	6.66	9.7	1.64	27.16
% HH recd benefits (1998-2005)	3.0	23.41	5.21	5.0	2.33	32.11	11.91	12.33
Fraction of benefits accruing to SC/ST (1978-1997)	67.74	32.22	0.40	32.76	0.45	33.48	45.71	33.44
Fraction of benefits accruing to SC/ST (1998-2004)	52.77	37.72	49.41	46.67	55.36	32.68	35.66	32.43
Fraction of benefits accruing to landless (1978-1997)	64.5	49.39	52.5	15.51	48.13	49.78	57.14	46.32
Fraction of benefits accruing to landless (1998-2005)	65.28	53.5	44.89	12.5	46.43	43.84	68.5	43.92

landholding – i.e., ceteris paribus big landholders prefer to express their political loyalty by making financial contribution than spending time in political rallies.

One other important thing to notice from Table 6 is effect of the sc dummy interacting negatively with a North Bengal dummy. And the opposite is true for agricultural land owned: its effect on political contributions is significantly higher in North

Table 9: OLS Regression of Number of Benefits on Household Characteristics
{1998-2004, with village fixed effects}

	(1) Number of Benefits Received by Households	(2) Number of One Time Benefits	(3) Number of Recurring Benefits
Education	-0.040*** (0.006)	-0.032*** (0.005)	0.000 (0.003)
ST	0.502*** (0.139)	0.292*** (0.111)	0.096* (0.058)
SC	0.181*** (0.053)	0.074* (0.043)	0.081*** (0.022)
Male	0.063 (0.072)	0.028 (0.057)	0.040 (0.030)
Immigrant	-0.085 (0.052)	-0.061 (0.042)	-0.046** (0.022)
Agricultural land	-0.015 (0.012)	-0.020** (0.009)	0.000 (0.005)
Non-agricultural land	-0.058 (0.039)	-0.051 (0.032)	0.003 (0.016)
Age	0.010 (0.009)	0.008 (0.007)	0.014*** (0.004)
Age squared	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000*** (0.000)
Constant	1.182*** (0.246)	1.016*** (0.198)	-0.238** (0.103)
Observations	2,399	2,401	2,401
Number of villages	89	89	89
R-squared	0.05	0.05	0.01

Std errors are reported in parentheses. ***, **, * denote significant at 1%, 5%, 10%, respectively.

Bengal. This would mean that in North Bengal, political participation among the scs is significantly lower and large landowners contribute more to campaigns. It may be mentioned that parts of North Bengal continue to be the traditional Congress base and our results indicate that politics in these parts of the state is still controlled by higher castes and big landowners.

Yet another form of political participation is attendance in GS. We have looked at two variants of this form of political participation: just attending a GS, and speaking or asking questions in a GS. Evidently the second variant, which we call participation in GS, is a deeper form of political participation than the first. Table 7 (p 51) records the two forms of GS involvement across different landowning classes.

Table 7 reveals that more than one-third of the population reported attending village meetings, which discussed matters relating to local government activities, within the previous three years of the survey. The proportion is high compared with 17% in the Karnataka districts studied by Crook and Manor (1998). Attendance rates do not show any clear pattern across landowning classes. In contrast, proportion of households standing up to speak or ask questions at the GS is just above 11%, and there is a notable difference in participation rates between the extreme ends of the landholding spectrum. The figures seem to suggest that while attendance rates in village meetings did not vary with respect to landholding, the big farmers were certainly ahead of the rest as far as standing up and speaking in a GS was concerned. Once more this was probably due to a superior education level of the big landowners. Regression results on GS attendance and participation (reported in our companion paper Bardhan et al 2008) confirm that the maximum level of education in the household is significantly associated with GS participation and to a lesser extent with GS attendance.

We conclude this section by noting that both political awareness as well as political participation is reasonably high on an average in rural West Bengal. The awareness and participation, however, varied across landholding classes and education. Controlling for education and landholding, the probability of political participation significantly increased when the household belonged to either the sc or the sr community.

4 Intra-Village and Inter-Village Distribution of Benefits

Next we examine the extent to which rural households of West Bengal could utilise political participation and awareness to obtain actual benefits from local governments. We are particularly interested in studying the proportion of benefits that went to the poor, and how far the distribution of benefits were influenced by political considerations. We carry out our investigation in three stages. First, we examine the proportion of benefits of different categories (such as housing, minikits, drinking water, ration cards and so on) going to the poor and the socially underprivileged classes. Second, we study the effects of different variables (like landholding, education, caste, political participation, etc) on the distribution of benefits *within a village*. Finally, we look into the determinants of benefits *across villages* to understand how village characteristics like proportion of landless or backward classes residing in the village or inequality in landholding and education within the village influence the distribution of benefits. The three stages of investigation, taken together, give us a more or less complete picture of distribution of benefits.

Table 8 (p 51) records the percentages of households who reported receiving different benefit programmes (house, water, employment, minikits of agricultural inputs, IRDP, roads, relief

Table 10: Targeting of Benefits within Villages, Based on Household Responses
(OLS regression with village fixed effects)

	Number of GP Benefits Received by Household
Education	-0.02 (0.04)
SC dummy	-0.22 (-0.59)
ST dummy	1.14 (1.09)
Non-agricultural land owned	0.72* (0.39)
Agricultural land owned	-0.04 (0.08)
Political meeting attendance dummy	0.95** (0.42)
Political campaign involvement dummy	-0.87* (0.48)
Campaign contribution made dummy	-0.08 (0.40)
Voted for winning party dummy	-0.32 (0.34)
GS attendance rate * education	-0.12 (0.13)
GS attendance rate * SC	1.51 (1.08)
GS attendance rate * ST	-1.06 (2.98)
GS attendance rate * non-agricultural land	-2.05* (1.09)
GS attendance rate * agricultural land	0.14 (0.19)
GS attendance rate * political meeting attendance dummy	-1.96* (1.13)
GS attendance rate * political campaign involvement dummy	3.17** (1.25)
GS attendance rate * campaign contribution dummy	-0.06 (1.22)
GS attendance rate * voted for winning party dummy	0.28 (0.93)
N, p-value	2001, 0.0000

Std errors are reported in parentheses. ***, **, * denote significant at 1%, 5%, 10%, respectively.

against disasters or old age or widow status, and ration card) over the periods 1978-98 and 1998-2005. We report these periods separately because the reported benefits for the earlier period may be subjected to a greater recall bias. We see that the proportions reporting receiving benefits were substantially higher for

the later period. Therefore, we use the figures for the later period in our subsequent analysis of benefits.

A number of observations can be made about the figures provided in Table 8. First, largest benefits were reported for roads (32%) and water (23%) which have non-excludable public goods properties. Within the set of excludable personal benefits, beneficiaries from ration cards (12%) and from relief of various kinds (12%) topped the list. The proportion of households benefiting from the remaining programmes was small. There is yet another list of benefits for which the proportions of beneficiaries are negligible. Those are not reported in Table 8.

But whatever the reach of the benefit programmes may have been, it is clear from Table 8 that a reasonably fair proportion of these benefits went to the landless and to the sc/st. We may recall from Table 1 that the landless constituted about 50% of our sample households while sc and sr taken together constituted about 37%. If we confine ourselves to the 1998-2005 period, we find that for five out of eight categories of benefits, the

Table 12: General Characteristics of Voters

Agricultural Landownership	% Enlisted as Voters	% Voter Turnout	% Reporting Disturbance or Not Responding
Landless	87.7	89	14.66
0-1.5 acres	98.6	99	11.89
1.5-2.5 acres	100	99	6.1
2.5-5 acres	99.6	99	8.91
5-10 acres	100	99	6.75
10 acres and above	100	100	6.89
All	93.36	93.96	12.36

proportion going to sc and sr households was more than their demographic weight and in the remaining three it was less but not remarkably so. Similarly for the landless, if we exclude minikits (because the landless have little use for them), in three out of seven categories the proportion of benefited households exceeded the demographic weight. In the remaining four categories, proportions of beneficiaries were slightly below the demographic share. Finally, if we ignore demographic weights and just look at the proportion of benefits going to the underprivileged, we find that the proportions were high.

The regression results in Table 9 (p 52) supplement Table 8. The results demonstrate that being a member of either the srs or the scs increased significantly the chance of getting benefits from the panchayat. However, the results show that the relationship between receiving benefits and landholding was not significant, though it was negative. To examine the clientelist hypothesis against the gratitude hypothesis, we have further divided the benefits into two categories: one-time and recurring. Clearly a clientelist relationship between the party and the electorate

would involve distribution of recurring benefits. On the other hand, if votes are obtained because of a gratitude factor, both kinds of benefits would be important. It is clear from Table 9 that the sts received more one-time benefits than recurring ones, while for the scs it was exactly the opposite. We shall see below that the sc/sr cohort comprise a major vote bank of the Left. The regression results of Table 9 suggest that while sr votes were based more on the gratitude factor, sc votes are mainly rooted in a clientelist relationship between the party and the electorate.

The high proportion of benefits going to sc, sr, however, has to be interpreted along with the regression results reported in Table 10 (p 52) where we examine determinants of the number of benefits (aggregating across different programmes) received by a household over the period 1998-2003, controlling for village fixed effects. The exercise captures the determinants of the distribution of benefits *within a village*.

We find from Table 10 that the number of benefits received by a household within a village does not significantly depend upon education, caste, landholding, voting preference or campaign contribution. This simply means that if we control for the other characteristics of a household, just being a member of the sc/sr community *does not* significantly affect the number of benefits received by the household. Therefore, it must be the case that the sc, sr households are getting a sizeable portion of the benefits (as we saw in Tables 8 and 9), because many of these households satisfy some other characteristics with which the number of benefits are positively correlated.

There are two variables which have *significantly positive* effects on the number of benefits: non-agricultural land owned and the political meeting attendance dummy. The first is mildly significant (at 10%) and the second is more significant (at 5%). The underprivileged like the sc and sr are unlikely to own more non-agricultural land than others. But from Table 6 we know that the association between sc and sr and attendance of political meetings was positive and significant. Thus one could infer that a high proportion of benefits have gone to the sc/sr largely because they attended political meetings more than others. But once we control for that, being an sc or sr as such did not significantly increase their chance of getting more benefits.

The other curious thing about Table 10 is that it records a significantly *negative* relationship between the political campaign involvement dummy and the number of benefits received. It is not easy to explain why benefits might tend to *fall* if a household is involved in political campaign on behalf of the party in power. Stories that we gathered from the field suggest a possible explanation. One may think of three possible shades of party loyalty in decreasing order of intensity:

Table 11: Inter Village Distribution of Benefits (1998-2003)

	Number of GP Benefits Per Household
Proportion landless	-1.076*** (0.38)
Proportion SC	-0.22 (-0.59)
Proportion ST	-0.163 (0.513)
GP Left share 98-03	-10.738*** (3.517)
GP Left share squared	9.475*** (3.400)
Constant	4.541*** (0.920)
Observations	88
R-squared	0.18

Std errors are reported in parentheses. ***, **, * denote significant at 1%, 5%, 10%, respectively.

Table 13: Distribution of Votes across Parties

Party	% of Voters among Surveyed Households	% of Voters in Zilla Parishad Election 2003
CPI(M)	48.51	48.67
CPI	2.93	1.62
FB	5.78	2.56
RSP	1.4	3.13
CPM - FB	0.37	
CPM - CPI	0.08	
CPM - RSP	0.04	
Total LF	59.02	56.39
AITC	11.27	20.02
INC	17.67	17.04
BJP	2.1	3.56
AITC - BJP	0.08	
AITC - INC	0.04	
Others	9.70	

taking part in political campaigns before elections, attending political meetings and rallies organised by the party, and simply voting for the party without engaging in the other two activities. There is yet a fourth activity, namely, making financial contribution to a political party, about which we shall comment later.

Anecdotes we heard in the course of our survey work suggest two possible reasons why households closest to the party and involved in campaigns may receive fewer benefits from the panchayat. On the one hand, to maintain a cleaner image of the party he is canvassing for, the campaigner cannot visibly receive too many benefits from the panchayat. In fact, he tends to take lower than normal benefits from the panchayat to project an honest image of the party and of himself. On the other hand, benefits that can be possibly received from the panchayat may be too small for the services rendered by the campaigner for the party. The campaigner may be compensated in less conspicuous but more rewarding ways.⁴

For households attending meetings and rallies, however, benefits received through the panchayat seem to be sufficient compensation, because attendance in political meetings entails an intermediate level of commitment to the party. Finally, contrary to popular perception, the voting process in rural Bengal still seems to maintain some confidentiality. As a result, just voting for the party in power, without participating in campaigns or showing up in rallies, cannot send any credible signal of party loyalty and hence does not seem to fetch any additional benefits from the panchayat. We must hasten to add that the above explanation, being based on anecdotes picked up in the field, has all the associated limitations.

The lack of significance of financial contribution to political parties, on the other hand, is not easy to explain. One could argue that since a large number of households are making financial contributions to the political parties, these contributions cannot be used as a screening device for distributing benefits. Perhaps making a contribution has become the norm: the act of not making a contribution is interpreted as a negative signal, i.e., is an indicator of active opposition to the Left. Since so many contribute, it is not possible for all of them to be given benefits given the resource shortages. Contributions are then a necessary but not a sufficient condition to receive benefits in return.

Another important thing that needs to be noticed in Table 9 is that the interaction terms of GS attendance rate with both meeting attendance and political campaign involvement are significant. Moreover, while the first interaction term is negative, the second is positive. This clearly implies that the biases in benefit targeting caused by meeting attendance and involvement in political campaigns are reduced by higher GS attendance rates in the village. It is easy to understand how higher GS attendance rates, by making the panchayat more transparent would partly eliminate the partisan bias arising out of meeting attendance. But it is not immediately clear why the under-provision of benefits associated with campaign involvement would be partly corrected due to higher GS attendance rates. Perhaps a more transparent-process-oriented panchayat reduces the apprehension of the campaigner of being falsely charged with misappropriation of panchayat benefits.

Finally, we examine the distribution of benefits across villages. The relevant regression results are reported in Table 11 (p 53). First, we note that the proportion of landless in a village has a negative significant association with per household benefits within the village. This means that villages with a larger proportion of landless received significantly *smaller* benefits, indicating a perverse pattern of targeting by higher level governments. The result is consistent with the results in Bardhan and Mookherjee (2006) based on an entirely different source and nature of data for the same villages covering the period 1978-98. It may be mentioned in this context that we tried to find out whether any formula or rule was used to allocate funds across GPs from higher level like panchayat samitis or zilla parishads. We discovered that even though a formula for disbursement of funds was laid down in the State Finance Commission Reports, even zilla parishad *sabhadhipatis* were not aware of it. Therefore, it seems that discretion rather than rule was used to disburse funds across GPs.

Second, the significant negative relationship between Left seat share within a panchayat and per household benefits in the village along with a significant positive relationship between Left

Table 14: Logit Cross-Household Regression for Left Vote I

	No Village Fixed Effects	With Village Fixed Effects
No of personal benefits (one-time)* Left share	0.066 (0.087)	0.044 (0.095)
Number of friends/family benefits received (one-time)* Left share	-0.019 (0.059)	-0.038 (0.073)
Number of personal benefits received (recurring)* Left share	0.468*** (0.152)	0.403** (0.165)
Number of friends/family benefits received (recurring)* Left share	-0.151 (0.137)	-0.277* (0.160)
Proportion of benefits received in the village* Left share	0.099 (0.284)	
GP help with occupation* average Left share	0.132 (0.162)	0.410** (0.186)
GP help during disturbance * average Left share	0.396*** (0.132)	0.284* (0.159)
Improvement in income over 1978-2004* average Left share	0.014 (0.012)	0.020 (0.014)
Improvement in number of rooms in the house over 1978-2004 * average Left share	0.024 (0.076)	0.076 (0.089)
Improvement in house type over 1978-2004 * average Left share	0.136 (0.185)	0.128 (0.202)
Improvement in agriculture over 1978-2004 * average Left share	0.053** (0.023)	0.093*** (0.028)
Agricultural land owned	-0.078*** (0.026)	-0.136*** (0.031)
Other land owned	-0.202** (0.088)	-0.159* (0.091)
Education	-0.037** (0.015)	-0.030* (0.017)
ST	0.916*** (0.349)	0.986** (0.485)
SC	0.376*** (0.123)	0.397*** (0.145)
Agricultural sector occupation	0.255** (0.117)	-0.003 (0.135)
Immigrant	0.171 (0.140)	0.172 (0.152)
Male	-0.036 (0.183)	0.037 (0.199)
Observations	1,695	1,637

Std errors are reported in parentheses. ***, **, * denote significant at 1%, 5%, 10%, respectively.

share squared and per household benefits indicate a significant U-shaped relation between Left seat share and per household benefits. The U-shaped relationship implies that more resources were allocated to villages where seat allocations were extreme, that is, either the proportion of Left seats was very high or very low. This, in turn, meant that in villages where the ruling party (Left or non-Left) was in big majority, it could successfully bring more resources from higher level governments. In contrast, more evenly contested panchayats could bring fewer benefits per household. The turning point of the U occurred around 57% proportion of GP seats secured by the Left.

5 Determinants of Voting Behaviour

From the discussion in Section 4, it is clear there was some partisan allocation of benefits both within and across villages. Within a village, attendance in political rallies tended to fetch more benefits than usual. Across villages, panchayats where the Left enjoyed an overwhelming majority were successful on an average in obtaining more resources from higher levels. The natural question is: how far did the allocation of benefits from above help the Left attract votes? To arrive at an answer we have to look into the voting behaviour of the households and identify, in particular, the significant determinants of Left votes. But before going into this we examine some general characteristics of the voters, provided in Table 12 (p 53).

On average, voter registration rates were quite high except among the landless where more than 12% households were not enlisted as voters. Reported voter turnout rates were almost universal, excepting among the landless. Probably, lower registration and turnout of the landless were caused by their relative mobility compared with the landed. Moreover, there must have been some over-reporting of turnout because the reported proportions are substantially above the actual figures. The aggregate reported voter turnout rate was however similar to that reported (95%) in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan by Krishna (2006).

As for those who reported disturbance during elections or declined to respond to the question, the overall proportion was not very high, but not negligible either. In fact, only four households in the entire sample reported not being able to cast their vote because of fear of disturbances, or because they discovered their vote had already been cast by someone else, or because they had to wait too long at the polling booth. So we describe instead their response to the question whether they faced any difficulties or disturbances when they went to vote (which does not seem to have prevented them from casting their vote). About 5% households reported facing difficulties or disturbances in and around polling booths and nearly 200 households did not respond to the question. Thus there may be some substance in the allegation that elections have not been free and fair in all areas. But it cannot explain the overall outcome of panchayat elections. More so

because those who reported disturbances or declined to answer were not predominantly non-Left voters. In fact, the proportions reporting disturbances were the highest among the landless and the marginal (who tend to vote Left).

We shall see below that there is a significant statistical relationship between voting Left and owning less land or belonging to the SC or ST community. It also appears that voter registration was the lowest among the landless and the marginal; voter turnout was 10% lower among the landless compared with other groups. Moreover, regression results (reported in our companion paper Bardhan et al 2008) suggest a strong negative correlation between having one's name in the voters list or showing up for casting one's vote on the one hand and being SC or ST. Finally, the last column of Table 11 suggests that the landless and the marginal faced more difficulties than others while casting their votes. All this taken together would imply that distortions in the voting process, if any, as picked up by lower voter registration, fewer turnouts and disturbances in and around polling booths, went *against* the Left rather than working in their favour.⁵

Before looking into the determinant of voting behaviour, we represent the actual profile of voters' choices. This is given in Table 13 (p 53). Apart from the households which have reported to vote for one single party all along, a small number have reported voting for

different parties in different elections. They have also found a separate place in Table 12. It is to be noted that the reported vote shares in our survey are not much different from the actual vote shares in the zilla parishad elections of 2003 which are given in column 3. In most cases they are unusually close.

We now investigate the determinants of the likelihood of a given respondent voting in favour of the Left Front. The relevant regression results are given in Table 14 (p 54). To settle the question of possible clientelism we make a distinction between two types of personal benefits: one-time and recurring. Clientelism involves an implicit *quid pro quo*,

an exchange of recurring favours for recurring political support. The latter category includes IRDP, credit, minikits, employment, the former including the rest. Some programmes are inherently one-time, such as land reform benefits, building of houses, toilets or installation of drinking water taps in the neighbourhood. For these a positive association is more likely to indicate gratitude rather than a continuing reciprocity. Others are ambiguous, such as road programmes. We include roads in one-time category partly because it has a one-time infrastructural, local public good nature. Besides, we ran regressions also including roads in the recurring category and found the results largely unchanged.

The following are the striking features of the regression results recorded in Table 14. First, while one-time benefits received by oneself or by one's friends or family members had no significant effect on voting Left in a Left-dominated panchayat, recurring benefits received by oneself had a significantly positive effect.

Table 15: Voting Patterns and Average Landholding Per Household (in acres)

District	Left Front Voters	INC Voters	AITC Voters	All Households
24 PGS (N)	0.839	1.16	1.85	1.00
24 PGS (S)	0.66	1.68	1.57	0.81
Bankura	3.09	9.65	3.31	3.95
Birbhum	0.57	6.53	9.01	3.60
Bardhaman	1.39	2.65	3.80	1.84
Coochbihar	1.69	3.33	2.33	2.03
Dinajpur	2.62	1.98		2.61
Hooghly	0.31	2.17	1.03	1.22
Haora	0.25	0.48	0.48	0.36
Jalpaiguri	1.61	3.63	2.51	1.41
Malda	0.54	1.28	0.41	0.73
Medinipur	1.49	2.61	1.14	1.52
Murshidabad	1.03	1.66	0.24	1.37
Nadia	0.75	1.92	1.82	1.16
Purulia	3.15	2.63	8.33	3.73

This suggests a *clientelist* relationship between the party and the voters.⁶

On the other hand, GP help during different kinds of disturbances and with occupation having the characteristics of one-time benefits are also positively significant. This is consistent with *gratitude* on the part of the households receiving help. It is harder to rationalise by a clientelism hypothesis, particularly in the case of one-time benefits (given that the votes are being cast after these benefits were received).

Table 16: Logit Cross-Household Regression for Left Vote II

	No Village Fixed Effects	With Village Fixed Effects
Personal benefits (one-time) * Left share	0.068 (0.082)	0.070 (0.090)
Acquaintance benefits (one-time)* Left share	-0.032 (0.056)	-0.077 (0.067)
Personal benefits (recurring) * Left share	0.469*** (0.154)	0.404** (0.167)
Acquaintance benefits (recurring)* Left share	-0.069 (0.133)	-0.249 (0.155)
Propn of vill benefits* Left share	-0.257 (0.272)	
GP help with occupation * Left share	0.196 (0.154)	0.434** (0.175)
GP help in disturbances * Left share	0.146 (0.126)	0.059 (0.150)
House type (1=kuchha)	0.402*** (0.111)	0.179 (0.126)
Sufficient food dummy	0.130 (0.187)	0.114 (0.210)
GS speech	-0.201 (0.175)	-0.190 (0.188)
GS attendance	0.386*** (0.120)	0.438*** (0.131)
TV	-0.003 (0.117)	0.083 (0.125)
Radio	0.145 (0.107)	0.162 (0.121)
Agricultural land owned	-0.075*** (0.025)	-0.122*** (0.030)
Other land owned	-0.167* (0.089)	-0.165* (0.094)
Education	-0.010 (0.015)	-0.024 (0.017)
ST	1.146*** (0.319)	1.214*** (0.408)
SC	0.537*** (0.115)	0.524*** (0.135)
Agricultural occupation	0.109 (0.109)	-0.045 (0.123)
Immigrant	0.222* (0.122)	0.285** (0.132)
Male	-0.261 (0.172)	-0.188 (0.185)
Constant	0.584 (0.614)	
Observations	2002	1944

Std errors are reported in parentheses. ***, **, * denote significant at 1%, 5%, 10%, respectively.

Third, improvement in agricultural incomes over the period 1978-2004, which was presumably credited to Left Front rule, had a positively significant effect on Left votes. In our study, improvement in agricultural income basically meant improvement in irrigation facilities, which came mostly in the form of shallow and deep tube wells. These irrigation facilities were built with private initiative. But the distribution of water during peak agricultural months needed panchayat help, especially with respect to management and resolution of conflicts. Moreover, anecdotes suggest that in many instances private providers of water installed deep tube wells when they had permission to install only a shallow well and the panchayat looked the other way. In short, irrigation facilities, though installed under private initiative, were often treated like recurring panchayat benefits. The same would be true with respect to distribution of agricultural minikits or disbursement of cheap credit under the IRDP programme under the recommendation of GP officials.

Finally, the regression results indicate that if we control for benefits (either recurring or one-time) being land poor, uneducated, or a member of the backward castes or tribes each separately increases the probability of voting Left. In other words, the

poor, the socially backward and the uneducated, irrespective of whether they received GP benefits or not, have a clear inclination to vote Left. The negative connection between landholding and voting Left is further demonstrated in Table 15 (p 55) where we find that in almost all the districts average landholding of Left Front voters is lower than that of the INC and AITC and that of the all district average.

The question is: why would the poor, the uneducated and the socially backward vote for the Left irrespective of whether or not they received GP benefits? The question seems puzzling if we consider the fact that in our survey approximately 11% of the sample households reported that they do not get adequate food. It may be mentioned that a similar figure of food inadequacy among rural households in West Bengal has been quoted in a recent NSS report (2007).⁷ In the NSS document 10.6% of the rural households in West Bengal have been reported to have inadequate food for some months of the year. The starvation figure is not only the highest among all major Indian states, it is significantly above that of Orissa (4.8%) which occupies the second highest place.

Table 16 reports some additional regression results concerning association of Left support with indicators of household well-being such as whether it lived in a non-permanent (*kuchha*) house, and whether it reported that its food intake was insufficient for its needs. While the sufficient food dummy did not have any significant association with Left votes, the non-permanent home dummy showed a significant positive correlation only in the regression without village fixed effects. This indicates that there is greater support for the Left in poorer villages, though not within a village across types of households. In other words, the regression results confirm that the poor constitute an important vote base for the Left, and even starvation does not reverse this loyalty. Finally, immigrants had a higher probability of voting Left, which could owe to the help of Left-dominated local governments in settling into their new habitat.

It thus seems that the loyalty of the poor and the underprivileged towards the Left has to be explained by factors which go beyond standard economic explanations. It is sometimes claimed that during the Left rule the poor in the villages of West Bengal came to enjoy a kind of dignity which was unknown to them before. Perhaps this social upgrading created another kind of gratitude⁸ which survived all economic hardships for 30 years. We do not have firm evidence on this, but it seems quite plausible.

A deeper understanding of voting behaviour, especially that leading to a lack of political change, requires an examination of the characteristics of voters who were consistently faithful to either the Left or to their political opponents over the past quarter century. We refer to them as *secure* voters. Part of the continued domination of the Left Front has been associated with a large secure base of voters. Forty-five per cent of respondents reported that they vote the same way as their fathers, while an even higher proportion (67%) reported voting for the same party in the last 25 years. The proportion that voted for Left Front parties in our ballot was 65%. Among those voting Left, the proportions of loyal voters were slightly higher than in the entire population: 48% reported voting like their father, and 76% reported having voted consistently for the same party in the last 25 years. This implies

approximately half of all voters have been loyal to the Left throughout the past quarter century.

Table 17 presents logit regressions predicting the likelihood that voters were secure for either the Left or non-Left parties, on the basis of household characteristics. It shows that households belonging to the scs or srs, those with little or no land and those with low levels of education had a significantly higher chance of being a secure Left voter. Among these categories, members of sc or sr had a significantly lower probability of becoming secure voters for the non-Left parties as well. Finally, gratitude arising out of GP help in dispute resolution or financial emergencies has also played a statistically significant role in enlarging the cohort of secured voters for the Left. These results reinforce the findings of Tables 16 and 14.

6 Summary and Conclusions

In this paper, we examined the working of grass roots democracy in rural West Bengal in order to understand factors underlying the unusual political stability in the state. The exercise involved a

Table 17: Logit Regressions for Secure, Left-Secure and Non-Left-Secure Voter Dummies on Household and Village Characteristics

	(1) Secure Voter	(2) Secure Voter (VFE)	(3) Left Secure Voter	(4) Left Secure Voter (VFE)	(5) Non-Left Secure Voter	(6) Non-Left Secure Voter (VFE)
Age	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)
Age squared	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Male	-0.31* (0.17)	-0.28 (0.17)	-0.16 (0.15)	-0.10 (0.16)	-0.15 (0.18)	-0.14 (0.19)
Edu max	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.03** (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)
ST	0.25 (0.32)	0.28 (0.32)	0.80*** (0.29)	0.94*** (0.31)	-1.15** (0.45)	-1.30*** (0.47)
SC	0.25** (0.12)	0.26** (0.12)	0.44*** (0.11)	0.47*** (0.11)	-0.38** (0.15)	-0.39*** (0.15)
Occupation agri	-0.08 (0.11)	-0.07 (0.11)	0.11 (0.10)	0.07 (0.11)	-0.23* (0.12)	-0.16 (0.13)
Immigrant	-0.26** (0.11)	-0.28** (0.12)	0.04 (0.11)	0.08 (0.11)	-0.48*** (0.15)	-0.56*** (0.16)
GP help in dispute resolution	0.17* (0.10)	0.25** (0.11)	0.24** (0.09)	0.31*** (0.11)	-0.12 (0.12)	-0.11 (0.13)
GP help in financial emergency	0.01 (0.12)	0.07 (0.13)	0.07 (0.11)	0.27** (0.13)	-0.11 (0.14)	-0.32** (0.16)
Other land owned	-0.14* (0.08)	-0.17** (0.08)	-0.06 (0.08)	-0.07 (0.09)	-0.13 (0.11)	-0.16 (0.11)
Agricultural land owned	-0.07*** (0.02)	-0.07*** (0.03)	-0.15*** (0.03)	-0.15*** (0.03)	0.08*** (0.03)	0.08*** (0.03)
Vill land gini	-2.14*** (0.49)		-1.73*** (0.45)		-0.28 (0.55)	
Vill education gini	-0.96 (0.96)		-1.24 (0.88)		0.52 (1.10)	
Propn village educated	-0.16*** (0.06)		-0.12** (0.05)		-0.05 (0.07)	
Vill propn SC	0.10 (0.25)		0.16 (0.23)		-0.10 (0.29)	
Vill propn ST	1.25* (0.70)		0.41 (0.57)		0.82 (0.66)	
Constant	4.53*** (1.10)		2.99*** (1.01)		-1.04 (1.25)	
Observations	2,215	2,189	2,215	2,208	2,215	2,110

Std errors are reported in parentheses. ***, **, * denote significant at 1%, 5%, 10%, respectively. VFE denotes inclusion of village fixed effects.

survey of 2,400 households spread over 88 villages in all the districts of West Bengal except Darjeeling.

A well-functioning local democracy involves on the one hand high political awareness and participation of the citizens. And on the other, it requires proper targeting of benefits distributed through the panchayats towards the poor and the socially underprivileged. In particular, it should preclude blatantly partisan distribution of government benefits.

Our survey results indicate that political awareness and participation have been reasonably high on average. As might be expected, these were somewhat higher among the educated and the relatively affluent, but poor and sc/sr households did not lag far behind. As for distribution of GP benefits within a village, they favoured the poor and sc/sr groups. There was no indication of partisanship in benefit distribution, after controlling for household socio-economic characteristics. Surprisingly, involvement in political campaigns, a more active form of political participation than attending meetings, were negatively correlated with the number of benefits received by the household. And comparing across villages, panchayats with more landless households tended to receive fewer benefits per household, and villages where the ruling party had an overwhelming majority tended to get more. All this, taken together, suggests some distortion in the distribution of benefits at the inter-village and inter-GP level by higher levels of government, but not *within* villages. To the extent that information about relative entitlements and distributions exists at the intra-village rather than inter-village level, this is likely to have contributed to the view that the panchayat system has worked fairly well to uphold the interests of vulnerable sections of the population.

Looking further into the determinants of political loyalties of voters, we found that Left votes were associated positively and significantly with receipt of recurring GP benefits, though not with one-time benefits. This suggests a clientelist relationship between the party and the electorate. On the other hand, gratitude also had a role to play in securing votes for the Left because GP help during emergencies or with occupation increased the probability of voting Left in Left-dominated panchayats. More importantly, controlling for the effects of benefit distribution, we found that being land-poor, socially backward or uneducated significantly increased the chance of voting for the Left. This might reflect a different kind of gratitude arising out of a social betterment of the disadvantaged during Left Front rule. Thus the unusual political stability witnessed in rural West Bengal seems partly due to a clientelist relationship between the Left and the electorate, and partly to a gratitude factor arising out of good governance in a general sense of the term.

On the basis of our 2003-05 survey do we have any indicators for post-2005 voting patterns? In general we can say that with improving education, increasing mobility, declining agriculture and eroding effects of past land reforms, our results would lead us to predict a trend decline in vote share of the Left parties in panchayat elections in the years ahead. But the actual election results depend on many contingent factors, including the nature of explicit or tacit alliance of the opposition parties. The opposition was quite divided in the 2003 panchayat elections and the

2006 assembly elections, which may have neutralised and overcome such a declining trend for Left share (particularly in seats). The recent 2008 panchayat elections show a sharp fall in Left seat share, which certainly have been partly associated with the recent events associated with the land acquisition process for new industries. The unplanned and uncoordinated ways of

implementing these programmes, and especially the high-handed and violent ways of meeting any resistance on the ground, have galvanised the opposition in the whole state, apart from causing disunity within the Left coalition and eroding its general credibility as a defender of the interests of vulnerable sections of the rural population.

NOTES

- 1 According to the National Human Development Report (2001) of the Government of India, West Bengal was below the all India average with respect to rural per capita consumption, growth rate of rural employment, rate of rural unemployment, rural households having pucca houses, electricity connections, access to safe drinking water or private toilet facility. On the other hand, the average West Bengal village was ahead of the average Indian village in terms of literacy and life expectancy.
- 2 Some studies like Suri (2004, 2006) and Yadav (2004) have attempted to relate voting behaviour in national elections with socio-economic characteristics of the voters.
- 3 The respondents were asked six questions to test their political awareness: they were asked to (a) name three political parties with their symbols; (b) name the party currently in power in the state; (c) mention the number of years the currently ruling party is in power; (d) name the present chief minister; (e) name the previous chief minister; and (f) name the party in power at the centre. For each correct answer a respondent got one point and the maximum point he/she could score was six.
- 4 Some examples of larger benefits a close party associate like a campaigner could get are: securing the order to build roads or to supply building materials for public constructions, getting jobs in government run schools or health centres, or simply an encouragement from the higher authorities to pursue a political career which involves getting a bunch of facilities including free transport.
- 5 Two particularly common methods of rigging elections are false voting and tampering with the voters' list. These would be captured in our data insofar as voters reporting not being able to vote

because they are not registered, or if someone else has voted on their behalf by the time they arrived in the voting area.

- 6 However, recurring benefits received by peer groups (within a village) probably gave rise to some envy producing a mildly significant negative effect on voting Left in Left-dominated panchayats.
- 7 National Sample Survey 61st Round: Perceived Adequacy of Food Consumption in Indian Households, 2004-05.
- 8 Since the respondents in our survey were household heads, there was an age bias. This age bias, in turn, probably led to a gratitude bias, which would have been reduced if we could incorporate the responses of the younger members of the household as well.

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