

CHAPTER 8

Human Security





Human Security

Human security is a broader concept than that of human development. If human development is defined as a process of widening the range of people's choices, human security means that people can exercise these choices safely and freely, and with some confidence that today's opportunities will not be totally lost tomorrow. Effectively, this requires safeguarding the vital core of all human lives from critical pervasive threats, in a way that is consistent with long-term human fulfilment. This is also different from notions of national security (especially in the military sense) since the focus is on individual lives, while recognising the role played by social arrangements and processes. Also, here the concern is with the "downside risks" of human lives, and preventing or mitigating their effects, rather than with the more positive expansion of freedom.

Human security requires safeguarding the vital core of human lives from critical and pervasive threats.

Many forces can erode or provide threats to human security, including economic, food, health, environment, personal, community and political forces. Several of these aspects are considered in other chapters. Here some features such as personal and community security are considered, in terms of the level of crime and violence, as well as the extent of protection against impact of natural disasters and against economic volatility. ■

Personal security: violence and crime

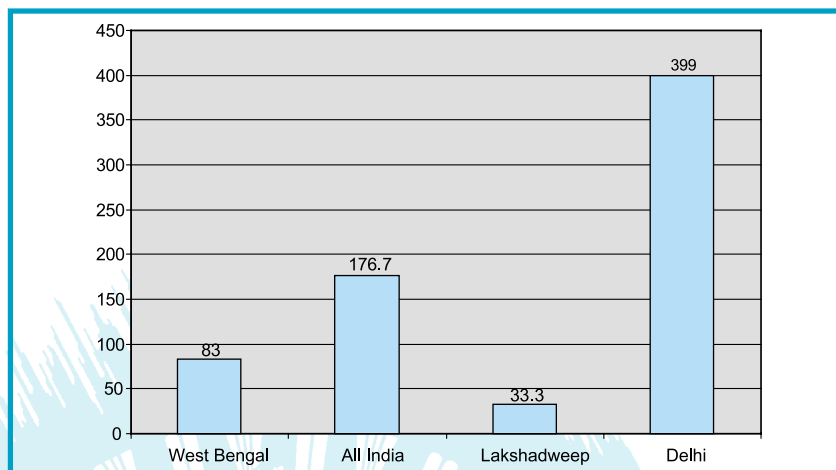
The crime situation in West Bengal has always been better in comparison to most other states in India, and it also seems to have been improving over time. Figure 8.1 indicates the relative position of West Bengal in 2000. Not only was the rate of cognisable crime (relative to population) in West Bengal less than half the national average, it was almost one-fourth of the crime rate in the worst region, Delhi, and not very much higher than the best performing region, Lakshadweep. In terms of rank, West Bengal had the fourth lowest crime rate among all 32 of the states and Union territories in the country. Furthermore, the number of cognisable crimes in West Bengal actually decreased over the period 1997-2001, which is in marked contrast to most of the major states. Further, in terms of "violent crimes" (Murder, Attempt to Commit Murder, Culpable Homicide, Rape, Kidnapping and Abduction, Dacoity, Robbery, Arson, Riots and Dowry Deaths), West Bengal seems to be one of the safest places in India, with third rank. The rate of violent crimes in West Bengal was 13.4 per lakh population in 2000, compared to the national average of 23.8 and the rate of 48.7 in the worst state, Rajasthan.



Table 8.1 Crime rate in West Bengal compared to the rest of India in 2000

Crime rate is defined as the ratio of cognisable crimes under the Indian Penal Code per lakh of total population

Source: *Crime in India, 2000*



West Bengal is generally a more secure place for women than many other parts of the country.

Among the metropolitan cities, Kolkata is among the safest, just after Chennai. Among all major cities in India, Kolkata contributed only 3.4 per cent of total crimes under IPC in 2000, which is well below its share of population of these cities. In terms of recorded crimes against women, West Bengal had a crime rate of 7.1 compared to the national average of 14.1 in 2000 and 22.3 in the worst performing state, Madhya Pradesh. The crime rate against women in Kolkata was 4.3 in 2000, compared to 17 for the 23 major cities of India. Apart from the aggregate statistics, there is no question that among metros Kolkata is generally perceived to be safer for women in public places, and that in general in the state women are not under constant threat of violence or with a strong sense of physical insecurity. In this respect West Bengal is certainly a more secure place for women than many other parts of the country. However, domestic violence (“cruelty by husband and relatives”) was the most significant form of violence against women in West Bengal, and this is widely known to be under-reported across India. In general information on the actual extent of domestic violence is difficult to obtain, and there is the possibility of violence against women in less public spaces, which does not get recorded.

It is also worth noting that the conviction rate (percentage of cases that resulted in conviction to the number of cases in which trials were completed, during a year) of IPC crimes during 2000 in West Bengal was only 22.6 per cent, which was among the lowest in India. The All-India average ‘conviction rate’ during 2000 was 41.8 per cent. In particular, the conviction rates for kidnapping/abduction of women and sexual harassment were considerably lower in West Bengal compared to the national averages.

West Bengal was the first state to institute a Human Rights Commission of its own, which suggests that there has been some



concern at the state government level to ensure that in addition to crime control and prevention, the violation of human rights should be monitored and controlled. Government records indicate that the threat to personal security from the state is minimal in West Bengal. On the basis of police strength (civil and armed), the rate of complaints against per 100 policemen was 0.1 in West Bengal in 2000, which was lower than the national average of 5.3 and also significantly lower than most other states. According to the West Bengal Human Rights Commission, the annual average number of custodial deaths in the state in the period 1997-98 to 1999-2000 was 66, with around two-thirds occurring in jail custody and one-third in police custody.

The state also has a very good record on security for people of different communities and Scheduled Caste groups.

One area in which the state performs very well is with respect to violence against Scheduled Castes and Tribes. The emphasis on these groups in the land reforms and in the subsequent programmes for social and economic advancement of the weaker sections in general, has found some resonance in the much lower incidence of crimes against these groups, and the generally greater sense of security among such people. The national violent crime rate against SCs/STs in 2000 was 2.5 per lakh of total population in 1999 and 2000. However, West Bengal, which accounts for around 12 per cent of the Scheduled Caste population in the country, did not have any reported crime against this group for several years up to 2000. Similarly, there were no reported crimes at all against Scheduled Tribes in West Bengal during 2000. In this respect, West Bengal seems to be among the safest places in India. This is a major achievement given the previous high levels of violence recorded in the state especially in the 1970s.

In terms of community security defined by religion, the state also has a good record. This is especially significant given the early history of the state, the violent effects of the partition of the state in the early 20th century, the post-Independence partition riots, as well as the fact that the leadership of many of the important community-based organisations such as the Hindu Mahasabha originated in Bengal. During the past two decades, and especially since 1990, the West Bengal government has effectively safeguarded the minority communities of the state, even in the times of country-wide communal tension (for example, after the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992 and the post-Godhra incident riots in Gujarat in 2002). In this respect, there is no doubt that social conditions in West Bengal remained almost entirely unaffected, at times when states like Gujarat and Maharashtra were in the grip of major communal tension and violence. Because of this greater prevailing security as well as the effects of local participation in government through the panchayats and their activities, the communalisation



Some parts of the state are especially prone to floods and cyclones.



of public and social life is much less developed in West Bengal than in many other regions of the country. In recent times, this almost complete avoidance in West Bengal, of what has become a major “downside risk” of human security in some otherwise developed and economically advanced states, must be seen as a major achievement.■

Protection against the effects of natural disasters

West Bengal is prone to various kinds of natural disasters. The most significant of these has been floods, which have been the major cause of agony due to natural disaster. In addition, cyclones have also wreaked substantial damage periodically. In the 1980s and early 1990s, it was estimated that more than 45 per cent of the villages in the state were susceptible to floods, and more than 40 per cent of the land area of the state has been identified as flood-prone.¹ However, there was less incidence of flooding subsequently, with the major exception of the devastating flood of September 2000 in the state. This turned out to be both more widespread and damaging in terms of life and property than previous floods. In addition, there have been other natural calamities, such as drought and earthquakes.²

Natural disasters have a number of adverse effects on human security. The most obvious immediate negative effect relates to destruction of life and property. There are also implications for livelihood and employment of people in the affected areas, and for the immediate viability of cultivation and other economic activities in the affected areas. Further, floods and cyclones in particular give rise to major health hazards, with the threat of epidemic disease resulting from such calamities being ever-present. It is worth noting, however, that none of the calamities mentioned above resulted in famines or epidemics. Following the severe flood of 2000, some water-borne diseases did emerge and spread, but this did not assume epidemic proportions. Thus, natural calamities have been managed such as to ensure that epidemic situations did not develop, even though the extent of other damage has occasionally been severe.

Prevention, where possible, and control are obviously even more crucial than the management of natural disasters. In order to reduce the problem of flooding, the construction of embankments is an important task, and the state government has allocated substantial funds for such construction, to be locally managed by panchayats. Most of the new construction is planned for the sub-Himalayan region, which has tended to be worst affected in recent times,

¹ Sengupta (2003), quoting Planning Commission, Government of India, Tenth Five-Year Plan.

² Guha Roy and Kasturi Sen (2001).

followed by the improvement and strengthening of existing embankments along the Gangetic plain. Some construction is also planned for the tidal basin area.

Drought management is an important issue for the western districts.

West Bengal lies along the Bay of Bengal which is exposed to cyclone-related hazards. About 5 to 6 cyclones form in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea every year, of which the majority are in the Bay of Bengal. Among all natural calamities, the devastation caused by cyclones tends to be the most sudden and severe; however, the effects can be mitigated by timely and precise weather forecasts. In recent years, improved forecasting, better disaster preparedness in highly exposed regions and more systematic response by local authorities have tended to reduce the human and animal deaths caused by cyclones, even if they have not managed to reduce the damage to property and real assets. However, there is still scope for much improvement in this matter.

The western districts of the state, especially Birbhum, Bankura and Purulia, are drought-prone and tend to receive inadequate rainfall. Drought management requires a combination of sustained and improved water harvesting techniques which reduce dependence upon any one rainy season, and much improved transport and communications links between the drought-affected areas and the rest of the state and neighbouring regions, such that greater supply of food and other commodities is provided during and just after the drought. There are currently various experiments under way designed to improve water management in the drought-prone districts (such as the water harvesting project in Purulia), although these are still in the nature of micro-initiatives rather than more widely based and systematic state government strategies. The improvement of transport links is critical in this regard. In this context it should be noted that although in September 2003 all the blocks of Purulia, seven blocks of Bankura and four blocks of Medinipur were declared drought-hit, this did not substantially affect local food availability or food prices because of measures to ensure increased supply into these areas.■

Social security

As in most other parts of India, social security schemes are relatively underdeveloped in West Bengal. It has already been noted that employment patterns have entailed a shift towards more casual and less protected work at the margin, and there is very little in the form of unemployment benefit. However, there are some social security services organised by the state government that cater to some beneficiaries. These include pensions for disability, widowhood or old age, which are currently being provided to more



than 52,000 beneficiaries at the rate of Rs. 500 per month. There are also several publicly run homes and hostels to cater to the needs of women rescued from trafficking or victims of violence as well as working women's hostels. An office has been set up for a Commissioner to monitor the rights and conditions of person with disability. In general, such schemes and programmes remain small relative to the requirement in society.

