

Social Protection: Enduring Legacy of Jyoti Basu

I first met Jyoti Basu in the mid-seventies, before he became Chief Minister of West Bengal, to discuss my plans for the integrated development of the Sunderbans, with support from the



International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and for increasing wheat production in West Bengal during the *boro* season. What impressed me most in his approach was his advice that the people of Sunderbans should be fully involved both in the development of the plan and in its implementation. No wonder on becoming the Chief Minister, he gave the highest priority to land reform and Panchayat Raj system of grassroot governance leading to the achievement of Gram Swaraj, a goal which was also very dear to

Mahatma Gandhi. The involvement of ordinary people in the governance system is one of his lasting contributions.

During the last 40 years, I have found his guidance in integrating scientific excellence with social relevance invaluable. Jyoti Basu identified that the pathway to poverty eradication is asset building, since the poor are poor because they have no assets like land, livestock or a skilled non-farm job. He addressed the fundamental issue of asset creation through land reform. Even now, his basic approach to poverty eradication through asset reform and community development is the most meaningful pathway to ensuring adequate social protection. India's future has to be built on the foundation of social protection of the economically and socially handicapped sections of the population. This is Jyoti Basu's enduring legacy.

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