I wish to thank IDRC for awarding me a Doctoral Research Award in the November 2004 competition. Attached is a report of my research activities during the six months long field-research trip to India between March and August 2005.

1. I undertook field research primarily in West Bengal, one of the two cases of my study, but also managed to finish the last bit of research in my other case, Kerala. I was based at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences (CSSS), Kolkata, where I obtained affiliation as a Research Affiliate. Dr. Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya of the Centre acted as my local supervisor and helped enormously by providing crucial contacts. During my previous visit to India (for research on the Kerala case), I had obtained affiliation at the Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum, Kerala where Dr. K.N. Harilal provided me with local guidance. During my field research in West Bengal and Kerala, the institutional affiliation provided me with key contacts, access to networks of social scientists and development practitioners, access to a wealth of development literature in the libraries, access to computer and Internet facilities, and opportunities for consultation with faculty at both institutions. The faculty were generous with their time and I benefited tremendously from the opportunity to bounce my ideas off them. It would have been impossible to accomplish what I did in six months without the institutional base provided by these institutions.

2. My data collection proceeded in two stages. The first stage comprised of collecting relevant material from three sources. First, I examined previously published scholarly work in social sciences in English and in the regional language, available in local libraries. The second source included annual reports, national sample surveys, and statistical reports produced by central and state government agencies. I also collected governmental documents including ministerial reports, spending levels and budgets, minutes from policy meetings, memos, briefing papers, political party positions and resolutions (published and unpublished) as well as newspapers and other periodicals published in English, Malayalam and Bangla.
This involved making countless trips to various libraries, administrative offices of government ministries, political party headquarters, and wading through endless mounds of papers. The third source was semi-structured interviews with ‘experts,’ people chosen for their knowledge of the field or for their involvement in the political and policy-making processes in the state and/or at the federal level. These individuals included academics, political leaders, development practitioners, local government personnel, civil servants, and community and NGO leaders and activists. I approached about 40 individuals with varying areas of expertise for interviews, of which I was able to interview a total of 29. In general, establishing contact and getting an appointment was easier than I thought, except for the politicians. I used a semi-structured format with a list of prepared questions for these interviewees, but varied my questions slightly depending on the expertise of particular interviewees. I recorded these interviewees with a recording device and also took hand-written notes. These interviews lasted somewhere between 45 to 90 minutes. Some interviewees also denied permission to record the conversation and, in such cases, I relied on hand-written notes.

3. The second stage of data collection involved participant observation and semi-structured interviews with ‘citizens at large.’ This stage was primarily used to corroborate the results that emerged from the first stage of data collection. Participant observation took place in two micro-settings (village) chosen on the basis of their HDI ranking from the north and the south of West Bengal. In order to make the sample as representative as possible, I chose two districts in the state of West Bengal with Middling performance in human development, one from North and one from South, and then chose one or more backward villages/panchayat areas from each of these districts for closer village visits. The village of Sitai was chosen from the North Bengal district of Cooch Behar and the villages of Subudhipur and Santoshnagar from the South Bengal district of 24 South Parganas. I lived in these villages and spent my time interacting with villagers at every available opportunity. The express purpose of this endeavour was to verify if the picture/explanation that emerged from the previously collected data was accurate. I spent about two to three weeks in each village and observed the patterns of village political life. This involved a variety of activities such as attending village council meetings, visiting local public libraries, clubs, social movements, protest demonstrations, labor councils, interviewing village elders, political leaders, and social workers. I also conducted several focus-group interviews with common villagers. Unlike the experts, they were not selected on the basis of their expertise or for their involvement in the political process.

4. Following was the chronological order of my research activities:

18 March – 21 April - Stage I - Kolkata, West Bengal
22 April – 04 May - Stage II – Sitai, Village in Cooch Behar District, West Bengal
04 May – 12 May - Stage I - Kolkata, West Bengal
13 May – 31 May - Stage II - Kerala
1 June – 7 July - Stage I - Kolkata
8 July – 21 July – Stage II - Subudhipur and Santoshnagar villages in 24 South Parganas, West Bengal
21-28 July - Kolkata
29 July – 8 August – Stage II – Thillankery village in Kannur district, Kerala
9 August – till return – Stage II Kolkata

I was able to return with a sense of satisfaction from the field. Although I lived in the developing world for the first 26 years of my life, this was my first experience of being in a village as a social scientist. It was enormously exciting and educative. I learned the basics of how to conduct actual ethnographic research in developing country contexts. My textbook knowledge of research methods and design had to be adapted to fit the reality on the ground. I gained a much deeper and closer understanding of the micro-politics of the region and more importantly, I learned the essential field research skills, that will prove very valuable in developing my career as a social scientist. On the whole, field research, was a lot more challenging and invigorating than I could ever imagine. I was so enthused by it and learned so much from it that I am ready to go back for another round.
My field research was in partial fulfillment of requirements for a PhD degree at the University of Toronto and I am currently compiling my findings and turning it into a dissertation. The tentative title of my dissertation is “Democracy and the Politics of Social Citizenship: A Comparative Study of States in India.”

I hope to complete a more detailed Final Report at the completion of my dissertation. I have not produced any research articles/papers during the tenure of the award but I do intend to publish scholarly articles and potentially a book based on the field research undertaken during the tenure of the award. I shall provide a detailed list of these in my Final Report.

Once again, I thank IDRC for making this possible.

Sincerely,

Anil Varughese