

ABSTRACT

This thesis describes and analyses the development of irrigation in West Bengal between 1977 and 1996. The thesis is based on data from secondary sources, and primary data collected over one agricultural year (1995-1996) in Bankura district.

From Independence through the 1980s, the record of agricultural production in the state was one of stagnation. Scholarly studies identified the underdevelopment of irrigation as the key constraint on the growth of agricultural production. It was argued that institutional obstacles and low levels of public investment in rural infrastructure resulted in long-term stagnation in the development of irrigation, and that, taken together, they were major obstacles to the mobilisation of investment and cooperative action for the development and management of irrigation.

Two important institutional changes - the implementation of rudimentary land reform and the reorganisation of institutions of local government - took place in rural West Bengal in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In the 1980s, agriculture in West Bengal emerged from a long period of stagnation and grew at a rate that was the highest among the seventeen most populous States of India.

The thesis examines the following three issues:

- It analyses the pattern of growth of irrigation from different sources in West Bengal between 1977 and 1996.
- On the basis of primary data, it describes and analyses the factors that contributed to the growth of irrigation during the reference period.
- It describes and analyses the irrigation institutions that emerged in the reference period.

The thesis identifies the following important features of expansion of irrigation in West Bengal over the reference period:

- The total area irrigated by tubewells grew rapidly.
- After decades of stagnation, the area irrigated by tanks increased in the 1980s.
- There was substantial expansion of irrigation from public sources in underdeveloped areas.

- There was a substantial decline in inter-district disparities in the development of irrigation.
- Important institutions, including water markets, cooperatives and beneficiary committees, emerged in the study villages to facilitate the expansion and development of irrigation. Particularly noteworthy were the interventions by the panchayat, in the development and management of irrigation.

In West Bengal, an agrarian economy that was noted for major structural impediments to private investment, *public* action also created appropriate conditions for the mobilisation of *private* investment in irrigation. The evidence presented in this thesis lends support to the argument that in the 1980s and early 1990s, agriculture in West Bengal emerged from a prolonged "agrarian impasse" as a result of public policy – particularly in the spheres of land reform, local government and electrification – that helped release the productive potential of the rural economy.

