



Decentralization and the Politics of Water Management in Rural West Bengal

by

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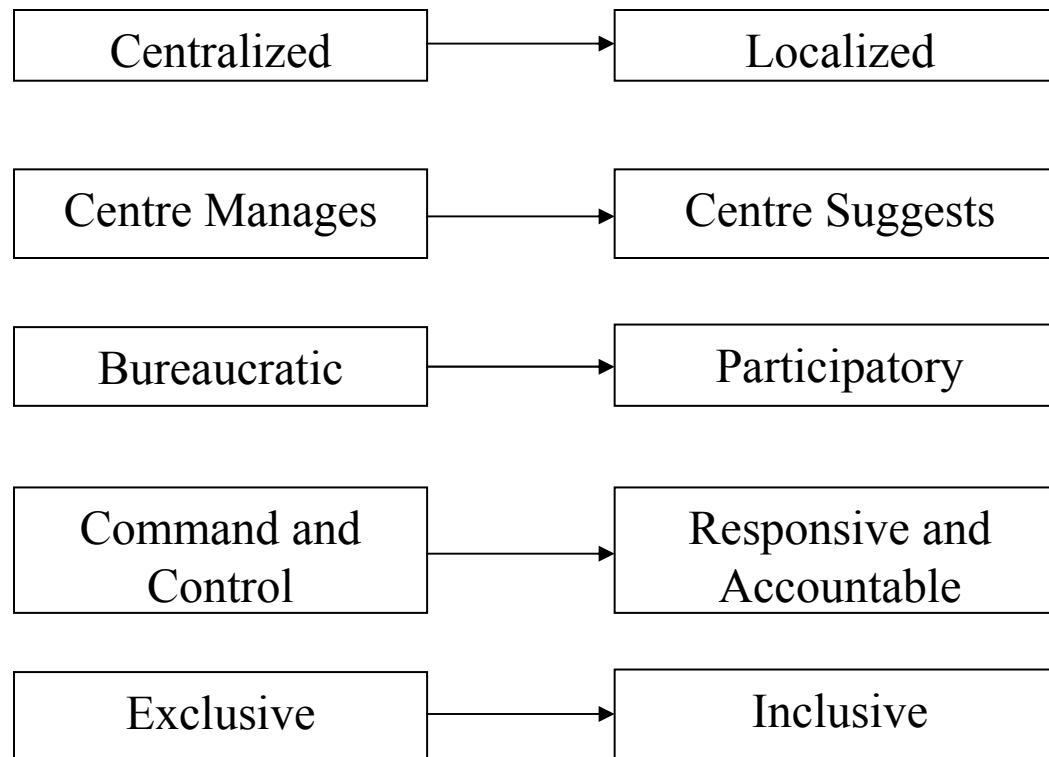
India Habitat Centre, 16 March 2005

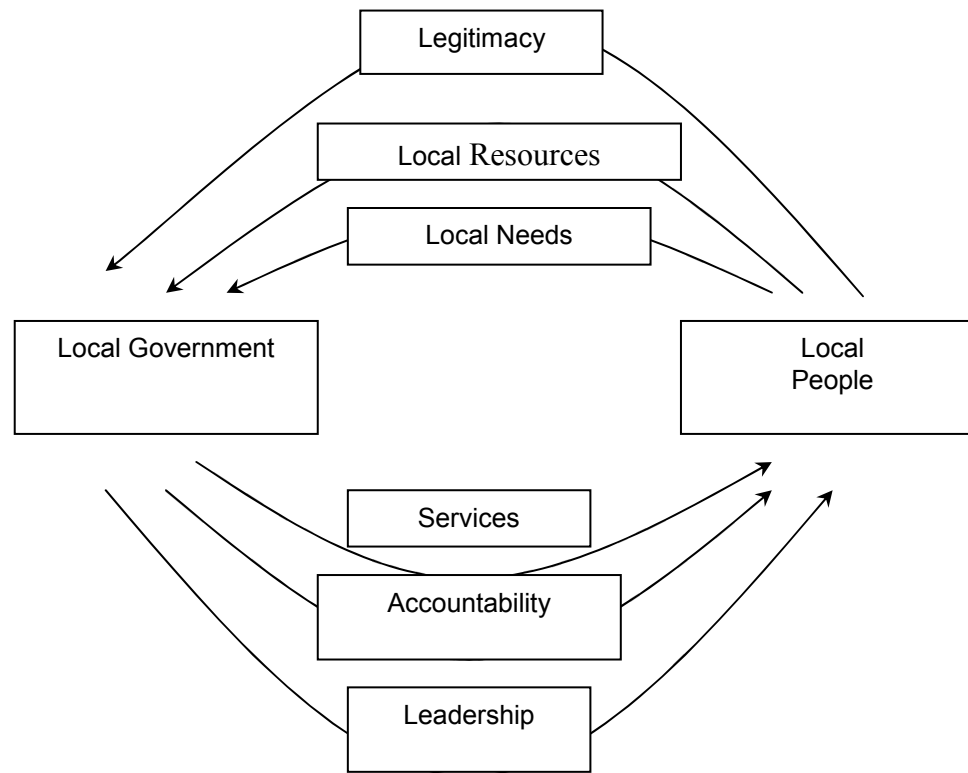
Decentralization

centrally initiated efforts to move authority and responsibility for significant government activity downward to local statutory government units, along with accountability of those units to the local people through democratic elections

Harry Blair (1996)

How does Decentralization help in resource allocation?





The Ideal Situation: Towards a Good Governance for Natural Resource Management

My research addresses the issue of decentralization and the politics of allocation of a scarce resource, water, in 3 villages of West Bengal

Decade following the first generation of Panchayats in West Bengal

the Congress Party losing the elections of 1967

a coalition of the leftist parties ruling that lasted only for nine months

President's Rule for one year

the comeback of the left parties in 1969, but again for one year only

Yet another President's Rule

comeback of the Congress in 1971

Huge Victory of the Left Front in 1977

Table: Decrease in involvement in the agricultural sector

Percentage of agricultural workers (cultivators + agricultural labourers) to total workers in rural West Bengal and rural Birbhum						
	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001
West Bengal	69.16	71.65	78.06	74.11	70.67	58.40
Birbhum	80.52	78.74	83.54	81.85	77.20	64.53

Table: Significant decrease of cultivators in the last decade

Percentage of Cultivators to total workers in rural West Bengal and rural Birbhum						
	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001
West Bengal	35.62	51.41	43.07	39.62	38.40	25.36
Birbhum	37.22	46.43	39.35	38.35	36.47	24.85

Table: Increase in involvement in the non-agricultural sector

Percentage of non-agricultural workers (household industry + others) to total workers in rural West Bengal and rural Birbhum						
	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001
West Bengal	30.84	28.35	21.94	25.89	29.33	41.60
Birbhum	19.48	21.26	16.46	18.15	22.80	35.47



Research Question

Why is there not representative participation of the local people, especially small farmers and agricultural labourers, in the process of decision-making regarding water management in West Bengal?

Working Hypothesis

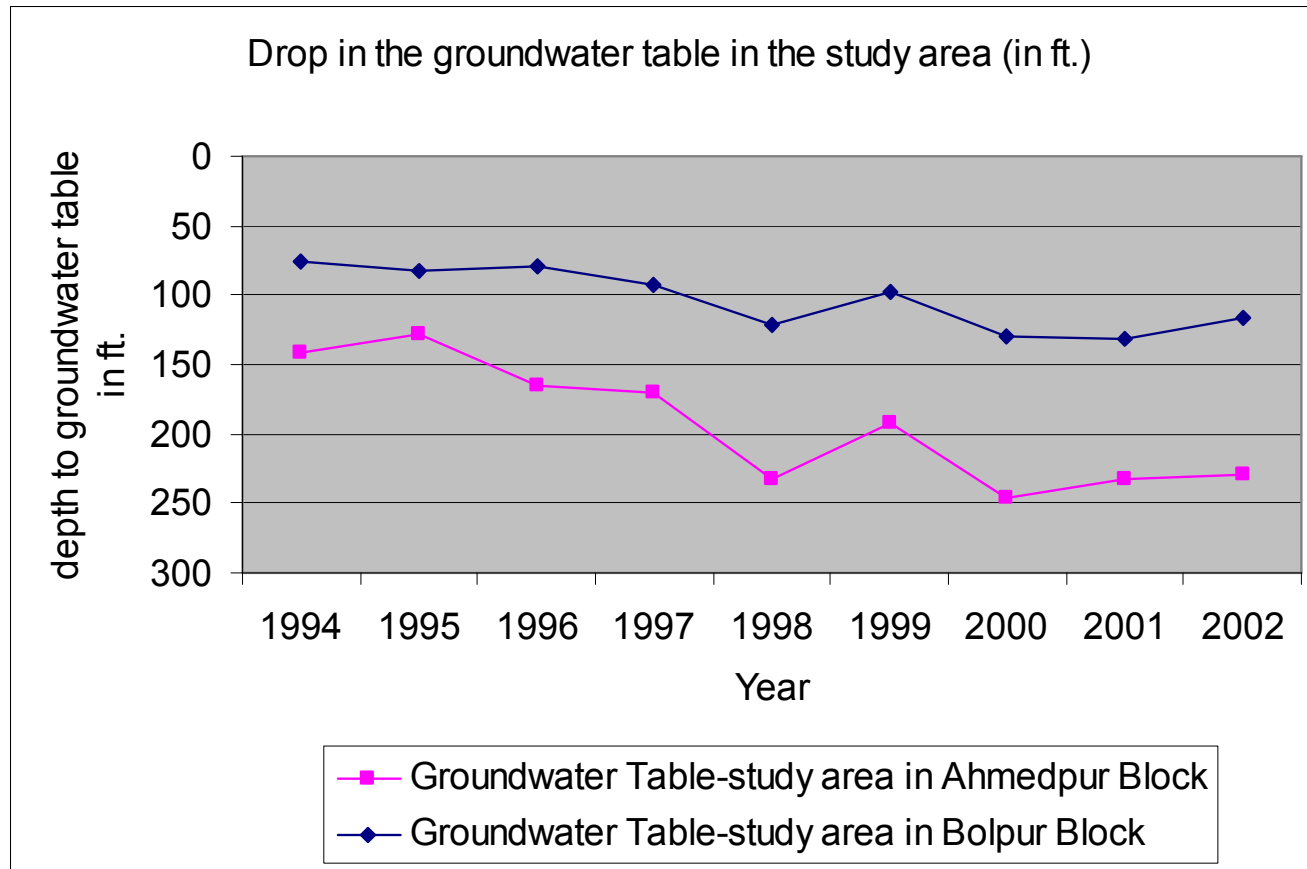
political interference at various levels in a nested hierarchy of decentralization of authority results in problems in local participation and decision-making that lead to a highly skewed distribution of water

Criteria for choosing the villages

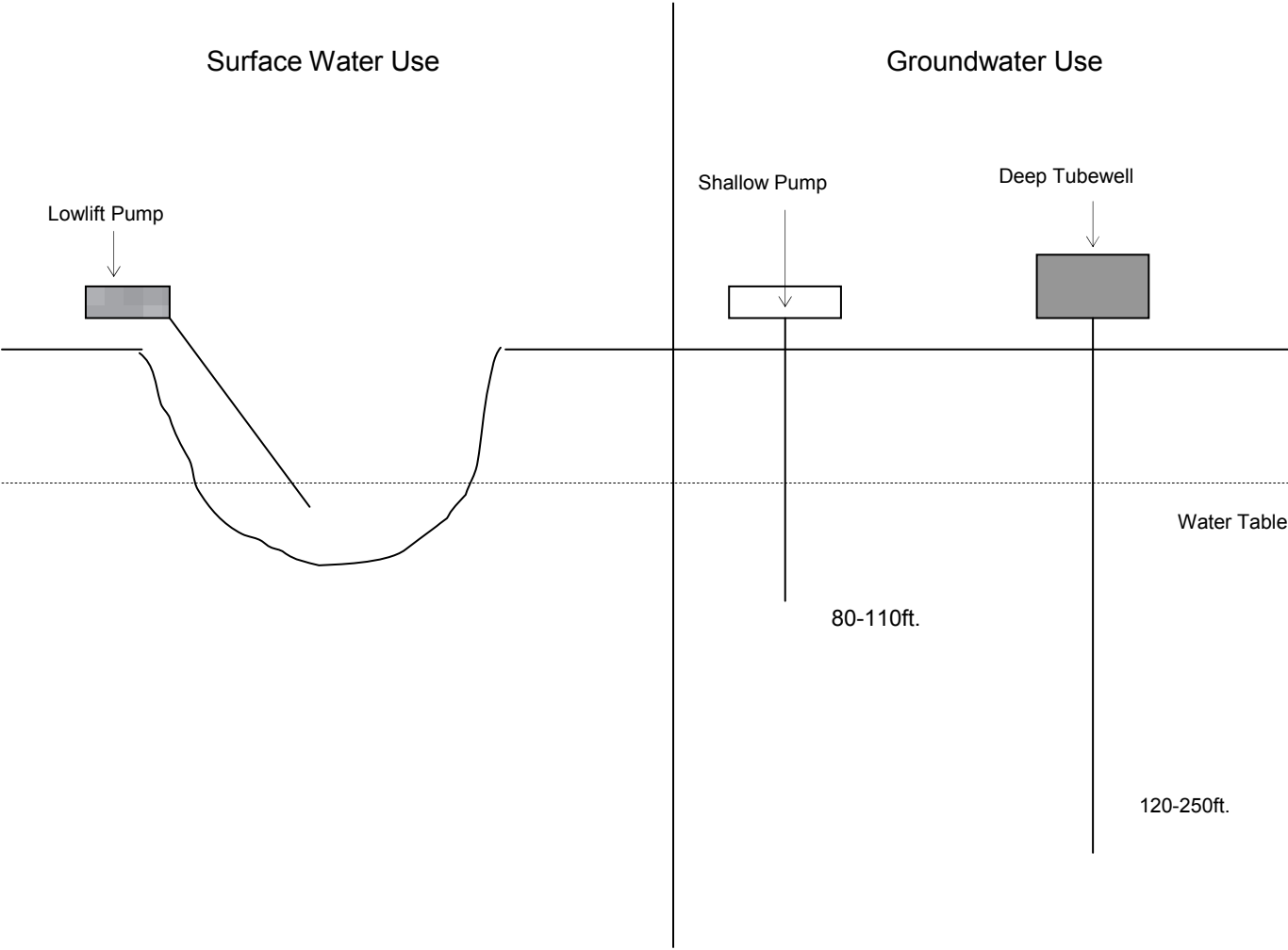


- All had acute water scarcity
- Close to each other, and had Panchayat members from different political parties (helped me to study variations)
- two belonged to the same Panchayat (helped to study the effects of the same administrative and political power at the top in affecting water management in different villages)

Drop in groundwater table in the study area



Shallow pumps replaced by deep tubewells



A deep tube well placed in a small hut



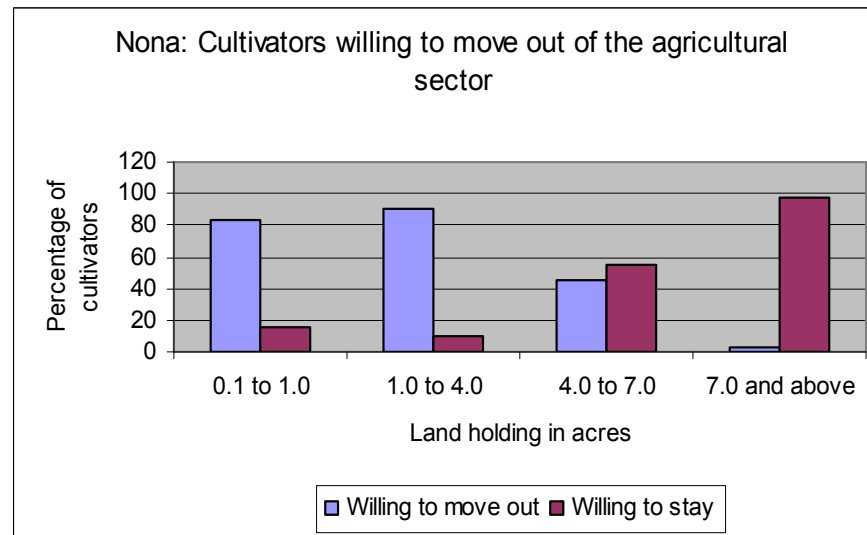
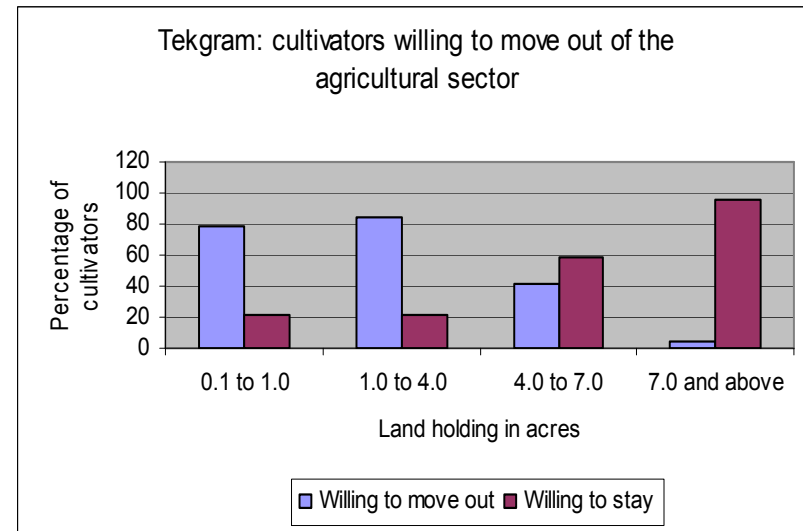
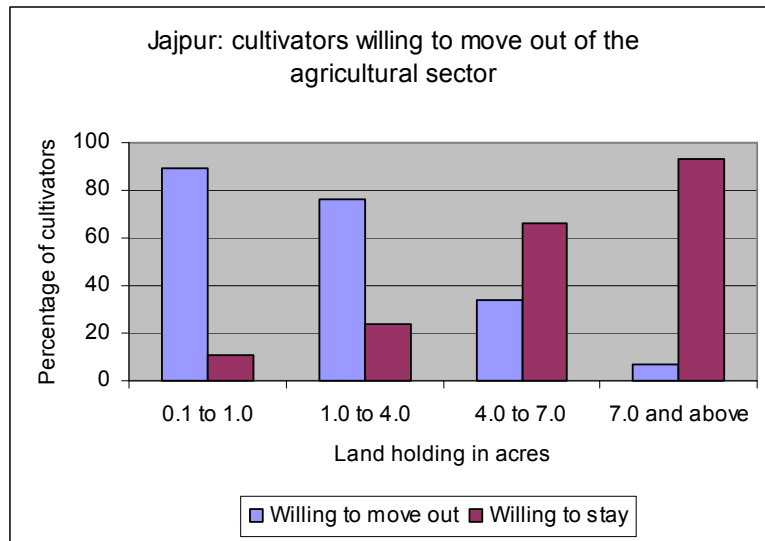
Irrigation done by gravitation



Land lying fallow in village Nona
because of water scarcity



small farmers willing to move out of the agricultural sector



Attendance of villagers in the meetings of the *gram sabha* (November 2002)

Jajpur: 10%

Tekgram: 11%

Nona: 11%.

Main players in the game of water allocation

- small farmers
- big farmers
- agricultural labourers
- local elites
- politicians
- panchayat officials
- government officials

Main Findings

Capture of water projects by local elites

Problems of representation from disadvantaged groups in the Panchayat and lack of their training

Lack of transparency in the work of the *gram sabha* about cost of water projects/ water service delivery options

Political capture of *Krishak Sabha* (Peasant Society), and hence problem in raising voice in water allocation

Main Findings

Lack of financial self-sufficiency about water projects

Lack of political watchfulness by other parties as a form of 'check' on decisions regarding water management

Political interference from up in the hierarchy about water projects

Factions within a political party that affects water allocation

Lack of co-ordination between government offices dealing with water

Working hypothesis that political interference leads to skewed distribution of water largely true

The main factors involved:

lack of financial self-sufficiency of the Panchayats,
leading to dependence on the party elites

party competition leads to contradictions in
power-sharing

Panchayat institution weakened by diminishing
participation, especially by the weaker section

lack of co-ordination among the government offices
dealing with water allocation

Decentralization – not an end, but a process

The question lies in the way it is implemented.