

Local democratic dynamics in micro-disasters: multiple starvation deaths in a West Bengali village

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Abstract

The article seeks to shed light on the paradox that the democratic dynamics accredited for preventing famines in India have apparently not had the same success at the local level with preventing waves of multiple starvation deaths.

Concretely, the paper investigates the local government dynamics surrounding a series of alleged starvation deaths during the summer of 2004 in the small village of Amlashol in West Bengal. The analysis indicates that the incumbent government did not take timely and adequate action to prevent these multiple starvation deaths despite democratic pressures from a critical free press and an engaged political opposition. The political dynamics in the local assembly were characterised by weak checks and balances, and the extensive electoral decentralisation process (without devolution) undermined public policy interventions by seeding the grounds for clientelism.

Government responsiveness in times of crisis is not necessarily intrinsic in local democratic institutions.

Introduction

Amartya Sen has famously emphasised the important role of democratic governments in famine protection. In a democracy, his argument goes, the political pressures exerted by the opposition parties, the media and the general public on the incumbent government foster an effective state response to a famine (Sen, 1982, 1990, 1999, 2003). The excellent record of democracies in preventing famine is often contrasted with the continued existence of chronic malnutrition and extreme destitution in many Third-World democracies. Despite India's impressive success with averting famine since independence in 1947, acute starvation is still prevalent with waves of multiple starvation deaths scattered across the country (Devereux, 1993; Currie, 2000; Banik, 2007, 2011; Rupesh, 2009). The explanation provided is that famines of disastrous proportions are likely to generate public pressure to intervene, whereas widespread poverty and starvation, besides being more complex issues to resolve, constitute an everyday situation of chronic deprivation that does not invoke the same political pressures (Sen, 1999).

However, if pluralist dynamics in India can really account for the absence of famine since independence, an obvious question would be why multiple starvation deaths do not trigger the same effective response at the local government levels? After all, multiple starvation deaths at the village or district level are likely to have the same severe political ramifications for the locally elected officials as widespread famine has at the national level. Accepting the premise that the absence of famine in India to a large extent can be ascribed the democratic political dynamics, what prevents these same dynamics from trickling down in such a decentralized and pluralistic system? One would expect the locally elected officials to face similar types of electoral pressure prompting them to prevent small-scale calamities such as waves of multiple starvation deaths.

The paper zooms in on the local government dynamics surrounding a series of starvation deaths in a small West Bengali village, Amlashol, in order to examine whether the political dynamics described by Sen and others (D'Souza, 1994; Varshney, 2000; Halperin et al., 2005; Rummel, 2007; Diamond, 2008; Kaufmann et al. 2008) can be observed at the local level. It should be noted that the purpose of this paper is *not* to provide a complete account of the causes of acute starvation in Amlashol (for a more complete account see Rubin 2011a); rather, the purpose is, more narrowly, to address the democratic dynamics at the

local government level, and to shed some light as to why they appeared to have failed to prevent the occurrence of multiple starvation deaths.

The paper will first briefly distinguish between the core concepts of famine, multiple starvation deaths and hunger. Subsequently, the empirical case of multiple starvation deaths in the village of Amlashol will be introduced. The paper will then present the theory of democratic responsiveness, and identify two assumptions underlying the theory: (i) functioning checks and balances capable of exerting a pressure on the local government; (ii) a neutral competent bureaucracy capable of effectively implementing government policies. The paper will assess the validity of each of these two assumptions in the analysis of multiple starvation deaths in Amlashol. Both these assumptions, it will be argued, were violated in the case of Amlashol.

Starvation, multiple starvation deaths and famine

What separates a sudden incidence of multiple starvation deaths from that of a full-blown famine is purely a question of magnitude (e.g. the total mortality); in fact the intensity (e.g. the mortality rate) of multiple starvation deaths might even be higher locally compared to a widespread, long-drawn famine (Howe & Devereux, 2004). With an excess mortality of between 5 and 8 people out of Amlashol's population of 379 within a 3 month period, the intensity is quite substantial. The starvation fatalities in the village would be equivalent to an excess mortality rate of between 1.5 and 2.3 people/10,000/day in the entire three-month period. Such mortality rate would generally suffice in being termed a disaster by most international development NGOs (Darcy, J. & Hofmann, C., 2003; IPC Global Partners, 2008). According to both the famine scales devised by Howe & Devereux (2004) and the recently developed Integrated Food Security Phase Classification System applied by key international relief organization (IPC Global Partners, 2008), the mortality rate experienced in Amlashol would be sufficient to qualify as a famine were it not for the confined nature of the starvations deaths. Starvation deaths of such intensity would surely constitute a localized disaster.

Both famines and waves of multiple starvation deaths are distinguishable from chronic conditions of extreme poverty and hunger by containing an aspect of sudden deterioration that causes excess mortality to shoot up. Such deterioration is a vital identifier both because famines are often defined as extreme events where the population experiences

adverse changes in mortality and/or other essential anthropometric indicators (Sen, 1981; Devereux, 2000; Ó Gráda, 2009:4) but also because the livelihood of vulnerable groups is greatly affected (both short-term and long-term) by adverse changes along key dimensions (Dercon, 2005; Moser & Rodgers, 2005). The basic argument here is that the traditional dichotomy between chronic starvation and hunger on one side (which can very well be widespread in poor democracies) and famine disasters on the other (which supposedly do not occur in even poor democracies) fails to take into account sudden deteriorations of food security at the local level that result in surges of starvation deaths. In sum, if famine could be said to constitute a macro-disaster for the national government, then an outbreak of multiple starvation deaths would constitute a micro-disaster for the local government

Multiple starvation deaths in Amlashol

The starvation deaths in the village of Amlashol were reported by all major West Bengali newspapers during the summer of 2004. While ‘death by starvation’ is not a conventional medical expression, the occurrence of multiple starvation deaths has been confirmed by the media, local officials, NGOs operating in the area and the villagers themselves. An estimated 5-8 people were believed to have succumbed to starvation in that period (Anandabazar Patrika, 10-06-2004; The Telegraph, 23-08-2006) out of a total population of 379 persons spread across 75 households (Census of India, 2002). These deaths were rooted in a general decline in food security at state level as well as more context-specific triggers.

Food grain consumption per capita in West Bengal declined from 476 grams per day in 1990 to 418 grams per day in 2001 (Government of West Bengal, 2004). An essential food security program, the Public Distribution Scheme, was downsized and transformed from a universal to a targeted scheme in 1997 leading to staple food price hikes for poor and non-poor households alike (Samuel & Prakasam, 2001). The village of Amlashol was particularly vulnerable to these general erosions of food security due to its high share of illiterate (64% compared to 45% in India as a whole), Scheduled Tribes (71% compared to 16% in India as a whole) and marginal workers (34% compared to 9% in India as a whole) (Census of India 2002).

The deteriorating food security situation was further aggravated in the village by the government decision in 2002 to escalate the conflict with the Naxalite rebel movement in the area. With the government's military offensive, village access to the jungle was restricted. This restriction led to a collapse in entitlements for many of the Schedule Tribes who had little or no land, and therefore based their livelihoods on assets from the jungle. The strong paramilitary presence in the area also destroyed existing social support systems where the Naxalites would aid vulnerable villagers during times of distress and vice versa.

While these factors surely contributed to conditions of acute starvation in the village, the question of why starvation deaths were allowed to take place in a mature local democracy is still left unanswered. Such political inquiry is the point of departure for this paper.

Theoretical background

Amartya Sen's (1982, 1990, 1999, 2003, 2009) democracy theory stipulates that in a democracy, the government is faced with opposition parties, a free press and regular elections. An elected government is therefore more responsive to popular demand, because voters have the power to replace it after the next election. Hence, government responsiveness is not triggered by the benevolence of a democratic regime vis-à-vis an authoritarian regime, but by the fact that democratic governments – fighting for survival (re-election) – will go to great lengths to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe. The free press plays an important role in this process not only as a mediator of information but also as a watchdog keeping the government accountable.

There has been a growing interest in testing the validity of Amartya Sen's hypothesis. Some have interpreted Sen's hypothesis deterministically as implying that democratic dynamics will always work to prevent famine thus excluding the possibility of famine in electoral democracies altogether (Myhrvold-Hanssen, 2003; Plümper & Neumayer, 2009). Others have subscribed to a more probabilistic interpretation, asserting that democracies could lower the intensity and magnitude of famine because the government is pressured into taking mitigative measures (De Waal, 1997; Banik, 2007; Rubin, 2009, 2011b).

Regardless of whether the aggregate correlation is deterministic or probabilistic, the actual channel through which democracies provide effective famine protection is carved in stone: the electoral political dynamics (with a free press and opposition parties) pressure the

government to timely and adequate interventions. This paper addresses this underlying political dynamic rather than the aggregate correlation. The described dynamic, this paper argues, ought to be as valid locally as nationally. The same political dynamics that prevent large scale famine disasters at the national level would thus also unfold at the local level in order to mitigate micro-disasters such as waves of multiple starvation deaths, especially seeing that the resources needed to avoid starvation deaths locally would be miniscule. This is consistent with Banik's (2011: 103) observation that among local officials in India there is a widespread belief that, while undernutrition can be tolerated, starvation deaths must be avoided at all costs. A sudden wave of multiple starvation deaths, therefore, should foster the same type of pressure from local political actors, and result in the same kind of effective responsiveness from the local government. This, quite obviously, has not been the case; while India has likely been spared famine disasters at the national level, hundreds of waves of multiple starvation deaths have swept over the country despite highly competitive local and national elections.

The political process of responsiveness in cases of famine and multiple starvation deaths rests on the same two major implicit assumptions locally as well as nationally.

The first assumption is that democracies do indeed 'spread the penalties of famine from the destitute to those in authority' (Sen, 1990: 12). Whether the assumption is valid builds to large extent on the strength of the *checks and balances* in place locally. Are there political actors capable of pressuring the government into action? And will this pressure result in effective policy responses or counterproductive political 'games' aimed at dodging responsibility, deflecting blame or engaging in pork barrel politics? (Hood, 2002; Boin et al., 2009). A key underpinning for functional checks and balances is a constitution ensuring basic liberal rights and a clear separation of powers. However, preventing elite capture also depends crucially on the incentive structure and the concrete balance of power between the main branches of government: the legislative, the executive, the judiciary and the media (as the forth branch).

The second assumption is that any decision reached in the decision-making phase is indeed implemented on the ground. The tradition of democratic pluralism, to which Amartya Sen's democracy theory belongs, examines how decisions are reached in a democracy for then to be implemented by a technically competent and loyally operating *weberian*

bureaucracy. However, politicisation often extends beyond the decision-making process to also encompass the phase of implementation (Gormley & Balla, 2008; Bang & Esmark, 2009). Rather than perceiving the local administration as a non-political instrument for securing the implementation of democratic decisions, it ought to be included as a political actor. An analysis of the political dimension of the starvation deaths would therefore also need to include the role of the bureaucracy.

It appears that the two assumptions of functioning checks and balances and an apolitical bureaucracy were at least partially violated at the local level of government and administration allowing for multiple starvation deaths to occur. The hypothesised electoral political dynamic where political actors can pressure the government to timely and adequate interventions simply failed to materialise. The following analysis will address each of the assumptions to investigate why the electoral dynamics short-circuited. The analysis is based on interviews gathered in 2007 as well as relevant secondary sources.¹

Incapacitated Checks and Balances: Violation of assumption 1

India is a federal republic consisting of 35 states/union territories and 650 sub-districts as per the new 2011 census. Aside from a brief intermezzo with an 18-month state of emergency in 1975–1977, the prevailing perception of India is that of a constitutional, liberal democratic republic since independence in 1947 (Diamond, 2008; Guha, 2007; Dahl, 1998). Yet, the checks and balances of this liberal, mature democracy appear to have been incapacitated in the case of the multiple starvation deaths in Amlashol during the summer of 2004. The reason, this paper will argue, is an imbalance of power between the four main political branches where the executive branch in particular enjoys substantial autonomy.

The executive – A unified and strong government

¹ I spend 2½ months in West Bengal (associated with the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (CSSSC)) investigating the starvation deaths. I conducted a total of 36 semi-structured interviews with civil service officials, NGO employees, Assembly politicians, ministers, academics, and journalists. Field visits to Amlashol and the surrounding villages were carried together with affiliates of the CSSSC (Nilanjan Dutta and Nilanjan Mandal). Amlashol was purposely selected based on the media's extensive coverage of multiple starvation deaths in 2004. The village interviews and group discussions were unstructured, open-ended (following Chambers 1997: 117), retrospective and had an overrepresentation of the Sabars based on their high share of starvation deaths.

West Bengal's local parliament, currently with 294 seats up for election every five years, has been dominated for more than three decades by the Left Front, which makes it the longest democratically elected communist rule in the world. This domination came to an end in May 2011 with the Trinamool Congress winning an absolute majority of seats in the local assembly. However, at the time of the multiple starvation deaths in Amlashol, the Left Front alliance, dominated by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)), held a comfortable majority of 199 seats following the elections in 2001.

The Left Front and the CPI(M) were free of any major internal fractions. Perhaps haunted by a turbulent period in 1960s where two leftist governments imploded after internal disagreement and disputes, the party discipline was strong in the CPI(M) as well as in other Left Front parties. The executive branch was thus characterised by strong unity. The power asymmetry in the Left Front, with the CPI(M) as the all-dominating party, impeded on the scope for other parties to draw political gains from any internal disagreement. The CPI(M) had absolute majority with or without the other government parties. The lack of political competition *within* the CPI(M) was just as much a cause of concern as the lack of political competition in West Bengal's assembly as a whole. Chakrabarty (2006: 3526) concluded at the time that: 'unless a mechanism of 'checks and balances' is internalised, the Left Front government is likely to drift away from the ideological goal that accounts for a massive popular mandate in its favour.' One could speculate that Chakrabarty premonition could help explain the nightmarish plunge in popular support that the CPI(M) experienced in the 2011 election.

The concrete implications of this strong, unified local government with respect to the reports of multiple starvation deaths was a silencing of any internal opposition and a refutation of reports of starvation deaths. At the Left Front committee meeting on June 18 2004, for instance, two government parties attempted to divert from the official agenda by raising the issue of starvation deaths minutes after the meeting began, only to be forced to silence by the powerful CPI(M) chairman Biman Bose. The chairman also denied the existence of starvation deaths in the Press and stated that 'I don't know if people have died of starvation or hunger. But I have information that deaths even from lightning strikes are being established as starvation deaths' (*The Telegraph*, 19-06-2004).

The Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee refused to comment specifically on the reports of starvation deaths, while the responsible government representative, Maheshwar Murmu CPI(M) as Minister of State for Development of the Backward Western Region, took a more confrontational approach claiming several times that most of the alleged starvation deaths were caused by diseases and illness – not starvation. When pressed and asked more specifically about the cause of deaths in individual cases, he replied ‘Am I a doctor that would know?’ (*The Telegraph*, 16-06-2004). On another occasion he just responded to the reports of starvation deaths with a ‘people do die, don’t they?’ Following the Chief Minister’s instruction, Murmu visited Amlashol shortly after the media reports of starvation deaths but argued that there were no indications of starvation: the children were well dressed and played cricket, and cooking pots were brimming with rice on the boil in most households he visited. When interviewed in 2007, Murmu maintained that starvation deaths had never taken place, and that they were in fact fabricated by the media. Yet, by method of triangulation, the existence of starvation deaths can be established with great certainty, as they are also independently confirmed by local officials, NGOs and the villagers.

Legislature – A weak and divided opposition

The dominance of the CPI(M) completely formed the political dynamics in the local assembly, and it appears to have undermined the strength of some of the key channels of responsiveness that were outlined by Sen. Not only had the Left Front dominated assembly politics since 1977 but the opposition at the time was weak and divided. As noted by Sumanta Banerjee (2006:865): ‘apart from remaining divided, the anti-Left political parties have neither had any leader worth the name nor any organisation capable of competing with the mass fronts of the Left parties.’

The opposition had failed to capture enough seats in the local parliament to be a credible threat to the government. Further, the opposition suffered from a lack of cohesion; divisions existed not just *between* the two main political contenders nationally, the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), but also *within* the Congress between the Trinamool Congress and the Indian National Congress. It is important to emphasise that these types of divisions had been present throughout most of years of Left Front rule, pointing to a great deal of institutional and cultural rigidity in the political landscape at the time of the multiple starvation deaths. Bidyut Chakrabarty (2006:3525) rightfully warned

that this failure of the opposition to provide checks and balances to the government had weakened the democratic practices. The lack of opposition pressure had long congealed the political dynamics in the local assembly.

The opposition, although it tried to include the starvation deaths in the political process, was too weak to mount any effective pressure on the incumbent local government. On June 30th 2004 during the Assembly's budget session, opposition Assembly members from Trinamool Congress and Congress picked up on many of the references that were made to deceased notabilities during the budget debate, and argued that five persons reported to have starved to death in Amlashol should be included in such an obituary list (*The Telegraph*, 01-07-2004). Such a move by the opposition has the characteristics of a political happening. So too has the walkout demonstration on March 15th 2005, where Congress and Trinamool Congress legislators walked out of the local assembly in protest against the state government's 'failure to stop starvation deaths' in different parts of the state (Asian Centre for Human Rights, 2006). These actions carry a symbolic significance that stretches beyond the direct parliamentary implications of the action. In another instance, a local member of parliament wrote directly to the Chief Minister and the District Magistrate to inform them of starvation deaths in West Bengal. Following the letter, the district magistrate did in fact ask the sub divisional officer to visit the affected villagers and for the Block Development Officer (BDO) to conduct a probe (*The Telegraph*, 06-11-2004). Such an action also bypasses the normal parliamentary channels. *Bandhs* (strikes) are another way to bypass conventional parliamentary processes and they are an integral part of Indian politics in general. However, West Bengal musters around 40-50 *bandhs* a year – more than any other state in India. In the words of the *The Economic Times* (18-12-2006): 'if there was such a thing as the maximum number of *bandhs* in a state in a single month in the Guinness Book of World Records, West Bengal would have set the record books on fire.' The *bandhs* are mostly, though not exclusively, organised by opposition parties, and it appears that the hegemonic power of the CPI(M) has made such *bandhs* essential tools for the opposition parties in their effort to influence the political agenda.

Thus, the lack of power in the local parliament had forced the opposition to pursue a diverse range of strategies for politicising starvation deaths, including provocative rhetoric, political happenings/demonstrations, *bandhs*, and direct letters – bypassing the legislative channels – to those in authority. With the monolithic CPI(M) in the local assembly, one of

the most important venues for pushing for a change in food policies was through the judiciary system.

Judiciary – independent but ignored courts

In April 2001, the People's Union of Civil Liberties filed public interest litigation on the right to food to the Supreme Court (People's Union, Writ Petition [Civil] No. 196 of 2001). The petition focused on the general need to uphold the right to food enshrined in the Indian Constitution (under the term 'right to life'). The Supreme Court passed orders to improve some of the public policies already in place but it faced problems ensuring implementation of the Court orders thereby rendering it less powerful in the face of a non-cooperative (or incapacitated) government or local administration. A progress report on the Court orders relating to the 2001 public interest litigation in West Bengal concluded that the orders have only been partly implemented. Even something as uncomplicated as prominently displaying copies of the Court orders in panchayat offices, ration shops and primary schools (as ordered by the Court) had not been undertaken. 'No copies of the Supreme Court's orders have been displayed in the area in the ration shops and schools. People were generally not aware of the provisions under the orders' (Right to Food, 2004). Compliance with this type of Court directive would demand such a negligible effort that it is not caused by a lack of capacity but rather a lack of political will. Forces within the local government and administration were not interested in spreading the awareness of citizens' legal entitlements. While the Supreme Court had some leverage, the West Bengal High Court appeared to have less of a bearing on local politics. In a political climate where the CPI(M) controlled both the executive and the legislative power, the Court was not considered a neutral agency but was often perceived to take sides against the government. One of the consequences of this politicisation of the state courts is what Mukherjee (2007:106) termed 'subversion of the rule of law': the government was simply ignoring court judgments including those invoking contempt of the court.

Media – investigative, critical but without leverage

In many ways, the West Bengal media was a perfect reflection of Sen's ideal of the media being both a mediator of information and a watchdog critical of the government. The starvation deaths in Amlashol were uncovered by the media in cooperation with local NGOs. The largest Bengali newspaper, *Anandabazar Patrika*, published many critical and

informative articles about starvation deaths in Amlashol in June 2004, which were followed up by the *The Hindustan Times* and *The Telegraph*.

The articles did not merely inform the public of the alleged starvation deaths, but they were indeed also very critical of the government. Most articles were investigative in nature with a reporter visiting the affected regions and trying to piece together the public policy failures that had allowed the incidents of starvation deaths to take place. Thus, the media performed the watchdog role predicted by the democratic theory.

Despite these efforts, the impact of the media appears negligible. The monolithic power of the Left Front in the local assembly made it difficult to channel the reports into political activism. Although members of the opposition referred to newspaper articles about starvation deaths, this did not compel the local government into acknowledging any public policy failures. The editor of the *Anandabazar Patrika* described the difficulties of turning public opinion and awareness into political action due to the weak opposition. In such political environment, she argued, media activism would often fall short of reaching long term goals.

Another route through which the media can pressure the government into action is through the electorate; the weak opposition disregarding, the CPI(M)-led government might nevertheless be punished by voters at the next elections if there is sufficient evidence of government mismanagement and neglect. Yet, the 2006 election cemented CPI(M)'s control of the local assembly, and it was not until the 2011 elections that the Left Front lost control of the local assembly. In other words, the media, despite being proactive and vocal, did not generate a persistent pressure from the public or from the opposition on the government. It lacked a strong political partner to catalyst the reports into the political arena, and the public at large did not appear to punish the government for the alleged starvation deaths.

Summing up

The political dynamics in the local parliament were characterised by weak checks and balances. It is clear that Moore & Teskey (2006:4) were right in noting that 'for an accountability process to be very powerful, the key parts of the sequence should be outside the control of the accountee.' Even within the contexts of a mature, liberal democracy, the

monolithic power of the CPI(M) had short-circuited the assumption that critical media exposure and a vocal opposition by themselves would suffice. Within the democratic system, therefore, it appears that other dynamics are capable of counteracting the mechanism of democratic responsiveness, thus rendering the net impact an open empirical question. The complete dominance of the CPI(M) did not only have adverse implications for the decision-making process but also for the administrative process.

A politicised local bureaucracy: Violation of assumption 2

When the Left Front alliance came to power in 1977, it reformed the system to strengthen the local government, and established the Panchayat Raj system in 1978 based on a grassroots level of elected self-governance. The panchayats in West Bengal have held free elections every five years since 1978. This makes West Bengal ‘the longest and most elaborate experiment in local democracy in India’ (Pal, 2006:502). This political decentralisation generated some adverse local dynamics that perpetuated the situation of acute starvation in Amlashol.

Politicised bureaucracy

In this system of local governance the existing administration, populated with a state appointed civil service, is subordinated the elected panchayat. Thus, the panchayat encompasses an administration elected by the rural people that runs as a parallel institution to that of the block level administration (Bhattacharyya, 2007: 351). This leads to a politicisation (democratisation) process not only of the decision-making process but also of the whole administrative apparatus.

The politicisation of the administration promotes patron-client relationships where certain groups could be excluded from vital public policy schemes in times of distress. This is consistent with other contemporary studies of local politics in India. Decentralisation in Karnataka, according to Richard Crook and James Manor (1998:77), actually placed vulnerable groups in a less advantageous position than before. In a comprehensive study of food consumption patterns in three villages in Tamil Nadu, Barbara Harriss-White (2004:66) also notes how many of the state’s pro-poor policies were ‘disproportionally captured by one of the three villages, the largest, most accessible, most diversified and “developed” village.’ Inquiring specifically into the political aspects of extreme starvation

in Orissa during the 1990s, Bob Currie (2000) and Dan Banik (2007; 2011) both uncovered a clear lack of political accountability at the local level.

Undercurrents of paternalism and clientalism run through much of India's liberal democracy. Mesquita et al. (2003:471) argue that personal loyalties dominate Indian elections and that patrons look after their clients in return for political loyalty. These patterns of patronage have turned most political parties into small enterprises – or family firms, to use Guha's (2007:751) expression – occupied with exchanging services to their own small constituency in exchange for votes. In the case of West Bengal, these patron-client dynamics had been further exacerbated by the continued dominance of the same Pater for more than twenty years. A quantitative study of the public policy implications of Left front dominance in West Bengal found that panchayats where the Left Front was in majority were more successful on average in obtaining more resources from higher levels of government (Bardhan et. al., 2009). This pattern is only likely to have been exacerbated in times of distress.

The most obvious consequence is that the implementation of vital schemes is not conducted by a neutral bureaucracy. The fact that the selection of beneficiaries for development schemes, for instance, is trusted to an agency that is subject to electoral competition has some adverse consequences. Chakrabarty (2006:3523) directly links the electoral competition of the panchayats and the fact that the winner has direct control over the substance of the village level plan as well as the selection of the beneficiaries, to the alleged starvation deaths in West Bengal. In normal times, this preferential treatment of supporters might not be prevalent but in times of distress (when for instance food security schemes are downsized) this politicisation could lead to discrimination against villagers from the opposition. A development NGO working to inform villagers of existing government poverty schemes described how panchayats often failed to call a meeting to discuss the distribution of state funds; instead, upon receiving the funds, they quickly compiled ad hoc lists of beneficiaries based on political affiliation. In other words, panchayats became providers of relief in exchange for political support, where villagers belonging to the opposition were bypassed. According to Subrata Bhattacharya, a senior Congress-man and ex-panchayat member that I interviewed, the panchayat directly attempted to cheat the illiterate villagers by not providing work within the stipulated time-frame, or by selling them rice of an inferior quality.

The politicisation of the administration hit Amlashol particularly hard. The village had voted for a CPI(M) politician to represent their interests in a panchayat that was dominated with a majority by the regional opposition party, the Jharkhand Party. The panchayat dominated by the Jharkhand Party, in turn, had to operate within other local institutional structures – the district and block level – that were under CPI(M) dominance. Thus, the villagers of Amlashol appeared to suffer twofold for their political affiliation. Firstly, they were discriminated by the Jharkhand Party dominated panchayat because the villagers voted for an opposition member from the CPI(M); secondly, they were discriminated by the CPI(M) administration at higher levels because their village was situated in an opposition controlled panchayat.

The panchayat dominated by the Jharkhand Party took little notice of warnings of acute starvation. Siddheswar Pyne, a former member of the panchayat, recalls how the panchayat at the time was highly ineffective, there was little cooperation between the panchayat and the administration level, and he only received information of the starvation deaths from the media.

The local administration appeared to be unresponsive in the face of the starvation deaths. The Panchayat Officer responsible at the time initially denied the existence of starvation deaths when interviewed, but later he blamed them on the incompetence of the elected panchayat. Like almost all state officials, he also blamed some of the deaths on the tribes' consumption of alcohol – although he had in fact never been to Amlashol during his five years in office. The *AnandaBazar Patrika* (11-06-2004) quoted the local Block Development Officer, Subhashish Baij, for arguing that: 'Nobody here can die of starvation. They can earn Rs 100 a day just by cutting wood from the forests.'

Mobilisation rather than implementation

Other than being a state instrument for policy planning and implementation, the panchayats had also come to play a major role in political mobilisation for the CPI(M) in the rural areas. What started out as political bastions to counter attempts to extend centre rule had morphed into political bastions to ensure Left Front rule. Bhattacharyya (2006) identified the most striking feature of the West Bengali democracy as the fusion of the party and the government at the local level. The CPI(M) state committee even publicly stated that the

‘panchayat activities should be conducted in such a way that they conform to the basic goals of the party.’ For that purpose the CPI(M) had established a guiding institution, *the Parichalan Committee*, which was entrusted with steering the panchayats in accordance with the directives of the party high command (Chakrabarty, 2006:3523). In this case the politicisation of governance was very much government-driven as a tool to secure control over policy implementation and to enforce CPI(M) party control. The emphasis placed on panchayats as a tool of CPI(M) mobilising could explain why the panchayat failed to prevent starvation deaths during the critical situation in 2004. While the function as a mobilising force of the party ‘ensured an evenly extended grip of the panchayat institutions, it also created conditions for political exclusion especially in places where the opposition is either weak or barely existent’ (Bhattacharyya, 2006: 119).

Decentralisation without devolution

The panchayats were tools of implementation; yet by construction they were also political entities. In essence, the decentralisation process was never followed by a true devolution of power. A report commissioned by the World Bank (Bahl et al., 2009) revealed that in fact the West Bengal government had delegated little taxation control to the panchayats: about 94 percent of the gram panchayats’ total revenues came from state controlled grants and transfers, and taken together, the rural local governments accounted for less than one percent of all revenues raised. On the expenditure side, the report revealed that less than 17 percent of government expenditures were managed by rural local governments. Of these expenditures, about two-thirds are ‘made by districts and blocks, who under the present structure, might be better thought of as spending agents of the state government’ (Bahl et al., 2009:9).

The analysis led the authors to conclude that there was not much self-governance in West Bengal considering the lack of revenue generation and the fact that most of the panchayat expenditure budget was driven by mandates from higher level governments (Bahl et al., 2009: Ex. Sum); rather the system had led to a politicisation of governance. Many authors have pointed to this politicisation of the administration. Kumar (2006:67) concluded that the panchayat institutions have remained agencies of the state government for implementation of its plans or programs. Ghatak & Ghatak (2002) also analysed the panchayat system and found that the system ‘indulges in politicisation of the planning process and the implementation of the public projects.’ The division of power between the

executive and the legislative branch loses relevance in a setting where the legislative branch is mostly used as a facilitator for ensuring effective implementation of schemes (that is, informing villagers about the scheme, selecting beneficiaries and reporting back).

Summing up

The local administration was a highly politicised institution under the influence of the CPI(M). In this case, politicisation undermined existing public policies by seeding the grounds for clientelism and exclusion, which hit Amlashol particularly hard due to the specific political configurations of the village. Thus, an effective democratic response, it appears, relies as much on how the actual *policies* are implemented and administered, as it relies on the *politics* of decision-making.

Conclusion

The analysis showed that the local democratic dynamics did not produce an effective government response to the outbreak of starvation deaths in the summer of 2004. Not because there was little interest in using the starvation deaths politically; both the opposition and the media drew attention to the occurrence of multiple starvation deaths in Amlashol, and attempted to hold the local government accountable just as predicted by theory. However, the two underlying assumptions did not hold up.

With regards the assumption of functioning *checks and balances*, the CPI(M)'s hegemonic power coupled with a weak and divided opposition blocked starvation deaths from becoming a key political issue in the local assembly. The balance was skewed and the checks were toothless. The media – although vocal and critical of the government – lacked an opposition that could turn media activism into political activism. The Supreme Court issued several food policy directives but, with limited influence over the implementation of the schemes, the outcomes have been mixed. In other words, the hypothesised political channels of accountability were congested.

The assumption of a *Weberian type bureaucracy* was also violated. The local level political dynamics of food security in Amlashol was characterised by clientelism, a lack of devolution, stigmatisation and political exclusion. Amlashol's distinct political affiliation, in particular, was conducive in creating conditions where starvation deaths were not hindered in time.

This provides food for thought with regards to India's record in preventing famine since independence. Rather than engaging in the debate of whether this has technically been true or not (see Plümper & Neumayer, 2009; Rubin, 2009, 2011b), this local level analysis has shown that the process of responsiveness where political actors exert a pressure on the government to act is not *necessarily* intrinsic to liberal democratic institutions. One only hopes, of course, that the dynamics specific to Amlashol will not be replicated at more aggregate levels in India or elsewhere.

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