

The Employment Assurance Scheme in West Bengal

Draft Field Report

ESRC Project

**“Rural Poverty, the Developmental State and Spaces of Empowerment in
Bihar and West Bengal, Eastern India”**

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1 Introduction

This report complements the EAS part of the draft field report written in December 1999 with the analysis of the empirical data.

The analysed data includes:

- 100 questionnaire interviews in a village in central Midnapore district
- 100 questionnaire interviews in a village in east Malda district
- 18 questionnaire interviews with female-headed households (full survey), and 5 interviews with both husband and wife in Midnapore
- 29 logframe interviews in Midnapore district (7 district level, 9 block level, 6 GP level, 7 village/ward level)
- 25 logframe interviews in Malda district (5 district level, 9 block level, 3 GP level, 8 village/ward level)
- State-level interview with Joint Secretary of Department and Panchayats and Rural Development

The structure of this report follows the logframe headings: goals and intentions of EAS; spread and allotments, scheme generation and selection; execution, leakage and outcome. Each section ends with a subsection on possible interpretations that relate to core issues of our research such as participation, trust and governance. Due to time constraints, these issues are not taken up separately in a concluding section.

2 Intentions and Goals of EAS

2.1 Interpretations of EAS Objectives

The EAS Guidelines: Primary Objective (Employment) and Secondary Objective (Village Infrastructure)

Excerpts from the EAS Guidelines (Government of India, Ministry of Rural Development, New Delhi, 1993) that were valid until 1998-99 read as follows (emphases not in original):¹

1.1 The Eighth Five Year Plan aims at bringing employment into a sharper focus with the *goal of reducing unemployment* to a negligible level within the next ten years. Such an approach is necessary, because it is now realised that larger and efficient use of available human resources is the *most effective way of alleviating poverty; reduction in inequalities* and sustenance of reasonable high pace of *economic growth*.

1.2 The crux of the Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS) is that those who are in need and are seeking employment will get assured wage employment for 100 days [for maximum 2 adults per household] during the lean agricultural season....

1.3 The *primary objective* of the EAS is to provide *gainful employment during the lean agricultural season* in manual work to all able bodied adults in rural areas who are in need and who are desirous to work, but cannot find it, either on farm or on other allied operations or on the normal plan/non-plan works during such period. The *secondary objective* is the creation of *economic infrastructure and community assets* for sustained employment and development.”

State and District Level Bureaucrats: Tilt to Asset Creation in Search for Success Stories

The district level officers all mentioned the primary objective of EAS to provide employment to the (rural) poor. However, only a few officers spontaneously mentioned that EAS aims to *assure 100 days* of employment (although they were aware of this goal). In the day-to-day discourse, the *Employment Assurance Scheme* seems to have changed into a more realistic “*Employment Provision Scheme*”. This is understandable given the reality that EAS provided way less than 100 days employment. A state level officer elaborated that “the amount of money that we spent in West Bengal on EAS can provide at the most four to five days of employment [per year] to the agricultural labourers” (WB 101).²

It is not surprising that lofty phrases of the EAS guidelines such as “larger and [more] efficient use of available human resources” were not repeated in conversations at the district headquarters. The importance of providing employment to the rural poor was stressed in other ways:

¹ The new EAS guidelines with effect of September 1999 mention the same primary and secondary objectives (point 1.3) with the exceptions that “employment during the lean agricultural season” has been replaced with “employment opportunities during the period of acute shortage of wage employment”. More significant is that the goal of guaranteeing 100 days of employment (point 1.2) has been dropped.

² In the Midnapore village study, poor households received 10 days work under EAS from 1995-99 on average. In the Malda village study this figure was only 1 day per poor household in the same time period.

“EAS is a good scheme. The objective of EAS is to provide assured employment of 100 days per year. There are many people who need that. There are almost no limits to these needs. [EAS projects] are micro-projects in which the benefit can easily be transferred to the target group.” (Mi 101)

Despite acknowledging the need for providing employment to the rural poor, particularly the interviewed junior IAS officers tended to get more excited about the secondary objective of EAS to create durable economic infrastructure and community assets. One officer (Mi 101) described at length how *he* established a mango plantation in 1994-95. Five years later, when he was posted again in the same district, the trees yielded well and gave the local people (adivasi) additional employment and income.

It seems that the junior IAS officers take personal job satisfaction from projects that have a visible and sustainable impact. Being at the beginning of their careers, junior IAS officers may also be eager to create their own success stories. Pointing to the number of days of employment created seems less suitable for this purpose as it is more abstract and, not least, because the employment creation is well below the “target” in any case.³

(Interestingly, there are some parallels between the junior IAS officer and the local level panchayat member, who is interested in implementing “visible” (infrastructure) schemes suitable for presenting to his/her constituents as proof of competence and power.)

Block and GP Level Officers: Informed but Sceptical

The block and gram panchayat level officers were equally aware of the objectives of EAS as the upper bureaucracy. Generally, they stressed the objective of providing and guaranteeing employment. This is probably because they are pressured by the upper bureaucracy to maintain the mandatory labour material ratio of 60:40.

Similarly, the lower bureaucracy knew that EAS did not achieve the objective to provide/guarantee 100 days of employment per year to poor households. Unlike the upper bureaucracy that traced back the problem to slow spending at the lower levels (see section 2.2), the block and GP level officer complained that not enough EAS money is available to them (see Ma B102, Mi G101, Mi G102).

Furthermore, block level officers felt the drawbacks of centrally defined goals. Particularly in Midnapore, criticism of the main EAS goals emerged (see also section 2.3):

In this part of Midnapore district, employment is no big problem. People by and large get jobs because of widespread double cropping (aman and boro cultivation). Employment generation programmes are more suited for districts such as Bankura and Purulia where there is only single cropping. [Mi B101]

The objective of employment generation stands in conflict with local area development in [this] block. This area is more or less developed. So, the people’s main demand is electricity, semi-pucca and pucca roads, school buildings, more supply of drinking water and other material-intensive schemes. There is a contradiction in the EAS guidelines as the 60:40 labour-material ration should be maintained as well as the generation of scheme ideas should be done in a participatory way starting from the Gram Sangsad. This contradiction can only be mitigated when EAS can be

³ MS’s observation that the Bihar-DM’s fear of scams discouraged them to take up more kaccha works seems not widespread in West Bengal. The prescribed wage-material ratio was maintained at district level.

combined with funds from other schemes that pay for the material component. There is some flexibility as the labour-material ratio has only to be maintained at the district level but not necessarily at the block level. There is higher potential to do labour-intensive works in the Jhargram Subdivision. But the Zilla Parishad does not officially fix lower labour components for the Blocks of eastern Midnapore. [Mi B103]

Providing additional employment may be more important in other parts of West Bengal, but in their generality the above remarks should be dismissed. Being from the middle class themselves, it is likely that the quoted government officers mix up the “people’s demand” with the demands of middle class people who can express themselves better than the poor (see section 3 for a discussion of middle class bias in (decentralised) planning). Our household census in Midnapore and Malda has shown that seasonal unemployment is a serious problem for the rural poor. This is not to say that the poor do not want better roads, electricity, etc in addition to receiving employment.

In the Midnapore village, the worst seasons for the villagers are congruent with the agricultural lean seasons from mid-April to mid-June and from mid-September to mid-November. At these times, the poor have to take recourse to coping strategies such as migrating, collecting wild plants and snails, taking consumption loans, selling off assets and reducing food intake (see Mi 502-Mi 508). Maybe, the poor do not need 100 additional days of employment, but most of the poor need some additional employment. The village survey confirms that additional employment under EAS is welcomed. Only 19% of the poor in Midnapore did not try to get EAS work because they have better employment opportunities or “dislike” labouring work.

In the Malda village, the lean seasons are similar. Moreover, the flood season in September/October brings additional hardship. Life comes almost to a standstill in that time. However, many people are also engaged in non-agricultural activities, and seasonal migration is very important here. As many as 64% of the poor had never tried to get EAS work. But almost half of these did not make any attempts because they were not informed about local EAS project. Still, 30% said to have better employment opportunities in the semi-urban economy of Malda or through seasonal out-migration.

The (CPM) MLA in Midnapore, himself very aware of the EAS objectives and provisions, defended the primary objective of EAS and argued that the parties represent the diverging class interests:

EAS is meant for providing employment to agricultural labourers in the lean season. This is the time when EAS projects are taken up. The main intention of EAS is the creation of employment and not village development. But village development can occur as a side product. For example, ponds dug under EAS become village assets... The opposition parties do not put proper stress on employment generation but tend to prefer projects that create assets – for example, buildings. The Left Front parties have a stronger commitment to the working class and their needs.

The awareness about EAS guidelines at the “lower order of the bureaucracy” was remarkable. Block and GP level officers did not reinterpret EAS goals and intentions. This does, however, not imply that EAS was implemented fully according to the guidelines. In practice, EAS was not demand led (see section 2.2).

Panchayat Members: Broad Understanding

With some exceptions, the panchayat members at the various levels (ZP, PS, GP) in both Malda and Midnapore more or less knew about the goals and intentions of EAS. The failure to create 100 days of employment was explained with insufficient funds. It seemed that many respondents found it unnecessary to know all the details of the EAS guidelines as they would be informed by the government officers on a project-to-project basis. Therefore, some misconceptions prevailed. In Malda, for example, there was the misconception that EAS guarantees 120 as opposed to 100 days of employment prevailed:

EAS is a perfect programme for the labour class, namely, landless agricultural and day labourers. They get at least 120 days of employment per year. (Ma B106)

The panchayat members tended to stress the type of works that are taken up under EAS rather than its primary goal of providing/guaranteeing employment:

EAS is for the construction of village roads and link roads; for tube-wells, canal digging, etc. (Ma B105)

EAS is for a particular type of works such as mud cutting, pond digging and making of guard walls. (Mi G105)

In Malda, the studied panchayat samiti seemed not to care much about the prescribed labour-material ratio. They kept the material component too high. Office-bearers told us that this would be evened out because other panchayat samities have a higher labour component. No explanation was given why Old Malda is allowed to spend more on materials. It is possible that the panchayat samities under Left Front rule are favoured by the zilla parishad, which is ruled by the Left Front, in this regard, and that the INC-dominated panchayat samities have to bite the dust.

The villagers in Midnapore: Widespread Awareness of EAS Objectives

Although far from satisfactory, quite a few people in the Midnapore village are aware of EAS. 30% of the poor (and 45% of the non-poor) in the Midnapore village heard of EAS. 23% of the poor (35% of the non-poor) identified EAS as a scheme that provides or guarantees employment. But only 6% of the poor (and 15% of the non-poor) knew that EAS aims to guarantee 100 days of employment and that the unemployed have the right to demand work. Only 2 respondents (one poor and one non-poor) thought that EAS is mainly for building village infrastructure.

The majority of the villagers may not be aware of EAS. But it is remarkable that among those who know about it, the main intention of EAS to provide employment has not been distorted significantly on the long way from Delhi to the village in Midnapore. What is more disturbing is that only a small fraction is aware of the right to demand work under EAS when needed (see section 2.2).

Most of the villagers who know about EAS were informed by the (CPM ruled) panchayat or by the CPM politicians. Information on EAS (though incomplete, see section 2.2.) was also spread in gram sansads. There is no evidence that people were excluded deliberately from information that EAS is aiming to provide employment for the poor. Rather, some may not recall that they were informed about this scheme.

The villagers in Malda: The Poor Are Kept Unaware

Knowledge of EAS among the poor in the Malda village is almost nil. Only 1% of the poor (25% of the non-poor) knew something about EAS. The only poor respondent who had heard of EAS knew that it was for providing employment. For the non-poor, it was also clear that EAS was supposed to provide or guarantee employment.

The panchayat and the political parties have failed to inform the villagers about EAS. The only poor respondent who has heard of EAS got his information from a government employee of the gram panchayat. An officer hinted that panchayat members have kept people unaware of EAS because they do not want to be hindered diverting money into their own pockets (Ma G101).

2.2 The Spirit of EAS: Led by Demand

The EAS (Government of India, Ministry of Rural Development, New Delhi, 1993) that were in effect until 1998-99 described the unique feature of the EAS without fixed targets but led by demand:⁴

4.2 ... The employment in works under the EAS will be provided up to two adults whose names are entered in the family-card, whenever they need and seek work under the EAS...

4.3 ... Whenever at least 20 adult persons whose names figure in the family-card ... demand work during the lean season, they should be provided unskilled manual employment by opening new works by the BDO under EAS within 15 days of their seeking work...

In line with the spirit of EAS, I start with the “demand side”, i.e. the villagers.

Village level: Uninformed and Misguided

In the Midnapore village, only 53% of the poor had an EAS card. Although an (incomplete) EAS register is kept, the cards are not maintained. People do not have to show the card to get work under EAS and other schemes. People without EAS get work.

The cardholders knew that the EAS card was related to “government work”. Some mentioned that they can use the card for getting government work running in other villages. Some knew that they can ask for work when they show the card. But 94% of the poor did not know that they have the right to demand work under EAS.

Interestingly, even those who know that they are entitled to demand work under EAS have never done so. They accepted the message they got from the gram panchayat (both elected members and government officers) that there is not enough money to provide 100 days of employment, and therefore refrained from putting their demands. They did not blame the gram panchayat or the panchayat samiti but the government (“sarkar”).

Consequently, EAS is not demand led in Midnapore. The amount of EAS work is not determined by the poor and their needs but by “whatever comes from the government”.

⁴ The new EAS guidelines dropped this progressive and potentially empowering idea and the corresponding provisions.

This episode also puts the widely shared perception of Midnapore as a society with strong grassroots participation into perspective. Rather, the poor may be described as “mobilisable” as they follow the command of the party and panchayat. This may show *trust* in the institutions of the panchayat and the party, but it also indicates a *lack of genuine, independent mobilisation*.

In the Malda village, where demand for EAS work is probably higher due to low agricultural productivity, no EAS cards have been distributed. The poor were not made aware of their right to demand work under EAS. However, if there happens to be a government employment scheme in their village, they feel a “moral right” to get employment and they are capable of demanding that right collectively:

When villagers saw that work in a government-owned pond was going on [under EAS] and that outside labourers from a nearby village were engaged there, a representative of each household of the para went to the GP member’s house and requested work for one person per household. The GP member did not meet their demands at first although the villagers threatened to obstruct the work forcefully. The villagers stuck to their promise and brought the work to a complete stop for one day. In response to this, the GP member recruited a few local labourers from very poor households. They got work for a few days. (Ma V104)

Unfortunately, this type of spontaneous grassroots mobilisation and collective action is rather the exception in the Malda village. Also, it happened not because EAS is demand led there but rather because the implementation of EAS has not paid much attention to local demands.

Despite the awareness of the EAS goals and provisions among the lower bureaucracy and panchayats, EAS did not become a demand-led scheme on the ground. If judged by its unique feature and main spirit, EAS has become unrecognisable in its implementation on the ground.

Why has there been a gap between awareness and practice? Why have villagers not been informed about their right to demand work under EAS? Why have EAS cards not been distributed and EAS registers not been maintained?

EAS Cards and People’s Awareness in Midnapore: Complacency, Capacity Problems and the Strategic Role of the CPM

In Midnapore district, the interviewees both in the bureaucracy and the panchayats, generally reacted with a mixture of denial, disbelief and complacency (and at times even hostility) when they were confronted with the ground realities in the study village:

I would say that [the question of unawareness about the demand-led nature of EAS] may be relevant in other states. But in West Bengal, due to the prevalence and strength of the panchayat system, awareness levels are generally higher than in the other states... [But] it is still necessary that people at large have to be informed through gram sabhas and village-level meetings. (Mi 101)

The labourers are aware of their right to demand work in the lean season. They do that in informal village meetings and in the gram sangsad. (Mi 104)

If the respondents admitted that a precondition for demanding work (i.e., the consequent distribution of EAS cards and maintenance of the EAS register) remained unfulfilled, they usually blamed capacity problems of the **lower bureaucracy**:

The maintenance of EAS registers and distribution of EAS cards have not been done properly because of understaffed gram panchayats. These people [government employees at the gram panchayat level, that is, the GP Secretary and the Job Worker] are more busy than we [district level officers] are. (Mi 103)

A district level panchayat member added:

The gram panchayat staff have not enough time to look after that [maintenance of EAS register and cards]. Also, the labourers are careless with the cards because they are not fully aware of the purpose of the card. Labourers usually did not bring their cards to the work site as they confused EAS with other employment generation schemes. Cards have also gone lost. (Mi 104)

A gram panchayat level government employee, after having denied for some time that EAS cards have not been distributed to all poor households in his gram panchayat, confirmed the above-mentioned problems. In order to solve their capacity problem, the gram panchayat “made the mistake” of giving charge to elected panchayat members and representatives (*preroks*, appointed but unpaid “messengers” of the GP) for the distribution of the EAS cards. The gram panchayat staff did not check the actual distribution of cards against the EAS register. They do not know who received the card and who did not (Mi G102).

Passing responsibilities on to **gram panchayat members and representatives** (and to other **CPM workers**) because of real capacity problems of the gram panchayat administration is not uncommon here. For example, BPL lists have been drawn by CPM party workers. Capacity problems make it easy for the ruling party to “encroach” on functions of the local administration. This opens the scope for nepotism and deepens poor people’s dependence on the CPM. However, as most poor villagers in the Midnapore village are (or portray themselves as) “supporters” of the CPM and because the party is keen to keep the whole vote bank, it behaves “rationally” by not favouring some at the cost of other poor villagers.

However, the same CPM did not launch an information campaign and mobilise the poor for their right to demand work under EAS.⁵ This is probably because this would have created a lot of pressure on their own Pradhan too. If “their” panchayat failed to meet the enormous demand of the workers, the CPM would have been more open to criticism and might have faced dissatisfied voters among their alleged champions, the working class.

The block and gram panchayat level government officers and panchayat members regarded EAS as having fixed allotments in practice (see below). Therefore, it seems logical that the local administration, the panchayat and the party kept the poor uninformed about their right to demand EAS work as they feared failure in meeting the demands. This would have been at a political cost for the CPM. However, the interviewees in Midnapore (unlike the ones in Malda, see below) rejected the possibility that the local administration, the panchayat and the party would have behaved in this (very “rational”) way.

There is no strong **civil society** (incl. NGOs) independent of the political parties at work in the study village that could have informed the poor about their rights under EAS. Those villagers who are aware of their rights did not put pressure on the panchayat for getting work but generally waited until panchayat work “comes” (see above). It is possible that they did not want to put their pradhan and the party, from

⁵ By contrast, the CPM organised demonstrations against the NATO bombings of Yugoslavia.

which they may be dependent, in trouble. This would suggest that a politicised civil society failed to create a visible demand for EAS.

Non-distribution of EAS Cards in Malda: Corruption and Fear of Village Pressure

In the Malda village, the EAS register has not been prepared and EAS cards have not been distributed. Gram panchayat staff reported to have prepared a list of potential EAS beneficiaries. But the former Sabhapati did not enter the names given by Mangalbari GP into the EAS register of the panchayat samiti. EAS cards are lying unused in the almirah of the gram panchayat office because without approved EAS register cards could not be distributed (Ma G101).

As in Midnapore, capacity problems were also mentioned as possible reasons for non-preparation of EAS registers and non-distribution of EAS cards (see e.g., Ma 101, Ma 102).⁶ The panchayat samiti of our study village directed the pradhans to prepare list with deserving EAS beneficiaries. The task of selecting EAS beneficiaries was further passed on to the (generally non-functional) gram sansads (Ma B106). It is not hard to imagine that this method led to a politically biased selection of EAS beneficiaries. Unfortunately, we were not able to see the EAS register of our study village.

The interviewees in Malda district also referred to political interference and prospects for diversion of funds for possible reasons why EAS card have not been distributed. A block level officer revealed that they were not able to distribute EAS cards because of (not further specified) political interference (Ma B103). The respondent explained the reason why **politicians (and panchayat members)** were reluctant to distribute EAS cards:

When a GP issues cards, the people they issue them to will be permitted to demand 20 [120?] days of employment. [The politicians] don't want to do this, because if cards are not distributed, [the politicians] will be free to give them to their own party supporters. (Ma B103)

Distributing EAS cards would also reduce the scope of diverting EAS funds and is therefore not in the interest of elected panchayat members here (Mi G101). A district level officer elaborated on this point:

[Failing to issue EAS cards in order to divert EAS money is possible] if there is an unofficial contractor behind the scene who wants to engage outside labour. If EAS cards had to be shown, this practice would be revealed. EAS cards would also reveal that payments were made long after the completion of the works – a strategy that is applied here to cover up the diversion of funds. [Kaccha work done before the rainy season is recorded with a delay. During and after the rains, it is impossible to check whether work has been done properly.] In fact, the distribution of cards may be a good indicator whether contractors are involved behind the scene or not. If there are no EAS cards, it is likely that corruption is higher. EAS cards make the "hide-and-seek policy" more difficult. (Ma 102)

These accounts lead to the conclusion that the elected panchayat members follow short-term rent-seeking behaviour rather than long-term political strategies of their parties. As in Midnapore, the political parties failed to inform the poor in Malda about their rights under EAS, but for very different reasons.

⁶ One district level officer suggested reserving one or two weeks for completing the task of preparing the EAS registers and distributing the cards so that the block level staff can do this in a time-bound programme and concentrated effort. The Job Worker should help the Gram Sebak to fill in the cards and maintain the EAS register (Ma 102). It is interesting this officer does not want to entrust the panchayat members and representatives with this task.

Furthermore, a panchayat samiti member admitted that they have become less motivated to distribute EAS cards. This is because dwindling EAS funds and the provision since 1998-99 that only 50% come to the panchayat samiti. This makes it impossible to provide 100 days of employment to all (Ma B106).

This point was picked up and concretised by a block level officer. The officer admitted that also the **block level bureaucracy** was reluctant to inform the poor about their rights to demand work under EAS because this would have led to immense pressure on them:

The BDO is responsible for arranging employment if 20 labourers included in the EAS register are in need for it and demand it. In West Bengal, a particular problem exists because the EAS money does not come to the BDO but to the panchayat samiti. In Malda, the panchayat samities usually fail to include labour-intensive schemes in the annual action plan. They use EAS money mainly for construction purposes. Therefore, the BDO is in a difficult situation. How can he/she provide employment for the labourers in all gram panchayats when the panchayat samiti selected one or two big road schemes in one or two gram panchayats only? If the labourers had EAS cards and came forward with their demands, it would create a huge problem for the BDO. There would be only pressure on the BDO, but he/she has no power.

In reality, it also takes months to receive the next instalment once funds have been exhausted (although new instalments should come within one or two weeks theoretically). So, it would create further problems for a BDO if labourers came forward when the EAS account is empty. The government knows about these shortcomings. That is why it does not insist for maintaining the EAS cards and registers. This is an open secret. (Ma B101)

This quote also refers to problems of fund flow (see below) and to the difficult relation between panchayats and the bureaucracy. Decisions by the panchayat samiti can make the life of the BDO very difficult. In this case, the BDO would face the demands of the poor. But in most cases, the BDO rather comes under pressure from higher levels of the bureaucracy.

A remark by another block level officer pointed to the difficulty that the existence of panchayat institutions can be used as justification for negligence on part of the bureaucracy. That officer was complacent about poor people's awareness of their rights. He claimed that the place for demanding EAS work would not be the block office but the elected representative of the village and the gram sansad (Ma B102).

The **civil society** (NGOs, etc.), which seems not very strong in the block of our study, did not fill the gap created by the bureaucracy, the panchayats and the political parties to inform the poor about the spirit of EAS.

2.3 Unlimited Instalments: Precondition for a Demand-Led Scheme

Unlimited Instalments in Theory

A unique feature closely related to the demand-led nature of EAS was the provision of granting unlimited instalments depending on expenditure:

2.5 50% of the available funds with the District (i.e. Opening Balance of the year plus the amount received) should have been utilised at the time of applying for the second instalment. Similarly, funds to the extent of 50% of the second/subsequent instalment should have been utilized additionally at the time of applying for the next instalment. (Government of India, Ministry of Rural Development, New Delhi, 1993)

In 1997-98 and 1998-99, the EAS instalments (80% from the centre and 20% from the state) went directly to the block (in West Bengal to the panchayat samiti). As soon as

a panchayat samiti spent 50% of the available EAS funds, it could apply for the next instalment.⁷

Perceptions at the Block and Gram Panchayat Level

At the block level, and particularly at gram panchayat level, EAS was perceived as any other government scheme, that is, as a scheme with fixed allotments. Limited funds were the single-most mentioned reason for not achieving the EAS goal of providing 100 days of employment.

One block level officer explained that there is a gap between rhetoric and reality:

[The upper levels of the bureaucracy] say that there is no target for EAS. The more you spend, the earlier you get another allotment. But actually that doesn't happen. After spending 50%, the panchayat samiti still has to wait for four or five months for the next instalment. Usually, the central share arrives earlier than the state share.

Since 1998-99, the state government has applied on behalf of the panchayat samiti for the next instalment to the central government. Earlier, we had to wait until the district as a whole spent 50%. This delayed the allotments even more. (Mi B101)

The experience of not receiving EAS funds immediately was shared by the equivalent block level officer in Malda:

The EAS allotment usually comes late. We have not received any EAS money yet although 100% was spent some time ago. All BDOs tend to spend EAS money fast as there is pressure from higher levels to do so. Thus, most or all money is usually spent before the new instalment arrives. I don't know why EAS money comes late. (Ma B101)

This officer, who had been promoted to the State Civil Service in 1998, was not even aware that EAS had the provision for unlimited instalments, and had no clue that the panchayat samiti was entitled to apply for the next instalment when 50% had been spent.

The EAS money comes automatically from the zilla parishad. The panchayat samiti does not need to apply for that, but just writes the monthly reports to the DM that include the statement on expenditure for each project. We just get the money and execute the schemes according to the annual action plan. (Ma B101)

Applying for, and receiving, the EAS instalments are obviously beyond the control of the BDO and the panchayat samiti. This renders the idea of EAS as a demand-led scheme (instalments depending on expenditure) non-functional.

What does explain this gap between theory and practice?

Fixed EAS Allocation in the GoI Budget

A state-level officer pointed to the contradiction between fixed budgetary allocations and the provision of unlimited instalments:

Theoretically, the EAS programme is demand driven; that is, if you spend the money, you get the next instalment. There is no fixed annual allocation. But what we found, maybe not only in the case of West Bengal but in an all India scenario, is that a budgetary provision of the Government of India is itself a limiting factor. Under the existing budgetary provisions for EAS it would not have

⁷ This unique provision has been changed in the new EAS guidelines. A district (zilla parishad) can get maximum two EAS instalments per year.

been possible for the Government of India to guarantee more than 15 days of employment in the country as a whole.

[However], we have seen from our own experience that if a block or the district completes and sends the necessary formalities such as the audit reports, etc., it would take between one month and 45 days for the funds to be allocated. This is rather fast. And since the bloc still have 50% funds at the time of claiming, there should theoretically never be any shortage of funds. (WB 101)

The quoted civil servant stressed that deficiencies in capacity and effective planning at the block and GP level explain West Bengal's relatively slow spending under EAS better than the limitations stemming from the limited budgetary allocations.

*Inefficient District Administration and Political Arrangements*⁸

In 1997-98 and 1998-99, the zilla parishad was responsible for making the sub-allotments to the panchayat samities (Ma 101). The funds from GoI came to the panchayat samiti via the state department and the zilla parishad. This may have lead to administrative delays.

For example, a district level officer in Midnapore admitted delays in applying for the next instalment of EAS because of the district administration lagging behind with the internal audit of the 54 panchayat samities and the 514 gram panchayats (Mi 103). It seemed as if the revised guideline to allot EAS money to the panchayat samiti as opposed to the zilla parishad has not been fully implemented. The quoted officer talked as if the zilla parishad and not the panchayat samiti had to apply for the next EAS instalment. Similarly, the equivalent district level officer in Malda mentioned that the panchayat samiti has to apply to the zilla parishad and not to the central government for the next EAS instalment (Ma 102).

In the case of Malda district, not only administrative-technical problems delayed the allotment of EAS funds but also political interference:

The zilla parishad sometimes delayed the release of funds unnecessarily. This was done because of political rivalry. This is very natural [in this district lacking political maturity]. The zilla parishad is governed by one party [CPM], but most of the panchayat samities are governed by another party [INC].

This will not be possible under the new guidelines. The zilla parishad will not be responsible for sub-allotting to the panchayat samities anymore. Now, the collector will directly allot 70% to the panchayat samities and 30% to the zilla parishad for their own schemes. So, the zilla parishad is no longer capable of delaying allotments. (Ma 101)

By contrast, the Midnapore zilla parishad forwarded the EAS funds in 1997-98 to all panchayat samities at the same time in order to prove its impartiality to those panchayat samities ruled by the opposition. However, the consequence was that good-performing blocks had to wait for bad-performing blocks to catch up with spending (WB 101).

Similar checks imposed by the district administration also seem to be in place in Malda. Block level officers from two different blocks confirmed that all blocks would get the EAS allotment at the same time (Ma B101). However, a district level officer rebutted this idea and insisted that panchayat samities received EAS instalments

⁸ It was generally very difficult to receive straightforward answers from district level officers and office-bearers regarding applying for EAS money.

according to their spending. In practice, up to three instalments were achieved (Ma 101).

It seems that the district administration and the zilla parishad in both Malda and Midnapore have transgressed the authority of the panchayat samiti by imposing district level arrangement of fund allocation.

2.4 Sector allotments

3.9 In starting new works the following percentages *may be kept in view*: 40% for water and soil conservation, including afforestation, agro-horticulture and silvipasture; 20% for minor irrigation works; 20% for link roads; and 20% for primary school and anganwadi buildings.

3.8 *Priority* should be given to [these types] of works under the EAS. (Government of India, Ministry of Rural Development, New Delhi, 1993; emphases not in original)⁹

State and District Level Views: Flexible Recommendations

Government officers at the state and district level confirmed that the provisions regarding sector allotment were recommendations. The recommended percentages could be followed with some degree of flexibility (see WB 101, Mi 103, Mi 107). It was added that the sectors are not clearly defined and overlapping (WB 101).

Still district level officers identified the guidelines on sector allotments as a major constraint for achieving the goals of EAS (and for fast spending):

Because of the limited funds for one sector, we had to do piecemeal work. For example, if a road of 10 km had to be built, the earmarked EAS money permitted only the construction of ½ km per year (or allotment). When the next allotment for the continuation of the road scheme came, this ½ km would already be damaged.

The new EAS guidelines with effect of 1st October 1999 have done away with the concept of sector allotments. [Now, the zilla parishad] can do things as per convenience and needs of the place. One year one could build 100 km of road; the next year one could spend the entire EAS fund for forestry. (Ma 101)

Other district level officers pointed to misconceptions at the lower levels of the bureaucracy and the panchayats that turned the recommendations on sector allotments into a major constraint for fast spending:

Sometimes there is confusion at lower levels. They try to divide each instalment into each sector and try to spend it simultaneously. For example, if they get an instalment of Rs. 200,000 and they can spend only on afforestation projects [because that is the only work that can be done in the rainy season when the money arrives], they do not consider that the total allocation for the whole year will be Rs. 1,000,000 so that they could spend the allotment (on afforestation) at once. Rather, they spend only 20% (Rs. 40,000) on afforestation projects and keep the rest for later. This leads to a lot of money remaining unspent, which is not a proper way of carrying out the work. The proper way is to spend the money keeping in mind the total overall sector allocation for the year. But somehow this clarity is lacking, which results in wastage of time and delays.

Some types of schemes cannot be carried in particular seasons. The timing is very important. Certain schemes cannot be applied during a particular period of time when the land is occupied by the crops. Therefore, the district administration tells the panchayat samities that whenever the

⁹ The new EAS guidelines have relaxed the recommendations regarding the types of work to be taken up under EAS. In particular, no recommendations for sector allotments in terms of percentages have been made.

money is available to them, they should do whatever is feasible. When the panchayat samities make their annual action plan and know the annual allocation, they should immediately carry out whatever is feasible during that time. For example, in the dry season minor irrigation, tank excavation and re-excavation, canals, construction of building construction, etc. can and should be done quickly. At the time of monsoon, they cannot do anything on minor irrigation schemes, they have to wait till November-December. If there is a delay, they may lose a whole year. It does not matter, if they spend the entire amount of one instalment at one time as long as they keep sector allocations for the entire year in mind. (Mi 101)

However, the anxiety of the block level officers is understandable. They do not know in advance how many allotments they will get in a particular year. It is difficult to do seasonal any seasonal planning when the amount of the funds are not known. The suggestion of another district level officer (Mi 102) to purchase materials for buildings, etc if EAS money arrives in the rainy season, store the materials and take up the construction later also bears risks for the block level officers. If no further instalments followed, the labour-material ratio would not be met and the officer would be in trouble.

Rigid Implementation at Block and GP Level

The panchayat samiti in Malda did not stick to the recommendations on sector allotments rigidly. This is not so much because of the “right reading” of these relatively flexible recommendations but rather because of a general disregard of the EAS guidelines, including the maintenance of the 60:40 labour-material ratio. The block officers could do no more than submit a written “objection” (see Ma B101, Ma B103). However, since 50% of the EAS funds have been devolved directly to the gram panchayats (see below), spending on soil conservation and minor irrigation (the locally defined domains of the gram panchayats) has gone up and has come close to the recommendations. However, GP level officers were not aware of the exact percentages of sector allotments as given in the guidelines (see Ma G101).

In the block and panchayat samiti in Midnapore, the recommendations were followed more rigidly but some sort of seasonal planning was practiced:

What [this] block does is spending a higher proportion than allowed for one sector in a particular season. For example, if the panchayat samiti gets an allotment (e.g., the state share) in December, it spends most of the amount for roads. This is done in the anticipation that there will be other allotments that can be spent on pond digging, etc. in the seasons when that type of work is more suitable. Block officers are flexible to make seasonal adjustments. *But over the year, one has to maintain the sector allotments as given in the EAS guidelines.*

However, in this flat region it is difficult to find suitable projects for soil conservation. What can be done is mostly excavation of canals and ponds. But these works can only be done during the relatively small period of the dry season when ponds and canals are empty. As the sector allotments are fix and 40% has to be spent for soil conservation, EAS works are held up. There is no scope for adjusting schemes to the topography of the area. By contrast, there is a lot of demand for works in the road sector (moram roads, boulders, bridges). However, one cannot spend more than 20% for this. Otherwise, the audit from the central and state government would have objections

Also, the GPs have clear guidelines to stick to the sector allotments. However, GPs sometimes try to spend EAS money allotted for soil conservation and small irrigation for road construction instead. [In a particular case,] the BDO had to take steps and ask the GP to recoup the spent amount. (Mi B101)

Interviews with other block and gram panchayat level officer (e.g., B103, G101) confirmed that the recommendations on sector allotments were regarded as inflexible guidelines.

A district level officer gave an interesting explanation why this misconception prevailed at the lower levels of the bureaucracy:

The manuals to lower level officers that are written in Bengali mention that the sector allotments *must* be maintained. This has been done because if the panchayat samitis were given flexibility, the situation would soon be out of control and the [60:40] labour-material ratio could not be met anymore. This is because the panchayat samitis and gram panchayats have a tendency to favour pucca works because of political considerations. Only pucca work will last for five years and can be shown to the electorate as something the Pradhan and the GP member have done for the village. (Mi 103)

It may well be that soil conservation and minor irrigation do not correspond with *political needs*. However, block and gram panchayat level officers stressed that soil-conservation projects are in the first place not adjusted to the local agro-ecological conditions:

In eastern Midnapore, it is difficult to spend the mandatory 40% for soil conservation, watershed development and social forestry and as there is no land available for social forestry. Pond-digging schemes have to be taken up, whether they are priority needs or not... (Mi B103)

Unlike in Jhargram [sub-division], soil conservation (40% allotment) is not appropriate here. It is difficult to choose soil conservation projects here. The only way is often to dig yet another pond. As a result, there are too many pond-digging schemes. Land is becoming scarce for creating new ponds. From an economic point of view, making more ponds does not make any sense without building up better marketing facilities/structures...

A problem of EAS is that there are the same guidelines and the same schemes for all regions. Administrative pressure disallows local adjustments that would make sense. EAS should take agro-climatic conditions into consideration. A rethink is necessary. For example, schemes of minor irrigation (for which 20% have to be spent) are not suitable here. What would be needed are canals that link the agricultural fields of this area to the main canal and river that are quite far away. But this cannot be done because it would be too expensive and too material-intensive. (Mi G101)

The same gram panchayat officer made an interesting comment on his difficult position at the interface of administrative directions and grassroots pressure:

As a consequence of inflexible guidelines, the GP Secretary is trapped between administrative pressure from above and people's pressure from below. Sometimes, people accept his explanation that the GP is compelled to formulate an Action Plan with projects that are less needed and desired than other projects that are not included in the plan. Sometimes, people complain and put pressure on the GP during the Gram Sangsad meeting. (Mi G101)

It seems that not only the above-mentioned *political needs* (of politicians) favour pucca schemes. The last quote indicates that pucca projects are also the *politically expressed needs* of "the people". These are not only middle-class needs. In the open question at the end of the questionnaire survey, among the 80 poor respondents in the Midnapore village wishes were expressed as follows:

- more ponds: 2
- more (semi-pucca) roads: 26
- electricity: 15
- better drinking water facilities: 10
- better irrigation facilities (that would improve employment situation): 9
- new primary school buildings: 6
- etc.

While the poor may value EAS for providing additional employment, the created assets (mainly ponds) do not correspond with the village priorities in the Midnapore village as a consequence of the rigid attention to the recommendations on sector allotments.

2.5 Possible Interpretations

This section looked at differences, and possible contradictions, in interpretations of the goals and intentions of EAS between various levels of the state and the poor in Malda and Midnapore. Four elements relating to goals and intentions of EAS were addressed. These were the predominance of the employment objective, the demand-led nature, the provision regarding unlimited instalments and the recommendations on sector allotments. For discussing the emergence of different interpretations it may be useful to refer to Kaviraj's hypotheses that "the 'upper orders' were forced to hire their recruits from the 'lower orders', from a class of men and women who failed to understand the modernist discourses of New Delhi or the State capitals and who reworked their designs into something quite different" (quoted from Draft Chapter 1).

Kaviraj Falsified: Unaltered Interpretations at the Village Level, Transformations by the "Upper Orders" and Modernistic-Instrumental Orientations of the "Lower Orders"

Interpretations of the primary EAS objective to provide employment do not vary between different levels of the bureaucracy and the panchayats. In the case of Midnapore, the villagers who heard about EAS mostly identified it as a scheme that provides or guarantees employment. The "lower orders" have not reinterpreted the policy "beyond recognition". Also at the level of implementation (as opposed to discourse), EAS was labour oriented – even though local demand would be stronger for more material-intensive projects. In Malda the scheme was slightly more material-intensive than designed.

However, the main spirit of EAS has been distorted at the local level. Both in Midnapore and Malda, EAS was not demand led in the sense that the unemployed and needy could have asked for work in the lean season, as the guidelines drawn in New Delhi prescribed. The "lower orders", though aware of this provision, did not pass on relevant information to the poor (that could have led to empowerment). However, the distortions did not take place because the "lower orders" rejected the modernistic ideas of the state and oriented themselves to a "traditional order" of the village. It was rather the opposite: the "lower order" bureaucrats protected themselves, and set themselves apart, from the grassroots pressure by not making the "locals" aware about this provision.

In the case of the discourse on unlimited instalments, (following MS) "the objectives of the program looked transformed indeed, but the tier of the state structure that was mainly responsible for this was not the lower order of bureaucracy, but the very order that Kaviraj thought would push the developmental programs due to its rational modern outlook. Surprisingly, none of the features of the traditional order of India, that were the main culprits in Kaviraj's model, seemed to have influenced this transformation." In practice, the EAS allotments from the centre and the state were insufficient and did not come quick enough to meet the total demand of labourers in the lean season. Because of the uncertainty regarding amount and timing of allotments, officers and office-bearers were reluctant to make the villagers aware of their right to demand EAS work.

The interpretations on the recommendations on sector allotments were also transformed on the way from New Delhi to the lower level bureaucracy. To some extent, it was again the state and district level bureaucracy that was responsible for this transformation (by making pressure on the lower bureaucracy to adhere to the sector allotments in a inflexible manner – in fear of not meeting the 60:40 labour-material ratio otherwise). It seems as if the upper bureaucracy foresaw political compulsions faced by the lower bureaucracy and pre-empted these. Similarly, if not more, important was that the lower bureaucracy in Midnapore tends to adhere to guidelines in a instrumental, technical sense – that is, targets and figures are taken very seriously. “Modernistic obsession” with targets rather than “rooted-ness in traditional India” influenced the transformation of policies. Furthermore, block level officers and most of the higher level gram panchayat officers are able to read and understand government circulars in English. In Malda, ironically, it was the exposure to the politicised panchayat samiti that stopped the bureaucracy from using the recommendations on sector allotments in a (from New Delhi unintended) inflexible way.

Information and Participation

The information flow from the state, to the districts, panchayat samities and gram panchayats is relatively good – particularly in regard to the basic goals of EAS, and except for the flexible recommendations on sector allotments. BDOs seem to be informed in the weekly meetings at the sub-divisional level.

In Midnapore district, there are weekly meetings at the block office with block level officers and all the pradhans of the area. The Extension Officers (Panchayats) are also responsible for passing on information on scheme guidelines to the gram panchayat officers and pradhans. Furthermore, we have seen that the Midnapore Zilla Parishad reprinted the (new) EAS guidelines (both the English and Bengali version made by the state government) and distributed the EAS booklet to all SDOs, BDOs, relevant Zilla Parishad members, Sabhapatis and Pradhans.

In Malda, the information flow to the pradhans and elected panchayat members seemed more problematic. The Extension Officers (Panchayats) in charge explained this with low levels of education, comprehension and interest on the part of the elected members (see Ma B102).

In Midnapore, information has also been passed on to the villagers. In the gram sansads, people were informed about the main objectives of EAS. However, there was little awareness building (not to speak of a movement) regarding people’s right to demand work under EAS. It seems that the local bureaucracy, the panchayats and the political parties tried to avoid grassroots pressure on them. As a consequence, the poor did not participate in the scheme in a way that would have gone beyond receiving economic benefits to contributing to socio-political empowerment. Interestingly, even those who are aware of the right to demand work under EAS did not make use of this provision. This puts notions of strong grassroots pressure in Midnapore in perspective with people’s common perception of a paternalistic government (including panchayats and the CPM). Alternatively, one could argue that the villagers have so much trust in the panchayats that they do not question explanations of the office-bearers.

In Malda, villagers were left uninformed deliberately. There is no attempt among panchayat members to support grassroots participation.

Political Economy of Governance

Although most local office-bearers are aware of the intentions of EAS, they also pursue their own objectives or the objectives of their party with this scheme. In the Midnapore block, “the party” (= the CPM) presents the schemes to the people as if they were achievements of the Left Front rather than sponsored by the central government. The party has a self-interest that the labour class benefits from EAS schemes. However, office-bearers generally prefer pucca projects because they can present these to both the middle-class and the poor electorate as their own achievement. By contrast, kaccha work that generated lots of employment for the poor becomes invisible later.

In Old Malda, the stress on “development” for nurturing vote banks seems not so apparent. The demolition, as opposed to repair, of a dam that was done under EAS with the purpose of harming INC-dominated villages and showing the powerlessness of the Congress is certainly an extreme case (see Ma B108). But it is common that office-bearers use EAS and other government schemes for filling their own pockets. One gram panchayat member told a BDO (see Ma B101): “Sir, now I must make money from these projects to pay for my election expenditures of Rs. 50,000-60,000. Later, I’ll see that I can make some profit too.”

The CPM in the Midnapore block does not tolerate such practices from their office-bearers. For example, the Sabhapati elected in 1993 has been sacked mid-term because he diverted money to his own pocket (and not only to the party coffers). The implementation of development projects is necessary for the party’s survival. The electoral strategy of the CPM in Malda is different: they make gifts (e.g., liquor, chickens) before elections (that’s why the high expenditures) and help the poor to approach government offices, protect criminals from police prosecution, etc. It seems that people in Old Malda have stopped having expectations in good and honest governance.

3 Allotment and Spread

3.1 Allotment

Size of Instalments: Confusion

EAS funds were allocated from GoI to the panchayat samities on the basis of a formula decided by the GoI. EAS money reached the panchayat samities through the state department and the zilla parishad (as opposed to the district collectorate).

The categorisation of blocks in A (= 20 lakh), B (= 30 lakh) and C (= 40 lakh) was not followed as in Bihar. We were informed that this classification is only used in relation with the transfer policy of BDOs. Most interviewees, particularly in Malda, mentioned that the size per instalment depends on some formula including population size and proportion of SC/ST population (see Mi 102, Ma 101, Ma 102, Ma 104, Ma B101, Ma G101, etc.). Some informants added criteria such as agricultural productivity (Ma 101) and rates of unemployment (Ma 102).

The perceptions in Midnapore were more diverse and confusing. One interviewee mentioned that there was no exact formula in the district: “big” blocks would get Rs. 40 lakh per instalment and “small” blocks would get Rs. 30 lakh (Mi B101).¹⁰ Another interviewee clarified that when EAS was introduced and data for estimating allotment size was lacking, the Midnapore Zilla Parishad decided to give equal instalments to all panchayat samities in order to avoid political tensions. To add to the general confusion, one zilla parishad member in Midnapore mentioned that the number of gram panchayats would determine the size of the instalment (Mi 104). The district level officer who is in charge of running the EAS in Midnapore claimed that the size of the allotment depends on the “proposal” of the panchayat samiti (Mi 107).

The confusing picture probably emerged because the decision regarding allotment size was made far from the local scene in Delhi.

Delays: Administrative Inefficiency and Political Games

On the way from the centre to the panchayat samities delays occurred because of technical-administrative and political reasons. The panchayat samities have to submit an audited report of expenditure along with the utilisation certificates, etc. These papers will be checked by the district administration (Additional Executive Officer). However, there had been instances of delays at the district level:

Up to August 1999, the [Midnapore] zilla parishad has spent more than 50% under EAS, but they have not yet been able to apply for the next instalment because the internal audit is not completed. The audit of 54 PS and 514 GPs in this huge district takes much time. Under the new system of EAS with allotments to the ZP (as opposed to the PS), the administrative burden and delays will become even worse in this huge district. (Mi 103)

Generally, Malda gets two allotments. Last year due to some errors regarding the audit report and other things at the District level their plans were sent back from Central Govt. three times – this took a total of 5-6 months meaning that it was impossible to complete sufficient spending to qualify

¹⁰ However, none of the recent instalments to this very same block was Rs. 40 lakh (or Rs. 30 lakh).

for a second instalment. According to a zilla parishad member, this was due to a technical mistake made by an accountant. (Ma 104)

A district level officer further commented on administrative delays and put the blame on the panchayats at lower levels:

The district generally does not receive the certificate from the concerned pradhans or panchayat samitis in time. We always have to push them for it [the utilisation certificate]. I have to tell them to make the expenditure according to the annual action plan and to immediately send the utilisation certificate to me. (Ma 101)

Delays may also happen at the state level that is overwhelmed with allotting EAS funds to the 341 blocks in West Bengal:

This allotment procedure [of releasing funds to the panchayat samities] induced a lot of paperwork... What happens informally is that the department takes a few blocks together, submits a style proposal and sends the proposals at once. (WB 101)

Wherever the delays are created, it seems that the bureaucracy administering EAS is quite inefficient. Apart from these technical-administrative deficiencies, political considerations and adjustment at the zilla parishad were responsible for delayed allotments, including the simultaneous allotment to all panchayat samities of a district. This has already been discussed under section 2.3.

Sub-allotments to the Gram Panchayats in Midnapore: "Rational" Decentralised Decision-Making

Because of capacity problems at the block level (insufficient number/quality of sub-assistant engineers), the state government directed "the zilla parishads to advice the panchayat samities to leave projects that need less technical inputs entirely to the gram panchayats" (WB 101). The department did not fix any percentage of EAS funds for the devolution to the gram panchayats. As a consequence, the practice of devolving funds differs from district to district.

In Midnapore the *advice* of the state government was taken as an *order*:

The [state] government "virtually" ordered that *all* the funds should be directed to the gram panchayats. This was done that that gram panchayat members and the local people can see that work is being done and that the total funds are being spent speedily. If the panchayat samiti "sits" on its 30 lakhs, it takes more time to implement the schemes.

However, if the panchayat samiti has enough (staff) capacity to implement schemes, they can retain some funds with them. Also they can implement schemes that cover two or three gram panchayats (e.g., link roads). If the scheme is limited to a single gram panchayat, then the gram panchayat can implement and execute it. (Mi 102)

According to a state level officer, Midnapore district implemented this direction in a meaningful way. The percentage of EAS funds that goes to the gram panchayats depends on the actual annual action plan, or the number of non-technical projects, respectively (WB 101). Decisions are made by the panchayat samiti.

In the studied Midnapore block, EAS funds have been devolved to the gram panchayats since the beginning of EAS. In 1998-99, for example, the gram panchayats received about 70% of EAS funds, 30% stayed with the panchayat samiti. The gram panchayats implemented the soil-conservation, the small-irrigation and the building-construction projects. Our study confirmed the assessment of the above-quoted state level officer that the devolution of EAS funds depends on the annual action plan. A block level officer reported:

The gram panchayat should take up all works that do not require the technical knowledge of block staff. That is more or less everything except for the construction of roads and bridges. However, it is at the full discretion of the panchayat samiti what proportion it wants to sub-allot the gram panchayats. There is no rule (fixed percentage) that prescribes how much money should go to the gram panchayats. The sub-allotment is done scheme wise. That means that if the panchayat samiti sanctions a bigger scheme for the implementation by a particular GP, this GP gets more EAS money in a particular year. (Mi B101)

This system theoretically leaves scope for the maldistribution of funds (see section 3.2). Moreover, the above-quoted block level officer himself put this assessment into perspective hinting at a “tradition” of leaving a certain percentage (20%) of EAS funds to the panchayat samiti. In fact, this may as well be a *concession* to the contractors. Interviewed contractors commented:

Only 20% of all EAS works are open for tenders and executed by private parties. These schemes – including construction of roads, culverts and bridges, installation of tube-wells and, to a small extent, bigger irrigation-canal works – are implemented by the Panchayat Samiti, that is, they are under the SAE. The other 80% of EAS schemes are implemented by the GP. In this case, there is no role for contractors. (Mi B105)

It was remarkable, how openly the involvement of contractors was discussed (and perceived as the official system) at the gram panchayat level (see section 5).

Sub-Allotments to the Gram Panchayats in Malda: “Rational”, Corrective Intervention by the District Administration

In Malda, an “enlightened” district administration has intervened and pushed through the direct sub-allotment of 50% of EAS funds from the zilla parishad to the gram panchayats based on the same formula that is applicable for the size of allotment for the panchayat samities. The panchayat samiti receives only 50% of the earmarked EAS fund. There have been long debates between the DM and the Sabhadhipati in this regard. Eventually, the (former) DM was able to convince the Sabhadhipati of this system [that came into effect in 1998-99] (WB 101).¹¹ This practice subverted the autonomy of the panchayat samiti to sub-allot EAS funds to the gram panchayats, and is technically illegal. But there were good reasons to do so:

This decision has been taken because of the political complexity of Malda district with panchayat samities and gram panchayats belonging to the opposition parties. At the same time, there is little political maturity [unlike in Midnapore]. So, what happens is that if a panchayat samiti can devolve money autonomously to the gram panchayats, it would maybe not give any money to those gram panchayats ruled by the opposition party (WB 101).

A state level officer explained that the small number of gram panchayats in Malda district would enable the zilla parishad to keep a careful watch over all of them. Furthermore,

the State government verbally told the zilla parishad that they should *encourage* sub-allotment to the gram panchayats. But the zilla parishad interpreted this as an instruction. (Ma 102)

Other district level officers and office-bearers did not open up on this point, probably because they are aware of its illegality. The Sabhadhipati herself, for example, claimed that “it is entirely up to the block how they deal with the requests for schemes

¹¹ I think the quoted state level officer also mentioned quarrels between the CPM district secretary and the Sabhadhipati that were used strategically by the DM to push through this district-specific sub-allotment system.

coming from the gram panchayats.” But this was clearly not the case, as a panchayat samiti member commented:

The panchayat samiti has no power to make any decision on the gram-panchayat-wise allotment. All is decided at the zilla parishad level. All the 47 gram panchayats [of Malda district] receive a fixed allotment under EAS ... based on a formula that takes population size and percentage of SC/ST population into account. The zilla parishad asked the panchayat samiti to provide gram-panchayat-wise demographic figures in order to calculate the allotment. [This panchayat samiti] has submitted the population figures only in 1999-2000. (Ma B106)

Without any data basis for the “rational” distribution to the gram panchayats, there would be scope for maldistribution. Indeed, two block level officers (Ma B101, Ma B103) commented that the sub-allotment to the gram panchayats was actually not done on the basis of the formula. Could it be that the CPM-controlled panchayats “outsmarted” the fair-minded district administration by not providing the required demographic data? (See section 3.2).

Interviewed gram-panchayat level officers and gram panchayat members did not know any details of the used formula for sub-allotments (see Ma G101, Ma G102). Thus, they were in no position to question the size of the allotment in a way referring to rules and regulations.

Allotment and Expenditure to Midnapore and Malda Panchayat Samities¹²

The available data on allotments remains very sketchy, particularly in the case of the panchayat samiti in Malda.

Table 1: Allotted funds under EAS, Midnapore Panchayat Samiti

Year	Allotted Funds (Rs. lakh)	Instalments
1994-95	N.A.	N.A.
1995-96:	50	1
1996-97:	68	1?
1997-98:	118 ?	2
1998-99:	59	1
1999 (up to Dec.)	21	1

Table 2: Allotted funds under EAS, Malda Panchayat Samiti:

	Allotted Funds (Rs. lakh)	Instalments
1994-95	N.A.	N.A.
1995-96:	40	N.A.
1996-97:	N.A.	N.A.
1997-98:	N.A.	N.A.
1998-99:	73.5*	1
1999 (up to Nov.)	0	? (one in Dec.)

* includes direct allotments to gram panchayats

¹² Collecting district and block level data turned out to be very difficult and time-consuming.

Data on expenditure is slightly more comprehensive.

Table 3: Expenditure under EAS, Midnapore Panchayat Samiti

Year	Expenditure (Rs. lakh)
1994-95	N.A.
1995-96:	94.53
1996-97:	62.30
1997-98:	80??
1998-99:	94.85
1999 (up to Dec.)	N.A.

Table 3: Expenditure under EAS, Malda Panchayat Samiti

Year	Expenditure (Rs. lakh)
1994-95	N.A.
1995-96:	40*
1996-97:	35*
1997-98:	32*
1998-99:	70.46
1999 (up to Dec.)	N.A.

* very unreliable data calculated from (incomplete?) list of projects

As a broad indicator for the position of the selected blocks within their respective district and compared with each other, the EAS expenditure per capita in 1998-99 (for which the data is reliable) has been calculated.

Table 5: Comparison of per capita Expenditure under EAS, 1998-99

Area	Rs. per capita
<i>Midnapore district</i>	29
Selected Midnapore block	45
<i>Malda district</i>	16
Selected Malda block	48

Both of the selected panchayat samities performed very well compared with their respective district as a whole. The performance (in term of expenditure) of the Midnapore and Malda panchayat samities were almost the same in 1998-99.

The selected panchayat samities were both ruled by the Left Front (as the zilla parishads). However, the collected data does not allow to draw any conclusions whether some panchayat samities ruled by the opposition parties were discriminated against through delayed allotments (see above). In any case, huge difference in expenditure between panchayat samities is not surprising and does not necessarily indicate (political) bias or maldistribution as EAS is demand led (theoretically). Weak

allegations by Trinamool party leaders in Midnapore (Mi 001) could not be substantiated. But the comment of a zilla parishad member from the CPM pointed to the importance of harmony within the panchayat samiti:

In Medinipur district there are 54 blocks, some of which are run by the CPM and some by the opposition. In Kharagpur subdivision, all panchayat samities are CPM dominated. They spend their money quickly and properly. There is little dissent as panchayats and the party work together. In the Jharkhand area, there are many more opposition party members [in the panchayat samities]. [Those panchayat samities] cannot make proper decisions – there is always dissent – and they do not spend the money quickly enough. (Mi 105)

Table 6 shows per capita expenditure under various development schemes that are not demand led and may, therefore, be better indicators for maldistribution between blocks.

Table 6: Resource Inflow under Various Development Schemes in Midnapore and Malda, 1998-99

Area	JRY (Rs. per capita)	IAY (Beneficiaries per 10,000 pop.)	IRDP (Beneficiaries per 10,000 pop.)	TRYSEM (Beneficiaries per 10,000 pop.)	DWCRA (Groups per 10,000 pop.)
Midnapore district	15	5	18	N.A.	0.6
Midnapore block	11	4	14	0	0.8
Malda district	13	7	12	6	1.4
Malda block	19	16	16	9	2.7

The table suggests that the selected block in Midnapore receives slightly less government assistance than the district average. The selected Malda block receives significantly more government assistance than the district average. This distribution reflects the socio-economic status of the areas (proportion of SC/ST, agricultural productivity, etc.). Blocks in eastern Malda district receive a relatively high amount of government assistance; the same would be true for the Jhargram area, but not for the central areas of Midnapore district.

3.2 Spread

We generally faced serious difficulties collecting all the data required for a conclusive statistical analysis of the spread of EAS money since its implementation. With the exception of the Midnapore gram panchayat, we lack data series over four to five years. The Midnapore panchayat samiti failed to produce data on their EAS projects altogether; the information given by the Malda panchayat samiti seems unreliable.

Size and Number of EAS Projects

Using EAS funds for a high number of small projects rather than for a few big projects makes a better distribution of employment opportunities and asset creation possible. Table 7 compares the size of EAS projects implemented by the Midnapore and the Malda panchayat samiti.

Table 7: Number and Size (Estimated Costs) of EAS Projects Implemented by Panchayat Samiti, 98-99

	Malda Panchayat Samiti	Midnapore Panchayat Samiti
Number of EAS Projects	7*	N.A. **
Average Size	2.80 ^a	0.67 ^b
Minimum Size (Rs. lakh)	1.26 ^a	0.25 ^b
1 st Quartile (Rs. lakh)	1.50 ^a	0.50 ^b
Median (Rs. lakh)	1.76 ^a	0.50 ^b
3 rd Quartile (Rs. lakh)	1.90 ^a	1 ^b
Maximum Size (Rs. lakh)	9.81 ^a	1.5 ^b

* List given by block office seemed incomplete

** No information on executed projects available. Annual action plan proposed 35 EAS projects for implementation by panchayat samiti.

a) As per estimated costs by SAE (technical sanction)

b) As per estimated costs in annual action plan (administrative sanction)

Table 7 clearly shows that the Malda panchayat samiti went for much larger EAS projects than the Midnapore panchayat samiti. Moreover, the gram panchayats, which tend to implement smaller projects than the panchayat samiti, were responsible for 50% in Malda and 65-75% in Midnapore. Until 1997-98, all EAS projects in Malda were implemented by the panchayat samiti. The average size of those projects was Rs. 2.83 lakh in 1996-97 and Rs. 1.58 lakh in 1997-98. Projects included construction of huge bridges and metalled roads.

Table 8 shows the same trend in case of EAS projects implemented the selected gram panchayats. In Midnapore, more but smaller projects are implemented than in Malda.

Table 8: Number and Size (Expenditure) of EAS Projects Implemented by Gram Panchayat, 1998-99

	Malda Gram Panchayat	Midnapore Gram Panchayat
Number of EAS Projects	17	62
Average Size	0.22	0.12
Minimum Size (Rs. lakh)	0.12	0.0016
1 st Quartile (Rs. lakh)	0.15	0.03
Median (Rs. lakh)	0.20	0.06
3 rd Quartile (Rs. lakh)	0.24	0.16
Maximum Size (Rs. lakh)	0.40	0.94

Based on these figures, one would predict that there is better spread of (small) EAS projects, and thus better spread of created employment, in Midnapore than in Malda.

Midnapore: Politically Biased Distribution to Gram Panchayats by Panchayat Samiti?

The gram-panchayat-wise distribution of EAS depends on (1) the sub-allocations to the gram panchayat and (2) the projects implemented directly by the panchayat samiti in the area of the gram panchayat.

In Midnapore, the system of sub-allocations on the basis of the annual action plan bears scope for maldistribution. The CPM-dominated panchayat samiti was responsible for the administrative sanction of the proposed gram panchayat schemes. Furthermore, technical sanction could have been delayed because of political influence on the block level government officers. Therefore, the panchayat samiti would have been able to discriminate against the four out of 14 gram panchayats that have been ruled by the opposition (TMC, BJP) since the last panchayat elections in 1998.

Table 9 shows the distribution of EAS sub-allotments to the gram panchayats in 1997-98 and 1998-99. The sub-allotments in the two years referred to were done under different political circumstances. In 1997-98, all the gram panchayats were ruled by the Left Front. But after the panchayat elections in May 1998, four gram panchayats came under control of the opposition and in two gram panchayats there was tie. Therefore, the last column of the table showing the change in sub-allotment from 1997-98 to 1998-99 is indicative of a political bias in the distribution of EAS sub-allotments. In the absence of gram-panchayat wise population figures, the sub-allotments could not be compared against the size of the gram panchayats.

Table 9: Sub-Allotment of EAS Funds to Gram Panchayats under Changed Political Conditions, Midnapore

Gram Panchayat	Allotment 1997-98	Allotment 1998-99	Allotment 1998-99 as percentage of 1997-98
A: Since 1998 Opposition	274,400	98,000	36%
B: Since 1998 Opposition	470,400	107,800	23%
C: Since 1998 Opposition	1,080,940	156,800	15%
D: Since 1998 Opposition	357,700	49,000	14%
E: Since 1998 Tie	524,900	240,100	46%
F: Since 1998 Tie	495,100	196,895	40%
G: Continuous Left Front	735,500	382,200	52%
H: Continuous Left Front	568,400	264,600	47%
I: Continuous Left Front	916,300	402,800	44%
J: Continuous Left Front	612,500	264,600	43%
K: Continuous Left Front	534,100	196,000	37%
L: Continuous Left Front	999,600	343,000	34%
M: Continuous Left Front	490,000	126,800	26%
N: Continuous Left Front*	1,029,000	254,800	25%
Total/Average	9,088,840	3,083,395	34%

* GP selected for our study.

The sub-allotments to the gram panchayats generally decreased from 1997-98 to 1998-99. On average only 34% of the amount in 1997-98 was sub-allotted in the next year. This is not very surprising since the allotment to the panchayat samiti as a whole decreased in the same time period. Table 9 suggests an overall bias against the gram panchayats ruled by the opposition. Opposition gram panchayats C & D were most severely hit. However, lower allotment could also indicate a higher opening balance and a higher amount of unused EAS money in particular gram panchayats. Therefore, a look at actual expenditure would be useful to see whether gram panchayats were able to maintain their level of expenditure despite a reduced allotment (see table 10).

Table 10: Gram-Panchayat Wise Expenditure of EAS Funds under Changed Political Conditions, Midnapore

GP	Expenditure 1997-98	Expenditure 1998-99	Expenditure 1998-99 as percentage of 1997-98
A: Since 1998 Opposition	99,957	220,548	221%
B: Since 1998 Opposition	423,895	411,355	97%
C: Since 1998 Opposition	301,354	91,716	30%
D: Since 1998 Opposition	745,947	466,675	63%
E: Since 1998 Tie	423,895	402,163	95%
F: Since 1998 Tie	228,682	417,125	182%
G: Continuous Left Front	319,910	462,231	144%
H: Continuous Left Front	311,509	373,455	120%
I: Continuous Left Front	683,997	740,900	108%
J: Continuous Left Front	308,918	509,321	165%
K: Continuous Left Front	282,993	342,120	121%
L: Continuous Left Front	326,606	859,286	263%
M: Continuous Left Front	291,110	365,403	126%
N: Continuous Left Front*	609,334	671,530	110%
Total/Average	5,358,107	6,333,828	118%

* GP selected for our study.

Table 10 shows an overall increase in EAS expenditure from 1997-98 to 1998-99. It appears (I don't know whether statistically significant) that the gram panchayats that got under control of the opposition generally were not able to increase their EAS expenditure. As the same gram panchayats were given comparatively small sub-allotments in 1998-99, one may conclude that there was a political bias against them. Gram panchayat A ruled by the opposition stands out as a remarkable exception to the trend both in terms of sub-allotment and expenditure.

In any case, for a conclusive assessment of political bias, one would need additional data on EAS projects directly implemented by the panchayat samiti¹³ and on the distribution by the panchayat samiti of other development funds.

Confirming our indicative (rather than conclusive) evidence, a block level officer also pointed to a political bias against gram panchayats ruled by the opposition:

¹³ Despite repeated requests (including requests to the DM and the BDO), the Sub-Assistant Engineers failed to provide information on the projects implemented by the panchayat samiti.

Big gram panchayats tend to receive bigger amounts under EAS. Also, the gram panchayats of the same ruling party [CPM] as the panchayat samiti tend to be favoured. Gram panchayats ruled by the opposition [TMC, BJP] get *a bit less* money. There is this political discrimination. There is no formula that would objectively determine the amount of funds allotted to the gram panchayats. (Mi B101)

The pradhan of the “exceptional” opposition gram panchayat A stated that the sub-allotment to his gram panchayat is less than one would expect from the population size. He partly explained the exceptional position of this gram panchayat ruled by the TMC. Particularly, the pradhan pointed to the role of an active opposition that, with the support of a neutral development bureaucracy, is able to bring about a fairer distribution:

Earlier [in 1998, just after the opposition came to power in some gram panchayats], the attitude [of the panchayat samiti] was not good at all. For the irrigation purposes we received the full amount that should have been allocated, but we didn't get the full amount for soil conservation. Nowadays, the attitude has changed to some degree. But we are still not getting the full amount that we should according to the level of population in the area. [The interviewee was not sure whether this gram panchayat gets its share of EAS projects implemented by the panchayat samiti (mainly roads).]

[The attitude has changed because] the ruling party has to allow the opposition to come forward with grievances [as the opposition has become stronger]. When we came to power, the Left Front tried to pressurise us for a couple of months. But when we didn't give way, the CPM realised that there had been a real change... Now, general meetings [of the panchayat samiti] are held every three months. And in the weekly meetings in the block office, we are put pressure.

In the Congress time, there was also opposition, but the opposition had no strength – so the Left Front just ignored them. There was no pressure from the opposition party. They had no scope to protest and had to remain silent. They haven't made any programme for protesting about the distribution of money – they haven't sent any deputation.

We get our main support from the TMC members, but also from the BDO. The BDO tries to keep neutral, and in that way they get some support [from him]... It is the BDO who [finally] makes the allocation of money. (Mi B108)

This quote indicates the development of political maturity. It seems that the CPM generally changed its attitude toward the opposition. Mutual respect has developed while in the early 1990s, the left was still in a more “combative” mode. Open opposition to the CPM (particularly among the labour class) was not tolerated and met with retribution, including threats and physical violence (see Mi B403).

By contrast, political clashes have become more common in nearby Keshpur block. Dozens of people were killed in the first half of 2000 alone (various newspaper reports). Apart from the more “combative” local political parties and their goons (some of which have walked over from the CPM to the TMC), the bureaucracy was said to be responsible for the political violence. The development bureaucracy and the police acted in favour of the Left Front. A disgruntled but growing the opposition reacted with violence, which was met by counter-violence.

Malda I: Fair Distribution of Direct Allotments to the Gram Panchayats

As mentioned before, the zilla parishad allotted 50% of the EAS funds directly to the GPs. Table 11 shows the direct allotment to the gram panchayats for 1998-99.

Table 11: Direct Allotment of EAS Funds to Gram Panchayats and Expenditure 1998-99, Malda

Gram Panchayat	Allotment (Rs.)	Expenditure (Rs.)
A: Left Front	7,31,375	721,577
B: Left Front*	5,48,202	257,828
C: Opposition	7,24,869	724,826
D: Opposition	6,53,084	650,887
E: Opposition	6,42,321	641,402
F: Opposition**	3,75,149	374,830

* Pradhan from LF because opposition that forms majority could not provide eligible candidate for reserved seat.

** Pradhan chosen by lottery as tie between Left Front and INC. (GP selected for our study.)

Unfortunately, gram panchayat wise population figures were not easily available for a more conclusive analysis. But table 11 does not confirm the earlier expressed suspicion that the CPM-controlled panchayats were able to “outsmart” the fair-minded district administration. Rather, the distribution seems to be equal between Left Front and opposition gram panchayats. (Gram panchayat F is significantly smaller in size than the other gram panchayats.) The intervention of the district administration seems to have been effective.

With the exception of gram panchayat B, the gram panchayats did use up their own EAS fund almost entirely. That particular gram panchayat suffers from politicking and non-co-operation between the Left Front and the INC rather than from maldistribution of funds. The Pradhan, on a reserved seat for ST, is from the CPM, which however is in the minority in this GP. But the INC was not able to fill the top seat with an adivasi. The Pradhan himself is semi-literate and not very powerful, but he is strictly “guided” by the CPM Local Committee. The CPM instructs the pradhan not to co-operate with the INC gram panchayat members. Thus, the pradhan does not accept any scheme proposals and proposed beneficiary list coming from the INC majority. The INC majority, on the other hand, resents not being in power, and does not give in to any CPM demand. As a consequence, only few development schemes are implemented.

Malda II: Personally Biased Distribution from the Panchayat Samiti to the Gram Panchayats?

Until 1997-98, all EAS schemes were implemented by the panchayat samiti that has been controlled by the Left Front. Table 12 shows gram panchayat wise expenditure roughly calculated from an EAS list of the panchayat samiti.

Table 12: Expenditure of EAS projects implemented by the Panchayat Samiti, 1996-7 & 1997-8, Malda

Gram Panchayat (1993-98)	Expenditure 1996-97 (Rs. lakh)	Expenditure 1997-98 (Rs. lakh)	Total (Rs. lakh)
A: Left Front	9.6	2.9	12.5
C: Left Front	4.1	1.6	5.7
E: Left Front	9.6	7.2	16.8
B: Opposition	2.1	0.4	2.5
D: Opposition	3.3	5.6	8.9
F: Opposition	4.7	0.3	5.0

Table 12 does not conclusively indicate any clear-cut discrimination against the gram panchayats that were ruled by the opposition, although the distribution of EAS projects seems far from being equal. Clearly, the Left Front ruled gram panchayats A & B were favoured. (The Left Front would probably have explained this with the remoteness of these two gram panchayats.) But gram panchayat D & F were also doing relatively well (if one considers the relatively small size of gram panchayat F). Gram panchayats B & C were discriminated against.

Generally, the maldistribution does not follow the pattern of political majorities in the gram panchayats. This, however, does not mean that politics were not at work. Rather, the distribution may point to more personalised politics. A block level officer indicated:

[D] is the gram panchayat of the Sabhapati, and [F] is the gram panchayat of [an influential panchayat samiti member and former contractor]. They are getting the most under EAS from the panchayat samiti. (Ma B103)

However, favouritism in relation with EAS seems not to have influenced election results very much. Although gram panchayat E and D were favoured, the Left Front lost power in E and was not able to gain power in D in the panchayat elections in 1998. Also, the distribution of EAS projects implemented by the panchayat samiti in 1998-99 does follow a similar pattern as before the panchayat elections. Gram panchayats A, D, E and F still got more EAS projects than B and C (see table 13).

Table 13: Expenditure of EAS projects implemented by the Panchayat Samiti, 1998-99, Malda

Gram Panchayat (1998-)	Expenditure 1998-99 (Rs. lakh)
A: Left Front	3.6
B: Left Front	0
C: Opposition	0.7
D: Opposition	8.9
E: Opposition	3.5
F: Opposition	1.2

Even Distribution among Wards within the Gram Panchayat

The Midnapore gram panchayat implemented 256 EAS projects in all its 19 wards between 1994-95 and 1998-99. Unfortunately, it was very difficult to identify the ward where particular projects were implemented from the (published) list of EAS projects and expenditure. However, a superficial look at the list suggests that there was no bias for or against particular wards. Until 1998, each ward was represented by a CPM gram panchayat member. Since 1998, four wards have representatives from the TMC and the BJP. These wards also received EAS projects after having changed colours. The most outspoken opposition gram panchayat member mentioned that a particular area of the gram panchayat had been neglected (Mi G105). But this area is not congruent with a stronghold for the opposition. The opposition politician's remarks did not suggest that wards ruled by the opposition were neglected, but that the CPM would favour their own supporters within all the wards, including the ones ruled by the opposition. A household wise, rather than ward wise, analysis may reveal political bias. However, in this area, "political" bias is to a big extent congruent with a bias toward the poor, the labour class and scheduled castes and tribes.

In Malda, the EAS projects implemented by the selected gram panchayat since 1998-99 also seem to be distributed more or less equally between the 10 wards, with the exception of one ward (with representative from CPM) that had no EAS project running. However, the pradhan (INC) assured that this ward would receive more EAS funds the following year (Mi G102). Indeed, the equally strong CPM and INC reached a compromise. The scheme selection committee of the gram panchayat committee includes politicians from both parties. The INC pradhan claims that this was done in order to avoid conflict. However, it seems that an influential CPM member of the panchayat samiti put pressure on the pradhan. The panchayat samiti member explained:

I reminded [the *de facto* pradhan] that he is not the actual pradhan but his wife is. I told him that I wouldn't care too much. "However, as acting Pradhan you must be neutral and not favour his own party. If you are not going to co-operate with the CPM members, I myself will see that you will not get any money from the [CPM-dominated] panchayat samiti." [The *de facto* pradhan] was afraid of that and gave in. (Ma B105)

As a consequence of this "intervention", and in order to avoid conflict, each gram panchayat member can be more or less assured of getting 1-2 small projects under EAS and/or JRY (see Ma G103).

Household Level

Before turning to possible discrimination at the household level, table 14 compares EAS and other expenditure in the two studied wards in Midnapore and Malda and sets the villages in the wider context of the gram panchayat, the block and the district.

Table 14: Expenditure under EAS and other Development Schemes in Selected Villages and in Wider Contexts, Midnapore and Malda, 1998-99

Area	EAS (Rs. per capita)	JRY (Rs. per capita)	IAY (Beneficiaries per 10,000 pop.)	IRDP (Beneficiaries per 10,000 pop.)	TRYSEM (Beneficiaries per 10,000 pop.)	DWCRA (Groups per 10,000 pop.)
Midnapore district	29	15	5	18	N.A.	0.6
Midnapore block	45	11	4	14	0	0.8
Midnapore GP	34	14	11	19	0	4.6
<i>Midnapore Ward</i>	<i>29</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>23</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>0</i>
Malda district	16	13	7	12	6	1.4
Malda block	48	19	16	16	9	2.7
Malda GP	32	10	25	36	29	2
<i>Malda Ward</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>36</i>	<i>14</i>

In terms of EAS, the selected blocks in Midnapore and Malda attracted significantly more money than the district average. But the selected gram panchayats spent less than the block average, and the selected wards/villages received less EAS money than the gram panchayat average. However, keeping the wider picture in view, one cannot conclude that the studied villages were generally discriminated.

Despite of similar expenditure under EAS at the panchayat samiti level, the poor villagers in the selected ward in Malda benefited much less from employment created under EAS from 1995-96 to 1998-99 than their counterparts in Midnapore (see table 15). This is because of the execution of bigger and more material intensive projects as well as the limited spread mentioned earlier. Furthermore, there has generally been more leakage in Malda than in Midnapore (see section 5).

Table 15: Work Participation in EAS, Poor Households, Midnapore and Malda, 1995-99

	Midnapore Ward	Malda Ward
Received work under EAS	75%	24%
Average workdays (beneficiaries only)	12.8	5.7
Average days of work received (all)	9.6	1.4

In Midnapore work participation in EAS projects was relatively high. A closer look at the data, however, reveals significant gender differences. Women had access to EAS work in only 41% of the poor households, while men worked under EAS in 60% of the poor households. Furthermore, female-headed households received only 3.4 days work under EAS during 1995-99. In Malda, Women had access to EAS work in only 14% of the poor households, while men worked under EAS in 21% of the poor households.

The following tables complement the analysis of poor households looking at caste, location and political affiliation.

Table 16: Work Participation in EAS by Caste, Poor Households, Midnapore, 1995-99

	Bhumij (ST)	Santal (ST)	SC	General
Received work under EAS	86%	71%	71%	50%
Average workdays (beneficiaries only)	9.7	16.8	17.0	10.8
Average days of work received (all)	8.3	12.0	12.1	5.4

Table 17: Work Participation in EAS by Caste, Poor Households, Malda, 1995-99

	Malpah. (ST)	Santal (ST)	SC	General
Received work under EAS	38%	86%	0%	8%
Average workdays (beneficiaries only)	6.3	4.5	--	6.0
Average days of work received (all)	2.4	3.9	0	0.5

Table 18: Work Participation in EAS by Village, Poor Households, Midnapore, 1995-99

	Village R	Village A	Village S
Received work under EAS	86%	74%	62%
Average workdays (beneficiaries only)	13.7	9.6	16.7
Average days of work received (all)	11.8	7.1	10.3

Table 19: Work Participation in EAS by Village, Poor Households, Malda, 1995-99

	Village J	Village I	Village K	Village N
Received work under EAS	31%	30%	4%	75%
Average workdays (beneficiaries only)	6.3	7.7	6.0	1.7
Average days of work received (all)	1.9	2.2	0.2	1.3

Table 20: Work Participation in EAS by Party Support, Poor Households, Midnapore, 1995-99

	Active CPM Supporter	Active Opposition	No Active Party Support
Received work under EAS	72%	--	76%
Average workdays (beneficiaries only)	20.9	--	10.5
Average days of work received (all)	15.1	--	8.0

Table 21: Work Participation in EAS by Party Support, Poor Households, Malda, 1995-99

	Active CPM Supporter	Active Opposition	No Active Party Support
Received work under EAS	54%	30%	5%
Average workdays (beneficiaries only)	6.1	3.7	6.0
Average days of work received	3.3	1.1	0.3

Table 16-21 clearly show that the Malda ward not only provides for less work under EAS, but also discriminated against particular groups among the poor: the scheduled castes and poor general caste people, residents of village K and people who are not active supporters of any political party. Given the extreme poverty among the Malpahariya, the difference in access to EAS work between them and the Santals is also difficult to justify. Most interestingly, the analysis by party support shows that persons who do not support any party were left out from the benefits of EAS while supporters of the opposition at least got some benefit (probably mainly before the CPM gained control over this ward).

In the Midnapore ward, by contrast, there is no substantial discrimination against any group. Access to EAS work was more or less equally spread over the various groups of the poor. Interestingly, active party (CPM) supporters have no better access to EAS work than others. But if they get work, they tend to get it for more days.

3.3 Possible Interpretations

Political Economy of Governance: Developmental Politics versus Politics of Patronage

In the Midnapore panchayat samiti, EAS is used for political gain.¹⁴ This can be positive and imply developmental politics. For example, the relatively good spread and inclusion of various groups may indicate that developmental politics are at work

¹⁴ For example, the local CPM presents centrally sponsored schemes as if they were their own initiative.

here. There are political obligations to distribute the benefits of EAS widely, as one block level officer pointed out:

The panchayat samiti has many obligations and compulsions. They have to make happy many people of many gram panchayats. Therefore, the panchayat samiti divides a big part of the allotted EAS money and gives it to various gram panchayats. EAS money is distributed without proper planning. (Mi B101)

Although the quoted block-level officer stressed the negative implication that money is spent without proper planning and not on the basis of “rationally” defined needs, “to make happy many people of many gram panchayats” is certainly a positive political compulsion. Indeed, villagers criticise their panchayat representatives in the gram sansad if they think that the panchayat fails to do enough development work in their village (see Mi V002, Mi V003). Grassroots pressure was crucial for the relatively equal distribution. In regard to the distribution of EAS funds to gram panchayats that is more obscure to the ordinary villagers, the struggle by an active opposition (supported by a neutral bureaucracy) and the evolving political maturity (see above) seemed to be more effective to check favouritism.

However, the perceived political compulsions in a situation of strong political competition are not invariably positive as the example of the continued tendency of the panchayat samiti to favour CPM-ruled gram panchayats shows. This bias may not only be an attempt to develop one’s own constituency but it looks as if it was also a show of power and a threat to those, particularly poor people, who do not vote in favour of the ruling party.

Although the Malda block has a similarly strong, in electoral terms even stronger, political opposition, the generally bigger EAS projects implemented by the panchayat samiti and EAS work in general were not well spread. Generally, the moribund opposition did not choose “development” as their political battleground. Senior opposition leaders did not involve themselves in development issues (unless for accusations of corruption) (see Ma B107). Furthermore, the pattern of maldistribution suggests that the ruling party did not only give in to the above-mentioned negative political compulsions. The ruling party also neglected some of its own constituencies (gram panchayats). Interestingly, favouritism is based on personalities rather than political parties. This indicates that the parties assume that the voting decisions are not primarily based on their performance in terms of development. Social and personal obligations of the panchayat samiti representatives who play the key roles in selecting EAS projects seem stronger than political obligations to the party and its followers. Furthermore, less influential panchayat representatives seem way too ignorant to effectively press for a fairer distribution of EAS projects. These are indicators of the prevalence of politics of patronage rather than developmental politics.

Given the prevalent situation of political immaturity and corruption, the bureaucracy in Malda was forced to apply more draconian strategies than its counterpart in Midnapore. The district administration decided that direct allocation to the gram panchayats was the only way to reduce the maldistribution of EAS funds.

The equal distribution of EAS funds from the gram panchayats to the wards is not a consequence of any sign of political maturity and inter-party respect. Rather, it is a forced political compromise between the pradhan (INC) and the upa-pradhan (CPM) and brought about by a key person in the panchayat samiti (see Box 4) who lives in this ward and belongs to the CPM. This compromise guarantees that all panchayat members can make a “profit” from the diversion of development funds. But the

prospect for individual rents seems not to be a sufficient condition for reaching such compromises (see Box 1).

Within the Malda village/ward, government benefits, including EAS work, are not well distributed. Unlike in Midnapore, the villagers seemed to accept that the supporters of the elected ward representative and the party in power at the gram panchayat level receive more benefits. There was no clear expectation that the elected panchayat member should look after the whole constituency. Rather, the villagers expected to be *looked after* by their own political leaders only. Favouritism based on party support was regarded as natural and not fought against. Opposition was raised only when it became clear that outsiders benefited from an EAS scheme. The locals agitated against the employment of outside contract labour in an EAS pond-digging project (see Ma V104). The locals felt a moral right to be employed by that project. However, the scope of collective action based on such a type of moral right is very limited as ordinary villagers are unaware of the general discrimination of their area.

Box 1: Forced Local Compromises Between INC and CPM in Malda

DC, a CPM politician and key player of the panchayat samiti (see Box 4) pressed two gram panchayats to distribute government funds equally to both INC and CPM gram panchayat members and give them autonomy of how to spend them.

In the selected gram panchayat of our study, there is a stalemate between INC and CPM, both having five gram panchayat members. The pradhan was chosen by tossing a coin. When I visited the block office for the first time in February/March 1999, the *de facto* pradhan (husband of the actual pradhan) (INC) was complaining to the BDO about the Upo-Pradhan (CPM) who tended to refuse countersigning the cheques necessary for releasing development funds. As a consequence, it was impossible to implement any government schemes.

Not the BDO but DC was eventually able to circumvent the impasse. He threatened the *de facto* pradhan to block all funds to his gram panchayat on the basis that he unlawfully acts as pradhan. (Obviously, the pradhan was not aware that the panchayat samiti does not have the power to block funds directly allotted to the gram panchayats.) DC forced the *de facto* pradhan to give equal funds and autonomy to both the CPM and INC gram panchayat members. This compromise ensured the smooth running of government schemes implemented by the gram panchayat.

In a neighbouring gram panchayat, DC tried to intervene in a similar way. There, the pradhan, on a reserved seat for ST, is from the CPM, which however is in the minority in this GP. The INC was not able to fill the top seat with an adivasi. The pradhan himself is semi-literate, not very powerful, and “guided” by the CPM Local Committee. He uses his formal power to refuse accepting any scheme proposals and proposed beneficiary list coming from the INC majority. In turn, the INC gram panchayat members do not accept any proposals coming from the CPM as they resent not being in power. As a consequence, no development work was done in the first half of 1999-2000 although money was available under EAS, JRY, etc.

DC failed to reach a compromise here as he was not able to use effective threats. Blocking government funds to the gram panchayat, if possible at all, would also reflect badly on the CPM pradhan. The prospect for individual “rents” from government funds was not motivation enough for the INC gram panchayat members to co-operate and compromise with the CPM.

The BDO faced questions from higher levels of the bureaucracy, as that gram panchayat failed to implement any schemes. The SDO, and later the DM and other district-level officers, became involved and tried to solve the problem. However, despite promises of all the involved parties at the gram panchayat level, the situation did not change. Finally, the bureaucracy gave up on this particular panchayat, and had to respect the autonomy of the panchayats. The disillusioned BDO remarked: “After all, the gram panchayat is an autonomous body.”

Box 2: Possible Roots of Political Patronage

Big zamindari ruled the countryside in the early 20th century in both our field study sites in Malda and Midnapore. In Malda, the erstwhile feudal system seems to have its ramification in a system of political patronage. For example, the villagers have more confidence in approaching the pradhan, the ward representative or the key player of the panchayat samiti personally than using the institution of the gram sansad. Villagers expect some benefits in exchange for their votes, but only if their own people are in power. Personalised networks are used to access the benefits. Even the panchayats have been personalised. The elected panchayat members are not regarded as the representatives of the area (and they also fail to act so). Benefits from government schemes are small, patronage seems generally more important for solving village disputes, which are frequent in this area of recent waves of immigration and inter-ethnic tensions.

Semi-feudal relations seem to continue to be part of Malda's politics at higher levels too. The (Congress) MP of Malda A.B.A. Ghani Khan Choudhury, is the son of the biggest zamindar of the region. The (Congress) MLA of our study village also comes from an important zamindar family. Ghani Khan Choudhury, Malda's MP for more than two decades became (in)famous as a Union Railway Minister in the mid-1980s when he favoured his constituency excessively. He is sometimes nicknamed the (former) Union Railway Minister of Malda. His populist policies in the past built him a comfortable and stable voter basis. Ghani Khan Choudhury has been re-elected many times, often despite his affiliation with the Congress. At times, he was the only Congress MP from West Bengal.

It seems that Malda's second generation of CPM leaders has successfully mimicked the Congress strategy of personalising power and protection. In Malda, the CPM focused on building up networks of patronage as opposed to mobilising the poor. While the old guard of left activists led the operation barga movement relatively successfully, the new guard of CPM opportunists remained apathetic to the more recent mass campaigns for adult literacy, etc. As the Congress politicians, CPM candidates in panchayat elections are engaged in trading chickens and liquor for votes. Short-term electoral victory seems the main driving force of the local CPM.

Midnapore has also a feudal history but no personalised system of political patronage emerged. Apart from the involvement of different personalities of the district-level CPM, the clear Left Front majorities just after 1977 may have created scope for the CPM to focus on "development". The CPM was able to set the political culture. Today's local leaders of the TMC try to win over voters with the same promise of "development" and good governance. By contrast, the political culture of Malda has been set by the Congress.

4 Generation, Short-listing and Selection of Schemes

4.1 The Process in Theory

In West Bengal, the generation and short-listing of EAS and other projects is integrated with the decentralised planning process of the panchayats. This is a multi-stage process:

1 Villagers suggest projects at the gram sansad, which is the statutory meeting held twice a year (May and November) in every ward, where all voters of the ward are invited. (What happens in the gram sansad cannot really be called “planning”. Rather, villagers are given an opportunity to express their felt needs.)

2 The proposals from the gram sansads are forwarded to the gram panchayat. The convenors of the four or five sub-committees of the gram panchayat draw up a priority list of schemes for the entire area. With the assistance of the gram panchayat Secretary, they list the proposals under the various government schemes such as EAS and JRY. The Job Assistant makes quick estimates (standard figures for standard projects such as pond digging). These lists become the draft annual action plan that has to be passed by the gram panchayat members in their (monthly) meeting.

3 The draft annual action plan, including the prioritised EAS list, is put before the gram sabha, the gram panchayat-level open meeting that is held once a year in December. The draft annual action plan is passed (with amendments if requested) by the villagers.

4 The amended list goes back to the gram panchayat, which finalises the annual action plan of the gram panchayat. The monthly meeting involving all gram panchayat members gives the final approval.

5 The annual action plans of all gram panchayats go forward to the panchayat samiti, first to the Public Works Standing Committee (sthayee samiti) for short-listing, then to the Finance and Planning Standing Committee for integration into the EAS annual action plan of the panchayat samiti.¹⁵

6 The recommended EAS annual action plan of the Finance and Planning Standing Committee is placed before the General Meeting of the panchayat samiti, which includes all pradhans, panchayat samiti members, zilla parishad members, MLA(s) and the MP from the area. The general meeting approves the EAS annual action plan.

7 The EAS annual action plan of the panchayat samiti is forwarded to the zilla parishad, first to the Public Works Standing Committee, then to the Finance and Planning Standing Committee. The zilla parishad has no authority to include its own scheme ideas. Only in the case of emergencies, the zilla parishad can add its own schemes and change priorities.

8 The District Planning Committee, which includes all elected zilla parishad members, MLAs, MPs and district level officers, integrates the EAS annual action plans of the panchayat samities into the District Plan. However, the District Planning Committee plays no role in approving or amending the EAS annual action plans.

¹⁵ The Standing Committee can be regarded as mini-cabinets involving elected members from the ruling coalition and block level officers.

9 The GoWB Department of Panchayats and Rural Development scrutinises the annual action plans and, if necessary, asks the zilla parishad to delete schemes that violate the EAS guidelines. However, the Department is not authorised to change the EAS annual action plans itself.

10 The EAS annual action plan of the panchayat samiti is the so-called “shelf of projects”. However, it must be noted that in practice the action plan is only the basis for the sanction of the schemes. In particular, the technical estimates/sanction are usually not ready at this stage. This is a reason for the slow implementation of the schemes (see section 5). When EAS allotments are made, the general meeting of the panchayat samiti can change priorities in the action plan.

4.2 Generation of Scheme Ideas

Inclusion and Exclusion in the Gram Sansad

A first, but insufficient, indicator of people’s participation in generating proposals for EAS schemes is the attendance in village meetings that discuss matters related to the EAS. Table 22 shows the big differences between the Midnapore and the Malda village.

Table 22: Attendance in village meetings where development schemes are discussed, Midnapore and Malda village

	Attended (Poor)	Attended (N-Poor)	Gram Sansad (Poor)	Gram Sansad (N-Poor)	Gram Sabha (Poor)	Gram Sabha (N-Poor)	Other Meeting (Poor)	Other Meeting (N-Poor)
Midnapore Village	75%	85%	50%	70%	13%	30%	53%	50%
Malda Village	23%	10%	21%	10%	3%	0%	1%	5%

In Midnapore, 75% of the poor (and 85% of the non-poor) have at least once attended a village meeting where development schemes were discussed. The most important meetings were the gram sansad and the *gram boithak* (see below). There are no big differences between castes and location. Party supporters are slightly over-represented: 89% of the CPM supporters attended. Supporters of the opposition parties also attended the gram sansad, and were in no way excluded (observation made in gram sansad meetings; the small sample of people who actively and openly support the opposition does not allow quantification.)¹⁶ Women are clearly under-represented in the gram sansad. In the observed meetings, only 5-20% of the attendants were women. Only 41% of the poor female-headed households ever attended a village meeting. Although there is no systematically engineered exclusion, attendance in gram sansads is relatively low, between 70 and 130 people (or between

¹⁶ The allegation of a block-level officer (Mi B101) that supporters of the opposition would not attend the gram sansad or would not speak up because of fear of CPM retaliation cannot be supported with the data and the qualitative impression of the observed gram sansads. This gap in perception may be because the political situation has been changing very recently. The CPM’s power is not uncontested anymore.

10-20% of the voters). The attendance in such meetings has also been declining, as the frustration grows that not every expressed need can be met with a scheme (see below).

In Malda, only 23% of the poor (and 10% of the non-poor) have attended a meeting where development schemes were discussed. The gram sansad was by far the most important village meeting where development schemes were discussed. But only 20-40 people attended the gram sangsad we observed directly. We also saw a “bogus” gram sangsad in the house of the gram panchayat member. Only 7-10 CPM party workers attended that meeting. After the meeting, by-passers were asked to sign in the attendance register in order to fill the quorum. When we asked people at the entrance of the village about the venue of the gram sansad, they looked puzzled. No one knew about the meeting.

Attendance in Malda varies strongly between different castes, political supporter groups and location. In particular, the residents of a Malpahariya para in Village J show a comparatively high attendance rate of 70% in village meetings. This group supports DC, the local strongman and key player of the panchayat samiti (see Box 4). Apart from favouring CPM supporters and giving them a chance to express their needs, this group may also have been invited because most of them are uneducated and not informed enough for putting pressure on the panchayat. By inviting ill-informed and relatively “docile” party supporters, the panchayat members are able to meet the quorum of the gram sansad without having to fear that too many proposals (besides their own) are put forward or that their activities are criticised.

Group interviews confirmed that other groups of villagers were systematically excluded from the gram sansad in the Malda village. Most other villagers did not hear about such a meeting being held; a few were invited personally, some others heard about the gram sansad at the gram panchayat office (Ma V105, Ma V108). The questionnaire survey reveals that 64% were either not invited to, or not informed about, village meetings of this kind. Some villagers in Village N knew about the gram sansad but they thought that it was only for the residents of the neighbouring village/ward, in which the meeting was held (Ma V108). There were no public announcements per microphone or beating of drums (which should be done according to the panchayat rules). The panchayat members neglected their duty of informing villagers. For example, the gram sansads in May 1999 were only conducted on pressure of the BDO.¹⁷ Also, the panchayat members refused to invite officers of the gram panchayat and the block. In some cases, the time and venue of the meeting was changed so that government officers found it difficult to attend the meetings.

Interestingly, the informed villagers seemed to play the same game of withholding information as the panchayat members. Individual villagers who knew about the meeting did not inform their neighbours. According to the poor in village N, they wanted to keep the meeting secret and thus reduce the number of proposals in order to enhance the chance that their own proposals will come through (Ma V108). This reflects a level and kind of “social capital” and disunity that are not suitable for

¹⁷ The new gram panchayat Secretary, together with the BDO, seem to have organised the gram sansads in May 2000. They camped in the villages and made people aware of the meaning of the gram sansad (Conversation with Secretary during revisit in June 2000). Unfortunately, we had no opportunity to cross-check this in the field. However, it seems that the bureaucracy is trying hard to enhance people’s participation and to create “space of empowerment”, which is ironically confined by the elected panchayat members.

collective action, in general, and for putting pressure on the state, in particular. Even if the expressed allegations of the villagers were baseless, they show the general lack of trust, not just between the villagers and the “state”, but also among the poor even in this small and ethnically homogeneous village.

Gram Sansad in Midnapore: No Prioritisation Because of Fear of Conflicts?

In the Midnapore village, the gram sansad represented an established mechanism for the villagers to meet, to express their needs and push forward their ideas. It seemed that most “bigger” EAS schemes of more than Rs. 10,000 were proposed in a gram sangsad at one time, though some ideas were initiated elsewhere – for example, at the village/para level gram bothak (see below).

In the observed gram sansad meetings, villagers from all classes and political colours proposed schemes. The gram panchayat and block staff present encouraged the villagers, including the few women, to make proposals. All proposals were noted down¹⁸, but they were not discussed or prioritised. The elected panchayat members and the gram panchayat staff made it clear to the participants that the short-listing would be done by the gram panchayat. They seemed to be very content to move the location for the decision-making out of the village meeting in order to avoid conflict.

In this regard, it was interesting to see what the gram panchayat members and staff as well as local politicians regarded as “a good meeting” and “a bad meeting”. In informal conversations it became clear that a good meeting is when many proposals are forwarded in a smooth manner. The longer the list of proposed schemes, the better. A bad meeting is when not many scheme proposals can be put forward and people start to argue about development works, about proposed ideas of raising panchayat taxes, about the performance of the elected members, etc. Such discussions were smoothed over. Looking at these perspectives, one may argue that the elected panchayat members (functioning almost like bureaucrats) have become obsessed with following the rules of the panchayat system rather than with upholding the spirit of panchayati raj to be an institution of real participation. If it were according to the elected members, the panchayats would be reduced to a formal mechanism of generating scheme ideas.

In the observed gram sansads in Midnapore, the villagers were constantly reminded that the “money coming from government” is not sufficient to take up schemes for all the expressed needs. In this way, they tried to lower the expectations and to present schemes as *gifts* from the government rather than as *rights* of the people. However, this did not always work. Participants, particularly middle-class persons who support the opposition more and more openly, questioned their gram panchayat members from the CPM. In some gram sansads, people refused to make new proposals, as old scheme ideas had never materialised in schemes. Despite the “bureaucratic” attitude of the elected panchayat members, the sansads are fairly lively meetings with some debate and challenges to the office-bearers.

Another response to the growing gap between the number of scheme proposals and actually implemented projects is not to attend the gram sansad and gram sabha. People also realise that the main decisions are not taken by them in the gram sansad

¹⁸ The gram panchayat Secretary confirmed that he is bound to note down all proposals (Mi G101).

but later in the office of the panchayat (or the party). As a consequence, attendance in these meetings have declined recently.

The lack of discussion and prioritisation of schemes in the gram sansad points to a reduced form of participation that gives local politicians scope for taking the main decisions (see section 4.3).

Box 3: Old and New Initiatives for Decentralised Planning

On the initiative of the former Sabhadhipati, now GoWB Minister of Panchayats and Rural Development, a programme of decentralised planning in Midnapore district. As an extension of the adult-literacy programme, ward-level planning groups were supposed discuss development problems and priorities regularly. The programme ran successfully from 1984-1993; now, it seems to be discontinued in most places. (However, officials at the district level talk about decentralised planning (using PRA methods) as if it was practised throughout the district (Mi 102, Mi 104).

The state government intends to revive, improve and replicate the earlier efforts in Midnapore under the “convergent community action” (CCA) programme commencing in 2000-01. Six development volunteers per gram panchayat, one for each sector including education, health, women’s development, agriculture and irrigation, cottage and small industry, and infrastructure, first collect basic information on local resources and socio-economic characteristics, and identify development problems. The gram sansad is divided in six groups (according to the sectors) and discusses the resumes by the development volunteers, prioritise development initiatives and ways to mobilise local resources. Sector-wise task forces, composed of panchayat members, government officers and NGO activists, prepare plans that are discussed and amended in the gram-panchayat level development seminar. That seminar also includes 10-12 representatives from each ward, political parties, etc. These plans are the basis for the annual action plan of the gram panchayat. The programme resembles Kerala’s experiment of decentralised planning.

The success of the programme will heavily depend on the planning and moderating skills of the involved persons and the commitment of the development volunteers and the community. It also remains to be seen whether decision-making will not be co-opted by the CPM as it happens at present at the gram panchayat and panchayat samiti level (see section 4.3).

Role of the Gram Sansad for Scheme Generation in Malda

In the Malda village, the majority of the villagers are excluded from the gram sansad. The gram sansads were also not the main institutions for generating schemes, certainly not for bigger schemes implemented by the panchayat samiti. When the direct EAS allotments to the gram panchayats were introduced in 1998-99, the importance of the gram sansad became slightly more significant. However, this cannot be regarded as a solely positive development as the majority of the villagers were excluded from this meeting.

The gram sansad meetings were conducted very differently than in Midnapore. For example, the attendants were told not to propose more than one or two schemes because of the limited funds (Ma G103). This has the danger that only the voices of the strong are heard. Indeed, in 1998-99, a pond-digging scheme was pushed through the gram sansad by the non-poor license holder of that pond (see Ma V101). So, even if schemes ideas evolved (or went through) the gram sansad, they may not reflect the needs of the intended beneficiaries, i.e., the underemployed poor.

The group interviews revealed that the villagers did not feel being part of the process of generating scheme ideas. Some villagers had no clue from where the scheme ideas came from (Ma V104), others thought that the gram panchayat itself would both propose and select schemes (Ma V103). Even those who knew about gram sansads and the idea that schemes can be proposed there, do not regard this institution as the

most efficient platform to put forward scheme ideas (Ma V102, Ma V105). According to the questionnaire survey, half of the people who attended a village meeting went there only because they were told to attend.¹⁹ Generally, there is no sense of ownership of the panchayat institutions, including the gram sansad. Furthermore, people have no trust that the panchayat would act on their proposals made in the gram sansad or elsewhere. Still, they prefer to go directly to the gram panchayat member or to the pradhan, although the prospects for success are no bigger. The village survey confirmed this. In the Malda village, only nine poor persons (out of the 80 interviewed poor households) placed a proposal in the gram sansad. Only four of the interviewees saw their proposal implemented. In the Midnapore village, there were 25 proposals coming from the poor, 17 of which resulted in a project (see also table 23).

Proposals made in gram sansads had later been overruled by the gram panchayat. This caused some outrage in the gram sansad in May 1999. The attendants refused to make any proposals regarding beneficiary lists and development work because they felt that these proposals will not be followed anyway. “If we propose some names today, you [panchayat members] will just write down their name but give benefits to your party workers, to close relatives and to yourself!” (Ma V001). Eventually, the beneficiary committee refused to let the pradhan and upa-pradhan leave without signing an agreed list of beneficiaries that was left with them – an attempt to put pressure on the panchayat to ensure that these names did become the eventual beneficiaries.

This would suggest that the gram sansad served as a forum for a small part of the electorate to put pressure on the panchayat members, although rules were disregarded. For example, the meeting did not have a full quorum, the BDO’s agenda was not followed, no panchayat or block workers attended as observers. However, this potentially positive aspect of the gram sansad was forcefully countered by DC. He just threatened to block all development funds to this ward if the gram sansad attendants do not come up with proposals. This points to a remarkable element of coercion in the gram sansad: People are forced to “participate” in a prescribed way. Of course, this is a rather extreme side effect of the over-formalisation of participation that goes against the spirit of panchayati raj.

Box 4: The Local Powerhouse in the Malda Panchayat: Patronage and Corruption

On our first visit to the study village, a crowd of 20-odd Santals was gathering around DC. We heard that the village was raided by dacoits the night before and that one of the villagers got seriously injured. DC, a forty-something old man dressed in western clothes, tried to get the story right and to calm the villagers down. The villagers seemed to respect him, and he promised to take the injured person to hospital.

DC is the most influential person in this area. He has been a member of the panchayat samiti since the last elections in May 1998. However, he became a locally respected person before that, and his power is not based on his official position alone.

In 1986, settled down here after his voluntary retirement from a clerical position at the nearby BSF, and started a pisciculture business. He soon became a locally important public figure, as he tried to help the poor in distress. If necessary, he would go to their houses in the middle of the night. He has helped people with all sorts of problems: sorting out village and land disputes, arranging loans, getting work for the local unemployed in nearby factories, etc. No question, DC

¹⁹ For example, when we asked villagers during our revisit in June 2000 whether they would come to our planned dissemination workshop, they replied that if DC (see Box 4) “tells us to attend we will attend; if not, we won’t.”

understands the problems of the poor better than anyone else here (and he is also able to exploit this). The villagers started to rely on him. Clientelist relations were building up.

Right after he came to the village, DC also established good connections with the police. His management of village disputes, for which he is able to call upon the police if necessary, has been an important source of his power in this area of ethnic tensions and occasional eruptions of violence. He is able to bail people out if they have come in conflict with the law. There are also allegations that DC protects a group of Malpahariya from police prosecution who are accused of being involved in cross-border cattle theft. A middle-class villager complained: "Since [DC] has settled here in the mid 1980s, the police has interfered in all matters. Before, we had more peace."

In the late 1980s, both INC and CPM leaders asked DC to join their party because of his popularity. Although most of his friends are INC supporters, DC joined the CPM and was allowed to attend the branch committee meetings even before 1990, when he became an auxiliary party member. He told us that he liked the principles of the CPM of looking after the poor. (More likely, his motives were opportunistic and he realised the potential rise of the CPM.)

DC's rise in the party was quick. From 1990-93, he was the unit secretary of DYFI, the CPM youth mass organisation. Because he dedicated a lot of his time to party work, he became candidate member in 1993. Usually, it takes longer to make that step. Although he is not a card-holding member and not official member of the block-level CPM local committee yet, he is widely respected in the block-level party leadership.

DC also developed an interest in panchayat work. In 1993, he stood in the gram panchayat elections and was defeated by only 15 votes. In the mid-1990s, he was contractor for various government schemes. DC gained the dubious reputation among his fellow contractors of being so corrupt – one speaks of fund diversion up to 80% – that his buildings and roads fell apart. However, he was not the first-choice contractor of the then all-powerful Sub-Assistant Engineer (who was also the son of an MLA of the CPM).

In 1998, the CPM branch committee suggested DC's name again for the gram panchayat elections. But the local committee decided to give him a ticket for the panchayat samiti seat, as DC was well known in the whole panchayat-samiti constituency and not just in his ward. DC was elected and managed to get two of the most important and "lucrative" positions of the panchayat samiti: the chairmanships of the Public Works Standing Committee and of the Food and Supplies Standing Committee. After the change of BDO in August 1998, the star of the once powerful Sub-Assistant Engineer and his best-friend contractors began to fall. After wrangles with the new BDO, he was transferred. The field became clear for DC.

Today, DC is in a position of local power that is very broadly based. He manages all types of village conflicts, as he has maintained relations of dependence and patronage with the poor. He is still the local person whom the police trusts and contacts first. The CPM gave him also the responsibility to look after the land disputes in the locality and he is member of the gram panchayat and block committee of the Krishok Sabha, the CPM peasants' organisation. Together with the CPM local committee, he controls, and benefits from, the development works of the panchayat samiti. He plays a significant role in the "sale" of ration cards to illegal Bangladeshi immigrants. His star within the CPM is also rising. There are whispers that he may get a ticket for a zilla parishad seat in the next elections in 2003. It is possible that he is able to further expand the boundaries of his influence without bringing any development to the poor of his constituency.

DC cannot be bypassed easily. A local strongman and former INC supporter who claims to have controlled all the former pradhans jumped on DC's bandwagon just before the last panchayat elections in 1998. Ordinary villagers may be able to avoid him (indeed, some refused his help to sort out a land dispute as they feared to come under his clutches), but they cannot oppose him and his corrupt activities.

As researchers, we also depended on DC's co-operation. He gave us "permission" to work in the village and became one of our best and frankest informants. Ironically, we needed his direct protection too. He was able to stop the aggression against our research assistants and thus made the continuation of our village work possible.

Is the Gram Sansad a Forum for the Poor?

Our ethnographic observations, village group interviews and the questionnaire survey give a picture – better than that of most interviewees at the block, district and state levels – of the role of the gram sansad for the generation of scheme ideas. However, the comments of two interviewees deserve attention and further discussion. A state-level officer elaborated:

The guidelines say that EAS should be truly demand led and the people of the locality should decide as to what schemes are to be taken up. What happens in practice is that as the decision making process is always biased in favour of those who are well informed and better off. In India, and specifically in West Bengal, the literacy rate is hovering around 60%, and even those who are literate may not be aware. So, even in a democratic set up, it is eventually the forceful people who can voice their needs and demands. [These needs and demands] pass off as the needs and demands of the society at large.

Those people who do not need [employment under EAS] are taking a more active part in planning. That is how, at the beginning of the planning process itself, employment generation, though it is supposed to be first priority in EAS, [becomes secondary] – and the creation of durable assets, [which is secondary goal] becomes the priority. [The better off] look from their own perception. Naturally, they would like to have the infrastructure that [benefits] them: roads, buildings, minor irrigation. These are the three broad areas in which they are interested. Regarding roads, they would prefer to have roads with more material content, like morum roads. Buildings, of course, are material intensive. Minor irrigation projects can be labour intensive. In minor irrigation, if the cropping intensity increases, there is some spillover benefits to the landless agricultural labourers in terms of increased wage and earning opportunities in the village. This would be consistent with the EAS objective to create assets that subsequently create further scope for employment. But one has to consider the land holding pattern in West Bengal that is basically tilted in favour of the middle, small and marginal farmers. Therefore, any extra investment going into the minor irrigation area leads to an increase in agricultural productivity that may not lead to increase in subsequent employment generation, because normally the family labour used. To that extent, even if the investment in the minor irrigation is economically beneficial otherwise, it does not always lead to generation of subsequent employment.

So looking at it in totality, I found that employment generation, though is the stated objective of EAS, has in most places found little importance. So, this is one of the *defects in the planning process itself*. (WB 101)

A block-level officer added a party-political dimension when he confirmed the dominance of the educated in the gram sansad:

The idea of involving the people at the grassroots is very good... But this does actually not happen... In most gram sansads, a few educated people and political leaders dominate. They are disturbing the democratic process. And because the party dominates these meetings, its proposals will get passed... [Furthermore,] CPM sympathisers are forced to attend the meetings. [But] the common people do usually not propose any schemes. The projects that the common people want are usually not taken up. (Mi B101)

The evidence from the field study is mixed. The gram sansads in Midnapore seemed open events where the poor and less educated spoke up as much as more educated, politically well connected middle-class people. In a group interview, poor villagers praised the gram sansad as an institution where they “can propose schemes in front of their fellow villagers and comrades” (Mi V104). However, the questionnaire survey reveals that only 53% of the poor (as opposed to 76% of the non-poor) felt that they had the opportunity to actively participate in village meetings, including the gram sansad. The other 47% of the poor felt incapable to express themselves in front of a relatively big crowd of 100 people and more, or equally seriously, they may also feared to propose schemes that had not received prior approval by co-villagers and CPM leaders in the gram boithak (see below). For middle-class supporters of

opposition parties, by contrast, the fear of retaliation from the CPM if they propose schemes, seems to be a thing of the past in the studied village.

The gram sansads in Malda seemed dominated by the well-informed middle-class people. For example, two non-poor persons suggested pond-digging schemes (as opposed to road schemes) as they knew that the gram panchayat, or the gram panchayat member respectively, was given money for this type of schemes. Of course, these two persons were also the main beneficiaries of the built “village” infrastructure. However, the questionnaire survey points out that 44% of the poor in Malda felt that they had no opportunity to actively participate in the gram sansad. This figure is probably lower than in Midnapore because of the lower expectations of the poor in Malda and because of the smaller size of the meetings that could be less intimidating.

Table 23 summarises the importance of village meetings (in Malda, mainly the gram sansad; in Midnapore, the gram sansad and the gram boithak) for the generation of scheme ideas. The poor in Malda have generally less opportunity to put forward scheme ideas in village meetings as their counterparts in Midnapore. Moreover, their proposals had a lower chance to be taken up as projects despite the comparatively low number of proposed schemes. The survey confirm the suspicion raised above that a few middle-class persons used the gram sansad to bring through their own schemes and were, unlike the poor, very successful.

Table 23: Participation in Village Meetings in view of Scheme Generation

		Midnapore village	Malda village
Made Proposal	Work was done Poor, N=80)	17 (28%)	4 (22%)
	<i>Work was done (Non-Poor, N=20)</i>	8 (47%)	2 (100%)
	Work was not done (Poor, N=80)	8 (13%)	5 (28%)
	<i>Work was not done (Non-Poor, N=20)</i>	5 (29%)	0 (0%)
Did not Make Proposal	(Poor, N=80)	31 (52%)	9 (50%)
	<i>(Non-Poor, N=20)</i>	3 (18%)	0 (0%)
N.A.	(Poor, N=80)	4 (7%)	-
	<i>(Non-Poor, N=20)</i>	1 (6%)	-
Total Attendance	(Poor, N=80)	60 (100%)	18 (100%)
	<i>(Non-Poor, N=20)</i>	17 (100%)	2 (100%)

Percentages in brackets refer to percentage of people who attended a village meeting.

The Gram Sabha

The attendance of the poor in the gram sabha is much less than in the gram sansad (see table 22). In the Midnapore village, only 13% of the poor (and 30% of the non-poor) ever attended a gram sabha meeting. Our observation of a gram sabha in the Midnapore gram panchayat suggests that predominately better educated, middle-class people speak up at these meetings of 200 and more participants (Mi G002). This is another indicator that size is a factor influencing active participation of the poor and less educated.

The EAS draft annual action plan was presented but not discussed, nor formally approved in the meeting. Rather, new proposals were suggested in an unsystematic manner (see Mi G102). It can be assumed that the gram sabha plays no significant role for generating EAS scheme ideas.

Other Sources of Scheme Generation at the Grassroots: The Gram Boithak in Midnapore

It has been mentioned that villagers in Malda directly approach their gram panchayat member or the pradhan for expressing their need for particular schemes. According to their own political affiliation, they approach either the gram panchayat member (CPM) and local CPM workers (if they do not have direct access to DC) or the *de facto* pradhan (INC). Under normal circumstances, the success rate is very low necessitating special strategies. For example, a group of Santals in Village J proposed repair works of their village road a few weeks before elections, the only time when politicians come to their para (Ma V102). In general, however, the poor in the Malda village are *reactive* rather than *proactive*; that is, rather than trying to push own scheme ideas through, they wait for the schemes to “come”. They are generally unaware of their right to make scheme proposals. A proactive attitude is rare and confined to getting information about the execution of schemes (see section 5).

In the Midnapore village, people are generally more aware of their right to make scheme proposals. There is also another mechanism than the gram sansad for the generation of scheme ideas at the grassroots: the multi-purpose, informal *gram boithak* (village sit-in). The gram boithak discusses mainly urgent village problems but is also used for generating scheme ideas, and informing about sanctioned development schemes and organising the work. This meeting is organised by local CPM leaders in single villages or tolas that are smaller than the ward/gram sansad. The gram boithak is fairly open to all villagers (Mi V104, Mi V105). The attendance is comparable with that in the gram sansad. 51% of the poor (and 50% of the non-poor) at least once attended a gram boithak. The frequency of the meeting depends on the initiative of the local CPM leaders and the gram panchayat member. In the studied village, these village sit-ins have become less frequent. Earlier, a meeting was held once a month.

The role of the gram boithak for the generation of scheme ideas is important. The less educated may find it easier to express their needs in a smaller meeting. The local CPM leaders have the opportunity to carefully listen to the problems of the poor and to help putting these on the agenda. The other side of the coin is that the local CPM leaders are capable of pre-selecting which schemes to put on the agenda. For instance,

in an informal chat with the prerok (liaison between the gram panchayat and the wards) over tea after the gram sansad in May 1999, we found out that the local CPM leaders had decided in a previous meeting which project proposals to push forward. They had also designated which party supporter would make the particular suggestions in the gram sansad (see Mi V001).

The role of the CPM and their gram boithak are therefore ambiguous. On the one hand, it offers the poorest and the most disempowered an informal forum where they can express their felt needs; on the other hand, the CPM channel and control the “voices of the poor” or the “created space of empowerment”. For the most marginalised, the CPM seems to be like a “big brother”. They might be afraid of proposing schemes at the gram sansad that have not made it through the gram boithak and the pre-selection of the local CPM leaders. For less disempowered, poor and non-poor villagers, however, the gram sansad is the most important forum for making scheme proposals. In the words of a group of Santals:

In the gram boithak we can only discuss. The gram boithak has no power to implement schemes. The gram sansad is more important for proposing new schemes. We can make the proposals in front of all. All proposals are noted down. (Mi V104, paraphrased)

Another group of poor, general-caste people alleged that they had not been invited to the gram boithak. But they did not mind, as they feel free to suggest schemes at the gram sansad (Mi V107).

However, some very small, ad-hoc schemes (mostly repair work) that are sometimes financed with left-over money from bigger were not generated through the gram sansad. If there is an active gram boithak, the villagers have the opportunity to propose and prioritise these immediate schemes. If not, party workers seem to decide what repair works are most urgent.

Scheme Generation at Higher Levels in Midnapore

The interviewees mentioned that the panchayat samiti adds its own schemes only if they cover two or three gram panchayats or in the rare case of emergencies (Mi G101, Mi B107, Mi B101). Unfortunately, we were not able to confirm this beyond any doubt with the available data. Comparing the 1998-99 EAS actions plans of the panchayat samiti with that of the gram panchayat, we found that five out of the 22 schemes listed in the former did not appear in the latter. However, this does not necessarily imply that these five schemes originated outside the gram sansad in the party, panchayat or block office. It is possible that schemes suggested in the gram sansad but not short-listed in the gram panchayat EAS action plan were picked up during the selection process at the panchayat samiti level. Because we have no access to the lists of proposed schemes in the gram sansads, we are not able to make any conclusions in this regard.

However, at least in the past, the panchayat samiti did add its own schemes. For example, the panchayat samiti building was extended with EAS funds from 1994 to 1997 (from GoI audit report, confirmed in Mi B101). This project does certainly not come under the emergency category. Apart from being a major transgression of the EAS guidelines, it is doubtful that this project ever evolved from a gram sansad or gram sabha meeting.

Also, local CPM workers tried to propose schemes directly to the gram-panchayat-level CPM local committee in their weekly meeting (Mi V102). This was probably just a parallel strategy to enhance the chance that particular scheme proposals made later in the gram sansad will be short-listed. The CPM, or the local committee respectively, seems to play a role in pushing, if not pre-selecting, scheme ideas before they are put forward in the gram sansad.

Despite indications that a few schemes may be generated at higher levels, villagers were not able to point out any development schemes in their village that had not been suggested in the gram sansad. Almost all schemes seemed to have originated from below, in the gram sansad and the gram boithak. In any way, given the high number of proposed schemes in the studied Midnapore village, the crux is rather the prioritisation than the generation of ideas (see section 4.3).

Local Autonomy for Small Projects, CPM Control over Big Projects in Malda

In Malda, the mechanisms of generating scheme ideas depend on the implementing agency. For smaller, more labour-intensive EAS schemes in the minor-irrigation and soil-conservation sectors for which the gram panchayat is the implementing agency, scheme ideas may come either from the gram sansads (though, as shown above, in a skewed manner), or from the gram panchayat members, or from the pradhan (Ma B106). The importance of the gram sansad versus the gram panchayat member seems to vary from ward to ward. If the gram panchayat member is able to bypass the gram sansad (in some cases, no or only bogus meetings are held), he enjoys a lot of autonomy. There seems little influence from the party offices and the panchayat samiti. EAS action plans of the gram panchayats are simply compiled and included unedited in the panchayat samiti action plan. Gram panchayat staff play no role in pushing forward scheme ideas.

By contrast, the gram sansad and the gram panchayat members play no role for generating proposals for bigger EAS projects in road and building sectors that are implemented by the panchayat samiti. A member of the panchayat samiti did not even try to pretend that these projects would come “from below”. He stated openly:

The panchayat samiti is the main institution where ideas are generated and discussed. Once the EAS money has been allotted... the Standing Committee Public Works [of which the respondent is the chairperson] looks for works that give the most benefit for the villagers. As there are panchayat samiti members from [the whole area], they can identify the locations that are the most needy.

We submit our suggestions ... to the [block-level] local committee of the [CPM]. Then, the priority list is made. We must get the party approval first. Otherwise, we'll be questioned later. After the local committee has approved the priority list, block level government officers may suggest to start earlier with a project further down the list on technical grounds. [Their] role is limited to giving technical advice... No proposals are made by government officers. (Ma B105)

So, the generation of scheme ideas comes mainly from members of the panchayat samiti and the CPM local committee. This was confirmed by a statement of a gram panchayat member that he would never make scheme proposals to the panchayat samiti member although he had good personal connections to its most influential member. Furthermore, government officers confirmed that they play no role at all in the generation (and selection) of EAS schemes (Mi B101, Mi B103).

The quote above, particularly the introduction “once the EAS money has been allotted...”, also indicates the limited importance of the EAS annual action plan. Ad-

hoc decisions seem for more important. In 1998-99, for example, only one of the eight projects implemented by the panchayat samiti appeared in the EAS annual action plan of the same year. Or, only one of the 15 projects listed in the EAS annual action plan was taken up.

The BDO confirmed the influence of the CPM local committee and elaborated on the power relations within the panchayat samiti:

The various standing committees [which should bring forward their own priority lists] do actually not meet. There is only one functioning committee, the Standing Committee (Development, Planning and Finance) that is extended by the Public Works Standing Committee. Other Standing Committees do not bring forward any schemes... [The chairperson of the Public Works Standing Committee] is the actual powerful person in this panchayat samiti. The Sabhapati has no power and is not very knowledgeable. In any case, the selection [and generation] of schemes is politicised. In reality the party [CPM] decides. (Ma B101)

The clout of DC, the chairperson of the Public Works Standing Committee, seems also big within CPM local committee although he is no official member yet. In reality, he is able to get through many of his proposals. But the role of the CPM local committee for approving schemes is important. A member of the CPM local committee members proudly confirmed the dominant role of the party:

A CPM pradhan or sabhapati cannot make any decision without the consent of the local committee. The party has like a parallel structure to the panchayats, that is, sub-committees for public works, land reform, education, etc. These sub-committees take the decisions. We fully control [the elected members], both the uneducated and educated. (Ma B004)

The decision-making within the CPM local committee was less transparent to us researchers, and indeed to the bureaucrats and the villagers. However, it can be assumed that, apart from political and personal favouritism, rent seeking among the party bosses is also a major factor for the generation/selection/administrative sanction of scheme ideas.²⁰ If so, the influence of rich people, including professional builders, is probably strong. As mentioned in section 3, the Malda panchayat samiti generally chose big, material-intensive EAS projects. In these projects rich contractors can, and indeed do, play an important role (see section 5). However, it was claimed, but not further explained, that the scheme selection was based on “need” and that the whole area (and not only the CPM constituencies) was looked after (Ma B105, Ma B106).

4.3 Prioritisation, Shortlisting and Selection of Schemes

CPM Control over Panchayat Samiti Schemes in Malda

Because the process of generating and selecting schemes are overlapping in Malda and done by the same people, the question of selecting schemes does not arise in the same way as in the case of the Midnapore panchayat samiti. On guidance (or command) of the CPM local committee, the schemes are officially approved by the extended Standing Committee (Development, Planning and Finance). The committee often approved and sanctioned schemes (of the road and buildings sector of EAS) that violate the EAS guidelines, such as black topping of roads, sinking of tube-wells, repair of panchayat samiti buildings. The members of this committee from the block administration have no voting rights. All they were able to do was to write a “note of

²⁰ A veteran CPM activist in Malda did not hesitate to accuse the current CPM leadership in Malda of rampant corruption. He described corruption as their leading motive.

dissent” in cases where approved projects violated EAS guidelines. But these written objections had no consequences (Ma B101, Ma B103). The “notes of dissent” served mainly for covering the back of the block-level officers.

The panchayat samiti failed to hold the general meeting (involving all elected members, MLAs, etc.) that should theoretically approve the EAS action plan. The BDO repeatedly reminded the sabhapati to hold this mandatory meeting. However, the sabhapati simply refused to hold it. He resorted to excuses, such as that there is no time for holding the general meeting. Despite the BDO’s notification, the zilla parishad did not take any action (Ma B101). These incidences, in which the BDO acted “according to the book”, exemplify the limited formal power of the BDO versus the panchayat samiti. Below, we will see how a BDO can have more influence by applying informal strategies.

The MLA (from the INC) lamented that no general meeting was held but did not put any pressure on the panchayat samiti. He generally seemed disinterested in rural development, unless it was related to a corruption scandal involving the CPM (see Ma B107).

The zilla parishad did not make any amendments in the EAS annual action plans of the panchayat samities (despite the notes of dissent). The EAS annual action plan of the zilla parishad is an unedited compilation of the action plans coming from the panchayat samities.

Relative Autonomy for the Gram Panchayat (Members) in Malda

For the gram panchayat EAS schemes in Malda, the respective elected ward representatives propose schemes or prioritise proposals from the gram sansad. Then, a four-member committee including the *de facto* pradhan (INC), two other elected members of the INC and the upa-pradhan (CPM) prioritise scheme ideas and draft the EAS annual action plan of the gram panchayat (Ma G102). The final word is with the *de facto* pradhan. Even the elected representative from the CPM, who has very good connections with the local strongman and chairperson of the Public Works Standing Committee, has to get his schemes passed by the *de facto* pradhan. However, the elected members seem to be given remarkable autonomy from the pradhan, their respective party offices and the panchayat samiti (which seems not to change the gram panchayat annual action plans). Generally, the interviewees felt no need to justify their prioritisation.

Unlike at the panchayat samiti level, the EAS annual action plan of the gram panchayat seems to be implemented. A gram panchayat member remarked:

I usually get Rs. 50,000 for developing my booth [ward]... I submit one or two schemes [one of which is usually granted by the pradhan]. (Ma G103)

The *de facto* pradhan may leave autonomy to the elected members because he is not very powerful and because he was forced to agree to compromise with the local CPM (see Box 1). Out of his ignorance, he probably transgressed many rules and therefore has become vulnerable to blackmail. It seems as if the party offices, particularly the CPM local committee, and the panchayat samiti let the gram panchayat members “play their little games”. The gram panchayat EAS projects (small-irrigation and soil-conservation) are very small. It may be “unprofitable” (both in political and economic

terms) and beyond the organisational capacity of the party and the panchayat samiti to control all these projects and all their members.

Relative autonomy to the gram panchayat members does not at all imply the involvement of poor people in the generation and selection of schemes. The fact that all the interviewed poor villagers believed that the scheme idea itself came from the gram panchayat member and that none of the implemented schemes has once been proposed by ordinary villagers reflects the lack of popular involvement. Even when schemes were proposed in the gram sansad, these were probably staged affairs. It seems that schemes were selected in order to favour influential individual (opportunistic) supporters of the ruling party or to accommodate influential persons from the opposition. As mentioned above, influential middle-class persons suggested the two EAS pond-digging schemes that eventually were implemented in the studied villages.

For example, the petitioner for the pond digging in village I implemented in March 1999 was also member of the beneficiary committee and, indeed, the main beneficiary of that project as he is the fishing-leaseholder of that pond. He told us that his was the only scheme proposed in the gram sansad (Mi V101). This seemed rather strange to us, as poor interviewees without being prompted made many suggestions for schemes that could come under EAS. This pond-digging scheme was selected although, or because, the petitioner-cum-beneficiary has an antipathetic relationship with DC, the local “big man” (see Box 4). He may well have been paid off for keeping silent about irregularities.

Importance of the CPM Local Committee and Local CPM Workers in Midnapore: Intra-Party Competition rather than Representative Democracy

Because of the long list of generated schemes coming from the gram sansads, the process of prioritising, short-listing and selecting becomes crucial in Midnapore. In the gram sansad, no prioritisation whatsoever is done. This points to the absence of decentralised or participatory planning in a real sense. In the gram boithak, some sort of prioritisation is done, but not in a transparent way. So what happens with the long list of proposals?

Officially, the gram panchayat sub-committees prioritise the schemes and have the EAS annual action plan discussed in the monthly meeting of the gram panchayat that involves all elected members and the gram panchayat secretary. However, some interviewees opened up and explained that the actual location of the decision-making is the party office (CPM local committee) rather than the gram panchayat or the pradhan. A gram panchayat member of the TMC criticised the practised process of scheme prioritisation and selection:

The gram panchayat meeting is fairly unimportant for selecting schemes. Proposals are not discussed at all. There is no voting on individual proposals or on the annual action plan as a whole. In any case, the four opposition gram panchayat members would always be overruled by the 15 CPM members. All we can do is making other suggestions and point out when the agenda of the meeting is not followed.

The short-listing of scheme ideas that were proposed in the gram sansads is actually done by the local committee of the CPM... In practice, [it] is done by the [Secretary of the local committee]. The pradhan is a good person, but unfortunately only a puppet. The [annual action plan] is not made in the gram panchayat office but in the party office. The opposition is not involved in this process at all. (Mi G105).

This quote tells us more about the lack of transparency in the selection of scheme than about the actual process of prioritising and selecting. The way how the local committee selects the schemes is hidden from the TMC panchayat member, who only interacts with the pradhan but never with the local CPM secretary. In fact, the pradhan, and particularly an elected member who chairs a gram panchayat sub-committee, are also influential members of the CPM local committee. More than the pradhan, the local CPM secretary seems to be like a “puppet”. However, the most revealing comment on the selection of schemes at the gram panchayat level came from a non-influential member of the CPM local committee:

The village level party leadership is given the responsibility to select schemes within their ward. The local leadership reports their suggestion to the [gram panchayat level] local committee. However, the local leadership portrays the local committee or the gram panchayat as the actual decision-maker. In this way, the local leadership can keep itself out of conflicts in the village. They do not have to disappoint any of their followers. (Mi G106)

This strategy, which can be labelled neither democratic nor dictatorial, seems entirely sensible and potentially effective in prioritising schemes that correspond with “local needs”.²¹ As one cannot assume that the local party leadership, and indeed “local needs”, are homogeneous, tensions at the local level are likely. In the studied ward, for example, the two most important CPM leaders are in more or less open conflict. However, local competition *between party leaders* seems to be an effective mechanism for the local committee to get a good picture of the ground reality. This can lead to a fair prioritisation of schemes by the local committee, provided its selection criteria are ethical and it gives more or less open access to all party workers.

In the absence of participatory planning, this is probably a better strategy than giving autonomy to the elected ward representative as in Malda. In the Midnapore situation, the elected ward representative would be able to avoid the criticism of the electorate, as the scheme selection is portrayed as the decision of the local committee or the gram panchayat.

Indeed, the group interviews revealed that the villagers were generally satisfied with the prioritisation of schemes. They perceived it as the decision by the pradhan and the gram panchayat, and accepted that not all proposals could be taken up because of the lack of resources (Mi V104, Mi V105, Mi V107).

The CPM local committee, or officially the gram panchayat, distributes the schemes equally between the wards; priorities are discussed ward-wise (Mi G106, Mi G102). Apart from the equal ward-wise distribution, the selection criteria are unclear. They probably also vary between the local CPM workers who bring forward their suggestions for selection. In the party office of the CPM local committee we received the standard answer that schemes are selected according to “needs” (Mi G106).

The described selection process excludes local party workers of opposition parties. In the studied CPM dominated gram panchayat, the local CPM workers influence the scheme selection also in the wards with elected representatives from the opposition and where the CPM supporters form a minority. This motivated a TMC gram ward representative to accuse the local committee of selecting only schemes that benefit CPM supporters (Mi G105).

²¹ However, other local committee member became visibly nervous, interrupted the respondent, and insisted that the gram panchayat would make the scheme selection.

But local CPM party workers and the local committee, though controlling the prioritisation and selection of EAS schemes, seemed more or less pro-poor. Even the mentioned TMC ward representative admitted that he supports some decisions of the CPM local committee when these are presented in the gram panchayat meeting.

Being pro-poor and favouring CPM supporters was not contradictory in the studied gram panchayat, because almost all the poor here supported the CPM (or they did not oppose the CPM openly). In the particular ward of the mentioned TMC office-bearer, for example, the CPM supporters are by and large poor agricultural labourers living in a separate village while the TMC supporters are by and large middle-class people living at the border of the town. In this case, favouring the CPM supporters overlapped with making the selection based on needs.²²

Despite this, the CPM party leadership seems not to engage in an open debate on the definition of needs. Rather, excuses are used to dismiss proposals of political opponents, as the experience of the TMC gram panchayat member shows:

Last year I made a proposal for a moram road in the gram sangsad. In the gram panchayat meeting, this proposal was rejected. In the following gram sabha I again requested to reconsider this road project for the annual action plan. At that time, the CPM people simply told the ordinary participants that my proposal was not made in the previous gram sangsad and can therefore not be considered. It is the strategy of the CPM to silence people who do not conform to their ideas. (Mi G105)

This also confirms our own observation that the gram sabha plays no significant role for discussion or amending the prioritisation of scheme ideas made by the gram panchayat or the party office respectively.

CPM Zonal Committee in Midnapore: The next important round of selection

The gram panchayat EAS annual action plans with proposals for all four sectors (roads, buildings, soil conservation, minor irrigation) are sent to the panchayat samiti where they are integrated into the panchayat samiti EAS annual action plan. The number of proposed schemes from the gram panchayats is still very high²³ so that another round of prioritisation and selection becomes necessary. Furthermore, the prioritisation of the gram panchayat is changed significantly. In 1998-99, for example, the gram panchayat pushed forward 41 EAS schemes in the action plan. The panchayat samiti EAS action plan included only 22 schemes for this gram panchayat. Five out of these 22 schemes (or 23%) did not appear in the action plan of the gram panchayat, thus were added.

We were not able to find out on what basis the panchayat samiti made these changes. Confronted with this question, the sabhapati denied that substantial changes to the gram panchayat prioritisation were made. If the panchayat samiti has to make changes, and when it has to select schemes, the decisions are based on “necessity”. The panchayat samiti members of the Left Front would look after the whole area [including gram panchayats ruled by the opposition] (Mi B109).

²² The litmus test would be to study a CPM ruled gram panchayat having wards where the opposition is strongly backed by the poor.

²³ Despite the gram panchayat secretary’s assurance that the gram panchayat would reduce the number of schemes that they fit the “allotment” – an idea which actually is inappropriate in the case of the demand-led EAS.

Indeed, the pradhan of a gram panchayat ruled by the TMC did not complain about unfair changes in their EAS priority list. Since they have fought against an IAY beneficiary list imposed by the panchayat samiti, the priorities of this gram panchayat have been left unchanged unless for technical reasons (Mi B108). By contrast, the CPM local committee of the studied gram panchayat did not complain and it did not try to proactively push through their projects at the panchayat samiti level.

It is quite remarkable that the CPM panchayat samiti interferes in the affairs of its own gram panchayats rather than the TMC gram panchayats. This may indicate some political maturity as well as fear of agitation by the active TMC opposition. Political violence and diminishing CPM supporter base in neighbouring blocks may also serve as a negative example of confrontational politics.

The decisions regarding prioritising, selecting and approving schemes are not made by the panchayat samiti but rather by the CPM zonal committee. A block level officer and member of various standing committees of the panchayat samiti commented:

The party [CPM zonal committee] pre-decides the sanction of projects at the panchayat samiti level. The comrades of the [elected] members of the standing committee [Development, Planning and Finance] direct everything. When the standing committee discusses the selection of projects, there is never opposition. The committee is just here to pass things formally...

In [this block], the actual power-holders are the secretary of the CPM zonal committee, the MLA and an ex-member of the zilla parishad. None of them holds any portfolio of the panchayat samiti. (Mi B101)

The MLA admitted that he is fully involved in the selection of schemes. His influence is not based on him being the MLA but on him being an important member of the CPM zonal committee.

As the MLA personally, I cannot do anything. I can do things only through the party [zonal] committee. The party committees control the panchayats. (Mi B107)

The main influence of the senior CPM leaders on the selection of schemes was informal and behind the scene. This is remarkable as the MLA would have formal channels of influencing EAS decisions as member of the general meeting of the panchayat samiti that meets three or four times a year and approves the EAS schemes. But the zonal committee is clearly more important. Before coming to the general meeting, decisions go through the zonal committee. The MLA, and other CPM leaders in Malda and Midnapore gave some justifications for their control over elected members (see 5). The approval of EAS schemes in the general meeting has become a rubber-stamping exercise, the more so because the CPM has a comfortable majority in this forum. Under these circumstances, it is maybe more remarkable that a general meeting was held regularly in order to conform with the panchayat rules.

In 1998-99, the panchayat samiti came up with an EAS annual action plan of ca. Rs. 1 crore (or about 2 ½ instalments), neatly divided into the four sectors and including projects for the gram panchayats and the panchayat samiti. Except for four projects (repair works for high school buildings), all the projects were in accordance with the EAS guidelines.

There was also no evidence that the zilla parishad or any other higher office amends the annual action plans of the panchayat samities. There is no EAS annual action plan of the zilla parishad.

Box 5: CPM Control over Elected Members of the own Party

It is common knowledge that, probably since the second panchayat elections in 1983, the CPM has not had their best and strongest leaders elected into public office in the panchayats. The party leaders have acted from behind the scenes and taken influence on the elected members. Indeed, the CPM party offices in both Midnapore and Malda controlled the elected panchayat members of their own party. In Malda, this did not extend down to the ward representatives probably because of the limited organisational strength of the party in an area where it has become powerful only recently. Whatsoever, the questions arises why the CPM finds it necessary to control its own panchayat members.

The simplest answer came from a district level officer: “Controlling its members is part of the communist ideology.” Certainly, political Marxism-Leninism is top-down and totalitarian. In more positive terms, one would talk about the good “party discipline”. Indeed, even Jyoti Basu cannot step down when the party demands it. (Ironically in this case, “the party” portrays itself as something bigger and beyond the individual. At the same time it wants to keep Basu in the post because it depends on this individual for electoral success.) Still, the lack of trust in its own members needs further explanation.

A well-positioned party member in Midnapore provided more detail [paraphrased]: “Often, the CPM gives the tickets in panchayat elections to popular people who are not necessarily party members.” (It is often said that the electorate chooses persons rather than parties in panchayat elections, and the CPM seems to take advantage of this.) “However, these elected panchayat members have to be directed because they do not understand the party philosophy. If they were not guided, the party would not be able to achieve its goals for the ‘common good’.” This view is rather remarkable. It suggests that the CPM leadership is not confident that their vision of social change (or the “common good”) can be communicated to individual panchayat members, let alone to the mass of ordinary villagers. This is in no way empowering.

In Malda, CPM leaders stressed the issue of corruption, which is certainly more prevalent there [paraphrased]: “The elected members are only the elected public faces of the *party*. Party control over the panchayat members is necessary because otherwise these would only work for their own benefit. That could be against the interest and philosophy of the party as well against the will of the people.” Interestingly, the party leaders claimed that controlling the elected members is democratic as it hinders the emergence of small and corrupt dictators in the panchayats. The sad irony is that the party leadership in Malda is itself very corrupt.

Even if one leaves corruption aside, the party control over the panchayats is subverting democracy. It is not only that the actual decision-makers avoid public accountability. They also seem to use popular figures who do not “understand” the party ideology. The party ideology itself, therefore, does not come under public scrutiny either.

Important Amendments to the Annual Action Plans in Both Midnapore and Malda Weaken Concept of Planning on the Ground

It must be kept in mind that the EAS annual action plans represent only the *shelf of projects*. Once EAS funds are released, the standing committees of the panchayat samiti (or rather the respective CPM party offices) decide what projects of the shelf are sanctioned. By and large, the mechanisms of the ad-hoc decision-making are similar to the one discussed above. Again, the role of the zilla parishad in both Midnapore and Malda is negligible in this regard. Often, projects are approved *post factotum*. However, the Malda zilla parishad added projects at this stage because the floods justified its intervention. The MLA in Midnapore also justified the amendment of the EAS action plan with the changed situation on the ground and the emergence of new pressing needs (Mi B107).

However, it was astonishing to see the divergence between the annual action plans and the actually implemented projects. In Malda, out of eight EAS projects

implemented by the panchayat samiti in 1998-99 only one, though a very big one²⁴, was included in the action plan of the same year. Or, only one of 15 proposed projects was implemented. The gram panchayat projects seemed to be implemented by and large according to the plan.

In Midnapore, many gram panchayat EAS projects in 1998-99 were not listed in the action plan, neither in that of the panchayat samiti nor in the draft plan of the gram panchayat.²⁵ Quantification cannot be made here as some of the proposed projects were split up in smaller ones for which the names became unrecognisable to us. Still, it seems that a significant proportion of projects, mostly very small ones, was added to the annual action plan. On the other hand, only nine out of 18 projects listed in the panchayat samiti action plan (excluding road schemes and pond-digging schemes) were implemented in full.

This raises serious doubts about the importance of planning (not to speak of participatory and democratic planning) for the implementation of the EAS in West Bengal. As much as medium- and long-term planning, ad-hoc decisions determined the implementation of the EAS.

In the case of Midnapore, political considerations are partly responsible for the lack of long term planning. In order to achieve a wider spread and to satisfy the people's expectations immediately, projects have to be split up and remain largely uncompleted (Mi B101). In the case of Malda, less noble motives were probably at work.

Street-Smart Bureaucracy in the Midnapore Block

In West Bengal, the bureaucracy is not supposed to play a direct role in selecting EAS schemes. Government officers are members of the various panchayat standing committees, but without voting rights. The development administration's function is to provide information and technical knowledge to the elected representatives on which basis they can make rational decisions. A district level elaborated on this point:

The role of the bureaucracy is to give people options. We have to strengthen their knowledge base. We should not bother about decision making. But decision making cannot be done in a vacuum. It has to be done on the basis of knowledge. That knowledge has to be provided by all the line departments. This should be done. And when I say it should be done, I also mean that it can be done... [For example,] the government officers (agricultural officers, BDOs, district level officers, DRDA officer, etc.) should make people aware of the nature of their soil and give technical inputs. If people are convinced of horticulture schemes after they got technical information, they will choose such schemes. If they are not convinced, they should do what they want to do. (Mi 101)

However, the relation between bureaucracy and panchayats is not always as unproblematic as described in the above quote. In the studied Malda block, the BDO felt that the panchayat samiti members do not listen to her advice at all and pick schemes that are against the EAS guidelines (see also box 6). The zilla parishad does not act on her notes of dissent. The BDO's (advisory) influence on EAS scheme selection was nil. The weak (but very honest) BDO was not capable of keeping the

²⁴ Rs. 9.8 lakh.

²⁵ The list of the EAS projects implemented by the panchayat samiti were not available and could therefore not be compared with the annual action plan.

rent-seeking panchayat samiti members (and some of her block level officers) in check.

Box 6: Broken Windows in the BDO Office

The following episode may illustrate the poisoned relation between the BDO and the panchayat samiti in Malda. When the BDO decided to exclude contractors for the implementation of IAY and gave the grants directly to the beneficiaries, she was threatened with violence. A panchayat samiti member mobilised a mob in front of the BDO office. The windows of the BDO office were broken. The panchayat samiti opposed the decision of the BDO because they got their cut from the co-operation with the assigned contractors. However, they justified their opposition saying that the beneficiaries would not use the (entire) grant for house building but for other purposes. (A fact, the BDO is certainly aware of.)

By contrast, the BDO in the studied Midnapore block was able to have some impact on the selection of EAS schemes. Apart from the attitude and educational levels of the panchayat samiti members, personal characteristics and different strategies explain the difference between the Midnapore and the Malda situation. The BDO in Midnapore was more experienced and innovative than his counterpart in Malda. (The BDO in Malda had recently been promoted into the WBCS. This was her first posting as BDO. She seemed not always be well-informed about schemes and regulations, and therefore maybe tended to be obsessed with implementing government guidelines according to the book.) The BDO in Midnapore also faced stronger grassroots pressure to balance out the CPM decisions:

Opposition leaders complain to me about the selection of projects. They ask why their proposed projects have not been taken up, etc... I believe that the bureaucracy has also the duty to look after the 50% not represented in the panchayat samiti... I try my best if I feel that a sanctioned project is against the common interest. (Mi B101)

However, the BDO's influence is limited because the people in the standing committee of the panchayat samiti are not the ones who make the decisions:

If I could talk to the person who is really in power and if this person was accountable [to the electorate], I could convince him or her and would be able to bring through my own projects. If the Sabhapati were the actual power-holder, I would be able to get through more projects of my own [rational] choice – about 10% of the projects taken up would maybe come from me. (Mi B101)

Without having direct contact to the decision-makers in the CPM zonal committee, the BDO has to resort to the formal instrument of sending a “note of dissent”. Unlike the Malda BDO, he goes beyond describing the transgressions of the EAS guidelines to include explanations why a particular scheme is against the “spirit of development”. This strategy is sometimes successful (see Box 7).

More interesting and relevant are the BDO's informal ways of influencing the selection of EAS schemes based on his official function of releasing money for particular projects. He sometimes threatens the panchayat samiti not to sign particular cheques if they do not take up one or two projects of the BDO's choice. Especially before elections, his bargaining power is good because politicians want to have works done quickly (Mi B101). He justifies his interference with counterbalancing the discrimination of whole areas by the CPM leadership. He summed up:

As per rules we don't have any say, but by blackmailing we can get some of our projects through... In that way, we can do something for the sake of the people. That is our [job] satisfaction. But this can be done only to a small extent. The bureaucracy can reduce discrimination only a little. (Mi B101)

This shows that the influence of the bureaucracy at the block level is potentially bigger for the ad-hoc decisions than for the long-term planning and drafting of the EAS annual action plan. The process of scheme selection and the division of functions between the development administration and the panchayats are not as straightforward as described in the opening quote of this subsection. But generalisations about the actual interactions between the bureaucracy and the panchayats at the block level are not possible. They often depend on the involved individuals and their motives.

The interviewed BDOs implied that the bureaucracy generally acts with more “developmental rationality” than the elected panchayat members. In its totality, this view is questionable. Bureaucrats also have less noble motives than bringing development to all. Furthermore, they face an information problem. A BDO, posted for no more two or three years in areas of several hundreds of square kilometres and populations of 150-250,000 people, cannot know the ground realities in detail. They have to rely on local informants. It is doubtful that a system depending on a few informants would bring about a fairer allocation of funds than political competition.

Box 7: A Note of Dissent to the Higher Authorities

The BDO in Midnapore had recently written a note of dissent because a proposed water-conservation scheme for the boro (summer) cultivation project would involve alterations of an inter-district irrigation canal. The area upstream (outside of this block) would be flooded in the rainy season. Crops would be damaged there. After the BDO’s interference, the panchayat samiti changed the project into three or four smaller ones that, however, would create similar problems. The higher authorities had been informed, and the money for this project remained unused. The BDO was very upset that the panchayat samiti did not care for the people upstream but looked only after the interest of their constituency.

4.4 Possible Interpretations

“Managing” Participation

Generally, levels of awareness and participation are higher in Midnapore than in Malda. In Malda, most interviewees blamed poor people’s “ignorance” and illiteracy for the lack of awareness regarding development schemes. However, it is far too easy and convenient to cite this as a necessary and sufficient condition for the lack of popular involvement. In the following, I will try to argue that people’s participation in West Bengal depends heavily on activities and strategies of the CPM, apart from levels of education and “social capital”.

It seems that the CPM in Midnapore and Malda “manage” participation in the generation and selection of schemes in very different ways. The Midnapore CPM built up an integrated, hierarchical system with a functional division between people’s participation for the generation of scheme ideas on the one hand, and party control over the prioritisation and selection of schemes on the other.

By contrast, the Malda CPM makes a spatial division: The party controls both the generation and selection of panchayat samiti schemes while it seems not to intervene in the selection of gram panchayat schemes. In the studied village, furthermore, the ward representative did not use his autonomy to involve poor people’s participation.

In the Malda case, it is therefore more precise to talk about restricting participation as opposed to managing popular participation. However, the relative autonomy of the ward representative was increasingly coming under threat of the local bureaucracy that started organising gram sansads that are more inclusive.

The different ways of managing and restricting participation can partly be explained by the CPM's organisational strength. The CPM has been strong since 1977 in the Midnapore village and built up a powerful network with numerous village-level workers, local committees at the gram panchayat level and the zonal committee at the block level. This system makes it possible for the party to control single ward representatives and the selection of numerous small schemes.

By contrast, the CPM in the Malda village found a majority only in the last panchayat elections in 1998. The local committee is at the block level and is in charge of an area of six gram panchayats. The local party leadership is relatively young and opportunistic as opposed to the old guard of committed Marxists. The party may simply not have the power to keep control over all the ward representatives and development schemes. Under these circumstances, leaving a well-defined portion of schemes to the gram panchayats seems a rational strategy. But looser party control did not lead to more democratic panchayat institutions. Rather, these are dominated by the individual office-bearers.

However, what are the rationales of the CPM, a self-proclaimed pro-poor party, for controlling popular participation? It is probably too simple (though not entirely false) to explain this paradox with the totalitarian ideology of communism and some sort of distrust in democracy and the poor. The motives of the CPM leadership in Midnapore and Malda in general, and those for managing participation, in particular, seem very different.

The Midnapore CPM seems concerned that the articulate middle class would dominate the participatory scheme-selection process. These fears are somewhat justified. For example, middle-class persons rather than the poor speak up in bigger meetings beyond the ward level such as the gram sabha. But this also points to the failure of the CPM of not having been able to achieve real empowerment after 23 years of Left Front rule, land reform and established panchayats. The mechanism of generating and selecting development schemes has had a limited impact on empowerment, although the CPM was pro-poor and development schemes benefited the poor significantly, probably disproportionately. The generation of schemes through the gram sansad raised expectations among the villagers. But the panchayats tried to control these expectations by referring to limited fund allocation from the government. So, the expectations were not transformed into people's demands.

The CPM and the gram panchayat staff also fear conflicts within the villages. This is partly because of the failure of the Midnapore initiative of decentralised planning to create mechanisms and criteria for scheme selection that are transparent and acceptable to the villagers. As a consequence, the location of the prioritisation and selection process is moved (or, represented as if it was moved) outside the village. However, the gram sansads are increasingly a forum to challenge the office-bearers who can find themselves trapped between the public and the party.

I dare accuse the CPM leadership in Malda of less noble motives than the one in Midnapore. An opportunistic group of "second-generation" members seems to control the party. For example, the leading local CPM activist of yesteryears plays no role in

the party anymore. (One of our informants, himself an opportunistic CPM supporter, shook his head and said: “What has happened to him! Today, he just does the accounts of a garage.”) The veteran activist accused the present day leadership in Malda district of rampant corruption. The commitment to the cause of the poor has become secondary, if not absent.

Rent-seeking behaviour calls for other strategies of controlling participation than the ones applied in Midnapore. One strategy is certainly to control information and to lower expectations at the grassroots. CPM leaders and panchayat members leave the ordinary villagers uninformed about schemes, about obligations of the panchayats and the government and about the rights of the poor. Popular involvement is not sought but avoided so that party members are free to take up projects that allow the massive diversion of government funds and execute them without any control by the people. The few attendants in the gram sansad are told not to make more than one or two proposals. By contrast, involving people in the generation of scheme ideas would also create a popular interest in (checking) the execution of the schemes. This could create some pressure for curbing leakage.

However, corruption makes the party leaders vulnerable to blackmail. Despite the control of information, there will always be a few people, including low level panchayat members, who are aware of the misconduct. The best strategy to deal with that layer is to “pay them off” so that they keep silent. This may be another reason why gram panchayat members are given relative autonomy. This autonomy keeps them happy as they can, and indeed do, use it for making profits themselves. These ward representatives, in turn, try to pay off well-informed villagers. This can be in form of projects for the particularistic benefit of the well-informed (see above-mentioned EAS pond-digging project) or in form of as little as two days of supervising work in a government scheme (unrecorded conversation with a youngster in village N). The “price” seems to depend on the influence, knowledge and connections of the potential accuser. Ordinary people with weak networks, on whose backs the benefits from corruption are made, find it useless to make complaints: the lower level government officers would anyway be involved in the corruption; higher level officers are not easily accessible and do not know what is going on precisely (Ma V108). (Leakage is discussed in more detail in section 5.)

This presentation of different strategies of managing and controlling participation challenges the conventional account that the CPM in West Bengal mobilised the masses and built up popular organisations that, in turn, put pressure on the government. The CPM seems to have continued directing popular participation. In accordance with conventional views of the CPM, the account given above implies and confirms that the CPM is the most entrenched and significant political institution in rural West Bengal.

Despite this rather gloomy picture of participation and CPM control, there is some cause for optimism. There are reform-minded people within the top-level CPM leadership who seem not afraid of real people’s participation. For example, the programme for decentralised planning, an initiative of the Department of Panchayats and Rural Development, is a sincere attempt to strengthen grassroots participation and to bring about radical democracy.

5 Execution, Leakage and Outcomes

5.1 Overview

In West Bengal, the EAS, like JRY, IAY and MWS, have been implemented by the panchayats as opposed to the development bureaucracy. This was exceptional in India before the new GoI EAS guidelines came into effect in September 1999, and passed the *implementation authority* to the zilla parishad from the District Magistrate in all states. An Additional Executive Officer (AEO) – from the WBCS cadre or junior IAS cadre – has allocated to the zilla parishad to look after the technical side of the implementation of EAS, JRY, etc. Before the introduction of the new EAS guidelines, the panchayat samiti was the primary *implementing agency*; gram panchayat were given responsibility for implementing smaller EAS projects. The BDO acted as Executive Officer. Line departments did not play any role in implementing EAS.

The official execution process (as described in Midnapore) involved the following steps:

1 Sanction

The implementation authority, the zilla parishad, gives *administrative sanction* of EAS projects. As mentioned in section 4, the panchayat samiti was given much leeway – or it took much freedom – to implement schemes that had not been listed in the action plans once the EAS allotment has been made.

Technical sanction and estimates are given according to the size of the project by the gram panchayat-level Job Assistant (up to Rs. 15,000), by the block-level Sub-Assistant Engineer (up to Rs. 50,000?), by the Assistant Engineer (up to Rs. ??) or by the district-level Executive Engineer.

2 Appointment of job worker:

The implementing agency can appoint and utilise a person (*job worker*) from the beneficiaries who monitors the works on behalf of the gram panchayat or the panchayat samiti. This person is the *de facto executing agent*. The Job Assistant (for projects implemented by the gram panchayat) and the SAE (for panchayat samiti projects) remain the official executing agents.

Contractor involvement is prohibited. If necessary, the block staff invites professional builders for *public tenders of supply materials*.

The rules regarding the selection of the job worker seemed to vary: He/(she) is selected either by the villagers directly or by the gram panchayat/panchayat samiti.

3 Organisation of works and labour payments

A village-level *project-inception meeting* informs the villagers about the execution of the project, estimated project costs and labour days created, and selects the members of the beneficiary committee. (In Malda, the beneficiary committee is selected in the gram sansad.)

On behalf of the implementing agency (panchayat samiti or the gram panchayat), the appointed job worker organises the work, calls and supervises the labourers. The beneficiary committee, the Job Assistant and the SAE make spot checks.

The implementing agency is responsible for *labour payments* and can make these either through its own staff (usually the gram sebok and the job assistant) or by giving an advance to an *appointed paymaster* (e.g., job worker).

4 Direct Monitoring

The *supplies* are checked by the Job Assistant or the SAE depending on whether the project is implemented by the gram panchayat or the panchayat samiti. Elected panchayat members have to verify and sign off the supply-measurement sheets.

The *muster rolls* are maintained by the job worker. The beneficiary committee has to verify the muster roll and sign it off.

The *measurement sheets* are sometimes prepared by the job worker. The measurements are checked by the Job Assistant or the SAE. Apart from the Job Assistant/SAE, the job worker and the beneficiary committee sign off the measurement sheets.

The beneficiary committee must submit a *completion letter*. Finally, the entire project is signed off by the BDO, SAE, Chairperson of the panchayat samiti Public Works Standing Committee, respective pradhan and the job worker. (For gram panchayat projects, this would be the Gram Panchayat Secretary, Job Assistant, pradhan, respective ward representative and the job worker.)

5 Administrative Monitoring

Since recently, there has been a *Vigilance and Monitoring Committee* at the block and district levels involving elected panchayat members, MLAs and MPs and government officers. These committees seemed not very active. Their role seemed to be limited to paper checks.

Monitoring at the state level involves (i) analysis of the monthly reports from the districts that include figures on expenditure, physical targets, etc.; (ii) quarterly meetings of the Minister of Panchayats and Rural Development and senior departmental officers with the district authorities; and (iii) fact-finding missions by senior departmental officers appointed to a particular district.

6 Auditing

The most direct form of auditing is the *social audit*: The project-wise expenditures are published and distributed in the gram sansad. (This was not the case in the Malda gram panchayat.)

The gram panchayat level (paper) audit is done by the block-level Extension Officer Panchayats. The panchayat samiti and zilla parishad are audited by the Examiner of Local Accounts, an officer under the control of the Comptroller and Auditor General, a constitutional functionary.

5.2 Delays in (Technical) Sanction

Capacity Problems in Midnapore

A state-level officer explained that the implementation of EAS in West Bengal lagged behind other states such as Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The expenditure under EAS was below the Indian average (WB 101). This is not because

there would be less “demand” for this scheme in West Bengal, but because of the limited capacity of the bureaucracy, particularly of the technical staff:

Our experience shows that the annual action plan is normally finalised by November-December. However, mere preparation of the annual action plan is not going to help, because you must have [the technical estimates]. The annual action plan is a non-technical document that only includes a quick estimate of how much money is required for a particular scheme. This is not always supported by technical advice. The action plan is only basic resource management; it is not an “actionable” plan...

[The timely completion of technical plans before EAS money arrives] has by and large not taken place anywhere in West Bengal. The panchayat samities start the whole process only at the moment when the money comes... [Then, they] ask the engineers to prepare the estimates... But there is the problem of infrastructure constraints [in regard to engineering staff]... Manpower available at these levels is very few, and the quality is also not up to the mark. (WB 101)

Because of the mentioned capacity problems, it takes a long time until the technical sanctions come through. The problem of delayed sanctions was confirmed in Midnapore:

The panchayat samities and gram panchayats are usually not able to implement schemes quickly when they have received the EAS money. Proper “shelves of projects” including technical estimates are not kept. When the zilla parishad forwards the funds, the block and gram panchayat staff [SAE, Job Assistant] sit together for the preparation of schemes. Technical plans and maps will be drawn, etc. After a long time, the technical staff will submit the estimate. (Mi 102)

The devolution of technical sanctioning powers to the gram-panchayat-level Job Assistant for projects below Rs. 15,000 seems not to have mitigated the problem of the slow sanction process sufficiently. Moreover, delays can lead to an untimely implementation order. A gram panchayat employee in Midnapore, for example, feels the pressure of the panchayat samiti to spend the allotted money that is tied to particular schemes quickly. However, some projects are sanctioned in unsuitable seasons. For example, the panchayat samiti sanctioned the construction of a school building in the monsoon in 1999 when the proposed construction site was waterlogged (Mi G101). The panchayat samiti was not able to quickly substitute another scheme for the school building. As a consequence, the implementation was slowed down. The problem has been aggravated by rigid attention to the recommendation on sector allotments (see section 2).

Interestingly, the gram panchayat staff blamed the central government for delaying allotments and, therefore, for causing these problems at the local level. This raises suspicions that the panchayat samiti extends wrong information to the lower tiers, and tries to pre-empt pressure from below for better and faster implementation. The gram panchayat staff and office-bearers in Midnapore passed on the wrong information to the villagers in the gram sansad. Their message was that only a few schemes could be implemented because the panchayats do not get enough money from the government. Because the villagers are not aware of the lengthy procedures in the block office and because they generally trust the word of their elected representatives, grassroots pressure for the speedy implementation of development schemes was absent.

The capacity problem has quantitative and qualitative aspects. The workload for the four to six SAEs, who are responsible for making estimates, supervising and taking measurements in a block, is big, particularly in situations where a large number of relatively small projects are implemented. An SAE in Midnapore lamented:

There are only six SAEs who have to look after the 100-150 schemes per year implemented by the panchayat samiti. We have no assistants... The insufficient number of technical staff is the main problem for the execution of EAS and other schemes. (Mi B104)

Box 8: Staff at block office and gram panchayat office in Midnapore**Midnapore Block (pop. ca. 210,000; 14 GPs)***(Excluding Agricultural Extension, BLLRO, Revenue, Food & Supplies Offices, etc.)*

BDO/Jt. BDO	2
Extension Officers/Inspectors*	16
Sub-Asst. Engineers**	6
Field Workers (Gram Seboks)	12
Clerks/Accountants/Typist***	18
Peons	7
Mechanics/Guards/Drivers	8
<i>Total</i>	<i>69</i>

* Panchayats, Relief, Welfare, Fisheries, Industry, Small Savings, Social Education, Agriculture (asst.), Anchal Development, Minimum Wages, SC/ST, Co-operatives, Progress & Evaluation, Panchayat Audit & Accounts.

** General, Rural Works, Block Plan, Power, Water Supply, Irrigation.

*** Head Clerk, Accountant, Cashier, Election Clerk, Block Planning Clerk, etc.

(Staff strength and composition in Malda Block are similar.)

Midnapore Gram Panchayat (pop. ca. 20,000, 19 wards)

Secretary	1
Job Assistant	1
Panchayat Workers (clerks)	2
Panchayat Workers (paid from own funds)	2
Peons/Guards	3
<i>Total</i>	<i>9</i>

(The Malda gram panchayat does not employ additional panchayat workers.)

Estimated number of block and gram panchayat staff (excluding peons, guards, etc.): ca. 125

The workload for the gram panchayat staff is no less. For example, the Job Assistant of the studied Midnapore gram panchayat had to make estimates of about 50 EAS projects in 1998-99. He was responsible for looking after more than 100 development projects scattered over the whole panchayat area. Furthermore, the quality of the Job Assistants and their work varies strongly, as this post does not require any formal technical qualification. The Job Assistant may often have to consult the SAEs.

Due to political compulsions to run projects in as many villages as possible, projects had to be split up in smaller parts to be implemented in successive years. The step-by-step execution has increased the administrative workload. For example, each part of the project must be tendered individually (Mi B101).

Another interviewee referred to the “human factor” for an explanation of delays in sanctioning projects without further elaborating on this remark (Mi 102). Possibly, the interviewee meant the stereotyped bureaucratic inertia. From a rational-choice perspective, it does not make sense for an SAE (or Job Assistant) to speed up the technical sanction process because this increases the number of projects that he or she has to supervise later. In any way, SAEs already appeared to be among the busier personnel in the block office. An additional “human factor” would be fear of being personally accountable for mistakes caused by “quick and dirty” estimates.

Fewer Projects, Fewer Capacity Problems in Malda

The problem of slow project sanctions and slow spending of EAS money were less apparent in the Malda panchayat samiti. This was reflected in the opening balance of the panchayat samiti and almost all gram panchayat EAS funds being virtually zero in March 1998 as well as in March 1999. For example, nearly all gram panchayats were able to spend the allotment in late January 1999 within two months. However, some “paper adjustments” were necessary for achieving this record. For example, the BDO asked the Job Assistant of the studied gram panchayat to report completion and expenditure under a particular EAS project in the financial year 1998-99 although the second part of the execution took place in the new financial year (in April 1999) (Ma G101).²⁶

The faster sanction and implementation in Malda compared with Midnapore can be explained with the lower number of EAS projects being executed here. The four or five SAEs in Malda block had to look after relatively few big schemes compared with their counterparts in Midnapore. In 1998-99, for example, they had to supervise only seven EAS projects implemented by the panchayat samiti. The block did not pass down the responsibility of making estimates for small projects to the Job Assistant, as cost estimates for EAS projects implemented by the gram panchayat were kept over Rs. 15,000. But for these projects, mainly pond-digging schemes, quick model estimates could be made that do not involve much work for the SAE. The gram panchayat projects are also much fewer than in Midnapore. Furthermore, the seasonally recurring floods in this part of Malda district allow fast spending of development money for boat hire, repair works, etc.

SAEs in Malda may also have special incentives for sanctioning projects quickly. Their payoff from EAS projects seemed substantial (see section 5.5), and political leaders do not checked on them very much. With irony, one could argue that EAS projects are implemented relatively fast in Malda “thanks” to rampant corruption there. It will be interesting to see whether the Bihar case studies support such an argument.

The zero opening balances in Malda also point to the problem of delayed allotments because of slow submission of utilisation certificates and of the audit report. For example, no EAS money was allotted to Malda district until December 1999 although the district had already spent 75% by March 1999. The Malda zilla parishad probably

²⁶ We have no access to data that would show us how fast the 1998-99 allotment to the panchayat samiti was spent.

failed to provide the audit report to the central government for the year 1997-98.²⁷ The problem of late submission of utilisation certificates is of general nature for various levels of the bureaucracy and the panchayats in West Bengal (see also section 3.1):

The [paperwork] for claiming the next EAS instalment is [generally] not done in time. The audited report should be complete in any circumstance. Quite often that is not done. Only when the blocks or panchayat samities have become eligible to claim [new funds], they realise that auditing has to be done. (WB 101)

Delays because of Formally Politicised Administrative Sanction Process?

Some government officers criticised the involvement of the panchayats in the implementation of EAS and other schemes. Among other drawbacks, the democratic (or politicised) process of sanctioning projects would lead to unnecessary delays. Indeed, the relatively democratic and competitive nature of scheme selection in Midnapore necessitates long deliberations and negotiations that cause delays in scheme implementation. In Malda, by contrast, the sanctioning process seems less contested within the panchayat samiti and the party office. This may lead to faster administrative sanction of projects, but also reflects the limited importance of developmental politics. The party and the panchayat samiti seemed not be interested in attempting to use development projects as a means to satisfy as many potential voters as possible (see section 3.3).

The democratised, or formally politicised, process of scheme sanctioning may cause some delays. But the more important point is that it requires more timely planning of the bureaucracy.

In any democratic set-up, the decision making process takes its time... [However,] planning was not done properly [in West Bengal]. If the block or panchayat samiti had prepared its next year's plan [including technical estimates] well ahead and if they had been ready with all other formalities, they could have spent [and received] more money... Whatever little technical expertise is available in the panchayats could certainly be more efficiently deployed to get a better output... The only thing is that the activities should be properly timed. When you finalise the schemes, they should be advertised. Then immediately one should give them to the technical experts to get an estimate. All these things can be done. If these things were done, then definitely, the capacity to spend money would definitely go up. (WB 101)

In a country like India, government officers are supposed to be more capable than elected panchayat members because of their educational and other background, and should therefore instruct the panchayat members about the need for timely planning. However, the lower bureaucracy does not seem to make such an effort. By contrast, other states such as Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Kerala and Tripura have proven that the panchayat system can be fast and efficient in implementing development schemes. (WB 101)

Political interference is probably more harmful in regard to technical matters of executing EAS projects, such as organising supply tenders, appointing SAEs to particular projects, organising labour payments. Particularly in Malda, co-operation and clear division of functional responsibilities between the block administration and the panchayat samiti was wanting and led to conflicts.

²⁷ For claiming funds under any central scheme before September, the audit report of the year before the previous year has to be submitted. If the application is done after September, the audit report of the previous year needs to be submitted (WB 101).

5.3 Executing Agent

Midnapore Gram Panchayat: Efficient Use of Job Worker

There was no sign of contractor involvement for the EAS schemes implemented by the gram panchayat, except for the supply of materials. The Midnapore gram panchayat made effective use of the provision that a person (job worker) from the beneficiary group can be appointed for calling labourers, organising the work, filling in muster rolls and taking preliminary measurements. Job workers effectively lower the workload of the gram panchayat Job Assistant (Mi G102). The employment of capable job workers made the involvement of (often corrupt) contractors redundant, as one job worker said:

I do the same job as the contractor did under the old system. But I don't get any advance, and there is no question of "profit" [illegal enrichment]. (Mi V103)

In the studied ward, the position of job worker did not rotate among possible candidates, that is, somewhat educated and technically skilled persons among the local poor. The same person, NS, was selected for more or less all development schemes, except for school-building works where the headmaster takes this position.

NS is in his late-forties. He is from a general Hindu caste, was allotted one acre of land during the land reform, and runs a paddy-processing business. He is not very poor but appears on the official BPL list.²⁸ NS is a very active local CPM worker. He himself described his main occupation as "party full-timer".²⁹ He estimated to have worked for more than 700 days as job worker on government schemes since the early 1990s. He usually was paid the government minimum wage for unskilled labour out of the contingency fund, although he would have been entitled to the rate for semi-skilled labour.

NS's monopoly over the position of job worker raises questions about the selection process and criteria. The gram panchayat or the pradhan, respectively, seemed to select the job worker.³⁰ The pradhan informs CPM leaders of the respective village who the job worker will be. In the project-inception meeting, the local CPM leaders forward this decision to the villagers (Mi V101). There seemed to be no competition for the post of job worker in the studied ward. There were no other candidates than NS, or these were not considered.

The villagers participating in the project-inception meetings seemed not openly opposed to the decisions by the panchayat. The selection of the job worker was not contested in this forum. In the questionnaire survey, however, 14% of the respondents criticised that they are not sufficiently involved in decisions regarding the execution

²⁸ Because of the limited capacity of the gram-panchayat bureaucracy, BPL lists are drafted by local CPM workers, including NS. The inclusion of NS in the BPL list may be self-serving or a border case. In any case, the BPL list drafted by the CPM seems quite fair otherwise.

²⁹ Indeed, he tried to give us the typical CPM spiel about West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura being the by far best performing states, etc. several times when we were asking about such mundane things as why nobody competes with him for being job worker (see Mi V103).

³⁰ Out of 25 villagers, 22 identified the panchayat or the pradhan, and one each the villagers, the party and the block office as the decision-maker regarding job-worker selection (Questionnaire Survey, Analysis 2b, Sheet ExeAgent, Table 3).

of EAS work. Another 22% complained that “all” is decided by others (party, panchayat, job worker) without further specifying.

No doubt, NS has very good connections to the CPM leadership of the gram panchayat. He is one of the most, if not the most, powerful local party worker, and enjoys an influential position within the village. However, the gram panchayat repeatedly picks him for the position of job worker not only because of his political clout and connections but also because of his technical skills, experience and integrity. This made him the preferred candidate of the gram panchayat staff and not only of the CPM.

Therefore, it would be too simplistic to claim that NS is imposed on the villagers only because of his political clout. Indeed, the villagers ranked the importance of NS’s technical skills slightly higher than his political connectivity. Among the 100 respondents of the questionnaire survey, 44% mentioned technical skills, and only 38% political connections, as reasons for the job-worker selection. It is therefore plausible that villagers did not contest NS’s position because they are generally satisfied with his performance. However, there have been a few allegations of corruption involving NS (see section 5.5).

In order to avoid conflicts at the village level and to ensure the appointment of capable persons, it seems appropriate that the gram panchayat as opposed to the villagers select the job worker. However, it is crucial that the villagers retain some sort of a veto right. It is difficult to judge whether this right is guaranteed in the project-inception meeting or whether the participants feel under pressure, both political and social, not to oppose the suggestions of the CPM party workers. NS claimed that the villagers would reject him immediately if he did not work properly. However, this comment has to be taken with a pinch of salt. For example, NS also claimed that he is elected for the post of job worker by the participants of the project-inception meeting (Mi V103).

Malda Gram Panchayat: Plethora of Informal Supervisors and Contractor Involvement

As in Midnapore, the Malda gram panchayat appointed job workers. In the reports of each scheme, one can find an official job worker. However, their role was minimal – so negligible, in fact, that none of the village-questionnaire respondents mentioned any of the job workers officially employed in the past as the *de facto* executing agent. Among the poor respondents, 34% percent perceived the gram panchayat member or the Job Assistant as the executing agent; 31% mentioned an unofficial supervisor from the village; and 35% were not aware who executed the EAS projects.

There was confusion regarding the role of job worker in the gram panchayat. The *de facto* pradhan, after holding office for 1½ years, was not aware that official job workers had been appointed in the past. He recently heard about the possibility of appointing job workers, but was not sure whether this was a new rule or whether he had failed to implement EAS projects according to the rules in the past (Mi G102). The gram panchayat member from the studied ward appointed project supervisors without consulting the pradhan (Mi G103). Furthermore, these supervisors were not congruent with the official job workers. Among others, he appointed his own brother who is relatively well off. It seems that the Job Assistant single-handedly entered

official job workers in the records in order to comply with the rules, but without the clear knowledge of the elected members. The local bureaucracy failed to inform the villagers and the panchayat members of the provisions of appointing job workers. The Job Assistant was probably afraid of entrusting this job to ordinary villagers lacking formal accountability.³¹

As indicated, quite a few informal supervisors were employed for a two or three days in the studied villages. Often, AB made these “appointments” to favour his political clientele and to pay off informed people who otherwise may speak up against corruption. The villagers also perceived the selection of supervisors as politically biased. The pradhan did not interfere because of his limited political power. Some supervisors were also “group leaders” of workers from the same para. These informal supervisors appeared as ordinary manual labourers in the muster rolls but did not do any manual work (Mi V101).

Box 9: The local gram panchayat member

Sitting on the veranda of the joint family house of the local gram panchayat member, we were offered “special tea” (with spices) and observed a group of labourers working on a relatively substantial house extension using good-quality wood. This landless scheduled-caste family, which came from Bangladesh (East Pakistan) to India in 1972, clearly is an upwardly mobile household moving from poverty into the new middle class. According to village rumours, wealth has come to this family since AB, the son of the household head who is in his mid-thirties, has become gram panchayat member and upa-pradhan (vice-president of the gram panchayat) in May 1998.

AB was elected on a CPM ticket in the panchayat elections in 1998. He occupies a reserved seat for scheduled castes. He almost became pradhan in the gram panchayat that has five members each from the CPM and the INC. The tossing of a coin made an INC member pradhan, and AB had to be satisfied with the post of upa-pradhan. In this function he is the immediate counterbalance to the pradhan and the INC in this gram panchayat. Thanks to the backing of DC, the influential panchayat samiti member, AB actually seems to play a more important role as the pradhan in many respects. For example, he is able to play a more active role than the *de facto* pradhan in the gram sansads we observed. At least, AB is given a lot of autonomy to do what he wants in “his” ward.

AB developed a fascination for the CPM in his childhood when he held the red flag in CPM marches in the early days of CPM rule in West Bengal. As a teenager he learned more about the party, its philosophy and structure. People also told him that the CPM could help him, a scheduled caste, getting a service job. AB continued to support the CPM after they moved to this village that was in the INC belt in 1985. Fortunately, the CPM has gained strength here since the early 1990s when local leaders such as DC could be encouraged to join the party. AB started to become more active in politics. He became candidate member in 1996 and auxiliary member of the CPM in 1997. However, he does not hold any posts in the CPM branch or local committee.

AB clearly plays second fiddle to DC. When people do not have direct access to DC, they seek help from AB and from other CPM workers in the various paras. (In the current political constellation, INC supporters try to go directly to the pradhan.) Despite AB’s limited influence within the village and within the CPM, he enjoys a lot of autonomy in selecting and executing small-scale development projects in his ward. In this function, he is able to divert government money in his pocket – as nearly all villagers would confirm. The recent economic improvement of AB’s household is remarkable considering that this landless family was financially dependent on rich neighbours when they settled here in 1985. Some villagers also complained that AB who used to be a “good person” has become arrogant and rude since has become upa-pradhan. It seems that AB belongs to the many opportunists in the CPM. He seems interested in making a profit during his tenure rather than being re-elected.

³¹ It will be interesting to see whether the recently appointed dynamic Gram Panchayat Secretary will insist on proper appointment and use of job workers.

The village questionnaire confirmed that AB, the gram panchayat member from the CPM, currently selects the supervisors because of their good political connections.³² The current *de facto* pradhan (INC) does not interfere because of his ignorance and limited power.

The short-term appointment of several informal supervisors as opposed to the appointment of one job worker for the whole project period puts the gram panchayat member in a more powerful position. Indeed, AB calls labourers himself (Mi G103, Mi G101). Because there is no EAS register, AB has a completely free hand to pick the labourers. This is an important opportunity to nurture his vote banks and to please his political boss, DC. In practice, AB is the executing agent and appeared as such to 34% of the villagers.

Many villagers suspected crooked motives behind the direct implementation by the gram panchayat member. To the question why no contractors were appointed for some projects, 11 out of the 35 (31%) who were able to give an explanation replied that this is because the panchayat members want to divert money into their own pockets and not share it with contractors. Astonishingly, the perception of contractors is not much worse. To the same question, 17% mentioned that contractors were excluded because they would cheat, and 31% said that contractors would not work properly (Questionnaire Analysis 2b Malda-Survey, sheet ExeAgent).³³

The above-mentioned results reflect the villagers' lack of trust in the panchayats rather than the actual reasons for excluding contractors. Indeed, contractors and their "mates" were involved even in tiny, labour-intensive EAS schemes, such as pond-digging projects. Their involvement and the use of outside contract labour allowed AB to divert a substantial amount in his own pocket (see below). Obviously, AB weighs between making financial profit (by appointing outside contractors) and achieving political gains (by giving out jobs to villagers).

Midnapore Panchayat Samiti: Clear Rules Regarding Contractor Involvement

In Midnapore, professional builders were involved in the execution of EAS road-and bridge-construction schemes, which are implemented by the panchayat samiti. Their role was not limited to supplying materials (as per EAS guidelines) but included the organisation of labour. It is interesting that gram panchayat staff and office-bearers (were made to) believe that this type of contractor involvement is legal (cf. Mi B103).

The local MLA regarded the involvement of contractors as a necessary evil in the absence of skilled locals:

³² Interesting compared with Midnapore where the villagers referred to "the panchayat" (as an institution), the villagers in Malda explicitly mentioned particular names of present and former elected panchayat members as the decision makers for the selection of project supervisors. This is another indication of the personalised, clientelist nature of the political and social system in Malda.

³³ In Midnapore nobody suggested that panchayat members keep out professional builders in order to maximise their own profit. Most of the those who were able to give explanations (24 households) referred to mistrust in contractors. 25% said that contractors would be corrupt, 21% said that the contractors would not work properly, and 46% said that they would not employ local labour. (Respondents gave max. two answers.)

The party [CPM] does not want the involvement of contractors. EAS projects should be projects for, and by, the people. But there is usually no local person [job worker] who could take up technically demanding construction of roads and bridges. Thus, contractors are necessary because of their technical knowledge. [For a particular bridge project,] it was possible to appoint a local skilled job worker. Good-quality materials were used, but in the end the finishing was still poor. (Mi B107)

The block staff was generally reluctant to admit the involvement of professional builders in other activities than supplying materials. Only in technically demanding bridge-construction projects that require close supervision, contractors would be involved. In these schemes, contractors also recruit and organise labourers and the entire project is tendered, including labour costs and material (Mi B101). In other projects, the SAE would be the executing agent himself, make spot checks from time to time and work together with the local beneficiary committee (Mi B104). The BDO admitted that contractors would sometimes bring in their own labourers for road schemes when local labour is not available, for example, during the harvest (Mi B101). (This poses serious questions about the ability of the bureaucracy to time EAS projects to maximum demand for employment.)³⁴

Village-level research and interviews with contractors showed that contractors and their “mates” were behind the scene in nearly all EAS projects implemented by the panchayat samiti, including technically undemanding small-scale road projects. The contractors or their “mates”, respectively, called the local labourers, took the measurements and made the labour payments (Mi B106, Mi B105). The position of the job worker becomes redundant in these projects. Contractors referred to them as “CPM party cadres that are paid semi-skilled wages without doing anything” (Mi B105).

Payment for the materials was made to the contractor in arrears. For larger projects, this was broken down in to a number of sub-stages, in the “bundle system” (see below). A final 10% of project costs was held back by the BDO for six months after the work is completed. This guarantee money was withheld as a check on work quality – if the road has collapsed after six month it will not be paid (Mi B105). It seems that professional builders advanced the labour payments and were unofficially reimbursed by a government officer.

At the district level, bureaucrats either vehemently denied the involvement of any contractors (Mi 107, Mi 102), or they claimed not to be aware of contractor involvement as they could not see the exact picture from their desks and would receive only expenditure certificates and make paper audits (Mi 103). These reactions are difficult to explain given that it is very easy to get the information locally. District-level officers even failed to take action when they realised that particular panchayat samities have employed contractors. All that was done was to caution the concerning panchayat samiti. There was no attempt to recoup money when projects had already been completed (Mi 103).

It seems that there is little interest at the district level to control contractor involvement and to disclose it to higher authorities. The district authorities are probably more interested in the smooth running of the EAS (even if this requires the involvement of technically skilled contractors) rather than in disclosing any kind of malpractice that would impede the implementation of EAS projects. In practice, the

³⁴ However, references during the interview made it clear that the BDO was well aware of the widespread involvement of contractors in EAS road schemes.

district authorities accept the justification of block-level officers why contractor involvement is necessary and are ready to turn a blind eye to that for the sake of efficiency.

However, there may be less noble motives of both the district and block administration to tolerate contractor involvement. It is common knowledge that contractor involvement facilitates the diversion of government funds. The local MLA pointed to the contractor-bureaucracy nexus:

The SAE prefers to work with contractors rather than directly with villagers. Vested interests are at stake when contractors are excluded. The SAE cannot put pressure on the panchayats [because] the quality of their work is usually good. But the SAE can put the contractor under pressure when the quality is not maintained. In this way “arrangements” are made between contractor and SAE, who will receive a percentage. The government departments are [therefore] hostile to the idea of doing away with the contractors. (Mi B107)

This comment has some credence. If the smooth running of EAS were the only motivation to involve contractors, there would be no need to pass wrong information to the gram panchayat level. Furthermore, facilitating smooth implementation would not necessitate contractor involvement in small-scale road schemes.

The clarity of, and obedience to, the informal (and illegal) rule that contractors look after panchayat-samiti-implemented EAS projects, but never after gram-panchayat-implemented projects, suggests that this is a compromise between the bureaucracy, the party and the contractors that was achieved when contractors were legally excluded from government schemes such as EAS. Contractors seemed not to be behind the scene in gram-panchayat projects because they were guaranteed their own territory. This demarcation of boundaries, though not legal, helped the efficient implementation of EAS.

How are contractors selected in the Midnapore panchayat samiti? There is an open-tender system for the supply of materials at the block level. The tender notices are publicly displayed at the block office. Professional builders are invited to bid for material supply of EAS schemes in the road sector. Officially, the contractors do not appear as executing agents.³⁵ Only in a few technically complicated projects (culverts and bridges), the tender relates to the whole scheme. Sealed bids are submitted to the BDO and the lowest bid will be approved (Mi B101).

The current BDO mentioned that before his tenure there had been no open bidding system for supplies. Deals were made secretly between the panchayat samiti and probably included significant payoffs. When he introduced the open-tender system, the BDO faced stiff resistance from the panchayat samiti and the contractors:

The panchayat samiti asked the BDO to form a “special committee” for the selection of contractors. But he did not bend to their demands and insisted in having a competitive bidding system. When the panchayat samiti tried to appoint their own selected contractors, the BDO blocked the projects by not releasing any money. The panchayat samiti finally gave in because it was election time and they were under pressure to complete development works. They couldn’t afford to delay the execution of the projects because of the tender question. Once the office-bearers understood that the BDO would not bend under their pressure, they agreed to have open tenders. (Mi B101)

However, the BDO admitted that he has to make “compromises” with the panchayat samiti sometimes because they also have the power to block development works:

³⁵ It was impossible to find out whether the SAE inflates the estimate in order to make possible the profit for the contractor who in practice looks after the labour.

You cannot just appoint the police and get the job done. If necessary, the office-bearers would mobilise the villagers. The Pradhan would instigate the people and not form any beneficiary committee. This would block the projects. (Mi B101).

The contractor/supplier selection through open tenders was not only hampered by the above-mentioned “compromises” but also bypassed systematically. In fact, the 16 contractors who are involved in the execution of EAS and other development schemes implemented by the panchayat samiti have an informal mutual agreement for distributing contracts among themselves on a rotation basis. Not all of them give a quotation for each tender (Mi B105).

Despite this mutual understanding, there are sometimes tussles between contractors. Also, the contractors’ rotation system is not capable of bypassing political pressures. For example, CPM leaders asked the contractors to donate for the Hul festival (tribal festival in May). One of the interviewees gave only Rs. 2,000 as opposed to Rs. 5,000 demanded by the party. As a consequence, he has not got any contract recently.

In practice, the CPM and the contractors seem to subvert the official open-tender system, of which the BDO is so proud. The contractors effectively curb competition and thus are able to bypass the bidding system introduced by the BDO. Furthermore, an unofficial bidding system exists in which not the lowest bid for a particular project, but rather the generosity regarding (party) donations are crucial. It seems that the CPM remains capable of controlling the selection of contractors.

Malda Panchayat Samiti: Various Renegotiated Types of Contractor Involvement

Contractor involvement in the Malda panchayat samiti is not as clear-cut as in Midnapore. Contractors appear in both gram-panchayat and panchayat-samiti projects. Their role in EAS projects implemented by the panchayat samiti varies from giving technical advice to actually executing the scheme, including filling-in muster rolls and making labour payments.

Officially, professional builders can bid for supply tenders only. But often the tender also relates to overseeing the works.³⁶ The SAE asks the contractor to do so. Contractors would be held responsible if any unused material disappeared on the construction site (informal conversation of research assistant with a contractor). The interviewees generally did not admit the involvement of professional builders in EAS projects as openly as their counterparts in the Midnapore panchayat samiti. However, the field visits confirmed that the role of professional builders went beyond supplying material:

The contractor who accompanied us was official supplier of materials for the construction of the visited bridge and semi-pacca road. He tried to convince us first that he was only supplier and did not play any other role. When we asked local labourers he prompted them what to say. We requested him to remain silent. The next person we asked about the project spontaneously told us that the contractor, whom he knew by name and whom he addressed affectionately, paid them the wage weekly... The contractor was quite embarrassed. Then, he explained that the SAEs [the official executing agents] are not able to be on the spot all the time for supervising the work and make the payments. (Ma B109)

³⁶ Again, we were not able to determine how the records were adjusted to make it possible to compensate the unofficially appointed professional builders for supervising the works. It was clear, however, that labour and material supply was over-reported.

For bigger schemes, professional builders officially appeared as the job worker (Ma B103). This is made possible through a “simplified” selection process that violates government guidelines. The few people who have been informed about a new project contact the sabhapati directly who finalises the appointment (Mi B101, Mi B103).³⁷ For smaller schemes, skilled non-local labourers – possibly “mates” of contractors – take over functions of the official job worker, such as taking measurements. These “skilled labourers” are well informed about new projects as they hang out in the block office (Ma B106).

In other EAS projects, professional builders and their “mates” seemed less directly involved. Here, professional builders only “assisted” the SAE:

Sometimes, a “private party with engineering expertise” is involved when the SAE does not have time to visit the site frequently. But this professional builder is not officially appointed, and does also not receive payment. Rather, this contractor is “repaid” in form of contracts for projects under other schemes, such as the MPLAD. (Ma B105)

In this case, professional builders help “voluntarily” in order to be in a better position for receiving future contracts from the block. Unlike in Midnapore where the informal contractor association mediated and distributed contracts on a rotation basis, the contractor/supplier selection seemed to involve more tussle and ad-hoc bargaining in the Malda panchayat samiti. Moreover, with the appointment of a new BDO in August 1998 and the election of DC to the panchayat samiti in May 1998 where he has the important position of chairperson of the public works standing committee, power relations and the previous selection system have been changed.

Before the appointment of the current (honest) BDO, there was no bidding system for supply tenders. A particular SAE informed three or four contractors when a new scheme was to be executed. The SAE alone decided which contractor would get the job. The former (highly corrupt) BDO and sabhapati did not intervene in this process. Previous BDOs were completely under the control of this SAE,³⁸ who is also the son of a CPM MLA of a nearby constituency. A close friend of the SAE received most contracts.³⁹ But he had to pay a lot of money for that favour. DC, now panchayat samiti member, was also one of the few contractors (Ma B101).

When the new BDO was appointed here in August 1998, the said SAE tried to make a “pact” with her. He thought it would be easy to manipulate the new BDO, even more so as she is “just” a woman. However, the new BDO insisted to have a real open-bidding system. When the SAE realised that the BDO would not bend to his demands, he started to abuse her verbally and tried to obstruct her work. With the help of the DM, the BDO managed to get that SAE transferred. However, he filed a case against the BDO and the DM. Although the SAE is well positioned in the Co-ordination Committee (influential, politicised, and the only, union of government employees in West Bengal), this association did not back him openly. The case is still pending (Ma B101).

³⁷ The sabhapati himself refuted this suggestion and claimed that the panchayat samiti would inform all villagers and that he, the BDO and the chairperson of the public works committee would select the candidates (Mi B106).

³⁸ Former BDOs seemed to have liked the posting here because it is an Integrated Tribal Development area and thus attracts more money from the government that can be diverted. For example, one BDO was posted here for five years between 1993 and 1998.

³⁹ This contractor also happened to be our landlord.

The formerly favoured contractor also tried to schmooze the new BDO. The BDO described her experience as follows:

When I came here as BDO, [this contractor] always sat in my office. For quite some time, I thought that he was one of my new employees at the block office. It took some time until I understood who [this contractor] was and what he wanted. He wanted to become “friendly” with me [i.e., pulling her into the practised system of corruption] and invited me to his home, etc. But I refused this and did not accept invitations to his home. (Ma B101)

Eventually, the BDO got the contractor off her neck.⁴⁰ This little episode shows the blurred boundaries between the public and the private sector, and how businesspeople try to capture the state.

The new BDO succeeded to break the earlier non-competitive bidding system for supply tenders only to some extent. She has not been able to reduce corruption involved in the bidding process (see section 5.5) and contractor involvement that goes beyond the supply of materials. On a field trip in January 2000, when the BDO was on leave, we also observed a meeting of DC with a handful contractors at the block office that, at first sight, resembled very much the meetings conducted by the former SAE.

Unlike in Midnapore, the BDO in the Malda block tried to exclude contractors from EAS schemes. Part of the reasons why this is difficult is the very material-intensive nature of the schemes taken up by the panchayat samiti that necessitates the engagement of a contractor (Ma B101). The BDO became very emotional, close to tears, when she explained why the bureaucracy at the block level failed to stop contractor involvement:

We are trying hard not to [involve contractors]... It is really difficult to keep the contractors out in the material intensive EAS projects implemented by the panchayat samiti. I’m not even able to tell you to what extent it is possible to keep out the contractors... Nobody can see what is going on behind the scenes. Even if I visit the spots personally, I cannot be sure that no contractors are involved. I don’t know what happens after I have left the place. I’m trying my level best to exclude the contractors and to help the poor for whom this scheme is meant.

There is also complete lack of feedback from panchayat samiti and gram panchayat levels... Theoretically, it should be in the interest of the panchayat samiti and gram panchayats to complain about improper execution. But I don’t get any complaints from any level of any gram panchayat. So, naturally, I feel that there is no reason for complaints. It’s the panchayats that should be concerned about the schemes. It’s theirs. They should complain when contractors are engaged. But complaints do not reach me... If everyone is happy with this system [of involving contractors], how can a single person [the BDO] do anything against it. On his/her own, the BDO is not capable of ensuring proper execution. (Ma B101)

The failure of the BDO to keep out contractors in EAS schemes is mainly because of the non-co-operation of the panchayats and the lower block bureaucracy. The BDO also pointed to the lack of consciousness among the people here (as opposed to another northern district where she was posted before) (Ma B101). This related to the recurring issue that villagers are kept unaware of government provisions from which they could benefit. The concealing of information by the panchayats, etc. explains the situation in Malda better than the often-mentioned general “lack of awareness” or “low degree of grassroots mobilisation”. Villagers do not remain passive in every

⁴⁰ For this, she also used our research team. She arranged accommodation for us in the contractor’s house. First, the contractor misinterpreted this as a rapprochement and was very happy. When he realised that the BDO did not make any other moves toward him, he somewhat lost interest in having us stay at his house.

case. Indeed, they agitated against employment of outside labour (see section 5.4), which they believe is morally wrong (rather than legally wrong). Only seven of the 80 poor respondents (9%) seemed to know that there is a government rule that forbids the employment of contractors.⁴¹

The departure of the above-mentioned SAE and the advent of DC in the panchayat samiti led to new power constellations that influenced the selection of suppliers/contractors. As the chairperson of the panchayat samiti public works standing committee, DC is not authorised to bid for tenders anymore, but he is in a good position to favour his own people. Despite the efforts of the BDO to introduce an open tender system, it is doubtful that this is really practised. Rather, it seems that the nexus between DC and one of his contractor friends has become stronger. As a consequence, the close friend of the former SAE received fewer and fewer contracts. At one point in September 1999, that contractor was so frustrated of having lost his direct connections to the block office and many contracts that he intended to give up the contractor business at all.

Job Worker versus Contractor

The execution of EAS projects varies not only between Midnapore and Malda, but also between projects implemented by the panchayat samiti and by the gram panchayat. The choice whether to appoint a skilled local person (job worker) or a professional builder (contractor) as the actual executing agent seems the most important characteristic and determinant of the system of execution. The employment of a job worker in projects implemented by the Midnapore gram panchayat signifies some degree of community participation in the execution of EAS. This can also lead to a stronger sense of ownership. For example, the job worker was capable of motivating the villagers to voluntarily contribute labour to village schemes (not under EAS). This contribution may not be 100% voluntary, but it probably would not be possible if villagers noticed any form of leakage.

Because he/(she) is a neighbour and member of the community, villagers generally have stronger and more direct means to hold the job worker accountable than any outside contractor. Villagers are likely to put pressure on the job worker to do the job properly. However, this presumes that villagers are sufficiently informed about the duties of the job worker and that the job worker is given real responsibility and does not just exist on paper or is a puppet of someone behind the scene. Furthermore, growing social and economic disparities may weaken accountabilities to the “community”, i.e., one needs to ask to which community (class, caste, etc.) the job worker feels accountable to.

In the Midnapore gram panchayat, the job worker felt accountable to his co-villagers although he was not democratically selected. In fact, the selection of job workers by the panchayat or the party in power can be more appropriate than democratic selection, as it reduces the risk of village-level conflict, contractor involvement behind the scene, and appointment of candidates with insufficient skills. If necessary, the community still has the power to complain to the political leaders against a

⁴¹ In Midnapore, only 3% of the poor seemed to know about this provision. This result may partly be because of the indirect way of asking the question, which was “Why do you think no contractor was chosen to execute these [EAS] projects?”.

dishonest and incapable job worker. In the Midnapore gram panchayat, villagers would be able to reject the job worker despite his close party connections, as there are many alternative networks to access the panchayat and the party leaders.

The system of project execution is well established in the studied Midnapore ward. There is a certain routine of holding project-inception meetings. There is no discussion and contest about the appointment of the job worker and the beneficiary-committee members. It would be simplistic to trace this back to CPM dictatorship. Rather, the CPM helped establishing a system of executing EAS projects that works well for all, including the labourers, the other villagers, the panchayat members and staff. The selection of labourers is quite fair; the minimum wages are paid; the works are of good quality; muster rolls and measurement sheets are well prepared and maintained by the job worker; etc. This well-established, conflict-free system enables the swift completion of sanctioned EAS projects.

The role of job workers appears very positive that one wonders why the Malda gram panchayat, the Midnapore and Malda panchayat samities did not make full use of job workers in the execution of EAS projects. For relatively big, technically sophisticated projects, there might be a lack of skilled and interested locals who could give technical advice and take preliminary measurements. The employment of unskilled job workers would either contribute extensively to the workload of the SAEs or result in building low-quality, non-durable infrastructure. In the Midnapore block, the SAEs may not have the capacity to look after all the many small-scale development project carried out there. Therefore, the block staff welcomes the involvement of skilled professional builders beyond their official role as suppliers. Ironically, the political imperative for having a high number of small-scale projects scattered throughout the block area may have contributed to contractor involvement.

However, the capacity problem and maintenance of quality are not the only reasons for contractor involvement. The involvement of contractors also makes possible the diversion of funds that often suits the bureaucracy, political parties and individual office-bearers alike. As opposed to the local job worker, the contractor has no direct self-interest in providing top-quality infrastructure. Furthermore, the beneficiaries find it more difficult to hold the contractor accountable because he is not resident of the same area and may be able to hide behind his “expert knowledge”. In most cases, the intended EAS beneficiaries lose when contractors are involved.

In Midnapore, the panchayat samiti and block-level bureaucracy are able to continue the inclusion of professional builders in the execution of EAS because they make villagers and gram panchayat members believe that this is accordance with government rules. By restricting information to villagers and gram panchayat member, who tend to be more accountable to the citizens than panchayat samiti members, pressure from below for the exclusion of contractors can be avoided.⁴² Politicians and bureaucrats were able to effect a neat division between panchayat samiti projects (contractor involvement) and gram panchayat projects (contractor exclusion). This clear, well-established demarcation, which possibly represents a compromise between political leaders, government officers and professional builders, reduced conflict, allowed (limited) community participation, and thus contributed to the relatively efficient implementation of EAS.

⁴² Grassroots pressure for quick technical sanction is pre-empted in similar ways.

In Malda, the boundaries of contractor involvement are not drawn as clearly. Part of the bureaucracy (i.e., the BDO) is not willing to compromise on government rules at all. But deals are made behind the back of the BDO. Individual government officers find it difficult, if not impossible, to stop contractor involvement. The lower bureaucracy did only start to inform the gram panchayat members about the provision of appointing job workers. Furthermore, power relations in the block office and the panchayat samiti have recently shifted. In the absence of a well-established system, government officers, panchayat members and various professional builders are contesting their space within a new system. This leads to continuous rearrangements of (unholy) alliances between panchayat members, various government officers and professional builders. Control over the selection of contractors/suppliers is crucial for making individual profit. At present, it seems that particular panchayat members have control over the system of execution. Political leaders and panchayat samiti member leave a lot of autonomy to the gram panchayat members. As a consequence, the system of execution of gram-panchayat EAS projects depends on the respective elected ward representative.

5.4 Labour

Access to Work: Comparison between Midnapore and Malda

It has already been mentioned in section 2.2 that only 53% of the poor households in the studied Midnapore ward hold an EAS card. In the Malda ward, no EAS cards have been distributed. Section 3 showed that in the Midnapore ward the poor received 9.6 working days on average under EAS in 1995-99. The figure for the Malda ward was only 1.4 working days. Section 3 also showed that work was relatively equally distributed among various groups of the poor (caste, political affiliation, village) in the Midnapore ward. But there was clear discrimination in Malda. This subsection gives further detail about access to EAS work in the studied Midnapore ward and Malda ward. Table 24 shows people's attempts to access EAS work and their success.

Table 24: Attempts to receive EAS work (poor households)

	Midnapore Ward	Malda Ward
Never Refused	26 (33%)	13 (16%)
Tried but Refused	20 (25%)	16 (20%)
Never Tried	16 (20%)	51 (64%)
Never Tried but Work Given	18 (23%)	--
Total	80 (101%)	80 (100%)

In reading table 24, one must keep in mind that the original question was whether the respondent has ever tried to get EAS work but been refused. Therefore, the numbers in the category "tried but refused" include people who have received EAS work on other occasions. Keeping this in mind, relatively few poor households have ever been refused access to EAS work both in the Midnapore ward and the Malda ward, i.e., 25% and 20%, respectively. However, there are strong differences between the two localities. In Midnapore, 56% have always received work when demanded or received

work without even demanding it. Only 13% of the poor household were in such a good position in Malda. In addition, the people's own perception of the reasons why they were given EAS work shows important differences between Midnapore and Malda (see table 25).

Table 25: Reasons for receiving EAS work

	Midnapore Ward	Malda Ward
Good political connections	1 (2%)	10 (53%)
Good relation with executing agent	--	8 (42%)
High degree of poverty	9 (15%)	2 (11%)
Strong need for work	4 (7%)	--
Suitable technical skills	2 (3%)	1 (5%)
Requested work	6 (10%)	5 (26%)
Everybody was called for work	39 (65%)	1 (5%)
Other	3 (5%)	--
Don't know	1 (2%)	2 (11%)
N.A.	2 (3%)	--
Total (Replies)	67 (112%)*	29 (153%)*

* Percentages relate to total number of poor households that received EAS work; that is, 60 households in Midnapore and 19 households in Malda. The question allowed max. two answers.

While good connections to political parties and to the gram panchayat member were the main reasons for receiving EAS work in Malda, the reasons given in Midnapore are much more in line with the EAS guidelines. Remarkable is that 65% of those who received EAS work found it unnecessary to give a reason for this as such because people from all poor households were called for EAS work. The reasons given for refusals of access confirm the higher degree of discrimination in Malda (see table 26).

Table 26: Reasons for EAS refusal (poor households)

	Midnapore Ward	Malda Ward
"Good" Reasons*	9 (45%)	2 (13%)
"Bad" Reasons**	5 (25%)	11 (69%)
Other***	--	2 (13%)
Don't know	2 (10%)	1 (6%)
N.A.	4 (20%)	--
Total	20 (100%)	16 (101%)

* Reasons include: "there was not sufficient work for all", "there was no project at that time", "others were needier", "unsuitable for that type of work"

** "People with good political connections favoured", "people from other village favoured", "people from opposition party discriminated"

*** "Not on official BPL list", "demanded from wrong person"

Many households never proactively tried to access EAS work. Table 27 illuminates the reasons for this. In both Midnapore and Malda, the main reason was that people had better employment opportunities. In Malda, many people were not informed about EAS work and therefore did not try to access it. The fact that five poor respondents in Midnapore (15% of those who had never tried to access EAS work; or 6% of the total number of poor respondents) felt that there was no point in demanding EAS work as others would be favoured anyway indicates aberration from the generally fair distribution of, and access to, EAS work

Table 27: Reasons for not trying to get EAS work (poor households)

	Midnapore Ward	Malda Ward
Individual Preferences/Reasons*	21 (62%)	24 (47%)
No hope for success	5 (15%)	3 (6%)
Not informed about work	3 (9%)	22 (43%)
Other	2 (6%)	--
Don't know	--	1 (2%)
N.A.	3 (9%)	1 (2%)
Total	34 (101%)	51 (100%)

* Better income opportunities, physically unfit or dislike labouring work

Apart from the generally lower access to information and EAS work, it is striking that the villagers in the Malda ward had to rely more heavily on informal sources of information (see table 28).

Table 28: Source of information about EAS work (poor households who received work)

		Midnapore Ward	Malda Ward
<i>Official Sources</i>	Panchayat (Member)	5 (8%)	12 (63%)
	Job Worker	45 (75%)	--
	Village Meeting	5 (8%)	--
Subtotal	Official Sources	55 (92%)	12 (63%)
<i>Unofficial Sources</i>	Party/Politician	1 (2%)	--
	Village Leader	--	1 (5%)
	Neighbours	4 (7%)	3 (16%)
	Saw works him-/herself	--	3 (16%)
Subtotal	Unofficial Sources	5 (8%)	7 (37%)
Total		60 (100%)	19 (100%)

The following two subsections describe and discuss the processes that underlie these figures.

Midnapore: Relatively Fair Access Provided by Job Worker

It is possible that the job worker, the most important source of information about EAS work, informed the villagers in the project-inception meeting. In the studied Midnapore ward, an inception meeting (which the villagers also referred to as the gram boithak) is held for each project. The pradhan sends a letter to the prerok (liaison volunteer between the gram panchayat and the ward) when a development scheme has been sanctioned. Then, the prerok, himself a very active local CPM worker, calls the inception meeting. However, the prerok invites only CPM supporters. His justification was quite interesting:

[Supporters of the opposition] know that this is a matter of the [CPM] party ... Well, yes, it's government work, but it's also party related. The opposition intentionally avoids these meetings because they also regard it as party-related work. All they want to do is to check the expenditure. They are not interested in the execution otherwise. (Mi V101)

Indeed, there were no complaints of the mainly middle-class opposition supporters about being excluded at this stage. The low attendance of middle-class persons is probably as much "self-exclusion" as systematic exclusion of political opponents. For the poor (mainly CPM supporters), by contrast, this meeting was important for getting information about work opportunities (Mi V104). Although the poor are generally not excluded from this meeting, the CPM sends clear signals to them what happens with political opponents. Opponents are systematically excluded from the meeting and thus from important information on work opportunities. This form of nepotism, or the threat of exclusion, seems effective in maintaining the CPM vote banks among the poor or, at least, in avoiding open opposition to the CPM among the poor.

Work usually starts one to eight days after the project-inception meeting. The night before the start, NS, the job worker, assisted by a few other villagers calls workers at their home and asks them to come to the work site the following day. NS claimed that he would call labourers every night when work is going on. For smaller projects, labourers from the same gram/para are employed. For bigger projects, labourers from the whole ward are employed (Mi V103).

NS has no list of registered EAS households, but he did not find it difficult to identify the needy: "I know everyone here; I know who the poor labourers are" (Mi V103). One could think that this "unscientific" method of calling labourers allows NS to make highly biased decisions. However, he applies a fairly "rational" method. As there is not enough work under EAS and under schemes for all the underemployed labourers, NS calls them by rotation (Mi V103; see also table 25). Indeed, there are relatively few complaints against NS regarding bias in calling labourers (see tables 26 & 27). In group interviews, only a few relatively poor general-caste people complained that NS, and the CPM in general, favours ST and SC households and discriminates against the poor general-caste people (Mi V107).⁴³ According to NS, most complaints came from unskilled labourers who could not be employed because skilled labour was needed, for example, for road repair. NS usually tries to solve these problems by affectionately talking to the labourers and promising them work for the next project (Mi V103).

⁴³ NS did not dispute that he first looks among the ST and SC household. But he justified this with the higher proportion of ST and SC families among the worker class (Mi V103).

There is little reason to doubt that the access to EAS work is organised in a relatively fair manner in Midnapore. The job worker, and more generally the CPM, seemed to try their best to provide fair access to EAS work. The fact that nearly all poor households are active or tacit CPM supporters certainly reduces the risk of political favouritism. However, apart from fair-minded individuals, potential grassroots pressure may explain the relatively fair access to EAS work. It is very likely that villagers would not tolerate favouritism in the selection of workers. In order to keep the support of nearly all poor households, the CPM finds it necessary to distribute employment from government works evenly. In this situation it is difficult to assess what is cause and what is effect: access to government work or CPM support among the poor. But what is important is that the poor certainly expect from the CPM-controlled panchayat that they get government work.

However, the poor generally did not proactively demand EAS work (see section 2.2). Rather, they expected from, and waited for, the panchayat to provide some work. Only six out of 60 households that received EAS work (10%) proactively requested work and eventually received it. A group of Santals elaborated on this:

[We] do not go to the gram panchayat to demand work. If government work comes, the gram panchayat sends the information and then we get work. When the work comes, we ... get the details about how much labour will be needed etc. If we don't get any message from the gram panchayat, we don't go ... neither personally nor group-wise. (Mi V104)

This passivity is against the spirit of EAS (see section 2.2), but most villagers seem satisfied having the panchayat and the CPM looking after them. They trust the panchayat to give them employment whenever there is money for a scheme. As mentioned before, it is likely that they would protest if this were not the case. In sum, there is a benign relationship between the CPM-controlled panchayat providing relatively fair access to EAS work and the big majority of poor households that support the CPM. It would be interesting to see whether the CPM would be more politically biased if not nearly all the poor were supporting them or, in turn, whether the poor would protest if the CPM did not give them fair access to EAS work.

The studied ward did not receive any EAS project from the panchayat samiti. In these schemes, the contractor employs his “mates” to organise labourers on the ground. The mates may vary in importance from simple foremen to virtual subcontractors. The official job worker seemed to have no significant role (Mi B105, Mi B106). Contractors reported that their mates take unskilled labourers from local villages wherever possible. Skilled labourers where needed are brought in from outside (Mi B105). A road-construction scheme in the studied gram panchayat confirmed this. There were no allegations of unfair selection of local labourers by the mates (Mi B106).

Malda: Hiding Information from Villagers, Engagement of Outside Contract Labour

In the Malda ward, the poor are generally not informed about EAS work (see table 27). Often, the villagers get to know about a government project only when they see that work has already started in their neighbourhood (Ma V104, Ma V106). Only selected party supporters are invited to project-inception meetings if they are held at all. In return for information about work, the gram panchayat member expects help in CPM election campaigns (Ma V103). Rather than the official job worker, AB (gram panchayat member) and DC (panchayat samiti member) called and selected the

beneficiaries of EAS projects implemented by the gram panchayat. “As there is no EAS register kept here, the selection of the beneficiaries is at the discretion of [panchayat members]” (Ma G101).⁴⁴ Unlike in Midnapore, there is clear evidence for political favouritism in giving access to EAS work in the studied Malda ward. But EAS was not primarily used to nurture vote bank but rather the pockets of panchayat members. The large-scale employment of outside contract labour (see below) cannot be explained otherwise.

In the case of projects implemented by the panchayat samiti, we were not able to verify whether the contractor employs mates for organising local labour on the ground or whether official job workers played any role. In a big EAS road project in the north of the block, the contractor camped at the construction site during the execution period of three months. He filled in the muster rolls and made the wage payments (Ma B109).

The panchayat generally prefers to employ contract labour from outside who accept to work at a piece rate or about Rs. 10 below the minimum wage. As a consequence, the ordinary local villagers, who generally do not accept piece-rate work, get less employment under government schemes (Ma V102, Ma V104, Ma V106, Ma V108). This partly explains the dismal performance of the studied Malda ward in creating labour under EAS (on average 1.4 days per poor household from 1995 to 1999). Of course, the young and healthy day labourers who are employed by contractors for employment under government schemes and other works do not refer to their job as “government work”.

One group of villagers openly suggested that the panchayat likes to employ contract labourers because these, unlike locals, do not care much about the quality of the works and about seeing the accounts. The gram panchayat member would therefore be able to make a better “profit” (Ma V106). Indeed, the employment of contract labour is an important method of diverting government funds away from the intended beneficiaries.

In exceptional cases, the villagers protested against the employment of outside labour. They generally feel that they have a moral, rather than legal, right to get employment when works take place in their own locality.⁴⁵ For example, in the EAS pond-digging scheme in 1999, villagers protested against the employment of outside contract labour by a contractor unofficially “appointed” by the gram panchayat:

When we saw that work in this pond was going on and that outside labourers from [a nearby village] were engaged there, a representative of each household went to the gram panchayat member’s house and requested work for one person per household. AB, the gram panchayat member, did not meet our demands at first although we threatened to obstruct the work forcefully. Eventually, we stuck to our promise and brought the work to a complete halt for one day. In response to this, AB recruited a few local labourers from very poor households, including us. A few local households got work for a few days. (Mi V104)

⁴⁴ The gram panchayat member claimed that he consults the members of the beneficiary committee and asks them to call 10-20 labourers from each of the four villages of the ward (Ma G103). However, this is very doubtful. First, the beneficiary committee is defunct. Its members are usually not informed if a project takes place outside their own village (Ma V103). Second, the questionnaire results and the group interviews strongly indicate that much fewer people were called for work.

⁴⁵ For example, villagers also felt it was their right to get employment in the nearby factories run by private entrepreneurs.

About 20 people, including four or five children (Ma V101), may have received work for three or four days (Ma V105). As mentioned before, such grassroots pressure is the exception rather than the norm. Villagers acknowledged that they can only press through their demands when they know about a project. In most cases, however, they are left in the dark about government schemes. In the case of the pond-digging scheme, they realised that because the work took place on government land it must be a government scheme (Ma V104).

In any case, the threat of violence is not effective in every case. For example, a group of scheduled caste villagers in village K did not protest when they saw outside labour working on an EAS road-construction scheme near their para for good reasons:

[If we threatened to bring a project to a halt, we] would probably fail... The pradhan and gram panchayat member know that the villagers here cannot afford to stay here and not go for work outside for more than one day. They would let us stop the works for one or two days knowing that we will not be able to persist. (Ma V106)

This also indicates that it is more difficult for poor people with an “outside” orientation (seasonal migration, daily commuting to nearby town) to hold the panchayats responsible and accountable. Compared with their counterparts in Midnapore, people in the Malda ward rely less on the panchayat and look for alternatives, such as seasonal migration. This has partly to do with better employment opportunities in the nearby town (see table 27), but also with a general disillusionment with the government.

For example, the scheduled-caste households in two paras of village K were so much disappointed with the state (panchayat, block office and political parties) that they decided not to deal with it anymore. They have virtually retreated from the state:

For the past two or three years, we have not allowed the pradhan and gram panchayat member to come and sit in this para. Nobody was allowed to campaign here in the last Lok Sabha elections [October 1999]. There are no political posters and wall paintings in this para. (Ma V106)

This is an extreme reaction that other villagers interpreted as weakness or failure of the villagers to demand benefits from the state collectively. At the same time, they found this reaction understandable, as earlier collective protests have not led to any improvements here (Ma V105).

For example, the above-mentioned episode of protest against the engagement of outside labour in the pond-digging scheme in 1999 was also of limited success. After the locals received a few days of employment, contract labour was employed again to finish the job. This was much to the delight of “the” member of the beneficiary committee and, indeed, main beneficiary of that scheme who justified the employment of outside labour as follows:

The locals do not work hard for government schemes, as they know that they are paid the same wage whether they work hard or not... The gram panchayat member and the Job Assistant cannot put pressure on the labourers. The adivasi – who are always drunk – would physically assault them.⁴⁶ So, they have to pay the workers the daily rate whether they work hard or not. [Also,] women and children are less productive workers; informal leaders from each village supervised their co-villagers and did no manual work but were paid; the widow of a man killed in a recent cow-theft incident did not work but was included in the muster-roll and received payments... However, we had to complete the project [the pond-digging scheme] on time – as per government guidelines. The contract labourers did about 50% of the job, including the hard work of digging the moist parts in the middle of the pond. (Ma V101)

⁴⁶ So much to the claim that adivasi are “docile”...

The above-quoted person was most concerned about the timely and technically satisfactory completion of the project – which was also in his self-interest. He justified the engagement of contract labour with the “government rule” that works have to be completed on time and, thereby, ignored the main goal of EAS to create employment of the poor. This reflects middle-class attitudes in Malda that government work should mainly benefit village – or in this case, individual – infrastructure. Because of the influential middle class, the primary objective of EAS gets corrupted (see section 1). Creating employment and income for the local poor seemed not to be on the top of the agenda of the middle class, including the panchayats.

It seems, though this is difficult to substantiate with hard data, that the middle class in Midnapore seems more interested in the wellbeing of the poor. At least, the CPM cadres feel morally (and ideologically) obliged to provide benefits for the poor. This is also apparent in the case of education. Middle-class people encourage ST and SC households to send their children to school. In Malda, by contrast, there is a growing economic and social gap (and growing mistrust) between the poor and the flourishing middle class, which mostly makes good profits from trade, including smuggling.

Paymasters: Office-Bearers in Malda, Gram Panchayat Staff in Midnapore

The EAS guidelines mention that wages have to be paid “at the work site in the presence of the local persons like sarpanches, panch and block committee members” (GoI, 1993, §4.3). Usually, the implementing agency appears as the paymaster. But the Government of West Bengal allowed the appointment of any trustworthy and knowledgeable local private person for the payment of wages under EAS (e.g., the job worker, prerok). The appointed private paymaster has to submit an indemnity bond that is 50% more than the amount of the daily payments (Ma 101).

However, nobody made use of this provision. Officially, the gram panchayat secretary or the job assistant were the paymasters for EAS projects implemented by the gram panchayat, and for projects of the panchayat samiti, gram seboks and block-office clerks made the labour payments. A district-level officer explained the reasons for this and pointed to the general distrust in Malda prevalent even among villagers:

What happens these days is that the panchayat people have no faith in this kind of people [i.e., knowledgeable private persons in the villages] and want to avoid them. Therefore, the office-bearers insist that a government officer must act as paymaster. The government officers cannot abscond because they have many things at stake, such as the family income and the pension.

Private persons are not even appointed to handle daily payments. If so, they would be given no more than Rs. 2,000-3,000 every day. Local private persons could manage the payments and the works on the spot better than a government officer from outside. But the pradhans are afraid of appointing someone without the required knowledge of keeping proper accounts. In that case, the pradhan would be held accountable for irregularities. Therefore, the pradhans usually hand over the responsibility for making labourer payments to the Job Assistant.

Although the Job Assistant may be the official paymaster, he or she sometimes takes the help of gram panchayat members [because of the heavy workload on the GP level officers]. In some cases, the gram panchayat members act as paymasters unofficially. Of course, this opens the scope for leakage. (Ma 101)

Indeed, in the studied Malda ward, the gram panchayat member made the payments to the local labourers. Usually, he did not do this on the work site but at his home. In this way, it is also easy to conceal the official (government) wage rate (see below). Gram-

panchayat staff was not present, nor anyone else. A gram-panchayat officer also hinted that the panchayat members take care of the payments to the local labourers in order to make possible the diversion of government money. As the “third body of government ... they have the freedom and power to do this” (Ma G101).

In the Midnapore ward, the role of the panchayat is diametrical. Office-bearers do not deal with labour payments. Rather than trying to divert money, they are feared by the gram panchayat staff for their scrutiny. Therefore, the gram panchayat staff preferred to do the labour payments themselves as opposed to appointing an official private paymaster:

[We do not appoint private paymasters] because this would only lead to problems of adjusting the advance. The pradhan would question us if we paid too much to the paymaster. To make the adjustments [getting the money back from the paymaster or paying him/her the balance] would be troublesome and would, in the end, take more time than making the payments oneself. (Mi G102)

Group interviews confirmed that the gram panchayat secretary and the job assistant made the payments for EAS projects once a week under the presence of members of the beneficiary committee (Mi V104, Mi V105). Members of the beneficiary committee reported that they no longer received advance money for the daily payment of labourers and that the gram panchayat staff would make the payments (Mi V103). This may be possible because of the relative proximity of the studied ward to the anchal office. However, it is doubtful that the gram-panchayat staff is capable of doing this in more remote areas, as numerous small-scale government schemes are executed simultaneously in this gram panchayat. Most likely, local paymasters (e.g., job workers, members of the beneficiary committee) are appointed unofficially and given “quasi-advances” that are not recorded as such.

In the case of projects implemented by the panchayat samiti in Midnapore and Malda, the contractors made the payments directly to the labourers (Mi B105, Mi B106, Ma B109). The contractors do not get any advance from the block office for this purpose. They have to advance the money from their own pocket (Mi B105, Ma B109).

The choice of paymaster shows the generally important role of the panchayat office-bearers in the execution of EAS projects implemented by the gram panchayat. But this power manifests itself very differently depending on different motives in regard to corruption. Both the fear of office-bearer scrutiny in Midnapore (influenced by the code of conduct instigated by a corruption-controlling CPM) and the office-bearer’s attempt of diverting EAS funds in Malda prevented the official appointment of private paymasters that would probably be most effective given the limited staff capacities.

Wage Rates: Uniform Payment of Minimum Wages in Midnapore, Violations in Malda

The EAS guidelines made it clear that “the wages paid to workers under EAS should be the minimum agricultural wages for unskilled labour prescribed by the concerned State Government” (GoI, 1993, §4.4). At the time of the field study in 1999, government minimum wages in West Bengal were set at Rs. 48. The minimum wage compared favourably with prevalent local wage rates for unskilled (agricultural) labour in Midnapore and Malda.

Table 29 shows no indication that workers in Midnapore were paid below minimum wages under EAS in Midnapore. Also, the wages paid by contractors in other parts of

the Midnapore gram panchayat were in strict accordance with the government minimum wage (Mi B106). By contrast, the majority of the few who received EAS work in Malda were paid wages below the minimum wage indicating a violation of EAS guidelines with severe impact on the intended beneficiaries.

Table 29: Payment of Minimum Wages (poor households)

	Midnapore Ward	Malda Ward
Minimum Wage Paid	39 (65%)	5 (26%)
Paid Below Minimum Wage*	--	13 (68%)
Paid Above Minimum Wage	--	1 (5%)
Can't Remember	15 (25%)	--
N.A.	6 (10%)	--
Total	60 (100%)	19 (99%)

* Including paid by piece rate.

Eight of the 13 households that were underpaid in Malda received Rs. 40 as opposed to Rs. 48. The other five households, mainly female workers, were less lucky: Their actual wage rate was as little as Rs. 24-30, or 50-65% of the minimum wage rate. Some people were also forced to accept piece rates. An elderly couple earned about Rs. 35 per head per day in this way (Ma V105). But usually, only young workers who often work with a particular contractor accept piece rates.⁴⁷

The villagers were not systematically informed about the government minimum rate. Indeed, the gram panchayat member kept better-informed villagers apart from others when paying the workers at his house. A group of well-informed Santal villagers in Malda believed that the right wages were probably paid to all those who were aware of minimum wages and of the current rate. The unaware Malpahariya in the neighbouring village, by contrast, were paid significantly less (Ma V105).

Apart from lack of awareness, people do not know whom to address for their grievances in regard to violations of the minimum wage act (and many other problems). Some villagers suspected that they were not paid the minimum wage. (Indeed, those men were paid Rs. 45 and women were paid Rs. 40.) They did not know where to get information about the current wage rate and were not aware of the Minimum Wage Officer. Moreover, they had no idea how to approach him/her because they usually contact government officers through their panchayat representative (who in this case was responsible for the underpayment) (Ma V104).

A contractor tried to justify underpayment The SAE would want to hold back some money because labourers often work less than required. Additional days of employment that are not accounted for in the estimate can then be paid from the savings (Ma B109). Given that muster rolls are inflated and labourers paid a piece rate, this justification is not convincing.

⁴⁷ We were not able to find out about wage rates paid by contractors to local labourers. Outside contract labour is paid at a piece rate. In a pond-digging scheme, a group of unskilled contract labourers was paid Rs. 20 per 100 square feet (Ma V101), which is the amount a worker under EAS is expected to dig in a day to be paid in full. This “saves” the panchayat 58% of the labour costs.

In the Midnapore ward, people were generally aware of the government minimum wage. They were also paid on the work site and could share their knowledge. A reported incident in 1997 shows the contrasting approach to labour payment. In that case, the Job Assistant paid the full amount to two workers even though their work fell short of the requirements. The workers, who had been told to work properly by a member of the beneficiary, got away with a mere warning (Village Questionnaire, Q96).

Satisfaction Among EAS workers

Apart from the local employment created, the level of satisfaction with working for EAS projects reflects the qualitative differences of the execution of EAS projects in the Midnapore and Malda ward. Table 30 shows that levels of satisfaction among EAS workers was much higher in Midnapore than in Malda.

Table 30: Level of satisfaction with working on EAS projects

	Midnapore Ward	Malda Ward
Satisfied	43 (73%)	9 (47%)
Mixed	11 (18%)	3 (16%)
Not Satisfied	5 (8%)	6 (32%)
Don't know	1 (2%)	1 (5%)
Total	60 (101%)	19 (100%)

Table 31: Reasons for satisfaction/dissatisfaction

	Midnapore Ward	Malda Ward
<i>Reasons for Satisfaction</i>		
Additional income	50 (83%)	10 (53%)
Good wage rate	7 (12%)	2 (11%)
Improvement of infrastructure	1 (2%)	2 (11%)
Other	1 (2%)	1 (5%)
<i>Reasons for Dissatisfaction</i>		
Insufficient days of employment	14 (23%)	3 (16%)
Low wage rate	--	4 (21%)
Cheated by executing agent	--	4 (21%)
Other	--	2 (11%)
<i>Total (Replies)</i>	<i>73 (122%)*</i>	<i>28 (149%)*</i>

* Percentages relate to total number of poor households that received EAS work; that is, 60 households in Midnapore and 19 households in Malda. The question allowed max. two answers.

Table 31 shows that the main reason for satisfaction was to receive additional income through EAS. Some respondents specified that additional income was particularly important to meet basic needs and during a period when there were no other

employment opportunities. A few respondents in Midnapore also appreciated to receive additional income for the festival time. Compared with additional income, the improvement of village infrastructure was an insignificant side product of EAS in the eyes of its beneficiaries. This indicates congruence of the beneficiaries' appreciation of the EAS and the planners' intended purpose. The planners got it right when they want to create additional employment for the rural poor. In Midnapore, the reasons of dissatisfaction were merely of a quantitative nature. People would like to have more of the same (additional employment). In Malda, however, the criticisms are also more substantial and of qualitative nature. Quite a few EAS beneficiaries were dissatisfied because they had been cheated by the executing agent (gram panchayat member) and given low wages, not to speak of government minimum wages. Cheating and corruption may also reduce demand of the rural poor to work under government schemes.

5.5 Monitoring, Auditing and Leakage

Section 5.1 described the monitoring and auditing process. This process involves many actors that can be roughly divided into:

- community institutions (beneficiary committee, gram sansad)
- panchayat members (pradhan, gram panchayat member)
- bureaucracy (Job Assistant, SAE, EOP, BDO, vigilance and monitoring committee, higher level officers)

At the local level, the monitoring of EAS projects and of the executing agent/supplier (job worker, contractor) involves community institutions, panchayats and the bureaucracy in a more or less horizontal system. The idea is that the various actors with different accountabilities check on each other. Theoretically, the beneficiary committee is directly accountable to the community. The panchayat members should be, more indirectly, accountable to the citizens and are often checked by political parties. The local bureaucracy, apart from being accountable to the panchayats, has to report to the higher departmental authorities and is scrutinised by the auditing system.

However, rather than checking on each other, some of the involved actors build a nexus among themselves and/or with the executing agent/supplier for the purpose of diverting money. Monitoring and leakage can be intertwined. Leakage can be related to material supply, measurements and wage payments. The extent to which this tendency can be suppressed or, more generally, the efficiency of the monitoring system depends primarily on the capacity, determination and motives of the involved actors and institutions and on their actual levels of accountability.

The actually practised systems of control and corruption are very complex, continuously negotiated and contested. The most interesting, and most original, part of the monitoring system in West Bengal is the institutionalised community control through beneficiary committees and the social audit in the gram sansad.

Midnapore: Undemocratic Selection of Beneficiary Committees and Questions of Accountability

Beneficiary committees seem to have been introduced by the Left Front Government in 1977 [check]. The district administration insists on forming beneficiary committees for all projects (Mi 101). They are supposed to supervise all types of projects implemented by the panchayat institutions. In the case of EAS, beneficiary committees supervise project implemented by both the gram panchayat and the panchayat samiti. Particularly, the beneficiary committee has to countersign muster rolls and measurement sheets of the works done. At the end of a project, the committee also signs a general completion/satisfaction letter. Their involvement in controlling the supply of materials is rare.

The beneficiary committee should consist of five to 10 local persons representing different classes, political affiliations, etc. They should be democratically elected in village meetings (e.g., gram sansad, project-inception meeting). One or two of the members should be skilled enough to read measurement sheets and to take basic measurements.

In the studied Midnapore ward, the CPM selected the members of the beneficiary committee in the same manner as the job worker (see section 5.2). Generally, there were blurred boundaries between the job worker and beneficiary-committee members. Many villagers mentioned that the beneficiary committee (including NS, the actual job worker) would execute the EAS projects here.

The beneficiary-committee members usually heard from the pradhan when they had been selected (Mi V102). The committee consisted of five “regulars” from village R, who are all active CPM supporters and members of the CPM gram committee. For some school-related EAS projects, political opponents who are members of the school-attendance committee were included in the beneficiary committee. Political opponents complained about the politically biased selection and deliberate exclusion of non-CPM supporters:

A gram panchayat member from the TMC was not informed about an EAS scheme in his ward. He did not know that a beneficiary committee had been formed, but on paper he was included in the beneficiary committee. He got to know about the scheme only after completion and was unable to carry out his duties as a member of the beneficiary committee. (Mi G105).

Government officers confirmed that the CPM cadres determined the selection of beneficiary committees (Mi B101, Mi B103, Mi G102). The undemocratic selection of the beneficiary committee indicates limited community participation in monitoring EAS schemes. It also reflects limited trust of the CPM leadership in the citizens, even in their own supporters.

However, there is a general trend in the Midnapore block to politically mixed committees, as the opposition has gained strength in many areas. In 1999, political opponents were represented in about 50% of the beneficiary committees (Mi B101).

At the district level, there was a general belief in the effectiveness of beneficiary committees because their members are rooted in the village and directly accountable to their fellow villagers:

The beneficiary committees work very effectively because proper execution is in the interest of the members. When a road is being laid in my village, I am the man who will be benefited. I should say whether it is being done properly. (Mi 102)

The beneficiaries should know the measurement, the quality of the works and the purchased materials, the wage rates, etc. [To give the beneficiary committee the authority] is the only way we can ensure proper implementation. (Mi 101)

The above-quoted interviewees also believed that the beneficiary committees are particularly effective in Midnapore district because of the generally high levels of consciousness, awareness and understanding among the people here (Mi 101, Mi 102). However, consciousness of, and accountability to, the community should not be assumed but be treated as an empirical question. For example, the beneficiary-committee members are selected by the CPM and not by their co-villagers. Therefore, they may not be primarily accountable to the community but rather to the party.

Indeed, some interviewees pointed to a nexus and overlapping between CPM cadres and beneficiary-committee members. The CPM is actively involved in diverting EAS money (mainly from the bigger, more material-intensive panchayat samiti projects) in collaboration with contractors and government officers (Mi B101). Because of these potential nexuses, politically mixed beneficiary committees appear to be the most effective institutions to curb corruption:

Beneficiary committees with people from the opposition are more vigorous. They are able to break the alliance between the party [CPM] and the contractors [in EAS projects implemented by the panchayat samiti]... These committees are effective in checking leakage. [I receive] the most objections and complaints are in association with projects [supervised by] such beneficiary committees. These complaints reach the BDO in form of mass petitions. (Mi B101)

However, the CPM is also interested in controlling leakage in order not to lose votes (see below). Another block level officer pointed to the disadvantage of politically heterogeneous beneficiary committees. They often disturb the smooth running of projects (Mi B103). In some cases, (false) allegations of corruption were used to get political mileage. Indeed, one of the TMC's promises to the voters is to reduce (CPM-fostered) corruption (Mi 001).

In any case, stronger political competition makes beneficiary committees – whether they are politically heterogeneous or not – more accountable to the community, or rather to the “political society”, as opposed to a single party. This is a positive development in terms of empowerment although the implementation of projects may be slowed down leading to reduced economic benefits for the poor.

Moreover, project implementation is often slowed down because of passivity of beneficiary committees rather than politically motivated tussles. For example, in the studied Midnapore gram panchayat where most beneficiary committees are politically homogeneous, about half of the committees are passive and only for “showing in the records”. Their members are often not available for signing off the work when it has been completed, and so delay the implementation of EAS projects (Mi G102). A democratic selection process of the beneficiary committee would probably reduce inertia among its members.

Effectiveness of Beneficiary Committees in Midnapore

In the studied Midnapore ward, the “regular”, CPM-picked beneficiary-committee members seemed honest and fairly proactive. For example, a member checked the supply of materials although that was not part of his duty. However, most of them were neoliterates and not capable of reading measurement sheets and muster rolls.

NS, the job worker admitted that most of the beneficiary-committee members, including the present gram panchayat member, do not understand much:

I have to teach [some of them] everything about the muster roll. [They] cannot sign without me... [However,] one or two members are usually skilled enough. (Mi V103)

A knowledgeable beneficiary-committee member and former elected ward representative who is not on very good terms with NS may have been able to effectively check the job worker in most projects. However, it is also possible that the CPM instructed these two party members to leave some amount to the party. Indeed, a political opponent, who was included in the beneficiary committee as member of the school committee, found irregularities in the muster roll in relation to a particular school-ground-clearing project in 1998. NS gave a whole extra list of people who did not work for this project. When challenged, NS pretended that he wanted to use the extra money for dressing the school ground. But this work has never been done (Questionnaire interview, Q96).

NS reported that political opponents started baseless “gossip” about irregularities. He was not disturbed by these false allegations because the opposition parties “cannot protest openly [anyway] because they are not powerful” (Mi V103). However, the changed political situation may make open criticism in the gram sansad possible.

It can be said with some degree of confidence that rampant diversion of funds from the small-scale EAS projects implemented by the gram panchayat is not possible. Compared with outside contractors, the local job worker is more accountable to the community. Indeed, villagers check the work site when projects are going on. Furthermore, the expenditure of the gram panchayat is made public in the gram sansad. All participants receive a booklet with the expenditure for each project during the past six months. The booklet provides full transparency of the executed development schemes. Social monitoring and auditing effectively limit the scope of corruption.

For the bigger EAS projects implemented by the panchayat samiti, community control is less. The role of the job worker, though officially signing off muster rolls and measurement sheet, is negligible. Furthermore, the limited competence of the beneficiary committee becomes more apparent in these schemes. Both SAEs and contractors complained about inappropriate interference of beneficiary committees:

Beneficiary-committee members lack technical knowledge and have a mentality that is not proper. Often, the beneficiary committee does not follow the project design and the technical specifications made by the government... Although the beneficiary committee should supervise projects under the advice of the SAE, they do things as per their own decision. In practice, it's too tough to implement projects through beneficiary committees. (Mi B104)

The beneficiary committee usually has eight members. Two of them understand a bit about construction works. The other six just disturb our work. They often take measurements in a way that is not in accordance with government guidelines. Therefore, there are often disputes between the beneficiary committee and the contractor. We should leave the job of measuring and checking to the SAE. The beneficiary committee has no understanding of these technical things. (Mi B105)

However, the interference of the beneficiary committee is sometimes appropriate. For example, the interviewed contractors mentioned a case in which the beneficiary committee complained to the BDO about insufficient supply of materials for a particular road project. The contractor found this an unjustified intervention because the beneficiary-committee members were neither capable of, nor responsible for, assessing the quality and quantity of supplied materials (Mi B105). This episode

reflects the aversion of the contractors (and the SAEs)⁴⁸ that ordinary citizens question their authority and limit their scope of action. Interestingly in this case was that the BDO ordered the contractor to complete the road with his own money. Obviously, the complaint by the beneficiary committee was not based on a wrong assessment whatsoever. Similarly, the SAE and contractors may also resent the beneficiary committees for disturbing of their “cosy” relationship.

Indeed, contractors admitted that the “disturbances” of the beneficiary committees reduced their “profit”:

Before the introduction of beneficiary committees, the contractors’ profit was up to 50%. Now we make 10% profit. For projects of the irrigation department where pradhans and beneficiary committees have no power to control the execution, the contractor’s profit is still 30-50%. (Mi B105)

This indicates that the beneficiary committees in the Midnapore block have been very successful in reducing leakage; i.e. from about 30-50% to 10%.⁴⁹ It appears that the stated 10% profit is not an official allowance for profit, but what the contractor expects to make on average. When schemes run badly (inclement weather, unforeseen problems, etc.) this 10% (and more) can be lost.

The beneficiary committees have often extended their official roles to checking the material supplies, and were able to weaken the nexus between contractors and SAEs. For the SAE, “the mass public control makes it too tough” (Mi B104). The BDO believed that some beneficiary committees were also able to break the alliance between the CPM and the contractors (Mi B101).

However, there are also allegations that some members of beneficiary committees are corrupt. The above-quoted SAE reported that projects sites closer to members of the beneficiary committees are favoured (Mi B104). The contractors mentioned that they are able to keep the beneficiary committees happy by “leaving a bit of laterite in front of the house of the beneficiary-committee members when a road scheme is going on” (Mi B105). These complaints represent rather small irregularities. More importantly, there are no indications that new nexuses between beneficiary committees and contractor/SAEs have emerged.

Ineffective and Corrupt Beneficiary Committees in Malda

In the Malda gram panchayat, a beneficiary committee for each ward was selected in the first gram sansad after the panchayat elections in 1998. Theoretically, the beneficiary committee is responsible for supervising all projects implemented by the gram panchayat in the ward during the tenure of the panchayat (five years). The tenure of the beneficiary-committee members can be less if there are complaints against them. Being on the beneficiary committee is an honorary post (Mi V103).

Unlike in Midnapore, beneficiary committees are selected democratically (if one can call the gram sansad, to which many have no access, a democratic institution). The

⁴⁸ “We [SAEs] have nothing to do. The SAE has to do what the beneficiary committee demands” (Mi B104).

⁴⁹ The effectiveness of beneficiary committees in reducing leakage in EAS projects implemented by the gram panchayat was more difficult to assess. The job assistant and the job worker who may have been able to give us this information denied that any EAS funds are diverted.

villagers are asked to select educated and knowledgeable persons. Furthermore, the committees are politically diverse. For example, the beneficiary committee of the studied ward had four members from each village, two CPM workers and two active INC supporters/politicians (Ma G103). The gram panchayat member from the CPM himself suggested the names of these four people in the gram sansad. However, this does not reflect political maturity but rather realpolitik, as the beneficiary-committee member and influential INC politician from village I explained to us:

I'm the most "senior" in this village and have been here the longest. I have good connections with, and control over, the villagers here [most of whom have traditionally voted for the Congress]. If I opposed a project, I would be able to stop it with the help of my local followers. Fearing this, the gram panchayat member wanted to include me in some way. (Ma V103)

Indeed, the influential INC politician could be co-opted and was further accommodated by granting the EAS pond-digging scheme mentioned earlier. In his position of the leaseholder of that pond, he was the main beneficiary. Thus, he was very interested in the technically proper execution and quick completion of that scheme. However, he was totally unconcerned about the official EAS goal to provide employment (at the minimum wage rate) to local labourers. Indeed, he encouraged the employment of cheaper outside contract labour. Furthermore, he did not take any interest in scrutinising the muster rolls. As a (middle-class) beneficiary-committee member, he did not feel accountable to the "community". The other members of the beneficiary committee were not called for the supervision of that pond-digging project. In sum, the beneficiary committee miserably failed to protect the interests of the local labourers.⁵⁰

Indeed, there was clear over-reporting of labourers in the muster rolls. It seems that the EAS pond-digging scheme was done in connection with a JRY kaccha-road-construction scheme. The labourers engaged in the road construction also did the pond digging, and collected soil for constructing the road. It seemed that the same labourers were included in both the muster rolls. Unlike the pond, the road was not completed as per records. Wastage on these schemes appeared to be massive. We estimated that corruption possibly ran up to 80% of total project costs for these labour-intensive schemes.

In the Malda gram panchayat, beneficiary committees seemed inoperative, or were made inoperative, respectively. For example, the above-quoted beneficiary-committee member did not supervise any scheme except for "his own" scheme. The panchayat did usually not call or inform him when a new scheme was executed. Furthermore, he did not even know who the other three members of the beneficiary committee were. This indicates that the committee was completely inactive as an institution. The beneficiary committee mainly exists on paper. This is mainly because the panchayat members were interested in keeping the beneficiary committee out of their business:

The gram panchayat member fears that [the four beneficiary-committee members] would protest against corruption. I [one member] would be vigilant if I was given the opportunity to supervise the projects. So, the gram panchayat member thinks it is best not to include me and the other beneficiary-committee members. (Mi V101)

⁵⁰ However, people in the gram sansad in another ward were able to make the beneficiary committee more accountable. They replaced some apathetic members of the beneficiary committee with a more vocal and active set of new members who forced the elected panchayat members to accept their beneficiary lists (Ma V002).

The vigilance of the quoted interviewee may be doubted in the case of projects where he is not the ultimate beneficiary. But the gram panchayat members probably have an interest to keep the number of people involved in monitoring schemes low as they do not want to share “profits” with too many.

For EAS projects implemented by the panchayat samiti, beneficiary committees should be formed for each project in a project-inception meeting, as in Midnapore. In this meeting, the BDO, sabhapati and respective pradhan should be present. However, this meeting is usually not held (Ma B108). If it is held, the panchayat samiti members fail to invite the BDO and other government officers (Ma B101). There is technical compliance with the rule of forming beneficiary committees, but no compliance with the spirit behind the rule that properly selected and informed beneficiary committees should be able to reduce corruption:

On paper, a beneficiary committee of course exists here too as per rules. But the beneficiary-committee formation is not done “rigidly”. If government officers were included at the meetings for informing about projects and selecting the beneficiary committee, there would be much less scope for corruption. Expenditures would be exposed. If the beneficiary committees knew what happens in their area, more complaints would probably come up. (Ma B101)

Furthermore, the improperly selected beneficiary committees follow the directions of the CPM (Ma B103), and their members may even be corrupt:

The beneficiary committee takes 5% of the “profit” from the contractor for its service of covering up corruption. I call this committee the “benefit company”. Three members of the committee “verify” the muster roll, sometimes use their own thumbs to sign for bogus beneficiaries, and turn a blind eye to irregularities. Then, the job worker, who also gets his cut, will sign and finally the SAE. (Ma B108)

Rather than checking corruption, the beneficiary committees seemed to engage actively in diverting government funds. A district-level officer who generally believed in the effectiveness of the beneficiary committees confirmed that beneficiary-committee members and executing agents can sometimes build a nexus:

In some places, [the beneficiary committees] are ineffective because they have fallen into a trap. This happens when beneficiary-committee members get in contact with unscrupulous elements, including suppliers and even government officers. If they can make a pact, there will be pilferage and the standard of the work will suffer. In these cases ... the beneficiary committee is not helpful at all. (Ma 101)

It was remarkable that we did not hear of a single case where the beneficiary committee became active and tried to curb leakage. The BDO lamented that no complaints from beneficiary committees and ordinary villagers ever reach her. A district-level officer with working experience in both Malda and Midnapore commented:

The number of complaints and the level of awareness go together. If people are not aware, the level of complaints is less. In Malda, there are generally fewer complaints. That does not mean that everything is fine and green. (Mi 101)

It is remarkable that the same institutional structure of beneficiary committees is not helpful or even counterproductive in Malda while it is effective in Midnapore. An important difference between the two places is that villagers in Malda are not informed about project estimates and expenditures in the project-inception meeting and the gram sansad. Social auditing cannot take place here as the panchayat does not keep the villagers informed. Uninformed villagers are less likely to hold the beneficiary committee accountable. If a big number of people knew about EAS

estimates and expenditure, corruption would be more difficult. Building “profitable” nexuses depends on effective exclusion of the masses from information.

Furthermore, the beneficiary-committee members do not feel accountable to their fellow villagers because of lack of social cohesion. The growing social and economic gap between the poor and the middle class in Malda has reduced moral obligation of beneficiary-committee members, who come from the middle class, to their poor co-villagers. Too often, accountability of “locals” to the “community” is presumed. With growing class (and caste) disparities, such a spatial concept has become inappropriate.

Moreover, there is little political will in the Malda block to make the beneficiary committees effective in controlling leakage (see below).

Panchayats and CPM in Midnapore: Controlling Corruption

The role of the CPM in regard to corruption was ambiguous. Clearly, the party was involved in corruption through a nexus with the contractors/suppliers in the case of EAS projects implemented by the panchayat samiti.

Most contractors are “loyal” [attached] to the CPM. The party asks them to give a part of the tender for party donation. In turn, the party covers up malpractice of the contractor. This can be done only if the CPM is in control of the beneficiary committee. Then, there is no objection from the beneficiary committee. If, on the contrary, the contractor did not give donations, he would not be able to do any work. The CPM-appointed beneficiary committee would harass him and accuse him of malpractice. (Mi B101)

The quoted interviewee believes that most of the diverted money goes to the CPM, although he thinks that the SAEs may also be involved. However, the CPM lost ground:

Because the party is not all-powerful anymore and not always capable of covering up the contractors because of non-CPM beneficiary committees, some contractors are moving away from CPM and have started to nurture good relations with opposition parties. The contractors try to make both the ruling and opposition parties happy. But this is not always possible. Therefore, the number of complaints from beneficiary committees has increased. (Mi B101)

It seems that increased political competition and the rise of the opposition has now started to disturb the “settled” system of corruption through the nexus between the CPM and contractors.

However, it would be totally wrong to describe the CPM as predatory. Rather, the party played a crucial role of “controlling” corruption – both in the sense of managing it and checking it. The party cannot afford too much leakage to happen. This would hamper their political success in a region where people are concerned with developmental success. In the Midnapore block, the CPM control over corruption meant the following:

Here, diverted money does only go to the party coffers. The CPM fills its coffers with development money. But any additional leakage would affect the quality of the development works. This would lead to complaints and have negative consequence for the party. The CPM depends on having a clean image and on ensuring development. If an office-bearer diverts development money for himself/herself, the CPM takes immediate action against him/her. (Mi B101)

The CPM does not tolerate individual corruption of its members. For example, the zonal committee ditched the Sabhapati elected in 1993 in mid-term because he was found filling his own pockets diverting money from development schemes. This person lost his position in the party completely. “He was not seen anywhere near here

after that” (Mi B101). Generally, organisational strength, which in many respects may confine empowerment, enables the CPM to effectively control their panchayat members. Party discipline helps the committed state and district leadership to keep corruption within limits. However, it would be too simplistic to describe the relation between the party and its elected panchayat members as a one-way control. Panchayat members may also make sure that the CPM does not divert too much money from projects running in their constituency (see below).

The CPM describes their institutionalised form of corruption as “party donations”. If they admitted the illegal diversion of government funds, party leaders probably would justify it with the important functions the CPM (as opposed to the bourgeois central state) plays for pro-poor development. It is obvious that money is needed to run the strong party organisation. Also, the CPM pradhans, whose official compensation for an immense workload is very little, are financially supported from party funds [check].

Furthermore, diverted government money is also used to nurture vote banks in ways that would be impossible under centrally sponsored schemes, even if these were implemented in a nepotistic manner. For example, CPM leaders ask the contractors in the Midnapore block to donate about Rs. 5,000 for events such as the Hul festival (tribal festival in May). We were able to attend that event in 1999. The cultural programme was spiced with political propaganda. CPM leaders had their speeches, made themselves very “visible” and appeared “important” for the big gathered crowd. One could argue that the CPM successfully redirected central funds earmarked for “development” and used them in locally adapted, entertaining ways to strengthen their political basis.

In the Midnapore gram panchayat, the honest and sincere pradhan from the CPM seemed to play an important role in curbing leakage. Apart from his official function to countersign muster rolls and measurement sheets, he also seemed to back the job assistant even when this was against the will of the CPM local committee. At least, verbal reference to the pradhan allowed the job assistance to carry out his duties:

The job assistant thinks that some party leaders do not want his help because they try to hide something... There are problems when the beneficiary committee is fully dominated by [CPM] party leaders. They sometimes try to obstruct his work. They would question why he has come to the spot. But he gets the backing of the Pradhan. He is able to silence the party leaders saying that the Pradhan has sent him. (Mi G102)

The job assistant hinted that the pradhan would not allow him to divert any money from development schemes. Although party control over corruption seemed crucial in Midnapore, the sincerity of local panchayat pradhans and their members should not be undervalued.

Malda: Predatory Panchayat and Parties

Block officers with some integrity primarily blamed the panchayat office-bearers and political parties for the high level of corruption in the Malda block (Ma B101, Ma B103).⁵¹ One officer pointed out that only the projects implemented without the interference of the panchayat samiti or any political party were successful.

⁵¹ Other block officers generally denied that any (substantial) leakage takes place (Ma B102, B104).

Furthermore, the panchayat samiti, that is in practice DC (see box 4), appointed the SAE to the various projects. According to rules, this should be done by the BDO but the panchayat samiti was able to press things through. The panchayat samiti always picks the same one or two SAEs for EAS projects, which are fairly big and material intensive and therefore potentially “remunerative”:

[These one or two SAEs] are handpicked people who the members of the party can trust to ensure that no corruption is detected. The panchayat samiti chooses me [another SAE] only for relief work, which has hardly any scope for corruption, because they know that I would not co-operate in corrupt practices. (Ma B103)

Despite the leading role of office-bearers and politicians, the main cuts from EAS projects implemented by the panchayat samiti seem to end up in the block office. According to a contractor, only 5% of the “profit”, which is between 20 and 60% of the total project costs, went to the party office, i.e. the secretary of CPM local committee; 5 % went to the beneficiary committee and 40% went to the SAE. This left 50% to the contractor (Ma B108). As in Midnapore, EAS money went into the party fund. However, it seems very likely that key persons in the panchayat samiti and the party, were able to extract some extra money for individual purposes too. DC, for example, seemed to play an active role in appointing the SAE, in selecting the contractor behind the scene and in organising contract labour on the spot. He was therefore in a position to directly skim off money.

Indeed, DC enjoyed a bad reputation even among contractors. While “honest” contractors would divert 20-60% and make sure that structures will hold, DC and his fellow contractors skim off 75%. For example, a road “built” under EAS and “repaired” several times in the recent past was in a dismal condition, full of potholes and could hardly be used (Ma B109).

At the gram-panchayat level, diverted EAS money seemed to end up in the personal pockets of the officer-bearers rather than the party coffers. In another block of Malda district, a GP member told the BDO:

Sir, now I must make money from these projects to pay for my election expenditures of Rs. 50,000-60,000. Later, I'll see that I can make some profit too. (Ma B101)

When speaking to us, most villagers accused the gram panchayat office-bearers of corruption. They resented that the pradhan and the local ward representative showed off their new wealth in form of a motorcycle and a lavish house extension, respectively. A conscious Santal villager believed that it is possible that gram panchayat members are not checked by the sabhapati and the party:

[Small] schemes are done by the gram panchayat alone, and all responsibility lies with the gram panchayat member of the area. The gram panchayat member can do anything under these schemes that is for his/her own benefit. Sometimes, contractors are involved with whom profits are shared. (Ma V108)

As the beneficiary-committee members, gram panchayat office-bearers felt not accountable to the people of their locality. They usually do not seek re-election. It appeared that the real motive for holding office was to make personal financial gain. Indeed, with growing wealth, they are able to separate themselves more and more from their poor co-villagers. Furthermore, the political parties in the Malda block do not have the organisational capacity and the political will to curb corruption by their gram panchayat members. Compared with Midnapore, there is no strong political imperative for the political parties to check their panchayat office-bearers and to ensure satisfactory execution of development schemes. Here, votes are not primarily

won by providing development but rather with short-term strategies of distributing chickens and liquor (and, possibly, vote rigging). Yet, development funds were used to *demolish* vote banks rather than to nurture them (see box 10).

Box 10: Case of criminal conduct connected with EAS

The person who gave us this first-hand account lowered his voice when he started to tell the story. His wife tried to stop him from telling it. But after we have assured them several times that no names or anything will leak out, he continued.

In the severe floods of 1998, the dam of a canal was in a bad condition. The BDO decided to allot Rs. 40,000 for repair work. This contract went to our informant. He started the work and wanted to do the job properly so that the dam and the people can be protected from the floods. However, CPM leaders, particularly the secretary of the local committee, forced him to breaking the dam as opposed to repairing it. The objective behind this was to harm the nearby village, which is a INC stronghold. In this way, the CPM leaders hoped to create dissatisfaction among the villagers with their party.

The CPM leaders told the contractor to bring in only one lorry of cement (as opposed two lorries as prescribed in the estimate and contract). “You can do with the rest whatever you want. We don’t care.” But the party leaders did care that the cement should be used in a way that it is washed out immediately. The labourers were asked to break the dam in some places. Although the contractor was an enthusiastic CPM supporter, he carried out these instructions only reluctantly. He finally did it, and became angry. He eventually ceased to be an active party worker.

The contractor seized the repair work, but of course not the intentional damaging, on video. He wanted to have proof that material was used in the repair work in case there would be an investigation from the block and district administration.

The canal embankment repeatedly broke at that place. There have been no steps by the panchayat samiti to build a permanent structure although this would be technically feasible.

Another interviewee confirmed that politicians and contractors co-operate in the destruction of dams. The contractors would only care about getting contracts and making money. The politicians hope that the villagers affected by a broken dam become angry about the own party and shift alliances.

Counterbalancing Role of the Bureaucracy in Midnapore

The job assistant and the SAE play a direct role in monitoring the suppliers and the actual executing agents. Without their consent, substantial misappropriation of funds is impossible. Particularly for checking the quality and quantity of supplied materials, their position is crucial, as these measurements have to be countersigned only by an elected panchayat member. In the Midnapore gram panchayat, however, the job assistant tried to avoid possible complaints by asking the job worker to be present when supplies are delivered (Mi V103). The material component is significantly bigger for EAS projects implemented by the panchayat samiti. However, it seems that some beneficiary committees started checking on the SAE and making complaints if the supply was found deficient (Mi B105). Generally, there were more complaints of wrong measurements against SAEs than job assistants.

Government officers were not as forthcoming to talk about the involvement of their colleagues in corrupt activities as they were in the case of political parties:

The BDO gets complaints. But it is very difficult to prove whether the SAE accepted any payment for a wrong certification, etc. because those who were making the payments are also not interested to come out with the truth. [I don’t think that] officers get a good gratification, [maybe] just some

small amount in cash or kind, just normal ... speed money, you can say... This side [the part that SAEs play in EAS] is probably okay. (Mi B101)

This reaction is not surprising because the “profit” of the SAE is usually distributed among various block officers. While government officers did not hold back to talk about corruption by political parties, they were therefore more restrained when it came to their colleagues.

Politicians were more willing to accuse government officers of being involved in the diversion of money from EAS projects implemented by the panchayat samiti. The local MLA pointed out that SAEs receive a percentage from contractors for turning a blind eye when they use inferior material or cut short the time for executing a project. Furthermore, he criticised the administrative monitoring and auditing system and implied that the various government officers who are part of this chain take their cut:

The official procedure of audits, etc. is very long and has scope for leakage. Nothing can be done without the BDO, SDO, etc. The party wants to cut this official procedure and the resulting leakage by giving more power to the panchayats. (Mi B107)

This would imply that the fewer government officers were involved in the supervision of project, the less money would be diverted. That the administrative monitoring system is counterproductive is certainly an interesting proposition but must be understood in relation with the CPM’s own role in controlling corruption. The party probably resents that the bureaucracy also wants to take their piece of the cake, and that the party has to co-operate with them in order to get their own piece. Thus, the above-quoted comment may not primarily reflect an unequivocal belief in the effectiveness of panchayat and community control. It seems that the party and the bureaucracy, while both are involved in diverting EAS funds, also check on each other.

Indeed, the block administration played an active role in checking corruption. However, it pursued informal methods more often than legal proceedings. For example, the BDO acted various times on complaints from the community:

When the BDO gets a complaint about the execution of a project, he/she asks one of the SAEs who was not involved in that work to make inquiry about the quality of the works. Sometimes, the BDO or Joint-BDO will also visit the spot. Because the group of contractors “work” at the block office in search of new contracts, they get to know about complaints and planned inquiries. The contractor gets scared and tries everything to complete the job. When the SAE comes to the spot, the contractor has usually finished to do the job right. In this way, the complaints are very effective... [Thus, legal action] is hardly ever necessary. (Mi B101)

In two more serious cases, the block took action against notorious contractors and excluded them from future tenders (Mi B101). Administrative action seems to be targeted to contractors rather than to SAEs. SAEs seem not so much under pressure of the BDO and higher authorities:

There is only little pressure from above. The SAE has to report to the BDO who, as a general bureaucrat, does not understand the technical issues. (Mi B104)

Nevertheless, the administration in the Midnapore block formed an important, neutral institution people, particularly political opponents, could turn to in case of suspected malpractice by contractors/suppliers. People from other blocks even turned directly to the district administration for complaints regarding EAS (Mi 101). This is partly a reflection of the high level of awareness here but also shows distrust in the block administration elsewhere. Indeed, various interviewees explained the political violence in adjacent blocks with the political bias of the block administration and

police. In the studied Midnapore block, by contrast, the neutral block administration contributed significantly to peace.

For EAS projects implemented by the gram panchayat, the Job Assistant admitted that he cannot be 100% sure that there is no leakage because he is not able to supervise all the schemes, particularly when three or four schemes run simultaneously. However, he believed that the scope for corruption is minimal as he takes the measurements and makes the payments himself (while the SAE sometimes leaves these jobs to the contractor in EAS projects implemented by the panchayat samiti).

The CPM local committee did not find it necessary to check the job assistant directly (Mi G106). The pradhan and the job worker seemed to effectively check the activities of the Job Assistant. Obviously, there was no (strong) nexus between the Job Assistant and the job workers as there was between SAEs and contractors.

It was generally believed that the job worker, as a community member, needs less supervision than the contractor, who is primarily a businessman. Party leaders had full faith in “their” job workers:

Here, all job workers are good and think about village development. The villagers keep also an eye on the executing agency. Because the EAS works are so small, there is not much scope for corruption anyway. The fact that labourers provide voluntary labour here is a strong indication, if not proof, that the development work is done well and properly here. (Mi G106)

Another indication of very low levels of corruption in regard to EAS projects implemented by the gram panchayat is that “left-over” money from medium-sized EAS projects is usually invested quickly in tiny projects (repair works, etc.). Also, unlike EAS projects implemented by the panchayat samiti, EAS projects of the gram panchayats have not been the object of complaints about corruption in the studied Midnapore block.

The block-level Extension Officer Panchayats (EOP) is responsible for auditing the gram panchayats, each of which manages about Rs. 10-20 lakh per year. The EOP in the Midnapore block did only paper audits but no field verifications. He found irregularities in 10-15% of the cases, mainly in regard to muster rolls.

It is almost impossible for the gram panchayat staff to pay the wages on a daily basis. When they are doing the weekly payment (it is compulsory to do it at least once a week), not all workers may show up on the particular day of payment. Therefore, a representative gives his/her thumb impression for a group of people. (Mi B103)

The EOP asked the gram panchayat staff to get individual thumbprints and signatures. He also informed the respective pradhan about these incidences (Mi B103). However, he believes that the monitoring system that involves many actors at the ground level (beneficiary committee, gram panchayat member, job worker) has been more effective than his paper audits for preventing leakage:

The muster roll has to be filled in and payments have to be made in presence of the beneficiary committee. The gram panchayat secretary and job assistant are effectively checked in this way. In general, the more people are involved in the execution and monitoring of schemes, the less likely it is to divert money. Otherwise, everyone would have to be involved. Also, the party [CPM] looks after the execution of schemes. Now, even a “social audit” has been introduced; that is, the gram panchayat has to disclose the accounts in front of the gram sabha. (Mi B103)

Section 5.7 will elaborate on the effectiveness of involving more or fewer people in the execution and monitoring of EAS.

Corrupt Bureaucracy and a Few Honest but Powerless Individual Officers in Malda

In Malda, the account of corruption in the bureaucracy is richer because a few interviewees were more straightforward than their counterparts in Midnapore. A contractor explained to us how the bidding system for (supply) tenders works:

Officially, there must be a public tender notice hung up at the notice boards of the block office, zilla parishad office and the office of the DM. It is the duty of the head clerk to hang up this notice. The head clerk at the block office (who is referred to as “boro babu”) has to send two copies each to the head clerks at the DM and zilla parishad offices. However, contractors with good relations to the block-level head clerk can convince the head clerk not to display the notice in block office and not to send it to the head clerks of the zilla parishad and DM office. Besides good relations, it is necessary to bribe the block-level head clerk. The “price” is fixed at 1% of the total estimated costs of the project [or supplies]. The contractor himself goes to the zilla parishad and DM head clerks where he gets the notice countersigned for the block office records. This costs another Rs. 100-200 or so. The contractor asks the head clerks to display the notice only on the last day of the tender.

[Another system is that] just before closing the tender, the head clerk informs the contractor with whom he has good relations about the lowest bid so far. The letters of other applicants are opened illegally. So, the favoured contractor can make a slightly lower bid. The commission for this service is also at 1% of the total estimated costs of the project [or supplies]. (Ma B108)

A district-level officer confirmed the involvement of government officers in diverting EAS money in both material-intensive and labour-intensive works. However, we were not able to find out how that money is distributed from the SAE to the other block staff and higher level officers. There might be well-established, block-specific distribution keys. The district-level officer pointed out that corruption mainly takes place when “outsiders” (contractors, middlemen) are involved besides officials. However, the payment system enforced by the BDO influences the scope of contractor involvement and thus leakage:

In the “advance system”, the BDO gives an advance for a particular EAS project to one of the block-level government officers (e.g., Gram Sebok, Anchal Development Officer). These officers become paymasters. They have to pay the beneficiaries directly on the spot, and must account for every rupee of the advance payment. Misappropriation of funds is little because the officer lives in fear of the BDO controlling the accounts.⁵² It's very risky to divert money as the officer must sign the documents himself/herself and cannot blame a middleman (contractor, etc.) if malpractice is discovered. As there are only small amounts advanced each time, this mode of payment involves much work for the BDO. Cheques have to be cashed almost daily at the State Bank of India, and administering all the small payments takes much time.

If the “bundle system” is applied, payment from the block office is done in bulk about two months after various projects have been completed. Often, the work is done before the rainy season between February and May, and the payment is made during the rainy season when it is difficult to check whether the (kaccha) work has been done properly. Even when there is no official contractor, workers are actually paid earlier through middlemen, who of course get their cut.

For pucca work, the supplier/contractor asks the SAE, Asst. Engineer or Executive Engineer for successive advances in order to be solvent. Although there is a rule that suppliers should be paid only on delivery, the government engineer happily agrees to give advances.⁵³ During the execution of a project, this is repeated many times. One can call this the “running bill system”. The more advances are given, the more cuts are feasible for the officers, whose bargaining position increases as more work (adjustments and calculations) need to be done. There are usually no real checks during execution of the works. The contractors usually spend the money for personal consumption. (Ma 102)

⁵² Of course, this fear is only real if the BDO is not involved in corruption.

⁵³ This system is also applied for bigger EAS projects in the Midnapore block (Mi B105).

The BDO in the Malda block tried hard to enforce that extension officers, the gram seboks, make the labour payments. However, the BDO felt resistance from the panchayat samiti (Ma B101). Previously, payments were made to the block cashier, who forwarded the money to the contractor. The cashier usually took 0.5% of the advanced money for himself (Ma B105).

In Malda, where floods unfailingly recur every year toward the end of the rainy season, there are also seasonal aspects of corruption, as one district officer explained:

The monthly expenditures are a good indicator for corruption.⁵⁴ If not much money is spent in February to May, and much money is spent in July, etc., then the “bundle system” is employed and funds are probably diverted to a very significant amount. If the BDO does not do any works in the dry and lean season, he/she has no chance to come up to 60-80% expenditure of the allotment. In the rainy season, only about 10% can be spent, for example, for afforestation. If things are done properly, at least 70% are spent in the dry season.

If work is done in the rainy season, [only] about 40% of the expenditure are actually used for the purpose. In the winter season, leakage tends to be much lower, maybe around 5-10%. Out of the 60% diverted in the rainy season, 30% may go to the labourers. For example, on a rainy day no work can be done but the beneficiaries are still paid. This is no problem as the money still reaches the needy. But another 30% reach officers and the contractor. 10-15% goes to the SAE who has to distribute widely among his colleagues (BDO, etc.). About 15-20% goes to the contractor. (Ma 102)

Some gram panchayats “save” EAS money until the floods start. For the schemes executed just before the floods, there is no accountability as it is easy to claim that everything has been washed away. To some extent, however, it is understandable that the gram panchayats and panchayat samities hold back money for flood-related emergency expenditures (e.g., hiring of boats). Gram panchayats and panchayat samities that overspent in the big flood of 1998 are now being audited and some have been asked to recoup the funds (Ma 102).

The BDO explained how much easier it would be to become part of the practised corruption system rather than resist it, not to speak of fighting it:

For a BDO, it is difficult to remain honest and not be part of the practised system of corruption. Both office-bearers and officers resent this as it disturbs the system. Office-bearers [including DC] organised a mob that broke the windows of the BDO’s office. This was to put pressure on her. There have been similar cases involving two BDOs in [other blocks of Malda district] being physically assaulted. Both are fresh from training. They wanted to keep out of the system of corruption there.

Upper levels of the bureaucracy, including the Executive Engineers, are often not very keen in honest block-level officers as these are their source of “additional income”. For example, Athena did not get much support from the district officers of the department of sanitation when she investigated in a case in which the panchayat samiti has obviously diverted money from the installation of tube wells. The panchayat samiti tried to make her sign on a copy stating that 31 tube wells have been installed (before her tenure) while the original showed the installation of only 21 tube wells. Higher levels were not interesting in recouping the difference. (Ma B101, transcribed from memory).

Unlike in Midnapore, the bureaucracy in Malda did not seem to receive many complaints from ordinary villagers about corruption in relation with government schemes. This made it very difficult for government officers to fight rampant corruption, even if they are willing to do so (Ma B101, see section 5.3 on contractor involvement). For honest officers, not able to fight corruption on their own, the job can become quite depressing. A visibly frustrated block level officer concluded: “I don’t [can’t] do anything for the poor here” (Ma B101).

⁵⁴ Unfortunately, we did not have access to the monthly reports of EAS expenditure.

However, poor villagers found it difficult to make complaints to the bureaucracy for good reasons (and not just because of general unawareness, illiteracy, etc.). We asked a villager who was well aware of the corrupt practices of the pradhan and the gram panchayat member why he did not turn to the Job Assistant and to the engineers at the block office to seek justice. His answer was quite revealing:

How can they protect us! They themselves are involved. All [officers and office-bearers] from the lower levels work together. And at higher levels, we can't turn to anyone because these [officers] do not exactly know what is going on. (Ma V108)

The formal procedures of the district administration to get “exact knowledge” tend to be slow (see box 11), and without exact knowledge the district administration is not able to take action. The strategy of the district administration generally seemed reactive rather than proactive. It seemed that spot checks were rare. Rather, the administration waited for complaints from the grassroots. And these had to be made formally:

There may be thousands of verbal complaints reaching me, but allegations of corruption have to be communicated to me in writing. Then one can start the inquiry and, if the government servant is found guilty, [one can start] the legal proceedings. But when I say, “Give me a written and signed complaint”, then nobody comes forward. (Ma 101)

Government officers may find it difficult, time-consuming and ineffective to take action against leakage using the formal monitoring system. It seemed that informal, “innovative” methods to curb corruption were rarely used here. This was despite the appreciation of the district administration that is difficult for villagers to come forward and make complaints openly. A district officer acknowledged that “in rural areas, the complainant would be threatened the following day by the person(s) responsible for leakage” (Ma 101). Furthermore, collective action was undermined by deliberate political interference (Ma B103). Although there were cases where politicians mobilised their supporters to agitate against corrupt practices, they were for individual reasons rather than for curbing leakage in general (see box 11).

Box 11: Large-scale diversion in a BMS road scheme and attempted cover-up by SAE

The panchayat samiti undertook a 10-lakh road scheme under BMS from M to N although according to the block plan this money should have been spent on a road scheme in B. This shift was probably not due to political favouritism as both areas have gram panchayat members from both CPM and INC. Rather, according to the INC pradhan, the panchayat samiti assumed that the people in M and N would be less aware and less likely to protest against corruption (Ma G102).

Indeed, the SAE allegedly spent only two lakh on this scheme. The laterite-brick layer was too thin and the road was not built the full length. Villagers protested and complained to the pradhan, who took them to the BDO and the sabhapati. The pradhan wrote registered letters to the Sub-Divisional Officer, the District Planning Officer and the District Magistrate. The pradhan claimed that the DM did not take immediate action. By contrast, the DM said that he immediately ordered the Executive Engineer to start an investigation that, however, came a bit too late.

This was because the concerned SAE, who ironically was appointed by the BDO for this scheme because the other SAE who usually is in charge of works under BMS had a reputation of being even more corrupt, got cold feet and immediately organised a group of labourers with the help of the involved contractor. They fixed the road during the night, but were met by villagers who, led by two INC politicians, tried to obstruct the works. According to a member of the panchayat samiti from the CPM, the actual reason for the conflict was not the bad quality of the work and attempted corruption by the SAE. Rather, one of the local INC leaders was angry because the contractor refused to give him a cut.

When the engineers checked the road the following day, things were more or less in order, except for the construction of a small side dam. The SAE was bold enough to accuse the district authorities of harassing them by launching an investigation and making frivolous *male fide* complaints. Despite the completion of the roadwork, the SAE was not off the hook. The district administration launched a departmental inquiry and a defalcation case against the SAE. He was charge-sheeted and eventually suspended.

The INC politicians who organised the protesters were angry about the SAE's cover-up. The following day, he assaulted the SAE and two of his colleagues in the block office. This led to protests by the block staff. Eventually, the SAE made an FIR against the attackers. The local MLA, from Congress, started to pull his strings in the district administration and courts to get his party colleagues out.

At the gram panchayat level, block officers, except for the Extension Officer Panchayats, are usually not actively involved in monitoring EAS schemes. The BDO has no direct role in checking EAS projects implemented by the gram panchayat. She would only react to complaints. However, only very few complaints reach the BDO (Ma B101). There are probably time and capacity constraints to follow more proactive strategies. The SAEs admitted that they have hardly any time to do spot check for gram panchayat projects, although theoretically they should check at least 20% of these projects. They also react only to complaints coming from villagers, and assume that everything is alright when no such complaints reach them. Often, they are not even informed when gram-panchayat projects start (Ma B104).

Therefore, the Job Assistant has the main responsibility of monitoring EAS schemes implemented by the gram panchayat. However, the Job Assistant in the Malda gram panchayat was forced to help elected members diverting EAS funds:

The pradhan and the gram panchayat members are corrupt. They sometimes pressurise me to make false records about the completion of the work. I have been asked several times to show inflated measurements. In this way, the office-bearers can over-report the labour days in the muster roll, and divert some money into their own pockets. (Ma G101)

The Job Assistant felt very uneasy about this:

If the superior officer reveals that I have done wrong measurements, I am held accountable for it and not the office-bearers. In one or two cases, I was able to avoid being pushed by the panchayat members. I sought the assistance of the BDO, who threatened the gram panchayat member with stopping that scheme altogether. (Ma G101)

However, there seems to be little control from the superior officer, the Extension Officer Panchayats, who is responsible for the audit of the gram panchayats, including paper checks of muster rolls, measurement sheets and estimates. The EOP does not do any surprise spot-checks. Although we detected gross irregularities in muster rolls (whole pages included identical thumbprints behind different people's names), the EOP claimed that he found only a very few "technical" mistakes in the muster rolls. He defended himself:

We are not experts [of checking thumb impressions]. If anything is unclear, I just put a question mark next to the thumbprint. (Ma B102)

During his one-year tenure in the studied block, the EOP had not taken action against anyone based on irregularities in muster rolls. If irregularities were detected, the formal procedure would be to write a note in the audit report going to the SDO and DPRDO. However, from the EOP's desk not even a single warning went to any of the pradhans. He passed the responsibility to the elected office-bearers:

The thumbprint impression has only to be identified by the gram panchayat member. If the gram panchayat member has identified the thumbprint [by signing off the muster roll], then there is no need for a query or for taking action. (Ma B102)

This indicates that the gram panchayat audit, as practised in the Malda block, is highly ineffective to expose corruption. One may also be reminded of the remark of the MLA in Midnapore that the long chain of administrative checks would increase corruption rather than reduce it.

5.6 Outcomes

The number and the spread of EAS projects in Midnapore and Malda have been discussed in detail in section 3. Generally, spending levels were similar in the two districts. In Midnapore, a higher number of small, labour-intensive projects have been taken up that allowed for a better spread. Spending was relatively slow in both districts because of the discussed delays in technical sanction. Once the money was sanctioned, however, projects were completed quickly. In Midnapore, bigger (road) projects are broken down in smaller projects and executed in successive years. Project completion is therefore slow.

To the layperson, the quality of created infrastructure seemed far better in Midnapore than in Malda. Pictures of EAS road- and school-building projects of both districts were taken. Semi-pucca roads in Midnapore used much more laterite. In Malda, many built EAS roads are in a terrible state. In some places, people walk and drive on the nearby field rather than on the road filled of potholes. The quality of school buildings was more difficult for us to assess properly.

Based on secondary data, as there is no in-depth study, a state-level officer concluded:

In the terms of performance, if performance is measured by the amount of money spent and by the quality of the work, Midnapore is ... in the top five [districts of West Bengal], but definitely not the best... Midnapore is one of the better performing districts, whereas Malda is not so. Malda is not the worst performer. The quality of implementation is better in Midnapore, leakage and wastage are also fewer in Midnapore. (WB 101)

In regard to the main objective of EAS, the creation of employment, Midnapore did far better than Malda. Employment created and levels of satisfaction among EAS beneficiaries are discussed in detail in section 5.4. Generally, EAS has been more important for the poor in Midnapore than in Malda where people rely more heavily on non-local, private employment (e.g., employment in near town, seasonal migration).

Apart from economic benefits, the empowering role of EAS for the poor is equally important. It has already been discussed that EAS did not contribute to social and political empowerment in Malda. Indeed, the poor were excluded from information and active participation in scheme selection, execution and monitoring. In Midnapore, EAS may have contributed to social and political empowerment to some degree. However, participation was controlled. For example, no sense of right to demand work under EAS developed. Participation in scheme selection, execution and monitoring is controlled to a certain degree. However, the panchayats ensured a high level of transparency. This is also reflected in people's own perceptions of their involvement in EAS (see table 32).

Table 32: Poor villagers perception of own involvement in EAS

	Midnapore Ward	Malda Ward
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Sufficient	21 (26%)	10 (13%)
Not Enough	33 (41%)	41 (51%)
No Opinion	26 (33%)	29 (36%)
Total	80 (100%)	80 (100%)

The levels of satisfaction were clearly higher in Midnapore than in Malda. However, even in Midnapore, more people feel that they should be more involved in decision-making regarding EAS. Table 33 gives further details about the areas where people's involvement has been satisfactory, on the one hand, and reasons for dissatisfaction or people's expectations for more involvement, respectively, on the other hand.

Table 33: Reasons for (dis-)satisfaction regarding degree of involvement in EAS (poor hh)

		Midnapore Ward	Malda Ward
Sufficient Involvement	Proposal materialise in projects	8	4
	Included in project supervision	10	--
	Receive work on request	1	6
	Don't know	2	--
Not Enough Involvement	No meetings, not informed	--	11
	No say in scheme selection	2	14
	No say in execution	10	2
	Work refused	--	9
	All decided by others (unspecified)	12	3
	Other	1	1
	Don't know exactly	3	1
No Opinion		26	29
Total		80	80

Table 33 shows that the poor in Midnapore have higher expectations than their counterparts in Malda where the poor are excluded from very basic forms of "participation", such as project information and access to work. Interesting is the high value attributed to participation in the execution and supervision of EAS projects in Midnapore. By contrast, limited participation in scheme selection seemed not to worrisome to villagers, as many of their proposed projects are eventually taken up.

In the broader context of West Bengal, the involvement of people and the transparency in decision making is said to be highest in Midnapore district:

Midnapore, at least insofar as people's awareness, their involvement in the decision making process, transparency, etc. [is concerned], would possibly rank as the number one district in the state... Burdwan is one district that has come very close to Midnapore. I think other districts do not fall into that category. (WB 101)

According to this state-level officer, Malda would be among the worst according to the criteria of people's participation and transparency. His complete district ranking (barring Puruliya and Darjeeling) is as follows:

1st: Midnapore, Burdwan

2nd: Birbhum, Murshidabad, Hugli

3rd: Howrah, North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas, Nadia, Bankura, Coochbehar

4th: Malda, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri

5.7 Possible Interpretations

Predatory State in Malda versus Developmental State in Midnapore

The pronounced differences in the execution of EAS in Malda and in Midnapore in spite of the same guidelines points to the limited autonomy of the state. Although the bureaucracy officially plays the primary role in executing EAS (as opposed to selecting schemes, for example), political parties, the panchayats, village communities and individuals (within and without the bureaucracy) were able to influence, if not disturb, this process.

In Malda, the execution of EAS appears to be organised for maximum siphoning off of government funds. Ordinary villagers are kept unaware of project estimates, expenditures and guidelines, such as the ban on contractor involvement. In this way, grassroots pressure is effectively avoided. Local job workers, who may be accountable to the community, are not employed but appear only on paper. The use of professional builders behind the scene, on the other hand, makes possible huge profits as the contractors have no self-interest in good-quality infrastructure and employ cheaper contract labour. Furthermore, the beneficiary committees, if formed at all, are usually not informed about schemes. Only one or two beneficiary-committee members are usually “invited” to sign off muster rolls, etc. In sum, community participation in executing and monitoring EAS that could possibly reduce leakage has been effectively excluded.

In Midnapore, government rules regarding execution of EAS are also violated. But the motives for doing so are more mixed. Individual profit motives cannot be ruled out. However, the pursuit of political dominance is a more significant determinant of the organisation of EAS execution and monitoring. Political imperatives in Midnapore dictate that schemes have to be implemented efficiently and relatively corruption-free. At the same time, the CPM needs “revenue” to run its powerful party organisation. In order to achieve these multiple goals, gram-panchayat and panchayat-samiti EAS projects are executed differently. For the smaller gram-panchayat projects, local job workers, who are directly accountable to their community, are employed. This facilitates both efficient and corruption-free project implementation. For the bigger panchayat-samiti projects, professional builders are involved behind the scene. Their involvement makes possible the efficient execution of technically demanding projects. They are restricted from employing cheap contract labour, as this would disturb vote banks. Furthermore, the party-controlled appointments of beneficiary-committee members enable the CPM to skim off EAS funds, mainly from projects implemented by the panchayat samiti and with the involvement of contractors. However, leakage is kept within limits that the created infrastructure can satisfy the voters. Particularly, individual benefits of party leaders and panchayat members are not tolerated.

Reasons why Midnapore has developed into a developmental state and Malda into a predatory state are related to social cohesion and trust within the community and between community and elected representatives; political will and capacity of

political parties, mainly the CPM; and a certain path dependence of local bureaucracies (see below).

Mechanics of Corruption

The structure of the monitoring system involves many actors directly involved in checking muster rolls, measurement sheets, etc. These direct monitors are supposed to have different interests and to be accountable to different institutions with different norms and objectives. For example, the monitoring structure of EAS in West Bengal involves beneficiary committees with accountability to the community, panchayat members with accountability to the citizens and political parties and government officers with accountability to higher administrative authorities. The community is likely to have primary interest in good-quality village infrastructure and/or additional local employment opportunities. The political parties may want to use development funds to nurture their vote banks. The administration is concerned with project implementation according to the set government rules. One can assume that the more direct monitors are involved, the lower the possibility for leakage in development schemes is. This would even be true if an institution behind the direct monitors, or individuals in those institutions, had an interest in diverting development funds because the direct monitors would check on each other.

However, the accountabilities of the monitors to the institutions in the background may be weaker than their common interest in diverting government funds. In such circumstances, the direct monitors are inclined to building nexuses rather than checking on each other. In Malda, for example, the accountability to the community and to citizens was particularly weak (for reasons therefore, see below). If capable beneficiary-committee members were effectively included in the monitoring at all, they tended to build nexuses with panchayat members, government officers and professional builders.

If the level of direct monitors is ineffective, the inclusion of more actors of the same institutions (e.g., the administration) tends to be counterproductive. The more officials are involved in inspecting and auditing (and covering up), the more the “profit” needs to be distributed, and the more stress is on diverting development funds. However, strong, capable and honest individuals in commanding positions in the bureaucracy or in an influential political party may be able to break this vicious chain.

Possible Reasons for Differences in Levels of Corruption

The integrity of individuals (government officers, panchayat members, political leaders, contractors, job workers) certainly influences the level of corruption. However, the huge differences between Midnapore and Malda cannot be explained with individual attributes of the actors involved in the execution of EAS. For example, the honest BDO in Malda is not capable of doing away with the well-entrenched system of corruption there.

Many interviewees referred to be different levels of awareness of the people in Midnapore and Malda. No doubt, levels of literacy, etc. are significantly lower in Malda than in Midnapore. But again, this attribute of individuals fails short in providing a satisfactory explanation. Rather, political leaders and panchayat members

in Malda try to keep information from ordinary villagers. The few honest government officers lack the capacity to fill in this gap. The poor are not informed about the role of job workers, beneficiary committees, project guidelines, expenditures, etc. People who get to know about guidelines and their violation tend to accept being paid off. For example, the gram panchayat was able to pay off a youngster who knew that the employment of contract labour was illegal by giving him two days of work as a project supervisor. Villagers generally know that corruption in some form takes place and involves their elected representatives. However, they do not know to whom to turn to, as their leaders are involved in this system. Also, many seem to have accepted corruption. For example, a group of villagers praised a former ward representative who took half of the beneficiary loan for himself but was able to arrange them a few loans. In this situation, political leaders find it easy to subdue grassroots pressure. In Midnapore, by contrast, political leaders pass on more information to ordinary villagers. People would not be apathetic and fatalistic but rather outraged if their leaders were involved in corrupt practices. They would be able to use various channels to the party and the bureaucracy for bringing corrupt practices to light. The life of a dishonest gram panchayat member would be made difficult.

Furthermore, the local people who carry out particular functions in Malda (panchayat members, beneficiary-committee members, job workers) seem not morally obliged and accountable to their co-villagers. They usually belong to the middle class, or aspire to become middle class. In a way, the growing economic and social disparities in this area relatively near the town have reduced accountability to co-villagers. The middle class disengages itself from the poor (or exploits them economically). Relations of trust and reciprocity, in so far as they ever existed, seem to be eroded. Social cohesion is further hampered by different waves of in-migration and related caste and community boundaries that are pronounced. In Midnapore, social cohesion across class and caste is much stronger. The last wave of in-migration of tribal groups goes back 40 to 50 years. The middle class and the (politically powerful) working class seem dependent on each other in this rural-agricultural economy. Panchayat members, beneficiary-committee members and job workers feel very much part of the village community, and are therefore less likely to cheat their co-villagers.

The political parties in Midnapore and Malda also function quite differently. In Midnapore, the CPM (and probably opposition parties alike) keep a close eye on their panchayat members. Corrupt office-bearers would almost certainly result in electoral defeat or at least loss of votes. In Malda, the CPM and the INC lack probably not only the capacity of, but also the interest in, checking on the local office-bearers. The political imperative for controlling corruption is less because of the lack of developmental politics (see previous sections). Because everybody seems to be corrupt, it also does not make any difference whether to vote for one or the other party. The CPM leadership at the state level is concerned about the practices of the CPM leadership in Malda district, but seems to find it difficult to intervene successfully.

Finally, the failure of honest WBCS officers in Malda to curb corruption in the block office points to path dependence. Unlike IAS and WBCS officers, the lower bureaucracy, including SAEs, extension officers and clerks, stay in their positions at the same place for a long time, and are therefore able to build up systems of corruption that are difficult to break. In Malda, furthermore, the political parties and panchayats seemed to encourage, rather than check, corruption by officers.