

**THE LAND QUESTION IN THE POLITICS OF WEST
BENGAL: AN ANALYSIS OF DISCOURSES AND RHETORIC
(1977-2021)**

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Certified that the Thesis entitled “The Land Question in the Politics of West Bengal: An Analysis of Discourses and Rhetoric (1977-2021)” submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Jadavpur University in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the supervision of Dr. Omprakash Mishra, Professor, Department of International Relations, Jadavpur University, Kolkata. And that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere/elsewhere.

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Preface

It was during the course of attending a lecture titled ‘The Changing Structure of the Indian State’ at Jawaharlal Nehru University in 2017 that I got interested in the changing relation of the Indian State vis-à-vis farmers. After hearing the lecture delivered by Professor Gopal Guru and Professor Sobhanlal Datta Gupta, I was convinced that no meta narrative can explain the role of the farmers in Indian politics. Also, the study of politics to remain relevant must focus on the use of symbols used by ruling regimes to generate consent from the public. I had also read the theories of nationalism by Partha Chatterjee and I wanted to relate these theories with the history of farmers’ movements in India I started reading on the topic after my Masters.

I got an opportunity to get enrolled as a PhD scholar at the Department of International Relations in Jadavpur University in 2020. I got the opportunity to work under the supervision of Professor Omprakash Mishra, who was then the Head of the Department. In the course of my studies, I realised that Bengal has a rich tradition of land based movements and these movements have survived even after Independence.

I wanted to relate my readings of political theory with the history of land based movements in West Bengal. So, I decided to use the concepts of ‘discourse’ and ‘rhetoric’ to study the land based movements in West Bengal. This seemed to be an under explored area for me. My supervisor allowed me the freedom to study the topic in depth and I decided to delve into the speeches delivered by political functionaries in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly, documents published by political parties like Election Manifestos and select documents published by the Government to study the changing nature of rhetoric vis-à-vis the question of land. The proceedings related to land reform in the Vidhan Sabha proved to be a mine of information on the topic. The life of land is continuously developing and land can be studied from a variety of angles. However, research for practical purposes must end within a particular period of time. I decided to focus on the enactments of the West Bengal Land Reform Laws and the various amendments made to the principal law over the years.

After going through the speeches, I noticed certain regularities in the speeches in a particular period of time. These speeches had the same inner logic. In my thesis, I have tried to trace the evolving land policies over a period of time (1977-2021) to trace the various triggers which brought about a change in the policies related to land. I have mainly focussed on the amendments made to the West Bengal Land Reforms Act. The role of the peasant as espoused through the speeches and documents after 1991 show a markedly different character. Any account of politics in West Bengal cannot ignore the events at Singur and Nandigram. In the course of my research work, I got a chance to study these movements in depth and more specifically through the lens of rhetorical studies. These events at Singur and Nandigram had occurred when I was in school and I did not perhaps understand the significance back then except in the broad characterisation of agriculture vs industry.

The study of the land policies pursued by the Trinamool Congress gave an opportunity to understand the roots of the idioms and phrases used in politics. I have used a case study of land acquisition for coal mines at Birbhum district to study the continuities and discontinuities of the rhetorical practices followed by the TMC in matters of land. Towards the end of my thesis, I argue that the rhetorical practises related to land take into account its socially situated character. The thesis gave me an opportunity to explore areas which are otherwise very difficult for a city bred boy like me to understand.

Glossary

- *Adhiars*: a practise prevalent mostly in north Bengal where sharecroppers received half the produce from the Jotedar.
- *Aman*: variety of rice cultivated in monsoon season.
- *Amin*: Revenue Officer.
- *Bargadar*: Sharecropper legally entitled to receive three fourths of the produce from the landowner.
- *Bamfront Sarkar*: a conglomeration of parliamentary left parties dominated by the CPI(M).
- *Benami land*: land held in excess of ceiling by using fictitious names.
- *Bhith puja*: a Hindu ritual of offering prayers before starting auspicious works.
- *Bhumi Sanskar*: land reform.
- *Bhumi Ucched Protirodh Committee*: Committee to Save Farmlands from Acquisition.
- *Bigha*: unit of measurement of land corresponding to 20 cottahs.
- *Boro*: variety of rice cultivated in summer season.
- *Chash o Boshobasher jonyo bhumidaan prokolpo*: Programme of the Left Front Government giving homestead land to the landless.
- *Chashir beta*: son of a farmer.
- *Cottahs*: corresponding to two shotoks (720 square foot).
- *Dharna*: sit in demonstration to press for people's demands.
- *Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Samiti*: Fishermen's Association in south Bengal.
- *Dayabhog*: Hindu school of inheritance, mostly prevalent in Bengal, where property can be claimed only after death.
- *Dinmohor*: transfer of property during marriage as a token of security in Islamic law, mostly given by husband to wife.
- *Lakshmi Puja*: Hindu ritual to worship the Goddess of wealth, Lakshmi.
- *Garibi Hatao*: Removal of poverty.
- *Gherao*: demonstration to stop work by a person or an in office unless demands are met.
- *Gram Panchayat*: the lowest tier of the Panchayati Raj Institution where members are elected from each election booth.
- *Gram Sabha*: a Panchayati Raj Institution constituted in each circle.
- *Gram Sansad*: village council consisting of voters from each election booth.
- *Gram Unnayan Samiti*: Development Committee constituted at the Gram Sansad level.
- *Jotedar*: farmer owning substantial amount of land and employing labour to cultivate the land.
- *Jobordokhol*: illegal and forced acquisition of property.
- *Jol Dharo Jol Bharo Prokolpo*: a rain water harvesting scheme of the West Bengal Government.
- *Kanungo*: Revenue Officer responsible for revenue collection and administration like assessment and survey.
- *Karmadakshya*: Chief of a Department in the Panchayat Samiti.
- *Khajna*: land rent.
- *Khas land*: land vested with the Government.
- *Khetmajur*: agricultural labourer.
- *Kisan Sabha*: peasant wing of the CPI(M).

- *Kisan Samiti*: peasant wing of the CPI.
- *Krishak Bandhu*: *Krishi amader bhatti, Shilpo amader bhabishyot*: electoral slogan translated as ‘agriculture is our future, industry is our future’.
- *Lakshmir Bhandar*: a scheme of the Government of West Bengal whereby women get a fixed amount of money.
- *Ma-Mati-Manush*: Mother-Land-People.
- *Mastarmoshay*: school teacher.
- *Mitakshara*: Law of inheritance of property by birth according to Yagnavalkya Smriti.
- *Mouza*: lowest unit of revenue collection.
- *Nijo Ghar Nijo Bhumi Prokolpo*: Programme of the Government of West Bengal of giving homestead land to the landless.
- *Nirupan patra*: a Bengali deed of family settlement.
- *Operation Barga*: Scheme implemented by the Left Front Government in West Bengal to record sharecroppers.
- *Paschimbanga Khetmajur Samiti*: Association of agricultural workers in West Bengal.
- *Panchayati Raj Institutions*: instruments of local self-government deriving their mandate from the Indian Constitution.
- *Panchayat Samiti*: the second tier of the Panchayati Raj Institutions operating at the Block level.
- *Patta*: settlement receipts which grant entitlement to land.
- *Pattadar*: a person having a patta of land.
- *Raiyat*: a cultivator of the land.
- *Sabhapati*: chief of a Panchayat Samiti.
- *Sali land*: agricultural land mentioned in land records.
- *Sangramer hatiyar*: instrument of struggle.
- *Sari*: a long piece of cloth worn by women mostly in the Indian subcontinent.
- *Singur Krishi Jomi Raksha Committee*: Save Farmlands Committee in Singur.
- *Sukha land*: dry land which cannot be used for agricultural purposes.
- *Sonar Paschim Bangla*: Golden West Bengal.
- *Shotok*: unit of measurement of land corresponding to one hundredth part of an acre.
- *Sufal Bangla*: programme initiated by the Government of West Bengal to promote marketing of agricultural produce.
- *Unnototoro Bamfront*: electoral slogan meaning that the alternative to the Left Front was an improved version of its own self.
- *Unnoyoner hatiyar*: tool of development.
- *Utpironer hatiyar*: tool of exploitation.
- *Zamindar*: a system of land lordship prevalent in colonial era.
- *Zilla Parishad*: upper tier of the Panchayati Ray Institutions functioning at the district level.

Abbreviations

- ADM(LR)- Additional District Magistrate (Land Reform)
- AICC- All India Congress Committee
- BLRO- Block Land Revenue Officer
- BAC- Block Advisory Committee
- BUPC- Bhumi Ucched Protirodh Committee
- CITU- Centre for Indian Trade Unions
- CMZ- Coastal Management Zones
- CPI- Communist Party of India
- CPIM- Communist Party of India Marxist
- CPIM(L)- Communist Party of India Marxist Leninist
- CIL- Coal India Limited
- DM- District Magistrate
- DBMS- Dakshin Banga Matsyajibi Samiti
- EPZ- Export Promotion Zone
- GATT- General Agreement on Trade and Tarriff
- GP- Gram Panchayat
- HDA- Haldia Development Authority
- HYV- High Yielding Variety
- INTUC- Indian National Trade Union Congress
- JLRO- Junior Land Revenue Officer
- LAC- Land Acquisition Collector
- LFG- Left Front Government
- LJKRC- Loba Krishi Jomi Raksha Committee
- NFF- National Fish Workers' Forum
- NFF- National Fish Workers' Forum
- NTPC- National Thermal Power Corporation
- NSSO- National Survey Sample Organisation
- OB- Operation Barga
- PDS- Party for Democratic Socialism
- PS – Panchayat Samity

- RSP- Revolutionary Socialist Party
- SJDA – Siliguri Jalpaiguri Development Authority
- SUCI- Socialist Unity Centre of India
- SEZ- Special Economic Zone
- SP- Superintendent of Police
- SRO- Special Revenue Officer
- SLC- State Land Corporation
- SKJRC- Singur Krishi Jomi Raksha Committee
- TMC- Trinamool Congress
- UFG- United Front Government
- WBCS- West Bengal Civil Service
- WBPKS- West Bengal Pradeshik Krishak Sabha
- WBHIDCO- West Bengal Housing Infrastructure Development Corporation
- WBIDC- West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation
- WBPDCCL- West Bengal Power Development Corporation Limited
- ZP- Zilla Parishad

The Land Question in the Politics of West Bengal: An Analysis of Discourses and Rhetoric (1977-2021)

Introduction to the Thesis

Context of the Study

The question of land ownership and land rights has been a contested one over centuries. The idea of land ownership and control changed drastically with the advent of British rule in India. In order to simplify revenue administration and maximise revenue, the East India Company administration since its inception sought to locate ownership rights in a specific class of people. Their experiments regarding the same finally culminated in the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 which vested proprietary rights in land on the Zamindar.

The agrarian structure framed by the Settlement over time assumed a multi-layered hierarchical structure with the Zamindars and Jotedars at the top and sharecroppers and agricultural labourers at the bottom. Also the issue of tenure security and rights assumed a significant dimension and the Colonial government sought to define and secure the rights of the sharecroppers by passing laws like the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885. Several Commissions were appointed before Independence to study and make recommendations on the issue of tenants on land among which the most notable was the Floud Commission. Left mobilised popular uprising like the Tebhaga movement brought the question of such rights to the forefront at the verge of independence. Keeping up with the spirit and demands of the period, the Central Government enacted the Zamindari Abolition Act, 1950 to abolish the intermediaries on land. States were given the power to frame laws to abolish the rights of intermediaries on land. In West Bengal, the Estates Acquisition Act, 1953 was framed to provide for ceiling limits and the West Bengal Land Reforms Act, 1955 recognised the sharecroppers or the *bargadars* as a separate category thereby protecting their rights and fixing the land revenue. Mainly two issues related to the definition of a *bargadar* and ‘personal cultivation’ were sought to be addressed through amendments in laws. However, such ceiling and redistributive reforms failed to achieve its objectives due to loopholes in the legal provisions and their implementation along with asymmetrical access of different classes of the agrarian hierarchy to power over legal access and economic resources.

The advent of the United Front government increased hopes for betterment. However internal struggle among the Front constituents and the Left policy dilemma made implementation of productive measures problematic. This culminated in the Naxalite movement of the 1960s. The Naxalite movement was a continuation of the earlier land based movements but was more radical in nature in that the legal formalities were skirted to ensure ‘land to the tiller’ and the cities were sought to be encircled.

The Left Front Government (LFG) led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) came to power in 1977; basically riding on the popularity of the land based movements in rural areas and instituted *Operation Barga* (OB). Over time the priority towards redistribution changed and land came to be seen as a resource from which productivity was to be increased. However, with the priorities shifting towards industrialisation and growth after the 1990s, the success of OB came to be increasingly seen as its failure mainly as landholdings were fragmented and marginalised. But efforts to push forward industrialisation met widespread resistance from people whose lands were taken away. This resulted in the LFG losing power after a record reign of 34 years. The then Opposition party the Trinamool Congress (TMC) formed a government in alliance with the Indian National Congress in 2011. The rhetoric related to land was framed as the dawn of a government of *Ma-Mati-Manush*.

Rhetoric and formation of dominant discourse is an imperative feature of the politics of any period. Political communication and rhetoric is the lifeline of political processes in organising, managing and constituting authority in States and for establishing a two-way interactional relation between the government and the citizens in a functional democracy. Various issues connected with land have dominated the politics of West Bengal since Independence. These issues were related with economic justice. Two major approaches were followed, namely increasing the productivity of land and that of redistributive justice. Some of the main points followed regarding the latter were those of security of tenure to the peasant and equitable distribution of land resources. Over the years, the focus has been on increase of productivity from land and bringing people left out from the process within the purview of welfare schemes.

The present research work is an attempt to understand, analyse and evaluate the uses and functions of rhetoric and of discourse formation in political communication through speech act by active participants in the democratic political processes in play in West Bengal on the question and issues centred on land-- reforms, acquisition and uses.

Objectives of the Study

The present research work on the topic *The Land Question in the Politics of West Bengal: An Analysis of Discourses and Rhetoric (1977-2021)* has been carried out with the following major objectives:

- 1) To understand, situate and analyse the significance of rhetoric and discourses in politics;
- 2) To present a comprehensive understanding and analysis of the land question involving land ownership, land reform legislations and land acquisition policies of successive governments in West Bengal over the last about 5 decades'
- 3) To analyse and interpret the speech act of government and political leadership of West Bengal in and outside the Legislative Assembly constituting rhetoric and discourses on land from the standpoint of politics and political mobilisation and
- 4) To examine and evaluate the significant changes in the stance and orientation of various political actors over time and through various government formations.

Statement of the Problem and Research Agenda

The present study aims to deal with the significance of discourses and rhetoric in understanding the politics of West Bengal with a focus on the question of land and its impact on society and politics. This is sought to be done by discussing the history of discourse and rhetoric and then applying these concepts to political movements based on land in West Bengal. The attitude of the governments both at the Centre and in West Bengal are discussed through the proceedings of the Vidhan Sabha, various Acts passed by the Parliament and the West Bengal Legislative Assembly and socio-political movements. The distinctive policies followed regarding land redistribution by the Left Front Government after 1977 are discussed along with their drawbacks. We try to identify certain speech acts which signal a deviation from the initial policies. Attempt has been made to discuss the various protest movements mobilised against the LFG policy priority on industrialisation which culminated in its losing power in 2011. After the fall of the LFG in 2011, the Trinamool Congress attempted to carve out a distinct break from the existing policies on land acquisition. The aim to project a radical departure from the policies of the LFG on land acquisition however has also meant non-availability of land for big industries and in many cases even for small business and commercial activities. The TMC government has stressed on the element of consent of all

landowners in any government clearance involving purchase of land. The Government has also continued the policy of increasing productivity from land and bringing those dependent on land within the net of welfare schemes.

The thesis work builds on the legislative acts related to land and how successive governments of Jyoti Basu from 1977 to 2000, Buddhadeb Bhattacharya from 2001 to 2011 and the present Mamata Banerjee Government from 2011 to 2021 have attempted to build up their own narrative of success in redistributive justice and welfare in this sphere for the rural populace of land tillers, share croppers and landless labourers. The research work aims to understand and analyse the rhetoric and discourses employed by the successive regimes to communicate their policies and priorities for the intended beneficiaries of the government's engagement with the central issues of land, land-relations, land reform, and imperative of land acquisition and finally the centrality of consent of land owners in any project involving land acquisition.

Scope of the Research

The thesis is an attempt to uncover the co-relation between discourses and rhetoric on the one hand and the entirety of issues related to land in West Bengal from the perspective of legislative measures, political currents and political mobilisation. The time frame chosen for the research work is from 1977 to 2021. The period covers the 34 years of Left Front Government's rule—1977 to 2011 but this long period had three phases. The first phase was focused on *Operation Barga* and the next phase was on debates and dilemmas presented in the wake of liberalisation and imperative of industrialisation in the 1990s. The third phase saw a resolution of the debate in favour of industrialisation under Buddhadeb Bhattacharya's stewardship of the Government from 2000 to 2011. This phase also unveiled multiple levels of contradiction in the policy and stance of the Government and helped build opposition to the LFG. The inauguration of the TMC Government in the state in 2011 and its two terms in the Government, up to 2021 constitutes the end point of the scope of the research. The analytical framework of the universe of rhetoric and discourses have been analysed in the first Chapter of the thesis and though not extensively, post-Independent India and West Bengal's journey in the formative years and up to the mid-1970s has been described for the sake of chronology and continuity in the second Chapter.

Review of Literature

Land has remained a very sensitive issue in the politics of West Bengal and has been addressed in great detail by various scholars.

One of the first frameworks used to address the issue took shape from the preoccupation of scholars with the question of whether the issues concerning land could be resolved within the bounds of pre and post-independent nationalist politics. In the context of the fervour of the Behavioural Revolution gripping American academics, grants allowed scholars to use a positivist method to analyse the politics of West Bengal in the years after Independence. Marcus Franda's work, *West Bengal and the Federalizing Process in India* is a detailed study of the problems faced by the state, the ideologies that developed in the context of these problems and the response of the political leadership towards these problems. The attitude and policies of the State towards the land question develops as part of an overall orientation towards these problems in the aftermath of independence and Partition. Both the convergence and the divergence between the policies of the Central and the State Government towards land are described and analysed in this book.¹

Myron Weiner in his work *The Politics of Scarcity: Public Pressure and Political Response in India* shows the various interest groups acting upon the Indian State and how the State responded to their demands. Weiner identifies five kinds of pressure groups in India, namely the caste based groups, the community associations formed through affinities towards language or religion, trade unions, organised business, agrarian and the student movements. The land policy is shown as a process of bargain between the landowners and the other sections like sharecroppers and the landless with the Indian State. However, when demands were not met by the Government which adopted a paternalistic attitude, various protest and agitation based movements arose.²

In his popular work, *Radical Politics in West Bengal*, Franda describes the context in which the radical forces among the Left parties gained ascendancy in politics in West Bengal. The process of split of the Communist Party of India in 1964 is explained through the debate within the Party on the various issues related to alliance against the imperial powers and on the question on what was the principal contradiction in Indian society. With the formation of the United Front Governments, the Left involved itself in the democratic politics and moved away from the 'radical politics'. This space was taken over by the Naxalites.³

¹ Marcus, Franda, *West Bengal and the Federalizing Process in India*, (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1968), pp.129-51.

² Myron Weiner, *The Politics of Scarcity: Public Pressure and Political Response in India*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1962), pp. 1-30.

³ Marcus Franda, *Radical Politics in West Bengal*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, M.I.T Press, 1971), pp.242-68.

Pradip Basu in his work *Naxalite Politics: Post-Structuralist, Postcolonial and Subaltern Perspectives* deals in details with the ideology of Naxalites.⁴ Partha Nath Mukherji carried out interviews of the local population at Naxalbari in the nascent stages of the movement to build a chronological account. Ranabir Samaddar's book also uses the context of the Naxalite movement in the popular rebellion of the 1970s.

The second framework developed in the context of these movements was an offshoot of the first to the extent that scholars have tried to examine the policy regime of the party in power and the State to underscore the nature of land based movements in West Bengal.

Several studies have documented *Operation Barga* that was carried out to record sharecroppers (*bargadars*) and to redistribute the land among the land poor sections. Various studies have explored the extent of success of OB and the impact of this exercise on society. One strand of such studies looks at how an elected Communist Government moved away from its radical promise gradually over the years.

Atul Kohli's work *The State and Poverty in India* was one of the earliest attempts at theorising the politics of West Bengal. The decentralisation of democracy along with devolution of funds and the minimisation of corruption prompt Kohli to give West Bengal a rank A among Indian states based on development. The LFG had implemented a social democratic experiment in Kohli's opinion.⁵

Prabhat Kumar Datta in his work titled *Land Reforms Administration in West Bengal* studied the changes made in the bureaucratic structure to implement the programme of land reforms and the role assigned to politics in the implementation of land reforms. Datta's study shows that in the context of land reforms, the concept of organisation is not confined to the bureaucracy alone. Innovations in organisations like the Panchayati Raj Institutions and the *Krishak Sabha* also played a significant role in the implementation of *Operation Barga*.⁶

Nripen Bandopadhyay in his article *Operation Barga and Land Reforms: Perspective in West Bengal* connected the enactment of the juridical pronouncements through land reform laws with the rise of the left wing political forces in West Bengal. However, he makes some

⁴ See for details Pradip Basu (ed), *Naxalite Politics: Post-Structuralist, Postcolonial and Subaltern Perspectives* (Kolkata, Setu Prakashani, 2017).

⁵ Atul Kohli, *The State and Poverty in India: The Politics of Reform*, (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 95-117.

⁶ Prabhat Kumar Datta, *Land Reforms Administration in West Bengal*, (New Delhi, Daya Publishing House, 2019), pp. 10-42.

critical comments related to the decreasing land-man ratio, a decrease in the rate of industrialisation and a lack of forward and backward linkages between industries and agriculture.⁷ Jaytilak Guha Roy also alludes to the role played by the Panchayats in the implementation of OB even before the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India made their formation compulsory.⁸ Maitreesh Ghatak and B Chattopadhyay in *Sharecroppers of West Bengal: A New Deal?* highlight the problems faced by sharecroppers and the legislative changes brought in to deal with these issues. However, recognition through legal recording, the authors opine, is not a sufficient pre-requisite to protect the sharecroppers from the operation of market forces which might ultimately lead to their expropriation from land. Through recording of their rights, the sharecroppers could be brought within the purview of a cooperative movement that was not dependent on the consent of the landowners.

Bikram Sarkar in his book *Land Reforms in India* describes the legislative enactments brought in to deal with issues of tenurial security of sharecroppers in West Bengal along with the methodology of implementation of OB. He highlights the fact that while OB was successful to an extent in recording the rights of sharecroppers, the issue of redistribution of land to the landless could not make much headway under the LFG.⁹

Kalyan Dutta in *Operation Barga: Gains and Constraints* says that the LFG overestimated the extent of feudal estimation while underestimating the degree of penetration of usury and merchant capital in rural society. So, OB had a lack of clarity regarding the fact whether the ultimate target lay in the creation of a proprietary economy of small peasants or in a mixed economy where the Government would extend support to small producer cooperatives along with agricultural workers and other land poor sections enjoying communal ownership of land.¹⁰

Ratan Khasnobis in *Operation Barga: Limits to Social Democratic Reformism* questions the inherent limitations of OB in bringing about only a slight realignment of property relations in rural areas. OB worked as a way in securing property rights that were akin to the bourgeois conception of property and thereby drawing the sharecropper into the fold of the market forces. While OB was successful in recording sharecroppers in the initial stages, the

⁷ Nripen Bandopadhyay, 'Operation Barga and Land Reforms Perspective in West Bengal', *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)*, Vol. XVI, No. 25-26, pp.38-42.

⁸ For details see Jaytilak Guha Roy, 'Role of Panchayats in Land Reforms: The West Bengal Experiment', *Kurukshetra* (1995), Vol. XLIV, No.1.

⁹ Bikram Sarkar, *Land Reforms in India*, (New Delhi, APH Publishing, 1988) pp. 158-92.

¹⁰ Kalyan Dutta, 'Operation Barga: Gains and Constraints', *EPW*, Vol XVI, No. 25-26, June 20-27, pp.58-60.

programme could not proceed with much gusto in the later stages as sharecroppers feared to record their rights.¹¹ Ashok Rudra in *One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward*, opined that the LFG through OB moved away from the category of the landless peasants, who were the most oppressed sections in rural areas, as the aim was to build up peasant unity which would help the LFG in political terms.¹²

Prabir De in *Politics of Land Reforms: The Changing Scene in Rural Bengal* also describes the mobilisation under the UFG and the LFG with field work in Murshidabad district¹³.

Ross Mallick while discussing OB in *Development Policy of a Communist Government* categorically opines that ‘more work’ was done under the period of UFG rule than under the LFG regarding the redistribution of land to the landless. He questions the very logic of OB in granting rights to sharecroppers as in many cases the landowner was not necessarily economically better off than the sharecropper. So, implementation of OB would lead to impoverishment of both the sharecropper and the landowner.¹⁴

As Dutta notes, the gains from OB were that the peasants were made more aware of their rights. Dwaipayyan Bhattacharyya notes that West Bengal had the highest number of recorded sharecroppers and that the Headcount Poverty Count Ratio decreased over the years under the LFG.

The third framework emerged when a new economic policy regime was adopted by the Central Government in 1991. The Communist Government in West Bengal was seen to be embracing the new economic policies and entering into a peculiar and paradoxical situation given its ideological and political commitments. The extent to which the new found priorities were implemented, the methods used in implementation and the problems encountered have produced a rich body of literature. Various explanations have been given for the electoral debacle of the LFG and how it deviated from the policies followed in earlier years. Ethnographic works have also been carried out on how perceptions changed towards the LFG in the later years.

¹¹ Ratan Khasnobis, ‘Operation Barga: Limits to Social Democratic Reformism’, *EPW*, Vol. XVI, No. 25-26, pp. 43-8.

¹² Ashok Rudra, ‘One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward’, *EPW*, Vol XIV, No 25-26, pp. 61-8.

¹³ Prabir Kumar De, *The Politics of Land Reforms: The Changing Scene in Rural Bengal*, (Kolkata, Minerva Associates) 1994, pp 1-10.

¹⁴ Ross Mallick, *Development Policy of a Communist Government: West Bengal since 1977*, (New Delhi, Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 199-235.

The most enduring explanations have been given by scholars who were mainly influenced by Post-Marxism. Dwaipayyan Bhattacharyya's book *Government as Practice: Democratic Left in a Transforming India* is an oft quoted study. Bhattacharyya gives a chronological account of the Left Front Government in power throughout the years from 1977 till 2011. What distinguishes the study from earlier studies is that he moves away from the binary between that of good and bad governance to ground the practices of the LFG in a continuum which he refers to as 'party society'. The concept of 'party society' was a theoretical tool to show how the Party began to mediate in all spheres of life thereby reducing social complexities to a political arena that could be mediated through the rhetoric of class struggle. In West Bengal, the 'party society' was constituted by a class of school teachers who could by virtue of their education and social status help involve the local population in various activities supported by the LFG like resettlement of refugees, Operation Barga and also in the elections to Panchayati Raj Institutions. Thus, moving away from the promise of radical politics, the activities of the LFG were reduced to an electoral affair devoid of a proper process of political communication especially after the 1990s, the 'implosion' of which was signified by the events at Singur and Nandigram which led to the electoral defeat of the LFG after 34 years in power.¹⁵

Ritanjan Das in his work *Neoliberalism and the Transforming Left in India: A Contradictory Manifesto*, describes the orientation of the LFG towards industrialisation in West Bengal after the adoption of the New Economic Policy by the Central Government in 1991. He opines that the stance adopted by the LFG was not much different from that adopted by the Centre. However, he notes that the traditional support bases of the LFG were built up through mobilisation of the peasants through the *Krishak Sabhas* and the trade unions workers through the Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU). So, the change in orientation was not confined only to a bureaucratic exercise rooted in the tenets of neoliberal economics but had to be justified politically. It is in this process that Das locates the 'transition'. The contradictions are brought out through a study of the changing nature of the speeches of important political leaders. These speeches are interpreted as attempts at finding a resolution between the earlier practises of Government and the newer practises after a pro-industry stance was adopted. Both the speeches of the pro-reform factions and those who did not support these initiatives are analysed using the content analysis method. The pro-reform

¹⁵Dwaipayyan Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice: The Democratic Left in a Transforming India* (New Delhi, Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 56-209.

faction dominated the Party and the perception of the common persons is analysed through the events at Singur and Nandigram.¹⁶

Dayabati Roy's work *Rural Politics in India: Political Stratification and Governance in West Bengal* probes into the fact whether the central discourse of the LFG hid any forms of political mobilisation at the margin. Through a study of various peasant mobilisations and also caste groups at Kadampur and Kalipur in Singur, she comes to the conclusion that these mobilisations are 'new' in their approach towards the issue of corporate capital. While the logic of transition towards socialism served to justify the political mobilisations of the various left groups against the forces of capital, the newer modes of resistance were predicated on how the 'poor people' interpreted the anti-poverty programmes of the regime and to what extent they felt that the tools of electoral democracy would help them overcome any lacuna in the governance if at all it existed. So, it was the extent of 'hegemony of corporate capital' which determined the forms of resistance.¹⁷

Achin Chakraborty and Anthony D'Costa in their edited volume on *The Land Question in India: State, Dispossession and Capitalist Transformation* use the framework of 'accumulation by dispossession' to analyse the 'new land wars' in India. Comparing the struggles over land acquisition in present day India to the days of Primitive Accumulation during the Enclosure Movement as analysed by Karl Marx in the first volume of *Capital*, the practise of populism is built up as the 'political form of mass democracy'. The 'mass democracy' is composed of individuals who are left out of the process of capitalist development.¹⁸

Kenneth Bo Nielsen in his study *Land Dispossession and Everyday Politics in Rural Eastern India* examines the protests over land acquisition for purposes of industrialisation which is justified by the State using the idiom of 'development'. Coming out of the usage of meta-narratives of 'neoliberalism' and 'accumulation by dispossession', Nielsen opines that the everyday politics which he observed through ethnographic research in Singur was influenced by pre-existing social practise rooted in the categories of class, caste and gender but with the

¹⁶ Ritanjan Das, *Neoliberalism and the Transforming Left in India: A Contradictory Manifesto*, (London and New York, Routledge, 2018), pp.64-189.

¹⁷ Dayabati Roy, *Rural Politics in India: Political Stratification and Governance in West Bengal*, (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 156-93.

¹⁸ Anthony P. D'Costa and Achin Chakraborty (ed.), *The Land Question in India: State, Dispossession and Capitalist Transition* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2017, Preface

unfolding of the movement over the years, the social practises were themselves reconstituted through a ‘temporal, processual and circular rather than linear’ process.¹⁹

Sarasij Majumder’s work *A People’s Car: Industrial India and the Riddles of Populism* is based on ethnographic research carried out in the aftermath of the protests against the LFG at Singur and Nandigram. He builds his research on the ability of the LFG to capture the various complexities in rural society in the wake of the new relationship which the State had developed with capital in the neoliberal era. Describing in detail the processes that lead to formation of the identity of persons in rural areas, he questions the official narrative of a binary that was built up on the distinction between agriculture and industry. Although peasants do not come into a direct relation with the forces of capitalism, yet they get entangled in the processes of capitalist modernity. Though Partha Chatterjee’s concept of ‘politics of the governed’ and Vinay Gidwani’s ‘politics of work’ attempts to explain these processes, Majumder opines that the term ‘peasant’ tends to obscure the various processes of identity formation linked with land which are explained through ethnographic research. Land serves as a hedge against the forces of capital and also serves as an instrument of prestige in rural society and the LFG failed in as much as it tried to deal with the issue of land in purely monetary terms.²⁰

Ranabir Samaddar’s work *Imprints of the Populist Time* uses the category of ‘populism’ to describe the nature of the Government and politics in the states of West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Telangana and New Delhi and tries to identify the commonalities as well as the differences in the practice of populism under these different circumstances. With the increasing ‘financialisation of the economy’ the State devised various welfarist policies that deviated from the norms of classical economics on grounds of fiscal prudence but served to act as a safety net for vulnerable individuals. With the onset of the Covid pandemic, the number of such welfarist policies increased. Here Samaddar opines that in contrast to open ended policies pursued through conventional economic schemes, the welfarist schemes are formulated to intervene in society. The poor would not create a socialist world but rather create a world of welfare. It is in this context that the various welfare schemes of the TMC Government like *Lakshmi Bhandar* and *Kanyashree* are examined. However, taking cue

¹⁹ Kenneth Bo Nielsen, *Land Dispossession and Everyday Politics in Rural Eastern India*, (London and New York, Anthem Press), 2018, pp. 17-36.

²⁰ Sarasij Majumder, *People’s Car: Industrial India and the Riddles of Populism*, (New Delhi, Orient Blackswan), 2019, pp.131-52.

from Foucault's notion of 'bio-politics' as seen in the strategic management of elections, Samaddar locates the practice of populism in welfare policies in societal practices.²¹

The study of rhetoric has been at the heart of political theory since time immemorial. George Kennedy's work is an excellent summary of the history of rhetoric and its significance in political life.²²

Aristotle systematically elaborated on rhetoric in the *Art of Rhetoric*, *Poetics* and also *Nichomachian Ethics*. He identified three genres of rhetoric, namely, forensic, deliberative and epideictic. Quintilianus's work has stressed on the theory of rhetoric as well as on the personal development of an orator. Perelman believed that epideictic rhetoric was of utmost importance as values central to the genre are central to all kinds of argumentation. All argument must proceed from a point of agreement and contentious matters cannot be resolved until sufficient agreement on prior or related issues has already been established. The task of the orator is to establish a sense of communion centred on particular values that are recognised by the audience. The orator tries to increase adherence to these values. The bases of argument are divided into 'facts and truth' and 'values and hierarchies'. In the Medieval Period, some kind of consensus was reached on the importance of prepared speeches and ceremonies in the performance of political activities.

Towards the end of the Medieval Period, Machiavelli believed that it would be easier for a Prince to rule if a conquered territory was homogeneous in language. The Social Contractual Thinkers were the first to ascribe fixed meanings to certain words like 'sovereignty' and 'State'. Hobbes believed in active classificatory thinking while Locke conceived of language as a system of external signs which made our thoughts known to others. Rousseau also spoke of the role of language in the creation of consensus through a Social Contract. Karl Marx did not ascribe much importance to rhetoric as meaning in social life was determined by historical laws.²³

However, the role of rhetoric was given a completely different tone through the studies of Foucault who brought in the concept of discourse. The discourse was defined as a series of

²¹Ranabir Samaddar, *Imprints of the Populist Time*, (New Delhi, Orient Blackswan (2022), 209-61.

²²George A Kennedy, *A New History of Classical Rhetoric*, (New Jersey, Princeton University Press), 1994, pp. 25-52.

²³James Martin, *Politics and Rhetoric: A Critical Introduction*, (London and New York, Routledge), 2013, pp.1-20.

statements that are localised in their application and have the ability to generate truth. Thus, rhetoric also becomes part of a discourse.²⁴

A body of literature has developed that can be said to have applied Foucauldian methods to other aspects of society. Mc Closkey has studied the development of economics as a discourse.²⁵

James Martin focusses on the role of public speech as enacting a ‘negotiation of past and future, intertwining positions with an unconditional promise to prepare for what comes’. In this way he tries to discern the hermeneutics of discourse and rhetoric.

In the context of India, the tools of rhetoric and discourse have been applied to a much lesser extent. Studies have tried to understand the use of language to capture how different social realities were exemplified through rhetoric. Ritanjan Das studies the transitory period of LFG as captured through use of phrases and words.

Anindita Bajpai in *Speaking the Nation: The Oratorical Making of Secular, Neoliberal India*, studies the ‘logical, lexical and semantic patterns’ of successive Indian Prime Ministers through their speeches on issues concerning secularism and the neo-liberalisation of the Indian economy. Taking cue from Richard Rorty’s book *The Linguistic Turn*, Bajpai writes that language is treated as a central tool in ‘weaving the social matrices of discourse through both its internal structures as well as how these structures are put to usage for certain ends by politicians’. Political rhetoric is treated in the context of the book as ‘usage of rhetorical means of persuasion by politicians’ and thus takes rhetoric away from the common sense understanding of being a decorative and ornamental embellishment to the spoken word. Since elections take place every five years, the speeches of Prime Ministers are taken as acts that not only ‘speak to’ but also ‘speak with’ the population.²⁶

Srabani Rai Chaudhuri’s book *Political Communication in West Bengal* studies the flow of information in West Bengal through circulation of newspapers and the media. The conclusion that emerges is that the ‘even in a developing society, the flow of information is not simply

²⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London and New York, Routledge), 1969, pp 1-20.

²⁵ D.N McCloskey, *The Rhetoric of Economics*, (Wisconsin, The University of Wisconsin Press), 1998, pp. 1-10.

²⁶ Anindita Bajpai, *Speaking the Nation: The Oratorical Making of Secular, Neoliberal India*, (New Delhi, Oxford University Press), 2018, pp. 1-40.

determined by the channel bandwidth. The signal-to-noise power ratio...is determined by the demands of the political system itself'.²⁷

Ravinder Kaur and Nayanika Mathur in their edited volume *The People of India: New Indian Politics in the 21st Century*, trace a genealogy of the 'people of India' not through the lens of 'anthropological-colonial knowledge' but as a 'mode of recovery of the democratic energy' of 'the people'. Certain symbols used in politics like the *kisan*, the political saint and the political activist are studied. However, the study does not go into the intricacies of politics in West Bengal.²⁸

Research Gaps

As we can note from the previous account, the studies on land based politics in West Bengal are quite extensive and the literature on discourses and rhetoric is also vast. Although some of the studies on West Bengal refer to the use of rhetoric by the ruling Party in power but as of now there is no serious study on a theory of rhetoric to analyse the significance of the concept in creating the space of politics. Thus, the role of rhetoric in creating discourses on land has remained relatively unexplored. Moreover, the relation between discourses and rhetoric on land also remains unexplored in the context of West Bengal. The present study is a humble effort to fill in these gaps by capturing the use and deployment of discourses and rhetoric to address and exemplify the issues related to land and its interconnectedness with politics and political mobilisation through the last about five decades involving 9 governments under three Chief Ministers and two political formations in West Bengal.

Research Questions

The present research work deals entirely with the discourses and rhetoric centred on issues and question related to land in West Bengal. It is necessary to delve deep into the sources and input for political mobilisation centred on land and how successive governments have attempted to use and deploy rhetoric for the purpose. The objectives of the present research work have been systematically examined in 5 substantive chapters by an attempt to answer the below research questions:

- 1) What are the significance of discourses and rhetoric in understanding politics in general and West Bengal in particular?

²⁷ For details see Srabani Rai Chaudhuri, *Political Communication in West Bengal*, (Calcutta, KLM Firma), 1978.

²⁸ Ravinder Kaur and Nayanika Mathur (ed.), *The People of India: New Indian politics in the 21st Century*, (Haryana, Penguin) 2022, pp. 100-50.

- 2) What and how laws and policies related to question of land ownership, distribution and land use in West Bengal have evolved?
- 3) What were the distinctive aspects and policies of the Left Front Government on issues related to land over the decades?
- 4) What were the reasons for the opposition against the Left Front Government on land issues and how political narratives were shaped by the LFG and the Opposition?
- 5) What are the distinctive aspects of the laws and the policy decisions taken by the Trinamool Congress Government on issues related to land?

Research Methodology

In answering the above questions, emphasis has been placed on usage of both quantitative as well as qualitative methods. References mined and used for the preparation of this research work are mostly based on primary sources. The governments at the centre as well as in the various states have invariably legislated on almost every aspect of the questions and issues related to land since Independence. The various legislations and their repeated amendments over the decades therefore constitute the basic framework shaping the work on this thesis. Since the legislation is the end-point of public discussion and discourse on a certain question, in this case issues related to land, political pronouncements of government and Opposition leaders and their speeches and intervention both outside and within the Legislative Assembly has been studied thoroughly and the various chapter contents enriched. Also, extensive use of primary source material from the Speeches and Memoirs of significant political actors, as well as official documents and reports of political parties and noteworthy public figures is another distinct feature of the present thesis. Moreover, the thesis has equally focussed on the materials in the form of government orders as well pamphlets and petitions of myriad organisations and association involved in questions and issues related to land, whether in support or in opposition to government moves and approaches in this regard.

The historical method has been used to analyse the Proceedings of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly and the policy decisions that were adopted over time. The case study method has been used while studying and analysing certain select socio-political movements. Usage of statistics by Government Departments and scholars has been used to corroborate the speeches made by various leaders in various forums during the period under study. Discourse analysis has been used to identify the key phrases, metaphors that recur in the speeches and to

understand how decisions taken centrally, percolated down to the grassroots level during various movements.

An Overview of the Chapters

The Thesis consists of an Introduction, five main Chapters and a Conclusion.

The first Chapter is titled *Understanding Discourses and Rhetoric in Politics*. In this chapter, the views of various scholars on rhetoric and how the views developed over time have been studied. The first part of the Chapter describes the various perspectives on rhetoric in the Ancient, Medieval and Modern Periods. In the Ancient period, discussions on the ideas of Aristotle, Plato, Cicero and Quintillian have been attempted. In the Medieval Period the formalism attached to the practises of kingship has been emphasised. In the modern period, the ideas of Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and Marx have been discussed in details. The ideas of John Rawls, Habermas and Hannah Arendt are also discussed. The second part of the Chapter studies how the concept of rhetoric is linked to the idea of discourse. After a brief description of the post-structuralism turn in political science, the ideas of Foucault on the creation of a discourse have been discussed. The idea of how economic ideas of justice also constitute a discourse has been discussed, thus paving the way for treating land reforms as an economic exercise. In the concluding part of the chapter, the salient features of both the terms, namely ‘rhetoric’ and ‘discourse’ have been identified.

The second Chapter is titled *The Land Issue in Post-Independent West Bengal (1947-1977)*, In this Chapter, a brief description of the evolution of the land policy in the post -independent period in the country and more particularly in West Bengal through the enactment of various laws and the speeches of prominent leaders has been attempted. The first part of the Chapter focuses on the period of Congress rule where the chief method of addressing the problem of land was through the enactment and implementation of laws. The second part of the Chapter deals with the approach of the United Front Government and the Naxalites towards the issue of land. The chief difference with earlier eras is that of the centrality accorded to the building up of mass movements to carry out the implementation of the land reform laws. The Chapter goes on to offer a brief description of the land based movements that played a role in producing politics and also the shaping of laws.

The third Chapter is titled *Discourse on Land Issues: The Left Front Government in West Bengal (1977-2001)*. This Chapter deals with the issue of implementation of land reforms

under the Left Front Government. The drive to record sharecroppers was undertaken through *Operation Barga* which started in 1978. The Chapter describes the implementation of OB through the formulation of a policy taking into consultation various stakeholders in the process and the involvement of the bureaucracy and the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The views of the important leaders belonging to the LFG and the Opposition have been studied through the Proceedings of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly. Certain key phrases and metaphors are identified that were used to create politics of land reform in our case. The second part of the Chapter deals with the changes in the overall policy orientation of the LFG after the adoption of the New Economic Policy in 1991 and the impact of this on the question of land. The shift in policy has been discerned through a study of select representative documents like the Policy Statement on Industrialisation that was tabled in the Vidhan Sabha by Chief Minister Jyoti Basu in 1994, a document titled 'Destination West Bengal' published in 1999 that was intended to attract businesses and the building of a township in Rajarhat where land was acquired through the application of the Land Acquisition Act, 1894 instead of direct purchase, as the presence of *bargadars* was considered a problem. The views of the members of the LFG in the Vidhan Sabha on the issues regarding General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade have been described to show that rather than on the grounds of redistributive justice, it was an outlook closer to the neoliberal one on the basis of which GATT was criticised. The prices of inputs in agriculture would increase and agriculture would become less profitable. Ideological issues are raised when the LFG members connected the issue of sovereignty and security of India with the signing of the GATT. In these documents the gains from land reforms are used to justify the changing priorities. Changes in land use pattern are sought to be studied on the basis of the above discussion. In the concluding part of the Chapter, arguments have been raised that while the implementation of OB constituted a discourse there were attempts to come out of the discourse in the later part of the 1990s. But the anti-incumbency wave could not amplify perhaps because the drives towards industrialisation did not gather much steam.

The fourth Chapter is *Land Acquisition, Politics and Opposition to Left Front Rule (2001-2011)*. This Chapter deals with the policies of the LFG after 2000 when Buddhadeb Bhattacharya came to power and more particularly after the 2001 Assembly election in 2001. The first part of the Chapter offers a brief description of the change in the policies of the LFG towards industrialisation and urbanisation and how this impacted the issue of land. Speeches of political functionaries who were instrumental in bringing about the proposed change have

been discussed. The legislative changes like Amendments to the West Bengal Land Reform Acts and administrative changes like a new manual on land acquisition that were brought about to implement these policies have also been discussed. Certain key phrases and metaphors that were used repeatedly in an attempt to facilitate this transition have been sought to be identified. The second part of the Chapter deals with the resistance and opposition faced by the Government in the implementation of these policies. The methods used by the affected persons to resist the process of land acquisition for industry and the involvement of political parties belonging to the Opposition have been discussed. The voices of dissent even within the LFG have been analysed to buttress the point that the LFG did move away from the discourse of the earlier periods. It is argued that the new discourse was only confined to a rhetorical management of the situation which developed in the aftermath of the land acquisition initiatives, the brunt of which was borne by sections of rural society that were hitherto loyal to the LFG. In the concluding part of the Chapter an attempt is made to theorise the rhetoric of the LFG.

The fifth Chapter is titled *Approach of the TMC Government towards Land Issues: Policies and Practices (2011-2021)*. This Chapter deals with the rhetorical stance adopted by the Trinamool Congress in dealing with the issue of land. In the first part of the Chapter, the Singur Land Rehabilitation Bill that was introduced in the Vidhan Sabha to give land back to the ‘unwilling farmers’ at Singur has been discussed. In the next section, the amendments to the West Bengal Land Reforms Act is also discussed along with case studies of instances of land acquisition in Birbhum to show the attitude of the Government towards security of tenure and compensation. The efforts to increase productivity from land resources with the increasing commercialisation of agriculture have also been described briefly. In the last section, an attempt has been made to describe how the TMC Government visualised the interests of the people dependent on land and how efforts were made to protect these individuals through the safety net of welfare schemes. Thus, the land policy is contextualised in the overall scheme of the TMC’s economic policy.

The analysis in the above five main Chapters is followed by a Conclusion to the thesis and a section on select Bibliography.

CHAPTER 1

Understanding Discourses and Rhetoric in Politics

Introduction

The roots of the word ‘rhetoric’ can be traced back to the ancient Greek word ‘rhetorike’ which means the art (tekhne or skill) of persuasive discourse undertaken by a rhetor (an orator or speaker). Rhetoric in this sense refers both to the instructive modes in this practice as well as the qualities that make a speech or a set of words persuasive. Successful application of rhetoric makes the subject who is speaking a particular set of words identify increasingly with the object of enquiry. As a corollary to this, it is difficult to wholly separate the subject from the object of enquiry that is the ability to persuade from the overall persuasiveness of discourse.¹ This raises a number of interesting questions as regards the nature of rhetoric. The question whether a speech is made persuasive by its intrinsic content or as a result of skilful manipulation by the orator is what begs deeper scrutiny. Another question is that can the art of rhetoric be mastered by all and sundry or is it a quality limited only to a handful of talented people? These questions arise from the definition of rhetoric and can point out the deeper underpinnings of the nature of politics. We can look into the issues of why certain ideas gain salience at a particular point in time; whether people actually believe what the rhetor says when they form their judgements or whether the people can be persuaded in any matter by the rhetor. This definition takes as assumption that a certain category of people exists who is to be persuaded to come to a decision in public life.

The study of rhetoric has been relegated to the backburner by scholarly volumes on intellectual history. The primary reason for this is that rhetoric is seen as a superlative of use only to the wily politician who manages his audience by hook or crook. Rhetoric is contrasted with speech that is a reflection of reality and with the approximation of the truth that lies beyond the words spoken, left unspoken, implied or left with a visual impact. Rhetoric thus hides the real intentions of the politician by a manipulative use of language. We can refer to how the Oxford English Dictionary defines the terms rhetoric and oratory. Rhetoric is defined as the art of persuasive speaking especially the exploitation of figures of speech and other compositional techniques to persuade or impress someone. The language used lacks in

¹ James Martin, *Politics and Rhetoric: A Critical Introduction*, (London and New York, Routledge), 2014, p.2.

sincerity and meaningful content. Oratory refers to the art of public speaking. We find the application of rhetorical language when learned discussions degenerate into pompous oratory.

However, at the same time it is universally recognised that free speech is the lifeblood of democracy and for popular judgements to be made a modicum of free speech is absolutely necessary for democracy to function. Free speech enables an individual to speak freely in public, to articulate his views, to win others over to this point of view, to question politicians and hold them accountable as well as to run for public office. This ambivalence is what makes the study of rhetoric interesting as despite knowing fully-well that modern democratic life is a function of free speech, a significant strand of thought exists that sees the dangers inherent in the unbridled application of free speech in public life. Democracy which is ultimately a game of numbers can result in ‘liars’, deceivers or prejudiced or malicious characters to gain public office.

This lurking suspicion about rhetoric is pregnant with notions of truth that are socially defined in time and that rhetoric involves use of persuasion and not violence or force. A rhetor has power over his audience in so far as he can convince them. Whenever an audience accepts what a rhetor says, it implies acceptance of the rhetor’s authority over one’s own self. The power that a rhetor has over others is not easy to define as it changes according to the context but it can be said with a degree of certitude that the art of persuasion connected with rhetoric is ubiquitous. Persuasion is a way of achieving political office, of changing the existing allocation of resources, of de-legitimising the opponent and of building alliances. It is when this dimension of politics is understood that the importance of rhetoric comes out. In this sense politics is understood as a debate over institutional principles. However a suspicion about rhetoric comes into the picture only when decisions are to be made about contingent principles or basic principles that underlie the roots of human association. In the hustle and bustle of institutional politics that takes place on a daily basis, the founding or the basic principles of a certain community remain the subject of competition among the various political actors. Rhetoric comes into the picture when a distinction is made between politics and the political. Invocation of the phrase the political is not to divorce it from abstract principles of political theory but rather to see the functions of rhetoric as an effort to define the basic principles that ground a community.

Thus, rhetoric has both temporal as well as spatial aspects. In fact, that is what makes the study of rhetoric different from the study of political philosophy or intellectual history. The

study of rhetoric is involved with the generation of a sense of agency as we go on to map the rhetor's speeches through a miasma of power relations like hierarchies, risks, public opinion or perception or social connections etc. The rhetor is essentially involved in a creation of a new 'public' through his speeches. To a rhetor his audience and the way he purports to create an audience is important.²

Rhetorical Theory in Ancient Greece and Rome

We shall now look at the various notions of truth that are found in the annals of Western political thought and can be traced back to the works of the Sophists in ancient Greece. This coincided with the period when democracy had come to Athens which was ruled till then by aristocratic families. After the reforms of Kleisthenes, the people who were called as 'demos', were permitted to sit in the assembly known as "ekklesia", as full citizens. The assembly was composed of the adult males and they were tenant farmers mainly. To add to that the influence of the traditional families did not wane. However, despite its many limitations, with the creation of new citizens the need for effective or persuasive communication arose.³ It is in this context that the new citizens or the aristocrats employed the services of the 'sophists' who functioned as teachers and offered their wisdom on how a citizen can speak and argue effectively in the public realm. These scholarly figures gave incisive intellectual insights and played a stellar role in the overall development of Athenian culture. The individual sophists studied aspects of how best to put forward an argument, different styles of grammar and after compiling speeches passed on their knowledge by creation of what would be a semblance of modern day handbooks. Thus, rhetoric was connected with the Athenian idea of morality and civic life where the freedoms granted to a citizen were to be in tune with notions of the common good. Speaking being sacrosanct to the public life, additional emphasis on rhetoric made the act of speaking a self-conscious activity. Democracy did not in any way imply one sided communication or a situation where a citizen would only get to hear another person speak. It was necessary that all citizens involve themselves in public debate both inside and outside the assembly. The need for cultivating good public speaking skills extended to the law courts where a citizen was extended to serve on the jury. But there were differing conceptions of civic life in ancient Greece.

The sharpest critique of rhetoric came from Plato. Plato, who is regarded as the fountainhead of western philosophy believed that it is not persuasion that is the basis of the just state but

² Ibid pp. 4-7.

³ Ibid pp. 16 -17.

rather there are certain rational principles or a philosophy that is the foundational principle of a state.⁴ The capacity of a rhetor to sway his audiences in an arbitrary manner according to his own choice is what bothered Plato the most, more so because he believed that his mentor Socrates was condemned to death unjustly by the citizens of Athens who were manipulated by speech. Plato did not believe that rhetoric was at all a form of knowledge as the expert in rhetoric could persuade the demos to do something against moral principles.⁵ Rhetoric was a practise that is similar to cooking which pleases the gastric juices and makes one happy and contented. Rhetoric was not at all a genuine field of knowledge and had no matter that can be rightfully called its object. Thus, a person guided by morality would not use rhetoric as it stood for relativism in public life. It was the guiding light of truth that would actually lead people. This light is provided by philosophy that is essentially rational.

Plato makes clear his contempt for democracy and envisages an ideal community built upon a rigid demarcation of roles that was already present in the souls of men. The citizen is allocated his class in society and would devote their lives in pursuance of their true natures. Philosopher kings with executive powers would be those who are blessed with intellect, citizens who had 'spirit' would protect the 'polis' by playing the role of military and the remainder of the population would satisfy their needs by way of trade. Plato's republic is the epitome of a silent order that does not need validity through the use of voice or externalities. It was a society that was in search of the truth and would inevitably dispose-off the public deliberation which was taught by the Sophists. Plato's rejection of democracy was premised on a fear that excess of democracy would bring disorder in the community. Rhetoric was irrational and elitist.⁶ If people did not work according to their abilities and relied on the power of rhetoric, anyone could be free to claim any role that he desired. The correct or the ideal arrangement of society would be hampered. All said and done, Plato himself was a great rhetor and we may say that even though emphasis was on higher principles, his ideas offered some degree of persuasion and deliberation. Speech or rhetoric was to be shown the path of truth and not exterminated altogether.

Aristotle was the most famous student of Plato and he also believed that the goal of human existence was the eternal quest for truth. Rhetoric played a useful role in holding the

⁴ Ibid pp. 18.

⁵ Gary Shiffman, 'Deliberation versus Decision: Platonism in Contemporary Democratic Theory' in Benedetto Fontana, Car J Nederman and Gary Remer (eds.) *Talking Democracy: Historical Perspectives on Rhetoric and Democracy* (Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania University Press, 2004), p.109.

⁶ Seyla Benhabib, 'Towards a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy' in Benhabib (eds.) *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1996), p.83.

community together and had a pragmatic nature. Man being the political animal, by dint of his nature was gifted with the power of speech. Rhetoric referred to liberty and power in the 'polis' and liberty was the defining feature of the 'polis'. 'Isegoria' (rights of equal speech), 'isonomia' (equal civil rights) and 'isokratia' (equal right to rule) referred to various forms of political equality in the 'polis. Speech enabled man to communicate his ideas and thus speech or rhetoric should play an important role in the life of the community. The principles of political association lay in the organic tendency of humans to live together and share a common life.⁷

This was visualised by Aristotle to develop in a teleological way. All things develop to fulfil their essential purpose. The reason for the 'polis' to exist was that it ensured the good life of the various communities that constituted it. This is where the catch begins. Notions of what constitutes the good life are relative and are never universal. Thus, it needed to be debated among the citizens as to what actually constituted the good life. It is in this context that rhetoric takes centre stage. Aristotle believed that knowledge of rhetoric was valuable for citizens and that rhetoric had an object of knowledge. In his book 'The Art of Rhetoric', Aristotle posits rhetoric as the counterpart of dialectic.⁸ The task of rhetoric was not persuasion, the way the sophists understood it to be but the identification of the persuasive aspects of each matter. Given the evidence at hand or the argument or the knowledge about an object, methods of rhetorical enquiry could help in ascertaining the truth.

Aristotle was careful in carving out the limitations of rhetoric. He opined that political rhetoric was the avowed course of action that the polis should pursue. Rhetoric would serve the common good by which citizens could lead the good life and it would also aid in the pursuing of happiness for all citizens. Three genres of rhetoric are identified by Aristotle namely, political rhetoric (deliberative), legal rhetoric (forensic) and ceremonial or epideictic rhetoric that involved display. Every speech had a speaker, a subject and an intended audience (telos).⁹ However, if the outward impression comes across as Aristotle being the torch bearer of rhetoric, we must take note of the fact that Aristotelian thought assumes a community of people who are wedded more or less to the same principles. Ideas like the existence of the slave system were never conceived as questionable. Aristotle did not want

⁷ Harvey Yunis, *Taming Democracy: Models of Political Rhetoric in Classical Athens*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 2-15.

⁸ Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. Kennedy, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1991), 1.3.1-3.

⁹ Ibid 1.2.1-2.

that the usage of rhetoric in the public sphere tarnish the stability of political life and thus he was wary of the rule of the mob as they could enter politics easily.

In modern society, citizens are no longer expected to voice their support for the common identity that binds them in a group. In ancient Greece or in Rome, the avowed freedoms were those of the community as a whole and not that of the individual citizen. Thus, the citizen took on duties to sustain and build up the collective identity which provided his family security and freedom. In fact, the reason why citizenship was limited was because a large number of citizens participating in the assemblies would harm the common good. Plato for example, did not teach the community to reason in terms of universal notions but his reason was contextualised in terms of time and space for the community. The Greek term 'Kairos' and the Roman term 'status', bear testimony to this.

Marcus Tullius Cicero was one of the greatest rhetoricians of the Roman Civilisation where the skills of rhetoric were taken to be central to public life. Cicero was of the opinion that republican life in Rome was sustained by the vital role played by rhetoric.¹⁰ There were umpteen opportunities for speakers to win over their audiences in Rome and speech was an important part of the self-governing institutions in vogue. The orator was an important figure in Rome and his self-image was that of someone who protected the community from the clutches of tyranny. Few individuals were bestowed with the right to speak with authority and there were factions within the aristocracy and the plebeian classes that riddled Rome.

Cicero was a famous rhetor in Rome and his contributions come across as more practical rather than philosophical. He could not reconcile himself to the Sophists' idea that rhetoric could be used for any purpose. Rather it was his belief that the true orator would be able to persuade his audience using a mix of reason, emotions and authority. The orator must adapt to different occasions and persons. A well-ordered speech had artistry and polish but that was impossible for an orator to deliver unless he had complete grasp of the subject of his speech. The orator would tune his speech according to the needs of the audience and through a skilful use of rhetoric. It was reason and the higher needs of the community that would prevail. All actions were subordinated to the common good of the community.¹¹ Some of the greatest speeches of Cicero were delivered in the greatest moments of crisis such as during the campaign against Catiline and his fellow conspirators. Following the death of Cicero, the

¹⁰Gary Remer, 'Cicero and the Ethics of Deliberative Rhetoric' in Benedetto Fontana, Car J Nederman and Gary Remer (eds.), *op.cit.* p.143.

¹¹ *Ibid* p. 150.

tradition of public speaking in Rome being identified with the greater good of the community persisted in figures like Quintilian.

To sum up we can refer to Jonathan Charteris-Black who identified three main contexts within which the classical tradition of rhetoric occurred. First, the ‘genus deliberativum’ was the kind of speech that needed to be persuasive because it dealt with controversial topics in public settings. Second, the ‘genus iudicium’ dealt with judicial decisions and the ‘genus demonstrativum’ was reserved as an act of display as in a eulogy.¹²

Rhetorical Theory in the Medieval Ages

However, after the decline of Athenian democracy and the collapse of the Roman Republic, rhetoric is gauged by a body of scholarship to have disappeared from public life. This view is associated with the widely held idea that the Middle Ages were the ‘dark ages’ in European history. But even this view has come to be increasingly questioned in recent scholarship on the topic to which we must take a detour. Rhetoric did play an important role in medieval political thought. We may look at George Kennedy’s distinction between primary and secondary rhetoric to see how scholars conventionally looked at rhetoric. Primary rhetoric was oral and civic and a feature of republican regimes whereas secondary rhetoric was textual and literary and was a feature of monarchical regimes.¹³

It is generally assumed by historians that rhetoric in medieval Europe is overwhelmingly dominated by textual practises possibly with the exception of religious preaching and so the political context in which these rhetorical practises developed is insignificant. The primary sites where the occurrence of medieval rhetoric can be traced were that of city republics. In northern Italy these cities flourished. These spaces with thick populations had thriving elite drawn from the commercial classes and more importantly a document culture had already started to develop. Therefore, in contrast to what is usually believed, a culture of eloquence in politics started to develop in the medieval age.¹⁴

From the thirteenth century, manuals of instruction in speech began to appear for the community level officials. After the mercantile movement based on guilds, the ‘popolo’, came to power, these practises of speech training began to expand. Government was carried

¹² Jonathan Charteris-Black, *Politicians and Rhetoric: The Persuasive Power of Metaphor*, (New York and Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan), 2005, p. 9.

¹³ George Kennedy, *A New History of Classical Rhetoric*, (New Jersey, Princeton University Press.), Preface.

¹⁴ Enrico Artifoni, ‘Una Forna Declamatoria di Eloquenza Politica in Lucia Calboli Montefusco (eds.) Papers on Rhetoric VIII Declamation (Rome, Herder Nelle Citta Comunali: La Concione’, 2007) pp. 3-5.

out by a complex system of councils and assemblies and thus deliberation assumed importance. To embellish the newly created rhetorical spaces, a corpus of literature developed that would impart the skills required for effective public speaking. Brunetto Latini, Bono Giamboni, Matteo de Libri and Giovanni da Vignano are notable examples of authors who wrote what can broadly be described as collections of model speeches.¹⁵

Despite the fact that these were influenced by Ciceronian practises of rhetoric and the Italian commune had a neo classical character, the culture of rhetoric that was created or was sought to be created by medieval European rhetoric was far from the political culture of ancient Rome or Greece. One significant difference, pointed out by Latini was that rhetoric in the Middle Ages had a written character. Frederick II's chancellor, Pier della Vigna was far better known for his writing eloquence than his speaking skills.¹⁶ But even a clear distinction cannot be made between the written practices and the spoken word as medieval practices of rhetoric demanded that letters be read aloud on delivery. Italian civic oratory was closer to the written 'arsdictaminis' while public epistolography betrayed a desire for the auditory effects of speech.¹⁷ The diplomatic missive where a certain rhetorical practise called the *cursus* was prevalent is an example.¹⁸ In the twelfth century, the papal chancery systematised a system of rhythmic prose in which a series of accented and unaccented syllables were to be used at the end of sentences. Rhetorical devices like alliteration and anaphora were already in use and in addition to the *cursus* described above were meant to enhance the impact on the ear. This made rhetoric stand out from the practises of speech used in daily life and made it the special speech of the State.

The practise of public speaking in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when Parliaments underwent a transformation from occasional events to institutionalised practise, made rhetoric extremely relevant. Since the role of rhetoric was to respond to the political context, persuasive language was increasingly used in negotiations between the Monarch and the assertive social groups who wanted a greater slice of power.

¹⁵Virginia Cox, 'Rhetoric and Politics', in Michael McDonald eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Rhetorical Studies*, (New York, Oxford University Press), 2017, pp. 330.

¹⁶Rita Copeland and Ineke Sluiter, *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric: Language Arts and Literary Theory, AD 300- 1475*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 758-9.

¹⁷Enrico Artifoni, 'Una Forna Declamatoria di EloquenzaPolitica' in Lucia Calboli Montefusco (ed.) op. cit. pp. 10-6.

¹⁸James A Doig, 'Political Proclamations and Royal Proclamations in Late Medieval England', *Historical Research* 71, No.176, pp 253-80.

The Aragonese – Catalan parliament was a case wherein we find that full speeches are documented and the monarch participated in parliamentary debates as a matter of routine. The monarchs were very fastidious about their speeches and this undoubtedly speaks volumes about the importance of rhetoric. The monarchs through their speeches enacted their role as the epitome of wisdom who was engaged in building civilisation. The speeches follow the ‘dictaminal’ disposition of the Italian political ‘arenga’ while others are in the form of a sermon.¹⁹

Even the English tradition of parliamentary speaking opens up interesting facets. ‘How to Hold a Parliament’ is a treatise written in the fourteenth century and it lays down that there should be three speeches at the parliament. The first speech would be a summons that mentioned the reasons for holding parliament. This speech was secular in nature. The second speech would be given by a cleric in the form of preaching. The third speech would be the king’s reply to the parliament. Over the course of the fourteenth century, the first two speeches merged giving rise to a new form of sermon that was delivered by the chancellor in the nature of reflections on morality and politics and attuned to the specific needs of the sermon. One of the first instances where a summon is delivered in the nature of a sermon in parliament is in 1332. The sermon was delivered by John Stratford but to be fair such practises became standardised as part of parliamentary procedure after the 1370s. The English parliament was quite akin to the Aragonese parliament if the length and the standards of eloquence are compared. The English sermons were elaborate from the rhetorical point of view and if we look at the comments of the clerks who recorded these speeches, then it smacks of connoisseurship in the field of rhetoric.²⁰ Chancellors are often praised for their copious speeches and for their choice of citations and sayings. Thus, it is clear that political oratory developed as a self-conscious art from the fourteenth century in England.

These rhetorical mores were influenced by the preaching of sermons (‘arspraedicandi’ in Latin) but were meant to intervene in the fleeting political debates of the day. But this is not to say that all speeches would trace their roots to the scriptures. Beaufort credits Horace, Cicero and the *Secretum Secretorum* as his intellectual influences whereas Simon Sudbury bases the need for defence funding on the parameters of ‘honour and advantage’. These are secularising features. Skills related to political oratory were not traceable to the clerical class

¹⁹ Suzanne F Cawsey, *Kingship and Propaganda: Royal Eloquence and the Crown of Aragon c.1200-1425*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 27-34.

²⁰ Nicholas Pronay and John Taylor (ed.) *Parliamentary Texts of the Later Middle Ages*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), pp. 71-2.

alone. For example, the election of Sir Peter de la Mare as the Speaker of the Commons is attributed to his eloquence as a speaker who was articulate and wise. Medieval English political percolated down to a wider section of society as is evident from the fact that even the layman had access to sources of instruction from where he could learn about rhetoric. Brunetto Latini's encyclopaedic work on rhetoric titled 'Tresor' was circulated widely in medieval Europe.

In addition to this, 'dictaminal' training also provided some kind of training for those who aspired to master the art of oratory for the political sphere. The Oxford masters recommended 'dictamina' and even within the manuscript tradition we can find manuals that can be reasonably presumed to have been as instructive for both the oral and written forms of political argument. Even procedures mundane to statecraft like the composition and the dispatch of diplomatic letters was considered as some sort of public spectacle.²¹

Visual rhetoric can also be traced here, for instance in the account that Anonimo Romano has given of Cola di Rienzo, considered a revolutionary figure in Rome. Cola wrote his letters only with a silver pen and his couriers travelled using wooden wands that were silver coated.²² Medieval political rhetoric was held mostly in ecclesiastical settings but this need not be overemphasised because medieval political thought was premised on the belief that divine authority shaped the world of humans. But this does not dilute the medieval thinkers' faith in the role of human agency in shaping the world of politics.

Early Modern Political Thought in Europe and Rhetoric

We find the resurgence of Aristotelian and Ciceronian ideas when the Renaissance bloomed in Europe and particularly in Italy. The idea that external forces should not play a role in governance and politics should be the handmaiden of self-governing cities again was a major influence in early modern political thought. We must note here that the rhetoricians of the Renaissance do not confine rhetoric only to the affairs of the ruling class though they remain few and far between. Juan Luis Vives in his 'Twenty Books on education' opined that the art

²¹ Martin Camargo, 'Special Delivery: Were Medieval Letter Writers Trained in Performance?' in Mary Carruthers (ed.) *Rhetoric Beyond Words: Delight and Persuasion in the Arts of the Middle Ages*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 173-89.

²² Giuseppe Porta, *Anonimo Romano: Cronica*, (Milan: Adelphi, 1981), p.108-9.

of rhetoric had an important role to play in a democracy whereas it had a limited role in the context of an oligarchy or a monarchy.²³

Scholars of the likes of Quentin Skinner, Hans Baron, Paul Oskar Kristeller and others have identified the art of rhetoric with republicanism and that with the cessation of republican governments in Italy during the fifteenth and sixteenth century, rhetoric lost its place. This argument however has been rejected as callow by Wayne Rebhorn .

The first reason Rebhorn identifies is that the role of rhetoric in igniting debates and discussions about politics was retained as it was taught in a systematic manner to the students. The pedagogy followed was that truth remained an enigma and thus every single question was a matter of opinion. Opinions could be argued in different ways. Perhaps such practises enabled the increase in the culture of dialogue during the Renaissance. For illustration we can look at *Utopia*, a seventeenth century work by Thomas More which is cast in the form of a dialogue. Baldassare Castiglione's book 'Book of the Courtier' is also written in the form of a dialogue and in its fourth book allows the characters to debate whether a monarchy or a republican government is the best. That rhetoric is identified with republicanism can also be gleaned from the writings of those scholars who wrote treatises in defence of monarchy.

Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa sees an inherent danger in rhetoric in that it can lead to seditious tendencies and destroy the state. According to Agrippa the reason for the destruction of Athens and Rome lay in the anarchic tendencies and the disorder brought in by rhetoric courtesy speeches by Brutus, Crassus, Cato, Cicero and Demosthenes. In his work, 'On the vanity of words' Montaigne wrote that rhetoric was an instrument that could manipulate crowds.²⁴ So even the ignorant people had power over all things and this led to perpetual disorder. Montaigne borrows from Vives but distances himself from his conclusions. It remains highly problematic for Montaigne that rhetoric is connected with democracy and helps people like Caesar and Pompey to gain power. Agrippa in his 'On the uncertainty and vanity of the arts and sciences' makes the point that rhetoric had seditious capacities and was the surest way to disorder. He even went on to blame rhetoric for misleading interpretations of scriptures in the ancient and Middle Ages.²⁵ In his book 'The advancement of learning',

²³ Vives, 'On the Causes of the Corruption in the Arts' in Wayne A. Rebhorn (ed.) *Renaissance Debates on Rhetoric*, (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2000), p.83.

²⁴ Wayne Rebhorn 'Rhetoric and Politics' in Michael J McDonald (ed.) op.cit. p.391.

²⁵ Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, 'On the Uncertainty and Vanity of the Arts and Sciences' in Wayne A. Rebhorn (ed.) *Renaissance Debates on Rhetoric*, (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2000), p.79.

Francis Bacon criticised Luther on the ground that he gave too much of importance to the word and that due to his influence the ancient scholars were re-read and re-interpreted. Bacon accepts that rhetoric was definitely useful to the extent that it could appeal to the imaginative senses of the people but then it would be better if rhetoric was discarded as it led to instability and chaos in society.²⁶

Despite these broad trends that seemed to underplay the importance of rhetoric in everyday politics, we find certain palpable changes taking place in the political life of Europe from this time. A limited number of citizens participated in politics but rhetoric was granted an exalted position in the sense that the common good could be debated and arrived at only through its judicious use. It was at this time that a humanist method of enquiry developed that was used to analyse the entire gamut of human activities. Thus, focus shifted from the purely religious or the revealed teachings about the cosmos towards human endeavour that would generate knowledge. Aristotle and Cicero were reinterpreted as contributors to the body of knowledge that created political institutions through human activity and not theological dogma. But as mentioned this was confined to a limited body of citizens who shared certain virtuous qualities and thus the possibilities of rhetoric being a harbinger of political instability was to some extent definitely neutralised.

A paradigmatic change was brought to the field of rhetoric with the emergence of the State in the modern period. The sovereign State inevitably had centralised authority, a demarcated territory and the executive power to implement a uniform set of laws through a monopoly on the use of violence. The ideational construct of sovereignty implied that public power or even force could be exercised sans recourse to public discussions and debate as deliberative forum like assemblies were subject to the final will of the abstract and indivisible sovereign. These phenomena were closely related to the development of rhetoric. It is in the works of theorists like Thomas Hobbes and Jean Jacques Rousseau that we find notions of sovereignty that underscored the nature of rhetoric. Both of them shared the lurking fear about rhetoric as evidenced from the fact that they palpably sensed the need to limit its deleterious effects.

Rhetoric and Modern Political Thought

²⁶ Thomas Sprat, History of the Royal Society, in Jackson Cope and Harold Whitmore Jones (ed.) *History of the Royal Society* (St. Louis, Washington University, 1959), p.111.

The political theory of Thomas Hobbes as exemplified in his *Leviathan* envisages the mainstay of political power as an independent authority that is separate from the body of the people. Yet it is to be mentioned that this political power is actually authorised by the people. It is not that there is no deliberation in Hobbes but this deliberation, theorised as a 'social contract', is at best momentary. Once the sovereign was agreed to as the legitimate power, there would be vesting of unbridled power in the powers of deciding the rights and liberties of the citizens. If the sovereign decided that no rights would be granted then that situation was absolutely in line with Hobbes' conception. Hobbes' method taken from geometry entailed that reasoning was carried out through logical steps derived from basic axioms. Thus, humans were never to be trusted to reconcile their common needs and desires. Driven by passion and appetite and by the basic need for survival, the situation was one of extreme uncertainty. People were as likely to be deceived by others as they were capable of reasoning. Even if people reasoned independently, their interpretations would differ among the most basic tenets of morality. This was Hobbes writing in the context of English civil war with its toxic combination of religious and political dispute.

Hobbes attacked the 'use of metaphors, tropes and other rhetorical figures, instead of words proper' because these along with religious advocates and the teachings of philosophers of a bygone era contributed to the atmosphere of uncertainty which led to political instability. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes abstains from the use of the visual effect through Frontispieces that were common in his time. The Frontispiece of *Leviathan* puts forth the argument that for peace to be preserved, the enemies of the State were to be 'kept under'. The contrast is between the dangerous forces namely the 'hostile military forces' that attack from the sea while artillery is fired from a fort near the shoreline to prevent the attack. The Frontispiece is divided by a line with the forces of peace on the top and those causing disorder beneath it.²⁷ Hobbes believed that the definition of words should be fixed and not left ambiguous. The state of political and social uncertainty was precipitated by the free use of language and thus human desires breathed life into concepts upon which the community could not agree. Thus, since humans in the community could not decide on the meanings of words, an external power was needed, a Sovereign for Hobbes, who would fix the meanings of words on their behalf.

However, Hobbes' writing is full of imageries as Quentin Skinner shows. One such imagery is that of the 'sea monster' which is represented as a creature of great strength. This was in

²⁷ Magnus Kristiansson and Johan Tralau, 'Hobbes Hidden Monster: A New Interpretation of the Frontispiece of *Leviathan*', *European Journal of Political Theory*, 13, pp. 299-320.

reference to the Civil War where he believes that if the State was made as powerful as that monster, then the English Parliament had no option. The Sovereign had to be permitted 'to personate such a monster if we are to have any prospect of living together in security and peace'.²⁸ The State was conceived less in juridical terms than as protective force.²⁹

Humans are not by nature a political animal but need a regulatory figure that could be authorised to protect them. Hobbes used the language of absolutist goals along with civic republicanism and liberal contractarianism. Hobbes himself was a master rhetorician as seen in the use of metaphors like 'a state of war of all against all' or portrayal of the sovereign as a 'mortal God'. Also his notion of the sovereign was a careful construct meant to delineate a space where one voice, that of the sovereign, would have primacy over that of the others. Thus, what was good or bad or just or unjust would be decided by the Sovereign. Hobbes wanted the State as the dominant entity in political life. The English Civil war was said to be caused by the orators who stirred up the religious sentiments of the masses and thus created sectarian discord in society. Thomas Hobbes believed republican assemblies that were wont to free play of rhetorical abilities were the cause of civil war and seditious tendencies. Despite these broad trends that seemed to underplay the importance of rhetoric in everyday politics, we find certain palpable changes taking place in the political life of Europe from this time.

In Rousseau's conception, sovereignty flowed from an agreement among individuals but this sovereign was to be located inside the community.³⁰ The collective body of citizens would themselves constitute the sovereign and thus have strong internal bonds by virtue of which they would have an obligation to obey the State. Society was to be re-ordered in a way that the schism between the public and private worlds of citizens would be reduced. Since the basis of the State was a hypothetical contract among the citizens, Rousseau believed that the State could have no interest that was different from the interests of the citizens. The sovereign would ensure the civil liberties of the citizens as by virtue of the social contract the citizens have given up the right to determine issues relating to justice privately. But this submission to the sovereign by citizens did not entail that the citizens obey something totally in dissonance with their inner natures. Here the concept of General Will is introduced by Rousseau.³¹ The

²⁸ Quentin Skinner, *From Humanism to Hobbes: Studies in Rhetoric and Politics*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 221.

²⁹ Ibid p.304.

³⁰ M Cranston (ed.), *J J Rousseau, The Social Contract*, (London: Penguin), 1968, p.61.

³¹ Ibid pp.76-7.

citizens themselves determine what is in their collective interest by way of meetings in open assemblies where decisions on public affairs are arrived at. Thus ‘moral freedom’ can be located only in the self-governing community when humans are not governed by their selfish desires alone. Rousseau preferred a language of rhetoric that would make a conscientious appeal to the individual to bypass his selfish interest taught to him by contemporary use of reason and come to a balanced judgment about what constituted the common good. Rousseau’s figure of the lawmaker was to guide people towards their contract without recourse to violence.

Garsten opines that Rousseau’s community emerged from the human feelings of pity and self-love that connected humans with one another. Thus, sovereignty was to be felt as the expression of shared feelings of community that arise from within and is not imposed from above. Rousseau assumes the existence of pre-existing common bonds as the basis for the creation of a new community. Thus, Rousseau is the harbinger of modern nationalism in a way because his rhetoric seems to place judgments made in the name of the community not mediated through rhetoric but from the combination of values and feelings that flow from the body of citizens and their desire for collective freedom. Rousseau’s ideas have focussed on how to ‘persuade without convincing’ by appealing to common sentiments. This would help an individual to identify with others.³²

As is evident from the above discussion, modern notions of Statehood have oscillated between two sources of sovereignty. The first question is whether to place sovereign powers in the hands of a few individuals who would rule over others or whether to situate sovereignty in a context in which it seems to emanate from the community. Rhetoric is essential in both the situations. In modern times though the need for commonality has remained, it is arrived at through representation. Rhetoric is no longer given the exalted status it was given in ancient times where a citizen could speak up for the polis. Rather the goal of rhetorical persuasion is to shape the idea of the constitutive elements of the polity and the position of the citizen within that community.

Economic Justice and Rhetoric

³²B Garsten, *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment*, (Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2006) pp.74-5.

Karl Marx criticised the notion of private rights because it heralded a system where private gains was treated as the norm. Marx felt that the assumption implicit in liberal democracies is that society would be managed better if citizens manage their own affairs as the public domain tends to remain in the clutches of a few experts. Formal citizenship by this logic does not demand that citizens take part actively in public affairs as the fate of political questions is left in the hands of career or expert politicians who represent the people and participate in parliament. Speaking or learning rhetoric is not a task that is expected of the citizen. Marxists assume that labour is a 'representative anecdote', social beings are influenced by the mode of production, class struggle is inevitable, political action being restrained by development of productive forces and the tendency of the ruling classes to preserve power through political institutions.³³ Marxism has been closely connected with the 'hermeneutics of suspicion'.³⁴ The 'two problems' which Aune identifies are making the intended audiences accept Marxist prescriptions and seeing 'liberatory processes' through 'communicative action'.³⁵

In modern times, especially after the Renaissance, classical notions of society being based on some trans-historical entity like God or being mediated by an individual or a collective body came to be questioned and subsequently rejected. The reality of authority in the political sphere was that it was not determined or fixed with reference to some externality. Quentin Skinner points out that sovereignty is not equated with the Prince or with any collective and deliberative body. Rather sovereignty is connected with an abstract State.³⁶ Claude Lefort opines that there was no fixed content in political power after the French or the American revolutions.³⁷ Authority is partially occupied by agents who struggle to represent the interests of every citizen. Thus, citizens are not a part of some complete society but belong to a society where a daily plebiscite is an everyday phenomenon. Unity of the society needs to be represented every day. This has been interpreted by scholars as the shallowness of modern politics. We dwell on the ideas of Hannah Arendt in some depth in a later section. Arendt felt that the ancient idea of political association contrasts with the modern notions as the idea of sovereignty is expressed as the final will of the State. This is in contrast to the ancient regimes where politics was seen to be open-ended and a creative endeavour on the part of the citizens. In the modern State, the discursive power of rhetoric is not evenly tilted for the

³³ James Arnt Aune, *Rhetoric and Marxism*, (Routledge: London and New York), p.13.

³⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, (Trans. by Denis Savage) (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1970), pp.32-6.

³⁵ James Arnt Aune, op. cit. pp.13-4.

³⁶ Hent Kalmo and Quentin Skinner, *Sovereignty in Fragments: The Past, Present and Future of a Contested Concept*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.40.

³⁷ Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, (Trans. by D Macey) (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), pp.17-9.

citizen vis a vis the State. Arendt does not address the issue or the subject of rhetoric in her works but her writings open a window for such comparisons.

We have to now see how this has impacted rhetoric. Citizenship as is clear from the discussion above has always assumed the existence of legitimate differences in society and since overarching ideas of religion and morality are frowned upon, the traditionally used values and principles that held a society together are questioned or loosened. In Athens, a great deal of emphasis was given on a dimension of existence that was universal in nature that did not seek to bulldoze differences among citizens but made them subordinate to the polis. Keeping the citizens' private affairs out of public debate and excluding women, slaves and children from the polis meant that there was a strong sense of some higher principle of Athenian society. However modern democracies see a role reversal in the sense that there is no fixed order of hierarchies or ranks thereof. Modern day democracy excludes the idea of society being complete and formed. Thus, formal notions of equality allow a greater number of agents to enter the political arena maybe with differing conceptions of the common good. The increased plurality has given way to some kind of instability as there are different perceptions of the universal principles that give society coherence. Ideologies are by-product of the modern day political system wherein a system of meanings give cubic content to the higher principles. However, at this point it is worth making the observation that even the universal principles are based to some extent in some aspect of society. For example, the formal freedoms that are granted by the modern State to citizens like equality and freedom are premised on the interests of the self-interested bourgeoisie. We find similar notions in the creation of several other stereotypes like the White Anglo Saxon Protestant man, the true inhabitant or ethic inhabitants etc. Freeden shows that ideologies can both approve of and disapprove of certain universal principles. Ideologies draw maps of facts that might be disputed. The collective nature of an ideology makes it a 'public property'.³⁸ This brings us to the next discussion of aesthetic representation where politics does not represent society but only a semblance of it.

This creates a gap in society that can never be bridged and elimination of this gap would, to use Ankersmit's term, lead to tyranny.³⁹ Politics is an art of representing others and does not follow set rules but rather is important from stylistic points of view. Modern democracies

³⁸ Michael Freeden, 'Ideology and Political Theory', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 11(1), p. 22.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13569310500395834>.

³⁹ F R Ankersmith, *Aesthetic Politics: Political Philosophy Beyond Fact and Value*, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1996) p.45

follow indirect modes of representation as discussed above and representatives of the people are successful to the extent that they can fashion themselves according to the needs of their voters. The target group or the audience is important for the representative. Citizens on the other hand are able to view themselves from the point of view of others and this is quite akin to a 'civilising mission' as the citizen can be forced to cut down on his self-interest or make it in tune with others. For the field of rhetoric, this has repercussions as this process highlights the aesthetic distance between society and the State. The framing of public policy is a highly selective exercise and involves both acceptance as well as dismissal of an opponent's views.

Rhetoric thus enables alternative representations of time and space by varied styles of representing opinion. Certain styles gain salience at particular points in time but with the expansion of communicative technologies, the public image of the politician has become of paramount importance. Thus modernity implies a reconfiguration of the dimensions of politics though it is rooted in the past. Citizenship is removed from attachment to one community but becomes an open ended project where different kinds of group identity can be imagined. Rhetoric might have lost its place as an elevated speech and becomes more accommodative to various traditions. Public power does not have rhetoric as its primary force as bureaucracy does that job but in the sphere of society, rhetoric does open up new avenues of contest. The need for representation of citizens has not diminished and thus rhetoric permeates society at various levels so that the needs for representation are met.

Hannah Arendt on Rhetoric

One of the most powerful defence for rhetoric has been given by Hannah Arendt in her book 'The human condition'⁴⁰. Arendt develops her theory by building upon Aristotle's theory of political judgement as well as from Habermas' theory of communicative action. The 'political' according to Arendt is a space where the citizen appears in a condition of plurality and where opinion is the decisive factor. She analyses the polis in ancient Greece where she finds that the citizen leaves behind what is his own and enters into a realm of commonality. Action and speech were of central importance to the Greeks with speech being the more important of the two. But if these two elements are constitutive of politics, then the speech must be public in nature. An individual can be opinionated only within the polis. A polis is

⁴⁰ Michael J. McDonald (ed.), op. cit. p.628-34.

that community where speech and action are found.⁴¹ Stateless persons are deprived of the right to have their own opinions.⁴²

Politics is meaningful when citizens can manage their affairs by speaking with, engaging with and persuading one another. Wherever these acts of persuasion are absent, it can be surmised for sure that politics is also absent. Arendt uses the category of persuasion more than a direct usage of the term 'rhetoric'. Within the true political community, appearance which is directly connected with the use of rhetoric does not veil reality. Reality in Arendt's conception is not to be confused with objectivity. For public affairs, reality is characterised by the presence of various perspectives and for which no common denominator can ever be devised.⁴³ Political actions require multiple judges because of the inherent subjectivity involved. Arendt opines that even the most objective of parameters leave out certain important characteristics of an object. Arendt does not develop the point in an elaborate manner but taking cue from Nietzsche we can say that one's opinion must be traced to the object under consideration. For example, our inherent ideas and opinions might induce us to take certain stands on certain issues. But if we look deeply then we might see that our opinion might have developed without considering the issue at hand. We might have come to the same opinion by studying different objects. Thus, no amount of studying different pre-conditions might actually take us to the truth of an object. It is only when one voices his opinion in the political realm and when others hear to and respond to their opinion can the truth emerge. Arendt says that there is an element of truth in every opinion whenever a person considers an opinion and does not simply voice his prejudices or his thoughts on ancillary matters. But complexities can arrive here also. A person might develop his opinion on a particular subject but then that opinion might have been the opinion of someone else. For example, the beauty pageant might be judging beauty from the perspective of someone else.

This holds great relevance for our modern day politicians when they cater to political symbolism of various kinds. So when conflicting opinions enter into a dialogue with one another, it gives an opportunity to an individual to reflect on whether he is actually committed to those ideas. Other than being confronted with different or antagonistic opinions, there is no way in which individuals can form an opinion.

⁴¹ Hannah Arendt, 'What ist Politik? *Fragmente aus dem Nachlab*', (Trans. by Ursula Ludz), (Munich: Piper), p.52.

⁴² Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 1966, p.296.

⁴³ Ibid.

Arendt in emphasizing the importance of speech does not hold the view that appearance is a mask for the reality that lies behind it. Nay it is through appearance that reality is constituted and no common measurement in objective terms can capture the contours of this reality.⁴⁴ Opinions are not derided as the children of a lesser God but the kernel of knowledge lies in ‘perspectival experiences of the world’. However, Arendt adds a caveat here when she says that one’s perspective must be contingent on the particular object. Any perspective formed without engagement of an object and sans appearances is not an opinion but a ‘subjective fantasy’. There remains an inherent truth to each opinion and in the ‘public realm of speech’ opinions are revealed. The validity of an opinion increases when confronted with a plurality of opinions and helps understand the commitment of an individual to a particular opinion.⁴⁵

Every opinion has truth in it as mentioned above but it is only when that opinion is challenged in the public realm, that we can say that it is a valid opinion and not a ‘subjective fantasy’.⁴⁶ A statesman excels in the art of rhetoric and understands the greatest number of viewpoints since political acts are subjectively analysed. Action reveals itself only to the storyteller who makes out its meaning in words but a mere linguistic appearance does not mean anything as the context in which these words are uttered is important. Since Arendt talks of the context in defining political actions, she comes to the conclusion that rhetoric or public speech is not to be judged by abstract standards of veracity. Political action opens up through a plurality of opinions. Power consists not in the achievement of Machiavellian glory but in choosing the right words at the right time. The truth arises from these words embedded in a temporal setting which is possible only when citizens are in pursuit of the ‘good life’ in a setting like the polis.⁴⁷ Thought is essential but of greater importance is speech because speech enables a rhetor to participate in a given situation. That is where the greatness of a rhetor lies. Thus, rhetoric illuminates time and brings it to public focus. For Arendt also, rhetoric implies a sense of agency. Arendt rejects the Plutonian idea of force and persuasion because in a polis the public issues are decided by dialogue only. The citizens can achieve the good life only through creation of a vibrant public sphere and for that rhetoric must play an important role.

⁴⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p.50.

⁴⁵ Hannah Arendt, ‘Truth and Politics’ in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (Harmondsworth : Penguin), p. 238.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, (New York: Penguin), p.260-61.

As we have seen through the above discussion, political theory has tended to view rhetoric mostly in the pejorative sense. However, Hannah Arendt remains a prominent figure who views rhetoric as significant in its own capacity. For her, the ancient Greek city-state or the Polis, as a 'second order of existence', was a modality that allowed the citizen to leave his individuality aside and enter into a common life which is associated with politics. Politics is associated with 'speech' and 'action' and speech is primary. Speech is a form of labour that involves an audience. It is through participation in such speech acts that politics is created. Common affairs are managed in the polis by citizens who speak with and try to persuade each other to their point of view.

John Rawls and other Liberals on Rhetoric

We look at alternate ideas in the conceptions of theorists in the twentieth century from whose works the place of rhetoric in public life can be analysed. John Rawls' works 'Political Liberalism' and 'A theory of justice' is relevant here. In the first book, the emphasis is on what should constitute social justice in a liberal, constitutional democratic state whereas in the latter the idea of justice that is worked out in terms of institutional principles in the first work can be react as a political principle to gain legitimacy in a liberal democratic state that is presumably plural.

Thus 'rigged definite descriptions' that can potentially permit the evolution of biased outcomes by people in their own favour are ruled out in favour of outcomes that are desirable for society as a whole. Rawls recognises the existence of moral disagreement in society but his novelty lies in thinking 'about its political implications'.⁴⁸ He tries to develop neutral principles not only among differing conceptions of what was the good life but also among 'comprehensive world views and metaphysical systems'.⁴⁹ These principles are described as procedural expressions of the categorical imperative.⁵⁰ In his later writings, Rawls dealt with the idea of justice built through an 'overlapping consensus' that could 'persist over generations' and 'gain a sizeable body of adherents in a more or less just constitutional regime, a regime in which the criterion of justice is that political conception itself'.⁵¹ Rawls maintained that only views that were reasonable be part of the consensus. The principles that flow out of the overlapping consensus are legitimate and no individual would have to justify the principles to others in a persuasive manner. In the context of differences between his

⁴⁸ Ian Shapeiro, *The Moral Foundations of Politics*, (New Delhi, Aakar Books), 2004, p.117.

⁴⁹ Ibid p.118.

⁵⁰ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1999), pp.222-23.

⁵¹ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 15.

deontological approach, the distribution of rights stands independent from any conception of the good. The conception of the good would be ‘thin’ so that it could work with people whose ideas were widely different.⁵² In his later works, Rawls believed that social goods should benefit the least advantaged sections of society called the difference principle. Accordingly, the ‘social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that ‘social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged...and b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity’.⁵³ Regarding the distribution of social goods, Rawls believes that the government can influence the distribution.⁵⁴

One of the most important ideas that run through all of Rawls’ works is that of public reason. The abiding purpose of public reason is to shape social institutions according to reasonable practises that each citizen can accept. Legitimacy is tied up with the conception of public reason and for any law to be legitimate it needs to be justified to all and sundry from everyone’s perspective. Thus, reason places the equality and the freedom of every citizen on a high pedestal. For Rawls, a true community can emerge only when persons are engaged in just practises. These just practises are essentially comprised of person engaged in facing each other and engaged in creating principles that is acceptable to each and everybody. Two questions can be brought in here if we take Rawls seriously. The first question refers to the issue of who would owe public reason to whom. The second question refers to who is expected to comply with the requirements of public reason. Since Rawls works in the context of a democratic society, it is evident that public reason is owed to the citizen. But the second part of the question begs a more complex answer. Rawls believes that both citizens and public officials owe an explanation to public reason. Here the citizen is situated in a liberal context and thus his political behaviour is shaped here. Free and equal citizens in a democratic society have a special obligation to ‘explain to one another’ how the principles or the values that they espouse can stand the test of public reason. It is based on the assumption that all citizens are part of a ‘true community’ whose members interact with one another ‘openly’. The second question that can be asked refers to the subject matter of public reason. Rawls asks, with reference to the matters that stand scrutiny to public reason that which ones are to be regulated by laws. Rawls’ answer is that ‘constitutional essentials’ and ‘matters of basic justice’ are to be regulated by laws. Constitutional principles refer to the overall

⁵² John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, op. cit. pp. 350-58.

⁵³ Ibid p.266.

⁵⁴ Ibid pp.78-81.

structure of government and the political process. Basic justice is traced to the basic structure of society namely equality of opportunity, income, wealth and minimum levels of welfare that are outside the purview of constitutional principles. Rawls keeps the conception of matters regulated by laws narrow because he feels that sans recourse to comprehensive doctrines, the political justice must be able to answer all questions reasonably.

Rawls does not mention the word rhetoric but it is crystal clear from the above discussion that with his insistence on the optimal use of public reason in a democratic framework, it is difficult to look askance at rhetoric. It is true that rhetoric is constrained by public reason of not only the rhetor but also the public reason of all and sundry. But even if citizens act within the bounds of legitimate public reason, for meaningful exercise of this faculty they need to be constantly engaged in communication with each other. Perhaps we might stretch this argument a bit and say that we find in Rawls a fear of rhetoric as it has the potential to usurp stability and order by not letting public reason flourish.

Since we talked of equality of opportunity in Rawls, it is necessary to bring in Michael Sandel who in recent years has talked of merit being an imperfect measure of equality in society as we occupy different positions in life. Sandel in effect circumscribes rhetoric in a way by making it dependent on our social context. Thus, despite the optimal usage of rhetoric we cannot rise in life if we are disadvantaged.

Thus, if we start our enquiry of rhetoric with what Aristotle had to opine, then we will find that rhetoric was about power no doubt but was never a method by which the rhetor or the speaker could be able to express himself fully. Rather rhetorical techniques provided for ways in which the agency of the target audience could be navigated across to realise the inherent power of speech. Rhetoric could achieve absolutely anything as anyone can be persuaded of just anything by the astute and wise rhetor. But then the audience was the primary entity whose tastes and interests the rhetor had in mind. Thus agency power resided both with the rhetor as well as with the audience as they engaged in a dialogue, even if it may be imperfect with each other. Modern notions of selfhood perhaps do not permit us at first glance to use what Aristotle opined about rhetoric.

Rhetoric and Anti-Enlightenment Politics

The moot point is that of the thinkers in this category are that all putative knowledge claims to truth are to be questioned. Following Wittgenstein, Richard Rorty believes that the notion of truth can be conceived as part of a language game and that truth is defined as part of a

social consensus and rationality as the outcome of conversational agreement or civility. Thus in Rorty's opinion, hermeneutics should replace philosophy and it should be the aim to 'keep the conversation going'.⁵⁵

Hermeneutics concerns itself with how to understanding the 'meaning of specific statements against a backdrop of received intellectual and textual tradition'. Interpretive choices are understood within the constraints of a 'prevailing circumstance'.⁵⁶ According to Zimmerman, there are three principles that guide hermeneutic reflection. Social subjects cannot be studied in isolation from their material and social worlds. The capacity to decipher truth is shaped by inherited meaning. This truth is discovered through the use of language that determines the way an unfamiliar terrain is inserted into known structures of meaning.⁵⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer believes that understanding in society is reached through a process of dialogue which new perspectives are encompassed through an expansion of conceptual horizons.⁵⁸ Derrida however does not situate the object of rhetorical enquiry in a particular time. Through a process of 'deconstruction', he shows that a particular 'context is always open'.⁵⁹ The meaning that is sought to be conveyed through language is always open to re-interpretation at a later stage. Rather than respond to the needs of the times, speech confirms or contests priorities and closes off an alternative thereby setting new expectations. Thus, Derrida calls time 'aporetic'.⁶⁰ The process of interpretation opens up to an undecidable future without surrendering entirely to it. This is what Derrida calls the 'coming of the other'.⁶¹

J L Austin described the 'performative' aspect of language in creating new social facts that shaped reality. However, the performative dimension of language does not exclude attempts at studying human action scientifically.⁶² MacIntyre comes to the conclusion that human beings have free will and thus attempts at creating a science of politics is bound to fail.⁶³ For example, if we look at the body of literature that studies the transition to democracy, we may find that different scholars hold different views. Tocqueville connected it with egalitarian

⁵⁵Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, (Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 136-64.

⁵⁶James Martin, 'Rhetoric, Discourse and the Hermeneutics of Public Speech', *Politics*, 2020, pp. 1-15.

⁵⁷J Zimmerman, *Hermeneutics: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 10-5.

⁵⁸H-G Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (London, Continuum, 1989), pp. 385-91.

⁵⁹J Derrida and M Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, (trans. G Donis) (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p. 20.

⁶⁰J Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, (London: Routledge, 1994), p. XIX.

⁶¹J Derrida, *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews: 1971-2001*, (eds. and trans. E. Rottenberg, 2002), pp. 16-7.

⁶²For details see J L Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

⁶³Alaistair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 88-108.

mores, Lipset with modernisation, Barrington Moore with the development of a bourgeoisie and John Stephens with an organised working class.

Scholars who criticise the Enlightenment project of absolute truth claims also bring in the issue of affiliatory systems that are inherited and thus lend meaning to action. However, these systems are not to be taken as granted as they can be ‘at least partly mobilised by political entrepreneurs who stand to benefit from either maintaining existing system of group solidarities or dismantling them and replacing them with different ones’.⁶⁴

Discourse and Rhetoric

It is at this juncture that I propose to discuss in some amount of detail what Michel Foucault would have us believe about the nature of power and subjectivity.

The concept of a ‘discourse’ is essential to understand the role of rhetoric and its relation with the latter. Discourse refers to a way of understanding the society or some aspect thereof like identity or relations. Discourse which includes talk as well as writings on the reality around us plays an active role in creation or in changing the social world. Discourse creates categories of meaning through which reality can be understood. Something which is prescribed as ‘meaningful’ is sought to be made ‘real’ through discourse. Discourse creates the social and linguistic conditions which breathe life into the categories like democracy and make it real. Schneider believes that truths do not exist ‘out there’ but are created through human interactions.⁶⁵ Stuart Hall defines discourse as a series of statements that are connected and integrated with each other and which form a ‘discursive formation’.⁶⁶ These statements share the same style and support a particular strategy which may be a ‘common institutional’ or a particular ‘political drift or pattern’. For example, we can locate a discursive formation in the ‘nation’ or a ‘national identity’ that was described by Benedict Anderson as an ‘imagined community’. This discourse of nationalism gave shape to the idea of a people and this idea influenced their actions.

For Hall there are essentially five elements involved in the discourse of nationalism. First, the discourse involves the circulation of national histories, literature and the media that help in the creation of stories, historical events, national symbols and rituals that entail shared

⁶⁴For details see Courtney-Jung, *Then I Was Black: South African Political Identities in Transition*, (Connecticut, Yale University Press, 2000).

⁶⁵Florian Schneider, ‘Getting the Hang of Discourse theory’, <https://www.politicseastasia.com/studying/getting-the-hang-of-discourse-theory>, 06.05.2013.

⁶⁶Stuart Hall, ‘the West and the Rest: Discourse and Power’ in Stuart Hall and Bram Gieben (eds.) *Formations of Modernity*, (Cambridge, Polity Press), 1992, pp.275-331.

experiences. Second, the national identity is invoked through a spirit to restore the ‘former glories’ as the nation is regarded to be an ancient community that has continued well into the present day. Third, a certain behavioural pattern is sought to be inculcated among individuals so that ‘national values’ are imbibed. Fourth, the genesis of the nation is traced to a distant past and is thus shrouded in mystery. Fifth, the national identity is attached to a ‘holy land’ and the ‘chosen people’ who are out to fulfil some mission ordained by history.⁶⁷

Michel Foucault’s work suggests that ‘notions of rhetorical agency are always already constituted by discourse’.⁶⁸ His study focussed on the history of language and the relation between words and things in different historical periods. According to Foucault, human action is understood to have been related with language and can be understood as even being created by language. This process was a departure from modernity where the central focus of study was the ‘modern man’ who could attain mastery over nature through his actions. For Foucault, power cannot be identified with any particular boundary, location or an identity. Rather, power is like a force that encompasses all of us. Right from the morning when we wake up till the time we go to bed, we are under the force of some power or other that regulates and governs us. For Foucault the world consists of structures of knowledge that are discursively constituted. These discourses are formed and under certain conditions transform themselves into unchallenged truths that appear normal. So different ‘knowledge regimes’ and ‘regimes of truth’ are created that Foucault tries to understand the structure of these rules and their development over time on subjects like mental health, criminology and sexuality. In the 1960’s, Foucault’s conception of power as made out from his work titled ‘Madness and Civilisation; A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason’ was quintessentially negative.⁶⁹ To give an example, Foucault uses the words ‘censor’ and ‘represses’ as characteristics of power.

But by the 1970s, Foucault is of the opinion that power is not entirely negative. Rather power is actually a positive thing as it produces new objects and new truths. In his book titled ‘Discipline and Punish’, Foucault discusses the role of the prison to support his argument. He is of the opinion that the prison actually produces a threat to stability in society and thus in the process serves to justify the modalities of disciplining and punishment that permeate

⁶⁷ Stuart Hall, ‘The Question of Cultural Identity’ in Stuart Hall, David Held and Tony McGrew (ed.) *Modernity and its Futures*, (Cambridge, Polity Press) 1992, pp 273-326.

⁶⁸ Robert Danisch, ‘Rhetorical Agency in a Neoliberal Age: Foucault, Power, Agency and Ethos’ in Kim Hong Nguyen (eds.) *Rhetoric in Neoliberalism* (Switzerland, Springer Nature), 2017, p.64.

⁶⁹ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, (London and New York, Routledge), 2001, pp.35-59.

society.⁷⁰ Foucault brings in the example of Bentham's panoptic vision to show that the inmate in a prison might not be physically watched by the jailor at all times but the prison itself was designed in a way that the inmate always had a feeling that he was under the watchful gaze of the jailor. The inmate is unable to see the jailor but is under his gaze and thus becomes an object that bears power. Foucault does not limit his argument to the prison only and makes the claim that all individuals in modern society are under some discourse at all points of time. It is something that ensnares us all. Either we accept that discourse or we go on to reject it but we cannot escape from that discourse.

Foucault locates the surveillance function of the panoptic in the modern state and it operates irrespective of whether the individual who is an object of power realises it or not. Thus, individual agency is either limited or controlled by power. In any case even if the individual rejects power and tries to create his own discourse, he is forced to negotiate with power within which he is trapped. One important takeaway at this juncture is that the agency and even resistance that is located in deliberations that take place in the public sphere is limited. The first reason why this is so is because even if we realise that we are trapped within some form of disciplinary practise, then also we cannot identify the sources of power. Foucault points out that power has no agency through which it operates and we will miss the more important functions of power if we try to identify a definitive source of power. Second, truth claims are absolutely essential in a public forum and they can only be made ironically as is demonstrated by his reliance on positivist claims. This would obfuscate the aim of rationally arrived at decisions. Third, arguments in the public sphere are often made seriously and in a dedicated manner. Foucault wants us to avoid this type of agency as it makes clear in a rather raw manner who has power and who does not have power. These identifications of power with particular individuals or laws or objects would be superficial. So Foucault makes us radically rethink modern notions of power and subjectivity. He says that notions of selfhood are creations of certain historical forces and so is the idea that subjects embody power as autonomous agents.

Knowledge is not objective and does not portray reality but is created by power relations. These relations of power are supported by institutions throughout historical milieus like governments, schools, prisons and mental asylums. Thus, what makes knowledge true is not its depiction of reality but power. Power does not retain its relational quality as it does not

⁷⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (translated from the French by Alan Sheridan), (New York, Vintage Books), 1995, pp.195-231.

belong to individuals but the discourse that is created constitutes an exercise of power over its subjects. So knowledge deployed in a particular way is an exercise of power over known subjects. The creators of the discourse have the power to make it true. So according to Foucault, power is not oppressive but it creates the social world where objects are defined, made different from each other and made true. But the exercise of power though not oppressive in the conventional sense also implies a closure or limitation of perceptions. The 'subject' who is a creation of the discourse and as a 'known' entity is subject to the exercise of power, is markedly different from the notion of the modern autonomous individuated self that is sovereign. Language is not something that the subject uses to express itself but it is language belonging to the discourse that speaks through the subject. So the subject is not in practical terms the authors of the statements made or the meanings expressed through use of language. Language has rules embedded within itself and an individual has to situate the self within those rules as well as the systems of meaning in the culture.

Thus excessive emphasis on individuals shifts our attention from the chief characteristic of power which is best treated as a discourse. Here we can find parallels between Foucault and Aristotle taking us back us to the idea that all of Western philosophy is either Aristotelian or Plutonian in origin. What both Aristotle and Foucault share in common is the identification of an external judge who constrains the agency of the rhetor.⁷¹ For Aristotle, this judge is the audience of the rhetor whereas for Foucault this judge is located within social practises of power. But the difference is also quite stark. Aristotle finds his rhetor wearing the garb of a public figure who engages in a quest for the good life by interacting with the audience. For Foucault, it is not the public figure of the rhetor but the private individual that is important. For Foucault, the kind of agency that we locate in Aristotle is not an option as the rhetor is already ensnared by a variety of social practises. Thus not the rhetor and the audience both occupy subject positions within the discourses of power. Foucault also discusses gay rights as an issue where the individual can actually secure rights by virtue of deliberative action. Such a conception has a touch of rhetoric as it talks of deliberation and the self is constituted as something that possesses rights. To create new possibilities for everyday existence, the existing relations of power need to be altered. An individual can be a part of this aesthetic possibility by refusing to accept the existing categories of knowledge and then by creating

⁷¹Robert Danisch, 'Rhetorical Agency in a Neoliberal Age: Foucault, Power, Agency and Ethos' in Kim Hong Nguyen (ed.) op. cit. p.65.

new categories. The process whereby new categories are produced and displayed exceeds the act of resistance.

Foucault goes beyond the instrumental value of resistance as merely self-expression and opines that through resistance an individual analyses the structures that order society, refuses to be a part of that order and produces new categories of thinking. Foucault in his 'On the use of pleasure' and 'The care of the self' produces arguments that provide a roadmap as to how an individual can recognise one's own self as the subject of one's own actions. One needs to produce one's own self and then needs to display that new production to create a new set of relations with others. New forms of power relations can never be produced when the self interacts with the social structure. Rather an individual needs to get into a relation with one's own self. In short, Foucault's argument is that the process of resistance is connected with the process of production.

Foucault's later work on governmentality needs to be brought in at this juncture. Governmentality as interpreted by Foucault refers to changes brought about within the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries with regard to the regulations on society and control over population. With the gradual disintegration of the feudal system, the population growth and the creation of administrative states, the European states began to conceive of their citizens as a population or a body in which groups had to be classified, managed and controlled. Statistics were created so that knowledge could be produced about populations and it is within this group or a particular population that an individual had to act as a subject. Now whether this formulation can be lifted unproblematically into the context of societies Foucault hasn't studied is an interesting issue. If we do so, then we might have to partake of Hayden White's criticism that Foucault cannot pull out himself from enlightenment values. But to come back to the discussion, it is a discourse that sets the parameters of what constitutes knowledge and what is doable or sayable in a particular context. Thus, governmental power is secured not by means of force as happened in earlier times but by new found administrative techniques that make the society manage it. Foucault focuses on the relation of an individual with oneself as a way of resistance to this form of governmentality. An insight that can be gained after reading Foucault is that history is visualised as characterised by changes in the nature of breaks that are not the outcome of human agency. Rather by focussing on the relation of an individual with one's own self, what Foucault hints at is the importance of rhetorical practises on a smaller scale. Whereas classical rhetorical theory would rather that human agency is lost in a situation where discourses are all pervasive, Foucault's focus is on

the subject created by governmentality that threatens modern notions of selfhood. But these two perspectives are not the antithesis of each other but both are to be seen as visualisations of power in relational terms. Foucault astutely pointed out that wherever there is power there is resistance but these might have been restricted to individual acts of self-creation. It is rhetorical practises that will provide us with a repertoire of examples and traditions as to how such acts of self-creation can be made more public. We need not critique modernity altogether as it has been stressed by hundreds of historians of modernity as well as by its lived experience that it can prove to be liberating force as well. Plus there is ample proof that pre modern forms of exploitation might have been worse off. So discursive practises created by social institutions like law and medicine authorise who can speak, the style of communication and how the speaking takes place. The wisdom of Aristotle's idea that character was not the property of a person seems to have been brought out by Foucault as well. Ethos remained a powerful source of persuasion and was a matter of judgement. So ethos or the character of a person is not ascribed by any source nor is it something that exists as a constant. Ethos is created as an outcome of the process of transactions in public life in which rhetoric plays the most important role. The orator or the rhetor engage in an interaction on the unsettled matters and thus by putting individuals into relations with each other, helps in the formation of the character of both the rhetor as well as the audience. Such an approach need not divest itself of meta-narratives like ideologies as well. Rhetorical practises thus depend upon this continuous dialogue that takes place between people by way of symbols, discourses and varied means of communication. Rhetorical practises might not or might depend on the modern notion of selfhood and is not a subset of discourse.⁷² Ethos as understood by Aristotle is important to rhetoric but I shall make a limited attempt to place ideology in the context of rhetoric as public announcements or speeches are made in the name of ideology or fashioned by ideology. Well before categories like populism landed on Indian shores, rich conceptual categories like communalism have been used to analyse Indian politics.

So in India where a tradition of public speaking is evident, we can well use ideology in the shoes of ethos to determine the quality or the kind of interaction that takes place between the rhetor and the audience. But this is not to say that we will take a complete detour from Foucault as he has correctly identified the behemoth that the modern State can become. With immense tools at its disposal and a great deal of power over media, the State can actually

⁷² Ibid pp. 65-79.

become a greater threat than it was in the eighteenth century. The question of ethos identified as ideology here places political interactions with others in society as central to the process of persuasion. So these relationships can be recast by placing them in the context of ideology. If rhetoric is identified with persuasion, then the agency of the rhetor is the ability to create new relationships with his audience through speeches, visual rhetoric, symbols etc more so in democratic contexts in India. So what Foucault identifies as agency when we establish a new relation with ourselves, we will do well to extrapolate that argument to relations we create with others in society. Without discounting the importance of discourses that ensnare us we can still go beyond the model of the economic or the self-interested man and place rhetoric in a context that traces its roots to Aristotle.

Ideas on Discourse

We now describe Laclau and Mouffe's ideas on what constitutes a discourse. Discourse consists of a 'system of meanings' and is not determined by the reality which is referred to.⁷³ This is influenced by the Saussurian views on signs. Signs consist of two aspects, namely the form which is the signifier and the content which is signified. The relationship between the signifier and what is sought to be signified is not fixed and is fluid as meanings attached to certain words emerge out of social interactions. Words constitute a system of meaning and from what is not signified by a particular word do we discern its meaning. So words and the reality which is ought to be captured changes with time. Since language has no specific meaning ergo social phenomenon also cannot be captured in an objective manner. Objectivity is produced through meanings produced out of social interaction and in this context Laclau and Mouffe differs with the tenets of Marxism. They argue that there is no difference between discursive and non-discursive phenomena and that our access to reality is mediated by 'systems of meaning' that are called discourses. Material universe is constituted by discourse. Social actions also derive their meaning from what they are not nay what they stand for. All social practises can be referred to as 'articulation' that can be understood as attempting to change the common meanings ascribed to them or attempting to change their meaning. Politics is understood as an activity that attempts to create the social arena in a particular way. What appears as 'sedimented' or 'natural' and 'objective' can also undergo a change with time and get articulated in a new way. So the aim is not to capture reality but to understand the ways in which meanings ascribed to reality are created. Thus as our study

⁷³ Marianne W Jorgensen and Louise J Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, (London, Sage, 2002) pp. 29.

shows, the issue of land reforms was understood as an economic exercise by all formations but after the 1990s this came to be seen as a way of creating a political base. Despite realising that the LFG portrayed the land reforms as an economic exercise.

For Foucault each historical epoch was identified with a particular 'regime of truth'. But for Laclau and Mouffe, a number of discourses exist simultaneously in society and they are in competition for the claim to truth. Thus, the process of creation of a discourse involves the competition for securing hegemonic control over minds.⁷⁴

We go on to discuss Fairclough and van Dijk who can be referred to as Critical Discourse Analysts.⁷⁵ Discourse is treated as a social world that constitutes the social world as well as being constituted by social practises. Identities and relations in society are constituted by the discursive practises which include both the production of texts as well as their consumption in terms of reception and interpretation. Thus, language which is treated as a discourse reflects social structures as well as plays a role in the formation of social structures. Fairclough observes that discursive practises do create new forms of politics but they are also influenced by societal forces that do not have a purely discursive character. These include the structure of the political system and the structure of the media. Discursive practises contribute to the production and the reproduction of unequal power relations in society between various social groups. Critical Discourse Analysts (CDA) differ from Foucault in that they rely on the notion of ideology to understand the patterns of domination and subjugation of social groups. Ideology constructs imaginary relations both between people and between people and the social formation they are a part of and CDA seeks to interpret representations of both the subjects and relations in society as these reflect power relations. Discursive practises play a role in furthering the interests of particular groups in society. CDA is committed to challenging the status quo in society and is desirous of social change. Hidden causes and connections are exposed to study the way power abuse in society, dominance and inequality are enacted and also resisted by text and talk in social and political context.⁷⁶

Discursive power is used to control individual beliefs and actions with the aim to further the interests of the dominant groups against the powerless sections. Political action was thus to be harnessed for the purpose of social change. For van Dijk, the macro level of analysis consists of terms like power, dominance and inequality while the use of language, discourses,

⁷⁴Ibid. pp. 33-4.

⁷⁵ Ibid pp. 60-96.

⁷⁶ Partha Basu, 'Discourse Analysis' in Bonita Aleaz and Partha Basu (eds.) *Revisiting Qualitative Methods in Social Science Research*, (New Delhi, Orient Blackswan) p.102.

verbal interactions and communication belonged to the micro level of the social order. For Fairclough, the use of language as a communicative event involves the dimensions of a text that might consist of a speech, a visual image or writing, a discursive practise that would concern itself with how texts are produced and consumed and social practises that lead to the origination of texts. Accordingly, there are three stages in CDA. First, the scholar must describe the formal properties and the linguistic features in a text, second for purposes of interpretation the scholar must focus on the text as an outcome of the process of production and how a text is used as a resource in the process of interpretation. Third the scholar must examine the relationship between the process of interaction and how the processes of production and interpretation are determined by society for purposes of explanation.

As mentioned in passing in the previous section, rhetorical discourse especially in contemporary times tends to focus on the use of symbols. The lexicon of social science refers to this field of knowledge as semiotics. Semiotics goes beyond the surface of a message studying both the verbal, visual and auditory signs to reveal the underlying structures of meaning and identifying or analysing the elements responsible for creating the underlying effects. It was the Paris School of semiotics that engaged extensively with rhetoric and later on the Michael Halliday inspired Sydney school of semiotics implicitly engaged with rhetoric.⁷⁷ The composition of the grammars of individual communicative modes was their endeavour whether it was in music, images, space, objects, animation etc. However, Halliday goes beyond the separation between grammar and rhetoric, that between langue and parole and between semantics, syntax and pragmatics. It sees language as a toolkit or as a resource for social action and linguistic structures as realising social practises. At each and every step, langue and parole are connected.

The Paris School

We first discuss the Paris school in brief. Roland Barthes in his work 'Mythologies' defined rhetoric as the form of bourgeois myth and the mythical signifier arranges itself as a set of fixed, related and insistent figures. Barthes goes on to discuss seven of these figures. He gives the example of the figure of tautology to show that it is an authoritative argument which is meant to be magical. Barthes goes on to study text- image relations in his 1964 work 'Image, Music, Text'. Barthes focus was on advertisements and he defined rhetoric as the 'signifying

⁷⁷ Theo Van Leeuwen, *Rhetoric and Semiotics*, Michael J McDonald (ed.), op. cit., p.673.

part of ideology' that was comprised of a 'set of connotators'.⁷⁸ Barthes believed that different rhetorical figures needed to be classified in order to study rhetoric.

Pioneering work has been done by Jacques Durand who follows Barthes' advice on the need for classification adding verbal and well as non-verbal, namely visual, examples in his 1970 work 'Rhetoric and the Advertising Image'.⁷⁹ Although Durand's work is bereft of the importance accorded to ideology by Barthes, there are certain insights that are important from the point of view of rhetoric. Visual metonyms substitute the part for the whole, the effect can also be substituted for the cause and a blank page might be left to indicate lack of change in a product. Durand discusses more than 70 rhetorical figures. Barthes opines that rhetoric is scattered throughout the text wherein persuasion is not achieved through argument but through use of signage that stimulate the formation of ideas that are the building blocks of ideology. Thus, rather than elaborately forming ideologies, the focus is on signage.

This makes advertising different from mass communication that has relied on the power of rhetoric that is persuasive in nature or from the hermeneutic tradition. Second, Barthes does not overtly deal with persuasive speech or with interpersonal communication. Rather the fact of how bourgeois myths in the form of ideas are communicated is what occupies Barthes. He does not focus on strategies that are necessary for communication despite requisite tools of such a genre playing a central tool in advertising. Language had a performative character as emphasised by speech theorists but Barthes chooses to ignore this. Bremond linked rhetorical figures to the accomplishment of certain rhetorical strategies like hedonistic, ethical or pragmatic strategies. Third, Barthes does indeed bring in rhetoric as a subject matter of semiotics but it advances a cynic view at the most of rhetoric. This is because rhetoric is visualised as an ideological device that needs to be unravelled to expose the manipulation inherent in its use.

Charles Sanders Peirce uses signs to develop a typology of rhetorical figures. Pierce describes rhetoric as the study of the requisite conditions that make transmission of signs from one person's mind to another person's mind possible and then he studies the formal conditions as to how certain symbols can appeal to the mind whereas others cannot. Thus, semiotics is not divorced from persuasion or rhetorical skills as in Barthes.

Social Semiotics

⁷⁸ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, (trans. Stephen Heath) (London: Fontana, 1977) p.49.

⁷⁹ Jacques Durand, 'Rhetoric and the Advertising Image', *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol.1, No.2, 1983, p.87.

Halliday who is regarded as another pioneer ushered in the study of social semiotics. Halliday makes only a cursory reference to rhetoric when he says that it is related to the use of language. He refers to the rhetorical concepts of 'expository, didactic, persuasive, descriptive and the like'.⁸⁰ For Halliday the medium or the channel is also important in the case of language as in face-to-face communication or mediated communication in the case of spoken speech or whether it is written. Halliday while maintaining the separation between grammar and rhetoric also tries to establish a relation between these two concepts. His contextual variables relate to what he refers to as the 'metafunctions' of language and from there to the specific grammatical and discourse systems.⁸¹ Thus, the textual function of language is related to the 'internal organisation of a sentence as a thematic construct and the cohesive relation that linked one sentence with another'.

Halliday underscores the role of the context in determining the nature of language used. The characteristic features of a particular situation function as the determinants of a text. Those who make signs and those who analyse signs play a crucial role in determining how rhetorical aims would be realised and whether they would be or would not be constrained by the context that are also socially fashioned.

Halliday studies metaphor and metonymy and terms them as 'incongruent' realisations and here the term 'rhetorical transference' is used.⁸² Nominalisations are incongruent as they are meant to represent a process but they end up representing an object. Nominalisations would be better realised by a verb instead of the noun that is used to describe them. These are connected with style and even if these elements make up some part of the total intended meaning of the text, Halliday refuses to connect these with ideology as they are a part of the style. What comes out as completely congruent might turn out to be flat whereas what comes out as completely incongruent might sound artificial and superlative. Nominalisation allows for the obliteration of agency as it hides responsibility and thus reflects bias. Halliday also discusses modes wherein he brings in the concept of genres. By genre, Halliday refers to the different stages that are christened in a particular way to indicate the rhetorical purpose it is intended to serve. Each state contains similar acts of rhetoric and thus is similar as regards linguistic structures. The overall sequence of all the stages is the reflection of a strategy that is meant to achieve a particular goal.

⁸⁰ Michael Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic*, (London, Edward Arnold), 1978, pp 43-5.

⁸¹ Ibid pp.222-4.

⁸² Michael Halliday, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, (London, Edward Arnold), 1985, p.322.

Having said this, there are some stages that might not be strictly essential to the fulfilment of the intended purpose. Leeuwen identifies certain features can be identified in this approach. First, all communication is conceived of as strategic. Since my thesis proposes to study rhetoric in the political context we can afford to think along with Halliday as politics is ultimately a game of words that is played with the sole motive of gaining power in any form. In fact, it is difficult to think of a different definition of politics. Second, Halliday's thesis undoubtedly brings in the question of agency. Genres are meant to perform specific rhetorical tasks but then they are culturally conditioned. This makes a genre receptive to critical interrogation as societal mores might change and the genre must reflect that since it is a strategic mode of rhetorical action. So a genre is never prey to over determination and is moulded according to the context by the rhetor. Whenever the genre is bereft of the social context it needs to be critically seen through the prism of agency and power. Third, genres might be studied as occurring through different modes. A particular stage of a genre might be realised verbally whereas non-verbal modes of rhetoric like visual imagery might characterise another stage.⁸³

Robert Longacre also connected rhetoric with grammar. He distinguishes between four genres of rhetoric on the basis of the purpose they are intended to serve. These genres are the narrative genre, the procedural genre, the expository genre which attempts to describe the world and the hortatory genre which aims to influence people to act in a particular way.⁸⁴ What is interesting is that Longacre claims universality for these rhetorical figures and while taking examples from societies round the world, tries to find correlation between the context of rhetoric and the linguistic means that are used as manifestations of this purpose. Thus, in Longacre, grammatical choices are linked to the different rhetorical purposes. This is what is referred to as 'deep structure choices'.⁸⁵ For example, we can refer to the use of time in a procedural text to buttress our point. Time in such kind of texts is always projected towards the future as the task being described has not been performed by the person who is listening or reading the text. But this kind of text is marked by an absence of the usage of future sense. Such a text is presented as a case study or as a best practise. Notwithstanding the nomenclature, all the stages of a procedure are included so that the text functions as instruction. This serves the entertainment brought in by narrative as well.

⁸³Theo Van Leeuwen, 'Rhetoric and Semiotics' in Michael J McDonald (eds.), op.cit. p.679.

⁸⁴Ibid. pp 676-77.

⁸⁵Robert. E. Longacre *The Grammar of Discourse* (Second Edition), (New York, Plenum Press), 1996, pp.51-97.

Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak also chalk out a ‘discourse-historical’ approach in which strategising is important. This alludes to an array of practises that are intentionally planned in order to aspire to some specific social, political, psychological or linguistic goal.⁸⁶ Rhetoric refers to both the ‘ars bene dicendi et scibendi’ which means the ‘practical art of writing and speaking well in public spheres through the use of various communicative genres and the theory about eloquence’. Thus rhetoric does not refer only to the ornamental use of language or ‘ornatus’. The ‘normative criteria extends to principles like ‘clarity and understandability (perspecuitas), grammatical correctness (puritas), evidence or vividness (evidentia) and adequacy (aptum) with respect to the speaker or writer, hearer or reader, the situation and the topic.’⁸⁷ Thus, rhetoric is the ‘science and art of practical language use’ with the crucial objectives of ‘logos, ethos and pathos’. Logos refers to persuasion through argumentation, information and ‘reasonable admonition or exhortation’. Ethos and pathos refer to the use of non-argumentative linguistic force such as emotionalisation, suggestion, demagoguery, propaganda and the use of threats (manipulative persuasion). However, Reisigl confines his analysis to the ‘use of rhetorical means of persuasion by professional politicians’.⁸⁸

Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen argue that representation is a process by which the sign makers try to approximate an object and their attachment with the object is a mix of the cultural, psychological and social history of the sign maker along with the context which serves as a modern day version of the Athenian audience, in short, the context.⁸⁹ Leeuwen emphasises the role of best practises, role models, experts, rules or even creative freedom that can act as constraints in the field of semiotics. Terms like choice, option or selection bring in a sense of agency to the discussion on rhetoric.⁹⁰

Rhetoric and Deliberative Democracy

A body of literature developed in the 1990s which has been referred to as deliberative democracy. The main crux of the deliberative model is that it sees citizens as engaging in exchange of views and persuading other citizens by giving reasons for their choices before any formal decision making takes place. The focus of deliberative democracy is on the

⁸⁶ Ruth Wodak, ‘Introduction: Discourse Studies – Important Concepts and Terms’ in Ruth Wodak and Michal Krzyzanowski (eds.) ‘*Qualitative Discourse Analysis in the Social Sciences*’ (New York, Palgrave Macmillan), 2008, pp.4-14.

⁸⁷ Martin Reisigl, ‘Analysing Political Rhetoric’ in Ruth Wodak and Michal Krzyzanowski (eds.) op. cit. pp. 96

⁸⁸ Ibid. p.97.

⁸⁹ Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (London, Routledge, 2006) p.6.

⁹⁰ Theo van Leeuwen, *Introducing Social Semiotics*, (London, Routledge, 2005) pp.53-66.

process whereby democratic decisions are legitimised rather than on the subject of communication. For the advocates of deliberative democracy, it is trust of the citizens that sustains government and for that purpose the act of voting is not enough. Citizens who constitute the public need to engage with each other much more than is warranted by electoral democracy. One of the chief concerns of deliberative democrats has been to ensure that dialogue or the process of engagement takes place between participants who are equals and for this purpose they prescribe a set of normative conditions. However, different thinkers within this tradition justify the need for dialogue in their own ways.

Jurgen Habermas believes that any form of communicative practise assumes what he calls an 'ideal speech situation'. The 'ideal speech situation' is constructed in the following manner. First, he conceives of society as mediated through speech acts. Second, he says that speech is 'propositional truth'. Third, he draws a distinction between truth and experience. Fourth, he advocates a rational consensus to ground the 'discursive redemption of validity claims'. Fifth, understanding in society can be reached only through communication. Finally, Habermas gives us the 'ideal speech situation' which captures this process.⁹¹ Democracy must strive to attain that ideal which is implicit in any form of communication.

Gutmann and Thompson locate in deliberative democracy the ideals of reciprocity, publicity and accountability. Citizens in any conception of deliberative democracy accept each other's reasons as valid without accepting the conclusions. Dialogue should be transparent and free of the distortions brought about by interests or deception. In a democracy, 'leaders should therefore give reasons for their decisions and respond to the reasons that citizens give in return'.⁹² Since rhetoric is based on emotions, it should be avoided.

However, scholars like Dryzek and Young working within the tradition of deliberative democracy have tended to take a less radical stand. Young argues that the over reliance on reason is faulty because all communication is intended to produce a desired result on the listener. Thus she proposes a distinction whereby communication that promotes understanding is distinguished from communication that goes on to further an individual's personal need. Dryzek also believes in the power of emotions as they help to reach out to audiences perhaps even more than what reason could. The deliberative citizen is already sure of the manner in which he will be convinced in any matter but in the real world such

⁹¹ D Rasmussen, 'Ideal Speech Situation' in A Allen, E Mendieta (eds.) *The Cambridge Habermas Lexicon*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp.182-84.

⁹² Amy Gutmann, Dennis F. Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 3.

situations are quite jejune nay impractical. To accept the theories of the deliberative democrats unproblematically is to remove the destabilising factor or the 'political' from politics altogether.⁹³

Studies that document the role of rhetoric in Indian public life remain few and far in between. Thus studies in rhetoric move beyond what has been termed as Norman Fairclough as the 'narrow' 'Chomskian formalism' that has 'primarily focussed on language as an isolated system with structures that are assumed to be organically given or pre-existing'. The 'linguistic turn' in Richard Rorty and the speech act theory that was described by John Austin primarily deals with the role of language as a 'social practice' or its use in society. Thus discourses are weaved by language in their societal settings not only by their internal structures as shown by Chomsky but the focus is on how the structures are used by politicians or certain objectives.

Conclusion

The purpose of rhetoric is to persuade a target audience to the speaker's point of view. Even if the listener is not persuaded by the speaker's point of view, rhetoric still remains important as a method of communication. As discussed, the notion of truth has been used as a yardstick through which rhetoric is evaluated. Truth was an external benchmark. Rhetoric involves another external component in so far as it involves an audience who are involved in the particular speech act. This conception of rhetoric was carried forward from the ancient to the medieval ages and till the beginnings of the modern era when the truth was fixed with certain concepts. Truth was to be found in the application of categories like sovereignty, liberty, freedom or class to society.

However, when truth is fixed then the problem arises as to the nature of the truth that is contained in these categories. It is here that the role of discourse comes in. Truth is believed to be something that is produced through social interactions rather than something which is an objective category. The study of discourse involves a study of the nature of social interactions and the patterns of power. Discourse, in contrast to rhetoric has an internal component as it does not need to be justified to an audience but is internalised through usage of certain symbols and signs, among which language is primary. The application of discourse that involves the circulation of power is to be studied at the local level.

⁹³John S. Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002), pp.1-7.

The thesis at hand deals with land and since the issues related to land and more specifically the process of land reform is taken as rooted in the principles of economics, it can be treated as a discourse that has been brought alive by the symbolism of a strong *Jotedar* against the weak *bargadar*, the amount of vested land, compensation paid and the amount of land redistributed. Laws that are enacted carry forward this purpose of circulation of a discourse as a law implicitly implies consent of the governed population as shall be seen in the next chapter.

However, when a Government is unable to create a discourse, the role of rhetoric assumes crucial importance in lending legitimacy to the ruling dispensation.

CHAPTER 2

The Land Issue in Post-Independent West Bengal (1947-1977)

Introduction

In the last chapter we have discussed the major strands in the theory of discourse and rhetoric and their significance in the study of politics. One of the chief features of discourse is that meaning is not situated in a particular text but the roots of the idea need to be located in their broader context. In this chapter we shall give a chronological overview of the development of the policy of land reform carried out in West Bengal after Independence. In the course of this chapter we shall trace the various influences behind the development of a land reform policy. The analysis is carried out to identify certain key words and phrases that recur throughout the course of the discussion. We say that it is through the application of these terms in political life that the policy of land reform developed in India.

Political Orientation

India was an agricultural economy after independence and 80% of the workforce was dependent on land for a living. However, land was concentrated in the hands of a few persons and thus policies to be followed regarding land emerged as one of the most contentious factors after independence. The problems faced by agriculture in India after independence was those of 'greater efficiency and greater justice'. Along with an increase in productivity, it was felt that changes were needed in the social structure to ensure 'equitable relationship among those engaged in agriculture'.¹

Francine Frankel opines that in the decades after Independence, the question of agricultural development was dominated by the irreconcilable goals of maximising increases in agricultural output to support industrialisation and the social objective of reducing disparities in rural life.² M K Gandhi located the figure of the 'peasant' in the village that was different from what the modern city offered. The village was characterised by equality in social relations. For Ambedkar, the village became a 'den of ignorance'. Jawaharlal Nehru referred to the poverty of the peasants and the 'physically and intellectually degenerate class' of the

¹M. L. Dantwala, 'India's Progress in Agrarian Reforms', *Far Eastern Survey*, Vol.19, No.22, December 20,1950, p.239.

² F R Frankel, *India's Green Revolution: Economic Gains and Political Costs*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), p.3.

landlords who had 'outlived the day'. However, all of them situated the peasant in the village and contrasted social life in the village with that of the city.³ At the All India Congress Committee's first session after independence held in 1947, it was decided to constitute an Economic Programme Committee. The Committee opined that 'all the intermediaries between the tiller and the State should be eliminated and all middle men should be replaced by non-profit making agencies, such as cooperatives'. The Agrarian Reforms Committee was constituted in 1948 and the Committee recommended that 'land should belong to the tiller' and intermediary interests be abolished. The Committee also recommended the prohibition of leasing of land except for widows, minors or disabled persons. If a tenant was cultivating land for six years, he should be given occupancy rights. Those who 'put in a minimum amount of physical labour and participated in actual agricultural operations would be deemed to be cultivating land personally'. Land Tribunals should be formed at local levels to create the Record of Rights, to prevent evictions and to let peasants have the right to purchase land at reasonable prices. 'Non official opinion' would also be involved in the process.⁴ However, the idea of what constituted an economic holding was critiqued as not being 'precise' and was not differentiated from 'optimum holding'. The 'economic holding' was to provide a reasonable standard of living to the cultivator and employment for a family of 'normal size'. This 'economic holding' was to be decided on a case to case basis.⁵

Five Year Plans

The First Five Year Plan also had a chapter on Land Policy. The Plan recommended the formulation of a ceiling to be implemented by the States but did not give heritable rights to the tenants. Up to the ceiling limit prescribed, the landowners could evict the tenants to resume personal cultivation.⁶ The Second Five Year Plan spoke of the lack of knowledge of tenancy laws, incomplete land records and defective administrative arrangements. The Plan also spoke of the need to balance the right to resume personal cultivation with that of the tenants. To allow the small landowners to resume personal cultivation, a 'basic holding' was operationalised.⁷ In the Third Five Year Plan it was mentioned that the impact of the tenancy

³ Surinder Singh Jodhka, *The Indian Village: Rural Lives in the 21st Century*, (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2023), pp.42-52.

⁴ H D Malviya, Report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee, *All India Congress Committee*, New Delhi, 1949, pp.7-8.

⁵ Ved Prakash Sharma, *Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee- A Critique*, *Economic Weekly*, January 7, 1950, p.9.

⁶ The First Five Year Plan: A Draft Outline, Government of India: *Planning Commission*, 1951, pp. 95-103.

⁷ Planning Commission, Second Five Year Plan: A Draft Outline, Publications Division: Government of India, February 1956, pp.74-84.

laws framed by states were less than desired because the definitions of personal cultivation and voluntary surrenders were not properly defined. Tenancy rights should be conferred on the largest number of persons.⁸ In the Fourth Five Year Plan it was realised that the tenants and sub tenants should have permanent right of cultivation and rights should be non-resumable, to enact laws so that the landlords could not evade ceilings and impose penalties for evictions.⁹ The Fifth Five Year Plan mentions that the rent on land should not exceed one fifth to one fourth of the total produce, permanent rights to tenants and if land could not be resumed for cultivation, then ownership rights should be granted to tenants.¹⁰

Legislation

The economic programme of the Indian National Congress in 1952 said that the agrarian system should be organised so that those who toiled could enjoy the fruits of their labour.

‘Land’ was a State subject (List II) in the Seventh Schedule as Entry 24 of the Indian Constitution. It was left to the States to enact laws to abolish the Zamindari system. However, the Right to Property was enshrined as a Fundamental Right in Article 31 of the Constitution. Articles 14 gave equality before the law and Article 19(i) (f) gave a citizen the right to acquire, hold and dispose of property. But the Act allowed for the compulsory takeover of land at a price that was not less than the market rate. Thus, the Zamindari Abolition Act was framed in 1950 and article 31A and 31B were inserted in the Constitution vide the first Amendment. Land reforms in India started off within a year of the adoption of the Constitution.

The administrative machinery showed a bias towards the landed classes and this was a reason why the implementation was slow.¹¹ The Planning Commission’s Panel on Land Reform in 1959 also spoke of the same issue.

The Situation in West Bengal

It is to be mentioned at this point that land related movements had shaken Bengal during the Tebhaga movement from 1946 till 1950. A large volume of accumulated wisdom in the form of information and expertise was available because of several previous efforts at land reform

⁸Planning Commission, Third Five Year Plan: A Summary, Publications Division: Government of India, 1961, pp. 95-102.

⁹Planning Commission, Fourth Five Year Plan: A Summary, Publications Division: Government of India, 1971, pp.49-51.

¹⁰Planning Commission, Draft Fifth Five Year Plan, Vol. II, Publications Division: Government of India, 1974, pp. 43-4.

¹¹P S Appu, *Land Reforms in India*, (New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House, 1996), pp.330-2.

during the colonial era. After the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793, several attempts were made at land reform legislations by the provincial administration and the legislature in 1859, 1885, 1928, 1930, 1938 – 1939 and 1940.

The Permanent Settlement of 1793 laid down the ‘basic legal framework’ by making the Zamindar the proprietor of the land and vesting in them all property rights that were not an ‘encroachment on the prescriptive or customary laws of the tenants’. The estate of the Zamindar could be sold for arrears of revenue if revenue was not paid on time.¹² Alexander Dow, a Scottish mercantilist, was the first to formulate the principle of ‘assessment for ever’ as a policy recommendation for Bengal. Henry Pattullo recommended the English models of land tenure for Bengal in an article published in London. The crown ownership of land, the dominance of law and the subordination of rank and authority to lay the foundations of a legal government were ideas that impacted the land question in Bengal in the late 18th century.¹³

The Rent Act of 1859 and the Bengal Tenancy Act, 1885 defined the rights under which a certain class of tenants occupied land as conditions under which rent could be enhanced were limited and by allowing for the transfer of occupancy holdings that were governed by local customs.¹⁴ The Bengal Tenancy (Amendment) Act, 1928 dealt with the rights of the *bargadars*, under tenants and issues related to transfer of land.¹⁵ In 1937, Fazlul Haque’s Krishak Praja Dal’s election manifesto maintained that lands of Zamindars would be seized without payment of compensation. The Bengal Tenancy (Amendment) Act, 1938 gave all classes of *raiyats* the right to transfer land holdings, Zamindars would not be granted 20% of the value of transferred land, eviction of tenants was limited, the rent would not increase over the next 10 years and any increase in rent would count as a Civil offence.¹⁶

Elaborate surveys of land were undertaken by the Bengal Rent Commission of 1880 and the Bengal Land Revenue Commission of 1940 with Sir Francis Floud as the Chairman (commonly known as the Floud Commission). The principal recommendations of the Commission relevant for our purpose are the calls for the abolition of the Permanent Settlement or what was known as the Zamindari system. The system of absentee landlords

¹² Partha Chatterjee, *Bengal 1920-1947: The Land Question*, (Kolkata: K P Bagchi and Co.), 2012, pp.12

¹³ Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement*, 2nd Edition, (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1982), pp. 18-110.

¹⁴ Ibid p.13.

¹⁵ West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings: Official Report, 1928, Vol.30, No.1, p.394 (Alipore, Bengal Government Press).

¹⁶ Satyabrata Dutta, *Banglar Bidhansabhar Eksho Bochor*, (Kolkata: Progressive Publishers) 2012, p. 281.

and intermediaries should be abolished. The ‘defects’ of Permanent Settlement were located in the financial losses to the Government as revenue was ‘below the fair share’, ‘absence of contact with the cultivators’ and no ‘up to date record-of-rights’, creation of a host of intermediary interests between the Zamindar and the cultivator, lack of initiative for agricultural improvement, pendency of cases in Civil Courts and loss of occupancy rights.¹⁷ The second major recommendation was that the actual cultivators be given the status of ‘tenants’ and hold land directly under the Government with definite rights on security of tenure guaranteed by law. The sharecroppers provided inputs for farming as well as labour whereas their financial position was rendered insecure by the will of the landlord who would share only what was left as surplus after the major part of the proceeds went over to the Zamindars and intermediaries with superior rights.¹⁸ Lack of ‘economic holdings’ was also identified as a reason for underdevelopment of agriculture. However, the implications of the Floud Commission report were not placed for public discussion.¹⁹

Expectations were there on the point of security of tenure and redistribution of land and this can be reasonably gleaned from the fact that the Tebhaga movement had shaken Bengal from 1946 till 1950. The Tebhaga Movement demanded two thirds of the produce to the sharecropper and assumed a militant character in some places notably North 24 Parganas and Sunderbans where even the idea of land to the tiller was sought to be recognised.²⁰

Several states had enacted land reform legislations since independence. These legislations were in part a response to the Communist backed movements that had sprung up in the years preceding independence like the Tebhaga, Telangana and the Warli tribals revolt in Maharashtra.

In West Bengal, the process started off with the enactment of the Estates Acquisition Act in 1953. However, before the passing of this Act, the West Bengal Bargadars Act was enacted in 1950 to protect the interests of the *bargadars*. The passage of two separate Acts itself shows that the issue of taking over of the estates was considered as distinct from the issue of the *bargadars* getting two thirds share of produce from the *Jotedars*. But passage of the Act did

¹⁷ Report of the Land Revenue Commission Bengal, Government of Bengal, (Alipore: Bengal Government Press, 1940), pp31-9.

¹⁸ Ibid p. 173.

¹⁹ Myron Weiner, *The Politics of Scarcity-Public Pressure and Political Response in India*, (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1968). pp 132-139.

²⁰ Asok Majumder, *The Tebhaga Movement: Politics of Peasant Protest in Bengal, 1946-1950*, (New Delhi: Aakar Books, 2011), page 30-52.

not mean that there was absolute congruence between the Central and the State leadership on the issue of land reforms.

Views of Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy

Before we go into a detailed discussion of the framing of the Bills in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly, we look at how Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy, the Chief Minister, viewed the issue of Zamindari Abolition. The Gandhian, Dr Roy held the view that the status of the tillers would not improve merely by transferring land from Zamindars to them. The rate of rent that a tiller paid to the Zamindar was probably the lowest in West Bengal. Other problems like growing indebtedness to moneylenders were caused due to the size of holdings which made them uneconomic. 74% of the cultivators held less than 3 acres and lands needed to be consolidated so that economic holdings could be provided to every tiller. Tillers would have to part their land. Those who possessed more than 100 *bighas* of land would have to part with their excess land. If provisions for mechanised farming through tractors and more food were provided, then even a larger number of people would be displaced. Before any scheme of redistribution of land was carried out, it was necessary that opportunities be made for alternate occupations so that they don't starve or face penury. So, land reform needed to consider the status of these displaced persons as well as the *bargadars* and the landless persons.²¹

Amid the expectations, the Congress Government brought in the Bargadars Bill in 1950 in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly. The Bargadars Bill dealing with the rent paying tenants was brought in by Suhrawardy but was shelved soon after. The provisions of the West Bengal Bargadars Act were taken from this shelved Bill.

B C Roy, the Chief Minister in a speech in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly informed the house that consisted of a Congress majority that the matter was in the hands of the 'lawyers' who would get 'proper legislation' done. Efforts were made to wriggle out of oppositions raised. Given the fact that the Right to Property was a Fundamental Right under the Indian Constitution, the fate of the Bill in the courts was also a concern with the Government and this is seen in the careful wording of the Bill. The next problem related to the question of payment of compensation to the dispossessed Zamindar that would be done from the state treasury. The third problem faced by the government was the democratic impact of alienating the sections of the population who would be adversely affected by the

²¹Karuna Mukherji, *Land Reforms*, (Calcutta: H Chatterjee and Co. Limited, 1949), p 85.

decision and were its supporters. The limits of law are identified here. There was no consensus as to the avowed benefits of land reform and in this situation it is to be remembered that the Congress party had not come to power on the basis of universal franchise. So, it could not perhaps afford to lose their support. But to prevent the cultivator and landless from perhaps shifting their support to the Communist parties, the path of reform through progressive legislations was chosen.

While introducing the West Bengal Bargadars Bill in the Vidhan Sabha, Harendra Nath Chaudhuri opined that the purpose of the Bill was to 'give protection to the *bargadars* by limiting the right of the owners to get rid of the *bargadar*'. The Bengal Tenancy Act, 1885 defined a tenant as a person who held land under another person and was liable to pay rent to that person. Thus the *bargadars* were not 'tenants' and could not avail of the protections available to 'tenants' under the 1885 Act. So, the Bill attempted to lay down to lay down certain specific grounds on which a *bargadar* could be evicted.²²

Sibnath Banerjee opined that the present Bill would not ensure the promise of 'land to the tiller'. The Congress was a party of *Zamindars* and it was better that they admit the 'tug of war' going on within their party between the *Zamindars* and the poor and landless peasants. A 'classless society' could never be established under the present situation. Jasimuddin Ahmed wanted a different Bill to be brought in for the Sunderban area as Permanent Settlement was not carried out there.²³

It is necessary to draw our attention to the creation of a Labour and Peasants Subcommittee that sent out a questionnaire to approximately one eighth of the state Congress leadership so that the thana, subdivision and the district committees could express their ideas on land reform. The replies sent by local Congress units give us an indication of the prevailing mood of the times. A section preferred the abolition of all intermediaries with a 'rehabilitation allowance' that would be paid in cash instead of compensation. Prafulla Chandra Ghosh's speech in the Vidhan Sabha is indicative of the stance of this section of the Congress. Another section did not prefer land reforms because it would be time consuming and ineffective. Rather the way to social justice lay in enhancement of agricultural output through education and technical skills. Changing the existing pattern of social relationships would not result in social justice. However, most of the party units agreed on abolition of intermediaries on land with the payment of some amount of compensation, differing amongst themselves on the

²² The West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings: Official Reports, Vol.1, No.1, 10th February, 1950, p.122.

²³ Ibid pp.123-28.

basis of computation of the compensation, quite in line with the recommendations of the Floud Commission.²⁴

West Bengal Bargadars Act, 1950

We shall take a brief look at some of the major provisions of the West Bengal Bargadars Act, 1950. The Act defined a *bargadar* as a person who cultivated the land of another person on the condition that a part of the produce would be shared with that person. But if a person was admitted to be a tenant by the landowner in any document that was executed or accepted or had been declared as such by a Civil Court, then he would not be included in the definition of a *bargadar*.

Although a *bargadar* would not have the security of their tenancy rights, Section 3 of the Act laid down that the produce from land would be shared between the landowner and the *bargadar* mainly in two ways. First, the produce would be shared on the basis of a written agreement between the *bargadar* and the landowner. Thus, no weightage was given to the relative power of either side. Second, if there was no agreement between the *bargadar* and the landowner, either side who supplied the seeds would be entitled to receive a similar amount of the produce as was equivalent to the quantity of seeds supplied. The balance of the produce would be apportioned into one thirds for each the *bargadar* and the landowner. The *bargadar* would receive a greater part of the balance of the produce if permitted by a written contract or local custom. After these amounts were deducted, the produce would be divided in a 'fair and reasonable' manner taking into consideration contributions to the cost of cultivation like 'plough-cattle, plough and other agricultural implements and manure'. Personal cultivation was allowed under circumstances where the landowner wanted to resume cultivation by his own self or his family members or by servants, if the *bargadar* had misused or neglected the land, if the *bargadar* had failed to pay within the stipulated period the landowner his due share and if the *bargadar* had disregarded the order of a Board or an Appellate Officer. However, the *bargadar* would still be entitled to getting back the cultivating rights on the land along with due compensation if the landowner did not start personally cultivating the land within a year or had within a period of five years from evicting the first *bargadar*, appointed a new *bargadar*.²⁵

²⁴ Marcus Franda, *West Bengal and the Federalizing Process in India*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968) pp. 151-179.

²⁵ West Bengal Bargadars Act, 1950 (Passed by the West Bengal Legislature), published in Calcutta Gazette, 15th March, 1950, pp. 2-3.

A Bhagchas Board was formed to settle any dispute that could arise between the *bargadar* and the landowner over the sharing of the produce or any other possible conflict like removal or restoration of a *bargadar*. The Chairman of the Board was to be a Government Officer and landowners and *bargadars* were to be represented through two other members each. A Government Officer who was tasked with settling disputes between the *bargadar* and the landowner subsequently replaced these Boards.²⁶ However, the issue of recording of *bargadars* was not addressed by this Act. Personal cultivation could be resumed unconditionally by the landowner and no receipt was required to be issued on sharing of crops between the landowner and the sharecropper leaving the latter in a state of anxiety.²⁷ However, 'wide scope was left for the *Jotedar* to evict *bargadars*. The Bargadars Bill despite its limitations did succeed in driving home the point that the demands raised in the Tebhaga movement were not illegal.'²⁸

Congress leaders when working for the 1952 elections had realised in many cases that an appeal on the basis of 'class' was not the best way to win elections and in this even the Communists had failed. At this juncture we can take a brief look at the activities of the West Bengal Kisan Sabha which was a Communist backed organisation. Bolstered by the success of the Tebhaga and the Telangana movement, the Communist party adopted a militant approach to agrarian issues of which land reform was central. In response to calls for a revolution and attacks on government and private installations, the Congress government declared the Communist Party illegal by bringing in the Public Safety Bill. Chapter III of the West Bengal Security Act laid down that no person would indulge in any 'subversive Act'. Chapter IV gave the power to the Government to censor any document that had the potential to cause such acts. The word 'looting' was defined and the police had could 'use such power' as was necessary to stop the loot.²⁹ Since all the important leaders were imprisoned, no organisational activities could be undertaken during this period. The reasons can be located in the speeches of Congress leaders wherein stress was laid on the damage to the economy and public order which was imminent in the face of Communist struggle.

²⁶ Ibid pp. 4-5.

²⁷ Samir Kumar Mukhopadhyay, *Permanent Settlement to Operation Barga*, (Calcutta: Minerva Associates Publications Private Limited, 1994), p 66.

²⁸ Sunil Sen, 'The Bargadars Bill' in A R Desai (ed.) *Peasant Struggles in India*, (Bombay: Oxford University Press), 1979, p. 454.

²⁹ The West Bengal Security Act, 1950, Legislative Department, Government of West Bengal, published in the Calcutta Gazette on 6th November, 1950, pp.6-9.

The Election Manifesto of the Indian National Congress for the 1952 General Elections laid down that *Zamindari* and *Jagirdari* would be abolished, security of tenure and fair rents would be provided to all the tillers of the soil, agricultural productivity would be increased through co-operatives and the conditions of the agricultural labourers in lower wage pockets would be improved.³⁰ After the 1952 elections, Congress leaders increasingly came to argue that land reform would not necessarily increase production or 'revolutionise' the countryside but rather improvement of technology in the countryside and the building of an industrial base in urban areas would do so.

West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act, 1953

It was in this situation that the Estates Acquisition Bill of 1953 was brought in that provided for state acquisition of intermediaries' land and the manner and rates of payment of compensation and in 1955 the Land Reforms Act was introduced both of which underwent significant amendments over the years.

The first comprehensive legislation which deserves our attention is the West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act, 1953. We shall take a brief look at the debates in the Vidhan Sabha during the passage of the Bill.³¹ The Bill dubbed as a 'great experiment' that would 'usher in a new era' was introduced by Land Revenue Minister Satyendra Kumar Basu with the purpose of introducing a system where the 'cultivator who tills the soil holds the land directly under the state on payment of rent'. The Government would be the custodian of land, land would be held by the tillers without the presence of rent receiving intermediaries, *Zamindari* and other rent receiving interests would be abolished by the state and land of a particular nature and kind was allowed to be retained directly under the Government on payment of rent. While the richer intermediaries would have to settle down for a lesser quantum of compensation, the poorer intermediaries would get compensation for the loss of their lands at a higher rate.³² Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy opined that the rights of intermediaries were taken away but Section 6 of the Act provided for cooperatives to be formed of 'small landless workers' in 'haats, bazars and ferries' for their livelihood.³³

³⁰ The Congress Election Manifesto, 1952 in A M Zaidi (ed.) *The Encyclopaedia of the Indian National Congress*, Vol.14, 1951-54, (New Delhi: S Chand and Company, 1987), pp.350-72.

³¹ West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings: Official Report, 1953. (West Bengal Government Press, Alipore, West Bengal), 10th November, 1953.

³² Ibid. p. 95-8.

³³ Ibid p. 487.

The purpose of the Bill was strongly criticised by Bankim Mukherjee of the Communist Party of India as a 'caricature of the system of feudalism' as the State would simply acquire the rights of the Zamindars and continue to receive rent. Thus no 'socio economic development' was possible as was seen in the Sundarban area where the tenants were directly under the State. 'Famine' was quite common there. The Zamindar should not get compensation as the rate of rent had 'increased at least 1600 times' since the time of the Permanent Settlement and the rent received was not used to benefit the tenants. The amount of compensation to be paid would lead to heavy expenditure and there would remain very little to be spent for the developments of the *raiyats*. In a socialist system no rent was necessary and in a capitalist system rent was related to profit. Even the Congress Agrarian Committee had proposed to reduce rent by 50%. The Bill was silent on the question of rent and thus it was a continuation of the feudal order. In his view even the State should not receive rent. Mukherjee's next point of attack was that '60% of the intermediaries' would still exist if the *bargadars* were not made 'tenants' under the Bengal Tenancy Act, 1885. The Bill did not mention the redistribution of land.³⁴

Charuchandra Bhandari opined that the provision in clause 6(1) (d) of formation of cooperative companies of 50 members with 100 *bighas* of land would allow a way for evasion of land ceiling in a scenario where the average size of land holding was below 3 acres. Rakhahari Chatterjee also criticised the Bill by quoting Justice Treror's observations on Zamindars not having absolute right to their lands that were mentioned in the Floud Commission Report. Since the rights on land were not absolute, the question of compensation did not arise. A new Bill needed to be brought to solve the land problem according to Kanailal Bhowmick. He said that the structure of rent would not undergo a change as per the provisions of the Bill. Rent was to be paid on land that was hitherto outside the structure of rent. Intermediaries or '*Zamindars*' owned 400000 acres while Jotedars and *Latdar*' owned 1300000 acres of land. Unless land was redistributed, there was not much scope for land reforms.³⁵ Subodh Banerjee criticised the compensation being paid to Zamindars and the ways that were available which made it possible to evade land ceilings. The Bill was reintroduced in the Assembly with alterations and the Land Revenue Minister gave a detailed

³⁴ Ibid p. 458-61.

³⁵ Ibid p.214.

description of the distribution of land. The Bill would not solve the problem of ‘concentration of land’ and give land to the actual ‘tiller’.³⁶

Jyoti Basu criticised the Bill by saying that the Bill allowed land to be retained by intermediaries like the Zamindar and the Jotedar and ergo the ‘latent creative energies of the people’ would not be released that would take them out of ‘famine, pestilence, destitute, unemployment and cultural backwardness’.³⁷ The issue of food security was also raised.

The Land Revenue Minister replied that the purpose of the Bill was to bring the tenants directly under the state and fix ceilings on the amount of land that could be held. Another Bill would be brought in that would direct the relationship between the *raiyats* and the State and how the land vested in the State would be redistributed.

However, Jyoti Basu said that land reforms brought in stages would not work as had happened in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. To maximise production, he felt that those who kept agricultural land should not be allowed to keep non-agricultural land and vice versa. Surplus land in tea gardens should be distributed among peasants. The issue of compensation was opposed by Basu as ‘at least Rs. 100 cores’ would be required for this purpose which could be spent on development. Subodh Banerjee opined that religious and charitable trusts should be defined as services of a ‘general public nature’ from which no ‘material benefit’ would accrue to the donor. Banerjee also suggested changes in the definition of an ‘intermediary’ so that more land could be made available and disabled, widows and minor intermediaries who held smaller amount of land would not be affected.³⁸

Raipada Das said that under the proposed ceiling limits, only 0.6% of intermediaries had ceiling surplus land and not much land would be vested in the State by its application. The Central government should be approached to amend Article 31A (2)(b) so that *raiyats* and ‘under *raiyats*’ could be included within the ambit of the Bill. So he proposed that the definition of a Jotedar be included in the Bill.³⁹

Binoy Krishna Chowdhury highlighted what were perceived as defects in the Bill. He suggested that the words Jotedar and *Latder* should be added in the category of intermediary under the ceiling net. 25 acres of agricultural land and 15 acres of non-agricultural land were allowed to be retained instead of 45 acres by an intermediary. Orchards, trusts and fisheries

³⁶ Ibid p. 217.

³⁷ Ibid pp.178-92.

³⁸ Ibid p. 543.

³⁹ Ibid p.542.

was not be exempted from ceiling limits, the *bargadar* should be made a *raiyat* directly under the state and smaller intermediaries having income less than Rs. 3600 per annum should be rehabilitated and a Record of Rights should be prepared before land reforms were taken up. The moot point was that smaller farms would boost productivity and that agricultural development was necessary for industrial development.⁴⁰

We now look at the framing of the West Bengal Land Reforms Act of 1955 which was aimed at covering both the West Bengal Bargadars Act, 1950 and the West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act, 1953. We look at certain salient aspects of the Act.

Political initiative is noticed in the Mayapur Provincial Conference of the West Bengal Pradesh Congress in 1955 where the idea of framing land ceiling laws, distributing the ceiling surplus land among the landless and retaining land only in the hands of those who had no other means of livelihood.⁴¹ However, the State Agricultural Ministries were of the opinion that ceilings should not be put on land holdings if the productivity from land came down.⁴²

West Bengal Land Reforms Act, 1955

The Bill was introduced in the House by Satyendra Kumar Basu to create conditions ‘for a more equitable distribution of the land resources of the country as well as for better means of production’. The Bill would help in the ‘evolution of a modern pattern of landholding and utilisation and a reorientation of the land tenure to create congenial conditions for more extensive, intensive and lucrative cultivation in the interest and for the welfare of the rural people’. The rural economy would be based on ‘peasant proprietorship’. But to derive benefits from this, the holdings needed to be ‘economical’. Individual ownership of land was connected to a sense of pride but ‘petty and fragmented holdings’ would not help in the process of having the ‘man behind the plough’.⁴³

The tenancy reforms were a ‘major obstacle in the ways of improved methods of farming and in raising the living standards of the cultivators’. The owners of the land would be brought into direct contact with the State and they would have to manage the land and cultivate it personally. ‘Economic duties’ were more important than rights. Absentee ownership was to be avoided. The Bill did not provide for tenancy rights for the *bargadar*. Rather for this kind

⁴⁰ Ibid pp. 117-23.

⁴¹ Atulya Ghosh, *Kashtakalpita* (Kolkata, New Age Publications, 1971) pp.191-95.

⁴² S K Basu and S K Bhattacharya, *Land Reforms in West Bengal: A Study on Implementation*, Planning Commission, Government of India, (New Delhi: Oxford Book Company, 1963), p.7.

⁴³ West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings, Official Report, Eleventh Session(Budget), 1955, Vol.XI, No.1, pp.678-80.

of 'partnership in farming', the Bill passed certain provisions for the regulation of the *barga* system of cultivation. Accordingly, the *bargadar* could not be evicted from his land except on certain grounds and was to be given a share of the crop he cultivated. A 'fair and equitable system of rent' based on the principles of income tax' would be introduced. To deal with the large number of uneconomic holdings, provisions would be made for the 'formation of cooperative farms'. The Minister says that there was a 'common notion' that due to the implementation of land reforms a large amount of land would be at the disposal of the State for distribution to the landless. But in the absence of statistics on the amount of land that could be distributed, the Bill did not incorporate the principles of land redistribution. After imposition of land ceiling, the land would be distributed among the 'owners of uneconomic holdings, *'bargadars* and landless labourers'.⁴⁴

The Communists members of the Assembly also criticised certain aspects of the Bill. First, the Bill did not abolish the Zamindari system and also served to replace them with the State. Rather than the rent being paid to the Zamindar, it would be paid to the state. The Government would be a 'worst Zamindar than the Zamindar of the past'. Lands would be assessed 'irrespective of the question of produce'. The government had not taken any step to record the rights of the '*bargadars* who were cultivating land, in many cases the big *raiyats* had forced the *bargadars* to surrender their land and work as wage labourers on the *majurikabuliyat* system. The brunt of agricultural income tax would be borne by the poor peasants. For resolution of disputes the powers of the Bhagchas Board were taken away and officers were given the power to adjudicate disputes. The Bill would not reduce the problem of inequitable distribution of land and 'the term 'reform' was a misnomer...a retrograde step in relation to the *bargadars*.⁴⁵ The produce from land was to be fixed in consultation with peasant organisations and on that basis the tax should be fixed.⁴⁶ It was expected that the Bill would help bring about a change but the intentions of the Congress Government were clear from the time the West Bengal Estates Acquisition Bill were framed. Land was not being redistributed and the principles on which redistribution of land would take place were to be decided by the Executive. The Legislature would not have any role in the redistribution of land.⁴⁷

Major Provisions of the Act

⁴⁴ Ibid pp.682.

⁴⁵ Ibid p.692.

⁴⁶ Ibid p.696.

⁴⁷ Ibid pp. 683-5.

Chapter III of the Act dealt with bargadars whereby it was mentioned that the produce of any land would be shared between the *bargadar* and the landowner on a 50:50 basis where the inputs like ploughs, cattle, manure and seeds were supplied by the landowner and in the proportion of 60:40 in other cases. The *bargadar* 'shall' deliver the produce to the landowner within the prescribed time period and upon receiving the produce, a receipt shall be given. The produce would be stored and threshed at a place that was mutually agreed upon by both the parties. A *bargadar* could be evicted only when he had failed to cultivate the land or used it for non-agricultural purposes or had not cultivated the land personally. A cap of 25 acres was placed on the amount of land that a *bargadar* was allowed to cultivate both in his personal capacity as well as a *barga*. Conflicts related to whether a person was a *bargadar*, delivery of produce, eviction of *bargadars* and the site where produce was stored or threshed was to be decided in a manner decided by the State Government. Another issue that was stressed upon was the 'consolidation' of land holdings.

In Chapter V of the Act, provision was made for the State Government to acquire lands from the *raiya*s if two thirds or more of the owners made a representation and upon payment of compensation, 'rearrange' and 're-allot' the lands to the *raiya*s keeping the quantum of land and quality and value as akin as possible to the original lands. Seven or more *raiya*s could consolidate themselves into a Cooperative Society where ownership would vest in the Society excluding homestead land but each member would have shares of value equal to the amount of land vested in the society.

Chapter VI of the Act laid down principles that were to be followed in case of distribution of land. For the purpose of redistribution of vested land, preference would be given to persons who resided in a particular locality and to those who were landless or owned less than two acres of land or who had organised themselves into a cooperative society.

Chapter VII of the Act stipulated that the Record of Rights be maintained of the lands taking into account issues of mutation due to transfer or inheritance, exchange of lands after partition, land consolidation or establishment of cooperative societies, formation of new land holdings, a change in revenue and a change in the 'mode of cultivation', for example by a *bargadar*.⁴⁸

Voluntary Disclosure of Land

⁴⁸ West Bengal Land Reforms Act, 1955, (passed by the West Bengal Legislature), published in Calcutta Gazette, 13th March, 1958).

Other than the laws that were enacted to bring about changes in the land holding pattern, there were attempts to achieve tangible results through the formation of voluntary organisations. Two laws namely the West Bengal Bhudan Yagna Act, 1962 and the West Bengal Gramdan Act, 1964 with the influence of the Bhudan Movement running strong. The main point was that land should belong to the entire village.

Under the Act, land was defined as 'agricultural land' and as that which was usable for horticulture. The stress was on 'voluntary donation' 'for distribution to landless persons'. Under Section 3 of the Act, a Bhudan Yagna Board would be formed to 'acquire, hold and dispense off property' and was empowered to 'enter into contracts'. The Board was to be comprised of the Chief Minister (who was represented finally by the Minister for Land and Land Revenue Department), the Secretary of the Board of Revenue and the remaining 3 members who constituted a majority were to be nominated by Acharya Vinoda Bhave himself. Section 6 of the Act empowered the Sub Divisional Land Officer to make enquires about the titles of donated land, issuing a 'vesting order' and sending this order to the Registration Officer. The Board would hold land as a '*raiyat* or a non-agricultural tenant' under the State Government. Under Section 8 of the Act, the Board was enabled to distribute the vested land among the landless persons who resided in that particular area (a person would also be eligible if he owned land less than 2 acres) with the conditions that land would not be kept unused, rent would be paid as decided by the Board and that the land would not be damaged permanently.⁴⁹

The Board met six times between December 1963 and June 1967 and 13742.072 acres of land were donated with donations from Diamond Harbour Sub Division in 24 Parganas District being the largest. But a letter from Purulia's Deputy Commissioner to the Land and Land Reforms Department, Government of West Bengal reveals that the donated lands were of inferior quality and thus the cost of reclaiming them would be unviable economically. Another reason why the Bhudan movement could not make such progress in West Bengal was because of the tendency to donate litigated lands which would not hit the donor economic interests.⁵⁰

The Gramdan movement also failed to make much of a dent as far as the redistribution of land is concerned.

⁴⁹ The West Bengal Bhudan Yagna Act, 1962 (passed by the West Bengal Legislature), published in Calcutta Gazette, 17th December, 1962.

⁵⁰ Bikram Sarkar, *Land Reforms in India*, (New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 1989), p.102.

Views of the Central Government

The Central Government appointed Panel on Land Reforms in 1959 highlighted the need for ‘administrative support’ because of the ‘social and economic weakness of the tenants’ who would find it difficult to access the administrative machinery. All the initiatives for land reform would aim at establishing a ‘new pattern of ownership and cultivation’ that would have the ‘germs of future development’. One problem was proper employment for those who were dependent on land. ‘Personal cultivation’ would need to be distinguished from cultivation by hired labourers. Co-operatives would help develop resources for the village as a whole. However, the economic viability of small land holdings was pointed out in the Report.⁵¹

The National Development Council constituted a Land Reform Implementation Committee which submitted its report in 1966. In this report suggestions were made to address the condition of the *bargadars*. The Committee suggested that permanent and hereditary rights of cultivation should be provided to the *bargadars*, ‘voluntary’ surrender by the *bargadars* should be prevented and if at all surrenders were to be made, it was to be made to the Government so that land could be let out to others, there should be reviews of cases where *bargadars* were evicted so that they could have their rights restored and the 40% share of the landlord in the produce should preferably be brought down to one fourth or one fifth of the produce. The committee noted that political activity on the afore-mentioned matters was ‘considerable’ in the ‘rural areas of West Bengal’ and so the *bargadars* were aware of the provisions.⁵²

The National Commission on Labour concluded that evasion of land ceilings was a reason why enough land was not available for redistribution. Another problem was the eviction of sharecroppers from land.⁵³

At this point it is necessary to give a summary of the activities carried out by the Communist Party of India during this period. The Food Movements of 1959 and 1966 were the elixir of Left popular politics in West Bengal. The official output of food grains was thirty-six lakh tons in 1948 but the Government procurement of 467000 tons was inadequate to maintain the

⁵¹Report of the Committees of the Panel on Land Reforms, Planning Commission, Government of India, New Delhi, 1959, pp.41-7.

⁵²Implementation of Land Reforms: A Review by the Land Reforms Implementation Committee of the National Development Council, Government of India, New Delhi, 1966, p. 61.

⁵³Report of the National Commission on Labour, Government of India, Ministry of Labour, Employment and Rehabilitation, (New Delhi, 1969), p. 405.

rationing system. By 1952, only 270000 tons were procured and thus the rural population especially the 'peasant workers, middle and lower middle class' were left at the mercy of hoarders and black marketeers. No provision for 'test relief work' was made for the 'poor landless labourers and the unemployed'. The Price Increase and the Famine Resistance Committee was formed by the Communist Party of India in 1959 and rallies were organised in cities like Calcutta and Howrah. The Movements were organised more spontaneously in north 24 Parganas district in 1966. Thus, Communist activities were built up on the issue of food security.⁵⁴ The mentions that 70% of the persons dependent on agriculture were 'poor peasants' and *khetmajur* (Agricultural labourers) and they lacked access to the means of production. The majority of peasants could not get adequate loans as they were dependent on the landlords. The *khetmajur* were employed for less than 180 days in rural areas and the villages were characterised by illiteracy and lack of educational and health facilities. The 'big peasants' had entered into an entente with businessmen in rural areas and they were close to the Government.⁵⁵

Formation of the United Front Government(UFG)

The 1967 elections saw the formation of a United Front Government that dethroned the Congress from power. The UFG intended to use the state apparatus to strengthen its projects and this showed that the left had become a part of the framework of democratic governance. The government resorted to interim measures before the harvest season began and since the UFG felt the policy proposals did not reach their final form through legislation. Through 1968 the UFG had time to work out a strategy with its partners and the CPI (M) also devised strategies to counter the Naxalite influence in rural areas and this affected the rhetoric. Thus, democratic socialism was the main idea no matter what the rhetoric was when in opposition.

Programme of UFG on Land

The programme of the second UFG in land reform can be best encapsulated if one goes through the '32 point programme' that was published in 1969. The Programme lays down that 'in the interests of the peasantry', legislative amendments were to be made to the West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act and the Land Reforms Acts. Peasants who held less than 3 acres of land were to be exempted from payment of land revenue. All land held in excess of

⁵⁴ S P Basu, 'The Defining Moments of Left-Popular Politics: The Food Movements of 1959 and 1966' in Ranabir Samaddar (ed.) *From Popular Movements to Rebellion: The Naxalite Decade* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2018), p.86.

⁵⁵ Communist Party of India(Marxist), Party Programme adopted at the 7th Party Congress, Kolkata, 1964, p.17.

the ceiling limit, particularly, the *benami* land was to be detected, recovered and distributed. Certain categories of land that were exempted from the operation of ceiling limit under the Estates Acquisition Act like fisheries, orchards, dairy, poultry etc. were to be brought within the purview of the Act. 'Smaller intermediaries' were to be paid compensation speedily. The right to cultivate *barga* land was to be made hereditary. Till suitable legislation was framed, the right to evict *bargadars* was to be suspended for three years. Land up to 5 *cottahs* was to be distributed to those who had no homestead land and tenancy rights. Those who were occupying land were to be given rights. Special Land Tribunals would be set up to adjudicate on issues of vested land, ceiling limits, mala fide transfers etc. thus taking these matters out of the jurisdiction of Civil Courts. A new survey of land would be taken up to cancel all false records' recorded earlier. Those who had sold off their lands in distress were to get their lands back and a moratorium was announced on debts that were 4 years old and belonged to peasants holding less than 3 acres of land. These reforms were to be modified to suit the 'special features' of Darjeeling district. The UFG would 'help the peasants' in realisation of 'legitimate democratic demands'. The UFG would also take steps to check the 'concentration of wealth' and the 'possession of unlimited land and housing property' in the urban areas.⁵⁶

The programme involved legislative measures but more importantly it was political mobilisation of the peasants and the agricultural labourers for a 'struggle' for the detection and recovery, acquisition and distribution of *benami* land which was more important than the framing of legislation and the movement assumed greater significance than even the mass movement on industrial front in 1967. Rather than the legislative proposals, it was the substantive content of the land movement that evoked disagreements among the coalition partners of the UFG.

The 18 point Programme also mentioned food security as the greatest problem facing the state and for whose solution land reform was a factor.⁵⁷

The Emerging Conflict

It is in this situation which serves as the context in which the land grab movement took place. The mass movements were not seen in all districts but was intense in districts like the 24 Parganas, Burdwan and Midnapore where there was forcible seizure of land.

⁵⁶ Sankar Ghosh, *The Disinherited State: A Study of West Bengal, 1967-70* (Calcutta, Orient Longman, 1971) pp.317-18.

⁵⁷ Ibid p.301.

The UFG had decided that the vested, *benami* and *raiya* lands that were shown to be fisheries should be detected, recovered and occupied. Conflicts arose during this time over the claims of the landless peasant over the sharing of the harvested crop. The movement was built on the slogan that the possession of the harvested crop lay with those who had actually tilled the soil. The Jotedars resisted the forcible seizure of their lands. It was not that *benami* land was always the target of seizure but normal lands also were forcibly occupied. Peasant unions were put in charge of seizing land. Rival claims put forward by different parties concerning occupation and possession and this led to clashes as there were complaints that distribution of land was not often to the most legitimate persons but to those with party connections. The land that was seized was not always ceiling surplus and 'middle' and 'small peasants' who owned no more than 25 acres of land which was within the legal limit had their lands forcibly taken over. Genuine fisheries were looted.⁵⁸

The UFG maintained the stance that such clashes should be avoided and they were to be referred to the party leadership at the state level if they could not be settled at the local level.⁵⁹ Some Jotedars whose lands were seized took recourse to legal measures and some other sought support of parties within the UFG. Although clashes during harvesting season were common, the UFG period saw clashes at a larger scale that were organised in a manner that encouraged challenges to the land ownership pattern in the State. Since a small amount of land was available for redistribution, the 'land grab movement' witnessed infighting among the concerned parties on issues related to ownership and possession of land.⁶⁰ The CPI (M) was the dominant factor in the twentieth session of the AIKS at Burdwan and gave emphasis on strengthening the organisation through concentrating influence on poorer sections of 'peasantry' and 'agricultural workers'. It was pointed out that the weaknesses of the 'spontaneous' 'mass movements' may be removed with the presence of the CPI (M) in places where it was weak. Stress was given on 'organising the workers' either 'separately' or 'inside' the Kisan Sabha.⁶¹

The land seizure movement reached its climax in the harvesting season of 1969 when the UFG apprehending the events tried to mediate the situation by issuing orders to district authorities like the calling of meetings by the District Magistrates in which all political parties including

⁵⁸'Mighty Peasant Movement for Recovery of Benami Land', West Bengal, 2.8.1969, p.1030.

⁵⁹'Tillers have the Right to Harvest', West Bengal, 22.11.1969, p.310.

⁶⁰S Sengupta, 'Confusion over Land Reforms: West Bengal Experience', Economic and Political Weekly, 27th June 1970, p.1004.

⁶¹Twentieth Session of the All India Kisan Sabha, Barsul, Burdwan, West Bengal Pradeshik Krishak Sabha, 1969, p.7.

the Congress were called. In addition to these meetings the guidelines that were that those who had actually grown the crop would harvest it and that the weapons should be taken away from the *Jotedars* and wherever trouble was apprehended the district authorities should implement Section 144 which was a colonial era legislation. The administration was to remain impartial and in cases where the land ceiling limit was maintained the UFG directed that though the crop was to be harvested by the cultivator, the owner would be entitled to claim his produce akin to that of a *bargadar*.⁶²

It is essential to go through Marcus Franda's understanding here. This will take us to the debate within the CPI (M) on the importance to be given to organising the landless labourers or the small landholders the roots of the debate being as old as independence. Franda notes that attempts by the CPI (M) to organise small landholders hurt the interests of the landless labourers and organising the landless would invariably hurt the small landholders.

The CPI (M) devoted more time to organisational tactics after 1967 and at the Calicut session of 1967 decided to develop the *kisan* work over larger areas in a 'contiguous belt'. It is from this time that we find an attempt to organise both 'agricultural labourers' and 'poor peasants' and to unite them with the 'rest of the peasantry'. Efforts were to be made towards training them into 'active cadres' to make them the 'militant vanguard of anti imperialist, anti feudal revolution'. The occurrence of mass movements obviously proved advantageous to the CPI(M) but the Political Resolution adopted at the Eighth Congress at Cochin showed that the CPI(M) wanted to bring these spontaneous movements into party fold to overcome the 'the spontaneous and mass character' that could turn out to be a 'weakness'. The weaknesses of the 'spontaneous' 'mass movements' could be removed if the presence of the CPI (M) was felt in places where it was weak .⁶³ The reasoning given was that the 'political consciousness' and the 'state of unity and mass organisations of the people' were at a 'deplorably low level'. The 'class composition' was defective at the present.⁶⁴ Thus, for the CPI (M) the task was on expansion of its organisation and for this both the landless and the poor peasants were to be organised under the party fold.

The CPI (M)'s decisions were in the backdrop of the Naxalite troubles that had already started to shake the countryside and thus the focus on increasing membership. The All India

⁶² 'Administration Must Serve Rural Masses' *West Bengal*, 15.11.1969, pp. 289, 302.

⁶³ Political Organizational Report of the Central Committee to the Eighth Congress of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), 1969, p.192.

⁶⁴ 'Why the Ultra Left Deviation?' Resolution adopted by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), 1968, p. 13.

Kisan Sabha claimed during this period that its membership had grown by almost 7 lakhs within a one year period from 1969 till 1970.⁶⁵ The CPI (M) realised that the small peasants and the landless had to support the movement to grab the land even if the party was ready to offer leadership and had better resources for organisation. Since the UFG was a coalition that also included the Bangla Congress, there were limitations imposed due to ideological grounds. The Constitution of the Bangla Congress envisioned the formation of a 'socialist state' through 'legal and peaceful' means and most of the supporters came from the landed class.⁶⁶ The main adversary of the CPI (M) was the CPI (ML) and the clashes between the two parties were seen as to be politically convenient for other members of the coalition as the CPI (M) was a contender for power and not the CPI (ML). The CPI (M) taking the lead in the land grab movement was not seen favourably by the other parties in the government and this proved disastrous for the existence of the second UFG. The CPI (M) also could not think of building an effective opposition to the Congress without the help of other parties.

Role of Harekrishna Koner

Koner one of the most prominent Communist leaders in the 1960s was made the Land and Land Reforms Minister under the second United Front Ministry of Ajoy Mukherjee in 1969.

Koner believes that the Congress Government efforts at land reform through legislation was a 'farce' and the true essence lay in the 'struggle' for *benami* land, that before the United Front Government was formed, was 'confined to small areas' and 'primarily among the sharecroppers'. The 'political consciousness' of the 'poor peasants' as was manifest in their 'desire for land' made them overlook the criticism hurled by the Congress and Naxals of having to buy rice at Rs 3 or Rs 3.5 a kilo. The 'peasant movement' had the potential to bring about a 'radical transformation'. It had developed under the aegis of the UFG and was to be understood in the background of 'deepening economic crisis' brought about by policies that the 'bourgeois-landlord' government was pursuing in India. These 'united and strong mass movements' were to be led under the 'leadership of the working class'. Koner also goes onto identify the 'character' of the 'peasant movement'. The apparatus of administration and the Governmental initiatives taken 'from above' had 'weaknesses' and the mass movement 'surpassed' the mere implementation of these initiatives. As an example, Koner cites that larger amount of '*benami* land' was recovered by the mass movements than through the

⁶⁵ 'Agrarian Crisis and the Struggles of Peasants and Agricultural Labourers in India', 21st Session of the All India Kisan Sabha, Rurkalan, Punjab, 1971, p.62.

⁶⁶ 'Coalition and Conflict: The United Front Governments of West Bengal, 1967 and 1969-1970', PhD thesis by Sally Roy at Australian National University, April 1974, p. 197.

Governmental efforts. Other than the recovery of *benami* land and redistribution of land, the movement had extended to issues concerning 'loans, food, wages' and even the 'problem of land surrendered to repay debts'. He criticises as 'erroneous' the ideas of the 'bourgeois economists' who believed that 'unless adequate land' was given, it would be cumbersome to cultivate 'a *bigha* or so' and that it 'would hamper production' in the long run. Even 'small' amounts of land would provide a 'sense of security' and generate 'enthusiasm' and release the 'creative energy' of the peasants to the extent that 'no land has remained fallow'. The 'agricultural labourers' were 'landless distressed peasants' suffered from 'want of employment opportunity, poor wages and various kinds of feudal exploitation'. Although active in some areas, the movement of this segment was 'relatively weak'. Koner says that though the 'base of the peasant movement' had started shifting from 'middle peasants' to the 'poor peasants' two years ago, this needed to 'further' consolidate and be imbued with 'political consciousness'. However, as the 'base' of the 'unity among peasants' was shifting to 'agricultural labourers and poor peasants', some amount of friction was arising with the 'rural middle-class people' who had earlier held the mantle of the peasant movement. Unity was needed against 'the feudalistic and hoarders and other reactionary forces'.⁶⁷

In another article in the *Ganashakti*,⁶⁸ Koner says that for the 'emancipation of the peasant', the grip of 'imperialism, feudalism and monopoly capital' over the State was to be countered by 'a worker-peasant alliance' led by the working class. But 'agricultural labourers' would be the 'base' of the 'firm alliance of poor peasants' formed with the 'middle peasants'. The 'peasant movements' were struggling for both '*khas*' and '*benami*' lands, recovery of 'more than ten lakh *bighas* of land', getting paddy on credit and the struggle for wages etc. A 'people's democratic revolution' should be built up with even the 'rich peasants' and the 'democratic people of villages' are united with the 'middle peasantry' and 'poor peasants and agricultural labourers'. The 'land rich' were uneasy and thus the UFG was also faced with a 'crisis' as the 'bourgeois parties' were labelling the peasants involved in the movements as 'robbers, unlawful and forcible occupiers and breeders of disorder'. To solve the land problems 'radically', it was essential not only to recover more land and bring changes in laws but the peasants would need to be aware of 'political aims' so that a 'People's democratic revolution' could be achieved. The 'whole of the landlords' land and 'non peasant' who were

⁶⁷ Harekrishna Koner, 'The new phase in peasant movement and its significance' in '*Desh Hitaishree*', Autumn Number, 1969.

⁶⁸ Harekrishna Koner, 'Peasant struggles in the light of Lenin's teachings', *Ganashakti, Lenin Centenary Issue*, March 1970.

dependent on other income sources would then be distributed among the and the 'non peasant small owners' would get 'alternative sources of income' along with 'landless and poor peasants'. Thus, the movement doesn't stop with land recovery.

In carrying out the 'mass struggle', Koner does not intend to 'neglect elections' as they are a means to strengthen the struggle and enhance political consciousness though merely depending on elections to solve problems amounted to 'serving the capitalist class'. But the achievements of the United Front Government in achieving 'partial demands' like stopping land eviction, defeating 'conspiracies of', redistribution of 1.2 million *benami* and vested land to poor peasants and agricultural labourers, rise in price of food grains were achieved through the 'own fighting power' of the 'people's struggle' and not through 'above showered benefits' of law. The people had 'learnt to understand' the 'class character of the State, its Constitution, its judiciary system and prevailing ideas and beliefs'.⁶⁹

Koner in another writing in 1972 said that 'big plans' and 'catchy slogans on agrarian development' were paraded by the ruling class to keep the peasantry away from the 'path of revolution'. He says that Lenin believed that middle and poor peasants could never become self-sufficient only 'through improved methods of self-cultivation without touching the rich'. The Congress rulers had understood that they would face an electoral defeat in 1972 due to mass movements and so had taken recourse to 'destroy parliamentary democracy itself' 'bidding goodbye to the process of elections'.⁷⁰ The aim was to form an alliance with the workers.⁷¹

Analysis of Vidhan Sabha Proceedings on Land Reforms

The creation of the 'peasant' as a rhetorical device is nowhere more apparent than the debates in the Vidhan Sabha during the framing of the Land Reforms Acts.

The amendment to the West Bengal Land Reforms Act which was put forward by Zainul Abedin was discussed as a non-official resolution.⁷²

⁶⁹ Harekrishna Koner, 'Crisis and Mass Resistance Perspective', *Nandan*, Autumn issue, 1970.

⁷⁰ Harekrishna Koner, *Collected Works*, p.123.

⁷¹ *Ibid* p.147.

⁷² West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings: Official Report, Forty Fourth Session, 1967, p.

The amendment was proposed to protect the rights of the heirs of a deceased sharecropper, either in his family or anybody else, to cultivate the same land. He drew attention to the fact that the West Bengal Pradesh Congress in its Mayapur conference had in line with Gandhiji's slogan of 'land to the tiller' decided that proper steps be taken to implement this principle. We discuss the major points in his speech before coming to an overall analysis of the opposition's viewpoint. The narration starts with the endorsement of the Congress' desire to build up a welfare state through various land reform laws and he traces the various land reform measures undertaken and their continuity till the present day. To decrease unemployment in villages and to reduce the increasing pressure on land, it was essential to protect the rights of the sharecroppers which would have to be framed through hereditary rights of cultivation. Later on in his speech Abedin would go on to use imageries that India lived in villages and 'Bengal doubly lived in villages' and that sharecropping was not prevalent in Kolkata alluding perhaps to the class character of the opposition UFG leaders who needed to focus on rural Bengal. Abedin takes recourse to legal concepts when he describes sharecropping as a 'contract' from whose benefits the 'legal heirs' must not be excluded. The amendment which he proposed was essential for this purpose and to goes on to ask the question for a solution to a situation where a deceased sharecropper had many persons who were eligible as legal heirs. Abedin proposed that the words 'heritable' and 'transferable' be added to the rights given to the *bargadar* to cultivate. Abedin's focus was on the legal route to effect change.

The proposed amendment drew support of almost all the other members of the house as we shall see and a discussion on this followed. Pijush Kanti Mukherjee of the INC supported Abedin's stand on hereditary rights to sharecroppers using the phrases of 'security of work' and that of the supply of adequate food. He gave the example of tea gardens that relied on family labour and where if security of tenure was not granted to the legal heirs, entire families would be reduced to 'begging on the streets' He stopped short of dwelling on the issue of a sharecropper having '3 or 4' legal heirs calling it a 'technical issue' that was to be settled through discussions between the landowner and the sharecropper's side. Another Congress MLA, Prasenjit Burman lent support to the amendment and this reply comes across as sharp in its tone with reference to the class character of the party. He draws out the image of an old sharecropper on his deathbed that did not have to worry about the future of his progeny as their rights were already secured by law. Through various land reform legislations, the INC had precisely tried to do that. He explained the need for conflicts arising out of sharecropping to be kept out of the purview of Junior Land Revenue Officer and

Special Land Revenue Officer courts manned by executive magistrates as they were extremely busy and could not focus on work. He also raised the issue of minimum wages to be implemented for sharecroppers.⁷³

Trilokesh Mishra of the INC opined that the issue of the sharecroppers was important and laws in this regard needed to be further amended. However, he stressed that he was speaking on 'certain ground' and opines that it was not the case that all sharecroppers would be deprived of their dues, only some would. He said that the hereditary rights should only be given to able persons willing to engage in agriculture and that if the legal heir was a girl child or a child, some solution needed to be found out. He then goes to stress on a very important point. Mishra is gingerly on the ability of law to improve relations between the sharecropper and the landowner. He is of the opinion that unity of the sharecroppers would only antagonise relations between the sharecropper and the landowner and since the former depended on the latter for inputs like loans, this would not be helpful. Legal cases in courts added to the complexities. He questioned the imagery drawn on a 'weak' sharecropper being pit against a 'powerful' *Jotedar*. He says that with the advancement of legal proceedings, the sharecroppers might gain confidence and even antagonise the moneylender. He wanted the Bhagchas Courts to have officers trained in law who would discharge their duties in an impartial manner. He further cites examples wherein the sharecropper demands 50% of the produce from the *mahajan* and not 53% out of a feeling of *souhardy* or friendliness. To keep the situation 'healthy' in the villages, it was essential that the sharecropper was not 'instigated' to demand 53% of the produce. He says that government was based on the 'willing cooperation of the governed' and 'public opinion' was important but it was equally important to see whether this public opinion was 'alert and intelligent'. It was the responsibility of the government to keep the citizens 'alert and intelligent'. This speech alludes to the prevalent discourse on scientific planning by experts. It can be pointed out that the ruling Congress party was opposed to the Central leadership but here support blossoms.⁷⁴

Next the Congress leader Shankar Sen Ishore stood up to counter the UFG claims and he used language that shows how Communist parties were perceived as anti-socials that would incite the common masses into indiscipline. He draws continuity in the Congress commitment to

⁷³ Ibid. p.499-501.

⁷⁴ Ibid pp. 505-7.

land reforms from Gandhian slogans down to the Mayapur conference of the West Bengal Pradesh Congress.⁷⁵

Purabi Mukherjee again brings up an imagery which is quite opposed to the UFG rhetoric and seeks to counter the class character of rhetoric. She tries to point out that the Jotedars were also Indian citizens and that 'compensation' was introduced not merely to satisfy the test of Constitutionality but also on the grounds of morality. Some alternative source of livelihood had to be found out for the *Jotedar* also. She questions the facts given by UFG leaders that 70 to 75% of the sharecroppers had been evicted and asks whether these have been recorded as facts. She goes on to list some of the pro sharecropper steps that were taken during the Congress period through legislation like the provisions for personal resumption which laid down that the *Jotedar* could only keep 1/8th of the land. If any sharecropper complained about not getting his produce on time, he would have to file a case within 2 years. So the sharecropper had to be educated on his rights, the speech being a hark call back to the top down model of developmental planning almost. She doesn't directly detract from the attention that the government gives to the *bargadars* but criticises the compartmentalised planning carried out by Departments of Agriculture, Finance and Land. She then asks the question as to why discussions was necessary on sharecroppers when the Congress had adopted the slogan of 'soil to the tiller' long ago. She said that the Mayapur conference had a chilling effect on '' who sensing the future motives of the government evicted sharecroppers before a policy was arrived at but the still existed 'full of exploitation'. She says that the Congress government had distributed hand bills among government officials as well as among the sharecroppers to make them aware of their rights. She asks for a 'balanced view' on the issue of sharecroppers when she describes a widow who gave 8 to 9 *bighas* of her land for sharecropping but after her husband's death wanted to cultivate the land personally. Mukherjee asks whether she be allowed to evict the sharecroppers or not. A 'humanistic' view had to be taken of the situation and not merely one based on law and economics. She says that the language of the amendment was important more so as the record of rights and survey of ownership was not completed and till then the UFG had to rely on a licensing agreement between the *bargadar* and the *Jotedar*. If the amendment was hurried, then a 'huge fracture' would emerge on the economic condition of West Bengal and it was best that 'experiments' and 'discussions' are carried out with the land reform process.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Ibid pp.513-4.

⁷⁶ Ibid pp. 515-9.

Nathaniel Murmu criticised Abedin on the ground that the Bill was passed after the UFG came to power and that the latter as a minister had objected to the amendments to the Bill as he himself as a *Jotedar* had land which exceeded the ceiling limit using *benami* transactions. Murmu pressed for voluntary disclosure of land held in excess of ceiling.⁷⁷

Gangadhar Naskar opined that the rate of eviction of sharecroppers was higher during Congress rule, wherein ‘thousands’ of sharecroppers were evicted especially from the Sunderbans, the figure being more than what was done in the period of British rule and that sharecropping under the present conditions constituted a kind of ‘*gulami*’ (Servant) that is roughly translated as slavery that reduced sharecroppers to beggars.⁷⁸

Debendra Nath Das refutes the emphasis laid on law by the opposition leaders and says that sharecroppers got whatever little they had through movements through their ‘blood’ braving the police actions in places like Sundarbans, Midnapore, 24 Parganas and Jalpaiguri. He says that ‘peasants’ were tortured by the setting up of police camps in rural areas and that the UFG doesn’t ‘instigate’ the rural masses but fights for their rights. He says that the amendments were an attempt at gaining political traction both among the ‘’ and the sharecroppers by the Congress which was losing its support in rural areas. He ends up supporting the amendment on the grounds that in the absence of alternative employment for the ‘poor’ and ‘middle class’ unemployed youth of the villages. So we find a clear attempt at creation of a class consciousness to tackle the situation. He also wanted that the ‘stolen’ *benami* land be recovered and handed over to deserving ‘peasants’ through this amendment. Whether or not these exact words can be taken to be a reflection of the debate within the CPI (M) on the strategy of incorporating the sharecropper or the landless in the party can be debateable but it is a fact that the emphasis is on creating an imagery of a weak sharecropper struggling against a powerful *Jotedar*. The landless does not come up in the discussion.⁷⁹

Satyanarayan Banerjee opined that the proposed amendment was silent on the hereditary rights of deceased sharecroppers and that the question of multiple legal heirs claiming ownership of the land was a ‘detail’ that would be taken up after a law had been framed. Sasabindu Bera started a scathing attack on the Congress saying that by virtue of winning votes, the party had got Bills passed in the legislature that benefitted the ‘Zamindars and the’. He went on to utter some sentences that encapsulate one of the many dilemmas that would

⁷⁷ Ibid pp.501-2.

⁷⁸ Ibid p.505.

⁷⁹ Ibid pp.507-8.

confront not only the UFG but also the Communist parties. Drawing on a High Court judgment, he described two classes of *bargadars*. One class got help from the *Jotedar* in the form of inputs and another class didn't get any help at all. If the owner of the land happened to be a small land owner and not a *Jotedar*, he would stand to lose. The amendment brought by the Congress did not distinguish between the two classes of *bargadars* and thus needed to be analysed in the light of the judgement. The amendment had the potential to create rifts between the two classes of the *bargadars*. But some solution had to be found wherein the *bargadar* would have to be tied to the land and his rights protected.⁸⁰

Amulya Ratan Mahato opined that the Congress had many chances to amend the land reforms Bill but did not do so when in power. He raised the question of provision of credit facilities to the sharecropper in the face of 'inflation. This was an attempt to free him from attachment to the *Jotedar*. He draws attention to the practise on the part of to make sharecroppers give their thumb impressions on blank paper and then evict them whenever convenient. The eviction activities are shown as a regular practise and since the sharecroppers are not given receipts, they cannot claim their part of the produce. If they do, they are evicted and a fictitious amount of loan is shown on the blank receipt.⁸¹

Nishita Nath Kundu opined that stress laid by Mukherjee on complete ownership, licensing etc. were technical issues which only served to increase the complexity. He says that discussions on who would be the legal heir of the sharecropper or who would create an atmosphere of 'enmity' in the assembly which the Congress should not embark upon in a parliamentary system. He then says that so many questions on the part of the Congress indicated a 'half hearted' attitude towards the sharecroppers.⁸²

Amalesh Chandra Majumdar also attacks the Congress by saying that though the amendment was brought in now, the 'Congress' evicted sharecroppers at will and the Government was a mute spectator. He claimed to have a list of it all. He identifies the reason in the 'class' character of the Congress party as a result of which they could never think of the interests of the 'sharecropper and the landless peasant'. He belies the stress laid by the Congress on unity between different classes saying that the Tebhaga movement was not fought on 'goodwill' but 'blood'. The imagery used is of a bright future at the end of a hard struggle.⁸³

⁸⁰ Ibid pp. 509-10.

⁸¹ Ibid pp. 514-5.

⁸² Ibid pp. 519-21.

⁸³ Ibid pp.521-2.

Nurul Islam wanted the fruit orchards, in his case the mango gardens, to be placed under some kind of land ceiling as they were used for *benami* transactions including in the name of elephants. To increase the food production, the ‘peasants’ had to get hold of land.

Apurba Lal Majumdar said that the State Acquisition Act, 1953 spoke of ‘under tenants’ but was silent on ‘sharecroppers’ whereas according to the census of 1961, 34% of the ‘peasantry’ in West Bengal were sharecroppers and that in different villages about 25% to 50% of the sharecroppers cultivated their own land. That statistics are used to influence policy decisions are important to be seen. At present he said that about 50% of the cultivable land was operated on by sharecroppers. He attacks the Congress for not implementing the recommendations of the Planning Commission and gives the examples of Assam, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh where claiming of land for personal cultivation and thereby evicting sharecroppers was abolished. Thus ‘voluntary surrender’ of land by the sharecropper needed to be regulated.⁸⁴

Bhupal Chandra Panda said that the amendment would not help in protecting the interests of the landlords. ‘50 to 75%’ of the sharecroppers had already been evicted and before the UFG government started work for protecting the *bargadars*, the Congress was trying to shield the Jotedars.⁸⁵ Nitai Bhandari said that the question to what extent the laws were implemented needed to be seen and that if the *bargadar* got rights to cultivate on a ‘permanent basis’ the ‘food problem’ of West Bengal would be solved to a great extent.⁸⁶ Prabodh Purkait said that the laws framed by the Congress were meant to protect the interests of the Jotedars and the landed class who by filing ‘false cases’ in Bhagchas Courts and so now the police shouldn’t be allowed to go to the site of disputes and protect the *Jotedar*.⁸⁷

Harekrishna Koner was the last speaker. He says that he would support the Bill even though it was introduced by an Opposition Leader. He says that he would not go into the reason why the Opposition had brought the Bill. The rights of the *bargadars* were important since the days of the Tebhaga struggle. The Congress Government had brought in ‘piecemeal’ laws instead of a ‘consolidated law’. Despite the laws being there, the *bargadars* had to fight for their rights and it was through struggle that they had been able to protect themselves. The problems facing the land reforms project were the attempts on the part of the Jotedars to

⁸⁴ Ibid pp.522-3.

⁸⁵ Ibid pp.526-7.

⁸⁶ Ibid p. 527.

⁸⁷ Ibid p. 528.

evade land ceilings through *benami* property and eviction of *bargadars*. It was only through building up of ‘democratic public opinion’ that these issues could be tackled. The ‘*bargadars*’ had to be organised and this would give them strength against the machinations of the *Jotedar*. He says that ‘personal cultivation’ should not refer to cultivation by servants.⁸⁸

The Role of the Kisan Sabha

The record of the West Bengal Kisan Sabha in this phase does not appear to be very enterprising. The sharecroppers and the landless labourers were not mobilised during this period and the number of sharecroppers grew during this time. In comparison with the all India average daily earnings of agricultural labourers at 49%, the wages grew only by 26.6% in West Bengal. As a bargaining body vis –a-vis the Government, the Kisan Sabha was not effective in emphasizing the importance of class struggle and radical solutions to tenancy problems as the way forward. During the period of war and economic stagnation during the years 1962 to 1966, the WBKS organised demonstrations against the land reform policies and food policies but these were not very effective. Growth of factions within an already weak association led to a diminishing ‘peasant’ movement in the 1960s and peasants gave up their leadership to join other Marxist led organisations.⁸⁹

Communism and the ‘*Bhadralok*’ class

Initially the Communist Party was in favour of activity among the urban middle class like the trade unions, teachers, students rather than the rural population or the factory workers but from the 1950s onwards, the membership of the party was increased and emphasis was given on enlistment of persons from low status groups. Leaders were recruited from this class and the Communist embarked upon new projects. However, the growth in party membership was controlled by the state leadership on the ground that on grounds of lesser ‘efficiency’ and even ‘loss of control’ by the state and central party committees and a lack of inclination for ‘electoral politics’. Despite these restrictions, ‘low and middle class rural individuals’ adopted ‘*bhadralok*’ manners based on an ethic of hard work, education and culture much in a Weberian manner and were drawn close to the Marxist ideology because of its modern, urbane and progressive outlook as Marcus Franda notes and joining the party would help in accessing jobs and leadership positions. Thus, the movement spread under three fronts of the

⁸⁸ Ibid pp.528-34.

⁸⁹ Marcus Franda, *Radical Politics in West Bengal*, (Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1971), p.77.

trade unions, the student unions and the Kisan Sabha and to help in elections, electoral committees were formed at the constituency level.⁹⁰

Conflict within the Communist Party of India

It is at this time that we need to look at a very important debate that surfaced between two factions in the Kisan Sabha regarding the strategy to be followed in rural areas. The two most important rural constituencies were the landless labourers and the small landholding peasants. The electoral front of the Party wanted to enlist the support of both the classes but if small landholders were organised, the support of perhaps the most 'revolutionary' classes would be lost and if the landless were organised, the small landholders who had considerable political and economic clout might be enraged. The latter strategy was not practical from the electoral point of view.⁹¹

In 1955, at the time the land reform legislations were framed, this debate came up in the party documents and initially the Left wing dominated the Right wing. In April 1954, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of India adopted a resolution that was titled 'Tasks among the Peasant Masses'. The Resolution laid down certain principles that were to guide the party in dealing with the *Kisan* movement. The Resolution despite using the imagery that would later on be reflected in the activities of the CPI (M) does recognise in a somewhat cursory manner the complexities that operate in the arena of land relations. The 'main fetter on production' was the 'antiquated land system' which required a 'united struggle of the peasant masses against the landlords'. The ceiling for landholdings should be fixed and excess land would be taken over and distributed among the 'agricultural labourers and the peasants'. The ceiling would be fixed in a way so as to allow a person to enjoy the 'same standard as a rich peasant' leaving aside enough land for the purposes of redistribution. The ceiling would be worked out 'from area to area' in 'close cooperation with the Kisan Sabha' after detailed studies. Small landholders were distinguished from landlords. The resolution noted that 'small landholders' might have leased their lands to 'tenants' when it was 'uneconomical' to cultivate it themselves or they were employed in 'towns and villages' as 'factory employees, petty traders, low paid professionals etc.'. The 'small landholders' should

⁹⁰ Ibid, p.70.

⁹¹ Ibid, p.77.

be able to cultivate land themselves, lease it according to the rules of fixity of tenure and reduction of rent under the Tenancy Laws take 'full compensation' from the Government at 'market prices' or give the land to the tenant who was cultivating the land. The Kisan Sabha would try to bring in 'unity' between the small landholder and the 'tenant' who were 'equally poor'. If a professional had 'incomes enough to maintain a reasonable standard of life' he could not resume personal cultivation on the land. The Kisan Sabha would demand an increase in the rates given by the landlord to the small landholder as land was leased by the landholder from the small holder especially in areas where commercial crops were grown. The Sabha would also demand reduction of rents paid by the peasants to the landlords and fixity of tenure. 'Agricultural labourers' constituted the 'militant section' of the 'agricultural population' and would 'firmly unite' with the 'middle peasants' and 'win over the rich peasants' against 'the landlords for land'. The Party and the Kisan movement would meet the demands of the agricultural labourers for land and 'champion their immediate demands'. Agricultural labourers must join the movement against the landlords and it would be ensured if their demands were met. Otherwise, there was the danger of these labourers turning against other sections in the villages through their participation in 'communal, disruptive or reactionary organisations' or even caste based exploitation. Some of the demands of the agricultural labourers were assignment of 'cultivable waste land', loans for farm inputs, cancellation of debts to landlords, removal of 'forced labour', free medical and educational facilities by the government, employment in irrigation and other development schemes, fixing of minimum wage for day labour and minimum salary for farm servants, reduction of work hours and holidays and the right to free house sites and stopping eviction from homestead land. The Resolution goes on to make a significant point when it mentions that the agricultural labourers 'should be organised separately in independent class organisations apart from the peasant organisation'. The reasons given were that their demands of 'wages, hours of work, holidays etc' were specific to their class and agricultural labourers belonged to the backward and 'untouchable castes' and other 'peasant groups' might not join their organisations. Agricultural labourers would emerge as a 'leading force' if they were separately organised and then made a part of the Kisan Sabha. There would be 'coordinating mechanisms' between the labours' organisation and the Kisan Sabha. The picture that emerges from an analysis of the Document is that of a village space constituted by the landlords, the poor, middle and rich peasants followed by the agricultural labourers and the farm servants. Wage earners and labourers who engaged in manual work were also a part of the class structure according to the Document.

There were also on the question as to against whom the peasant unity should be directed. In most cases it was the 'bourgeois-landlord' alliance.⁹²

After that since 1957, the right wing within the party who advocated supporting the small landholders in the village dominated the Party.⁹³ So the Kisan Sabha favoured compensation for those smaller intermediaries whose land had been taken over by the government along with organising agitations for agricultural loans and other inputs and excessive taxation. The Kisan Sabha decided to work within the framework of existing legislation to maximise the benefits that the peasant could get. It decided to support the Panchayat Acts and credit and handicraft cooperatives along with marketing societies along with the community development programme and national extension service. How the Kisan Sabha decided on whom to select for purposes of compensation as 'small' is another question.

These measures amply show that the Kisan Sabha at this stage was interested in maintaining what Myron Weiner calls 'rural harmony' rather than chalk out a strategy of class conflict. Despite the official resolution for harmonious politics at the village level, the Communist party activities remained what Franda would describe as 'fragmented and localised'. In areas where the left faction dominated, the landless labourers would be instigated against the small landholders and in course of time this led to the birth of the CPI (M) after the left faction joined the electoral front. In areas where the right faction dominated, the focus was on harmonious politics and the small landholders were roped in. At this juncture we take a look at the proceedings of the West Bengal Krishak Sabha to identify the key themes that were discussed at meetings after the United Front Government of which the CPI (M) was a part. In 24 Parganas, Howrah, Hooghly and Burdwan the landless were mobilised and small landholders were mobilised in Midnapore.⁹⁴

Views of the Paschimbanga Pradeshik Krishak Sabha

The views of the West Bengal Pradeshik Krishak Sabha in this period do not conflict with the official line followed by the United Front Governments.

At the 19th Conference of the West Bengal Pradeshik Krishak Sabha held in Sonarpur in 1968 it was decided that a 'worker-peasant' alliance needed to be built up. It was pointed out in the conference that earlier the largest number of members belonged to 'rich and middle

⁹² T.R Sharma '*Communism in India*', (New Delhi, Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1984 p.77).

⁹³ Bipan Chandra '*The Indian Left: Critical Appraisals*', (New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House Limited, 1983), pp. 377-399.

⁹⁴ Marcus Franda, '*Radical Politics in West Bengal*', op. cit, p.78.

peasants'. But at the present Conference it was a welcome sign that out of 676 representatives, 71 were landless workers, 228 were poor peasants and *bargadars* and 20 persons were non-agricultural labourers. At the 20th Conference held in 1969 at Kanthi, it was mentioned that the 'landless and almost landless *khetmajur*' and poor peasants' would carry on the struggle against the '*Jotedar-majutdar* and *mahajans*' and for this purpose the formation of a 'class based political consciousness' was necessary. Land based movements were 'central' and the issues involved were those of stopping eviction of *bargadars*, distribution of government owned '*khas*' land, to distribute land back to those *raiya*ts who were evicted as landowners had converted land into fisheries and granting of homestead land to the landless. The Krishak Sabha wanted change in the laws to address the situation. The changes demanded were that a family wise ceiling should be adopted and recorded, '*Debottar*' estates be excluded, *benami* land be identified, land reforms be taken out of the ambit of Civil Courts, '*bargadars* be given hereditary rights of cultivation and small landowners be deprived of the right to evict *bargadars* to use the land for personal cultivation, land revenue would be collected from those who owned more than 3 acres of land and the rates would be increased for those owning more than 10 acres of land. At the 21st Conference held at Chinsurah, the Krishak Sabha praised the UFG for infusing lakhs of agricultural labourers and poor peasants with renewed vigour and that they had decided to come out of their past experiences of exploitation through struggle.⁹⁵

Land Reform Legislation under Congress Government

The West Bengal Land Reforms (Amendment) Act, 1972 was framed by the Congress Government under Siddhartha Shankar Ray. The Communist Party of India was an alliance partner in the Government. Gurupada Khan was the Minister in Charge of Land Reforms. The main intention of this amendment was to apply the land ceiling to the of excess land held as a family. The deadline was extended thrice over two years. The share of the *bargadar* in the total produce was increased and a receipt had to be given to a *bargadar* by the landowner.

The words 'not being a share of the produce' was added to the definition of 'personal cultivation' in Section 2(8) so that the *bargadar* could not be evicted by being paid wages in cash or in kind. It was the share of the produce that would be paid to the *bargadar*.

Another law was the West Bengal Acquisition of Homestead Land Act of 1975 which aimed to confer absolute title of ownership to any person to a land on which homestead was

⁹⁵Mohammad Abdullah Rasul, *Krishak Sabhar Itihash*, (Kolkata: National Book Agency, 1990) pp.198-216.

constructed provided it did not exceed .0334 acres. It may be recalled that the definitions of 'homestead' and 'occupier' were made clearer in 1975 than what was there under the provisions of the original Act of 1969. Under Section 4 of the 1969 Act, a person who was an 'occupier' would have to make an application to the Collector who after conducting an inquiry, in the case of settlements found true, would acquire the land and publish a notice in the Official Gazette. The 1975 Act did not put the onus on the 'occupiers' nay the State Government was tasked with the implementation of the Act.⁹⁶

In 1976 West Bengal became the only state in India where the Urban Land Ceiling Act was passed.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) who were the main opposition boycotted the Assembly during the time period from 1972 till 1977. The reasons were that the Youth and Student wings of the Congress had 'let loose a reign of unbridled terror and physical attacks' against the CPI(M) cadres and the People's Democracy reported the death of 487 CPI(M) supporters. Jyoti Basu demanded a 11 point programme to restore 'social and political peace' in West Bengal.⁹⁷

In this chapter we have described two alternatives to the process of implementing land reforms through legislation. The first was the Bhudan Movement. We shall also look at the question of the Naxal movement in some amount of detail. D'Mello opines that the Maoist movements have clearly distanced themselves from the politics of the Parliamentary Left in India.⁹⁸ The movement started off in village Naxalbari in the Siliguri sub division in 1967 when the local CPI (M) unit mobilised the landless peasants and the *bargadars* to forcefully seize the landlords' land. The CPI (M) was a part of the United Front Government formed in 1967 and the police was sent to crush the Naxalite movement. Differences within the ranks of the CPI (M) over the appropriateness of the police action led to a faction coming out of the CPI (M) as the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) that was ideologically aligned with the Chinese Communist Party and espoused armed struggle against the perceived class

⁹⁶ The West Bengal Acquisition of Homestead Land for Agricultural Labourers, Artisans and Fishermen Act, 1975, Government of West Bengal, Legislative Department, published in the Calcutta Gazette on 5th January, 1976.

⁹⁷ John Osgood Field and Marcus Franda, *Electoral Politics in the Indian States: The Communist Parties of West Bengal*, (New Delhi: Manohar Book Service, 1974), pp.14-7.

⁹⁸ Partha Chatterjee, 'Maoism and Indian Democracy' in Partha Chatterjee (ed.), 'After the Revolution' (Hyderabad, Orient Balckswan, 2020) p. 52.

enemies. The Naxalite movement basically had the programme of creation of self-sufficient villages and of encircling the cities.⁹⁹

The Naxalite Movement

We shall now look at the major events to identify the process of discourse formation during the Naxalite movement.

From the 'six documents' circulated by Charu Mazumdar, the points on which all the sections agreed were that armed struggle would complete the agrarian revolution, the politics of the revolution was to be circulated among the workers and peasants for mobilising them and that a party organisation of a secretive nature would be built up.¹⁰⁰ Mazumdar wanted to form secretive combat groups to set fire on the houses of the Jotedars and to attack individual Jotedars, a point of view that he held till the very end. Kanu Sanyal's group did not agree to this. Ultimately it was decided that in Naxalbari the guidelines on which all sections of the party agreed were to be implemented along with the experiences of peasant leaders whereas Mazumdar's plan of action would be implemented in Chater Hat Islampur in West Dinajpur. Mazumdar did have considerable differences with other leading figures like Sushital Roychoudhury and Ashim Chatterjee.¹⁰¹ Kanu Sanyal later on wrote that the lack of political propaganda and the lack of mass organisations to carry on the struggle were reasons why the actions at Islampur failed.¹⁰²

At a conference in Buraganj in 1967 the documents written by Mazumdar were discussed in front of 'nearly 5000 peasants' wherein agreement was reached that the lands of the and plantation workers who had purchased land from the peasants should be seized. The peasants would cultivate and retain the entire crop from the' land but share half the produce with the plantation workers.¹⁰³ The land of a *Jotedar* engaged in self-cultivation would not be seized. As the elections of March 1967 came closer there were some doubts as to whether a party advocating agrarian revolution should involve itself in parliamentary politics. With the win of the Congress candidates, the Naxalites further went on to mobilise peasants, cultivate land

⁹⁹ Ibid p. 53.

¹⁰⁰ Ashok Mukhopadhyay, 'Charu Majumdar: The Dreamer Rebel' (Kolkata, Niyogi Books, 2022) pp 200-215.

¹⁰¹ Biplab Dasgupta, *The Naxalite Movement*, (Allied Publishers, New Delhi, 1974), pp 161-169.

¹⁰² Kanu Sanyal, 'More About Naxalbari', Proletarian Path, Vol II, No.4 and 5, 1974, pp. 21-41.

¹⁰³ Partha Nath Mukherji 'Naxalbari Movement and the Peasant Revolt in North Bengal' in M S A Rao (ed.) *Social Movements in India: Studies in Peasant, Backward Classes, Sectarian and Women's Movements* (New Delhi, Manohar Publishers, 1979) p.44.

taken forcibly and confiscate stocks of paddy from the ‘ stores. The snatching of weapons belonging to the *Jotedar* was another strategy that was adopted.

The UFG and the Naxalite Problem

The first non-Congress ministry was formed with the United Front and Harekrishna Koner who was the Land and Land Revenue Minister had to rush to Siliguri in May 1967 to negotiate the issue with Kanu Sanyal.

The Superintendent of Police put forward three proposals that could effectively solve the problem.¹⁰⁴ The first was that armed actions were to be stopped immediately and that complaints related to settlement would be brought to the attention of the Block Development Officer or the Sub Divisional Officer who would solve them effectively, persons involved in violence should surrender themselves voluntarily and that looting of food grains was not permissible if done in the absence of police or government officers. This was possibly the last time a senior CPI (M) leader met the Naxalite group officially.

We get instances of skirmishes between the police and the Naxalites after the discussions ended. In Barajharujote we learn that Inspector Wangdi was killed when the police tried to enter the village. In retaliation there when the police entered the village with the Sub Divisional Officer, they were surrounded by the women from the villages.¹⁰⁵

The local units of the CPI (M) had organised meetings so that the villagers were not demoralised after the police action. The Buraganj area witnessed processions that attracted about 10000 persons at times and the ‘*Jotedars*’ were to voluntarily part with their weapons which some of them did voluntarily but others were compelled to do. The area was declared a ‘muktanchal’ with a parallel government and people’s courts were established with leading comrades examining cases before presenting them to an assembly of party sympathisers who decided on the quantum of punishment. Nagen Roychoudhury a Jotedar who did not accept the peasant government was murdered despite the police cordoning off the entire area. At this point the West Bengal Government sent a Cabinet Mission to Siliguri to whom the district administration presented their understanding of the situation. The demand for land was seen as a function of land prices and police action was necessary to control unlawful activities. The Cabinet Mission mentioned that exploitation by the Jotedars, moneylenders and the plantation owners needed to stop but that the administration would take strong action if

¹⁰⁴Ibid p.47.

¹⁰⁵Ibid p.69.

violence continued. The Naxalites continued raising arms and ammunition to overthrow the State even after this and the Mission announced the creation of Land Reform Committees at the Sub Divisional and the *Thana* levels. The Block Development Officer was the Chairman and the Junior Land Reforms Officer was the Secretary. Other members consisted of the Legislative Assembly members, the *Anchal Pradhan* and the *Gram Adhyaksh*. These Committees would meet local people. But we do not find any evidence of these Committees being able to carry out their functions efficiently. With Naxalite activities continuing unabated, police action started where prominent leaders like Majibur Rahman, Oli Mohammad and Jangal Santhal were arrested and firearms recovered. Ashim Chatterjee commented that the idioms used by Mazumdar like the mobilisation of landless and poor peasants and agrarian revolution diluted the content of the problem of land ownership. Also, the idea of annihilation would inevitably lead to terrorism and individual acts of valour and sacrifice reflected bourgeoisie ideals.¹⁰⁶

Alongside police action the Sub Divisional Land Reforms Committee drew up a course of action that included the licensing out of vested agricultural land, trying to increase the amount of cultivable land by surveying lands that were considered as unfit for agriculture, to inquire into cases where *bargadars* were evicted illegally, to regularise the encroachments on vested lands by withdrawal of pending cases and allotting lands to the eligible persons. The persons who received licenses were to pay a fee of Rs.10 per acre without ownership title. The Committee functioned in areas where the Naxalite control was relatively lesser and claimed to have distributed 984.22 acres among 686 persons.¹⁰⁷

But the working of the Committee could not capture the rural complexities. First, occupants had settled on land even before these were recorded as vested because of being ceiling surplus, benami etc. Usually occupants got *pattas* (settlement receipts) but non occupants also got *pattas*. Second, conflicts arose between persons who got *pattas* and those who were in actual possession of land. Thus, cases piled up in courts. Third, a class of land brokers arose who approached the marginal and poor peasants to help them get *pattas* on lands that they were occupying. Fourth, social groups like the Rajbansis who were prosperous lost lands as these were occupied by settlers. Thus, even if they were sharecroppers or poor, they did not

¹⁰⁶ Ashim Chatterjee, *Naxalbarir Prakita Shikshake Urdhe Tule Dharun*, (Calcutta: Asit Sinha, 1978), pp. 17-8.

¹⁰⁷ S K Basu and S K Bhattacharya, *Land Reforms in West Bengal*, op.cit. p.10.

qualify as persons eligible for redistribution of land as they owned ceiling surplus land in 1952.¹⁰⁸

The Communist Party of India and other parties like the Forward Bloc, viewed the Naxalite issue as something that could keep out the growing influence of the CPI (M) in politics. Thus, the murders committed by the Naxalites were not critiqued by them. College students, school dropouts and even the poor persons in urban areas like slum dwellers joined the Naxalite movement. In areas like Belegghata, Shyampukur in Kolkata and Barasat in North 24 Parganas, there were reports of Forward Bloc activists closely helping the Naxalites with legal aid.¹⁰⁹

However, a section within the CPI(ML) believed that by focussing attention on Calcutta, the work in rural areas were cut short and the cadres were prevented from visiting the countryside. By focussing on cities, the Charu Mazumdar faction had spoilt party strength to an extent as the 'base of the old society in rural areas' was damaged. The main focus should have been on building up support for the movement in the rural areas and work in urban areas would be complimentary to this process.¹¹⁰

Despite these activities that were followed by police action, the Naxalite activities spread to villages and urban areas in Siliguri. Charu Mazumdar wanted to utilise the democratic students' movements for his own purposes.¹¹¹ The North Bengal University was a space where political battles were fought out between the Naxal sympathisers and their opponents. The MA exams were cancelled and police presence was maintained on the campus. Charu Mazumdar was arrested in November and released in December. After his release he advised his supporters to go underground. Sushital Raychoudhury criticised the move to attack the educational institutions since he felt that the students should have demanded for better educational opportunities and cultural reforms.¹¹²

The Charu Mazumdar group wanted to direct the harvesting movement against the rich peasants and the Jotedars who actively co-operated with the police. A situation already existed in India where a revolution could take place. Guerilla squads would help to carry out

¹⁰⁸Partha Nath Mukherji 'Naxalbari Movement and the Peasant Revolt in North Bengal' in M S A Rao (ed.) op. cit. pp.58-60.

¹⁰⁹Statesman, 22.7.1971.

¹¹⁰On Struggle Between Two Lines in the Party, Liberation, Vol.5, no. 1-2, 1971, pp.24-5.

¹¹¹Tarun Kumar Banerjee, *The Naxalite Movement: Currents and Crosscurrents*, (Kolkata: Progressive Publishers, 2010) p.335.

¹¹²Sushital Roychoudhury, *Hathakari Bampanthi Nitike Pratihata Karun*, (Resist the Left Adventurist Policy), p.14.

these activities. The whole peasantry was the ally of the working class but all the peasants did not belong to the same class. Mazumdar identified four main classes among the peasantry namely, the rich, middle, poor peasants and the landless. There were differences in their revolutionary consciousness and working capacity. In addition to armed struggle, other forms of struggle were also encouraged.¹¹³ The Ashim Chatterjee group wanted to politicise the peasantry by uniting the landless peasants. The peasants were to be armed and village defence squads would be formed. The despotic landlords, usurers and corrupt officers were to be punished and landlords' grains and other properties would be seized.¹¹⁴

Sushital Raychoudhury organised strikes in tea estates evoking the memories of those who were killed in police firing a year ago. By 1968 as trouble again resumed, the police entered the villages and met with armed resistance and one Babulal Vishwa Karmakar was killed in police firing. By this time Mazumdar had given the call for total capture of power through armed struggle. In October 1968, Kanu Sanyal and Keshab Sarkar were arrested.¹¹⁵ The presence of the police in the area even after arrests were made can be interpreted as the peasants' support for the Naxalite activities. In jail, the Naxalites demanded the status of political prisoner and did not change their minds under pressure. By 1969, other political formations like the CPI (M), the SSP, the AIGL also started emulating the radical methods that had won the Naxalites popularity like gheraoing the BDO and managers of tea estates, clearing parts of the Goke forest and encouraging settlement, organising workers' strikes in tea estates, arming people with bows and arrows and demanding seizure of surplus lands and organising forcible harvesting of paddy from vested and *benami* lands. In this atmosphere we find instances of Jotedars being murdered which continued till 1971.

These events were markedly different from the happenings of 1967 because the increasing cases of murders led by secret guerrilla squads were not directly related to agrarian issues like the seizure of *benami* lands and did not involve the peasant and worker masses. 1971 saw clashes between the CPI (M) and the CPI, CPI(ML), Congress (R) and the INTUC. The Naxalite attacks continued on educational institutions, the Railways and on individuals including the police and government officials. However, after 1972 we find that the revolt had subsided to a large degree. The Provisional Central Committee of the CPI (ML) led by

¹¹³ Pradip Basu, *Towards Naxalbari (1953-1967): An Account of Inner Party Ideological Struggle*, (Kolkata: Progressive Publishers, 2000) pp.160-64.

¹¹⁴ Saroj Chakraborty, *With West Bengal Chief Ministers: Memoirs 1962-1977*, (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1978), p.406.

¹¹⁵ Partha Nath Mukherji 'Naxalbari Movement and the Peasant Revolt in North Bengal' in M S A Rao (ed.) op. cit, p.64.

Satyanarayan Sinha maintained that peasant struggles would continue to be led against oppression and that an agrarian revolution led by the working class was still a possibility. However, the immediate task was to build up a front against the 'naked fascist forces' in the country.¹¹⁶

Analysis of the Naxalite Movement

As has been described above, the programme of land seizure by the '*krishaks*' or what constituted the 'peasant' class was announced by Koner immediately after the United Front Government had come to power in 1967. This programme was sought to be given effect by the Naxalite movement though similar activities had started in north Bengal even in the 1950s. Meanwhile Koner had realised the imperatives of being in office and it was difficult to dismiss the legal formalities altogether. Thus, as we have noted, Koner went to meet Mazumdar and rein in his revolutionary zeal. Mazumdar refused to oblige with Koner and later on with the Cabinet Mission. This led to a somewhat turbulent parting of ways even though their objectives were quite similar. So as a paradox stares us in the face, we can identify the difference between Koner and the Naxalite faction as being one of method. While Mazumdar had no qualms about resorting to violent methods being guided by the Marxist wisdom that force was the midwife of revolution, Koner did not approve of the same means labelling the Naxalites as 'ultra adventurists' and 'Liliputian adventurists'.¹¹⁷ He opines that a 'militant land struggle' that lacked a clear idea of 'enemies and allies at different stages of the struggle' could be misled into 'revisionism or sectarianism'. Although this researcher feels that documentary evidence is hard to come by on the last point, still we can get some idea by looking at CITU's efforts to contain trade union militancy around the same time.

We now go on to give a description of the Central Government's response to the Naxalite activities in West Bengal.

Response of the Central Government

The Central Government had set up a Central Land Reforms Committee in 1970 under the Chairmanship of Fakhruddin Ali Ahmad with the purpose of identifying the weaknesses in the land reform policy and to make recommendations for its improvement.¹¹⁸ The West

¹¹⁶ Tarun Banerjee, op. cit. pp. 405-25.

¹¹⁷ Harekrishna Koner, '*Prabhandasankolan*', (Kolkata, National Book Agency Private Limited) p.326.

¹¹⁸ Sohail Jawaid, *The Naxalite Movement in India*, (New Delhi, Associated Publishing House, 1979), pp 126.

Bengal Land Reforms Act of 1970 was approved by the Central Government on the basis of the recommendations of this Committee.

The Report of the National Commission on Agriculture submitted in 1976 criticised the tendency to depend 'primarily on legislation' to carry out agrarian reforms 'to the serious neglect of implementation'.¹¹⁹ The Task Force on Agrarian Relations set up in 1973 also pointed to the gap between 'precept and practice, between policy pronouncements and actual execution' in the field of land reform. One of the reasons cited was that the bureaucracy was manned by persons who were 'substantial landowners' or had close links with the landowning class.¹²⁰

Legislative changes after the Naxalite Movement

The amended West Bengal Land Reforms Act of 1970 laid down a ceiling of 12.4 acres of land in irrigated areas and 17.3 acres in non-irrigated areas. The ceilings were to apply to families and not individuals. A 'family' was to consist of five members and relations like the husband, wife, minor sons and daughters were included. If the number of family members exceeded five, the ceiling limit was relaxed to 17.3 acres in irrigated areas and 24.13 acres in the non-irrigated areas. For an unmarried adult, the ceiling was 6.2 acres in irrigated areas and 8.62 acres in non-irrigated areas. Forcible occupation of land by the Naxalites was sought to be undone. Where a trespasser was not eligible but still occupied more than two acres of land and where a trespasser had displaced a person who was eligible to cultivate land, the Government would under the new law take immediate action. If the land was being held within existing ceiling but was forcibly occupied, then the issue was to be addressed in law courts. The Government proclaimed that the sharecropper who provided all the inputs would get 75% of the crop and the sharecropper who contributed labour and other inputs were provided by the landowner would get 60% of the crop as in earlier times. However, the tanks and orchards were exempt from the ceilings and the landlords used the 'family' clause to carry on *benami* transactions with the help of the administrative machinery.¹²¹

The West Bengal Land Reforms Act was amended again in 1972 wherein hereditary rights were granted to the *bargadars* that were denied under Section 17(2) of the West Bengal Bargadars Act, 1950. In cases where the heirs of a deceased *bargadar* failed to take up

¹¹⁹ Report of the National Commission on Agriculture, Land Reforms Policy, (Government of India: Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation, New Delhi), Part XIV.

¹²⁰ Report of the Task Force on Agrarian Relations, Planning Commission, Government of India, New Delhi, 1973, pp. 13-29.

¹²¹ West Bengal Land Reforms (Amendment) Act, 1971, Ministry of Law, Government of West Bengal, pp. 5-6.

cultivation even after instructions from the Government, the landowner could appoint a *bargadar* of his choice. If the owner had failed to personally cultivate land after eviction of a *bargadar* and had allowed a second *bargadar* to cultivate the land, the Government could sell the particular piece of land to the evicted *bargadar*. A receipt system was introduced for transactions between the landowner and the *bargadar*.¹²² Another law introduced perhaps as a novelty only in West Bengal was the ceiling on land in urban areas in 1976.

The attitude of the ruling Congress towards land is best encapsulated in an article that appeared in a publication titled '*Swadhinotar Pochish Bochor*' (25 years of Independence) published by the Government of West Bengal in 1973.¹²³ Shanti Kumar Mitra writes that according to a Rockefeller Foundation Report, the adoption of a shorter variety of paddy took twenty years but at the rate farmers and scientists were adopting it in India, that would take probably half the time. The article says that most of the land holdings were below one *bigha* and given the increasing pressure of population, the adoption of new technology in agriculture was imperative. New technology included improved farm tools, usage of fertilisers, High Yielding Variety of crops, irrigation, shallow tube wells, cold storage and marketing facilities, construction of new roads and usage of trucks among other things. The article admits that the cost of adopting these were perhaps a tough call for small peasants but it was worth the trouble. The number of unemployed persons in agriculture was seventeen lakhs and if multi-cropping was possible after the adoption of new technology; jobs could be created for seventy-six to ninety-five lakhs persons. The article makes a case for perpetuating the benefits of the Green Revolution and pointed out that land reforms, provision of electricity, irrigation, facilities for buying the farm inputs and cheap credit were necessary for the purpose. The 'small farmer' can be uplifted through these measures by the State.

The Embedded Logic in Land Reforms

As we have seen from the above discussion, land reform was projected as an economic exercise by all the political parties with differing ideologies.

As Herring notes, the 'economic logic of land reform' was located in certain benefits that would accrue from the process. First, large land holdings were critiqued from two angles mainly that the large farm was dependent on the relationship between the landlord and the

¹²² West Bengal Land Reforms Act, 1972, Legislative Department, Government of West Bengal, published in the Calcutta Gazette on 4th May, 1972, pp. 100-1.

¹²³ Shanti Kumar Mitra, 'Paschimbanke Krishibiplob' in *Swadhinatar Pochish Bochor*, (Department of Information and Public Relations: Government of West Bengal, 1973) pp.44-50.

tenant. The economic organisation of smaller farms was economically preferable as labour could be intensively applied. The Indian Journal of Agricultural Economics conducted a series of studies and came to this conclusion in the 1960s. Second, shared tenancy was riddled with ‘economic evils’ mainly as the tenant did not have the ‘economic incentive to apply sufficient working capital and labour to achieve maximum output, or to make permanent improvements on the land’ as his ‘tenure could be terminated’. Land to the tiller was justified on Rawlsian grounds, both by the Indian National Congress and the CPI (M). ‘Land to the tiller’ could not be brought about as ‘equal basic liberty’ was denied as the landless were dependent on landowners. Thus, returns must be made commensurate with effort put on the land. And here the nature of the moving ‘social process’ is important. ¹²⁴

With the changing nature of society, we shall see how rhetoric played a role in forming the concepts as well as changing them

Economic Justice in the Rhetorical Tradition

In this section we shall see how the rhetoric of justice is framed through the discipline of economics in modern times. McCloskey notes that ‘economics is highly metaphorical’ as the official reasoning followed is metaphorical.¹²⁵ He gives the example of demand and supply curves being used to represent the market and the game theory being used to denote a ‘two person negative sum cooperation game’. Although metaphor is viewed as decorative in scope meant primarily to arouse the emotions but the scope is exclusive of truth or knowledge as Aristotle viewed it. Max Black defines a metaphor a figure of speech that had ‘the power to bring two separate domains into cognitive and emotional relation by using language directly appropriate to the one as a lens for seeing the other’. Examples are cited of ‘depression’, ‘elasticity’ and ‘durable goods’. But the ‘question is whether economic thought is metaphorical in some non-ornamental sense’. Here the answer lies in the fact that the metaphor derives its meaning from the interaction between the two separate fields of thought. Since the economy is an aggregation of humans, meaning is constituted through interactions. Closkey says that analogical thinking has two dimensions going by their ‘explicitness’ namely, explicit, middling and implicit and ‘extent, namely, short and long. The explicit would be a simile and a ‘tiresome caution’ would repeat the simile. The middling would be a metaphor and allegory. The implicit would be a symbol and a symbol system that used

¹²⁴ Ronald J Herring, *Land to the Tiller: The Political Economy of Agrarian Reform in South Asia*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 239-68.

¹²⁵ Donald N McCloskey, ‘The Rhetoric of Economics’, *Journal of Economic Literature*, Vol.21, No.2, (June 1983), pp.502-7.

mathematics or a theory. So ‘mathematical reasoning’ is metaphorical. For example, ‘Aggregate capital involves an analogy of capital with something...that can be added in a meaningful way’. So the metaphor comes across as an instrument for thought as it selects certain ways ‘in which the subject is to be compared with the modifier’. Although critiqued by ‘methodological authoritarians’, that such an approach would lead to ‘irrationalism’, but then a ‘practically impossible test takes over the prestige of the real test, but free of its labour’. So we must look at rhetoric of economics as that of a disciplining paradigm where the reasoning holds true ‘within its field’.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen that the issue of reducing inequalities in rural areas was sought to be carried out through implementation of land reforms in the context of West Bengal. Throughout this period, the debate between the major political formations was not on the economic efficiency of land reform but rather the methods through which land reform could be implemented. The issue of land reform arose in the agenda of law makers very early after Independence in tune with Gandhi’s slogan of ‘land to the tiller’. The Zamindari Abolition Act was passed by the Parliament in 1950 with a view to end intermediary interests on land but the Act got entangled in legal disputes as right to Property was a Fundamental Right under Article 31A of the Constitution. In West Bengal, legislation, namely the West Bengal Bargadars Act, 1950, the Estates Acquisition Act, 1953 and the West Bengal Land Reforms Act, 1955, was framed to tackle the issue of unequal land ownership and for redistribution of land. It was during the course of implementation of these laws that differences arose both on the extent of implementation and also on the methods that were used. After the formation of the United Front Government in 1967, the emphasis on laws took a backseat and political mobilisation was deemed as more effective in carrying out land reforms. The Naxalite movement took this a step further by starting a land grab movement which brought it in conflict even with the UFG in power. However, the exercise was short lived as the UFG Ministry was dissolved. The Congress ministry under Siddhartha Shankar Ray carried on the task of recording the rights of *bargadars* and the laws were made more stringent to stop eviction of *bargadars* from the land that they cultivated.

Thus, as we have seen during the period under discussion, the key words that recur are rights of the *bargadars*, acquisition of intermediary interests of the Zamindars and, compensation to be paid, ceiling limits and consolidation of land. The symbolism is created of a weak

bargadar against a strong *Jotedar*. For the Congress, it was through harmony among different sections of the peasantry that the rural society could progress towards higher production and industrialisation. For the Communists the theme that developed during the UFG and Naxalite years was that of realisation of peasants' rights that could be achieved through creation of peasant unity against the using Communist ideology. However, all the parties showed a Leftward orientation to some extent and the role of the State was to mediate class based actions.

CHAPTER 3

Discourse on Land Issues: The Left Front Government in West Bengal (1977-2001)

Introduction

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the issue of land reform constituted one of the most powerful currents in the politics of West Bengal since Independence. Land reform was linked with class-based mobilisations by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) led Left Front Government. The first LFG in West Bengal was formed after the Congress Ministry of S S Ray was defeated in the 1977 Vidhan Sabha elections. After the formation of the Government, utmost priority was given to the issue of land reform. Laws were amended and the issue of land reform was linked with class-based mobilisations by the LFG in rural areas. Land based political mobilisations constituted one of the primary planks through which the 1977 elections were fought. For this purpose, Operation Barga (OB) was initiated. In this chapter we shall discuss the Land Reform Acts through a description of the Amendments that were brought in the Vidhan Sabha, political writings of leaders and also through a study of the methodology followed during the implementation of OB. We look at the achievements of OB and the perception of the opposition parties towards OB. We shall see whether any changes took place in the priority accorded to land reform over the years and if so, what were the nature of these changes and the reasons behind the changing priorities of the Government. Certain key words and phrases are identified here to create the universe through which politics was constituted in the initial years of the LFG and also in the decade after the New Economic Policy was adopted by the Central Government. In this context, we shall describe the significant decisions taken regarding land reforms to further the redistributive agenda of the Government.

Political Orientation

One of the first tasks of the LFG after coming to power was to amend the land reform laws. The Manifesto of the CPI (M) for the 1977 elections to the Vidhan Sabha mentions that ceiling surplus land would be distributed among the landless, poor peasants and agricultural workers. The laws related to land reform would be modified to benefit the *bargadars*. (sharecroppers) The outstanding loans of all peasants would be cancelled and steps would be

taken to ensure that they get loans at concessional rates. The *khetmajur* (agricultural labourers) would be employed throughout the year. Provisions for inputs like seeds and fertilisers would also be made. For the 1982 elections, the Manifesto mentioned that the redistribution of land was a priority along with proper maintenance of the Record of Rights. The minimum wages of the *khetmajur* needed to be fixed and for increasing production, provisions had to be made for support prices, storage facilities and access to the market. The area covered by irrigation would increase from 30% of the net sowed area to 50%. However, the LFG maintained that it was not getting requisite help from the Central Government. The 1987 Manifesto mentioned that the programme of land reforms needed to be expedited and that transportation, animal husbandry, marketing and distribution of agricultural produce needed to be improved.¹

The Tasks on the Kisan Front outlined that the various sections of the peasantry like the agricultural labourers, poor, middle and rich peasants had their own interests and they were united in their opposition to the policies of the ‘bourgeoisie-landlord’ State. For the People’s Democratic Revolution to succeed, they had to be brought within the fold of the broad democratic movement with Trade Union Workers.²

Another document from 1977 mentioned that the efforts at land reform under the Congress Governments had strengthened the control of 5 to 10% of the land owning section over the rest of the rural population. Along with political power this section dominated the cooperatives and acted as the money lender to the poor.³

Vidhan Sabha Proceedings on Land Reforms, 1977

We have discussed the amendments to the Land Reforms Act under Congress rule from 1972 in an earlier chapter. The last section showed the ideological blueprint of the CPIM regarding agrarian reforms as brought out through policy documents.

The West Bengal Land Holding Revenue Act, 1979 made the ‘valuation of land holding the main determinant of revenue assessment’. Land holdings whose valuation was below Rs. 50000 were exempted from payment of revenue and above that value, they were being assessed on progressive rates. This was done to relieve the burden of revenue on ‘marginal,

¹ ‘Paschimbanger Bidhansabha Nirbachone Bamfronter Istahar Sankolan: 1977-2006’, Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2008, pp. 5-42.

² M Basavapunniah, ‘The Statement of Policy’ Reviewed, *The Marxist*, January-March 1985, p.35.

³ Marcus Franda, *Voluntary Associations and Local Development in India*, (New Delhi: Young Asia Publications, 1983), p.281.

small and middle farmers'.⁴We now see how this was actualised in West Bengal through a study of select documents in a chronological manner.

Once again amendments to the Land Reform Act were introduced in 1977 right after the LFG came to power. The amendment that was brought in by Land and Land Reforms Minister Benoy Krishna Chowdhury with the purpose of 'protecting the interests of *bargadars*' and lessening the burden of land revenue payable by *raiya*s'.⁵Chowdhury was a peasant leader from Burdwan with a background in freedom struggle against the British and was respected across party lines.⁶

A person would be entitled to get the benefits of the land reforms only if he was a resident of the locality for the 'greater part of the year where the land is situated and the principal source of his income is produced from such land'. The apprehension mentioned was not the landowner must not be an absentee landlord. He said that rules would be framed thereafter as to the definition of a locality. The minister then goes on to make a request to the opposition that such amendments should not be seen not only from the niceties of law but from the point of view of 'social justice'. The reasoning provided was that a person who was settled in other professions and perhaps had a husking mill, a shop, or a salaried job etc. should not be given the right to reclaim land for 'personal cultivation' as the 'poor *bargadar*' would be deprived. The small landholders could still cultivate land using labour but sharecroppers could be evicted only when land was brought under self-cultivation of the person concerned or his family. A sharecropper could be evicted and the land would be cultivated by hired labour. Second, he alluded to the fact that in some districts the small and medium landowner often evicted sharecroppers believing that personal cultivation would be more profitable but when this did not turn out to be the case, sharecroppers were again hired. So, the amendment would not affect these farmers.

The main problem was that of registration of the sharecroppers. The 1972 Act had a provision of giving a receipt to the sharecropper once he got his share of the crop but this was not followed and thus not granting of a receipt was made a cognizable offence as a result of which if the '*bargadar*' was not given a receipt, a provision of six months' imprisonment and

⁴ D. Bandopadhyay, Land Reforms in West Bengal, Government of West Bengal, 1980, p.10.

⁵Extracted from 'West Bengal Land Reform Amendment Bill, 1977' in 'West Bengal Legislative Assembly: Official Report, Sixty Sixth Session, (August to October, 1977), (West Bengal Government Press, Kolkata), p. 179.

⁶For details see Benoy Krishna Chowdhury '*Atiter katha: kichu abhigyata*', (Kolkata, National Book Agency), 2011, pp. 33-105.

a fine of Rs. 1000 or both could be imposed. The burden of proof was shifted to the landowner instead of the *bargadar* who was the 'weakest' section of society in case doubts arose. For the purposes of collection of *khajna* (land rent) he said that under the 1970 rules, irrigated areas under 4 acres were exempt from *khajna* and non-irrigated acres under 6 acres were exempt. He said that *khajna* was a 'tribute paid by the tillers to the lord of the land' and that the Estate Acquisition Act of 1953 abolished intermediaries. But there was a difference between 'urban' and 'rural' people. Those residing in urban areas had to pay *khajna* even when his income was below a certain limit. The condition in villages was different due to differential patterns of irrigation facilities etc. and so it was proposed that the net income be calculated by subtracting the cost of production from the total price of crops produced and then fix the *khajna* on a graduated scale.⁷

Kashikanta Moitra (Praja Socialist Party, later on Janata Party) raised the issues of effectiveness of laws in stopping the eviction of sharecroppers from lands. He criticised the 'camp courts' that were established in villages during the United Front regime and said that these measures could not record sufficient number of sharecroppers.⁸ So rather than focussing on laws it was necessary to build up 'public opinion' in support of these laws and that 'illegality' could not be the basis for 'social justice' whether it was called 'bourgeois' or 'socialist' ethics. He said that when the 'entire country' had not shown courage to enact a law which gave ownership rights only to a person who resided in a particular village, the LFG was unclear about its own intentions in this matter. It was impossible for a person to reside in a particular area if he was maintaining 'two sets of establishments at the same time in two localities'. The Act did not define the term 'locality' properly and it was left to the executive to frame 'subordinate legislation' to give effect to the same. He said that the shifting of the burden of proof to the landowner was not necessary to protect the sharecropper. He goes on to say that the definition of *bargadar* needs to change since the Act according to him mentioned that a lawful cultivator could only be the owner of the land himself, or his family, or hired labour under the definition of the Act. He gives the example of a widow or a class three or four employee or a primary school teacher who had perhaps 5 to 10 *bighas* of land and under the circumstances anybody could go and claim to be a lawful cultivator. So, the term *bargadar* needed to be changed and defined. In effect 'another class of landless labourers' were going to be created who could be given *bargadar* status and this would sow

⁷ Ibid pp. 181-84 and 186-88.

⁸ Ibid pp. 190-98.

the 'seeds of discord and disharmony' in villages. He said that the positive outcomes of the 42nd Amendment Act like creation of legal aid societies to help the poor and Boards of Industrial Management should be used for positive purposes and the real 'vulnerable segments' of the population should be protected. So, there was no need of hurrying the provisions relating to 'personal cultivation' as even homestead land could not be perhaps provided by the government. Such provisions would lead to the 'worst form of localism' as 'social mobility' would be stopped. The form of government did not matter whether it was Communist or Marxist but better avenues for the 'uplift' of people should be made. In states like Punjab and Haryana where people enlisted in defence services and minimum wages were paid, the standard of living was better. He again asks the question as to who would fix whether a person derived his 'principal source of livelihood' from a particular land. A person employed as a teacher or a professor would have to leave his job to settle and cultivate the land in his village and after his death, land would anyways be fragmented. Perhaps the LFG would get the votes of one generation but not the next. The process of 'urbanisation' would stop and the Bill was not made to protect *bargadars*. Rather newer kinds of crisis would hurt the processes of industrialisation in West Bengal as unless a 'marketable agricultural surplus' could not be 'siphoned off to industry', the country 'had no future'. Since the 'land-man ratio' in West Bengal had reached its maximum limits, promises of providing minimum wages to the genuine landless along with twelve years of employment would turn out to be vacuous.

We shall look at the views of the other political parties especially those in Opposition in the debate.

Satyaranjan Bapuli of the Congress opposed the Bill on the grounds that it would be a lawyer's paradise. He repeats the criticism that since a 'locality' was not defined, a person employed as a primary school teacher or the like could not retain land in his native village. With the burden of proof being shifted to the landowner, any person working on land could lay claim to be a '*bargadar*' and demand a receipt. If the landowner was unable to yield to that request, then he would run the risk of being arrested. This would hinder the interest to work on land and use 'high yielding varieties' of crops. The provisions to protect *bargadars* had already been framed during Congress rule like the 3/4ths share to *bargadars* and provision of receipts. Thus, the earlier government was there to protect 'genuine' *bargadars*

but the new provisions would only add to increasing litigation as a result of which people would be forced to vacate their lands.⁹

Zainul Abedin of the Congress raised familiar points to criticise the bill.¹⁰ He said that a person who was a hired labour could claim to be a sharecropper later on and the existing machinery of the LFG could not dispose of 'more than 50%' of the received applications. In this atmosphere of 'uncertainty', no 'personal efforts' would be made towards 'mechanisation, irrigation or modernisation' of land. Arabinda Ghoshal pointed out that the definition of 'personal cultivation' could turn out to be problematic as cultivation by 'servants or labourers' was not included. He further pointed out that many persons who owned land in villages were 'daily passengers' to the city and so a definition of 'locality' was needed. Further appeals were to be made before the ADM who was not an expert in the field. Rather it should have been made to the District Judge or Additional District Judge. Further the provision where the JLRO should go to the field to inspect complaints by sharecroppers should be implemented again.

A K M Hasanuzzaman of the Congress said that the parts dealing with 'locality' needed to be changed because in many cases a 'class 4 staff would own land in Midnapore but work for 7 months in Kolkata' or 'if he stayed in Kolkata from Monday till Saturday'. If a 'Muslim girl' was married off 5 to 7 miles away from her family home, how would the definition of locality affect her was another point. He goes on to say that it was not possible to cultivate any land 'single-handedly' and so labour had to be hired. If any sharecropper was to be evicted by 'lawful means' through the JLRO office, then these acts could not be brought under the penal provisions.¹¹

Bholanath Sen criticised the changed definitions of 'personal cultivation' and 'locality' in the Bill and said that a person could cultivate land using farm workers and if his 'principle source of income' was not agriculture, then he would be left out of the definition of 'personal cultivation'. He said that if a person owned 2 acres of land in four different places then he would be left out of the above definition. If the 'principle source of income' was from agriculture, then there remained no other source of income. Sen said that many a time, it was not possible to cultivate land in settled areas of villages and so a person owned land '2 to 4 miles' away from the village. There was no definition of 'locality' and this could create

⁹ Ibid pp. 198-201.

¹⁰ Ibid pp. 201-04.

¹¹ Ibid pp.218-19.

problems. He mentions Section 21(1) of the Act which said that a person who owned land of the nature of '2,3 or 4 *bighas*', but had no 'cattle or ploughs' was entitled to get help from the Agro Service Centres. This effectively brought in this category within the definition of the sharecropper. Second, the fact that the phrase 'attempts to terminate' was added without civil or criminal sanctions was another issue. Third, a person who owned 3 to 4 *bighas* of land could not get the support of banks as he was already getting the support of Agro Service Centres. He had to prove every year that he owned the permitted amount of land. 'Infructuary mortgage' was allowed to get the money for a period not exceeding 15 years but the person was not allowed to get it now. He said that he had visited villages 'many times' and on the basis of Census Reports could say that 'most of the land was under 4 *bighas*'. When someone went to help a person with '4 acres of irrigated land or 6 acres of non-irrigated land', then he would easily lay claim to be a sharecropper and this would lead to litigation. Any worker who went to cultivate a land, would be 'deemed to be a sharecropper'. A person could not get money from the bank till he was a part of some cooperative like a Farmers' Society or an Agro Service Society. The intention behind the Act was not bad but it could lead to instability in the economic sphere. He requested that the Amendments be sent to the Select Committee for consideration.¹²

Trilochan Mal opined that the amendment had two main features which were the shifting of the onus to the landowner to prove that someone was a sharecropper if a claim arose and the granting of receipts to the sharecropper, non-issuance of which would invite penal action. However, due to spurious claims of impostors claiming to be sharecroppers, the 'real sharecroppers' would not be benefitted and the law was better under the Congress. But even the true sharecroppers were not recorded and there were false demands. The way out lay in formation of associations of the '*bargadars* and the landless' so as to help in formulation of their demands.¹³

Sunirmal Paik said that it was not necessary to take 'so much trouble on the floor of the Vidhan Sabha' to protect the sharecroppers. He knew the situation being from a 'Krishak's' family.¹⁴ He opined that other than section 19b of the Act, much more was needed to protect the sharecroppers along with proper implementation of the Act. He mentioned the fact that the shifting of the burden of proof to the landowner to prove that someone was not a

¹² Ibid pp. 222-4.

¹³ Ibid p.220.

¹⁴ Ibid pp.220-21.

sharecropper perhaps was not in line with the Indian Evidence Act and the Minister was silent on this issue.

Probodh Chandra Sinha said that according to law, 'a person lawfully cultivating any land belonging to another person shall be presumed to be a *bargadar*'. He again raises the question that if a servant or a labour claimed to be a *bargadar*, the issue of how the authorities would respond remained unclear. He also raises a point regarding the issue of the definition of 'locality' being changed so that a new class of absentee landlords was not created. According to him many a time, 'poor people' who worked in CMDA or as labourers involved in building roads etc. had '1 or 2 *bighas*' of land back in their villages. He also brought in the issue of 'white collar workers' and persons in 'transferable jobs'. These points allude to counter facts to counter the narrative of the land reform project. Thus, if the present definition of the term 'locality' was kept unchanged, 'small farmers and the common people' would be affected. He criticised the addition of the phrase 'attempts to terminate' being brought under penal provisions as such attempts were bereft of 'documentary proof' and litigation would pile up based on 'imagination'. He believed that the 'real cause' of the sharecroppers being evicted from land was not due to a dearth of laws but due to a 'lack of will of the administrators to protect the *bargadars*'.¹⁵

Nikhilananda Sur said that the amendments were needed to protect sharecroppers and ceiling surplus land was seized from those who owned 'over 6 or 7 thousand *bighas*' of land, the use of police force to help the '*Jotedars*' was stopped and the accusations by the opposition of the office goer or peon losing his land were unfounded if his '*bargadars*' were registered as productivity would be higher under the latter cultivating the land. If the sharecroppers were given a chance, then the 'rural economy' would improve and West Bengal would also change for the better.¹⁶ Satyapada Bhattacharya coming in with his inputs on the debate opined that the benefits of retaining land for personal cultivation were to be given to a person when that person or a member of his family resided for 'the greater part of the year in that locality'. The real reason for the making of such a provision was to curb the practise of absentee landlordism from Kolkata and so that sharecroppers could not be evicted and personal cultivation be carried on by hired labour. As to the figure of the widow and the minor child, he said that such persons owned only about 10% of the total land in West Bengal. It was necessary to ascertain as to which was the source of higher income for a person if he earned

¹⁵Ibid p 214-17.

¹⁶ Ibid p. 206-08.

both from land and owned a husking mill for example. He goes on to highlight the problem faced by sharecroppers from the JLRO or the 'Barga Officer' and in the High Court, the sharecropper had to face a very high cost of litigation. So perhaps a 'Bargadar Tribunal' should be formed for this purpose.¹⁷

Biswanath Mukherjee said that he could understand the situation of the sharecroppers as he was involved in the movement for his entire life. He said that apprehensions on the part of those who practised self-cultivation that their land would be taken away were unfounded because a clause dealt with eviction of sharecroppers on grounds of self-cultivation. He reiterated the point that the onus of proof lay on the landowner to prove that someone was not a sharecropper if such a claim arose. If such a claim was not raised, the landowner had no such obligation. The reason for shifting the burden of proof was because the landowner was 'powerful, had social position and being a landowner was wealthy having access to lawyers'. He also addressed the issue of *bargadars* not residing in a particular locality not having the right to evict sharecroppers on the grounds of self-cultivation. The reason was that the Government feared it would lead to the formation of a new class of absentee landlords much in the old fashion. He then criticises Zainul Abedin's remarks on 'modernisation and mechanisation of land' saying that nothing could be done if the rights of sharecroppers were not protected. He goes back to the days of the Tebhaga struggle and that the Congress government had taken away the rights granted to the sharecroppers by the Land Reforms Act of 1955 under the 'influence of *Jotedars*'. For purposes of 'capitalist development of agriculture', the options of creation of cooperatives and development of land which the 'small and medium farmers' had received was always there. There was no need to introduce mechanisms through which sharecroppers could be evicted according to Mukherjee. In the concluding portion of his speech, he brings in the issue of the 9th Amendment to the Constitution of India which he said was enacted because the Congress Government was blocking the attempts at land reforms by filing court cases under the Right to Property.¹⁸

Manindranath Jana supported the Bill saying that the 'small landowners' had nothing to fear because the *khetmajur* or the agricultural labourers would not stake a claim to the land as sharecroppers. He criticised the Congress on the ground that the party led protests of

¹⁷Ibid p. 208-10.

¹⁸Ibid p. 210-14.

bargadars to the JLRO office and then in collusion with the landlords stuck off their names as sharecroppers.¹⁹

Mohammed Daud Khan supported the amendments calling it a product of the struggle that began with the Tebhaga movement and that it would protect the interests of the sharecroppers. Laws were insufficient to protect the sharecroppers and so the *benami* land was to be recovered from the ‘land thieves’ and handed over to the ‘landless’.²⁰

Manindranath Verma said that ‘bargadars, adhiars and small peasants’ were deprived of their rights for a very long time and the opposition’s rhetoric gave the impression that they were interested in uplifting the sharecroppers but the ‘villagers knew their real nature’. If the opposition was really interested in upliftment of the sharecroppers, then the amendments were to be supported. Maha Bachcha Munshi introduced himself as a *krishak* or a peasant and said that unless land was distributed, ‘production and industry could not be increased’. The *Adhiars* (a kind of sharecropper) who were recorded since 1967 were deprived of their rights and unless they were recorded and land redistributed, the ‘problem of unemployment’ would increase and the ‘market destroyed’. The fact of educated persons with IA or BA degrees remaining unemployed in villages was also mentioned by him.²¹

Summary:

We have seen that while the views of the LFG members tended to bring out a picture of the poor and weak peasant in the village for whose upliftment, he must be brought within the scope of some protective laws and that it is for the betterment of the peasant that the class struggle against the exploitative forces was necessary. The Opposition critique did not challenge the idea of the emergence of the peasant as an autonomous subject through recording of his rights but subtle use of phrases like ‘farm mechanisation’ do tend to bring out the debate between whether increase in production or structural reforms was the way ahead for agriculture in India.

Legislative Changes

¹⁹Ibid p. 217-18.

²⁰Ibid p. 219-20.

²¹Ibid p. 225.

The Amendment after being passed by the Vidhan Sabha was sent for Presidential assent on 29th September, 1977. The amended Act was published in the Calcutta Gazette on 3rd February 1978.²²

The changes that were brought in Section 2(8) of the WBLR ACT, 1955 were that ‘personal cultivation’ meant ‘cultivation by a person of his own hand on his own account- (a) by his own labour (b) by the labour of any member of his family (c) by servants or labourers on wages payable in cash or in kind (not being as a share of the produce or both): Provided that such person or member of his family resides for the greater part of the year in the locality where the land is situated and the principal source of his income is produced from such land’. The definition of the word ‘family’ was left unchanged from the meaning in Section 14(k) (c).

Section 21(b) was also added which shifted the onus of proving whether a person was a *bargadar* or not to the landowner. This was done so that the *bargadar* could approach the Settlement Officer with ease. So the ‘person cultivating land of another person to be presumed to be a *bargadar* in certain cases’ if he ‘is not a member of the family of the other person whose land he cultivates and the burden of proving that such land is in his personal cultivation.... lie on the person who alleges that the person cultivating the land is not a *bargadar* in respect of such land’. Section 17 postulated that ‘personal cultivation shall not include cultivation by servants or labourers on wages payable in cash or in kind not being as a share of the produce or both’.²³ In Section 19A dealing with the eviction of *bargadars* for resumption of land for personal cultivation, the words ‘or attempts to terminate’ were inserted with the earlier phrase of ‘terminates or causes to be terminated’.²⁴

Operation Barga

Aims:

Having summarised the discussions in the Vidhan Sabha on land reform related issues, we can refer to the salient institutional aspects of Operation Barga that were introduced under the LFG. The aims of Operation Barga were ‘bargadar recording, protection of bargadars, vesting

²² West Bengal Land Reforms (Amendment) Act, 1977, Government of West Bengal, Legislative Department, p. 277.

²³ Bikram Sarkar, *Land Reforms in India*, (New Delhi, Ashish Publishing House, 1989), p 179.

²⁴ Government of West Bengal, Legislative Department, op. cit., p. 277.

of land, distribution of land, institutional coverage of bargadars and new allottees on vested lands so that land reform measures are administered properly'.²⁵

As we have seen, reference to the 'rights of sharecroppers' does appear very often in the political discourse in post independent West Bengal. The programme under the LFG can be said to be a continuation of the earlier programmes but the novelty was in the association of 'groups of beneficiaries' along with the associations of rural workers and rural self-governing institutions of the Panchayats. Land held in surplus of the ceiling limit is acquired by the State under the Estates Acquisition Act, 1953 and the Land Reforms Act, 1955. The land vested in the Government is distributed among the beneficiaries.

Administrative Changes

The post of a Land Reforms Commissioner was created. A Land Reforms Advisory Committee was to be framed at the block level comprising of 'representatives of the Left Front as members, one representative from each of the other recognised parties..., local MLA or his representative, one Government nominee, Block Development Officer, Junior Land Reforms Officer, an officer of the Food Department, a representative of the Directorate of Land Records and Surveys'.²⁶ The Committee would 'select its own Chairman for each sitting'.²⁷

Initially for every block, 'Panchayat Samitis as constituted under Section 94 of the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973 are to perform the functions of the Land Reforms Advisory Committees'.²⁸

Later on, the '*Unnayan, Parikalpana O Bhumi Sanskar Sthayee Samiti*' (Development, Planning and Land Reforms Committee) would function as the Land Reforms Advisory Committee²⁹ as 'about 50% of the Zilla Parishads and Panchayat Samitis have already expressed their desire'.³⁰ The 'Karmadhyaksha' (Secretary) of this Samity is entrusted with the business of this Samity.³¹ The Junior Land Reform Administration is the representative of the administration in the Samity. The constitution of the Samity is made in such a way that

²⁵ Letter No. 13104(19)- G.E from Office of the Board of Revenue to Commissioners, Director of Land Record and Surveys and Collectors, Calcutta, 17th July, 1978.

²⁶ Circular No. 893-G.E. of the Office of the Board of Revenue, 24th January, 1978, Calcutta.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Circular No. 333-G. E of the Office of the Board of Revenue, 10th January, 1979, Calcutta.

²⁹ Circular No. 16050-G. E of the Office of the Board of Revenue, 7th December, 1979, Calcutta.

³⁰ Circular No. 1726(15)-G. E/842/78 of the Office of the Board of Revenue, 14th February, 1979, Calcutta.

³¹ Prabhat Datta '*Land Reforms Administration in West Bengal*', (New Delhi: Daya Publishing House, 2019) p.44.

the people's representatives can help in finding out the beneficiaries as they remained in direct touch with the people whereas the involvement of bureaucrats would help in the smooth functioning of the administrative process. For 'level to level administrative collaboration', 'frequent inter-wing visits/inspection of camps/offices....was to be effectively ensured',³²

Methodology

To decide upon and implement the new methodology of recording the sharecroppers, the West Bengal Government in April 1978 created the post of a Land Reforms Commissioner. 'Reorientation camps' were held in quick succession in two villages of Belda in Midnapore and Halusai in Hooghly. The Minister in Charge of Land Reforms, Benoy Krishna Chowdhury, the Land Reforms Commissioner, D Bandopadhyay as well as relevant officials from concerned departments took part in discussions with local villagers in the local settings to understand the gaps in previous Governmental efforts as well as to understand the problems faced by villagers. The methodology of Operation Barga was worked out during the time at the Camps upon the recommendation of a tribal person, Sambu Tudu, at one of these camps. So, Operation Barga was to focus on a process of conscientization followed by action at both the political and administrative levels taking cue from Paulo Freire.³³ The reasons why the sharecroppers did not get their names recorded were because the previous meetings were held in the premises of the landowners and the meetings took place during office hours when the sharecroppers were at work in the field.

The act of recording the '*bargadars*' at a particular locality was carried out through the following five activities:

- a) 'Identification of priority pockets with large concentration of bargadars
- b) Formation of squads
- c) Meetings with the bargadars
- d) Reconnaissance and field verification
- e) Actual recording',³⁴

³² Letter No. 16015(19)- G.E. 589/80 from Office of Board of Revenue to Commissioner, Director of Land. Record and Surveys and Collectors, Calcutta, 6th November, 1980.

³³ Debabrata Bandopadhyay, 'Land reforms and agriculture: The West Bengal experience', Economic and Political Weekly, 38:9, 2003, p. 879.

³⁴ Memo No. 12304(27) - G.E, Office of the Board of Revenue, Government of West Bengal, 5th July, 1978, Calcutta.

In a meeting on 23rd and 24th June, 1978 in Calcutta, the programme design of Operation Barga was worked out. The State of West Bengal was divided into Area A of 24000 mouzas already covered by *Khanapuri- Bhujerat* (land settlement operations) and Area B of 18000 mouzas not covered by *Khanapuri Bhujerat*. '*Khanapuri- Bhujerat*' is conducted during the early phase of settlement operations and plot to plot surveys are carried out by the officials to record actual possession. This process was slow as identification of the concerned persons was mired in complexities not found during recording for census operations in which the name of the person found at the spot was recorded. So it was decided that within a year, the names of *bargadars* would be recorded in Area B. The time period of Operation Barga was till 30th June 1979 and thereafter several times.³⁵

For 'preparation of lists of eligible persons and distribution of vested agricultural lands', the order of priority was as follows:³⁶

- 'a) A landless person found to be in uninterrupted possession for a minimum period of three years.
- b) Landless agricultural workers who belong to the Scheduled Tribes.
- c) Landless agricultural workers other than the above
- d) Landless bargadars who belong to the Scheduled Tribes.
- e) Landless bargadars who belong to the Scheduled Castes.
- f) Landless bargadars other than the above.
- g) Landless persons who used to cultivate the lands in question as bargadars or agricultural workers under the previous owners.
- h) Raiyats who belong to the Scheduled Tribes and cultivate themselves.
- i) Raiyats who belong to the Scheduled Castes and cultivate themselves
- j) Raiyats who do not belong to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and cultivate themselves.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Memo. No. 6225(18) - G.E/269/79 of the Board of Revenue, 26th May, 1979, Calcutta.

k) Ex service personnel who are eligible under Section 49 of the West Bengal Land Reforms act but are not considered for allotment of land from the earmarked quota’.

‘Priority pockets’ were to be identified ‘in consultation with the local peasants’ organisations’ and to get an idea about such areas the settlement records of the Estates Acquisition Act or the current settlement may be used.³⁷

Implementation

A new institutional structure was put in place for the implementation of Operation Barga. The Board of Revenue had control over the two wings of Land Management and Settlement. Under the LFG the two wings were brought together for the implementation of Operation Barga. At the lowest level of the land management wing was the Tehsildar who was a part time government servant and had no fixed scale of pay. The Tehsildars were absorbed as ‘*Bhumi Sahayaks*’ (Land Helpers) at the Gram Panchayat level as full-time workers. For each circle coterminous with community Development Blocks, the Junior Land Reforms Officer was supported by a couple of Circle Inspectors. There was one Revenue Inspector at the Gram Panchayat level. The Sub Division consisted of many Circles. The Sub Divisional Land Reforms Officer and the Collector was assisted by the Additional District Magistrate (Land Reforms) at the district level. At the level of the settlement, the *Kanungo* was a gazetted officer at the *halka* level whose jurisdiction spread over several villages. The Special Revenue Officer who was a Grade 2 Officer functioned at the circle level above the *halka* level. Above this was the Charge Officer at the sub divisional level who belonged to the State Civil Service and at the top of the hierarchy was the Settlement Officer.³⁸

The proposed structure had Squads, each consisting of the ‘Kanungos, JLROs and requisite number of Amins’, working under the supervision of a Special Revenue Officer Grade 2/ Senior Land Reform Officer or Charge Officer, were to visit the sites themselves to ascertain the nature of the land being vested in the State. After the ADM (LR) received a report, the Special Revenue Officer (Grade 1 or II) took possession of the land and sent the list of such lands to the JLRO.

The JLRO would place before the *Unnayan Parikalpana O Bhumi Sanskar Sthayee Samiti* of the Panchayat Samiti, the lists of eligible beneficiaries of along with schedules of land vested

³⁷ Memo No. 12304(27) - G.E, op. cit., p.34.

³⁸ Prabhat Kumar Datta, *Land Reforms Administration in West Bengal*, op.cit, p.39.

in the State.³⁹ However, the Samitis 'insisted on preparation of fresh lists of eligible persons and failed to make their recommendations due to various reasons'. So it was impressed upon the Samiti members that they were competent only to 'modify/alter' but not 'replace' the lists prepared by the JLROs. Recommendations had to be made quickly.⁴⁰ Later on it was decided that the Special Revenue Officers, Grade II and Settlement *Kanungos*, Grade I will take over the possession of vested lands and send the report to the JLRO. The SRO or *Kanungos* would take a representative of the JLRO in whose jurisdiction the land was vested.⁴¹

When Operation Barga was implemented, changes were brought at the interface of the *bargadars* with the Land Department officials. One of the most important innovations was that the *bargadars* were not required to go to the officials. Rather the concerned officials went to identified places where the *bargadars* were situated at the suggestion of the Zilla Parishad, Panchayat Samity and the Gram Panchayat and also the peasant organisations. Meetings would be held as 'near the places of residence of the *bargadars* as possible and the officials should try to talk to them in such a way that the *bargadars* take this exercise as a genuine attempt on the part of the Government to protect their rights and interests'⁴²

In the evening meetings, senior officials like the Block Development Officer and the SDO were required to be present along with the MLAs, the *Pradhans*, the *Sabhapatis* and the prominent members of the 'peasant organisations'. Some of the evening meetings were even attended by the DM, the Land Reforms Commissioner, Officers of the Board of Revenue and the Minister in charge. Care was taken to address the issue of officials not attending meetings in the evenings and stress were given on the time.⁴³

Usually markets, village schools and playgrounds were selected as the meeting places of these officials with the *bargadars* and it was seen to it that the Police Officers did not remain openly present in such meetings. After these meetings which stretched over one or two hours, lists of unrecorded *bargadar* were prepared and the list was hung up at a prominent place. The next day the officers who usually stayed in the village school building or the Panchayat office would verify through field visits, whether the names were genuine or not. On the third day, the objections were disposed of and certificates issued to the *bargadars*.⁴⁴

³⁹ Memo. No. 6225(18)- G.E, Office of the Board of Revenue, Government of West Bengal, 26.5.1979.

⁴⁰ Memo. No. 4156/1(67)-G.E, Office of the Board of Revenue, Government of West Bengal, 20.3.1980.

⁴¹ Memo. No. 8995-G.E, 443/79, Office of the Board of Revenue, Government of West Bengal, 17.6.1980.

⁴² Memo. No. 12304(27) - G.E, op. cit., p.34.

⁴³ Memo. No. 882(42)-G.E, 474/78, Office of the Board of Revenue, Government of West Bengal, 28.1.1980.

⁴⁴ Prabhat Datta, *Land Reforms Administration in West Bengal*, op. cit, pp. 44-8.

After the recording a certificate was to be issued to the *bargadars* in case the *parcha* (settlement receipt) was not given. The certificate was to be taken back after the *parcha* was issued.⁴⁵ In case the *bargadar* was physically removed and the owner had not resumed self-cultivation or inducted a new *bargadar*, the old *bargadar* would be inducted along with a certificate mentioning the same.⁴⁶ The question whether a person was a *bargadar* or not and certain categories of disputes would be decided after holding a 'local enquiry' to gather 'first-hand knowledge about the state of things in the field'.⁴⁷ In cases where a *bargadar* gave up his land, the Bhagchas Officer would 'satisfy himself that such surrender... was not caused due to intimidation, coercion, baiting or bluff etc.'⁴⁸ The *bargadar* could be recorded at any stage of the settlement proceedings.⁴⁹

The aim was to pool funds flowing from Integrated Rural Development Projects, National Rural Employment Programme, Integrated Tribal Development Projects and other Central Government projects.⁵⁰ A great deal of stress was laid on 'institutional cover to the new assignees of vested lands and the share-croppers'. 'Short term crop loans' would enable the beneficiaries to 'snap their age-old client patron relationship with the moneylender, the landowner and the merchant'. The *bargadars* in villages could see the 'direct benefit that flows to the recorded *bargadars*' and this would 'boost the entire operation'. This needed a collaborative effort. The coverage was extended from the *kharif* (summer) to the *rabi* (winter) season. The main constraint to coverage by bank loans would be the availability of assured sources of irrigation for the winter paddy (*boro*) (rice cultivation in low lying areas after the *Kharif* crop) cultivation. Banks could also be asked to provide loans for sinking a shallow tube well. If land was not consolidated, then the person who received a loan would perhaps not be able to use the water himself. But he could 'augment his meagre source of income' by selling the water to 'affluent neighbours'. Through District Level Co-ordination Committee Meetings, the areas where such operations would be carried out would be identified and a target would be fixed for each bank branch commensurate with the infrastructural facilities and administrative support. The Settlement Officer and the Additional

⁴⁵ Memo. No. 13692(19) G. E of the Office of the Board of Revenue, 26th July, 1978, Calcutta.

⁴⁶ Memo. No. 16779(76) G.E of the Office of the Board of Revenue, 19th September, 1978, Calcutta.

⁴⁷ Memo. No. 9027(18) G. E of the Office of the Board of Revenue, 24th May, 1978, Calcutta.

⁴⁸ Memo. No. 10741(18) G. E/368/78 of the Office of the Board of Revenue, 14th June, 1978, Calcutta.

⁴⁹ Memo. No. 5091(27) G E of the Office of the Board of Revenue, 2nd May, 1979, Calcutta.

⁵⁰ Bikram Sarkar, *Land Reforms in India*, op.cit., p.178.

District Magistrate (Land Reforms) would prepare the list of *bargadars* and the assignees of vested lands.⁵¹

The Additional District Magistrates (Land Reforms) would send the list of banks to the respective Sub Divisional Officers who would collect the names of the sharecroppers and assignees of vested lands from the Land Reform and the Settlement wings. The Settlement Officers would instruct Circle Officers to supply the lists to the Sub-divisional Land Reforms Officers. This list would be sent to the concerned bank. The Block Development Officer would hand over the list of loan applications to the Gram Panchayats concerned. The GP would ascertain the willingness of the sharecroppers to take the loans. If the person was not a defaulter on any loan, he would get to fill in a loan application form and the form would be sent to the Bank through the BDO. The bank on receiving the loan application would indicate when the GP or PS would ask the intended beneficiary to come to the local branch to receive the loan.⁵²

Even the World Bank stressed on the role of rural organisations for the successful implementation of land reforms.⁵³ The Indian Parliament ratified the International Labour Organisation's Convention 141 which stressed on the role of rural organisations in economic and social development. Bandopadhyay says that legal backing for OB was taken from this document.⁵⁴

We can take a look at a mimeograph '*Tebhaga theke Operation Barga*' published by the Government of West Bengal in 1979. The theme running through all the articles was protection of the rights of the *bargadars*. Benoy Choudhury in an article says that the important issue regarding laws was the definition of the term 'personal cultivation' and another issue was that of the *bargadars* getting themselves recorded. Out of an estimated 30 to 35 lakhs *bargadars* only around 8 lakhs were recorded. This was essential so that they could avail of the benefits that would be bestowed by the laws. He says that for the *bargadars* who were dependent on the landowner could avail of benefits like loans from bank. This would benefit the small landowners also. The interests of the *bargadars* and other sections of

⁵¹D. O No. 4957(41)-LRC, 24th April, 1978, from Land Reforms Commissioner, West Bengal.

⁵² Memo. No. 194(41) Bank2/11/B-38/79, 27th April, 1979.

⁵³ World Bank, Land Reforms, Sector Paper, Washington D C, p.10.

⁵⁴ D Bandopadhyay, Land Reforms in West Bengal, op.cit, p.6.

the peasantry are basically shown to be the same here thus attempting to create a homogenous category of the peasantry that could serve as a useful tool in elections also.⁵⁵

Although it was too early to give a verdict on OB, the large numbers of *bargadars* coming forward to get their names recorded was a strength and that this could be counted as a 'strength' of agriculture in West Bengal. The 'deprived, weak and exploited *bargadars*' were now more aware of their rights and the improvement of *bargadars* could benefit the entire rural society.⁵⁶

The modalities of evasion of the land ceiling provisions were studied in detail by Parimal Bandopadhyay. The methods of evasion were through '*Denmohor*' (transfer of property under Mohammedan law), '*Nirupanpatra*' (transfer of property under Hindu law), misuse of Section 5A of the West Bengal Land Reforms Act, 1955, through transferring of land to religious and charitable trusts, '*Mitakshara*' and '*Dayabhaga*' schools of inheritance of Hindu property, ante-dated documents, *benami* transfers, built in defects in the laws, rent receipts post vesting transfer, the ambiguity in applicability of Section 57b of the Estates Acquisition Act, 1953, tanks, orchards, application of the Coochbehar Tenancy Act and the application of the WBLRA in areas transferred to West Bengal from Bihar.⁵⁷

Description of Assembly Proceedings in 1978

In 1978, a Land Reforms Amendment Bill was moved in the Vidhan Sabha again by Minister Chowdhury.⁵⁸ Benoy Choudhury while introducing the Act said that the need for amending the Act was felt because of primarily three reasons. The first reason was an error that had crept in the language of the Bill namely a phrase 'produced from such land' instead of 'produce from such land'. The second argument was that there was no time period within which a *raiyyat* could appeal to the Revenue Officer for revision of orders related to the Record of Rights. At times this would lead to cases being filed by 'big *raiyyats*' and the process would be delayed. The procedure that Choudhury suggests is that the right of appeal be removed from Section 3A and instead the Revenue Officer be given the right to change the Record of Rights only on a suo-moto basis. So, the words 'application made to him' were to be deleted from the Act. However, the *raiyyat* could seek redressal of genuine grievance through Section 54.

⁵⁵ 'TebhagaTheke Operation Barga', Government of West Bengal,(Government Press: Alipore) 1979, pp.24-6

⁵⁶ Ibid. pp. 55-7.

⁵⁷ Parimal Bandopadhyay, *Land and All That*, (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2013), pp.243-91.

⁵⁸ West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings, Official Report, Sixty Eighth Session, September, 1978, p. 29.

A K M Hassanuzzaman of the Congress criticised the amendment on the ground that the Government planned to strengthen the executive department and it would 'cripple' the judicial department. He alleged that 'CPI (M) cadres' were threatening the Junior Land Revenue Officers (JLRO) and forcing them to file reports as would suit the formers' interests. He gives examples to point out what he perceives as attempts at partisanship. He gives the examples of two brothers involved in a quarrel with each other and the JLRO giving an order that one of them could not trespass onto the other's land. In another case, he says that two drunken youth beat up a land owner and his two men injuring them. The events reached a climax when the JLRO asked the land owner to explain under Section 19A why he had attempted to evict the *bargadars* from his land, failing which he could face both imprisonment and a fine. He asks whether granting more power to the executive was a way of doing whatever the ruling dispensation wanted to. He suggests an amendment that the order passed by the JLRO could be reviewed only when the 'previous order' came across as 'erroneous' or 'non consideration of material facts and within three months of such discovery'. He said that the JLRO was not a 'saint' and that precautions were necessary. He suggests that instead of 'revise', the word 'review' be added citing the principle of *rex judicata*.⁵⁹

Benoy Krishna Choudhury replied that the word 'revise' was appropriate. The reasons given were that the word 'revise' implied an alteration in the records in the rights on land and it was possible that a person owned land in more areas under a different *thana*. So, the word 'review' could not capture the essence of the action implied. The *raiyat* still had the power to appeal under Section 54 but the problem was that at the present *raiyats* were appealing to the High Court and the cases were pending.⁶⁰

Hassanuzzaman replied that the Revenue Officer could take a bribe of Rs.10 or Rs.100 and revise the proceedings. Choudhury replied that facts might be collected over time and that the ambit of these facts might spread onto different districts and thus the word 'revision' was necessary. Choudhury also added that for this purpose that it was not possible to set a time limit of three months within which appeals were to be disposed of by the Revenue Officer. After the process of voting, Choudhury introduced the Second Amendment to the Bill wherein he mentioned that the Civil Procedure Code granted the power to summon a witness to any person in a land related case and order that relevant documents be produced and return

⁵⁹ Ibid p 30.

⁶⁰ Ibid p 32.

the ownership of occupied land or orders of the like. But a decision of the High Court stipulated that any Government Officer who was hearing an appeal could not send back that appeal to the Revenue Court. So the amendment of Section 57 of the Land Reforms Act was considered essential. The Government Officer would be empowered to send an appeal back to the concerned court to carry out the necessary functions like issuing summons to a person, forcing his presence with relevant documents, scanning the documents etc. by the new amendment. The land related cases could hopefully be expedited through this process.

The others members of the LFG also supported the proposed amendments on the issue. Nikhilananda Sar opined that the 'poor people' were being deprived of their right to land and that even though the land was supposed to be vested in the State, yet the Government was not getting possession of the land as cases were filed in High Courts and other courts. He says that the big farmers were taking advantage of the legal provisions. He says that the Congress had walked out of the discussion on the amendments to the Bargadar Act and that they were interested in furthering the interests of a particular class. He goes onto say that the opposition did not fight for the interests of the *bargadars* and when the *bargadars* struggled against the *Jotdars*, there was no Satyagraha. He says that the opposition had interrupted the proceedings in the house by seeking adjournment motions half a dozen times thus showing their displeasure at the Bill. Anil Mukherjee opined that the decision to grant powers to the JLRO as per the Civil Procedure Code was long needed to 'solve the problem' and it was a question as to why it was not implemented earlier. He puts forth the proposal that the JLROs being 'matriculates or BA' pass outs and not lawyers, they should be given 'proper training' by 'retired High Court judges' or 'eminent lawyers'. Otherwise, the Courts might grant injunctions to further delay the matters. He supports the word 'revision' as land might need to be transferred and a change in the Record of Rights be made necessary. The word 'revise' was needed when there was a same of action before a same judge. He made a personal attack on Hassanuzzaman saying that he was a loudmouth and ignorant of law at which point he was interrupted by the Speaker. He continued his speech with the same argument that for carrying out the examination of witnesses and recording their version or carrying out cross examination, the concerned persons must be trained in law or else the aggrieved party might obtain an injunction of three years from the High Court.⁶¹

The next speaker Satyapada Bhattacharya of the Revolutionary Socialist Party speaking from his own experience said that the amendment would help to empower the 'helpless JLRO' to

⁶¹ Ibid pp .35-6.

address the cause of the 'rights of the *bargadars* that were 'strengthened'. But he disagrees that the WBCS officers lacked knowledge and they along with Bhagchas Officers had given goof judgements. But he says that the peasant had to procure a non-judicial stamp and this increased the cost of the exercise. Also, he felt that the term 'tank fisheries' needed to be defined given the variety like tanks with banks or those with two or four banks etc. He says that *haats* and *bazaars* (*markets*) still remained as private property. Amendments were necessary in the Land Reforms Acts to make it more 'production' friendly.⁶²

Renupada Halder of the SUCI opined that persons could be deprived of their right to appeal to a higher court if the appellate court did not give a proper judgement and that provision should be made for free legal help to the needy as otherwise the 'rich landowners' who had earlier attempted to stop the 'recording of *bargadars*' would get an advantage. Hassanuzzaman opined that the revenue officer must be someone 'not below the rank of a Revenue Officer' and that the words 'setting aside *ex parte* orders and restoration of proceedings' be added.⁶³

Benoy Choudhury replied that there was no Revenue Officer below the rank of a Revenue Officer and that since facts may arise at a later stage of investigation, the new amendments were necessary. The amendments put by Hassanuzzaman were put to vote and they lost.⁶⁴

The Government also undertook a number of studies to check the process of evasion of land reform laws.

Proceedings in Vidhan Sabha, 1980

In 1980, the Land Reforms Act was again amended mainly to provide for compensation for those lands acquired by the government and to select those *bargadars* to whom this excess land would be redistributed. We shall look at how the proceedings panned out at that time.⁶⁵

Sasabindu Bera criticised the amendment on the ground that the method of calculation of compensation was not acceptable by 'any standard of reason' though it sought to make the process straightforward and simplified. He raised the question as to whether compensation would be fixed at 15 times the 'land revenue or its equivalent assessed for the rent?'. He wanted that when land was acquired, then the compensation should be given as per the

⁶² Ibid pp .39-40.

⁶³ Ibid pp. 40-1.

⁶⁴ Ibid pp. 41-3.

⁶⁵ West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings: Official Report, Seventy Second Session, Vol.72, No.IV,

market value. Compensation should be fixed after calculating the income from land which is obtained after deducting the rent tax collection charges from the income derived from land and then multiplying this amount and creating a slab system. The Estate Acquisition Act provided for compensation in a most reasonable manner but in the present scenario a *raiya* was only paid Rs.135 as compensation. If a *raiya* lost land worth Rs.5000 and was paid Rs.135 as compensation, then that *raiya* could very well not accept that amount as compensation. Next he drew attention to clause 4 of the amended Bill saying that it provided for installation of a new *bargadar* on the land from where the original *bargadar* was evicted and that this new *bargadar* would be eligible to get compensation. Bera said that the old *bargadar* should have the rights of getting compensation. Otherwise, the procedure would be marked by a lack of ‘natural justice’.⁶⁶

Joynal Abedin also countered the amendment. He asked as to what would happen if a *bargadar* who was not eligible created a homestead from where he was forcibly evicted. He further went on to ask as to how government would meet the provisions of article 226. A cultivator did not reside in the same locality that he owned land in. He said that government must see whether a cultivator actually cultivated the land himself or he hired labour to do so on his behalf. He further went on to ask whether the revenue officers would calculate compensation or land held above ceiling levels or *khajna* or distribute surplus land. Relying on the Panchayat is questioned on grounds of competence. He also believed that contradictions within the Bill needed to be removed and that details mentioned in his speech needed to be added. He further demanded that the existing litigation should be disposed of as quickly as possible and that though the government had packed the Committee lawyers with their ‘own men’, he and his party didn’t want a committed judiciary. Towards the end of his speech, he asked whether any ceiling surplus land was actually freed by litigation and in such cases the concerned persons didn’t get the copies of relevant documents from a party that believed in political liberties.⁶⁷

The next speaker Binoy Krishna Koner said that it would have been better if following the Russian example, surplus land was seized from the ‘Jotedars and Zamindars’ without any compensation. This would be perfect from the ‘peasant’s point of view’ as there was surplus land available to be distributed to those who worked on the farm. He said that no land was seized from those who tilled the land themselves and crores of money spent as compensation

⁶⁶ Ibid pp.368-71.

⁶⁷ Ibid pp.371-4.

did not benefit the 'peasant'. He went on to say that it was due to the lacuna in the peasant movement that the present anomalies could be detected like 2 or 3 people working on the same land as sharecroppers. He thus highlighted the importance of the 'peasant movement' as the laws framed by the Congress were implemented in the breach and the land was cultivated by capitalist methods without concern for the rights of sharecroppers. These laws were framed so that the Congress could use the word 'socialism'. Without '*krishak*' organisations and their own efforts, it was not possible to implement land reforms. He said that the amendment was necessary to correct wrongs. He further drew attention to the fact that '*khas*' (vested) land was to be distributed to those who had less than one hectare. If land was wrongly allocated to anybody, under the new provisions, the concerned Revenue Officer was empowered to reclaim the land, if necessary, by use of force.⁶⁸

The next speaker Nabakumar Roy of the Congress attacked the amendments by saying that under the LFG, disputes had increased as 7-8 *bargadars* laid claims on the same land. The reason for this was because the LFG had deprived the true *bargadars* of their rightful claims and instead distributed land to the CPIM, Forward Block and RSP supporters. The amendment laid down that during the process of land redistribution, the person who was sharecropping the land for a longer period of time would get the rights. But if a person was granted the sharecropping right by a *Jotedar* only a year before the LFG came to power and if after coming to power a new sharecropper was installed, then the original sharecropper would be deprived of his rights. He goes on to ask as to why the Block Development Officer exercised his power of annulment when the allocations to the landless were done on the recommendations of the Advisory Committee that had representatives of all political parties. The BDO and the SDOs who conducted hearings on disputes were getting influenced politically and people were being deprived of their just claims. He again questioned the amount of compensation and refuted the LFG's idea that no compensation should be given to exploiters. He said that a change in mind set had come.⁶⁹

Tarakbandhu Roy said that he had always supported the movements for seizure of land in excess of the ceiling limit. But he had to work within the limits of the Constitution that favoured 'the rich'. He then said that numerous landless persons existed and the day the seized land was actually distributed among the landless, should the question of compensation arise. He then said that middlemen did not let the real owners whose lands were acquired

⁶⁸ Ibid pp.374-7.

⁶⁹ Ibid pp.377-9.

know of the compensation to be awarded and wrong persons collected the money. The department was thus marked by corruption.⁷⁰ Renupada Halder said that the Junior Land Revenue Officer worked as the Bhagchas Officer and the Sub Divisional Officer worked as the appellate authority. Since these officers were burdened with work, the process of justice to *bargadars* was time consuming and a Bhagchas Board should be constituted with representatives of the *krishak sangathans* (peasant organisations). The JLRO of any other officer would be the chairman of this board. In this way the sharecropper would get justice quickly as the ‘peasant organisations’ would help the poor, illiterate and exploited peasants get justice which was not possible now despite the rules of the Bhagchas Court laying down 3 weeks as the time limit for settlement of disputes. He then wanted a time frame to be fixed within which the vested land would be distributed among the landless. Another point was that peasants should be able to sell the produce that was not accepted by the landowner and pay him the money without the presence of the Panchayat agents. The Panchayat Samiti needed to ascertain who the landowner was and who the *bargadar* was. Compensation was to be given accordingly. Otherwise in a scenario when both sides were given police protection, confusion arose.⁷¹

Birendra Kumar Maitra said that the LFGs policy was that of not giving compensation to the landowner and this would invariably be challenged in the courts. In addition, the LFG’s policy would entail a huge establishment cost. In the absence of clarity about whether to give compensation or not, he asked whether compensation would be 15% of the income which was higher or the *khajna*. He said that the policy was not clear as to whether the government wanted to further fragment landholdings or create a self-supported family. In many cases illegally held land was sold off. During the case proceedings if a *Jotedar* forcibly occupied a land, there was no remedy in the amendment. Despite the Revenue Officer being empowered to run Bhagchas Courts, everything was being done by the persons close to the party.⁷²

Benoy Krishna Chowdhury opined that ‘property was theft’ and that exploitation was palpable when the property was concentrated in the hands of a few persons. The Congress Governments had framed the Urban Land Ceiling Acts and under that Act, the compensation to a person whose property was ‘expropriated’ by the State was not as per the market value of land. Under Section 14V, the person could get at least 95% of the market value of land. He

⁷⁰ Ibid. pp.381-2.

⁷¹ Ibid pp.382-3.

⁷² Ibid. pp.384-5.

also makes another point when he says that a person could claim to be a *bargadar* when he cultivated land for a year. He also refuted the idea of an ‘economic holding’ as ‘relative’ because even if a person got only an acre, then at least with loans and other support mechanisms, their ‘bargaining power’ would increase.⁷³

Legislative Amendment in 1981

In 1981, the Land Reforms (Second Amendment) Bill was passed in the Vidhan Sabha. However, the Amendments received the President’s assent only in 1986 and thus the date of retrospective application was shifted to 1969 instead of 1955.⁷⁴

The salient features of the Act were that orchards up to 15 acres and water bodies that were hitherto excluded were brought under the ceiling net. The meaning of what constituted land was extended to ‘anything attached to earth’ (Section 2(7)) though the ceiling limit remained the same under section 14(M). In calculating the Lands belonging to religious bodies were considered as private trust lands and brought under the purview of the ceiling. Public trusts that were created for charitable purposes were allowed to retain as a *raiyat* up to 7 hectares of wet land that could be relaxed on request under sub-sections (5) and (6) of Section 14 M . Sub Section (5) of 14T read with sub sections 8 and 9 empowered the Revenue Officer to ‘on his own motion or upon any information, may, after giving the persons interested an opportunity of being heard, enquire and decide any question as to whether any trust, endowment or institution is of public or private nature or of exclusively religious or charitable in character, or both’. Sub section 7 made provision of appeal against the order passed under sub section 5 and 6. Cases arising out of land reform were transferred to Land Tribunals created for the purpose. Under sub section 6 the ‘actual user of income or usufructs of land, mode of cultivation, pattern of utilisation of land and the share of income or usufructs...’ were to be determined to decide the amount of land that would be vested in the State. Sub section 9 postulates that the sub sections 5,6,7 and 8 were inserted in the WBEA Act, 1953. The rights of the *bargadar* were made ‘heritable’ and could not be transferred. The provision would not apply to a ST *bargadar* holding land under a ST *raiyat*. If an owner failed to bring land under personal cultivation within two years of evicting a *bargadar*, then the land would vest in the State in an unencumbered manner. A State Land Corporation (SLC) would be created with the objectives of advancing funds to a *bargadar* who intended to purchase land from a *raiyat* up to one hectare who was forced to carry on distress sale but

⁷³ Ibid. pp. 385-9.

⁷⁴ West Bengal Land Reforms (Amendment) Act, 1981, Government of West Bengal, Legislative Department.

could not do so in the open market. The SLC could transfer land to an eligible person if the *bargadar* failed to buy the concerned land. The Act also reduced the ‘artificial distinction between agricultural land and non-agricultural land’ as both categories of land were brought under the ceiling net. Earlier the State had acquired the intermediary rights over land under the West Bengal Non-Agricultural Tenancy Act, 1949 but not the land itself and thus in effect there was no ceiling. By the Amendment, the non-agricultural tenants were treated as intermediaries and the under tenants were treated as *raiya*s and their land was brought under the ceiling net by Section 3A. The ceiling limit was to be calculated by the following formula: Ceiling of agricultural land including homestead as on 15.2.1971+ orchards +tank/fisheries+ land belonging to religious bodies that were not of a public nature+ non-agricultural land within ceiling limit. The West Bengal Land Reform Rules, 1965 were amended in 1988 so that the Government could instruct a *raiya* to submit a return in form 7AA for determination of ceiling to the Revenue Officer within 30 days of the issue of notification.

Vidhan Sabha Proceedings on Land Reforms Amendment, 1986

In 1986 the Land Reforms Act was again amended. The reason why we choose this amendment is to highlight a feature of Operation Barga. We shall not go into detailed analyses of all the speeches as they are a repetition of earlier themes. The Act was amended to bring certain areas that were excluded from land reforms under the purview of the Act.⁷⁵

The benefits of the Act were spelt out by Mohamad Ramjan Ali wherein he mentioned that the amendment was brought in to remove the contradictions between the Calcutta Municipal Corporation Amendment Act and the Land Reforms Act after an amendment extended the jurisdiction of the former Act. The Amendment was necessary to remove the overlapping jurisdiction and in effect brought Jadavpur, Garden Reach and south suburban areas within the jurisdiction of the Land Reforms Act. He justified the amendment by resorting to the overall logic of land reforms. In West Bengal an attempt was made at distributing land among the eligible persons but ‘economic holdings’ were not being created and their ‘wealth’ was not rising. So it would be ‘appreciable’ if steps were taken by the Government to constitute State Cooperative Farms to aid in the creation of economic holdings. He then went on to

⁷⁵ West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings, Official Report, Eighty Fifth Session, March-May, 1986, p. 549.

praise the fact of land Reforms being equally applicable in all the districts and thus efforts to retain ceiling surplus land for 'bheris' (fisheries) and orchards were curtailed.⁷⁶

Zainal Abedin called the Bill 'piecemeal' and said that the extension of land reforms to the new areas was a 'political decision' because the LFG had lost the elections to 'Calcutta Corporation proper' and 'only by virtue of these fringe areas' had the LFG 'owned the corporation election'. He then went on to mention the fact that the prices in urban areas had increased 500 times according to reports of the Reserve Bank of India and credit was due to the planned process of development carried out by the Congress Government. This fact was used to highlight the 'inequalities in the possession of the bounties of nature'. Abanti Mishra criticised the land reforms on the grounds of improper implementation as land was not being distributed to the landless and the landed class drew the benefits of land reform. It was the LFG that was protecting the *Jotedars* and Zamindars as the Congress always was tied to the interests of the landless. He said that the delay in granting of central sanction to the 1977 Land Reform Bill was because it took time to carefully scrutinise such an 'important bill'.⁷⁷

Legislative Changes

West Bengal Land Reforms (Third Amendment) was incorporated as an Act after receiving the President's assent in 1989. The Proviso to Section 14J directed that the land reforms would not apply to vacant land in any urban agglomeration under the Land Ceiling Act, 1976.⁷⁸

Thus, as a perusal of the Vidhan Sabha proceedings show, once in power, there was a clear deviation from the promise of 'radical politics'. The attempt was to show that the LFG had to function within a 'given structure' that was tuned to the service of 'vested interests'. This gave the LFG little power to bring about transformation in society. So the task before the LFG was to bring about a 'basic structural change' in central economic policy and a 'national democratic change' the nature of which would be 'anti-imperialism, anti-monopoly and anti-feudalism'. For the purpose of land reform, the struggle was to be waged against the State that favoured the interests of the 'bourgeois- landlord alliance'. The struggle was to be waged by 'workers-peasant-labour unity'. For a 'unified, militant and long term mass movement' to be formed, creation of a 'political and socialist consciousness' was essential.

⁷⁶ Ibid p. 556.

⁷⁷ Ibid p. 557.

⁷⁸ West Bengal Land Reforms (Amendment) Act, 1989, Government of West Bengal, Law Department, Published in the Calcutta Gazette on 27th September, 1989.

Assessment of Operation Barga

The literature on Operation Barga is quite huge as it attracted the attention of the academics from across the world. We shall look at how the exercise fared and to what extent the criticism that the CPIM was a party of middle peasants was correct.

Abhijit Banerjee, Gertler and Ghatak conclude that in West Bengal, the implementation of tenancy laws lead to improved share of crops and a higher degree of security for tenants engaged in agriculture as compared with Bangladesh. The implementation of OB helped in '28% of subsequent growth of agricultural productivity' in West Bengal.⁷⁹ Pranab Bardhan and Dilip Mookherjee find that OB had effects on the yield of rice and farm value added per acre and that the magnitude of these effects in quantitative terms were smaller compared to agricultural kits, credit and irrigation facilities delivered by Panchayats. The predicted impact of OB on farm yields was estimated at 5%. The authors opine that OB had a spill-over effect on non-tenant farms also.⁸⁰ Bardhan in another article comments that the tenancy reforms lowered inequality through its effects on 'household divisions and land market transactions'. But the effect was 'quantitatively dominated by inequality raising effects of population growth'.⁸¹

Sengupta and Gazdar comment that the LFG was able to redistribute 2.15 million acres of land to the landless and to the land poor sections since 1977 and almost 90% of the population was able to receive land. However, the beneficiaries of land reform from 1947 till 1977 were only marginally higher than the beneficiaries from 1977 till 1991 as the authors' data show. The Poverty Head Count Ratio decreased in West Bengal as is shown by the fact that WB the highest proportional rate of decline among all other major States from 1983 till 1987. However, there were only 'marginal improvements' in overall levels of consumption. The 'efficiency effects' of the Barga system were not 'likely to have been unambiguously positive'.⁸²

⁷⁹Abhijit V. Banerjee, Paul J. Gertler and Maitreesh Ghatak, 'Empowerment and Efficiency: Tenancy Reform in West Bengal', *Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 110, No.2, 2002, pp.239-80.

⁸⁰Pranab Bardhan and Dilip Mookherjee, 'Subsidized Farm Input Programs and Agricultural Performance: A Farm-Level Analysis of West Bengal's Green Revolution:1982-1995', *American Economic Journal, Applied Economics*, 3(4), pp. 186-214.

⁸¹Pranab Bardhan, Michael Luca, Dilip Mookherjee and Francisco Pino, 'Evolution of land distribution in West Bengal,1967-2004: Role of Land Reform and Demographic Changes', *Journal of Development Economics*, Vol.110, 2014, pp.171-90.

⁸²Sengupta and Gazdar, 'Agrarian Politics and Rural Development in West Bengal' in Amartya K Sen and Jean P Dreze (ed.), *Indian Development: Selected Regional Perspectives*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996) p.155.

Atul Kohli opines that compared to the past performance at land reforms under the Congress Governments, the current performance of the CPI(M) was ‘spectacular’ and that the policies under the CPI(M) had the ‘promise to have a long term impact on the living conditions of the rural poor’. However, of the estimated 2 million sharecroppers, only 1.2 million had been recorded. The existence of ‘bonds of reciprocity’ in ‘pre-capitalist social relations’ were a reason why Operation Barga faced resistance. The ‘partial success’ in registering sharecroppers stemmed from two reasons. First was the ability of the CPI (M) to penetrate the villages ‘without being co-opted by the landed classes’. Second was the facilitation of the political mobilisation of the sharecroppers that helped State power in implementing land reforms. Kohli refers to OB as an experiment in social democracy that served the interests of the ‘middle peasant’. The benefits of OB were ‘increased income security and political efficacy’ for the *bargadar*.⁸³

According to Nossiter, the efforts made at land reforms were a ‘truly remarkable accomplishment’. When compared with other states in India, the record was ‘indubitably impressive’. Only 275000 sharecroppers were registered in the period preceding the LFG rule. From 1977 till 1982, approximately 1.3 million sharecroppers of the estimated 2 million sharecroppers were recorded. West Bengal accounted for 1.2 million acres of the total 4.4 acres of ceiling surplus land vested in the Government throughout the country. Out of this, 800000 acres were redistributed among the landless. Even the Club of Rome praised Operation Barga.⁸⁴

Ratan Ghosh opines that the performance of OB was ‘remarkable’ as it showed what could be achieved when ‘active political participation’ was combined with ‘political will of the Government’. On an average, about 18000 *bargadars* were getting themselves every month and ‘about 50%’ of the *bargadars* could get their names registered. However, the problems faced were resistance from the landlords who filed cases at the High Court and lack of mechanisms for ‘alternative institutional credit’ as banks were not willing to lend to sharecroppers. In collaboration with the Public Sector Banks, the State Government arranged for loans to 1.3 lakh *bargadars* in 1979-1980. To encourage the repayment of loan, full

⁸³ Atul Kohli, *The State and Poverty in India*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp.126-32.

⁸⁴ T J Nossiter, *Marxist State Governments in India*, (London: Pinter, 1986), p. 140.

interest subsidy scheme were given to those who paid back the full loan within the stipulated time period.⁸⁵

It was recognised as early as 1980 that the 'area of operation was not always correctly selected, that evening meetings were not always held in the meeting and at places where *bargadars* generally resided, that adequate prior publicity was not given, organisations of rural workers were not always properly informed, that operation did not follow the evening meetings, officers....commuted from static posts, field verifications were not always done with expedition...,that barga certificates were not distributed immediately after the operation was over, and that subsequent entries in the Record of rights were not made immediately on completion of the work in most of the cases'.⁸⁶

Only 66621 acres were vested till 1983 and this was not much better than the Congress Governments' record.⁸⁷ The rate of monthly recording of the *bargadars* 'fell sharply since 1982'. By December 1990, out of 2310000 *bargadars*, around 1429319 *bargadars* were recorded. The campaign that was supposed for completion in 1979 got extended on multiple occasions. Evening meetings were discontinued and recording of *bargas* was done as part of the normal settlement work.⁸⁸

Ashok Rudra opines that the view of the sharecropper as the most exploited section of the village society was not valid. Sharecroppers leased in land from smaller landowners. In Hooghly, 90% of the landowners who gave their land for *barga* cultivation owned less than 4.942 acres with 40% owning less than 1.23 acres. About 90% of *bargadars* owned less than 4.942 acres of land. In districts like Hooghly, West Dinajpur, Bankura and Birbhum, only 47% of the landowners were economically better off compared than the *bargadars* and 21% of the sharecroppers were better off compared to the landowner. Thus, a section of the sharecroppers belonged partially to the 'capitalist class'.⁸⁹

In another article, Rudra describes Operation Barga as an experiment that was devised aiming at 'majority support among the agricultural population'. Thus, the LFG 'moved away from the most exploited and the most oppressed sections of the rural masses' constituted by the

⁸⁵Ratan Ghosh, 'Agrarian Programme of Left Front Government', Economic and Political Weekly, June 20-27, 1981, Vol. 16, No.25/26, pp.49-55.

⁸⁶ Circular No. 882(42) GE 474/78 Office of the Board of Revenue, 28th January, 1980, Calcutta.

⁸⁷Profulla Roy Choudhury, *Left Experiments in West Bengal* (New Delhi: Patriot Publications,1985), p. 159.

⁸⁸Dwaipayyan Bhattacharyya, '*Government as Practice: Democratic Left in a Transforming India*', (New Delhi, Cambridge University Press) p. 80.

⁸⁹ Ashok Rudra, 'Paschim Banglar Bargadar', (Calcutta: Kathashilpa, 1981), pp.12-33.

‘agricultural labourers’ who constituted about 25% of the population dependent on agriculture. But they were ‘only one’ among other segments of the agricultural population the ‘target groups for being formed into an alliance’. *Bargadars* were much fewer in number than agricultural labourers and the land under *barga* cultivation was much lesser than that cultivated by family or hired labour or a combination of the two. Operation Barga perpetuated tenancy in agriculture and even after the recording of ‘bargas’, the incomes of the *bargadars* had not risen. The *bargadar* did not receive the share of the crop entitled to him under the law. The cost of production was not shared by the *bargadar*. Operation Barga had not weakened the influence of the ‘rich farmers over the village community’ as the landowner did not ‘derive all his income from investment in tenant cultivation’. Many *bargadars* did not come forward to get themselves recorded and Operation Barga did not ‘include any provisions’ to build institutions that would provide tenants with ‘consumptive loans as well as production advances’. The weaker section was ‘much less organised than the middle peasants and the rich peasants’. Although claims were made that 35 lakhs families of ‘landless peasants and marginal farmers’ were the target group of land redistribution, the specifics were not spelt out. Agricultural income tax was not applied in West Bengal. Regarding the issue of wage rates, Rudra says that the LFG did not do anything to raise the wage rates in rural areas as it could anger the rich and middle peasants.⁹⁰

Ross Mallick’s critique follows similar lines and maintains that the LFG did not mobilise the landless and the marginal sections of the peasantry as this could damage the peasant unity that the party hoped to build up in the countryside. Mallick opined that ‘primary attention’ was given to Operation Barga in a situation where ‘agricultural labourers outnumber sharecroppers’ and ‘sharecropping is admitted...to be on the decline’. About one half of the sharecroppers cultivated the land of landholders who possessed less than 5 acres of land.

Going by the total amount of land cultivated by the sharecroppers, about a half was under possession of landowners owning less than 5 acres. 16% of these landholdings were under *barga* cultivation. 16% of land less than 1 acre, 21% of land between 4 to 5 acres, 25% of land between 5 to 10 acres and 1/3rd to ½ of land over 10 acres was given for *barga* cultivation. Thus, implementation of the provisions of the land reform laws related to sharecropping would harm the interests of small landowners while ‘benefitting the bargas’. The interests of the ‘poor landowner and his poor sharecropper were as irreconcilable as

⁹⁰ Ashok Rudra, ‘One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 16, No.25-26, 1981, p 61.

those of their richer counterparts'. At the same time, had the law not been implemented, the poor sharecropper would suffer in comparison to the richer sharecropper who cultivated the land of richer landowners. The richer sharecroppers had better access to credit and other agricultural inputs while the poorer sharecropper was even more dependent on the landlord and was afraid to even get himself recorded as a *bargadar*. There was no way to address this issue 'as long as the concept of private property in land' was maintained. Collectivisation of land would have harmed the LFG politically. This is evident from accounts given by party leaders also.

In the absence of 'updated settlement record of holdings', the officials had to depend on the 'local Left Front cadres' to select the appropriate beneficiaries. Legitimate sharecroppers were not recorded as stress was laid on quick recording of *bargas*. Mallick alludes to a Government Report that mentioned how sharecroppers, even in Burdwan, a CPI (M) stronghold faced eviction and received a lower crop share even after being recorded as a *bargadar*.

Thus, Operation Barga had consolidated the position of the bigger sharecroppers and landowners who cultivated the land of a smaller landowner.⁹¹

Ajit Kumar Ghose refers to the role of Operation Barga in benefitting the class of middle peasants who owned land ranging from 2.5 to 7.5 acres and were politically active as supporters of the LFG. With landlessness looming large and a decreasing land-man ratio, the creation of a class of 'middle peasant' sharecroppers would make further land reform more difficult.⁹²

R K Lahiri comments that with only 13 lakh *bargadars* operating on land above 2.5 acres, it could be a pertinent point whether they were *bargadars* or agricultural workers. Cultivation by wage labourers was increasing and was more exploitative than cultivation by *bargadars*. For the purpose of maintaining peasant unity, the Government was shifting away from the agricultural workers who were more numerous.⁹³

Ratan Khasnabis alludes to the fact that under the tenancy laws implemented by the LFG, a non-cultivating landowner had authority to receive rent under Operation Barga. Khasnabis

⁹¹ Ross Mallick, *Development Policy of a Communist Government, West Bengal since 1977*(Cambridge, Cambridge University Press) 1993, pp. 29-30.

⁹² Ajit Kumar Ghose, *Agrarian Reform in West Bengal*, (Geneva: International Labour Organisation, 1980), p.24.

⁹³ Ranjit Kumar Lahiri, 'Land Reforms in West Bengal-Some Implications' in Manjula Bose (ed.) *Land Reforms in Eastern India*, (Planning Forum, Jadavpur University, 1981), pp.108-21.

says that even the slogan of 'land to the tiller' was a 'bourgeoisie call' as it sought to remove remnants of the feudal order, namely the intermediaries. In this context, OB sought only a 'slight rearrangement of property relations...well within the limitations imposed by bourgeois property rights..'. Any programme that gave land to the 'real cultivators' could not function within the Constitutional framework. Under OB, laws were amended to modify the definition of 'personal cultivation', shift the burden of proof to the landowner in case of disputes on tenancy rights and forced eviction was made a criminal offence. The local Krishak Sabhas were included in the process of recording of *bargadars* till a judgment of the Calcutta High Court in Biswanath Ghosh vs State of West Bengal ruled against this administrative practise. However, as of 1981, only 1 million out of the estimated 2 million *bargadars* came forward to get their names recorded. Khasnabis opines that this showed the influence of the 'big landowners' in rural society as the 'weak tenants' were apprehensive of getting their names recorded. Thus, OB laid bare 'the limitations of a reformist measure in a class society'.⁹⁴

Kalyan Dutt opined that under OB certain tangible benefits were indeed made. 6.31 acres of land were distributed among more than a million beneficiaries thus making the size of the operational holding small. Since the detection of ceiling surplus land was more difficult, the idea was to involve the *bargadars* and the local Krishak Sabha in the process. The group action would 'impart a sense of self confidence' among the *bargadars*. Dutt makes an interesting point when he says that the 'bargadars are not a homogeneous category'. He divided the *bargadars* into categories where landholdings had leased in area with/without owned area in holdings below 5 acres, landless tenants and holdings above 5 acres where a significant number had leased in areas. Dutt raises questions as to how long a recorded '*bargadar* could sustain his family without 'economic viability' and in a situation where facilities of 'institutional finance and marketing' were absent. Households operating with less than 2.49 acres could 'hardly survive' as cultivators. In this context, Dutt opined that though the poorer sections of the rural population' had shown a greater consciousness of their rights, it was not clear as to whether the LFG wanted to bring in a 'small peasant proprietor economy' or a 'mixed economy where the agricultural labourers and the poor artisans will have communal ownership of land with the Government extending support to small producers' cooperative'.

⁹⁴RatanKhasnabis, 'Operation Barga: Limits to Social Democratic Reformism', Economic and Political Weekly, Vol 16. No. 25/26(Jun 20-27), 1981, pp.43-8.

Nripen Bandopadhyay comments that a major drawback of OB was the lack of a model that could act as a countervail to the pressure of capitalism in the ‘overall economic framework in the country’. There was no grassroots level political mobilisation other than what could be achieved through the Krishak Sabha. The only way towards genuine ‘agrarian reform’ from ‘land reform’ was to couple the redistributive reforms with ‘co-operative production movement’. Bandopadhyay feels that it was appropriate that ‘labour, land and enterprise’ be united at the grassroots so that cooperatives of the poverty stricken population in rural areas could be built up.⁹⁵

Amartya Kumar Sen has commented that sharecropping arrangements distorted the pattern of labour use and it was not ‘very easy’ to cure this malady within the framework of the present system. Land reform measures reduced the insecurity of tenants.⁹⁶ For long term efficiency it was the security of sharecroppers along with inputs like facilities for irrigation that were important. Minhas and Srinivasan also highlight the role of inputs in increasing the long term investments on land.⁹⁷

Dipankar Basu comments that ‘interests of the landless labourers are most conspicuous by their total absence in the agrarian reform programme of the LFG’. The minimum wage rates of the agricultural workers were not fixed and States like Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and Assam fared better. Even if the ‘actual upward movement of real wages’ was more promising in West Bengal, this took place in the context of a similar rise in wage rates throughout the country in the 1980s. Agricultural output also rose in the 1980s and thus the increase in wage rates cannot be connected with increased bargaining power due to OB. Not raising wage rates was a tactic to maintain peasant unity and the West Bengal Pradeshik Krishak Sabha was clear that the agricultural workers and the landless did not require a separate organisation. In this situation, democracy would be subverted by the owners of property to serve their interests. These are identified as some of the ‘objective’ factors behind the political violence in rural West Bengal.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Nripen Bandopadhyay, ‘Operation Barga and Land Reforms Perspective in West Bengal: A Discursive Review’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 16. No. 25/26 (Jun 20-27), 1981 pp.38-42.

⁹⁶ Amartya K Sen, *Employment, Technology and Development*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp.67-8.

⁹⁷ B S Minhas and T N Srinivasan, ‘New Agricultural Production Strategy: Some Policy Issues’ in Pramit Chaudhuri (ed.) *Readings in Indian Agricultural Development*, (George Allen and Unwin: London, 1972), p.137.

⁹⁸ Dipankar Basu, ‘Political Economy of ‘Middleness’: Behind Violence in Rural West Bengal?’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.36, No.16, (April, 21-27, 2001), pp.1333-44.

Even the increase in productivity that was highlighted by the LFG starting from the 1990s has been subject to scrutiny. The increase in productivity was attributed by the LFG mainly to Operation Barga. This has drawn considerable academic attention.

However, the LFG in trying to portray the Central Government as the 'other' exemplified through usage of the phrase 'bourgeois-landlord' alliance, it was not prudent electorally to speak of the role played by the Green Revolution Technologies that increased productivity. John Hariss disputed this view in the *Economic and Political Weekly* where he says that security of tenure was an incentive for increasing agricultural production but the role of improved seeds, fertilisers, irrigation and better farming methods also played an important role.⁹⁹

We may say that the area under irrigation increased over the years but the LFG did not consider it useful electorally to highlight this. There was widespread application of HYV seeds for the main *aman* paddy crop (variety of rice grown in monsoon), extensive cultivation of *boro* crops, use of groundwater that was provided through shallow privately owned tube wells. Multi-cropping in the dry season encouraged the cultivation of cash crops like vegetables and oilseeds was made possible through irrigation and fertilisers. Rain water harvesting structures and small and temporary structures used for irrigation were constructed using money received as wage employment. under the Sixth Five Year Plan there were massive devolution of funds and under the auspices of the Panchayats, infrastructural works were created to augment agricultural production.¹⁰⁰ The big tenure holders who stayed back in villages in many cases evicted *bargadars* and carried out personal cultivation. They had adequate monetary resources and being abreast with the newer technologies could afford to take risk. The wheat boom of Birbhum and *boro* cultivation was their handiwork. Also, the references to depleting water table can be found in Assembly Proceedings from the 1990s further giving credence to this point of view.

Going by the number of recordings it is a known fact that the bulk of the work of vesting of ceiling surplus land in the State and redistribution among the land poor were done within the first five years of the inception of Operation Barga and then the rate of recording of *bargas* slowed down. The total land that was vested from 1977 till 1982 constituted 87.77% of the

⁹⁹ John Hariss, 'What is happening in rural West Bengal? Agrarian Reform, Growth and Distribution', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 28, issue no.24, Jun.12,1993, pp.1237-47.

¹⁰⁰ Debabrata Bandopadhyay, 'Land Reforms and agriculture: The West Bengal Experience', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38:9, 2003, p. 879.

total land vested till 1990. Similarly, the amount of land distributed among the land poor till 1985 constituted 62.5% of the total work done till 1990.¹⁰¹

Thus Herring comments that OB left the *bargadars* in ‘subordinate class position’ but with ‘enhanced rights’.¹⁰²

Rudolph and Rudolph comment that CPI(M) could not stay true to its slogans of being a revolutionary party because of the demands of ‘short term goals, competitive process of determining policies and the public interest, and the provision of private goods...constrained and directed by the imperatives of electoral victory and pluralist and class bargaining’.¹⁰³ Thus, the slogans over the years changed to ‘*bamfront sarkar ke chokher monir moton raksha korun*’ or ‘protect the LFG like your own eye balls’ which was a far cry from the radicalism of the early 1970s.¹⁰⁴ Commentators identified such a trend in the practise of Indian Communism as early as the 1950s when it was said that the ‘Left and Right factions have always existed’ and that ‘factional opposition to the formally prevailing policy has never been fully obliterated’.¹⁰⁵

Political responses to Operation Barga

The drawbacks pertaining to Operation Barga were discussed at the 80th Plenary Session of the Indian National Congress held in Calcutta in 1997.¹⁰⁶

Atish Chandra Sinha writes that the total population of West Bengal was 7 crores out of which 5 crores lived in rural areas. If everybody were to partake of land equally, then the per capita availability of land would be 0.78 *bigha* or 15.5 *cottah* which was not an ‘economic holding’ and could not alleviate rural poverty. Till July 1977, 10.75 lakh acres of land were vested in the State out of which 6.35 lakh acres were distributed among 9.84 lakh ‘poor and landless’ people. Till December 1996, 12.87 lakh acres of land were vested in the State out of which 10.75 lakh acres were distributed among 13.88 lakh recipients amounting to 0.71 *bigha* or 14 *cottahs* for each person. A person couldn’t sustain himself ‘even for a few weeks’ on the

¹⁰¹ Agro-Economic Research Centre, ‘*An Evaluation of the Programme of Barga Operation in West Bengal*’, (Shantiniketan, Viswabharati, 1986), XXVII, Table 6.1, p.11.

¹⁰² Ronald J Herring, Class Politics in India in Atul Kohli and Perna Singh (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Indian Politics*, (New Delhi: Routledge, 2016), p.134.

¹⁰³ L Rudolph and S Rudolph, *In Pursuit of Lakshmi*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p.179.

¹⁰⁴ Partha Sarathi, *Left Politics in West Bengal*, (Kolkata: Purbalok Publications, 2016), p.129.

¹⁰⁵ Gene D Overstreet and Marshall Windmiller, *Communism in India*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1959), p. 531.

¹⁰⁶ Hossainur Rahman (ed.) Souvenir 97, 80th Plenary Session, Indian National Congress, Netaji Indoor Stadium, Kolkata, 1997.

‘uneconomical land’ and in many cases the vested lands ‘changed hands for small sums of money’.¹⁰⁷

Saugata Roy opined that the registration of 14 lakhs *bargadars* was a good achievement but it was ‘doubtful’ as whether land reforms could be linked with the increase in productivity. The cropping intensity in West Bengal was 164% compared to 191% in Punjab. The productivity in West Bengal for rice was 2000 kg per hectare and that in Punjab was 3000kg. This was despite the fact that West Bengal produced 120 lakh tonnes of rice that was the highest in the country. The reason was that only 50% of land was under irrigation in West Bengal whereas 91% of land was under irrigation in Punjab.¹⁰⁸

Zainul Abedin comments that the LFG had not been able to distribute the entire land that was free from Court injunctions to the landless beneficiaries. The majority of land that was redistributed was carried out under the Congress Governments.¹⁰⁹

Abdul Mannan commented that OB had become an ‘easy instrument for making money’ as landowners had to ‘pay ransom’ to local CPI (M) bosses. While the ‘rich’ could ‘buy peace’, the rest of the population was harassed under the pretext of OB. Smaller landowners were deprived of their land as agricultural workers claimed themselves to be *bargadars*.¹¹⁰

The Congress (I) submitted a memorandum to the Governor wherein the issue of ‘forcible occupation of land’ was mentioned among other issues like political crime committed on Congress sympathisers and favouritism in administration and at the local Panchayat level. Ajit Panja opined that farmers were being evicted from their land and that land was being distributed among the supporters of the CPI (M). The CPI (M) worked with the support of the police and Dr Panja opined that in addition to grant of compensation to those injured in police firing, a judicial enquiry commission must be constituted to investigate such incidents. With reference to the murders of Prankumar Bhakta and Alope Biswas allegedly by CPI(M) supporters, Dr Panja said that persons of Bangladeshi origin were being recorded as *bargadars* and allowed to settle on land.¹¹¹

An article titled ‘Agrarian Transition in West Bengal: Arrested by the Half-Measure’ published by the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) in 1996, opines that the LFG

¹⁰⁷ Ibid p.225-8.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid pp. 231-35.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid pp. 221-25.

¹¹⁰ Ibid pp.235-38.

¹¹¹ Mohd. Ayub Mallick, *Congress (I) in Opposition During the First two left Front Governments in West Bengal*, (Kolkata: Progressive Publishers, 2002), pp. 85-150.

appeared to be considering land reforms a ‘closed agenda’. The LFG had institutionalised the sharecropping system in 1977 and could not ‘pretend there is nothing more to be done or could be done in the direction of furthering the land reforms’. OB is defined as a ‘bourgeois democratic’ measure where ‘registration had passed for radical reform’ and ‘regulation of rent’ had ‘only served to legally institutionalise surplus extraction by the landowner’ thereby helping the ‘rich peasant’ instead of helping the ‘small peasant to reinvest and improve productivity in his rented farm’. Using data from the NSSO, the document shows that the number of landless persons had increased, there was a trend towards ‘parcellisation of land’ and when the ‘marginal’ and the ‘landless’ categories were clubbed together, then this segment had definitely increased between 1953 and 1982. The ‘big and large’ categories comprised ‘1.37% of households but they accounted for 13.67% of owned area in 1982’. Out of the total operated area, 28.25% was operated by 8.07% of households in the ‘middle range’. In 1982, only ‘56% of leased in area could be found under shared tenancy’. OB had a ‘strong class collaborationist content’. It was not solely the fear with Tenancy Laws that reverse tenancy had increased. Rather the ‘revolutionary peasant struggles in the late 1960s and early 1970s’ in the ‘wake of Naxalbari’ were the reason. The area of land leased out by the small and marginal categories had increased over time to 82.16% in 1982 from 77.98% in 1971 and 59.78% in 1953. The quantum of lands leased in by the marginal households had come down to 13.25% in 1982 from 25.82% in 1972. The share of the ‘marginal’ category in both leased in and leased out area increased to 73.05% and 62.35% in 1982. This showed that farming was ‘unstable’. OB had not conferred ownership titles to tenants and ‘supply side assistance in favour of small peasants’ were absent.¹¹²

Creation of the Party Society

While carrying out Operation Barga that changed the politics of rural West Bengal, the CPI (M) created what scholars have variously called a ‘party society’. Civil society as an analytical tool could not explain democratic processes in a ‘post-colonial society like India’. Civil society was dominated by elites who bargained individually with the State and enjoyed citizenship rights. However, a large section of the population remained excluded from such a process and they relied on a process of collective bargaining with the State.¹¹³

¹¹² Agrarian Transition in West Bengal-I, https://www.archive.cpmi.org/liberation/year_1996/september/article3.htm.

¹¹³ Swagato Sarkar, ‘Civil Society and Exclusion: Partha Chatterjee on ‘The Politics of the Governed’, Indian Journal of Human Development, 2(2), 2008, pp.449-58, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0973703020080210>.

Partha Chatterjee found the reasons for the stability of the LFG, in a 'field of political transactions' that remained within the 'reach of most villagers and where matters of most villagers can be negotiated and sorted out on a day to day basis'. The 'daily renewal of the legitimacy of power' was vested in the 'permanently mobilised corp of workers' that the CPI (M) employed.¹¹⁴

This field constituted what Chatterjee refers to as 'political society'. Chatterjee argues that the marginalised sections of the population who were excluded from 'civil society' constantly made attempts to protect their livelihood by bargaining with the Government collectively in response to specific policies. Under conditions of electoral democracy, this section of the population could not be ignored.¹¹⁵ Though the process of capitalist transformation had dislocated peasants from their means of livelihood but the peasants were not transformed into the proletariat class. The Indian State had to negotiate with this vast segment of the population and in this context, the small scale or 'non corporate capital' was allowed to survive with corporate capital. Political society was a Foucauldian notion which used welfare in a strategic manner to include parts of the population left aside by processes of development.

Dwaipayyan Bhattacharyya brings in the concept of 'party society' which he calls a 'modular form of political society'. While political society consolidated around shared interests, 'party society' split 'settled communities along partisan lines'. Thus, other forms of political mobilisation are left outside the fray of communities. The goal of 'party society' is to 'protect the constituency of a party's support base and expand it periodically from election to election'. The principal institution through which the 'party society' functioned was the Panchayat.¹¹⁶ The CPI (M)'s interactions with the rural persons had increased courtesy OB and also the issue of settlement of refugees on land.¹¹⁷

Glyn Williams also refers to the role of various hierarchical organisations in transmitting the decisions taken by the upper echelons of the Party to the people. The rural people were less

¹¹⁴Partha Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.160-61.

¹¹⁵Partha Chatterjee, *Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World of the World*, (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004) p.64.

¹¹⁶Dwaipayyan Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice*, op.cit, p.126-27.

¹¹⁷For details see Prafulla K Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men*, (Kolkata: Naya Udyog, 1999).

dependent on the local landlords but rather to the Party. The Party also endeared itself to the local people by projecting impartiality, good governance and fair play.¹¹⁸

The recording of Bargas for all practical slowed down by the 1990s and new priorities were found.

Role of Jyoti Basu

As the Chief Minister and also one of the most respected leaders within the LFG, Jyoti Basu's speeches and writings give us a glimpse of the process of transition that was taking place. We shall identify certain key phrases from Basu's writings. In 1982, Basu writes that Government must be complimented with class based movements against the 'bourgeois landlord state'. He gives the example of OB to show that better rates of recording were achieved in areas where the *bargadars* and the *khetmajur* or landless could organise themselves. Where organisation was weak, the Government despite the best of intentions could not go ahead much.¹¹⁹ He says that the rights of the *bargadar*, the redistribution of vested land, confronting of reactionary 'Jotedars' and implementation of the minimum wages for agricultural workers would not happen without the development of a strong peasants' organisation that would include all persons dependent on land.¹²⁰ OB was implemented to protect the interests of 'lakhs of *khetmajur* and *bargadars*' and to give these sections of the population a degree of status.¹²¹ The demands made of the Central Government in 1984 were that the Land Reform Laws passed by the State Legislature had to receive Presidential assent in a time bound manner, provisions be made for quick disbursal of peasants' loans and a minimum wage be fixed for agricultural workers.¹²² The LFG had passed a series of laws to implement land reforms but these were held back by the Central Government. At the same time, the irrigation, fertilisers were obtained at a subsidised rate.¹²³

The proper implementation of OB and provision of agricultural inputs had led to a rise in productivity in agriculture in the 1980s and in the production of food grains notably paddy. Later on, the peasants had to join the struggle along with workers, middle classes, intellectuals, students, women and youth. The powers of the LFG were limited within the

¹¹⁸ Glyn Williams, 'Understanding Political Stability: Party Action and Political Discourses in West Bengal', *Third World Quarterly*, 2001, Vol.22, no.4, pp.610-12.

¹¹⁹ Jyoti Basu, 'Bamfront Sarkar o Gonosongothon' in Marxbadi Path, November 1981, pp. 9-14.

¹²⁰ Jyoti Basu, 'Bamfront Sarkar o Gonoandolan' in *Desh Hitaichi*, Sharodiya Sankhya, 1982, pp.21-5.

¹²¹ Jyoti Basu, 'Krishaksabhar Bhumika Gourabujjol' in Aniruddha Chakraborty (ed.) *Jyoti Basu Nirbachito Rochonasomogro*, Vol.3, (Kolkata: National Book Agency, 2010) p.190-91,

¹²² Ibid p.261.

¹²³ Jyoti Basu, 'Kenoeikutsha o opoprocharerabhijan', Marxbadi Path, November 1984, pp.9-19.

present socio-economic setup and the Government had to function within constraints of the Constitution.

By the 1990s we can discern a shift in Basu's tone. Land reforms had increased the purchasing power of persons in rural areas and this had unleashed the potential of the rural economy. However, industries were needed to cater to the needs of the population who had a greater degree of purchasing power and also to solve the problem of unemployment.

Jyoti Basu pinned the reason for inflation in the country to different economic policies followed by the Central Government. The result was that only a certain segment of the population benefitted from the neoliberal policies while keeping the poor outside the ambit of benefits.¹²⁴

In earlier times, funds were not allocated for the development of *khetmajur*, *bargadars* and 'peasants' and Government spending was meant to benefit the *Jotedars* and vested interests. West Bengal was 'ready for industrialisation' because OB had increased the purchasing power of the masses in the rural areas and this had created a large market for industrial and consumer products. The signs of success were located in the rate of per capita increase in food grain production. West Bengal had the highest rate of rice production in India. Industrialisation had to be facilitated in the present context.¹²⁵

In an interview with the Washington Post, Jyoti Basu opines that the purchasing power of the rural population had increased due to the successful implementation of OB and this was a reason why the state could think of industrialisation.¹²⁶

Land Acquisition for Setting up a SEZ at Rajarhat

Inception

The process of land acquisition at Rajarhat since the 1990s requires a deeper look. It was decided by the LFG in 1993 that a new town would be created at Rajarhat and the township was inaugurated in 1995 in the presence of Union Minister Pranab Mukherjee who belonged

¹²⁴Jyoti Basu, 'Bikalpo Drishtibhongite Yojana' and 'Osonkhyo Badharmodhyei shilpayon' in Aniruddha Chakraborty (ed.) *Jyoti Basu Nirbachito Rochonasomogro*, Vol.4, (Kolkata: National Book Agency, 2010), pp. 168-317.

¹²⁵Jyoti Basu, 'Shilper punoruthhaner jonyo Paschimbango prostut', *Desh Hitachi, Sharod Sankhya*, 1994, pp. 20-22.

¹²⁶Jyoti Basu, 'Amra atmobishwasi' in Aniruddha Chakraborty (ed.) *Jyoti Basu Nirbachito Rochonasomogro*, Vol.5, (Kolkata: National Book Agency, 2010), p.63.

to the Indian National Congress.¹²⁷ A Task Force constituted by the Housing Department described the area as low land and that there were no permanent fisheries in the area.¹²⁸ In 1995, the LFG prohibited the sale or mortgage of the notified area in 25 *mouzas* but soon thereafter in 1996 it was decided that sale, mortgage and lease of land was forbidden in 21 *mouzas*.¹²⁹

LAND ACQUISITION:

IIT Kharagpur was asked by the Housing Department to review the Concept Plan. Most of the activity relating to the acquisition of land was carried out from the years 1997 till 2000. Parimal Bandopadhyay who was the Director of Land Records and Surveys and the Director of Urban Land Ceiling Department describes the process of acquisition of land for the 'greenfield township project' at Rajarhat. We are informed that the process of acquisition of land for Rajarhat started in 1996 after 'necessary administrative actions' under the West Bengal Town and Country Planning Act. The State Government had initially wanted to buy the entire portion of land since acquisition would be time consuming and costly. After a brief hiatus due to the simultaneous elections to the Indian Parliament and the Vidhan Sabha that year, the West Bengal Housing Board resumed the direct purchase of land and this land would be subsequently transferred to WBHIDCO (West Bengal Housing Infrastructure Development Corporation), a Company with zero paid up capital.¹³⁰

Problems:

In the initial stage around 150 acres of land were acquired. However, administrative problems soon arose with the direct purchase of land or the project. Quite surprisingly, issues connected with the land reform programme came to be seen as a stumbling block for the acquisition of land. The first issue was that ownership of land vested in many cases as co sharers had transferred the land among themselves without the knowledge of the absentee sharers. The absentee sharers had filed Title suits in Civil Courts due to which HIDCO was unable to take possession of land.

¹²⁷Nilotpol Datta, *Rajarhater Jomi Dokholer Itihas*, (Kolkata:Rajarhar Jomi Bachao Committee,2010), p. 7.

¹²⁸Task Force, Rajarhat Project Report, Housing Department, Government of West Bengal, September,1995, p.1.

¹²⁹ Ibid p.75

¹³⁰Parimal Bandopadhyay, 'Land Procurement for a Greenfield Township Project' in Parimal Bandopadhyay and Pradyut Kumar Biswas (ed.), *Untold Stories of New Town's War Room*, (Kolkata: Dasgupta and Co. Private Limited,2022), p.102.

Second, under the provisions of the West Bengal Land Reforms Act, 1955, the rights of the *bargadars* were heritable and land shown as agricultural, even if acquired, could not be converted into any other category.

Third, even if land was under forcible occupation, the occupier could through an appropriate order of the Civil Court still exercise ownership. Direct purchase of land continued. The Minister in charge of the Housing Department created a Committee for calculating the compensation to be granted to the landowners. The Committee would collect the sale value from the office of the Sub- Registrar and prepare a value based on the updated inflation indexed sale value and the agricultural productivity of land. Here again, the value of land that had an emotional value was not calculated. Land was purchased at the rate of Rs. 6600 to Rs. 8000 per *cottah*.¹³¹

Change in Method of Land Acquisition

In 1997 it was decided that direct purchase was to be discontinued and the provisions of the Land Acquisition Act would be invoked for the purpose in a meeting held by the Land and Land Reforms Minister at the request of the Minister in charge of Housing. The process of land acquisition for the township project started in 1999 in April.

The District Collector of North 24 Parganas was entrusted with the responsibility and for the 5 *mouzas* that were selected initially, 2 land acquisition teams were deployed in each *mouza*. The teams consisted of a senior officer from the West Bengal Civil Service who was promoted from the higher grade of Revenue officials, one Surveyor, one Amin and 2 Group D staff. The team collected from the office of the Block Land and Land Reforms Officer, the land schedule and other details of land for each plot. The sale deeds for the last three years were collected from the office of the Sub Registrar and transmitted to the Additional District Magistrate who was the special Land Acquisition Officer for calculating compensation based on the value of land. The value given in private transfers of land also influenced the land value calculation. The users of the land were informed about the classification and use of land simultaneously and the team initiated office work at Salt Lake under the Land Acquisition Act, 1894.¹³²

A decision was made to acquire land at 'negotiated prices'. The Land Procurement Committee would negotiate an 'acceptable price with the affected persons'. The cost of land

¹³¹ Ibid pp.102-04.

¹³² Ibid p.107.

acquisition was higher than what would happen through direct purchase but this was adopted to speed up the process.¹³³ The West Bengal Housing Board did continue to acquire land through direct purchase. However, rehabilitation and compensation were outside the purview of the Land Acquisition Act.¹³⁴

Acquisition and Opposition

Originally 600 hectares of land was acquired for the Rajarhat project but HIDCO wanted 3000 hectares for the development of land. The acquisition notice was served for about '3075 acres of cultivable land'.

There were '30000 landowners' and '5000 recorded *bargadars*'. The number of unrecorded *bargadars* was 'double of that'. In Mahishgoth and Thaakdnari, the cultivators protested because the compensation of Rs. 5000 or Rs. 6000 was grossly lower compared to the official figures of Rs. 40000 or Rs. 50000. In 2001, there were protests in Ghunimouja where women lay down on the field to protest acquisition.¹³⁵

Details of the process of land acquisition can be gleaned from the affidavits submitted in Calcutta High Court by the Government when a case was filed by the Rajarhat Jomi Bachao Committee (Save Farmlands in Rajarhat Committee), and the *Howrah Ganatantrik Nagarik Committee*.¹³⁶ Although the language used in law courts reflects a particular kind of discipline, yet the processes can be understood as having the force of public statements. Land acquisition was challenged in 1999 on mainly five grounds. It may have been that the opposition helped the petitioners to file the case.

First, the notion of 'public purpose' behind the acquisition of land was challenged.

Second, the government had given the dispossessed landowners compensation that was much lower than the prevailing market rates. For example, in Jatragachi *mauza*, the landowners received Rs. 6000 per *cottah* as compensation whereas the market rate was Rs. 200000 per *cottah*.

¹³³Gautam Deb, *Forging an Audacious City: A Participatory Perspective* (Kolkata: Das Gupta and Co. Private Limited, 2021), p.47.

¹³⁴*Ibid.* p. 77.

¹³⁵Ishita Dey, Ranabir Samaddar and Suhit K Sen, *Beyond Kolkata: Rajarhat and the Dystopia of Urban Imagination*, (New Delhi: Routledge, 2013), p.68.

¹³⁶Nilotpal Datta and others vs The State of West Bengal, In the High Court at Calcutta, *Constitutional Writ Jurisdiction*, Writ no. 8154 of 2004, pp. 6-24.

Third, under the provisions of the Land Acquisition Act, an ‘award’ was to be given as compensation. The compensation which the landowners had received was arbitrary.

Fourth, the Government had not brought out any proper notification to intimate the landowners. Fifth, land acquisition was carried out without any proper plan.

The petitioners demanded that the government provide some explanations on the above grounds. This was rejected by the Government who believed that no further explanations were required. The petitioners also complained of the lack of job opportunities as the projects were proceeding in a tepid manner and that it was difficult to verify records kept with the government and this created problems. Mass petitions made the point that the Government was destroying the topsoil in cultivable areas. Another mass petition after minute calculations on the price of produce in terms of farm inputs and remunerative prices makes the point that in Patharghata *mauza*, the minimum amount of compensation was not given. The Government Departments that were involved in the land acquisition process could not give categorical answers to the questions that were raised. The Joint Secretary of the Department of Environment in what can be construed as almost an act of defence submitted to the High Court that precautions were taken and conditions were also imposed on HIDCO while granting permission to go ahead with the project. Compliance reports were to be filed by HIDCO regularly. But no such compliance report was produced in Court and no reason was furnished in court for the destruction of wetlands by HIDCO. The Department had submitted to the Court that modifications were suggested to the original plan, the project report was prepared by IIT Kharagpur and that permission were given phase wise for ‘action areas’. Most importantly, the reported number of affected persons was an overestimation according to the Joint Secretary and the township would create employment opportunities for both skilled as well as unskilled labour. The environment would not be harmed since the project would remain open from all sides. However, despite the denial of the charges brought in by the petitioners, the respondent here does not give us alternate data on the quantum of displacement brought in by the project or the employment opportunities that could possibly be created in the future. An affidavit filed by the Housing Department submitted that the allegations raised by landowners were not substantiated as it was the Government that was acquiring their land and not some ‘private builders’. Here we find attempts at building trust with the landowners with the government and portraying the private sector in a negative light. But this is far removed from the rhetoric used in the 1970s and 1980s in the heyday of the trade union movement. The Chairman of HIDCO could only give the names of 529 villagers

whose lands were cleared by the High Court for acquisition whereas on the ground and even in the earlier submissions to the High Court, it was mentioned that 3075 hectares of land were earmarked for acquisition purposes.¹³⁷

Government Response

Protests started against the process of land acquisition and there were reports of women lying down in the fields of Ghuni *mouza* to prevent the takeover of land.

Although the modes of protest were emulated in other *mouzas*, at this stage the movement did not receive any support from political parties. Samaddar notes that right from the start of the process of land acquisition, ‘land was grabbed with the help of brokers, goondas, political party workers and leaders’ and unwilling land owners were harassed by the police and were jailed on false charges. The rhetoric used by the Government was that land acquisition was carried out by relevant committees which included members of the Opposition as well. Thus, land acquisition was seen to be portrayed as something that was inclusive in scope and implied that consent had been obtained from the dispossessed, a point to which we shall come back later.

We can take a look at the District Statistical Handbook of North 24 Parganas, Bureau of Applied Economics and Statistics, Government of West Bengal which says that the out of 3958 hectares of agricultural land, about 60% was multi crop land and in 1993-94 the annual production of fish was 10388 quintals from 819 hectares of wetland.¹³⁸ A look at some of the findings of the Comptroller and Auditor General’s Report of 2007 will help us understand the dynamics of the land acquisition process in Rajarhat.

The Report states that 708.65 hectares of land was purchased from ‘small landowners’ at rates below the market price. This resulted in the loss of Rs. 503.4 million on the part of these landowners. In 3 *mouzas*, 712.94 hectares of land was purchased at rates higher than the market prices by 3 to 174%. The arbitrary fixing of rates for compensation clearly showed that the provisions of the Land Acquisition Act were bypassed. Further 83% of the landowners were not identified and were left out of the purview of monetary compensation. The CAG Report on the financial transactions involved in the processes of land sale and development reveal that HIDCO sustained a revenue loss of Rs. 3717.50 million. An analysis

¹³⁷ Ishita Dey, Ranabir Samaddar and Suhit K Sen, *Beyond Kolkata: Rajarhat and the Dystopia of Urban Imagination*, op.cit, pp. 128-34.

¹³⁸ Pranab De, *Rajarhat: Sarkar jokhon lootera*, (Kolkata: Nagarik Mancha, 2011), pp.19-20.

of HIDCO's pricing policy showed that there were deviations from the stipulated rule as a lower price was to be charged for weaker and lower income groups, breakeven price for middle income groups and higher market price for higher income groups. But the CAG Report reveals that HIDCO fixed the selling price at 150 to 200 percent of the breakeven cost for the High Income Groups and 68 to 125 % of the breakeven cost for the Middle and Lower Income Groups thereby extended relief to the tune of Rs, 41.48 crores to the former. Under two special quotas belonging to the HIDCO Chairman there was evidence of malfeasance. 3630 applications were received till 31st March 2009 under the Chairman's quota. 292 plots were allotted and the CAG scrutinised the records of 172 allottees wherein it found that 6 allottees did not submit their applications, 90 did not mention the category under which they were eligible, 167 allottees did not submit the required supporting documents which would have made them eligible for the quota. 72 Government officers and even two directors of HIDCO gained from the allotment process. The Chairman did not give any reasons to explain the anomalies in the allotment process.¹³⁹

Originally 600 hectares of land was acquired for the Rajarhat project but HIDCO wanted 3000 hectares for the development of land. We now focus on Gautam Deb's writings to get a glimpse of the reasons which informed the major decisions. As Gautam Deb says in 'Forging an audacious city', the slogan was to 'build a township' for the 21st century and 'not the 20th century' and 'from the very beginning', HIDCO had to work under certain broad parameters or principles.

First, the township would be financially self-independent and separate allocations in the budget would not be required.

Second, New Town would be a 'modern city' and remain vibrant at all hours. The population would be a million and about 5 lakhs people would constitute the floating population. The city would be connected through the national highways to all other major cities.

Third, for the purposes of land 'mobilisation', the fund would be 'solely' dependent on the market forces and not the government.

Once one particular mode of development was completed, the next mode would be taken up. So once the basic necessities. New Town would be built in an 'incremental' manner despite the usual problems in the take off period, difficulties in completion and increase in price. The

¹³⁹ Audit Report (Commercial) for the year ended 31st March, 2007, The Comptroller and Auditor General, Government of India, https://www.cag.gov.in/html/cag_reports/wb/rep_2007/com_chap_2.pdf, para 2.1.14.

Main Arterial Road and surface water supply were to be first completed and thereafter the activities like power supply, power stations, drainage, telecommunication and land acquisition which would entail the development of land for markets and health and educational facilities were to be taken up in phases.

So, creation of land use plans with detailed sector wise structural plans were deemed to be of utmost importance. The Plans were changed over the years and deviations were palpable.

That the process was not as smooth as projected in made evident by a letter from the Additional District Magistrate (Land Reforms) to the Joint Secretary of the Housing Department, wherein it was mentioned that the West Bengal Housing Board had sponsored eleven companies to mutate the Record of rights 'in their favour by the Block Land and Land Reforms Officer'. The offices did not exist and could not be served notices.¹⁴⁰

New Town's primary objective would be to provide 'affordable housing' to the people from the Lower and the Middle Income Groups but the persons from the higher income groups, the Non Resident Indians and even the richer classes would also be accommodated. The majority of the population was to belong to the lower and the Middle Income Groups. This was to be done through the policy of cross subsidisation where the price of plots and flats would be kept lower than the market value for those belonging to the Lower and the Middle Income Groups. Incentives would be provided to those who took plots through cooperatives though individual plots and flats were also available. The method for formation of Joint Venture Companies was carried out as the 'only profit syndrome' of the private sector which was balanced with the 'social commitment' of the Government. The efficiency of a JVC was to be judged on the basis of certain parameters. The first parameter would be that in any project at least 50% of the dwelling units would have to be earmarked for the Lower and the Middle Income Groups, a cross subsidy policy would be followed, MIG flats would be sold on a no loss and a no profit basis and only the cost price would be charged and the flats meant for the Higher Income group would be based on the market price. Profits would be permitted and it would be divided equally among the private firm and the West Bengal Housing Board. Flats were to be allocated through an 'open and a transparent' lottery and 'very few' were reserved for the chairman and the company. In these Joint Ventures, the Government and the private firm each owned 49.5% of the total stakes and 1% was reserved for the market 'preferably government officials'. This was done to allay fears in the minds of the private firms that

¹⁴⁰Land, People and Power, *Anthropological Survey of India*, Government of India, (Kolkata, D K Agencies, 2015), p.79.

these JVCs would not become public sector companies later on. Within the 'same boundary walls, the dwelling units for the LIG, MIG and the HIG were constructed and the policy of pricing sent a 'warning' to the 'unscrupulous promoters' in the area. A LIF unit would cost in between Rs. 1,50,00 to Rs. 2,00,00. A MIG unit would cost between Rs. 3,00,000 to Rs. 5,00,000 and a HIG unit would cost between Rs. 8,00,000 to Rs. 15,00,000.¹⁴¹

Deb claims support from many politicians including Prime Minister Vajpayee. In building up the project, the land losers would be provided with assistance in matters of allocation of flats, compensation for the lands taken away and opportunities for vocational training for future employment. Deb notes that the sharecroppers wouldn't 'be let down' and 'even the landless' would be considered in a favourable manner. As for the matter of resettlement, Neighbourhood Development Committees were formed with the 'public, the political parties and Panchayats' for taking up infrastructure projects in the areas bordering New Town. Later on the Bhangore and Rajarhat Development Authority were formed. Institutes were set up to impart skills to those 'villagers' who would be losing their land.¹⁴² However, how effective these measures were having also been subjected to scrutiny by scholars.¹⁴³

Changes since the 1990s

The New Economic Policy was adopted in 1991 and we treat the Vidhan Sabha proceedings of 1991 and 1994 as our sample to identify whether there had been any shift in discourse. To understand the change in the situation we look at the discussions in the Vidhan Sabha.

The Policy Statement on Industrial Development was laid in the Vidhan Sabha by Chief Minister Jyoti Basu showing its significance in September 1994.¹⁴⁴

The context was the LFG's calls for an 'alternative economic policy' concerning the 'vital issues of industrial development, rehabilitation of sick units and generation of employment underscoring the strategy address to promotion of new investments, creation of employment opportunities and protection of the legitimate interests of labour'. The strengths of West Bengal lay in a well-developed communication network, the availability of raw materials, a large pool of 'skilled and qualified technical persons', the 'substantial growth in the agricultural sector' that provided the 'necessary base for accelerated industrial development'

¹⁴¹Gautam Deb, *Forging an Audacious City*, op. cit. p 89.

¹⁴² Ibid pp.75-7.

¹⁴³ For details see Ishita.Dey, Ranabir Samadhar and Suhit K Sen, *Beyond Kolkata: Rajarhat and the Dystopia of Urban Imagination*, op.cit, pp. 75-9.

¹⁴⁴ West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings: Official Report, Hundred and Fifth Session, Vol.105, September,1994.

and harmony in society. Till the late 1940s, West Bengal enjoyed a pre-eminent position in industrial development that reduced over the years due to the 'large influx of refugees', the 'serious discrimination by the Central Government' as shown in 'granting of industrial licenses' and 'selective freight equalisation', the 'location of Headquarters of major financial institutions in Bombay and elsewhere' and also the 'deleterious effects' of the 'countrywide recession of the sixties'. Surprisingly trade union activities were not mentioned as a reason.

The process of land reforms accompanied by provision of inputs like the irrigation, seeds and fertilisers and decentralisation with the Panchayati Raj were a 'major breakthrough' that had achieved the 'highest rate of growth of food-grains per hectare' in the country for West Bengal. This led to a 'corresponding increase in the purchasing power of the vast majority of people in rural areas' creating a 'new market for consumption of industrial products'. Thus, the potential for 'agricultural inputs', 'agro-processing' and 'horticulture' were increasing.¹⁴⁵

'Local resources and skills' were to be harnessed for building cottage industries. Sick industries were to be rehabilitated in jute, textile, engineering, pharmaceutical sector etc. For the sick Central Public Sector Undertakings, the State Government 'was helping' the unions and the management to develop rehabilitation packages for the consideration of the Board of Industrial and Financial Reconstruction. Also, 'modern industries' were to be promoted for 'downstream employment' while protecting the 'legitimate interests of the workforce'. Indian industries would be exposed to competition and 'new technology and investments' would be welcomed in spheres of 'mutual interest'.

The Public Sector was considered for 'social justice and balanced growth' and the Private sector was necessary for 'accelerated growth' and 'mobilising necessary resources and expertise' in sectors like power where demands were increasing and the State had budgetary constraints. 'Social infrastructure facilities' in health, education, satellite townships were to be developed along with schools and colleges and Polytechnics and ITIs. Certain 'thrust areas' were identified for industrial development in petrochemicals, electronics and IT, iron and steel, metallurgy, textiles, leather products, food processing, medicinal plants, pharmaceutical manufacturing, mining, jewellery and tourism.¹⁴⁶

Accordingly, certain policies like the Single Window System were developed under the West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation, escort services by the Small Industry

¹⁴⁵Ibid. pp.459-60.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid pp. 462-63.

Development Agency and the Chief Secretary was to be the Chairman of an Empowered Committee so that investment proposals could be cleared. At the District level, the Empowered Committees would comprise the District Magistrate, the Superintendent of Police, the Assistant Labour Commissioner, the General manager of the District Industries Centre etc to expedite decisions 'regarding land, employment and other related matters'. Tripartite negotiations had evolved in the field of industrial relations and in industries like jute, engineering, tea and textiles, 'long term agreements had been successfully implemented'.¹⁴⁷ However, in all this the notion of the empowered peasant did not come up for discussion and was not seen as strength of West Bengal's economy.

We shall now see the themes that recur in discussions in the Vidhan Sabha after the adoption of the New Economic Policy in 1991. For our purposes, we select a sample of the speeches in 1991 and 1994. Interestingly in 1994 a motion was brought under Rule 185 by Rabin Deb and Lakshman Seth to oppose the New Economic Policy that was brought in by the Central Government in 1991. The Liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation reforms were criticised on the grounds that India's sovereignty and self-reliance would be affected. The Congress had failed to remove unemployment, tackle inflation and bring in equitable development. Lakhs of factories were on the brink of closing down due to the new trade and economic policy and the GATT Treaty. The 'rural population' was in a deep crisis due to the removal of subsidies, the public sector being reduced and the agriculture, rural development and welfare schemes being reduced. Subrata Mukherjee of the Congress countered the Motion by saying that the CPIM MLA's were in effect contradicting the Statement brought in by Jyoti Basu. Around this juncture, we also find the occasional reference to land reform but not in the form of a struggle. These are instances that come in the nature of a comparative assessment of the successes of the Programme under different regimes. Manas Bhuiyan opines in 1994 that land reform was carried out by the Congress under Bimal Sinha. Block Advisory Committees were created with representatives of all political parties to redistribute land, allot *pattas* and record sharecroppers. He says that 3 lakhs 10000 *bargas* were recorded till 1977 and that from 1977 till 1991 only 7 lakhs 90000 *bargas* were recorded. The record of *bargas* would have no meaning to a hungry peasant.

We analyse the discussion regarding the GATT agreement in 1994 to see whether discordant voices existed within the CPIM and even if they did exist did this counter our premise of a shift from the notion of an empowered peasantry.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid p. 467.

Soumendra Chandra Das demanded that the Central Government immediately withdraw from the GATT because the prices of fertilizers would increase, the benefits from irrigation be reduced, the subsidies on power be reduced and the traditional varieties of seeds also be discouraged. Since India was an agricultural country with more than 70% of the population depending on agriculture, this was necessary.¹⁴⁸

Benoy Krishna Chowdhury opined on the same lines that the prices of fertilisers were increasing and in certain places where *boro* crops were grown the larger landowners were entering into a sort of arrangement where the 'poor peasants' were being convinced to part with their land and at the end of the season given 3 or 4 mons of paddy out of the total produce that was about 20 times higher. Moreover, the variety of paddy grown in Mexico might not be suitable for India. West Bengal had achieved the highest production of paddy despite having lesser agricultural land but under the new situations American companies were looking for 200 acres of land to grow potatoes without usage of local seeds. He further questions the credibility of officers who signed the GATT on India's behalf and gives examples to put his point across of foreign products flooding Indian markets. The removal of patents on Indian seeds would be harmful.¹⁴⁹

Sachindranath Hazra also opposed the GATT as prices of fertilisers would increase, agricultural tools would become costly and the removal of subsidies on irrigation tax would hurt farmers. Nirmal Das opined that with land reforms and more amount of land brought under irrigation, West Bengal had high productivity levels and that after the GATT the prices of produce and also inputs would increase due to 'imperialist forces of USA'. The GATT was inimical to the independence and sovereignty of India.¹⁵⁰

Kamakhyanandan Das Mahapatra also criticised the GATT on the grounds that a Multinational Company could acquire around 1000 acres of agricultural land. In Thailand, shrimp was being cultivated and after some years when the prices came down, the land was used for paddy cultivation. But the salinity levels of land made this difficult. In West Bengal land was not still used for shrimp cultivation. Another point he makes is that the power would be taken away from the hands of the small and medium farmers to purchase seeds. The

¹⁴⁸ Ibid p.468.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid p. 469-74.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid pp. 474-76.

farmers would be deprived of the right to use bio fertilisers and bio pesticides. So, we find references to the power of peasant but not in the earlier sense.¹⁵¹

Santiranjan Ghatak also opposed India's decision to join the GATT because it was being opposed in other countries like Japan and Thailand, India lacked a framework like China where 'Terms and Conditions' were required by foreign companies to enter the domestic markets and because removal of subsidies would mean that the prices of deep tube wells, diesel, electricity would increase. On 29th September an all India strike was called to protest India's decision to join the GATT.¹⁵²

Thus, in the above discussion, we find references to the peasant but not in the way it happened in earlier decades since the Left came to power. The peasant is drawn into the struggle not after a process of empowerment but he is assumed to be empowered and the GATT is opposed on grounds that it means a change in status quo. Here productivity is shown as success in agriculture. Land reforms are somewhat of an exercise that is denuded of its futuristic appeal. The peasant loses his autonomous status and becomes part of an appendage of industrial development. With growing emphasis on the means of production rather than redistribution, the conception of what constituted the rights of the peasantry also underwent changes. At an all India level the process was ushered in earlier courtesy the Green Revolution. In West Bengal the LFG had tried to causally establish a link between the increase in productivity and Operation Barga. After the process of transition which began after the 1990s, the LFG being in power since 1977 had to establish a continuity that would legitimise the stances adopted over the years. So coming out of the time tested discourse, newer forms of rhetoric were adopted to suit the circumstances. While the political reasons lay in the dwindling urban base of the LFG as seen in the 1996 elections, the economic backdrop was the adoption of the NEP in 1991. The creation of truth in a discourse is a function of itself and this evident in the implementation of land reforms through Operation Barga but the onus of justifying its moves after the 1990s fell on the LFG. Rhetoric had an external component with a focus on strategic communication unlike discourse which is something that is internalised.

¹⁵¹ Ibid pp.479-83.

¹⁵² Ibid pp.483-86.

We shall discuss another document published by the Government of West Bengal titled 'Destination West Bengal' in 1999¹⁵³ and this will make clear the change in thinking of the Government. The document clearly lays down that West Bengal was making a 'sectoral shift' towards a 'mature industrial economy'. The 'strong agricultural base' had the potential to create a 'powerful and dynamic rural economy'. The 'gains of agricultural growth' needed to be consolidated towards 'industrial development'. Besides the 'intent of the Government' and 'strong desire of the people', the State had to offer 'land, water, power, raw material and man power' to the industrialists with a vision of becoming 'India's most favourable environment' for both 'domestic and foreign investment and the 'most rapidly growing industrial region' with Calcutta as a 'leading industrial, trade and services centre of India' and as 'India's principle gateway to the economies of Asia'. Thus, we find a clear change in the stance adopted towards the subject of the peasant who now appears only as an appendage to 'agricultural growth'. The 'overall purchasing power' had increased in 'rural areas'.¹⁵⁴ Thus, the 'empowerment of the peasant' that was the electoral promise of the LFG was not considered as a factor that could invite industrial investment to the State.

However, we might note that the issue of land acquisition had not been in the forefront of rhetoric related to land but land acquisition was carried out by the application of mainly two laws in West Bengal, namely the Land Acquisition Act, 1984 and the West Bengal Land (Requisition and Acquisition) Act, 1948. The latter Act was justified on the grounds that land was required for 'development purposes' after the influx of a huge number of refugees from East Pakistan after independence. While the colonial era Land Acquisition Act, 1894 stipulated the payment of compensation, under the provisions of the 1948 Act, land which was requisitioned by the Government could be acquired without the payment of compensation. We shall look at the arguments proffered by the Government in extending the life of the 1948 Act through the decades. In 1978, Benoy Krishna Chowdhury argued for the extension of the Act by bringing the issue of development programmes that remained incomplete and that after the damage caused by the 1977 floods, it would be required. In 1983, Choudhury again argued for the extension of the Act by putting forth the reasons for which land was required. The reasons cited were for the supply of essential commodities, building up of industrial townships, irrigation work, housing in both the rural and urban areas and other developmental works. In 1989, the Act was again extended for five years. The

¹⁵³ 'Destination West Bengal', (*West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation*, Government of West Bengal, 1999).

¹⁵⁴ Ibid pp. 1-12.

points raised by the Opposition pertained to the delays made in the payment of compensation to land acquired under the Act and that there was a lack of transparency in calculating the amount of compensation. In 1993, the Act was extended only till all the remaining 15000 cases of land acquired by the Act were disposed of. The lands could neither be returned to the original owners and neither could the acquisition be shown to have been made under the 1894 Act. It follows from a description of the proceedings related to land acquisition in the Vidhan Sabha that the issues raised by the Opposition members mainly harped on payment of compensation whereas the issue of rehabilitation was not addressed. The Union Government had brought out a Report of the expert Group on Land acquisition in 1967. In 1989, a LFG member pointed out that the Congress was trying to ‘create disturbances’ by using the fact of ‘small landholders caused by acquisition’. But the acquisitions were not done on a massive scale and were accompanied by land reforms project also. However, the primary argument was that land would be acquired for ‘development purposes’.¹⁵⁵

Discourse formation and the LFG

We can identify a ‘series of statements’ that constituted the discourse related to land reforms in this period. The themes that recurred were that of ‘land to the tiller’, rights of *bargadars* that were almost always used together with the ‘rights of *khetmajur*, the amount of ‘vested land’ that the Government had acquired as ‘ceiling surplus’, the quantum of ‘redistributed land’ and the ‘abolition of intermediaries’ which raised the issue of ‘rent’. The phrase that was almost exclusive to Congress (I) politicians was ‘economic holdings’ and the ‘bourgeois-landlord’ alliance to the LFG. In creating these discourses, the imagery that was used was of that of a strong and exploitative *Jotedar* who was pitted against a weak *bargadar*. The category of weakness that emerged in the nature of a binary was inclusive in including the landless agricultural labourers and also the various categories of peasants classified on the basis on land ownership. Whatever might have been the ground situation, the binary of the strong *Jotedar* being pitted against the weak *bargadar* was all pervasive.

The ‘peasant’ was typically located in the countryside and his life was characterised by poverty and rural simplicity. Facts and data in speeches were used to strengthen arguments and thereby highlight the achievements of the Government. Thus the peasantry was to be ‘empowered’ through OB which entailed the attainment of rights on land at the grassroots. But only the attainment of rights was not deemed sufficient as seen from Party Documents

¹⁵⁵ Abhijit Guha, *Land, Law and the Left*, (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2007), pp.60-9.

but these rights were to be attained through a struggle under the aegis of the CPI (M) and the local Krishak Sabha. This process would lead to enhanced political consciousness. So in this process of uniting the rural population against the *Jotedars* identified as the class enemy and the 'other', the 'peasant' emerged as a homogeneous category. Certain common points like inflation, price rise of food items etc. were identified to unite different sections of the peasantry and in the second step, draw this segment of the population into the broader democratic struggle consisting of Trade Unions workers, students, women etc. Also, the issue of the LFG working within a 'federal structure' made it 'impossible' to carry out 'fundamental economic changes' without the support of the Central Government. So 'land reforms' was connected with Centre-State relations, the Centre being projected as the 'other'. Thus the 'subject' of the peasant was situated in a particular time and space.

After the New Economic Policy was adopted and investment was sought to be invited, the notion of the empowered peasant was not seen as a factor or as a strength that could court in investment. Although the CITU continued to oppose the NEP and the LFG also based its opposition on ideological grounds, the Government did make an attempt to reach out to investors. The issues that was relevant here was that agriculture had become unprofitable. Also, in rural areas rather than the empowered peasant, the issue that could draw investment was that rural consumption power had increased considerably. The fissures in the concept of the homogenous peasantry persisted and thus the discourse showed a palpable shift when references to the empowered peasantry, being drawn into a revolution fizzled out. Land based struggles in West Bengal were not uncommon and the Policy Documents did not address the issue adequately even though land would be required for industry. Congress (I) members also highlighted increasingly the political nature of Operation Barga. So, the future portrayed and the sketch of time in the 1970s was definitely not adhered to increasingly after the 1990s by the LFG.

Thus, in the above discussion, we find references to the peasant but not in the way it happened in earlier decades since the Left came to power. The peasant is drawn into the struggle not after a process of empowerment but he is assumed to be empowered and the GATT is opposed on grounds that it means a change in status quo. Here productivity is shown as success in agriculture. Land reforms are somewhat of an exercise that is denuded of its futuristic appeal. The peasant loses his autonomous status and becomes part of an appendage of industrial development. The idiom of the Five Year Plans was 'Help the Plan, Help

Yourself'.¹⁵⁶ We can say that the peasant in West Bengal was being persuaded to help himself by supporting the process of industrialisation. The struggle is no longer similar to the struggles led by the Left parties for the sharecroppers and the landless.¹⁵⁷

With growing emphasis on the means of production rather than redistribution, the conception of what constituted the rights of the peasantry also underwent changes. At an all India level the process was ushered in earlier courtesy the Green Revolution. In West Bengal the LFG had tried to causally establish a link between the increase in productivity and Operation Barga. After the process of transition which began after the 1990s, the LFG being in power since 1977 had to establish a continuity that would legitimise the stances adopted over the years. So coming out of the time tested discourse, newer forms of rhetoric were adopted to suit the circumstances. While the political reasons lay in the dwindling urban base of the LFG as seen in the 1996 elections, the economic backdrop was the adoption of the NEP in 1991. The creation of truth in a discourse is a function of itself and this evident in the implementation of land reforms through Operation Barga but the onus of justifying its moves after the 1990s fell on the LFG.

Rhetoric had an external component with a focus on strategic communication unlike discourse which is something that is internalised. In Marx's formulation the peasant and his system was not compatible with progress and 'it was in truth less an economic program than a historical decree'.¹⁵⁸ Eric Wolf shows that the problem for the Marxists was that the agrarian revolution would have to be led by the peasants themselves and not the proletariat.¹⁵⁹ There was not much of a difference in the liberal perspectives and the Bengal Marxists' perspectives regarding the position of the peasant in the capitalist economy.

We can say that the subject of the singular peasant was constituted through the discourse of Operation Barga as a 'rational subject of modernity'. The evasion of laws, in this case, the land ceilings, served to 'discipline the self in others'. The 'disciplinary society' was produced through the 'production and the deployment of the bifurcated self'. Public life would be characterised over debates with which side of the 'bifurcation would receive priority'.

¹⁵⁶Nikhil Menon, *Planning Democracy*, (Penguin, Haryana, 2022) pp.113-65.

¹⁵⁷Dipankar Gupta, 'Whither the Indian Village: Culture and Agriculture in 'rural' India' in Subhas Mohapatra (ed.) *Society and Culture in India: A Reader*, (New Delhi: Social Science Pres, 2016), p.243.

¹⁵⁸David Mitrany, *Marx Against the Peasant: A Study in Social Dogmatism*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1951), p.14.

¹⁵⁹For details see Eric R. Wolf, *Peasants*, (Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1966).

In the humble opinion of this scholar, the LFG did not have to resolve the tensions between the two tendencies because of a lack of a viable opposition.¹⁶⁰

Conclusion

As we have seen the most distinctive feature of the policy followed by the Left Front Government was the implementation of the process of land reforms through Operation Barga in addition to bringing about changes in the land reform laws of the State. Through a process of taking feedback from the grassroots, involvement of the local Krishak Sabhas and the Panchayati Raj Institutions and taking care to reach out to the actual beneficiaries, OB did succeed in changing the politics of rural areas by reducing the political and the economic hold of the *Jotedars* who were the landed interests. Politically the aim was to build up peasant unity and then draw the peasant into a struggle with students, women, youth, Trade Union workers against the 'bourgeois-landlord' alliance ruling the Indian State. The presence of the 'other' in the powerful landlords and the Indian State described as a 'bourgeois-landlord', the involvement of the local population in the process of land reforms, amending laws based on ground situation and the electoral dominance of the LFG make us believe that the process had the ability to generate truth. This truth was generated through usage of phrases like ceiling limits, evasion, rights of *bargadars*, 'vested land', 'personal cultivation' and 'redistribution' and during OB the *bargadars* did participate in the various processes.

However, the process of recording *bargadars* reduced by the 1990s. The changing priorities and the nascent efforts at coming out of the discourse are noticed in the tabling of the Policy Statement on Industrialisation in the Vidhan Sabha and the plans for creation of a new township at Rajarhat. Even the Motions in the Vidhan Sabha that offer a critique of the GATT on ideological grounds, the priorities are noticeable. I argue that the peasant was not seen as an autonomous subject who could achieve his rights through a process of struggle but rather becomes an appendage to the process of industrialisation. But since industrialisation did not proceed with much steam, these measures did not lead to a widespread political change.

¹⁶⁰ William E Connolly, *Politics and Ambiguity*, (Wisconsin, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987) , pp.102-07.

CHAPTER 4

Land Acquisition, Politics and Opposition to Left Front Rule (2001-2011)

Introduction

In the last chapter, we have traced the process of discourse formation that took place under the LFG in the period till 2000. Attempts were made towards creating an alternative discourse but it could not proceed. Jyoti Basu stepped down in 2000 and Buddhadeb Bhattacharya led the LFG into the 2001 elections to the Legislative assembly. In this chapter we shall analyse whether the shift in discourse that was palpable under Basu since the 1990s was continued and how there existed dissident voices both inside the LFG and also from other political forces against the attempts at creation of a new discourse. A counter discourse also emerged very strongly against the LFG and this would also be analysed in the course of this chapter. We discuss certain case studies to analyse how the political currents against the new discourse took shape and how the LFG attempted to counter the resistance that was built up against it. Whether these attempts can be counted as the formation of a new discourse is discussed. If the efforts towards formation of the discourse failed, what strategies were followed to respond to the situation by the LFG is also discussed in this chapter. However, the discourse did not reach down to the grassroots and local levels and thus rhetoric was an attempt to bridge this gap in political communication.

The emergence of what came to be called ‘Brand Buddha’ also deserves to be dealt with in some amount of detail.

2001 and 2006 Elections

Chief Minister Bhattacharya led the LFG into the 2001 and 2006 Vidhan Sabha elections. The 2001 elections were contested by the LFG with the tagline of ‘*unnototoro bamfront*’. This meant that the alternative to the LFG was an improved version of its own self. If the LFG failed to live up to the expectations of the people, no other political formation could fulfil those.¹ The Manifesto in 2001 mentioned that land reforms and the Panchayati Raj institutions had increased the productivity from agriculture and that the economic policy of the central government was the reason why other states lagged behind in agriculture. Usage of seeds,

¹Ritanjan Das, *Neoliberalism And The Transforming Left In India: A Contradictory Manifesto*, (London and New York, Routledge, 2018) p. 143.

fertilisers and irrigation facilities had improved.² In 2006, the slogan of the LFG was '*Krishi amader bhithi, shilpo amader bhobishyot*'.³(agriculture is our base, industry is our future) The Manifesto in 2006 mentioned with regard to agriculture that the gains from land reform had to be completed 'in the present circumstances'. Scientific methods of farming had to be adopted to increase agricultural productivity and that agricultural land was necessary for industries to be set up. Adequate provisions were to be made for compensation and rehabilitation for those whose lands were to be acquired.⁴

After 2006 we find a clear shift in the attitude of the LFG towards the issue of industrialisation and the state identified itself with the process. But it could not come out of the earlier discourse completely since it was in power since 1977 and had to justify continuity in policies due to political reasons. In this context we shall discuss certain representative arguments that prominent leaders of the LFG put forward. While the nature of the speeches has been attributed to a divulgence between 'theory and practice',⁵ the State unit leaders through their speeches and writings put across the point that the gains made under Left rule since 1977 could be carried forward only if a process of industrialisation was pursued. In this context, the entry of foreign capital was as necessary as that of private capital.

Attempts at Creating a new Discourse

The State Unit of the CPI(M) was dominated by Bhattacharya along with some of his closest confidantes like Nirupam Sen, Surjya Kanta Mishra, Mohammad Salim and Gautam Deb.⁶ As a Party *Chiti* (written communication from the Party to its members) shows the decisions taken at the top level were not discussed with the lower rungs of the party.

Bhattacharya in an article written in 2011 opines that the land reforms had changed the political and the economic landscape of the villages. After dwelling on the struggles of the CPI(M) since the 1960s on land reforms, the article says that the increase in agricultural productivity was a success story. Then he says that 'we know that we cannot confine

² Left Front, Election Manifesto, West Bengal Legislative Assembly Election, 2001, (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 1st March, 2001). p.63. For details see *Paschimbonger Vidhan Sabha Nirbachone Bamfronter Istahar Sonkolon, 1977-2006*.

³ Ritanjan Das, op. cit. page 143.

⁴ Left Front Election Manifesto, West Bengal Legislative Assembly 2006, (Communist Party of India (Marxist), 16th February, 2006). p.81. For details see *Paschimbonger Vidhan Sabha Nirbachone Bamfronter Istahar Sonkolon, 1977-2006*.

⁵ Partha Pratim Basu, 'The CPI (M) and Globalisation: Anatomy of violence' in Bhupinder Brar and Pampa Mukherjee (ed.) '*Facing Globality: Politics of Resistance, Relocation and Reinvention in India*' (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012) p.180.

⁶ Ritanjan Das, op cit, p. 144.

ourselves to agricultural growth alone'. The slogan would be '*Krishi- Shilpa- Manush*'. (agriculture-industry-people). The task of industrialisation was the same as that of agriculture, namely, the protection of people's interests. He says that the factory at Singur would have benefitted the people in a way not possible through agriculture and that the shifting of the factory would not hurt the TATAs but rather the people of the State including the youth and the women who had taken technical training. He says that despite the Government deciding to withdraw the chemical hub from Nandigram, roads were destroyed and thus the 'unfortunate' police action was necessary. Women and children were killed due to this. He says that the TMC wanted to close down opportunities for work and send the youth to work in fields. He says that in Paschim Midnapore, Bankura and Purulia, the TMC was aiding the Maoists and police action was needed to protect the Left workers. In this article, the efforts at industrialisation are sought to be justified by invoking a sense of continuity with land reforms. But the basic difference lies in the fact that a sense of agency is missing. The Tatas are othered but in a nuanced way. But in a series of interviews, writings and speeches throughout his tenure, the same issues are brought in.⁷

In an article written for *The Marxist*, Bhattacharya says that the peasant movements of the 1960s were given administrative support through Operation Barga which entailed the recognition of rights of the sharecroppers and the granting of 'patta' rights. He mentions about a debate within the CPI(M) on the 'viability of small plots of land' but experience had proved that these plots were viable as OB had directly led to an increase in agricultural production especially paddy, vegetables and fish. The rate of growth in agriculture was 4% against an all India rate of 'less than 2%'. The success was reflected in the 'increasing purchasing power of the *kisans* in villages' and thus demand for goods like cement, motorcycles or textiles were high. However, problems of landlessness and rural indebtedness have increased and Agricultural universities were asked to review these. The problems faced by peasants included the fragmentation of land, rise in cost of inputs like fertilisers, water and seeds, lack of a marketing system and the 'mindset' which could hamper the gains from 'agricultural production and food security'. So over time, a 'progressive' mindset would mean that the share of the industrial sector would have to be increased gradually. The Opposition did not want that the LFG move beyond the 23% of land earmarked for urban and industrial use. However, the Government had detailed reports of vested land and non-

⁷Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, 'Bamponthaipoth' in Narayan Dutta (ed.) '*Bamfront Sarkar, ManushiSesh Katha*' (Kolkata:Ganashakti, 2019), pp. 294-96.

agricultural land for each block and *mouza* and the expropriation of land would not happen in a 'brutal manner' as in capitalism. In the 'interests of the farmer's', the owners and dependents on land would get a 'fair deal, without coercion'. The Opposition had brought in hoodlums from outside places in Singur and Nandigram and indulged in violence. The unrecorded *bargadars* felt deprived and the LFG would carry the 'poor people' with them as land was a 'sensitive issue'. With agriculture as the base, the focus would be on industry in the future.⁸

Nirupam Sen in 2010 opined that the State was forced to adopt the neoliberal reforms because the sources of revenue were drying up. With '84%' being 'marginalised and poor peasants', the State had to increase manufacturing and industry. The 'struggle for industrialisation' had started in 1977. He says that the opposition was trying to cash in on the insecurity among the peasants created by neo-liberalism induced unemployment as peasants did not protest land acquisition earlier. They were now protesting even against the installation of a pole of their land as it could reduce the price of land. The propaganda was spread by TMC and they had stopped 'development' for their 'narrow interests'. The farmers are shown as misled and negative virtues are mentioned but associated with the opposition TMC.⁹

Surjya Kanta Mishra in 'On Agrarian Transition in West Bengal' opines that the pressure on agriculture was increasing and that the size of landholdings showed a decreasing trend. Agriculture itself was becoming unprofitable in the neoliberal era and job opportunities had to be created in industries. The land reforms had increased agricultural productivity in rice, fish, vegetables along with high enrolment ratios of girl students in schools, decrease in rural poverty and the reduction of mortality rates. The demand for consumer goods had increased in rural areas. The marginalised and small peasants benefitted the most from land reforms. The way out lay in industrialisation so that the gains of land reform could be sustained and it was necessary in the interests of agriculture also. First, agriculture could not improve the conditions of all the persons oppressed by the feudal and the semi feudal systems. Second, industrialisation would help in the modernisation and increase in agricultural productivity. Third, the agricultural commodities would be linked up with an industrial market which would improve incomes and employment opportunities. Fourth, the revenues of the State

⁸Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, 'On Industrialisation in West Bengal', *The Marxist*, Vol.XXIII,1, January to March 2007, pp.1-8, https://cpim.org/wp-content/uploads/old/marxist/200701_marxist-wb%20industrialisation-buddhadeb.pdf.

⁹Nirupam Sen, '*Unnoyon o sangramenitiabhimukh*', in Narayan Dutta, op. cit., pp 272-77.

would improve with industrialisation and this could be invested in infrastructure, agricultural inputs and human development.¹⁰

Gautam Deb counts among the successes of the LFG the era of land reforms that reduced the number of poor people and the progress made in agriculture. The marginalised sections of the society like the poor, the women and the minorities had a greater amount of self-esteem. The State was trying to bring back lost glory in the industrial field. Democracy was revived in the State and power was decentralised through the Panchayats. The class nature of the LFG was reflected in the giving of compensation to those affected by the process of land acquisition.¹¹

Anil Biswas in 2005 writes that almost 15 lakhs acres of land were redistributed and 14 lakhs of bargadars got rights on their produce. Almost 72% of agricultural land was in the hands of marginalised farmers. Land reforms within the Constitutional parameters had laid down the basis for increase in agricultural productivity and the purchasing power of rural people, demand and circulation of commodities had increased thereby laying the basis for industrialisation. However, the decrease in productivity in the 1990s compared to 1980s, the rising cost of inputs and the pressure of increasing population on land had decreased the number of working days in villages. So, it was in the interest of those dependent on agriculture that industrialisation was necessary. The industries would not be built on fertile land but infertile areas. A new method of land acquisition would make the attainment of consent necessary and unused land from industry would be used for building new units. Means of production in agriculture, food processing industries, cold storages etc had to be improved as well.¹²

Biswas in another writing opines that industrialisation was being ushered in West Bengal courtesy the efforts of the LFG since 1994. However, the impact of the neoliberal economy was felt deeply on the trade union workers and their wages and conditions of work had deteriorated. The LFG was protecting people from such a situation but it was impossible for the LFG alone to bring about fundamental changes in the situation. Although the LFG would not be able to fulfil all the expectations of the people yet it would be wrong to think that the LFG would not be able to do anything within the bounds of the social and the economic structure. The efforts of the LFG from 2001 may be seen in this context. So, with limited resources at the disposal of the State Government it was necessary to decide the amount of

¹⁰SurjyaKanta Mishra, '*Paschimonger Krishi Bikasher Proshnoti Ki?*', Ibid pp. 189-202.

¹¹Goutam Deb, '*eibabosthyay Bicolper sandhane*', Ibid, pp. 203-06.

¹²Anil Biswas, '*Krishi o Shilper Sommonoye Unnoyoner Kormosuchi*', Ibid pp. 262-77.

investment, both private and in the Joint Sector, in 'productive fields' like agriculture, industry, and infrastructure and 'also' in education and health. The benefits from land reform had made it possible to move towards industrialisation. Investments were coming in small, middle and large scale industries in backward districts like Bankura and PaschimMidnapore. Work on building agro-industries had also started. The process was being implemented with a 'class outlook' in the sense that the marginalised sections of the population would be benefitted. So the 'struggle for development' was a 'part of the class struggle'.¹³ This was all the more important because States had a very less amount of freedom to implement an alternative to the neoliberal policies.¹⁴ But neo-liberalism is projected as contributing to inequality in society.¹⁵

Benoy Koner, the President of the Krishak Sabha, in an article opines lists down certain steps for the improvement of agriculture. The steps enumerated are that crops should be grown as per the nature of the land, increase in production of oilseeds and pulses, availability of improved variety of seeds, fertilisers, irrigation, development of cooperatives, livestock farming, proliferation of agricultural knowledge among farmers and improvement of the distribution system in agriculture. Although land reforms had led to decreasing levels of poverty, increase in production, increase in purchasing power in rural areas, increase in wages of agricultural labourers and better self-esteem for people in rural areas.¹⁶

Jyotirmay Bhattacharya opined that it was necessary in the interests of agriculture to develop industries for agricultural inputs and this would lead to an increase in agricultural productivity in the future. Land would need to be acquired for industries and industries could not always be set up on fallow land. The reason was that industrialists would not setup factories on land selected for them by the Government.¹⁷

Calcutta as the Metaphor

In the Municipal Elections in both 2000 and 2005, the LFG had fared poorly. Also, the 2001 elections saw the TMC gaining votes in the state and particularly in urban areas. Buddhadeb Bhattacharya mentions this in an interview. The attempt towards creation of a new discourse

¹³Anil Biswas, 'Unnoyon o songram' in Narayan Dutta (ed.) *Anil Biswas: Nirbachito Rochona Sankolan*, (*Ganashakti: Kolkata*, 2011), Vol. 4, pp.306-07.

¹⁴ Ibid p.312.

¹⁵Anil Biswas, 'Marxbad o Bishyayon' in Narayan Dutta (ed.) *Anil Biswas: Nirbachito Rochona Sankolan*, (*Ganashakti :Kolkata*,2011), Vol. 3, pp. 174-75.

¹⁶Benoy Koner, 'udarnitirchabuk o krishite notun bhabna', Ibid, pp 181-89.

¹⁷Jyotirmay Bhattacharya, PaschimbongeShilpayoninAnupMitra (ed.) *Paschimbonge Shilpayon o bartaman praristhithi*, pp.93-100.

can also be seen in the attempts made to modernise Calcutta. This discourse was not new. For example, at the 17th Conference of the Kolkata Zilla Committee of the Communist Part of India (Marxist), it was decided that Calcutta needed to be made more ‘attractive’ through initiatives for beautification. Clearing of garbage and improvement of roads and slums was necessary. A ‘*Nagarik Sammelan*’ (people’s convention) was created to involve the local people in every ward at the level of the borough.¹⁸ A drive called *Operation Sunshine* sought to remove hawkers from Kolkata pavements earlier in 1996 but could not succeed in the face of protests.¹⁹

After 2000, this process continued but in a different manner. Calcutta’s name was changed to Kolkata despite attempts to project it as one of the most ‘progressive’ cities in India. Tradition and history were used to invoke Bengali pride in this era of transition to gain support for the drive. Funding was received from sources like the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, WHO, Department of International Development of the United Kingdom to aid in the process of ‘improvement’ of Calcutta’s image. The impact of these processes on politics has been analysed by Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay.²⁰ He locates a process of ‘disenfranchisement’ here when he points out that the decisions relating to the future of the city were kept out of the purview of elected bodies. Elected bodies like the Calcutta Municipal Corporation saw a reduction in their sphere of activities and ‘welfare-oriented activities’ which were pro-poor like schools, housing and clinics were ‘gradually phased out’. ‘Multinational Corporations, ‘experts’ of transnational organisations, real estate vested interests, foreign investors and funded NGO’s none of whom are accountable to any electorate’ were entrusted with the process. This was evident in the construction of flyovers, by pass expressways, satellite townships, vast complexes and shopping malls with aid from foreign capital. Pavement spaces and walkways were reduced.

Kolkata was described as an ‘internationally important city’ and activities in Kolkata provided inspiration for the ‘poor, middle class and the struggling population’. Compared to the period under Congress rule, the conditions in slums had improved in Kolkata and

¹⁸Report of the Political-Organisational Committee, Communist Party of India (Marxist), 17th Kolkata Zilla Conference, 1995, pp. 1-3.

¹⁹ Arup Kumar Sen, ‘Paradox of History’, *Frontier*, Vol.50, No.37, March 18-24, 2018, <https://www.frontierweekly.com/articles/vol-50/50-37/50-37-Paradox%20of%20History.html>.

²⁰Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay, ‘Crossing the Howrah Bridge: Calcutta, Filth and Dwelling-Forms, Fragments, Phantasms’ in ‘*Theory, Culture and Society*’, Vol.23 No.221, 2006, DOI: 10.1177/0263276406073224.

provision was made for clean drinking water, proper toilets and health centres.²¹ The Calcutta Hackney-Carriage(Amendment) Bill, 2006 was brought in to cancel the licenses of hand pulled rickshaws as the practise was ‘inhuman’ and lead to traffic congestion.²² Decisions were taken ‘ad hoc’ and these ‘behind closed door decisions’ kept the ‘public completely in the dark’. Since these events were of a localised nature and often portrayed as the culmination of a process that began decades ago, resistance could not be articulated by the opposition. We have instances of how drives towards industrialisation were praised by even the opposition leaders. But this does not mean that resistance was not building up against the LFG.

During the drive for industrialisation, the CPI (M) did not fully support the Centre for Trade Unions (CITU) on all occasions. Issues which saw disagreements included the privatisation of Great Eastern Hotel in Kolkata, modernisation of Kolkata’s airport through private participation and most importantly the withdrawal of the right to call strikes in the new Information Technology hub in Kolkata.²³ The stance of the LFG towards this new category of workers in the Information Technology sector is very interesting and has been mostly ignored in research. The IT sector was seen as an area that could lead to economic growth and prosperity almost using the logic of ‘trickle down effects’ on the economy. We do not come across documents that the workers would fit into the clear-cut categories of either the bourgeois or the proletariat. That capitalism could turn out to be a liberating force especially with the glittering new buildings and a new lifestyle was not discussed by those who supported strikes. Partha Basu observes that Bhattacharya was able to implement his reforms better than Jyoti Basu because he could manage the party better and could get the support of its members even though not at first sight. During a business trip to Singapore and Indonesia in 2005, Bhattacharya made a speech wherein he asked Communists to ‘shed their dogmas’ and that the ‘lesson from the collapse of the Soviet Union and from China is that we reform, perform or perish’.²⁴ For Bhattacharya, the industrialisation of West Bengal entailed an improved work culture among the state government employees as well.

²¹ Report of the Political-Organisational Committee, Communist Party of India (Marxist), 20th Kolkata Zilla Conference, 2005, pp. 2-3.

²² Lili Ray Gangopadhyay ‘Manusher Tana Rickshaw Ucched: Jotharto Punorbashoner byabosthya kothay?’ in Mahul Mukhopadhyay, Shalti Research Group (ed.) ‘*Uchedder Satkahon: Prothom Porbo*’, (Kolkata: Nagorik Mancha, 2011), p.63.

²³ Partha Pratim Basu, ‘Brand Buddha in India’s West Bengal: The Left Reinvents Itself’, *Asian Survey*, 47(2), (March-April 2007), pp.288-306.

²⁴ ‘Bengal tiger: Calcutta is transformed from Marxist redoubt into India’s latest hotspot’, October 20, 2005, Media Center, mea.gov.in.

Legislative Changes

The West Bengal Land Reforms Act was amended in 2000 to include under Section 14Y a ‘township’ as an industry in areas where construction was carried out under the application of the Town and Country Planning Act.²⁵ The Act was again amended in 2005 allowing the change in the character of water bodies under Section 4C. The only condition was that a new water body would have to be built up in the place of the old water body whose character was changed.²⁶ Section 6(3) of the Estates Acquisition Act, 1953 stipulated that industries could retain as much land that was put for industrial use. If land was not used for industry, then the land would not remain as private property of the industrialist. However, the 2005 Amendment gave the industrialist the power to own and sell the land that was not being used for industrial purposes.²⁷ The West Bengal Land Acquisition Manual, 1991 was also amended.

Revised Land Acquisition Manual 2006

The Government brought out on 6th June, 2006, the revised procedures for land acquisition while the agitations at Singur were going on.²⁸

The objective of the manual was mentioned as the ‘expeditious disposal of land acquisition cases for public purposes’ and was in pursuance of the resolution adopted in a Cabinet meeting dated 14th February. The Land Acquisition Collector was instructed not to ‘receive or entertain’ any proposal for land acquisition that was not ‘complete in all regards’. A proposal would be deemed as complete only when it met the requirements of Order No. 1702-3M-07/06. The LAC would supply the requirements required of tentative proposals in a Prescribed Application Form to the Receiving Body. If the needs were met, then the LAC would submit the complete LA proposal for administrative approval of the Land and Land Reforms Department ‘within 10 working days’. The Department would give their approval within 5 working days and for one *mouza* only one land acquisition case would be recorded so that ‘equity and justice in value assessment’ could be ensured for a particular class of land. Persons affected by a project had ‘full rights to submit Compensation Claim to the LAC’. The *raiyyat* could get compensation and the *bargadar* would also get compensation. Even the beneficiaries of *Patta* land would get compensation. After the LA notification was issued under Section 4 of the LA Act, 1894, the land schedules would be verified and the objections

²⁵West Bengal Land Reforms (Amendment) Act, 2000, Government of West Bengal, Law Department, p.5.

²⁶West Bengal Land Reforms (Amendment) Act, 2005, Government of West Bengal, Law Department, pp. 2-3.

²⁷Ibid p.4.

²⁸A New Approach (Revised procedures for acquisition of land under Land Acquisition Act, 1894), Government of West Bengal, Land and Land Reforms Department, 06th June, 2006, pp. 2-24.

received would be heard. The land could be acquired 'irrespective of the same being retained by the Collector at his disposal or allotted by issuance of *patta* or by grant of long term lease'. Compensation would be paid for seven types of land namely, 'non irrigated agricultural land', 'irrigated agricultural land', 'homestead land', 'unused vacant lands', land under 'commercial and industrial use', 'water bodies' like tanks and Government land like 'vested land, Departmental Land and Public-utility-cum-common-property-land). In rural areas, the compensatory amount would be above the average value fixed for each type of land on grounds of 'locational advantage'. The land would 'legally stand vested in the State free from all encumbrances' and 'physical possession' would be undertaken only after the payment of compensation. Until the RB issued a notice, the cultivators would continue work on the land even after acquisition and if such notice was issued suddenly, then compensation amount for the damaged crop in harvest season would be paid as the Collector could decide.

The Singur Fiasco

We shall now have a cursory look at the events that transpired in Singur between May and November. In the context of the above discussion, it is essential to trace the events that are connected with the process of land acquisition in Singur. Shortly after the elections, representatives of TATA Motors and West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation (WBIDC) paid a visit to Singur. Singur was a census town located about 40 kilometres from Kolkata and connected to the city via NH2 and the Durgapur Expressway. We cannot find any authentic record of the immediate reaction of the TATA Motors officials who visited the site on behalf of the company but that day itself a gathering of local persons in Singur tried to block their passage. The standpoint of TATA Motors regarding the selection of the site can be gleaned from the statement given in May 2006 by the Chief Managing Director of Tata Group, Ratan Tata, who announced that a small car project was to be set up in Singur with a goal of rolling out the Nano, priced at Rs. 1,00,000 or 2000 dollars by an estimated time period of 2008. Proximity to Kolkata and the presence of communication facilities like airports, ports, railways and the highway were cited as the reasons for selection of Singur as the site for the factory.²⁹

One can recall the contents of the Industrial Policy Statement of 1994 and say that Tata's statement was a leaf out of the 1994 Statement. Initially about 2500 cars would be produced per annum which would be increased to 3500 cars per annum for both the national and

²⁹Samir Kumar Das 'Singur: The exemplar of peasant resistance' in S. Irudaya Rajan (ed.) *India Migration Report 2017: Forced Migration*, (London, Taylor and Francis, 2018) p. 29.

international markets. Ancillary units would be set up so that the components of not only the Nano but also other cars could be made at Singur itself and for this purpose national, multinational and foreign firms like Bosch, Behr, Gabriel, Exide, Caparo, Kinetic, Sona, Subros, Rico, Rasandik, Lumax, Tata Reyerson and Tata Auto Component were invited to invest. The rhetoric adopted by the LFG was that the project at Singur would turn West Bengal into the next automobile hub of the country and create a chain of downstream ancillary industries. The success of the project would increase industrial output and employment by attracting more investments into the state.³⁰ The small car model to aid in industrialisation was a development policy followed in many Western countries in the 1960s and was implemented in India through the Maruti 800 Project in the 1970s.³¹

Protest Activities

A large number of women participated in the protests. The women from Gopalnagar, Beraberi Gram Panchayat were the first to protest the land acquisition. Among the crowd that gathered, there were a large number of 'landless *bargadars* and marginal farmers'. The leadership of the movement said that these sections of the population were at the forefront of the movement.³² Ironically this was not the first time that protests against land acquisition by the TATA group were carried out in recent years.

In June, an informal platform called the *Singur Krishi Jomi Raksha Committee* (Save Farmland in Singur Committee) was formed which would protest the State Government's decision to hand over land to the Tatas. Social activists, human rights groups, CPI(ML) and the TMC were members of the Committee.³³ The Socialist Unity Centre of India and the Trinamool Congress were involved in the protests from the beginning. Nielsen believes that perhaps the Opposition did not 'want to miss the boat'. Despite not having any strong ideological stand against industrialisation, the protests took shape with the support of the Opposition.³⁴

³⁰Chaitanya Kalbag, 'Buddha says he has to follow capitalism', *Hindustan Times*, July 20, 2007.

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/kolkata/buddha-says-he-has-to-follow-capitalism/story-YnzYxn5k8qYEv4V3SMg4MK.html>.

³¹Smriti Sawkar, 'A small car for a small family: building India's first people's car', in *Contemporary South Asia*, 30(4), 2022, pp 465-80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2022.2091518>.

³²Dayabati Roy, *Rural Politics in India: Political Stratification and Governance in West Bengal*, (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp.160-61.

³³Sumanta Banerjee, 'Peasant Hares and Capitalist Hounds in Singur', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41(52), 5th January, pp.5296-5298.

³⁴Kenneth Bo Nielsen, 'Contesting India's Development? Industrialisation, Land Acquisition and Protest in West Bengal', *Forum for Development Studies*, Vol.37, No.2, p.165.

Throughout the 1990s, a spate of protests broke out against several TATA projects. Some of the notable ones were the protests against the Chilka Aquatic Farm project, the construction of the steel plant in Gopalpur and in Kalinganagar, the construction of Dhamra Port at Bhitarkanika and Gahirmatha in Odisha, in Tuticorin in Tamil Nadu against the construction of the Titanium Di Oxide mine and also in Bangladesh for the construction of a Rs. 17000 crore power project. In all the above cases, the projects had to be abandoned by the Tata Group of Companies.³⁵

Government Response

In July 2006 through a Gazette notification it was announced that the colonial era legislation, Section 4(1) of the Land Acquisition Act of 1894 would be invoked for purposes of acquisition of land for setting up of the TATA Motors plant by the State Government and the government started to procure consent letters from those persons who would be potentially affected by the process of land acquisition.³⁶

Another notice was issued in August 2006 and the declaration of compensation award was made in September 2006. The payment of land acquisition was to commence from 25th September 2006. It may be noted at this point that this was not required under the 1894 Act but this can be read as an attempt on the part of the LFG to ‘demonstrate that the entire land had been willingly given over by the peasants to the government’.³⁷ This could also be taken to indicate rhetorically the support of the concerned persons for the project by readily agreeing to sell their land. Acceptance of the compensation amount by the affected persons could mean that both the process of land acquisition and the amount of compensation given were just. This could be used as a ‘political tool to undermine the opposition’ that could be shown to be opposed to development. The acquisition of land was sought to be shown as a smooth process. Initially about 1053 acres were proposed for acquisition but 175.57 acres were taken out from the initial proposed area and 119.68 acres were added. This revised area amounted to about 997 acres of agricultural land was sought to be acquired for setting up of the Nano factory. The land affected by the process of acquisition was spread across the five *mouzas* consisting of Beraberi, Gopalnagar, Singerbheri, Bajemelia and Khaserbheri.³⁸

³⁵For details see Naba Dutta (ed.) *Tata Kahini*, (Kolkata: Nagarik Mancha, 2008).

³⁶Cited in S. IrudayaRajan (ed.) op. cit. p 29.

³⁷Ritanjan Das, op cit, p. 161.

³⁸Status Report on Singur, Published by West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation, Government of West Bengal, December 5, 2006, p. 2, <https://www.scribd.com/document/6621833/A-Status-Report-on-Singur-version-6122006>.

Accordingly, a series of nine meetings were held in the coming days with the section of the local people who were unwilling to hand over their land on the issue of compensation. Four of these meetings were with the *Singur Krishi Jomi Raksha Committee*. The meetings remained inconclusive.³⁹ A local enquiry revealed that there were 237 recorded *bargadars* and 170 unrecorded *bargadars*. The compensation was fixed for owners at Rs. 6.02 lakh per acre for Sali land and Rs.8.92 lakh per acre for *Suna* land. The total compensation payable was Rs. 131.49 crore. The protests over land acquisition grew during this period with the demand being that 400 acres of land be returned to those persons who were unwilling to part with it for industrialisation and to those who had refused to collect the compensation cheques. Some of the landowners were absentee landlords who were based in Kolkata. A West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation Camp Office was set up to help enrol the local population in Industrial Training Institutes to prepare them for future employment by collaborating with Industrial Training Institutes and Ramakrishna Shilpa Mandir.⁴⁰

Political Affiliation

By this time, the spreading of the movement was instrumental in bringing together political unity among different parties. This space was spearheaded by the TMC and supported by the Party for Democratic Socialism (a breakaway group of the CPI(M) and the Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI).

The movement at Singur was receiving ‘widespread support’ of ‘civil and human rights groups, legal bodies, social activists, writers, artists, and theatre and film personalities’. Thus, the support was not necessarily confined to local areas. Kolkata based intellectuals, prominent national level figures and even intellectuals based outside India lent their support to the cause.

We may argue that the ground level realities in Singur arising out of the complex agrarian structure, the changing economic scenario further bolstered by liberalisation reforms had a role to play in the movement but with the involvement of persons outside this structure, the idioms of the movement were fashioned in a particular way. The ‘group of intellectuals’ who were involved were Bibhas Chakraborty, Saonli Mitra, Koushik Sen, Suman Mukhopadhyay, Bratya Basu, Arpita Ghosh, Aparna Sen, Prof. Sunanda Sanyal, Debabrata Bandopadhyay (retired IAS), Joy Goswami, Ananya Chatterjee, Jogen Choudhury, Samir Aich, Miratun

³⁹Ritanjan Das, *op cit.* p. 161.

⁴⁰Status Report on Singur *op. cit.*, pp.3-4.

Nahar, Mahashweta Devi, Prasun Bhowmick and others belonging the Association for Protection of Democratic Rights. They made their stand public through gathering at the Press Club in Kolkata and other protest marches.⁴¹

Saonli Mitra located the reason for women's participation in movements to their intimacy with nature and the 'machine civilisation' and 'development' that was introduced by the State that destroyed the 'balance in the relationship'.⁴²

Political communication here was a two-way structure between the constitutive categories of the 'rural' and the 'urban' and as Majumder shows both the categories went on to influence and shape each other. Characterising the movement therefore as that of 'peasants against industrialisation would actually be a simplification'.⁴³

Response of the Government

The Government remained steadfast with the proposal to acquire the land for the West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation to hand over to the TATA factory by November. The notification gave the reasoning that land would be acquired for the public purpose of generation of employment and overall socio-economic development of the area. This might be contrasted with the language used in the backdrop of industrial projects in earlier decades by the LFG where class struggle would render the benefits of industrialisation palatable.

In September, the Government announced that around 997 acres of land would be transferred to the Tata group on a 99-year lease for the construction of the factory.⁴⁴ Devoid of any kind of competitive bidding or auction, the details of the deal struck with the Tatas or the tax concessions granted remained a secret and even the opposition political parties could not get access to this information. Under the Factory's Act the 'site plan' and the 'detailed project plan' would have to be submitted to the Chief Inspector of Factories and since automobiles fell within the category of 'hazardous industries', a No Objection Certificate was required from the authorities that dealt with environment issues.⁴⁵

Thus, it can be reasonably gleaned at this juncture that the details of the deal would be removed from public but were available for perusal of relevant government authorities. Since

⁴¹Shuvaprasanna, *My Life with Painting, Vol. 2, (Kolkata: Mitra Ghosh,2023), p.94.*

⁴²Saonli Mitra, 'Erokom hotei thake' in *Singur Andolan: Amader Bhabna, Amader Protibad*, (Kolkata: Emancipation,2007), p.54.

⁴³Sarasij Majumder, *People's Car: Industrial India and the Riddles of Populism*, (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan,2018) pp.139-47.

⁴⁴Cited in S Irudaya Rajan, op. cit. p 29.

⁴⁵For details see Naba Dutta (ed.) *Singurer Taposhira* (Kolkata: Nagarik Mancha,2007).

the protests started over land, it was essential to place these in the context of our discussions on land reform in the earlier chapter. The land that was earmarked for acquisition was owned by 12000 plot holders and for which the Government announced compensation to the tune of Rs. 8.70 lakh for an acre of *Sali* land and Rs. 12.76 lakh for an acre of *Suna* land was highly fertile multi crop land used to produce rice, potatoes, jute and other vegetables and which was fully irrigated by the Damodar Valley Corporation and had access to groundwater was selected for the project. It was not less fertile mono-crop agricultural land.

Many land owners in Singur were ‘absentee landowners living in Kolkata’ and the largest number of persons dependent on land were ‘small and marginal peasants’ owning ‘less than two *bighas*’. About 3500 families cultivated land using family labour. In addition to this the land records on which compensation was calculated did not match the massive conversion of unirrigated *Sali land* to irrigated multi crop *Suna land* that received higher compensation and as a result of this, the landowners were grossly underpaid. The landless labourers, tenants, small landowners, unregistered sharecroppers were left out of the purview of the compensation package.⁴⁶

At this point, the Government brought modifications to the compensation package that included an enhanced monetary sum, employment of one member from each family and 70 acres of land within the protest area as against the opposition’s demand of 400 acres. Most of the landowners in Singur were small holders who owned less than 2 *bighas* of land and land acquisition hit them the most as they depended on land for a variety of reasons not all of them being of an economic nature. More than half the population was constituted by small and marginal peasants. Not all the sharecroppers were registered and there were a large number of landless labourers as well.

Only one third of the total number of affected landowners had given their consent and the litigation that was filing up in courts threatened to stall the project unless the loopholes were tied. The Land Reforms Minister Abdur Rezzak Mollah admitted that the situation in Singur was complicated.⁴⁷

The West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation itself admitted that the total number of unrecorded *bargadars* was about 170 and ‘about 60’ of these *bargadars* had applied to the

⁴⁶ Arup Kumar Sen, ‘Letters: Land struggle in Singur’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 23rd September, 2006, pp. 3994-4088.

⁴⁷ Dwaipayyan Bhattacharya, *Government as Practice: Democratic Left in a Transforming India* (New Delhi: Cambridge, 2016), pp. 191.

WBIDC wanting some form of compensation.⁴⁸ Michelman brought in the category of ‘demoralisation costs’ to calculate the intangible effects of land acquisition. Property ownership gave the people a sense of security and this could be used for future enjoyment of a product. There are certain costs that are psychological in nature and are not included within the economic costs that are used to carry out a cost-benefit analysis for rehabilitation packages.⁴⁹ The local *bargadars* and landless labourers were against the decision to acquire agricultural land for the purpose of industry. Thus, a loose coalition of various social forces led the movement in its initial days.

Entry of Trinamool Congress

The Trinamool Congress led by Mamata Banerjee which was the main opposition party in West Bengal entered the fray on 25th September 2006 after the protests had erupted and led a movement called ‘Save farmland’. This was supported by Congress leaders like Somen Mitra, Subrata Mukherjee and even Priya Ranjan Das Munshi.⁵⁰

Incidents that can be read as disciplining of a recalcitrant population in the Foucauldian mould are those of the Block Development Officer’s office in Singur was gheraoed, the police dispersed the 7000 strong crowd using *lathicharge* (baton charge) in which many people including women alleged that they were manhandled. 72 activists of the *Singur Krishi Jomi Raksha Committee* were arrested and 27 persons were arrested that day after the Government deployed the Rapid Action Force.⁵¹

The Government tried to assuage the situation by handing over cheques to the farmers who had willingly donated their lands the very next day.⁵² In tune with this action, the Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya announced that the Singur project had the potential to change the face of the State and that it should not be stalled. The Government resorted to imposition of Section 144 and there were reports of the ‘shadow state’ manned by CPM cadres substituting the work of the police by intimidating the villagers who were protesting.

On 2nd December 2006, a large contingent of police personnel was present to act as a counterweight against the villagers who were already protesting when the work of actually

⁴⁸ Status Report on Singur, op. cit. p2.

⁴⁹ Malabika Pal, ‘Land Acquisition for Economic Development’, in Varsha Bhagat-Ganguly (ed.) *The Land Question in Neo-liberal India* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), p.176.

⁵⁰ Press Trust of India, ‘Centre not to bail out Wb Govt on Singur issue: Dasmunshi’, The Economic Times, 28.8.2008, <https://m.economictimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/centre-not-to-bail-out-wb-govt-on-singur-issue-dasmunshi/articleshow/3417433.cms>.

⁵¹ Dwiapayyan Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice* op.cit, p.191.

⁵² S Irudaya Rajan op.cit. p.32.

fencing the 997 acres of land begun. In the police action that followed, there were injuries and many persons were arrested some of whom were slapped with the severest sections of law like attempt to murder.⁵³ CM Bhattacharya declared that there would be no change in the decision to acquire land from the Tata factory. These measures were taken on the part of the government so that the fencing operations could continue unabated.

The CPI(ML) was instrumental in organising the agricultural labourers in Singur against the police atrocities.⁵⁴ It was at this point that Mamata Banerjee called a state wide strike against the police action and demanded that 400 acres of land be returned to the '*onichhuk chasi*' (unwilling peasants).⁵⁵ This was followed by a 25 day hunger strike at Dharamtalla in the heart of Kolkata. The selection of a prominent site can be read as a symbolic challenge to the Government as it gave out the message that disenchantment with the government had led to an almost parallel source of to spring up. Symbolically politics in Kolkata was taken to be microcosm of politics in West Bengal. Holding the fast in Kolkata also would gather more attention.

By this time the movement had spiralled into an anti-incumbency movement against the Communists which attracted the attention of social activists from across the country. It took a personal request from the President and the Prime Minister to call off the strike. This tactic was criticised by the Government as a political manoeuvre as the LFG had got an electoral majority in the 2006 elections and this was a way to revive political fortunes. Buddhadeb Bhattacharya commented that there would be no change in the Government's policy of handing over land to the Tatas but modifications could be made as regards the resettlement and rehabilitation. Noted social activist of the Gandhian mould, Medha Patkar, was stopped from going to Singur that very day.⁵⁶

The movement took another turn when on 18th December, the dead and severely burnt body of Tapasi Malik who was the daughter of a landless labourer was recovered from inside the fenced portions of a field in Bajemelia village.⁵⁷ The State Women's Commission entered Singur three days later and the figure of Tapasi Malik not only became emblematic of the protest against the CPIM but it also highlighted rhetorically the injustice committed against

⁵³Dayabati Roy, op.cit. pp. 164-66.

⁵⁴Dipankar Bhattacharya, 'All Roads Lead to Singur in Buddha's Bengal' https://archive.cpi.ml.org/liberation/year_2007/January/singur_struggle.html.

⁵⁵Ritanjan Das, op cit, p. 161.

⁵⁶'MedhaPatkar sneaks into Singur', December 19, 2006, <https://www.news18.com/news/india/medha-patkar-sneaks-into-singur-253877.html>.

⁵⁷Cited in S IrudayaRajan, op. cit. p31.

the poor and helpless woman by an arrogant and desperate ‘shadow State’, to use Barbara Harris White’s term, that was trying to intimidate the villagers into submission.⁵⁸ The CPI (M), however, dissociated itself from the murder.⁵⁹

Events in Kolkata also took an interesting turn when Mamata Banerjee agreed to withdraw her fast at the instance of President A P J Abdul Kalam and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. The President had telephonic conversations with the Prime Minister and Buddhadeb Bhattacharya. After this, Bhattacharya sent Banerjee a letter in which the CM had reportedly agreed to the withdrawal of prohibitory orders in Singur and agreed to have discussions with Mamata Banerjee on all issues including what was termed as the forcible acquisition of land from ‘unwilling’ peasants. Some kind of negotiation was to be arrived at in the presence of the Governor. But even after these talks in front of the Governor, which were mediated by ex-Chief Justice Chittatosh Mookerjee of Bombay High Court, between Bhattacharya and Banerjee could not solve the deadlock. Protests had intensified in Singur against the Tatas.⁶⁰

Inauguration of the Project

A ceremonial inauguration was carried out at the project site on 21st January 2007 to show that the work was going on smoothly. Construction on the factory site continued throughout 2007 and the first half of 2008 in the face of protests that took a violent turn mostly. Work was disrupted on several occasions and workers and officials at the site were assaulted and intimidated leading to disruption of work. Another round of protests led by Mamata Banerjee took place on the ground of returning land to the ‘unwilling peasants’ was carried out in August 2008. On the tenth day of the protests by the TMC outside the factory demanding return of the 400 acres of land that was forcibly acquired, work on the site was completely halted on 3rd September 2008. What followed were a series of negotiations between the Government and the opposition parties which remained inconclusive.

It took only a month after that for Tata Motors to declare that they were pulling out of Singur and shifting the factory to Sanand in Gujarat.⁶¹ In a public announcement through a press conference by the CMD of TATA Group, Ratan Tata, said that work was stopped in the face of continued protests, agitation and aggression by the ‘opposing parties’ and that the ‘investor

⁵⁸Ritanjan Das op. cit. p167.

⁵⁹B Prasant, ‘Who killed Tapasi Malik at Singur?’, *People’s Democracy*, Vol XXXI, No.18, May 06, 2007, <https://archives.peoplesdemocracy.in/2007/0506/05062007bengal.html>.

⁶⁰Sitaram Sharma, *West Bengal: Changing Colours, Changing Challenges*, (New Delhi: Rupa India Publications Private Limited, 2014) p.123.

⁶¹Cited in S Irudaya Rajan, op. cit.p. 32.

friendly policies of the current government' was the reason the Group invested in West Bengal.⁶² In the 2008 Panchayat elections, the LFG showed signs of decay among a population that was its stronghold. In the 2009 Parliamentary elections, the LFG won only 15 seats down from the 35 seats it had won in 2004. It was the Vidhan Sabha elections in 2011 that saw the LFG being unseated from power by the TMC which had entered into an alliance with the Congress after 34 years of rule. The Panchayat elections in 2008 showed that the Left Front had started crumbling. In the Parliamentary elections the next year, the Left Front tasted defeat. The State Legislative Assembly elections of 2011 sounded the death knell of the Left Front Government with the LFG slumping to 62 seats whereas the coalition of TMC, INC, SUCI and others winning as many as 227 seats. The comprehensive win was catalysed by the peasant resistance in Singur. The electoral outcome of 2011 marginalised all forces that were a part of peasant resistance in Singur and helped the TMC to monopolise the oppositional space. The rainbow space of civil society activism that emerged in West Bengal in the wake of the Singur Movement was effectively controlled and monopolized by the TMC.

The existence of the West Bengal Land Acquisition Manual 1991 paragraph 8 provides for the constitution of a Screening Committee to screen every project. The Committee was to be constituted by the Additional District Magistrate in charge of land acquisition, the concerned Sub Divisional Land and Land Reforms Officer, the *Sabhapati* of the concerned Panchayat Samity, the local Member of Legislative Assembly or his representative, the representative of the Requiring Body and the Special Land Acquisition Officer. In Singur, no such Screening Committee was constituted.⁶³

The meeting of the State Committee of the CPI (M) on 30th October, 2006 showed the fault lines within the party regarding the modalities of land acquisition. Jyoti Basu made the very important point that the frontal organisations of the parties namely the *Krishak Samity* of the CPIM and the *Krishak Sabha* (Farmers' Organisation) of the CPI were not actively involved in the land acquisition process. So, there was no scope of the members of these frontal organisations entering into some sort of a dialogue with the persons who would be affected either directly or indirectly by the project and then taking up the issue with the administration if modifications were needed. Moreover, the compensation for multi crop land was not

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³ For details see The West Bengal Land and Land Reforms Manual, 1991, Board of Revenue, Government of West Bengal, 1991, para 8.

adequate. Leaders from Howrah, Hooghly and South 24 Parganas made the point that there needed to be more clarity on the issue of land acquisition.⁶⁴ In Singur the issue concerned one sided political communication and thus the rhetoric was confined to some official pronouncements.

The Falta Special Economic Zone

Before we go on to describe the Nandigram episode, it is worthwhile looking at the attitude of the LFG towards the setting up of Special Economic Zones. Although rhetorically the CPIM at the national level criticised the setting up of SEZs which offered tax cuts and relaxed labour laws to incentivise investors, in practise the SEZ policy of the LFG differed little from the line taken by the Central Government though the states retained ‘considerable discretion’ in framing the rules.⁶⁵ We can get an idea of the attitude of the LFG towards SEZs from the official notification issued for the Manikanchan SEZ. All the units operating at Manikanchan and at Falta were classified as ‘public utility’ services under the Industrial Disputes Act of 1947 which virtually took away the right to strike given to workers. Exemptions were granted from electricity duties, sales tax, stamp duty and registration fees for firms within the SEZs. In the absence of a Rehabilitation and Resettlement policy which were framed by other states, the marginalised persons were affected negatively. According to Walter Fernandes, between 1947 and 2000, development projects in West Bengal used 4.7 million acres of land and affected 7 million people out of which only 9% were rehabilitated. Even in cases where compensation was purported to be given, it was very low. Moreover, given the agrarian structure, compensation was given to landowners and agricultural labourers and unregistered sharecroppers were kept outside the purview of compensation. Even the registered sharecroppers upon whom the entire Operation Barga rested were given only 25% of the value of the acquired land as compensation. The rural space remained highly diverse in West Bengal more so after liberalisation and the continued efforts at coming out of agriculture wherein a section of people depended upon activities like ‘leased in cultivation, livestock rearing, milk trading, crop and vegetable trading, artisanal works and small

⁶⁴Special Correspondent, ‘Basu sermon to Buddha’, The Telegraph, 30.10.2006.
<https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/basu-sermon-to-buddha/cid/768209>.

⁶⁵For details see Partha Sarathi Banerjee, ‘Politics and Conflict behind SEZs in West Bengal’, Centre Tricontinental, 25th January, 2011, <https://www.cetri.be/Politics-and-conflicts-behind-SEZs?lang=fr>.

industries and businesses'. This section of the population was kept out of the ambit of compensation.⁶⁶

We take a look at the setting up of the Falta Special Economic Zone at this juncture. 280 acres of land were acquired for the Falta Special Economic Zone in 1984 to set up 'modern, state of the art infrastructure and support facilities and services to facilitate exports'. The Export Promotion Zone at Falta was converted into a SEZ in December 2002 with additional fiscal advantages for the operating units as well as a simpler and faster passage through customs procedures. Land was acquired at Falta under the provisions of the West Bengal Land Requisition and Acquisition Act of 1948 under which the land could first be acquired and the owners compensated thereafter. Even in the 1980s, the process of acquisition of land for the EPZ at Falta had raised considerable protest action. Agriculture and fishery were the mainstay of these villagers and there was the anxiety that the industrial project would not benefit them. The evicted families were to receive homestead plots, Rs. 5000 to Rs 10000 for construction of new houses and compensation of Rs. 15370 per acre which was below the market rate by any standards. Even this compensation was not paid fully with 20% remaining unpaid. Even land titles were not given to the evicted families who comprised mostly marginal and small farmers when they were resettled on new land.⁶⁷

When land was acquired again at Falta in 2002, the incumbent Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya had to comment that every family affected by the displacement due to land acquisition would get one job in the SEZ. The Central Government had cleared Bhattacharya's proposals for setting up SEZs and this brought him into conflict with the Centre for Indian Trade Unions as well.⁶⁸

In Falta, industrial effluents drained into village land and the river Ganges which had serious consequences for both lives and livelihoods of the villagers. Air pollution was another factor which caused disturbance to the villagers. Another point which requires mention here are the working conditions. Despite the exports rising from the SEZ, most of the workers employed were contractual workers who lacked job security and outnumbered the regular employees. Contractual workers most of whom were women were paid wages much below the legally

⁶⁶I Dey, 'Negotiating Rights: The Case of a Special Economic Zone', in S B R Chaudhury and I Dey (ed.) *Sustainability of Rights after Globalisation* (New Delhi: Sage, 2011), pp.177-205.

⁶⁷P S Banerjee, 'The SEZ Imbroglio in Rob Jenkins, L Kennedy and P Mukhopadhyay (ed.) *Power, Policy and Protest: The Politics of India's Special Economic Zones*, (New Delhi: Oxford, 2014), pp.279-80.

⁶⁸For details see TNN, 'Buddhadeb's SEZs get green signal; CITU frowns at rules', *The Economic Times*, 10.10.2006, <https://m.economictimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/buddhadeb's-sezs-get-green-signal-citu-frowns-at-rules/articleshow/2132496.cms>.

stipulated minimum wages for regular workers. Workers were paid around Rs. 81 per day for an average of 15 to 20 days of work in a month. Such low wages would never allow for prospects of upward mobility. Another issue that proved disadvantageous to the development of the project was the lack of infrastructural facilities around the SEZ. Lack of housing facilities, schools, hospitals etc. were a major factor dissuading the development of the project. The road connecting Falta to Kolkata was congested and not developed. Thus, the managers who did not face workers' protests, had to either stay close to the SEZ without their families or undertake the lengthy journey to work which led to a loss of work hours.⁶⁹

The Nandigram Episode

We now look at the events at Nandigram which were different from those at Singur but yet added to the anti-incumbency against the LFG. The Government announced in August 2006 that a Special Economic Zone would be set up in Nandigram situated opposite the industrial town of Haldia.⁷⁰ Nandigram came under the jurisdiction of the Haldia Development Authority. It should be remembered that around this time the events at Singur had provoked anxiety among the people at Nandigram who believed that they could meet a similar fate. Such a perception of the event by local people, gives us a glimpse of the attitude that the local persons had regarding issues of industrialisation and government processes. Whether these were actually reflected in the rhetorical practises of political parties is an issue that requires scrutiny. Land was to be acquired in Nandigram for the Salim Group which was an Indonesia based conglomerate. On 15th November 2006, the Statesman published an article saying that the jitters of Singur were felt in Nandigram. The identification of the two places as a metaphor for industrialisation served to both justify the drives of the LFG as well as build up opposition against the protest. It was on 27th December that the local MP Lakshman Seth announced that 27 *mouzas* of agricultural land would be acquired for a chemical hub in Nandigram and two *mouzas* in the adjoining Khejuri village.⁷¹ The Haldia Development Authority announced the acquisition of land through a notice the next day through the Chief Executive Officer Parwez Ahmed Siddique. On 29th December 2006, it was announced

⁶⁹Partho Sarathi Roy, 'Falta SEZ in West Bengal -A fact-finding report on workers and environmental impact', <https://sanhati.com/excerpted/1942>.

⁷⁰Dwaipayyan Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice*, op.cit., p.201.

⁷¹*Report of the People's Tribunal on Nandigram; What Really Happened?* (New Delhi: Danish Books, 2007). p.14.

through a land Acquisition Notice that land would be acquired for the chemical hub. 10000 acres of land would be acquired covering five Panchayats.⁷²

Confrontation

The fact that the notice for land acquisition had not been served after consulting the people who would be affected is borne out by several incidents. On 20th November, 2006 before the notice was brought out, the issue of land acquisition was discussed at a street corner meeting organised by the local unit of the CPI (M) and the conversation with the local people was not smooth. Demonstrations started as the people sought more information from the Kalicharanpur Panchayat Samity Office about the acquisition process. The first instance of confrontation took place between the protestors and the police in January 2007 and blame could not be fixed on either of the two sides as they blamed each other for the violence. In these confrontations the villagers claimed that some persons were injured and the protestors set ablaze a police vehicle. A bridge at Jalpai that connected the villages of Nandigram and Garchakraberia was damaged to prevent the police from entering. After these initial incidents of confrontation, the local people dug up roads and destroyed the bridges so that the police could not enter their villages.⁷³ This paved the way for creation of a '*muktanchal*' which translates loosely as a liberated zone. Women involved in the protest came out with brooms and kitchen knives whereas the men used sickles and sticks.⁷⁴ A crowd even proceeded to the police station to seek release of those arrested.

It was at this juncture that the *Bhumi Uchched Protirodh Committee* (Save Farmland Committee) was formed. The BUPC at the outset consisted of non-political groups among which the most notable was the *Gana Unnayan o Jana Adhikar Samity*⁷⁵ (Committee for Development and People's Rights) but joined the TMC at a later stage. The protests continued unabated and it was at this time that at least six persons were killed as armed men who were allegedly backed by local CPIM cadres hurled bombs at them. On 7th February 2007, separate processions were taken out by the supporters of the CPI (M) and the BUPC to Sonachura where there were casualties due to violence a month earlier. The local people dug roads to prevent the police and party cadres from reaching the proposed acquisition site.⁷⁶ As

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid p.16.

⁷⁴Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar, 'A Place Called Nandigram' in G Roy (ed.) *Nandigram and Beyond*, (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2008) pp. 43-4.

⁷⁵*Report of the People's Tribunal on Nandigram*, op. cit. p.15.

⁷⁶'People's Uprising Against Forced Land Acquisition: All Disquiet on the Nandigram Front', 'Paschim Banga Khet Majdoor Samity, Kolkata, 2007), p. 2.

the members of the BUPC proceeded in a 'peaceful manner', they were fired upon by the CPI (M) supporters.

We find the statement of Inspector General of Police Raj Kanojia who said that the police had not been able to enter the 'troubled areas' since 6th January despite entering with reinforcements. Arun Gupta the Inspector General of the Western Range as commenting that 'the presence of policemen in Nandigram would only add fuel to the fire'. N R Babu, the DIG of Midnapore Range also said that violence would occur if the police move in.⁷⁷ On 18th February bombs were thrown towards Nandigram from Khejuri. Clashes were commonplace in the area between supporters of the BUPC and the CPI (M). The BUPC responded by taking out a procession at Tekhali Bazaar to protest the damage caused to property by the burning down and looting of shops selling jewellery and garments.⁷⁸

Amidst the reports of dumping of illegal weaponry at Nandigram, the protests did not stop.

Initial Response of the Government

Buddhadeb Bhattacharya in January held the *Jamiat Ulema I Hind* (JuH) responsible for 'an ugly communal campaign' in Nandigram. The CM said that the CPI (M) cadres were forced to defend themselves upon attack by the Opposition. This was repeated by Benoy Koner who also spoke of retaliation in case the TMC attacked in future.⁷⁹

A notice issued by the CEO of Haldia Development Authority (HDA) to the Gram Panchayat where 27 *mouzas* were to be acquired in Nandigram-1 block. Out of the 27 *mouzas*, 14 *mouzas* were to be acquired completely. The acquisition was to be of nearly 14000 acres. Buddhadeb Bhattacharya said that no such notice for land acquisition was issued and Laxman Seth also dismissed the notice as a rumour spread by the Opposition parties.⁸⁰ The DM of East Midnapore called an all-party meeting wherein it was decided to repair roads and bridges wherever destroyed and that land acquisition would start only after consulting all political parties. CM Bhattacharya conceded that the HDA had issued the LA notice in haste and a 'micro study of land' would be carried out. The aim was to restore 'normalcy' in the locality. It is worth mentioning that the District Statistical Handbook which says that out of 13600

⁷⁷Report of the People's Tribunal on Nandigram, op. cit. p.19.

⁷⁸Press Trust of India, 'Violence at Nandigram; bombs hurled', 18th February, 2007.

<https://www.livemint.com/Politics/K6yj55GX303ICgeNpjeNGM/Violence-at-Nandigram-bombs-hurled.html>.

⁷⁹Report of the People's Tribunal on Nandigram, op. cit., p.17.

⁸⁰TNN, 'Buddha dumps land notice, eyes truce', 10.1.2007, The Times of India. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/buddha-dumpa-land-notice-eyes-truce/articleshow/1115544.cms>.

hectares, only 2470 hectares of agricultural land was irrigated. Thus, agriculture was not developed.⁸¹ Bhattacharya commented on 12th February at Haldia that no industry would be set up at Nandigram if people did not want.⁸² However, Lakshman Seth continued to say that the chemical hub would be built and the ferry service from Haldia to Nandigram was suspended. While Industries Secretary Sabyasachi Sen said that a 'scaled down' of the project would come up at Haldia, Nirupam Sen said that the project was necessary for the poverty stricken minority population.⁸³ On 11th March, Bhattacharya repeated the promise of the hub at Nandigram at a rally of the *Krishak Sabha* at the Brigade grounds in Kolkata that was attended by Chairman Ramnarayan Goswami, General Secretary Samar Bawra, Vice Chairman Benoy Koner, Assistant Secretary Surya Kanta Mishra among others.⁸⁴

On 14th March, two groups of armed police personnel entered the area from the Nandigram and the Khejuri sides. This force was alleged to have included hundreds of CPIM cadres who wore the police dress as a camouflage along with sandals and a cap affixed with a photo of Bhagat Singh⁸⁵. In the firing which followed, 14 persons were killed and hundreds of people were injured. There were reports of women being sexually assaulted as well and these allegations were made against both the police as well as party cadres. These incidents were not reported to the District Magistrate and neither was a FIR filed.

Thus the initial response of the Government tended towards using force to contain the protest. This was accompanied by attempts to justify the land acquisition through a series of statements from above.

On 15th March as Governor Gandhi made a statement that a sense of 'cold horror' had overtaken him, the High Court initiated a Public Interest Litigation and passed an order on its own motion where it was mentioned that the police action of firing was 'prima facie unconstitutional' and that these could not be justified under any legal provision. A CBI enquiry was ordered. As reports arose of relief workers not being allowed to enter

⁸¹Dayabati Roy, 'Nandigram: Victory of the Subaltern' in G Roy (ed.) op.cit. p.79.

⁸²*Report of the People's Tribunal on Nandigram*, op. cit., p. 21.

⁸³'Nandigram project split into two, will find new home in Haldia', 05.04.2007. <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/OUYCs43F4c1raSGuNJ7TWM/Nandigram-project-split-into-two-will-find-new-home-in-hald.html>.

⁸⁴Bitanu Chattopadhyay, '*Nandigram: Asholejaghotchilo*', (Kolkata, Patrabharati, 2023) p.134.

⁸⁵*Report of People's Tribunal on Nandigram*, op cit. p.24.

Nandigram, the CHC ordered that teams carrying out relief work could not be stopped from entering Nandigram.⁸⁶

The Government started acquiring land in Haldia after the incidents at Nandigram in Haldia. The aim was to acquire '359.24 acres....in seven phases'. The compensation package was fixed at 'Rs 11 lakh plus a solatium to land loser families' however the land acquisition notices did not mention the purpose for which land would be acquired by the State. The Additional District Magistrate Sreekumar Tarafdar is reported to have said that after acquisition, the HDA would decide on the purpose to which the acquired land would be put to use. However, Nirupam Sen denied that the West Bengal Industrial Infrastructure Development Act, 1974 was used to acquire land by issuing a 15 days' notice under Section 27(2). Compensation had been paid to 100 families in two *mouzas* and they were asked to collect their cheques by 8th August.⁸⁷

Response of Opposition Parties

In the beginning, the Indian National Congress and the SUCI had supported the protestors when they gheraoed the Panchayat office in January and a 12 hour *bandh* was called that was supported by the TMC.⁸⁸ Allegedly the CPI (M) party office was set ablaze. It was at this juncture on 6th January that the *Bhumi Uchched Protirodh Committee (BUPC)* was formed. The BUPC at the outset consisted of non-political groups but joined the TMC later on due to a congruence in aims. The methods used were calling general meetings at street corners and burning effigies of the CM and CMD of HAD. The BUPC would 'not remain silent' if the 'government and police' used 'violence'. The protests continued unabated and it was at this time that at least six persons were killed as armed men who were allegedly backed by local CPIM cadres hurled bombs at them.⁸⁹ On 10th January, Mamata Banerjee demanded that the Land Acquisition Act should be scrapped rather than the shifting the chemical to Haldia.⁹⁰ No opposition party submitted the names of their representatives to an All-Party Peace Committee meeting called by the Sub Divisional Officer of Nandigram.⁹¹ The TMC MLA Subhendu Adhikari denied that the Opposition parties had spread rumours and that land

⁸⁶For details see judgment of the Calcutta High Court in Association for Protection of Democratic Rights Vs State of West Bengal and Ors, <https://indiakanon.org/doc/1186017>.

⁸⁷Saugata Roy and Sukanta Goswami, 'Bengal acquiring land, quietly', *Times of India*, 05.08.2007, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/bengal-acquiring-land-quietly/articleshow/2256139.cms>.

⁸⁸Report of People's Tribunal on Nandigram, op. cit. p. 16.

⁸⁹Ibid p. 17.

⁹⁰'Stop acquisition of land everywhere' News18.com, 17.3.2007 <https://www.news18.com/news/india/stop-acquisition-of-land-everywhere-261059.html>.

⁹¹Report of People's Tribunal on Nandigram, op. cit. p.17.

acquisition notice was not served. Adhikari said that ‘...acquisition lists are hung up at the....Kalicharan Gram Panchayat...It was a spontaneous reaction’.⁹² At a meeting called by the District Magistrate, all parties decided to ensure peace as school examinations had started. After the firing, we do not find evidence of any representative of any party present at the hospital except Siddiqullah Chowdhury.⁹³

Mamata Banerjee arrived the next day but she was stopped by the CPI (M) cadres and the police. The police action, aided by the cadres, led to the death of 14 villagers among whom were women and children. Incidents of rape were also reported. Economist Shankar Acharya said that this was not a good way of creating jobs and that it would be better to do away with Labour Laws.

A large number of persons left the villages following the events of 14th March. The members belonging to the CPI (ML) entered the scene in mid-march 2007 and the leader Telegu Deepak stayed in the area for about six months.⁹⁴

On 5th June, an all-party meet was called but it did not lead to any fruitful result. The BUPC attended the meeting for the first time as it was boycotting calls for all party meets since the March 14 firing. The meeting was convened by the DM East Midnapore. A news report states that all parties had decided that the work for restoring roads would be taken up but the time would be decided by the BDO in consultation with the parties.⁹⁵

Throughout 2007 and well into 2008 there were a series of events which involved violence.

Confrontation in November

The Dainik Statesman reported on 2nd November that there were reports of firing at Nandigram. It was at this time that the local MP Lakshman Seth gave a speech at Heria saying that the chemical hub would be built after the agitations subsided. The Governor published a statement that the reason for the trouble at Nandigram was that the culprits of violence went unpunished and compensation was not granted to the victims of the firing. The CPI (M) was trying to portray the TMC as the perpetrator of the violence by showing that people were rendered homeless at Khejuri also.

⁹²Saugata Roy and Sukanta Goswami, ‘Bengal acquiring land, quietly’ op. cit.

⁹³Mahua Santra, *Assignment Nandigram*, (Kolkata: La Strada, 2024), p.57.

⁹⁴Bitanu Chakraborty, ‘Nandigram: Ashole ja ghotchilo’, (Kolkata: Patrabharati, 2016) pp.162-94.

⁹⁵Press Trust of India, ‘All party meet held in Nandigram’. <https://m.www.rediff.com/news/2007/jun/05nandi.htm>.

On 6th November, at Dumurjola, CM Bhattacharya announced that the terrorist activities carried out by the TMC at Nandigram would not be tolerated for long.⁹⁶ Economist Abhirup Sarkar also attests to the view that this was a political stance though activities of both sides had involved violence. One reason for the ‘peasant uprising’ was that the landless labourers got nothing from the compensation package.⁹⁷ Shankar Acharya said that this was not a good way of creating jobs and that it would be better to do away with Labour Laws.

On 7th November as the local CPI (M) cadres tried to enter the villages, the villagers abandoned the locality. Home Secretary, Prasad Ranjan Roy, is reported to have said that the situation was tense and that the firing started from the CPI (M) stronghold of Khejuri.⁹⁸ Both sides were involved in firing and the CPI (M) was trying to capture villages through supporters informally referred to as ‘*Harmad Bahini*’ (mercenaries patronised by CPI (M)). Initially it was decided that the police would not enter Nandigram as the Maoist presence had been exterminated by local CPI (M) cadres. On 9th November the Home Secretary announced that the police would enter Nandigram.⁹⁹

Medha Patkar was stopped from going to Nandigram that day.¹⁰⁰ Noted film personalities like Aparna Sen boycotted the Film festival in protest. On 10th November, the Governor sent a report on Nandigram to the President and the Home Minister¹⁰¹ on the basis of which additional CRPF companies were sent by the Union Home Ministry. On 11th November, a bike rally of the ‘*harmad bahini*’ carried out an attack on a protest demonstration.¹⁰² The next day Mamata Banerjee was stopped from visiting the Tamluk Hospital and reporters from media houses like Anandabazar Patrika and Bartaman were also stopped.¹⁰³ She issued a statement that the ruling UPA Government did not deal with Nandigram seriously as the nuclear deal and support to the coalition government was involved.¹⁰⁴ Demonstrations were carried out in front of Central Forces. The call by the CPIM cadres to villagers to return to their homes was not heard. On 14th November Calcutta High Court ruled that the media could

⁹⁶Bitanu Chakraborty, ‘*Nandigram: AsholejaGhotechilo*’, op. cit. p. 262.

⁹⁷Randeep Ramesh, ‘Six Protestors die in Indian Land Clashes’, The Guardian, 15.3.2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2007/mar/15/india.internationalnews>.

⁹⁸MahuaSantra, Assignment Nandigram, op.cit. pp.80-2.

⁹⁹Anup Banerjee, ‘*Unnonoyon Singur Nandigram Tatyā, Tothyo o Dalil Sankolan*’ (Kolkata: Durbar Kalam, 2008) p.295.

¹⁰⁰Rakeeb Hossain and SujitNath, ‘MedhaPatkar assaulted in Nandigram’, Hindustan Times, 9.11.2007, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/kolkata/medha-patkar-assaulted-in-nandigram/story-sRrSOwLenwmHOA6lvN1LHP.html>.

¹⁰¹Anup Banerjee, op.cit, p.74.

¹⁰²Ibid.p.75

¹⁰³Bitanu Chakraborty, ‘*Nandigram: AsholejaGhotechilo*’, op. cit. page 296.

¹⁰⁴Anup Banerjee, ‘*UnnonoyonSingurNandigramTatyā, Tothyo o DalilSankolan*’ op.cit. p. 75.

not be obstructed from entering into Nandigram. The CM made a statement at Writer's Building on 14th November that the protestors 'had been paid back in their own coin'.¹⁰⁵ The supporters of the CPI (M) like artists, writers and intellectuals carried out a march against recent events on 16th November. The CRP camp was removed from Nandigram on 20th November and as a result of '*Operation Surjoday*', about '10000 houses were destroyed' and '38 persons' were missing. Tapan and Shukur who were widely believed to have been involved in the violence were not arrested as per CBI reports. On 25th November, the media was not allowed to enter Nandigram again on 5th December, Mamata Banerjee carried out a protest march at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi. According to CBI reports, a team of 4 CPI (M) leaders had led the Operation from Khejuri.

Civil Society Groups

The incidents at Nandigram are marked by the involvement of several civil society groups who visited the site to ascertain facts. The People's Tribunal was one of the first groups to visit Nandigram and brought out a Report in August which has been quoted above.

An Independent Citizen's Team from Kolkata visited Nandigram in the aftermath of the November violence. The Team after interactions with local persons at Nandigram Hospital and the villages of Sonachuria, Garchakraberia and Daudpur, came up with certain preliminary findings in an Interim Report. First the report alluded to the role of CPI (M) cadres in bringing in a 'reign of terror' where peaceful protesters were fired upon and villages torched. Second, the report speaks of the fear among villagers who tried to return to their villages but had to come to the Relief Camp because they were threatened by CPI (M) cadres. The Report mentions rampant incidents of sexual violence against women 'ranging from rape and forcing rods into women's vaginas, to rampant sexual harassment, as well as abduction of girls...'. Whenever the CRPF went off vigil, the threats of CPI (M) cadres returned again. Most of the villagers, the Report mentions, were unhappy with the 'partisan role' played by the police authorities who seemed to ignore the atrocities committed by the CPI (M) cadres.¹⁰⁶

A Citizen's Team comprising Medha Patkar, Anuradha Talwar, Debjit Dutt, Swapna Tripathi, Bijoya Chanda, Atmaram Sarogi, Chhabi Roy, Chandan Pal, Amita Bag, Gautam Bandyopadhyay, Pusparaj, Biswajit, Swapna and Kalyan Sengupta among others visited

¹⁰⁵ Ibid p.76.

¹⁰⁶ 'Nandigram: Peasants' Demands for Democratic Rights and Political Choice', An Independent Citizens' Report, Kolkata, 8th March, 2008, pp.16-32.

Nandigram and came to the conclusion that the attempt to capture villages was ‘planned like a war campaign, with villages after village being invaded and the strong holds left for the last, human shields were used to subdue the most rebellious areas’ and the ‘media, opposition leaders and civil society’ were not allowed to enter the locality. After a village was captured, ‘looting, beating and intimidation has followed along with indoctrination and forced marches’. Even Chakraborty speaks of this. The team opines that since the BUPC was not strictly a partisan organisation, this was not a fight between the TMC and the CPI (M) or between the Maoists professing ultra-Left ideology and the LFG. Rather the local party machinery othered the opposition as law breakers against whom use of force could be justified.¹⁰⁷

Maitree, an organisation campaigning for women’s rights, carried out a mass campaign for collection of signatures and some members took part in a *dharna mancha* in Kolkata. In a leaflet printed for circulation, the violence perpetrated by the LFG to ‘re-establish their domination in the area since mid-October, with the explicit support of Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, Chief Minister, who has openly justified their actions’ was criticised. ‘Thousands of women, men and children’ had left their homes and people were afraid of returning to their homes. The conditions of relief camps were ‘abysmal’ and ‘rations were meagre’. Since children were also put up in the camp, they were being deprived of their right to education.¹⁰⁸

On 14th November a protest rally was organised at College Square in Kolkata that was attended by intellectuals from across India like Medha Patkar, Subhaprasanna, Mahasweta Devi, Koushik Bose, Rupam Islam among others. What stood out in this rally was that it was not organised under the aegis of any political party and that it witnessed huge crowds. A perusal of the slogans shows that the main demands harped on the fact that the LFG had strayed away from the principles of Communism as murder as a political weapon as shown in Operation Sunrise could not be justified. The procession walked till the Metro Channel where eminent personalities gave speeches.¹⁰⁹ The posters brought out caricatures comparing Buddhadeb Bhattacharya to Narendra Modi, the then Chief Minister of Gujarat. Other posters criticised the decision of the LFG to side with the capitalists thereby throttling political democracy and freedom. Nandigram was depicted as a model of peasant resistance against

¹⁰⁷ ‘Report on Nandigram Events: A Citizen’s Report’, Kolkata, November 2007, pp.19-20.

¹⁰⁸ Leaflet printed for circulation by *Maitree*, Women’s Rights Network, 7th December, 2007.

¹⁰⁹ Shuvaprasanna, *My Life with Painting*, op.cit, p.95.

the forces of the LFG that had sided unabashedly with capital. The metaphor of development came to be identified with violence.¹¹⁰

In Nandigram only a notice was served under the Land Acquisition Manual. On 18th November 2007, the People's Democracy reported that the proposed chemical hub would not be built in Nandigram. Rather a sparsely populated area in Nayachar near the Haldia coast would be selected for the site.

Stance of the Government

The People's Democracy wrote that the State Government had not issued any notice for land acquisition at Nandigram and the 'confusion' was created due to some information by the HDA. It required a 'proper examination' by the State Government. Any acquisition of land needed to be carried out in a 'transparent manner and in consultations with those who would be affected'. The TMC was 'terrorising villagers through the spread of murderous clashes'. Parties with ideologies as disparate as TMC, BJP, Jamaat, INC and ultra left groups had entered the protests. These parties who were 'expressing their so called concern for the farmers are the very same ones who champion and adopt policies of economic liberalisation that apart from everything else is responsible for the acute agrarian distress that our country is facing'.¹¹¹

Benoy Koner in an essay titled '*Krishokdorodider mora kanna*' writes that for industrialisation, land was absolutely necessary. The question arose as to what would happen to the peasant if land was taken away from him. Here Koner casts the question quite negatively against rural life. He says that only 22% of India's national Income came from agriculture even though 65% of the population was engaged in it. There was a marked difference in the income of those who stayed in villages *vis a vis* those who stayed in cities. Even those who worked in factories presently were a couple of generations ago employed in agriculture. Due to implementation of ceiling laws the large sized farms had not developed in West Bengal and farming was increasingly unprofitable.¹¹²

The stance of the Chief Minister was that once the project at Nandigram was scrapped; there remained no need for the BUPC or any other kind of opposition. The point was that the opposition parties were trying to gain political mileage out of the issue which was not correct.

¹¹⁰ 'Paid back in the same coin: A Montage of posters of the historic rally on the 14th November', <https://sanhati.com/literature/452>.

¹¹¹ 'Nandigram: Issues and Facts'. *People's Democracy*, Vol.XXXI, No.01, January 14, 2007, Editorial.

¹¹² Benoy Koner, *Nirbachito Rajnoitik Probondho: Smriti o Shoron*. (Kolkata: National Book Agency, 2011).

In West Bengal, the fallow land was only 1% of the total land area and so land needed to be acquired. But Singur and Nandigram were mistakes.¹¹³

In April after the Government withdrew plans for the SEZ but compensation was not announced for persons injured, killed or had been victims of sexual harassment. The Calcutta High Court had ordered a CBI enquiry into the March 14 firing but the decision was challenged in the Supreme Court by the State Government thus effectively stalling the prosecution of persons allegedly involved in the incidents.

Gradually the police were withdrawn from camps and that at the CPI (M) stronghold in Khejuri, the '*harmad bahini*' was being marshalled.

On November 1, 2007, Lakshman Seth at the 4th Conference of the CPI (M) Nandakumar Zonal Committee said that 'We have been pushed to the wall. The only option now is to kill or get killed. We have to fight till the last drop of blood in our bodies'. On 4th November Brinda Karat who was a Politburo member in Kolkata said that the opposition needed a dose of '*dumdum dawai*'. The phrase was a reference to the heyday of the Food Movement where the hoarders of food grains and black marketers were physically attacked in public by communist party members. The metaphor of struggle was not divorced from the priorities of industrialisation.¹¹⁴

The Polit Bureau of the CPI (M) opined that 'Maoist violence' in Nandigram under the guide of the BUPC needed to be checked in Nandigram if necessary with Central Forces.¹¹⁵

Prakash Karat in an article in the People's Democracy opined that land would 'have to be acquired for the growing needs of infrastructure development, industry, planned urbanisation and other sectors' and that 'wasteland and non-arable land would obviously be the main source of such usage'. In cases where agricultural land would also have to be acquired for industries requiring some amount of continuity, 'arable land that was monocrop would be provided rather than fertile multi crop land'. Those who criticised acquisition of land for purposes of industrialisation were 'either uninformed' or had the 'political motive of casting the LFG in a bad light'. Land had been acquired in West Bengal in Rajarhat, Howrah, Siliguri

¹¹³ 'Singur, Nandigram were our biggest mistakes: Buddhadeb', NDTV, 18.4.2011, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/singur-nandigram-were-our-biggest-mistakes-buddhadeb-453328/amp/1>.

¹¹⁴ Special Correspondent, 'Dr Karat prescribes dose for Didi- Brinda wants to give Nandigram rivals taste of Dum Dum Dawai', The Telegraph, 04.11.2007, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/dr-karat-prescribes-dose-for-didi-brinda-wants-to-give-nandigram-rivals-taste-of-dum-dum-dawai/cid/669906>.

¹¹⁵ 'Nandigram: Check Maoist Violence', *People's Democracy*, Vol. XXXI, No.45, November 11, 2007, https://archives.peoplesdemocracy.in/2007/1111/11112007_pb%20on%20nandigram.html.

and other projects for urban housing projects. The process followed in these cases was ‘based on certain laws and subject to public scrutiny’. Karat’s tone here is in support of the initiatives shown by Bhattacharya towards industrialisation of West Bengal but his tone sounds gingerly especially when it comes to the nature of land to be acquired and the issue of ‘public scrutiny’.¹¹⁶

Prakash Karat known for an orthodox ideological stance succeeded Harkishen Singh Surjit as the All India Secretary of the CPI (M) in 2005, said that there was no serious ideological confrontation between the party’s central headquarters and the stance followed by Bhattacharya in West Bengal. In fact, Karat supported Bhattacharya on the issue of conversion of agricultural land for industrial and other non-agricultural practises.

Haripur Nuclear Plant

In the late 1980s, Chief Minister Jyoti Basu had proposed that a nuclear plant be set up in West Bengal and that Haripur in Midnapore was a potential site. The proposal was revived and it was decided to set up a Nuclear Power Plant in Jharkhali in the Sundarbans area in South 24 Parganas district and the ruling LFG extended its support for the project as generation of power would contribute to industrialisation in 2000. The plan did not materialise in the face of protests by the local wing of the CPIM and the involvement of local population. They were joined by environmental activists who were ‘at the forefront’ of the ‘science movement’¹¹⁷. The mode of spreading the message was by circulating pamphlets among the local villagers to highlight the fact that the radiation emitted from the nuclear plant would adversely affect the health of the villagers.¹¹⁸ The technocrats published articles in the Anandabazar Patrika and reminded people of accidents concerning nuclear plants as in Chernobyl. Annu Jalais opines that while efforts were underway for environmental conservation in the region, the Government seemed to prioritise a new developmental paradigm.¹¹⁹ In addition to the local wings of the CPI (M), the Revolutionary Socialist Party withdrew support for the project. In the face of these protests the project was shelved. By the mid-2000s, the Haripur region in Purba Midnapore district was selected as the site for a nuclear project to be built with Russian help on the Water-Water Energetic Reactor light water Reactor design and six reactors of capacity 1000MW each would be built. This was

¹¹⁶Bhupinder Brar and Pampa Mukherjee (ed.), op.cit, pp.181-84.

¹¹⁷Varigonda Kesava Chandra, *Society, Resistance and Civil Nuclear Policy in India: Nuclearising the State*, (New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2021), (ebook) p250.

¹¹⁸Varigonda Kesava Chandra, ibid. p251.

¹¹⁹Annu Jalais, ‘The Sundarbans: Whose World Heritage Site?’ *Conservation and Society*, Vol. 5(2), pp. 335-42.

also in tune with the Central Government's policy of demarcating Coastal Management Zones.¹²⁰

Genesis of the Opposition

In the months of July and August a team comprised of Government officials of the Site Selection Panel of the Nuclear Power Corporation of India went to visit the site to test the soil and to check the feasibility of developmental projects in the area. As no Governmental notification or spokesperson had given any reason as to why the team had visited the area, the villagers questioned the team who gave the reply that developmental projects were in the pipeline.¹²¹ On 18th August, 2006 we find a news report in the Anandabazar Patrika that a nuclear plant was proposed at Haripur village in Block number 1 of the Mazilapur area in Kanthi in East Midnapore district. The population in the concerned area where acquisition would be carried out consisted of small farmers and fishermen. The news report acted as an impetus which propelled the villagers to contact the local branch of the National Fishworker's Forum (NFF) named as the *Dakshin Banga Matsyajeebi Samiti* (DBMS).¹²² Chandra through his ethnographic research also attests to the fact that the local population consisting mostly of fishermen was active in participating in protests against activities like 'intensive fishing, coastal degradation and other aspects of large scale commercialisation or industrialisation' along the coastline even in the mid-1990s under the slogan 'Save Water, Save the coast, Save the fishermen!'.¹²³ After the adoption of the Coastal Management Zone notification by the Central Government, the protests had intensified all over the country.

The DBMS under Harekrishna Debnath was involved in organising protests against commercial projects in the region since the 1990s that could affect the livelihood and environment of the region. Debnath in an official statement opined that the project at Haripur would lead to the eviction of 'at least 50000 fishermen' and that and 'destroy' lives that would not be rehabilitated in their traditional ways of life. The first attempts at mobilisation on the issue took place with two hundred persons conducting a public rally in a ten kilometre stretch between Contai and Junput on 18th September, 2006.¹²⁴ Over the next few days, the NFF and the DBMS involved themselves in spreading information on the dangers of a

¹²⁰VarigondaKesavaChandra, op. cit. p.253.

¹²¹Ashish Mukhopadhyay, 'Haripur ebong Paramanu Bidyut Kendra' in Mahul Mukhopadhyay, Shalti Research Group (ed.) op. cit. p 138.

¹²²VarigondaKesavaChandra, op.cit. p.256.

¹²³Ibid. p.257

¹²⁴, Ibid. p.258.

nuclear plant to the local villagers as many persons remained optimistic that the project would bring electricity to the area not yet connected to a grid. In the month of October, a meeting was held against the CMZ notifications under the aegis of the NFF. On 11th October, the local villagers who were getting organised sent a deputation to the Assistant Director of Marine Fisheries at Contaito show their opposition to the nuclear project. The local people blockaded the Junput-Digha Highway the next day to show their protest. The NFF carried out the task of increasing the awareness of local people on the adverse effects of the nuclear plant by involving Kolkata based scientists. The scientists gave lectures in front of locally assembled persons. Among the points stressed in these explanations were the declining catch of fish, the release of poisonous nuclear waste, the possibility of accidents and the displacement caused by land acquisition for the project. Kolkata based scientist Sujoy Chakraborti, went to the villages to spread information to the villagers on the nuclear project.¹²⁵

Harekrishna Debnath said that traditional fishermen in India were passing through a crisis of livelihood and that with hotels being built near the coast, the local economy would suffer.¹²⁶ Thus, the tropes of the ‘science movement’ that was operational since the 1980s in West Bengal was used to contextualise the movement in the local context and thereby pave the way for mass scale involvement of the local population.¹²⁷

Confrontation with the State

Shortly afterwards as the news of the visit of the officials of the Nuclear Power Corporation of India officials was published in English newspapers, three members namely Sandeep Sinha, Amit De and Chittaranjan Pal of the *Paschimbanda Khetmajur Samiti* visited the area on 15th November to raise consciousness around the issue and mobilise the local people against the project.¹²⁸ On 16th November it was decided to obstruct the specialists if they came for work on the site and carry on with the protests. The protestors carried out rallies in the area with microphones to raise awareness against the protest. Upon getting news that officials

¹²⁵ Ibid. 266.

¹²⁶ Bharat Dogra, ‘Plight of Coastal Fisherfolk’, *Frontier*, Vol.41, No.16, Nov.4-10, 2007, <https://frontierweekly.com/archive/vol-number/arch-issues-vol-40.html>.

¹²⁷ Sabyasachi Chatterjee ‘The role of the Science Communications in Generating Environmental Communications in Generating Environmental Consciousness: A Case Study of West Bengal, India’ in Sudip Dutta, Saikat Kumar Basu and Amit Krishna De (ed.) ‘*Environmental Concerns and Perspectives*’ (New Delhi, APH Publishing, 2007) pp. 238-56. (The ‘science movement’ was a way of popularising the latest scientific innovations among the common people through discussions and debates since the 1960s in West Bengal. The environmental movements were an offshoot of this ‘science movement’).

¹²⁸ Cited in Mahul Mukhopadhyay (ed.) op. cit. p.139.

were at Digha and planning to come to Haripur, loudspeakers gave the announcement asking people to form a gathering near the Junput- Contai Highway.¹²⁹ On 17th November a team comprised of the Chairman of NPCIL S K Jain and 12 officials were being escorted by police vehicles. The local crowd consisting mostly of women and even children obstructed the convoy with conches being blown and plates being banged to show dissent.¹³⁰ This shows that the protests were organised in a non-violent manner. The team was unable to proceed and returned at 5 pm in the evening only to be greeted with more aggressive protests.

Involvement of Opposition Parties

The local MLA belonging to the Trinamool Congress Suwendu Adhikari arrived at Haripur with a local Panchayat member Benu Pyayra of the Socialist Party. Alongside night vigils the protests gathered more steam the next day when a meeting was held between the Pradhan of the Gram Panchayat Tapas Jana, the Sabhapati of the Gram Panchayat Ratan Jana, MLA Adhikari, Atanu Giri, Prabhuram Das of the CPI (M), Benu Pyayra and others whereby it was decided that the delegation must be allowed as it involved the State's honour.¹³¹ The next day the delegation was unable to visit the locality despite heavy police presence including the SP. Adhikari, whose father Sisir Adhikari had been the local MLA since 1991, was categorical in saying that he was on the side of the protestors.¹³² The Adhikari family was influential in the region. In the middle of protests, it was decided that without informing the MLA or Panchayat Pradhan no outsider would be allowed in the locality. It was further decided to dig up roads so that cars could not enter. On 20th November, a mass convention witnessed huge crowds where environmentalist Pradeep Dutta, Swapan Ganguly of the *Paschimbanga Khetmajur Samiti*, Harekrishna Debnath of *National Fishworkers Forum*, MLA Adhikari, members of the SKJRC and local SUCI activists placed their opinions.¹³³ A 'Jivan Jeebika Bachao Committee' (Committee to save lives and livelihood) was formed with 200 villagers of 20 villages of Bamunia and Majilapur. On demands of local fishermen, the name was changed to '*Paramanuchulli birodhi o bhitmati bachao committee*'. (Committee to save home land against nuclear plant) The committee was tasked with popularising the anti-nuclear movement in Haripur as well as throughout the country. About 4000 local fishermen feared eviction if the project was to go ahead. It was decided to mobilise local groups of

¹²⁹Varigonda Kesava Chandra, op. cit. p. 266.

¹³⁰Cited in Mahul Mukhopadhyay (ed.) op.cit.p. 139.

¹³¹Ibid p.140.

¹³²Varigonda Kesava Chandra, op. cit. p 275.

¹³³Cited in Mahul Mukhopadhyay (ed.) op. cit.p. 140.

villagers who would sound conch shells whenever a Government car attempted to enter the area. Over the coming days, the SUCI organised protest walks with the slogans that the attempted nuclear plant would cater to the needs of American and European capitalists and not generate power.¹³⁴The ‘*Matsyajibi Unnoyan Samiti*’, (Fishermen Development Forum)the Anti-Nuclear Forum and the NGO Disha called on a gathering at the Town Hall at Kathi before which a large crowd circled the town. Suvendu Adhikari raised the demand on 22nd November that a large number of persons would lose their land, occupation and homes if the Nuclear Power Plant was to be built.¹³⁵An all Party delegation should be formed to explore an alternative site for the nuclear plant.

However, the DBMS was keen that the movement be organised in an apolitical manner as if it was organised completely under the TMC, then political imperatives could force compromises with the original aims, The TMC workers decided that they would join the protests without taking party flags with them. The TMC would also organise protests on its own.¹³⁶The preferred mode of the activists was organising long marches and the area increased over the days to include Junput, Aladarput and Baghuran Jalpai also. The Youth Congress also joined the protests and a protest meeting was organised at in Kathi. The movement took an interesting turn when Fisheries Minister Kiranmoy Nanda asked the local members of the Socialist Party to disassociate themselves from the movement. The local members formed the ‘*Paribesh suraksha parishad*’.(Committee to Save Environment)Protests were organised in Kolkata by the National Fish Workers Forum where local person from Haripur namely Ratna Majhi, Lakshmi Panda, Prabhuram Dalal and Emanul Hossein gave speeches. On 3rd December the TMC organised cycle yatras wherein the participation of a thousand cycles were recorded.¹³⁷At a Sabha in Majilapur, it was decided that a convention would be organised at Kathi Town hall to protect ‘Ma and Mati’.¹³⁸On 8th December around 15000 farmers, agricultural labourers, fishermen, children, old persons, women joined the protests. The Zilla Sabhapati of the Congress Sailaja Das opined that the State Government had gone ahead with the acquisition by showing the Central Government a 1940 map when the nature of settlements and habitations were different from the present scenario. A non-political convention was also held. A crowd of around 200 persons most of whom were women went around different villages under the Bamunia Gram

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid p.141.

¹³⁶ Varigonda Kesava Chandra, op. cit.p. 275.

¹³⁷ Cited in Mahul Mukhopadhyay p. 142

¹³⁸ Ibid

Panchayat on 24th December. A deputation from among the protestors went to visit the District Magistrate on 26th December. The protestors were supported by Mahashweta Devi who said that the struggles at Haripur were no different from the struggles at Singur or Nandigram and a mass struggle on the lines of the Quit India Resolution needed to be built. On 1st January a rally of a 'few thousand' persons were taken out where women and children joined spontaneously. Shishir Adhikari, Suvendu Adhikari, Amit Manna, Chiranranjan Pal and others joined the rally where a battle cry was given by a freedom fighter Balailal Das Mahapatra's wife Malayrani Das Mahapatra. At the Kanthi Book Fair, a verbal squabble broke out between the local TMC supporters and Dr Pranabesh Mitra when he tried to defend the project at a programme on the relevance of the Atomic Center. Mass conventions continued at the site. These protests were carried out by using candlelight marches through the villages, large scale protest rallies and workshops.

A mass convention was held at the Contai Science Centre on 6th January.¹³⁹ At Junput a demonstration was organised on 24th January where Suvendu Adhikary, Debnath and Thomas Kocherry gave speeches to resist the building up of the nuclear plant.¹⁴⁰

Government Response

On 19th November, Chairman Jain of the NPCIL met Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya at Writers Building and commented on the 'good potential' that Haripur had for 'setting up a nuclear plant'. Bhattacharya opined that local people had to be 'convinced' about the 'need for the plant and that there was nothing to fear' as it was 'urgently' needed. A study would ascertain whether the proposed plant would disturb marine life and whether Haldia Port could handle the required machinery. This would be followed by land acquisition. A report would be sent to the Atomic Energy Commission and the PMO would take the final decision after consulting the State Government.¹⁴¹

Civil Society Involvement

The science movement in West Bengal was confined to urban intellectuals trying to spread their ideas in the villages. However, at Haripur, the movement gathered much popularity among the local population as well courtesy the frequent visit of anti-nuclear activists based in Kolkata. Mahasweta Devi came out in support of the protestors at Haripur and also urged

¹³⁹ Cited in Mahul Mukhopadhyay, (ed.) op. cit. p. 143.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid

¹⁴¹ Staff Reporter, The Telegraph, 19.11.2006, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/bengal-site-bags-first-nuclear-land-acquisition-challenges-lies-ahead/cid/755097>.

the people of West Bengal to support the protestors. Father Charles Dougherty also voiced his opinion in support of the villagers at Haripur by visiting the spot. Civil society groups in Kolkata and throughout the country came out in support of the local people.

After the Indo-USA Civil Nuclear Agreement in 2008, we find doubts within the CPIM on the issue. The CPIM walked out of the UPA coalition at the Centre after the signing of the alleged nuclear deal on grounds of American involvement and there were doubts on whether land acquisition was feasible. But the issue was framed on ideological grounds of opposing imperialism and not on irregularities in the process of land acquisition.

In 2010 we find reference to the Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission Srikumar Banerjee speaking at the 60th Foundation Day of the Saha Institute of Nuclear Physics in Kolkata where he mentioned that the ‘baseline study’ to track the living standards of the local population over a 10-30km radius would get start after the Environmental Impact Assessment was complete by the end of the year. He had met CM Bhattacharya earlier in the day.¹⁴² This would start the process of land acquisition and finally the nuclear plant of 6000 – 10000 MW capacity would be built. He claimed to have the support of the studies carried out by eight universities that said that the tolerance of sea water temperature was adjusted so that marine life was not affected. Nuclear power was cleaner than thermal power and only the temperature of the water should not be more than 7.5 degrees above the sea water temperature. The AEC proposed to acquire contiguous land of 2.5km in diameter and 1.25km in radius with a proposed investment of around Rs. 10000 crores. On January 27, 2011, Jain stated that the NPCIL had appointed agencies to finalise relief and rehabilitation plans in consultation with Gram Panchayats.¹⁴³ Rather than payment of ‘one time money’, the plant would ‘cycle back’ to the particular area ‘some percentage of the profit’ after the plant started operating. On March 2, 2011, Jain stated that the process of environmental clearance would be over by 2012 and that after acquisition of land, the project would start within the period of the 12th Five Year Plan by 2014. Minister of State in the PMO V Narayanasamy said in the Lok Sabha that no plan had been made to shift the nuclear plant from Haripur. CM Bhattacharya in 2010 wanted a confirmation from the Central Government regarding its stand on the nuclear plant at Haripur.

¹⁴²Express News Service, The Indian Express, 17.7.2010, <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/kolkata/atomic-energy-panel-head-upbeat-on-haripur-nplant/lite/>.

¹⁴³ET Bureau, 17.7.2010. <https://m.economictimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/buddha-wants-firm-stand-from-centre-on-haripur-nuke-power-venture-/articleshow/6178781.cms>.

Before the 2011 Vidhan Sabha elections, the LFG had reportedly asked the NPCIL to go slow on the process of land acquisition as the population density was high.¹⁴⁴

The events at Haripur can be read as a part of series of trends that reveal the growing ambivalence between the ideological posturing of the CPI (M) and the actual practise of government under the LFG. The CPI (M) was a part of the United Progressive Alliance led coalition government along with other Left parties like the Communist Party of India, Revolutionary Socialist Party and the All India Forward Bloc. The Nuclear Deal signed by the UPA with the USA was opposed by the CPI (M) on grounds that the deal was a part of India's growing cooperation with the USA and that if the deal were actually carried forward it would compromise 'India's independent foreign policy and its sovereign rights for developing a self-reliant nuclear programme'.¹⁴⁵ So the 'growing military cooperation with the USA would harm India's security interests'.¹⁴⁶

Land Acquisition at Rajarhat

At Rajarhat, the process of land acquisition was not executed at one go like in Singur but rather through stealth over a span of sixteen years from 1995 to 2011.¹⁴⁷ Some scholars identify a process of 'primitive accumulation' here.¹⁴⁸

In 2009, WEBEL which was the government agency for developing the Information Technology industries and electronics signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Vedic Realty and Diamond Group, two companies that had established a joint venture, to acquire 600 acres of land for an IT SEZ in Rajarhat. Infosys and Wipro would be accommodated inside the acquired land. In August 2009 there were reports of violence regarding attacks on local villagers by a gang. The death of a boy was reported due to shooting injuries. Vedic Village a luxury resort was set on fire by local villagers who had been attacked. Police investigations revealed the connection of this gang with the joint venture set up to acquire

¹⁴⁴TNN, 7.10.2010, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/n-park-put-on-hold-with-polls-in-mind-/articleshow/6703507.cms>.

¹⁴⁵ Notes Exchanged in the UPA-Left Committee on India-US Civil Nuclear Cooperation, *Left Stand on the Nuclear Deal*, (New Delhi, Hari Singh Kang, 2008) p. 15.

¹⁴⁶Ibid p156.

¹⁴⁷ A Roy, 'Land Acquisition and Rural Transformation, A Case Study from West Bengal', *Chinese Sociological Dialogue*, 1(1), pp.32-47, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004908571004000406>.

¹⁴⁸I Dey, R Sammadar and S K De, *Beyond Kolkata: Rajarhat and the Dystopia of Urban Imagination*, (New Delhi: Routledge, 2013), pp.237-38.

land for the SEZ.¹⁴⁹ The owner of Vedic Resorts Rajkishore Modi was arrested and the State Government admitted that there had been ‘procedural irregularities’ in land dealings. This project was cancelled. Members of both the LFG and opposition parties maintained gangs and relied on violence to secure lucrative deals. Local persons were threatened and forced to sell their lands at prices set by the ‘land mafia’. When a landowner did not accept the demands made by the mafia, he would have to face consequences which commonly meant the dumping of waste materials that rendered land uncultivable. The development venture in rural areas was quick to attract the ‘non-traditional actors like realtors, speculators and local housing developers’ who viewed agricultural land as an item of consumption.¹⁵⁰ In this context, the price of land was viewed in terms of its utility.¹⁵¹ The resentment of villagers against these practises carried out for years found expression in the Vedic Resort incident.

In fact, after the Singur and Nandigram incidents, there was some kind of direction to the anti-incumbency sentiments as the LFG was aggressively pushing forth industrialisation coming away from the traditional rhetoric. The protests were never against industrialisation but against the methods adopted towards this end. The Governmental authorities did not prevent the use of coercive techniques in land based transactions which meant that even if the prices of land increased as they did in Rajarhat from Rs. 9 lakh to 9 million per acre, the affected persons could not reap full benefits of market forces in the absence of a rehabilitation policy.¹⁵² The compensation given by the LFG was inadequate. The LFG and the opposition blamed each other for supporting violence in Rajarhat.

Amit Bhaduri describes the nature of economic development in India after neo-liberalism using three points. First, the State has abdicated its role and left the process in the hands of large corporates. Second, the increasing openness of the Indian economy towards international finance. Third, the State exercises fiscal restraint to comply with the needs of the international finance market. The most visible face of this new process is land acquisition

¹⁴⁹ Partha Sarathi Banerjee ‘Orissa and West Bengal: The SEZ Imbroglio’ in Rob Jenkins, Loraine Kennedy, Partha Mukhopadhyay (ed.) *‘Power, Policy and Protest: The Politics of India’s Special Economic Zones’*, (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2014) p. 287.

¹⁵⁰ Animesh Roy, ‘Dispossession, Neoliberal Urbanism and Societal Transformation: Insight into Rajarhat New Township in West Bengal’ in Deepak Mishra and Pradeep Mishra (ed.) *Land and Livelihoods in Neoliberal India*, (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p.187.

¹⁵¹ For details see Sanjoy Chakravorty, *The Price of Land: Acquisition, Conflict and Consequence*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁵² Partha Sarathi Banerjee ‘Orissa and West Bengal: The SEZ Imbroglio’ in Rob Jenkins, Loraine Kennedy, Partha Mukhopadhyay (ed.) op. cit. p.287.

by the State for 'public purpose'. The forcible acquisition of land leads to the 'internal colonisation of the poor'.¹⁵³

The activities of the LFG were described as focussing on 'redistribution before growth'.¹⁵⁴ Operation Barga, in addition to fostering redistributive justice, was also an experiment in 'participatory democracy'.¹⁵⁵ But there was a marked difference with States like Punjab, the area under irrigation, quality of seeds and fertilisers did improve over the years as official data show. However, the LFG moved away from the focus on redistributive justice after the 1990s. The focus shifted towards increasing the productivity from agriculture.¹⁵⁶ In all the case studies described above, the landless section of the population was at the receiving end. We shall discuss this issue in some amount of depth.

The impact of the redistributive on the landless sections of the population has been studied by scholars. As NSSO data show, the problem of the number of persons in rural areas who are landless also rose in West Bengal during the period studied in this chapter. According to the NSSO, the number of households who owned land less than 0.02 acres of land can be considered as 'landless' but as per the data of 2002-03, rural households owning less than 0.4 hectares of land used more than 90% of the land as homestead. So, the percentage of rural households who owned less than 0.02 acres of land and effectively no land other than homestead land was 46.5% in 2003.¹⁵⁷ The number of 'marginal farmers' in the total population dependent on farming increased to 58.23% in 2003 from 27.28% in 1971-72 and from 30.33% in 1981-82.

The growing incidence of landlessness would not help in the development of capitalist relations in agriculture. In semi-feudal conditions of production, the method of surplus extraction was through land rent as per tenancy laws. A study of the tenancy situation revealed that tenancy cultivation had also reduced progressively over the years. In West Bengal the ratio of agricultural workers to cultivators stood at 1.30 in 2003.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵³ Amit Bhaduri, *The Face You Were Afraid to See: Essays on the Indian Economy*, (New Delhi: Penguin Books India Limited, 2009) p.37.

¹⁵⁴ Rakhahari Chatterjee, 'Politics of West Bengal: Mobilisation, Institutionalisation and Rule', *Calcutta Journal of Political Studies*, Vol.2, No.1, 1981, p.68.

¹⁵⁵ D Sengupta and D Ghosh, *West Bengal: State and People*, (Kolkata: Centre for Rural Resources, 2006), p.42.

¹⁵⁶ For details see Nilangshu Mukherjee (ed.), *Aajker Krishibhabna*, (Kolkata: National Book Agency, 2007).

¹⁵⁷ 'Household Ownership Holdings in India, 2003', National Sample Survey, Government of India, Report No. 591, 59th Round, January-December 2003.

¹⁵⁸ Amit Basole and Deepankar Basu, 'Relations of Production and Modes of Surplus Extraction in India: An Aggregate Study', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46(14), 41, 2011, pp.41-58.

At the 22nd State Conference of the CPI (M) in 2008, it was mentioned that 1111000 acres of land had been redistributed among 2914000 '*pattadars*' which meant a per capita ownership of 0.38 acres of land. In a situation where inputs had to be purchased by the '*pattadars*' themselves, this could lead to landlessness.¹⁵⁹

The West Bengal Human Development Report (2004) mentions that 13.7 lakh acres of land had been vested in the State under the LFG and 10.4 lakh acres of land had been redistributed. 41.3% of the rural population had benefitted from these programmes. The programme of '*barga*' recording did not carry the same significance which it did in the past. However, the Report referred to the 'rapid increase in landlessness' using NSS data.¹⁶⁰

The *Paschimbanga Rajya Krishak o Khetmajur Samiti* was formed in 2002 and the first State Conference was held in 2010. We take a look at the pamphlet that was printed for circulation among the representatives. The pamphlet mentions that none of the existing political formations could address the issues of the *khetmajur* properly. The benefits of the Congress sponsored Green Revolution had not made a difference to the lives of the *khetmajur* and the Left parties had also failed to protect them.

The new organisation had the following aims. The first aim was to improve the living standard of the *krishak samaj* (peasant community) within the framework of the democratic system and in a peaceful manner. Second, the organisation would continue the struggle to protect the gains that the *khetmajur* had acquired over the years. Third, the organization would if necessary move beyond formal legal channels to fight for the rights of the *khetmajur*. Fourth, the organisation would press for the development of the agricultural system. Fifth, a mere development of agriculture could not bring about changes in society. The development in other fields was related with the development in agriculture. The development of agriculture with development in other fields was not contradictory. Sixth, a unified movement needed to be built up to protect the gains made from earlier years and also to protect the interests of other sections of society.

The major demands made of the government were the following. All land vested in the Government had to be redistributed, work should be provided throughout the year to the '*khetmajur*', co-operatives be formed, seeds and fertilisers be provided at reasonable prices,

¹⁵⁹ Partha Sarathi, *Left politics in West Bengal*, (Kolkata: Purbalok Publications, 2016), p.125.

¹⁶⁰ *Paschimbango Manob Unnoyon Protibedon, 2004 (shonkhiptoshar)*, Department of Development and Planning, Government of West Bengal, 2004, pp.10-11.

increase the area under irrigation, improve road connectivity, improve cold storages and methods of transportation of agricultural produce.¹⁶¹

Partha Chatterjee studies this process through the concept of ‘primitive accumulation’.¹⁶²

Fissures within the LFG and the CPI (M)

It may be pointed out that the CPI (M) had modified its Party Programme in 2000 and the 20th State Congress of the CPI (M) endorsed industrialisation. The need was to build new industries. Private investment was needed and industries needed to be made more competitive.¹⁶³

This was a far cry from the policies adopted in 1978 by the LFG towards industrialisation where the aim was to tackle unemployment by building cottage industries and ‘lessening the stranglehold of the monopoly houses and multinationals on the economy of the State’.¹⁶⁴ Ritanjan Das points out through an analysis of the Party documents and unpublished Party Letters that those who supported industrialisation had come to dominate the Party and the LFG. Those opposing the drive were restricted in number and thus ‘largely ignored’. Since both the 2001 and the 2006 elections were fought based on the issue of industrialisation, ‘there was hardly any negotiation involving the district level members and downwards to clarify the need for these initiatives’ as a result of which ‘contrary views/disagreements were marginalised’.¹⁶⁵

Ashok Mitra was one of the most trenchant critiques of the LFG in this period.¹⁶⁶ In no uncertain terms he criticised the movements of the LFG to court private investment. He said that the ‘Left Front Government does not like nationalised industries’ and ‘hence there are promises to acquire land on behalf of the national, international capitalists’. The electoral mandate of 235 seats in 2006 was taken as a signal that ‘all of a sudden peasant were told to leave’ in an ‘arrogant’ manner. The Government maintained ‘for eleven months’ complete silence and inactivity’ and ‘the police was instructed to remain inactive’. West Bengal was lucky to have Gopal Krishna Gandhi as Governor.

¹⁶¹ Pamphlet printed for circulation, Paschim Banga Krishi o Khetmajur Samiti, First State Conference, 24th and 25th October, 2010, Lalbagh, Murshidabad.

¹⁶² Partha Chatterjee, ‘Land and the Political Management of Primitive Accumulation’ in Anthony P D’Costa and Achin Chakraborty (ed.) *The Land Question in India: State, Dispossession and Capitalist Transformation* (New Delhi: Oxford, 2017), Prelude.

¹⁶³ CPI (M) 20th State Congress, pp.77-8.

¹⁶⁴ Statement on Industrial Policy, 1978, Government of West Bengal, p.1.

¹⁶⁵ Ritanjan Das, op.cit., p.145.

¹⁶⁶ <https://mronline.org/2007/11/20/ashok-mitra-on-nandigram>, 11.7.2007.

Ashok Mitra pointed out that even in the 2006 elections; the LFG had lost in Howrah, 24 Parganas and Hooghly as there were talks of land acquisition.¹⁶⁷

Prabhat Patnaik located the ‘tragedies like Nandigram’ in the ‘operation of a neoliberal policy regime’ though efforts were made to locate these in the ‘Stalinist methods of the CPI (M)’. Not one incident had occurred before the neoliberal era. The reason lay in the ‘accumulation through encroachment’. Patnaik felt that the LFG lost the support of the ‘rural poor’ due to this policy of not opposing the neoliberal regimes.¹⁶⁸

Prabhat Patnaik locates the decline of the Left in the process of ‘empiricisation’ by which he refers mainly to ‘mundane and pedestrian’ politics which is bereft of the ideals of ‘transcending capitalism’. As the LFG distanced itself from the farmers and workers, it lost the balance it maintained between the electoral imperatives and that of the revolutionary agenda.¹⁶⁹ Dipankar Bhattacharya says that it was not during Singur or Nandigram but the LFG transformed itself from ‘*sangramerhatiyar*’ (instrument of struggle) to ‘*unnoyonerhatiyar*’ (instrument of Development) to ‘*utpironer hatiyar*’ (instrument of exploitation) over the years during the journey in Parliamentary politics.¹⁷⁰ Gohain says that the LFG moved away from serving the interests of basic classes and catered to the needs of those in power.¹⁷¹

We now look at some of the dissident voices that had built up within the ruling coalition against these measures. For this purpose, we shall look at inner-party documents that are meant for circulation among the Party members.

The 2008 Panchayat elections were an indication of what was to follow in the coming days. The Party *Chithi* analysing these elections identified certain reasons for the electoral defeat of the LFG. The first reason was that the ‘vested interest in villages’ that included a newly rich class who had benefitted from Left rule had put up candidates unitedly against the Left. A campaign aided by the media had been carried out over the past year against the Left. The Congress had tied up with the TMC and this ‘rightist’ force had joined hands with the SUCI to hide its true intentions. For the purpose of improving the standard of living of the peasant and flourishing of agriculture, it was necessary that the pressure of population be reduced

¹⁶⁷ <https://www.rediff.com/election/interview/loksabhapoll-interview-with-ashok-mitra/20090514.htm>.

¹⁶⁸ Prabhat Patnaik, ‘In the Aftermath of Nandigram’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.42, No.21(May 26-June 1,2007), pp. 1893-1895.

¹⁶⁹ Prabhat Patnaik, ‘The Left in Decline’, *Economic and Political Weekly*,49(29),2011, pp.12-16.

¹⁷⁰ Dipankar Bhattacharya, ‘For a Left Resurgence’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46(47), 2011, pp.71-3.

¹⁷¹ Hiren Gohain, ‘Decline of the Left: A Critical Comment’, *Economic and Political Weekly* ,46(38), pp. 79-80.

immediately. A section of the peasantry had to be removed from agriculture towards other forms of employment. This is a reference to fragmentation of land. The land reforms within the Constitutional framework had been successful but the peasants were caught up with pre capitalist consciousness. The issue of campaigning and building up support for land acquisition had not got sufficient importance. This had hurt the LFG electorally. The LFG must continue to 'raise' the consciousness of the peasantry for building up support for land acquisition for industrialisation that would benefit the State. Here also the peasant is not empowered but is yet a discordant voice.¹⁷²

Another open critique of the LFG was Land and Land Reforms Minister Abdur Rezzak Mollah. Mollah's view was that the taking away of farmland meant a farm crisis in the near future. More agricultural land needed to be created. Non-agricultural land was made fit for agriculture but agricultural land lost to industry was not recovered. Every year 20 hectares of agricultural land was lost to industry and urbanisation activities. In total 161875 hectares was lost for non-agricultural purposes. Only 121406 hectares was converted to arable land.¹⁷³ Later on Mollah was to use language like '*hele shap dhorte pare na, keute dhorte geche*'. (cannot catch a common snake, trying to catch a cobra) The land ceiling was placed at 12.5 acres which meant that the State had to acquire land. In 2008 he opined that Operation Barga needed to be resumed again.

A land ceiling Bill was introduced in the Assembly to 'relax the rural land ceiling for industry, commerce and infrastructure projects' faced a 'lack of consensus in the all-party meet'. The reason lay in the fact that the CPI (M) did not want to take the risk of land acquisition till the Panchayat elections in 2008.¹⁷⁴ The Bill was referred to the Select Committee of which Mollah was the Chairman that failed to clear the Bill even after three sittings.¹⁷⁵ Another provision was that the *bargadar* could surrender his right to cultivation in more than 50% of the land by a 'mutual agreement' with the landowner.¹⁷⁶ A Document of the 20th State Conference of the CPI (M) says that 'broad peasant unity' would be spoilt if

¹⁷² Party Chithi no. 4, Communist Party of India (Marxist), West Bengal State Committee, pp. 23-7.

¹⁷³ Maureen Nandini Mitra, 'Fissures in West Bengal's Left government over land acquisition', <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/environment/fissures-in-west-bengals-left-government-over-land-acquisition-8259>. 31st August, 2006.

¹⁷⁴ Our Bureau, 'Ceiling Bill survives Panel Term', <https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/ceiling-Bill-survives-panel-term/cid/699459>. 24.7.2007.

¹⁷⁵ Our Bureau, 'House panel stalls land ceiling Bill', <https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/house-panel-stalls-land-ceiling-Bill/cid/699064>. 16.7.2007.

¹⁷⁶ The West Bengal Land Reforms(Amendment) Bill, 2006, Government of West Bengal, Law Department, p.3.

‘*bargadars*’ confused their cultivation rights with ownership rights and refused to hand over the share of the crops to the owner.¹⁷⁷

A B Bardhan of the General Secretary of the CPI criticised the government’s policy to let the industrialists choose parcels of land and then using State power to acquire it. The CPI and Forward Bloc demanded the creation of a High Level Committee to decide where to set up industries. Figures like Manoj Bhattacharya of the Revolutionary Socialist Party, Hafiz Alam Sairani of the Forward Bloc, Mihir Bains of RCPI also alluded to the lack of trust within the LFG.¹⁷⁸

One reason why the LFG moved away from its rural support base can be attributed its composition. The LFG was composed primarily of the upper castes. The reasons for this were that the Bengali Communist cadres were recruited from the elite sections of society, the practise of democratic centralism did not promote a quick change of the leadership and the Communists ignored caste in their analysis of society.¹⁷⁹ Politics in West Bengal was dominated by the ‘*bhadralok*’ (urban gentry). Scheduled Tribe MLA’s who had relatively lower levels of education were under represented among professionals (at 0.6%) and over represented among workers at 38.9%.¹⁸⁰

Nature of Rhetoric

In all the cases of opposition against the LFG that have been described above it is seen that the protests were not because the ‘ends and purposes fostered by an order’ became ‘objects of dissatisfaction’ but rather because the ‘actual content’ of these ends, here industrialisation, became ‘clear through cumulative experience’. Rhetoric was adapted to mend this gap between ‘personal identity and institutional practise’.¹⁸¹ The ‘legitimacy of the entire order involves the ability of each set of priorities to retain the reflexive allegiance of most citizens and second, the continued ability of each priority to exist in priority with the other’.¹⁸² But institutions would ‘decline in its ability to secure allegiance of its role bearers once they were experienced and the ‘practises of work, trade....have solidified into an interdependent

¹⁷⁷ Document of the 20th State Conference of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), West Bengal State Committee, 2006, p.5.

¹⁷⁸ Ritanjan Das, op.cit. pp. 149-51.

¹⁷⁹ Stephanie Tawa Lama-Rewal, ‘The Resilient Bhadraklok: A Profile of the West Bengal MLA’s’ in Christopher Jaffrelot and Sanjay Kumar (ed.) *Rise of the Plebians? The Changing Face of Indian Legislative Assemblies*, (New Delhi: Routledge, 2009), p.377.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid p.385.

¹⁸¹ William E. Connolly, ‘*Politics and Ambiguity*’, (Wisconsin and London, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p. 75.

¹⁸² Ibid p. 77.

structure resistant to serious reconstitution'. In that case, one segment of the population would have to bear the costs of the 'imposition of austerity'.¹⁸³

The options are to accept the 'moral voice of virtue or to shift towards a 'technocratic conception of politics'.¹⁸⁴

Habermas' 'ideal speech situation' is an answer to the individual to reflectively identify with the 'way of life that they share in common'. But if 'the resources of knowledge are insufficient to generate a single result, the theory provides only 'an idea of democracy beyond the reach of practical imperatives'.¹⁸⁵ For Foucault the 'denial of the existence of a consensus' is the feature of modern life and the 'depoliticisation' is a sign. Rather than point out the limits to freedom, the constitution of the subject is important. As we have seen the attempted discourse failed other than the fact that it produced an 'other'.

Donald F Miller opines that our conception of things develops around certain oppositions, namely, the 'deviant versus conventional, art versus science, unconscious versus conscious, child versus adult, primitive versus Western rationality'. Literal language is associated with rational thought and metaphorical language produces irrational thought.¹⁸⁶ In this chapter, we have seen how the rationality of a discourse related with land is questioned.

Laclau and Mouffe ground their theory of rhetoric in the unstable nature of discourse and that is why their understanding of rhetoric is significant here. In 'Hegemony and the Socialist Strategy', the role of rhetoric is necessary to alter the relation between the 'signified' and the 'signifier'. Political identities had to be constructed through hegemonic discourses and not discovered through a Marxist science. Thus, in the process of creation of politics, the interests of the masses had to be given priority and a 'radical and plural democracy' would be created. The elements of this discourse would have 'no class belonging' and the resultant 'collective will' would lead to the formation of a new 'historical bloc'. When conceived as a totality, the hegemonic subject becomes the 'State'. Thus, the meanings assigned to the 'floating signifiers' of 'liberty' and 'equality' was fixed within the terms of democratic discourse.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸³Ibid p. 82.

¹⁸⁴Ibid p. 84.

¹⁸⁵Ibid p.89.

¹⁸⁶ Donald F Miller, 'Metaphor, Thinking and Thought', *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, Vol.39, No.2 (Summer 1982), p.136.

¹⁸⁷ E Laclau and C Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, (London: Verso, 1985), pp.57-185.

Errejon and Mouffe later opined that the Left had an ‘essentialist’ understanding of political identity as class which preceded the ‘discursive articulation’. They modified their theory to say that there could not be one rupture in society but ‘counter hegemonic struggle is a process involving multiplicity of ruptures’.¹⁸⁸ With caste, religion and gender issues becoming important for the Left in the Indian context as the old trope of ‘class’ failed to generate consent, we can say that this brought the LFG after 2001 closer to the model of governance best described as left-wing populism.

So, in Singur the issue that was framed in terms of a binary between ‘industry vs. agriculture’ can be interpreted as an attempt to depoliticise the space of reflective allegiance of the citizens towards the established order. The binary between agriculture and industry was present since independence. Nehru’s critics persistently contended that he had promoted industry at the cost of agriculture. Numerous land acquisition projects were legitimized with reference to the notion of ‘public interest’. The scenario however changed after industrialisation became absolutely imperative for the LFG. Yet the logic of land acquisition in public interest did not appear that easily acceptable. For this, part of the explanation lay in the history of the LFG’s much vaunted land redistribution policy while the other part had to be attributed to the way the opposition parties took advantage of the growing popular resentment. As we have seen, in Singur some of the land owners were absentee landlords settled in Kolkata but this fig leaf was lost in the other cases described above namely, Nandigram, Haripur, Falta and Rajarhat where most of the persons affected were marginal landowners at the most.

But as Nandigram or Haripur became the metaphor for industrialisation that was seen as a virtue, it needed an ‘other’ to ‘provide the contrast against which virtue is defined’. In an attempt to signify the ‘other’, the opposition forces were seen as ‘opportunists’ and ‘criminals’ who misguided the local people. The CPI(M) was detached from the ‘political dynamics of society’ and this created a situation where the Party did not bother about legitimacy but only functioned as an instrument to carry out the interests of its members.¹⁸⁹

Conclusion

¹⁸⁸ I Errejon and C Mouffe, *Podemos in the Name of the People*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2016), pp.39-40.

¹⁸⁹ Jyotiprasad Chatterjee and Suprio Basu, *Left Front and After: Understanding the Dynamics of Poriborton in West Bengal*, (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2020), p.124.

In this chapter, we have seen the protests that built up the anti-incumbency sentiment against the LFG after 2006 as Buddhadeb Bhattacharya tried to create a new discourse in his second term in power after 2006 by emphasising the need for industrialisation. An attempt was made to amalgamate the needs of the future with the achievements of the LFG in the past. So OB became a successful venture of the past that had increased the purchasing power of the rural population. The marginalisation of land, rising cost of agricultural inputs which made agriculture unprofitable and the willingness of the farmers to come out of agriculture were the phrases used to show that the industrialisation had the consent of the masses. The process of othering is present as the Central Government was blamed for the hardships that agriculture faced. Discourse needed its other and the binary between agriculture and industry fitted this well.

However, as the case studies discussed above show, this attempted discourse did not percolate down to the masses who were in most cases the peasants, a trusted political ally of the LFG through the elections. In such a process truth could not be generated in the backdrop of a breakdown of political communication. Rhetoric emerges as an attempt to bridge this gap in political communication as peasants were not involved in the actual process of decisions.

The attempts at discourse are evident in the creation of a binary between industry and agriculture and also in the use of tropes that the people themselves want to come out of agriculture. In this way the State machinery was used to discipline the part of the population that did not fit into the rather passive roles envisaged for them.

As we have seen in all the cases of land acquisition described above, the Government resorted to the rhetoric of consent as a reaction to this changed situation. In the process, the LFG was at loggerheads with not only the Opposition but also the constituents inside the LFG. Laclau and Mouffe refer to the political significance of rhetoric that is predicated on discourse. The rhetoric is linked to discourse more so because the LFG was in power since 1977 and had to show continuity.

CHAPTER 5

Approach of the TMC Government towards Land Issues: Policies and Practices (2011-2021)

Introduction

In the last chapter we have discussed the resistance against the new discourse that was directed against the LFG. The LFG was defeated electorally after 34 years in power in the 2011 Vidhan Sabha elections when it tried to use the metaphor of industrialisation as a political weapon. The Trinamool Congress came to power on the basis of the slogan of *Ma-Mati-Manush* (Mother- Land-People) Since the interests of the population dependent on land constituted the primary support base of the TMC in the 2011 elections, in this chapter, we analyse the policies followed by the TMC towards land. For this purpose, we take a look at the policy orientation of the Trinamool Congress regarding land and the proceedings in the Vidhan Sabha on Bills related to land are analysed. To understand whether a discourse was created, two case studies of land acquisition for coal mines at Loba and at Deocha-Pachami (both in Birbhum district) are discussed. Towards the end, the overall policy of the Government *vis a vis* agriculture is discussed to identify the place of those dependent on land. Through this process an effort has been made to analyse whether a new discourse related to land has emerged in West Bengal under the TMC. If not then we discuss how the Government has reacted to land-based issues on a case to case basis, what were the priorities in guiding such decisions and the role of rhetoric in creating the world of politics.

Formation of the Trinamool Congress:

Before we go into a discussion of the rhetoric used by the TMC government after coming to power in 2011, it is necessary to understand the roots of the formation of the party and its experience with parliamentary politics. The TMC was formed largely out of the Youth Congress in 1998 under Mamata Banerjee. We shall have to take a brief look at Banerjee's political career before we delve into a discussion of the politics. Banerjee was a member of the Congress from her student days and was handpicked by the leadership to contest the Lok Sabha polls from Jadavpur Constituency in 1984 against CPI (M) heavyweight Somnath Chatterjee. Later on, as the LFG maintained its electoral domination through the 1980s and the 1990s, she started to gain popularity within the Congress and Siddhartha Shankar Ray,

who was the President of the West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee in the 1990s, wanted to project her as a prominent face in the electoral battle against the ruling LFG.¹

Ideological Issues:

Due to frequent differences with the leadership of the Congress both in West Bengal as well as in New Delhi, she ultimately left the Indian National Congress to form the Trinamool Congress which translates from the Bengali as Grassroots Congress.² This brief history was necessary to show the ideological roots of the TMC since its genesis. As has been discussed in the previous chapters, the land reforms that had a socialist connotation was supported by the INC. We have seen the attitude of the INC towards land reform in the previous chapters. Political initiative is noticed in the Mayapur Provincial Conference of the West Bengal Pradesh Congress in 1955 where the idea of framing land ceiling laws, distributing the ceiling surplus land among the landless and retaining land only in the hands of those who had no other means of livelihood.³ As we have seen in previous chapters, the West Bengal Land Reform Laws were framed in 1955. The Election Manifesto of the Indian National Congress in 1972 spoke of ‘*Garibi Hatao*’ (Removal of Poverty) and ‘*Sonar Paschim Bangla*’ (Golden West Bengal) which would be achieved through an improvement of incomes by land reforms and better agricultural techniques and subsidiary provisions.⁴ As late as 2011, the issue of land reform or ‘*bhumi sanskar*’ (Land Reform) was included in the electoral manifesto of the INC with the claim that the record at land reforms was only marginally better under the LFG than under the Congress. The Election Manifesto further adds that those persons who were recorded as *bargas* under the LFG became landless labourers over the years⁵

Mamata Banerjee being a part of the Congress since her student days was naturally expected to share the ideological space with her parent party. In her early days she concentrated on politics in the urban areas. Even if we go by her rhetoric as an opposition leader, we shall find that it wasn’t directed towards the discourse of the LFG especially on questions of industrialisation and land.

¹Shutapa Paul, *Didi: The Untold Mamata Banerjee*, (Haryana: Penguin, 2018), pp. 71-94.

² Mamata Banerjee, *My Journey*, (New Delhi: BEE Books, 2018), p.84.

³ Atulya Ghosh, *Kashtakalpita* (Kolkata, New Age Publications, 1971)pp.191-95.

⁴ Prasanta Sengupta, *The Congress Party in West Bengal: A Study of Factionalism, 1947-1986*, Calcutta : Minerva ,1988), p.134.

⁵Paschimbanga Pradesh Congress Committee, *Election Manifesto of the Indian National Congress*, Pachimbanga Bidhan Sabha Nirbachan, 2011, pp. 14-6.

Analysing the nature of these protests, Samaddar writes that in contrast to the ‘high politics’ of Jyoti Basu, Mamata Banerjee’s politics was about ‘hearing and seeing, the visualising the girl of the locality, the low domain of life’. Visualising became the ‘discourse of the vote’ and ‘Mamata manifested the role that every woman wants to assume but cannot....’ She could walk into a police station alone, sit on a strike in front of Ministers who belonged to her own Party, demand that a closed factory be re-opened and even agitate on issues that concerned the common housewife like that of the price of edible oil or kerosene. The beginnings of an ‘event centric discourse’ can be seen with the arrival of the ‘Mamata phenomenon’ where politics was identified with ‘sentiment, emotion and appeals’.⁶

Some of the major incidents where she was involved were at Howrah Bridge against the rise in bus and tram fares in 1991, on 21st July, 1993 when she led a march to the Writers Building in Calcutta to press for mandatory Voter ID cards and the *jail bhor* movements in every district against the ‘LFG misrule’.⁷ Mamata Banerjee’s struggle was focussed on the atrocities committed by the LFG which gave her campaigns an emotive angle.⁸ The common refrain against her was that she created nuisance and later on that changed into her having a nexus with the Naxals. Thus, protest activities were branded as criminal by the LFG which had come to power on the brink of such exercises as we have seen in the previous chapters.

Ergo, the creation of the TMC was not followed by attempts at creating a class of loyal supporters using a rigid ideological framework or driven by a bottom-up approach. Rather the exigencies of parliamentary politics led to the creation of the party in the first place. It had absolutely ‘no pretensions’ of being associated with the ‘high politics’. In this way, Mamata Banerjee could draw crowds by focussing on regular issues that concerned daily life.⁹ Two such instances are that of flinging her shawl at Ram Vilas Paswan and dancing on the bonnet of Jai Prakash Narayan’s car. Monobina Gupta writes that perhaps the genesis of the ‘emotional rhetoric’ of Banerjee ‘stems from a lifelong sense of betrayal’ at the hands of her ‘classmates in school’ and ‘the party she grew up in’ which ‘ruined her chances of routing the CPI(M)...’. That her apprehensions are not totally off the mark can be reasonably gleaned from the fact that the performance of the Congress (I) was ‘comparatively good’ in ‘urban-

⁶Ranabir Samaddar, *Passive Revolution in West Bengal: 1977-2011*, (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2013) pp.58.

⁷For details see Mamata Banerjee op. cit. pp. 18-84.

⁸Dola Mitra, *Decoding Didi: Making Sense of Mamata Banerjee*, (New Delhi: Rupa Publications India Private Limited, 2014), pp.61-2.

⁹Ranabir Samaddar, *Passive Revolution in West Bengal: 1977-2011*, op.cit. pp.53-9.

industrial seats' even in the 1980s.¹⁰ In the 1996 elections to the West Bengal Legislative Assembly, the Congress(I) won 82 seats out of a total of 294 seats. But the Congress (I) could not effectively challenge the LFG due to 'serious factional feuds' and the lack of funds.¹¹

Use of Symbolism in Politics:

In the 1980s and the 1990s, the political image of Mamata Banerjee was that of a dynamic and an aggressive woman but in her personal life she projected the 'image of a sanitised, chaste womanhood'. Her image is opposed to that of the *bhadralok* class.¹² Her ideological praxis' is that of combating the CPI (M). She stayed away from the bipolar ideological distinction that was perpetuated by the CPI (M) and the Congress.¹³ This ambiguity would later on be reflected in her politics.

'Female populist leaders' involve themselves in 'precarious balancing acts, compelling them to appropriate contextualised traditionalist discourses and modes of power to qualify for conventional leadership roles'. The leaders have to balance between 'hegemonic masculine and feminine traits'. These 'cultural obstacles' are met through a 'discursive construct of political asceticism' alongside 'other concepts particular to the socio-cultural context'. Mamata Banerjee's political identity is encapsulated by the use of the term 'Didi' (elder sister) for her that implies a 'relational' aspect.

The 'discourse of asceticism' in India implies a 'renunciatory, nonmaterialistic ideational approach towards life and involves a set of practices aimed at a rigorous disciplining of the body, mind and the self'. The ascetic has a higher degree of 'moral power'. Women's political participation was represented through the 'frame of the unnatural' even in struggles against colonial rule. Political participation had to be justified morally by a rejection of 'instrumental power politics'. The 'anti elite vocabulary' appeals to a 'homogenised body of people'.

This is combined with the 'practice of street style politics' and 'high emotions, anti-elite rhetoric, absence of political lineage, lack of command of English alongside the provision of

¹⁰ Prasanta Sengupta, 'Politics in West Bengal: The Left Front versus the Congress (I)' *Asian Survey*, Vol.29, No.9, (Sep.1989), p. 888.

¹¹ Ibid p. 897.

¹² Monobina Gupta, *Didi – A Political Biography*, (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2012), p.5.

¹³ Ibid. p.2.

an array of conditional cash transfer schemes.’ These schemes can be interpreted as her opposition to politics based on a particular ideology.¹⁴

Kenneth Bo Nielsen opines that her style as that of an ‘unsophisticated and unpolished political maverick’. He situates her in the category of a ‘self-made’ leader. Her ‘activist style of leadership’ involves, not exuding ‘glamour or awe’ but a distinctive simple lifestyle. As a ‘grassroots activist’ she ‘departs from certain culturally informed ideas about how political leaders should comport themselves’. Her background and brass speech mark her out from the usual *bhadralok* who is a Hindu, a Brahmin and a male. But she does not abandon the *bhadralok* credentials altogether. The use of the term Didi implies a kind of love that is based on differences in age and is hierarchical.¹⁵ She has been compared to the Goddess Durga and this serves to mystify her ‘authority and power’.

Her books *Struggle for Existence* and *My Journey* are written in a rather casual manner. In the middle of a discussion on politics, there comes a section on her personal life. She persistently invokes religious figures and her decision to come out of the INC is justified on grounds that she wanted to serve the ‘people’. Despite opposition in her initial days as a Parliamentarian, she did not give up. She refers to various cases where she is portrayed as a victim of conspiracy.¹⁶

She claims to represent the aspirations of the ‘people’ against the elite. The Party was formed to counter the ‘barbaric rule of the CPI (M)’. That way her stand is ‘apolitical’. The two flowers on the logo of the TMC represent a commitment to ‘secularism’.¹⁷

The TMC in power and the Land Question:

In the 2001 Assembly elections, the TMC won 60 seats but was reduced to 30 seats in the 2006 elections. The LFG witnessed a 7% increase in vote share in the 2006 elections from 2001 and the LFG was able to expand ‘its support bases even among those who never stood by the Left’. The LFG won 10 constituencies in Kolkata as well as 14 out of 16 seats in Howrah and 17 out of 19 seats in Howrah.¹⁸ However, the fact that the opposition remained ‘fragmented’ and was unable to match the electoral machinery of the Left Front was

¹⁴ Proma Ray Chaudhury, ‘The Political Asceticism of Mamata Banerjee: Female Populist Leadership in Contemporary India’, *Politics and Gender*, 18(4), 2022, pp.942-77. DOI: 10.1017/S1743923X21000209.

¹⁵ Kenneth Bo Nielsen, Mamata Banerjee in A E Rudd, G Heierstad (ed.) *India’s Democracies: Diversity, Co-optation and Resistance*, ebook, (Creative Commons, CC BY40, Universitetsforlaget, 2016), pp.101-34.

¹⁶ Mamata Banerjee, *Struggle for Existence*, (New Delhi: MagvisualPriyonkar Publications, 1998) p.17.

¹⁷ All India Trinamool Congress (AITC), ‘About the Party’, <https://aitcofficial.org/the-party/>.

¹⁸ Bidyut Chakraborty, ‘Left Front’s 2006 Victory in West Bengal: Continuity or a Trendsetter?’ *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.41, No.32(August 12-18, 2006), p.3523.

identified as a reason for the electoral victory of the Left.¹⁹ The ruling LFG took the electoral verdict of the 2006 elections as a mandate in favour of industrialisation. The tagline for the elections was ‘agriculture is our base; industry is our future’. It was for the setting up of industries that the process of land acquisition started. Popular movements arose in the backdrop of these processes of land acquisition, most notably at Singur and Nandigram, which have been discussed in the previous chapters. The TMC capitalised on these movements with a robust presence through grassroots organisations in the village areas and using local idioms which had widespread acceptability brought down the LFG in 2011 after the Vidhan Sabha elections. Mamata Banerjee was sworn in as the Chief Minister.

The slogan that was framed in the heyday of the movements at Singur and Nandigram was ‘*Ma-Mati-Manush*’. The influence of the ‘rich-peasant-moneylenders-traders’ in villages declined to an extent with the implementation of land reforms under the CPI (M). Power did shift to the lower castes in the second half of the twentieth century.²⁰ Ghosh alludes to the fact that land reforms when implemented properly could increase productivity and incomes in rural India and stimulate domestic demand.²¹ P C Joshi had identified a difference in the ideology of land reform and the actual implementation which tended to favour the superior tenants.²² But land reforms also led to a marginalisation of land holdings.

After Independence, land was acquired by the State for various ‘development’ projects using the colonial era Land Acquisition Act, 1894. Walter Fernandes estimates that about 50 million persons were displaced from their lands and lost their livelihood as a result of land acquisition by the State between 1947 and 2000. In tune with the changed priorities after the Indian economy’s turn towards neo-liberalism, industrialisation began to be aggressively pursued after 2006 in West Bengal. Although ‘land reforms’ was included in the Election Manifesto of 2011 by the CPI (M), the changing priorities were evident. The issue of land came back to haunt the process of industrialisation in a different manner. Amit Bhaduri observes that aggressive drives towards land acquisition are justified on grounds of efficiency. In the ‘multiparty competitive democracy of a predominantly agrarian economy with massive poverty’, this process survives ‘only through a dangerous mutualism between

¹⁹ Ibid p.3525.

²⁰ Arild E Rudd, ‘*Poetics of Village Politics: The Making of West Bengal’s Rural Communism*’, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 205-11.

²¹ Jayati Ghosh, Social Policy in Indian Development in M. Thandika (ed.) *Social Policy in a Development Context*, (Houndmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p.295.

²² For details see C P Joshi: *Land Reforms in India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1996).

corporation and political parties. If this mutualism crystallizes over land acquisition, an oligarchic democracy would emerge, oligarchic in content but democratic in form'.²³

Analysing the nature of the resistance against the LFG in Nandigram, Bose identifies certain themes that emerge from 'content analysis'. The recurring themes are those of 'attachment to place', 'connection to land', 'perceptions of territoriality', 'oppositional identities' and 'claims'.²⁴ Levian also views the life of land as a social relation.²⁵ Banerjee-Guha also stress on the attachment of peasants to place.²⁶ Land acquisition marked a break in the social processes connected with land.

Partha Chatterjee opined that the 'use of violence in peasant agitations seems to have a far more calculative, almost utilitarian logic, designed to draw attention to specific grievances with a view to seeking appropriate governmental benefits'.²⁷ These grievances arise in large part from the social nature of land.

Nikita Sud analyses the processes through which the conflicts have taken shape in various parts of India. In the context of West Bengal, the slogan of *Ma-Mati-Manush* encapsulates what she terms as 'enlivened land'. Land was connected with 'history and memory' and seen as a 'provider and mother'. Agency power is not vested in the land per se. Human actions evoke 'divinity or memory' in land. In the slogan, 'Ma' refers both to the motherland and also to womankind in a patriarchal society. 'Mati' refers to the soil on which the motherland is situated and this territory needs to be safeguarded. History and memory are related with the soil as well. 'Manush' refers to individuals, here the citizens, who depend on the land and would thus protect the land. In the aftermath of the movements at Singur and Nandigram, the TMC wanted to create an identity based on the slogan of *Ma-Mati-Manush*.²⁸

We shall look at the rhetoric of the TMC government closely while it was in power in its first term from 2011 till 2016.

Policy Orientation of the TMC on Land

²³ Amit Bhaduri, 'A Study in Development by Dispossession', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 42(1), pp. 19-31, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cje/bex026>.

²⁴ Sayoni Bose, 'Attachment to Place and Territoriality in Nandigram land struggle, India', *Human Geography*, Vol. 13(2), 2020, pp.139-53, DOI: 10.1177/1942778620944383.

²⁵ M Levien, 'The politics of Dispossession', *Politics and Society*, 41(3), 2013, pp.351-94, DOI: 10.1177/0032329213493751.

²⁶ S Banerjee-Guha, 'Accumulation and Dispossession', *South Asia*, 36(2), 2009, pp.165-79, DOI:

²⁷ Partha Chatterjee, 'Democracy and economic Transformation in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 19.4.2008, p.60.

²⁸ Nikita Sud, *The Making of Land and the Making of India*, e-book, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2021) p.72.

The TMC Government released a booklet before the 2011 Assembly elections titled ‘West Bengal: A Change for a Better and Brighter Tomorrow’.²⁹ The notion of the empowered peasant that made a marked disappearance since the decade of the 1990s does not definitely make a comeback. The booklet talks of the ‘collapse of the agricultural sector’ because agricultural growth had fallen sharply. Statistics show how the ‘high’ growth of 17.3% during 1965-1975 had fallen to a ‘pathetic’ 7.8% during 2000-2007. The ‘cries of farmers’ had fallen on the ‘deaf ears’ of the CPI (M). The source of the data is traced to the Central Statistical Organisation. The new government would undertake a ‘farmer centric comprehensive rural development program’ with the aims of increasing agricultural productivity, a ‘revolution in agro-processing’ and focus on ‘agro-research for the farmers and with the farmers’. Agro-processing units’ would be developed using the ‘unique resources of fruits and vegetables, flowers and marine food resources’. A campaign would be developed for ‘raising production, storage, processing, marketing using local entrepreneurship and capabilities’. The document mentions that West Bengal’s ‘industrial glory’ would be revived through a ‘broad and deep focus’ on Micro, Small and Medium enterprises, by restarting and remodelling the closed Public Sector Units and by attracting ‘large private investment’. The issue of land acquisition for industry doesn’t find any mention here.

Redistributive Justice

In a policy paper in 2001 Hanstad and Brown recommended that the ‘homestead allocation program must be extended, mutually beneficial sale agreements between the seller and the landowner must be facilitated, market led land reforms must be encouraged where the State helped the private players purchase land and also water assets.’³⁰

The problem of landlessness was discussed in the 59th Survey Round of the National Sample Survey Organisation in 2003. In West Bengal about 4,27,000 households were landless, lacking even homestead land. Landlessness is a major indicator of poverty. To tackle this issue, the LFG launched a programme for allocation of homestead land titled *Chas o Bosobasher Jonyo Bhumidan Prokolpo*. The Government would purchase land and redistribute it to the landless. The maximum size of a plot would be 16 decimal.³¹ The West Bengal Government in 2006 in a rehabilitation package had approved a two *cottah* (670

²⁹ ‘West Bengal: A Change for a Better and a Brighter Tomorrow’, *All India Trinamool Congress*, Kolkata, 2011.

³⁰ T Hanstad and J Brown, *Land Reform Law and Implementation in West Bengal*, Rural Development Institute Reports on Foreign Aid and Development 112, (Seattle: Rural Development institute), p.61.

³¹ Sudipta Biswas and Sukumar Pal, ‘Tribal Land Rights: A Situational Analysis in the Context of West Bengal’, *Journal of Land and Rural Studies*, Vol.9, Issue 1, 2020, p.197.

square metres) plot inside the project complex for those displaced by projects and those who did not accept the land would get a house worth Rs. 25000 under the Indira Awas Yojana in rural areas or a flat worth Rs. 40000 in a town under the Valmiki Ambedkar Awas Yojana. Displaced families would be paid Rs. 150000 and those with no needs from land would be paid Rs. 10000. This drew rifts within the LFG as State Agriculture Minister is reported to have said that he was never consulted before land was earmarked for acquisition.³²

The programme was discontinued and brought out in a new format by the TMC Government. In a document titled 'Hope to Reality' the decision to create a land bank is mentioned, a *Nijo Ghar Nijo Bhumi Prakalpa* where every landless family would be provided with 3 *cottahs* of land per family in one cluster so that infrastructure like water, roads etc. could be provided with necessary support from NABARD (till 2012 about 112.34 acres land had been distributed among 1031 families), greater disposal of mutation proposals, from 2011 to 2012 about 1819.99 acres of land of ceiling surplus agricultural land had been vested and 2331.664 acres of vested agricultural land had been distributed among 7912 beneficiaries of which 2061 belonged to SC and ST category, land would not be acquired peacefully for private companies, land would be acquired in a 'humane, participatory, informed, consultative and transparent manner'. Land laws had been amended to 'facilitate the setting up of different industries, service sector units and infrastructure'. It was decided that Land Use Maps of seven districts would be prepared, the concept of zoning would be introduced, block wise maps would enable the 'entrepreneurs intending to set up industry to visualise the actual infrastructure that will be available at the proposed site', land records would be digitised and these would be integrated with Bhuchitra software and to citizen centric services like mutation, conversion plot maps with measurement of size of plots would be provided. A Digital Land Records Modernisation Programme would be implemented in the State.³³

The *Nijo Ghar, Nijo Bhumi Prakalpa* was launched on 18th October, 2011 by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. The 'secured ownership' of land would take a 'family towards a world of self-respect, dignity and peace'. *Pattas* would be distributed in the name of the woman who was the head of the family or jointly in the name of both husband and wife. The possession of

³² Maureen Nandini Mitra, 'Rift within West Bengal's Left Government over land acquisition', 15.07.2006, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/environment/rift-within-west-bengals-left-government-over-land-acquisition-8032>.

³³ 'Hope to Reality: one year of working together', (Chief Minister's Office, Government of West Bengal, 2012), <https://wbcmo.gov.in/reality.aspx?page>, pp. 108-111.

the land would be secured through incorporation of the names of beneficiaries in the Record-of-Rights.³⁴

The beneficiaries of the *Nijo Ghar, Nijo Bhumi Prakalpa* were the landless agricultural workers (*khetmajur*), rural artisans and persons dependent on fisheries who did not own agricultural or homestead land even by inheritance. The land would have to be used as homestead and for economic activities. The land would be purchased by the Government and distributed among the landless. Land vested in the Government would also be distributed. Under the scheme, houses would be constructed for an average of ten to fifteen families and facilities for drinking water and road connectivity would also be developed. A Land Purchase and Land Distribution Committee at the level of the Block would implement the scheme. The District Magistrate would be the Chairperson of the Committee. The other members of the Committee were the Sabhapati of the Panchayat Samiti, a Development Officer, the Karmadakshya of the Forest and Land Reform Sthayee Samiti, Assistant Officers from the Department of Agriculture and the Land Reform Departments.³⁵ By 2014-15, a total of 1,96,384 *pattas* had been issued to eligible beneficiaries.³⁶

Legislative Initiatives

One of the first legislative initiatives undertaken by the TMC Government after it came to power was the passage of the Singur Land Rehabilitation and Development Bill in 2011.³⁷ The purpose of the Bill was to initiate the return of land to the unwilling farmers at Singur in line with the electoral promise. The Bill was introduced by Partha Chatterjee for the consideration of the House.³⁸

Almost immediately, the timing of the Bill was criticised by Abdur Rezzak Molla of the CPI (M) as he felt that the incumbent government was hurrying up the passage. A sitting MLA had expired that day and Molla pointed out that in such circumstances the House is expected to remain adjourned throughout the day though he mentioned that he wanted the new government to start work quickly. He said that the Speaker had used his powers to push the Governmental agenda forward at the cost of the opposition who were not given enough opportunities. Next, Molla goes on to make certain perceptive comments about the Bill. He says that the TATAs had withdrawn from Singur and even Mamata Banerjee had said that

³⁴ 'Egiye Bangla', 'Nijo-grihaNijo-bhumi', <https://wb.gov.in/government-schemes-details-nijogriha.aspx>.

³⁵ Naushad Mallick, *Panchayat o Unnoyon*, (Kolkata: Boddhisatwa, 2023), pp.144-45.

³⁶ 'Egiye Bangla', 'Nijo-grihaNijo-bhumi', op. cit.

³⁷ *West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings*: Official Report, First Session, May and June 2011.

³⁸ Ibid p.31.

there was uncertainty about when the factory would be built. But the Bill specified that a certain portion of the land was to be earmarked for industry and the remaining portion was to be distributed among the peasants. He questions the rationale of still leaving a certain portion of the land for industry. As for the distribution of land back to the peasants, Molla opined that the government shouldn't make a distinction between the 'willing' and the 'unwilling' peasants and that land should be returned to all the peasants. In a roundabout way of defending the LFG which had been ousted from power, Molla says that the bureaucrats who were responsible for the downfall of the LFG could very well be the reason for faulty decisions which had to be shouldered by the TMC now. He says that the WBIDC took away farmer's lands by tying up with industrialists and giving them undue favours. After retirement, these officers joined the organisations ran by the bureaucrats. The next part of Molla's speech deals with the legal angle of the Bill. He says that the Land Reforms Department had made the West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation the *raiyat* or the landowner and that the land was mutated and converted in their name. Thus land was being recovered from the WBIDC. The land after it was recovered by the government should have been vested with the Land Reforms Department and not the Industries Department. In the present case, the Bill should not have been introduced by the Industries Minister. Further he goes onto point out that the WBIDC could have terminated the lease to Tata Motors through an executive order and there was no need of bringing in a new law for this purpose as it could create complications. The complications lay in the fact that under the provisions of section 5 of the Transfer of Property Act which was a central legislation, property could be transferred from one 'living person to another living person' and companies in the nature of government undertakings or the WBIDC in the present case came under the definition of the living person. But here land was being vested in a non-living person, namely the state and the state could not give a free hold title to any individual. The Bill was silent on the issue whether the unwilling peasants who were about to get back their land would get a 'lease, *patta* or a settlement' right on the land. The Bill required the President's assent also. He requested the House to withdraw the Bill as it could open a floodgate of litigation. Mollah's speech was interrupted several times and it is evident that he takes recourse to law to prove his point which was a departure from the earlier practises of the Left. As we have seen in the previous chapters, building up a community based movement in rural areas was one of the reasons for the continued success of the LFG from which a departure is evident.³⁹

³⁹*Ibid.* pp.33-4.

The next speaker was Rabindranath Chatterjee of the ruling coalition. He expressed his support for the Bill and opined that the rule of the LFG was authoritarian in nature. From his speech we come to know of another instance of land acquisition in Katwa in Burdwan district in 2006 with which he draws parallels to the context in Singur. He says that the thermal power project in Katwa in 2006 was inaugurated by ‘two ministers’ of the LFG and as the sitting MLA he was kept unaware of the developments. The land acquired, he claims was extremely fertile with three crops being grown in a year. The local peasants started to protest the land acquisition and the situation became so complicated that the Power Minister Mrinal Banerjee requested the sitting MLA to look into the matter. It was then that Chatterjee requested Managing Director Mahapatra of the Power Development Corporation Limited to shift the project to some adjacent area. He says that the concerned official replied that had the Government shifted the industry to some adjoining area, then the onus for filling up the waste or not so fertile land would fall on the government.⁴⁰

Chatterjee found the logic unacceptable and says that the only thing that mattered was an oft quoted statement from Buddhadeb Bhattacharya that glorified the electoral success of the LFG in 2006 as ‘we are 235, they are 30’. He praises Mamata Banerjee’s personal intervention which could give a ‘democratic’ organisation to the movement in Singur. He explains the rationale behind the Bill by saying that the WBIDC had given the land to TATA Motors on a 3-year lease and that after the protests had started, the lease was renewed for a period of one year. But in the meantime, no industry came up on the multi cropped fertile land. So the Bill was designed with the intention of returning the land to the unwilling farmers who had decided to not part with their land. Out of the 997 acres that had been virtually converted into a ‘no man’s land’, land would be returned back to the unwilling farmers and after that the portion of the land left behind would be used for ‘industry or any other developmental activity that would benefit the common man’. Here Chatterjee points out that even those who were portrayed as willingly having parted with their land could have in reality done so due to pressure exerted by the ruling party or the police. Provisions had been made in the Bill that empowered the District Magistrate of Hooghly to seize land and try to remove the legal difficulties if TATA Motors refused to give back land to the unwilling peasants. Provisions were made for monetary compensation for the unwilling peasants and till the time the land was not returned to the peasant, they could enjoy the rent from land and also 6% rate of interest. Mamata Banerjee was to be thanked for bringing in the Bill.

⁴⁰ Ibid pp.34-6.

The next speaker Subhas Naskar of Opposition RSP criticised the Bill on the ground that it had nothing to do with the peasants as it was introduced by the Industries Minister and that it could have been better introduced by the Land Reforms Department headed by the CM. However, he was quick to add that he would not oppose the Bill as his party in principle was not against the distribution of land back to the unwilling peasants. He asks whether the Bill was an industrial Bill or a peasants' Bill meant for the peasant? He was interrupted several times and after a few verbal exchanges with the TMC members he continued his speech. He said that from the beginning the TMC was not opposed to industrialisation and that there would be industrial activities on the land taken from unwilling farmers. His party welcomed these moves. He said that there was a demand to define the term *onicchuk* or unwilling peasant. Out of the total of 997 acres, 400 acres of land belonged to the category of unwilling peasants. Had 800 acres of land been owned by peasants who were unwilling to give their land back, then Naskar says as per the Act that the industry would have to be shifted to the sky as it would be impractical to build industry on such a small parcel of land. Based on this figure he says that 'many' peasants did want the industry to be set up. Anyways he wanted the peasants to come back quickly to the land and resume farming activities. Before ending his argument, he makes the point that the entire land would be vested in the government before it was distributed back to the farmers. So while distributing the land it would be found that some portions were high lying, others were low lying and some were marsh areas. The government could not distribute back land as per its own liking. So, Naskar following the footsteps of Mollah criticises the passage of the Bill in that it was done hastily and that time should have been given to the members so that the provisions were debated and the public could also get an idea of the Bill.⁴¹

The next speaker Tarun Naskar of the SUCI(Communist) welcomed the Bill saying that the way the multi cropped fertile land of Singur was forcibly occupied (he uses the Bengali term *Jabar dokhol* in a pejorative sense) was a 'dark spot' in the history of India's democracy. He adds instances of excesses committed by the CPI (M) party cadres and the police as seen in the deaths of Rajkumar Bhul and the rape and murder of Tapasi Malik. He demands that those who were getting back land after all these days be allowed some compensation and along with them the labourers who were unable to find work also be compensated. Thus, we find the category and term 'peasants' was sought to be riddled with complexities with the division into landowners, agricultural labourers etc. As usual this was an unresolved issue for the LFG

⁴¹ Ibid. pp.38-9.

even after so many years rather the binary of industry/ agriculture came to dominate the discourse.⁴²

The next speaker Anandamoy Mondol was eloquent in his criticism of the Bill. First, he points out that the land was acquired under a central legislation and that returning the land by taking recourse to a state law without any amendments in the Central Government law could lead to conflicts with the Central law. Second, he questions the modalities of the Bill on the ground that the government had made the category of willing and unwilling farmers in returning back the land. The reason was that the willing farmers had given their land hoping for certain benefits. But the Bill was silent regarding the return of 400 acres of land only mentioning the category of unwilling farmers who had to be returned their land because there was a chance of worsening of law and order situation. The quantum of land to be returned was not mentioned.⁴³

Becharam Manna of the TMC started his speech by welcoming the house on behalf of the ‘peasants, *bargadars*, *khetmajur* and the protestors’. His speech gives us a narrative of the movement from the point of view of the ruling TMC. He starts his speech by saying that Mamata Banerjee was at the forefront of the struggle in Singur and despite facing intense brutalities she did not budge from the struggle against the LFG. Manna claims that an attempt was made to throw her down the Second Hooghly Bridge and on 25th September 2006 she was assaulted by the police. But she carried on her struggle by indulging in hunger strikes first for a period of 26 days and then for 15 days near the Durgapur Expressway. Her efforts were lauded by Bengali intellectuals, various organisations around the world and human rights’ organisations. He brings in the reference of Tapasi Malik who was ‘raped and burnt alive’ and Rajkumar Bhul who succumbed to injuries sustained during police action. Prasant Das, Haradhan Das, Shrikant Shee, Bimla Khamaru, Shankar Patra, Shankar Das, Kalipada Majhi, Bholanath Patra, Birendranath Das, Purnachandra Das, Narendranath Das were some of the people who had committed suicide in the atmosphere of uncertainty which prevailed after the acquisition of land. These instances give us the picture of local people standing up against the might of the oppressors and the detailed recitation of the names serves to give an impression that this was the only discourse which was relevant in Singur. He attacks Rezzak Mollah on a sarcastic tone by saying that one becomes a ‘true *chasir beta*’ not by wearing ‘a *gamcha*’ but by returning the land to the unwilling farmers. To highlight the use of force in

⁴² Ibid pp.39-40.

⁴³ Ibid p.40.

this case, Manna says that the erstwhile LFG riding on the back of its success in the 2006 elections carried out the process of land acquisition by imposing Section 144 for a period of 71 days and the police force consisting of 3500 personnel were deployed mainly to serve the interests of the incumbent government. Manna says that the ‘peasant’ who employed 12 to 13 labourers was now thanks to the Government’s policy reduced to a labourer himself and that the ‘people of Singur’ were waiting for the Bill so that they could get back their land. From his speech we get to know that the unwilling peasants of Singur and the deceased Tapasi Malik’s father were invited to the House to witness the proceedings and this sent out a strong visual political message which perhaps called for immediate sympathy and relief. He concludes by saying that the LFG spread the myth of the land being mono cropped and not being fertile and that it could not provide paddy during the period of *Lakshmi Puja*. The people had rejected these ideas and thus the Bill was to be supported.⁴⁴

Akshay Thakur says that the Forward Block supported the move of a Bill which would help the peasants get back their land in Singur. The movement led by Mamata Banerjee had taken Singur to make headlines not only at the national level but also internationally. Perhaps the LFG had lost the plot because it failed to read the ‘hidden anger’ in the minds of the local people. After this he goes on to point out what he perceives a legal gap in the Bill. First he says that the Bill was silent regarding the nature of ownership that would be vested in the peasant after he got back the land. The Bill did not mention whether the peasant would be granted full ownership rights or whether he would get a lease through which he could eventually occupy the land. It is pertinent that this question was asked because the Land Reform Act recognised only types of cultivation namely, personal cultivation and cultivation by the *bargadar*. Further, in the tone of other speakers from the opposition he asks as to what would happen to the peasants who had willingly given up their land in the event of the factory not being built. Since the TMC Government claimed that land was taken over by force of the CPI (M) and the police, they should get back their land as well as they might not have wanted to part with the land at all in reality. This is an attempt at simplification of the situation. Thakur wants the Government to have a clear stand for the peasants who might want their land back though they were shown to have willingly parted with their land earlier. He also says that the Bill of such an important nature ought to have been sent to the Select Committee for detailed discussions before it was tabled in the Vidhan Sabha.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ibid pp. 41-2.

⁴⁵ Ibid pp. 42-3.

The next speaker was Asit Mitra of the Indian National Congress and he started his speech by expressing full support for the Bill tabled by Partha Chatterjee on a 'historic day'. He refutes claims of the opposition that the Bill needed Presidential assent or that it suffered from legal errors on the grounds that the Bill needed to be brought in as early as possible. He draws the attention of the House to an old clipping in the *Anandabazar Patrika* which had come out on the day of the police firing at Nandigram that described how Buddhadeb Bhattacharya had announced the Nano project with Ratan Tata by his side. He had wanted to build the factory with the support of Tata and that 'Tata would be the beacon of development' for Bengal. With Mamata Banerjee in power she had correctly decided to make the 'peasant, *bargadar*, *khetmajur*, *mehnnati* person' the force of development in Singur by understanding their emotions. He attacks the LFG by saying that the reason why they have been reduced to the Opposition is because they thought that the projects which affected farmers were being opposed just for the sake of it. If the CPI (M) members continued to oppose the government even now, then perhaps they would not find a place even as the opposition inside the house. He goes on to list the report of the Asian Human Rights Commission which had described the 'brutal assault on peaceful peasants by the police' when they tried to resist the 'forcible acquisition' of their land. Concerns were raised about whether a 'democratically elected system' was in place as both the civil administration and the police force acted as 'henchmen' of the TATA group.

Here we find the creation of a binary of force and peaceful without clearly defined parameter. Each and every citizen of India had the right to protest peacefully. Here the Bill was an outcome of the 'people's struggle' against the injustice and torture of the LFG. The oppressed people had found a voice in Mamata Banerjee who upheld their cause. In this situation the Bill would not only help the people of Singur but also the administrators 'throughout India' who would know that a law could be framed that would give back land to the peasants if they were tortured and their land was taken away forcibly. He goes on to recall the meeting that had happened between Buddhadeb Bhattacharya and Mamata Banerjee in which the Governor Gopal Krishna Gandhi had agreed to mediate. When the House was disrupted by noise and the Speaker asked the member not to mention Buddhadeb's name who was not a MLA, he changed the topic and wanted to know the contents of the Memorandum of Understanding that was signed between the Government and Tata Motors. This was not revealed to the public and so Mitra feels that Mamata Banerjee had shown mercy by not 'forcibly' recovering the land. As for improvements to the Bill, he suggests that the word 'forthwith' be replaced by a

specific time period of a fortnight or a year. And he hoped that successive notifications would reveal the content of words like ‘socio economic development, employment generation, industry and other public purposes of the state’ more clearly.⁴⁶

The next speaker was Rabindranath Bhattacharya who hailed from Singur and was popularly known as *Mastarmoshay* or school master. He starts his speech by mentioning that the day when the Bill is being debated in the Assembly was awaited not only by the ‘peasants’ of Singur but also by the entire peasant community of West Bengal. Here ‘peasant’ seems to refer to a way of life connected with agriculture rather than specific relations of production. He says that the movement was built around the personality of Mamata Banerjee who was the chief source of inspiration and had won victory by remaining steadfast even by risking her life. Thus, other sources of spontaneous protests that were apolitical or of other political formations were brought under the shadow of the TMC. After the change of government her first task was to give back the land to the unwilling peasants. This was a noble act and that the people of Singur were with Mamata Banerjee. As to the allegations raised by the opposition that the TMC government was rushing through the Bill, Bhattacharya says that there was a similar attempt by the LFG to invite the Tatas and build the factory in a hurry. He says that the day the LFG was sworn in 2006, there was an announcement of 1000 acres being given to the Tatas for the automobile factory. The Government was in such haste that they did not even take the consent of those peasants whose lands were taken and no notice was served on them. Even the local CPI(M) leaders or the peasants who were CPIM supporters were not informed. As the MLA, Bhattacharya was not informed of the process of land acquisition. He criticises the process as an outcome of Buddhadeb’s arrogance after the 2006 elections where riding on the back of 235 seats in the Vidhan Sabha, his party refused to listen to 30 voices of the opposition. Buddhadeb had even claimed that 954 acres of land were given willingly whereas the Land Reforms Minister Rezzak Mollah had said that only 326 acres were given willingly for the factory. He further says that the LFG had in principle given support to the Bill now but it didn’t seem that they actually supported the Bill from their past actions. People had understood this and had brought the LFG to its present condition. The slogan of the sickle and the hammer that the Communists used could not establish any emotional connect with the peasants as the metaphoric hammer had oppressed peasants and intimidated them to take away their lands. To fulfil the desire of Tatas, the land

⁴⁶ Ibid pp.43-5.

which the peasants owned for generations was taken away from them. He wished that the communists never repeated these mistakes in future and got wiped away.⁴⁷

The next speaker was the Leader of the Opposition Surjya Kanta Mishra. He expresses his party's support for the Bill from the standpoint of principle and wants that the peasants of Singur get back their land. But whether the Bill introduced in the Assembly could actually help the peasants get back their land is something which Mishra expresses his reservation about. He says that it was initially reported in the newspapers that the Government would bring about an amendment in the Land Acquisition act, 1894 and the process of giving back land to the peasants could be done very easily. He states the case of Tamil Nadu where the Land Acquisition Act was amended in 1997 and received Presidential assent. Section 48B of the Act provided that if the acquired land was not required for the purpose for which it was originally acquired in those circumstances then the Government could return the land to the peasant if he was willing to give back the amount given to him for acquiring the land, in short, the compensation amount. But the same exercise was not being done in Singur and the Bill used phrases like the land being 'taken over' and 'vested'. But in effect the land was acquired under the Land Acquisition Act, 1894 and so could turn out to be inconsistent with the provisions of the State law. The second point to which he draws the attention of the House is how could the government define the term 'unwilling'. As to the method of giving back the land to the peasant, Mishra says that there were peasants who had willingly wanted to part with their land for industry. In this case the Government had made the claim that they would be able to give back the land to the affected peasants. But a situation might arise where a person was in possession of *sukha land* before the acquisition but would get *sali land* after the passage of the Bill. The land was given to Tata Motors by a lease under the Transfer of Property Act. The State Government under the TMC had the power to cancel the lease granted to the Tatas and retrieve the land. He says that after the Tatas had been granted 1100 acres of land they had shifted the factory to Sanand in Gujarat. It was recorded that the Tatas had opined that they had wanted the industry to be built but it did not happen at Singur. So they had demanded compensation to the tune of Rs. 500 to Rs. 600 crores. The relevant files had been sent from the Minister of Industries to the Chief Minister. Anyways the LFG had refused compensation to them. If the present Government had carried out the activities under the Transfer of Property Act, then the Tatas might have demanded compensation from the TMC as well. So, Mishra feels that the TMC Government which actually should have

⁴⁷ Ibid pp. 46-8.

received compensation must not go ahead with giving compensation to the Tatas as mentioned in the Bill. The Transfer of Property Act could have been amended and the new Government got compensation from the Tatas. Mishra warns the Government not to get lost in the complexity of various Acts viz the Estates Acquisition Act, Transfer of Property Act, Contract Act etc. At this point there was noise due to which the speech was again disrupted. Mishra then goes on to point out that land was incorporated under List 2 in the Seventh Schedule of the Indian Constitution and was a State subject. Land acquisition and requisition fell under List 3 which was the Concurrent List. Any law made by the States under the Concurrent List required Presidential Assent which was not very certain for the Bill in the present context. So, he felt that the government was misguided. Towards the end of his speech he mentions that the Central Government was in the process of creating a new Land Acquisition Act which would hopefully address the issues of rehabilitation and compensation that were springing up throughout the country. But two years had elapsed and the Act had still not been framed even when the TMC shared power with the Central Government. So, the Government should insert a paragraph on the lines advised by Mishra in the Bill.⁴⁸

After the leader of the Opposition had his turn, Mamata Banerjee rose to proffer her point of view.

After thanking the *krishak* families, the *bargadars*, non-*bargadars* and *khetmajur*, she said that the new Government would not distinguish between any category of *krishak*. She tried to recall the ‘victims at Singur’ but could not do so within the limited time. She said that she was trying her best for Singur but could be misled by bureaucrats who had started their journey under the LFG. She defended the Industries Minister bringing the Bill in the House because the land was leased to the WBIDC. She said that more than the legal aspects, her decisions were based on ‘practicalities’. Towards the end of her speech she said that the people had voted the LFG out of power and the decision of the House would be final.⁴⁹

Land Acquisition post-Singur

West Bengal government did not develop any legal formula for the grant of compensation. Mamata Banerjee started giving Rs. 2000 to each family along with 16 kg of rice to each family who had lost land in Singur. But the largest sections of person were those who didn’t own any land and were out of whatever was improvised as a step towards compensation. In

⁴⁸ Ibid pp. 48-52.

⁴⁹ Ibid pp. 52-5.

Singur land owners who were at times absentee landlords had wanted to part with their land but the involvement of the landless persons or cultivators' sans property ownership who had supported the TMC could not be sustained after the TMC actually came to power.⁵⁰

Thus, after a perusal of the framing of the Singur Bill, we go on to analyse certain trends in the policy of the TMC towards land. For the LFG, acquisition of land for industry was an act of 'public interest' and the Government was to purchase land from the farmers for the WBIDC and then wanted to lease the land for industry at very low rates of interest. The acquisition rate was the mean of the land value calculated for five earlier years pending the acquisition and thus remained very low compared to the current market value. Thus, acquisition lacked an element of participation from local people with the Land and Land Reforms Department being given the power to fix the value of acquisition. The last chapter has discussed certain cases where the value of acquisition was protested against.

This policy was changed under the TMC Government.

West Bengal had rejected the Land Acquisition Act, 1894 and principles for implementing the Land Acquisition Act, 2013 were not framed by the Government. Mamata Banerjee in 2012 called the Land Acquisition Act, 1894 a 'draconian law'. An Expert Committee was created with Debabrata Bandopadhyay and Soumendranath Nag to frame a land policy for West Bengal. The Government would not acquire land at the barrel of a gun.

Given the history of violent protest against land acquisition not all of which were highlighted by the media before Singur and Nandigram, the policy followed under the TMC regarding the grant of land to industry could happen under roughly two ways.

First, a general policy was adopted that the Government would not interfere in the acquisition of land for industry. Rather the private capitalists would have to bargain with the local people and then acquire land on their own through direct purchase.⁵¹

Second, the private capitalist could also buy land directly from the state through the land bank of the WBIDC.⁵²

⁵⁰ TNN, 'Mamata Banerjee delivers 'success story', tinged with Singur regret, 20.5.2012, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/mamata-banerjee-delivers-success-story-tinged-with-singur-regret/articleshow/13309251.cms>.

⁵¹ B S Reporters, 'Wont acquire land for industry: Bengal', 20.1.2013, https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/won-t-acquire-land-for-industry-bengal-111070300024_1.html.

In 2016 the standpoint of the TMC Government regarding matters of land acquisition was vindicated by the Supreme Court in the judgement delivered under Kedar Nath Yadav vs State of West Bengal whereby it was held that acquisition of land for private industry cannot be defined as ‘public purpose’.⁵³ So the entire land was returned to peasants in Singur giving some kind of a seal of finality to an otherwise complicated issue. However, as the well-known aphorism goes ‘The Supreme Court is final not because it is true but because it is final’. The quote with Foucauldian moorings is relevant in the case of Singur because the judgement gave a moral and political victory to the TMC.

As regards the Government’s policy of acquiring land taking the legal route of the Land Acquisition Act, the policy adopted in the absence of any well-defined law was that the Government would acquire land through the Municipalities or the Zilla Parishad. A committee consisting of the District Magistrate, the District Land Revenue Officer, members of the Panchayat Samiti where the land was to be acquired, the Secretary of the Zilla Parishad and representatives from other administrative departments. The instruments of local self-government were to be involved in the acquisition of land. This committee was to be made representative as it consisted of both the people’s representatives as well as officers acting as the Government’s representatives. The members of this committee would fix the market value of land. Assessment of the value of land was to be carried out by the executive engineer of the Public Works Department or the Zilla Parishad. Another concept that was introduced was that of the ‘set forth price’. The question as to who would set forth the price was not very clear but what the policy implied was that the asking value for land in the market would be considered. The policy had a scope that the higher price between the assessed value of land and the asking value in the market would be adopted. So, land would be bought by the Government at the higher of the available prices in the absence of an Act of acquisition.⁵⁴

Since 2011 till 2016 there had practically been no acquisition of land by the government for the West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation. Out of the 4146 acres with the WBIDC, about 2000 acres were acquired by the various industries. There have been no official figures about the quantum of land purchased directly from local persons by the

⁵²Press Trust of India, ‘No Forcible Land Acquisition, we have land bank: Mamata Banerjee, 18.1.2016, <https://m.economictimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/no-forcible-land-acquisition-we-have-land-bank-mamata-banerjee/articleshow/50627256.cms>.

⁵³For details see Kedar Nath Yadav vs State of West Bengal and ors, 31st August, 2016, Civil Appeal No.8438 of 2016.

⁵⁴*West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings: Official Report, First Session, May and June 2011, op. cit.* pp.56-7.

private capitalists wanting to set up industry. But rather than the development of industry worth mentioning, the land was used for real estate development and in some cases ancillary units of already existing industries were set up. In the budget speech of 2016 it was mentioned by Mamata Banerjee that only 950 acres of land acquisition was sanctioned by the state and another 200 acres for the Central Government. As for the figures pertaining to land redistribution, it might be mentioned that homestead land to the tune of 5 decimals each has been distributed to 3.15 lakh of homeless people. The *pattas* of 3000 acres of agricultural land each measuring 28 decimals were distributed till 2016. So in a way legal rights were given to those who were holding land illegally without any change in the macro structure of land reform laws.⁵⁵

However, these steps were not always linked to political stability as land based protests continued unabated under the TMC. Land was acquired under the LFG for various projects and the TMC as the opposition played a role in mobilising protests both against the acquisition of land and also the price that the dispossessed persons were getting for their land. But after coming to power the political leadership of these protest movements were abandoned by the TMC.

The land bank that was created under the TMC held land in parcels and thus was not attractive to the industrialists. Moreover, the land was held in areas where infrastructure was not well developed with proper facilities for power, roads or electricity and this acted as an impediment for acquisition of land. The industrialists who would buy land from the WBIDC were to do so at the prevailing market price. Another factor that could be noticed during this period was people's resentment which manifested itself in people demanding back their land once they realised that industries would not come up on the acquired land. People had been given vocational training for a year but in the absence of factories opportunities could not be availed of. Rather this land was being given out for real estate. Land was taken at perhaps Rs. 2000 per *cottah* but was given to real estate developers at even 40 times that price. Land acquired during the LFG rule did not meet with any logical conclusion under the TMC but there was uncertainty.⁵⁶

West Bengal Land Reforms (Amendment) Bill,2012

⁵⁵ For details see <https://www.wbidc.com/wbidc-land/availability-of-land-modules>.

⁵⁶ Audio-visual document, 'Contemporary West Bengal: A Panel Discussion' - Part -I, Swati Bhattacharjee and Rajat Roy, Azim Premji University, <https://youtu.be/Nuvi433rReQ?si=CIEf73hkPQz4kAaz>.

The West Bengal Land Reforms Amendment Act was moved by Industries Minister Partha Chatterjee in 2012.⁵⁷ The Speaker referred to the motion by Leader of the Opposition Surjya Kanti Mishra to have the Bill referred to a Select Committee of the House. Whether the Bill would be referred to the Select Committee was a matter of discussion which would be decided after the general discussion according to the Speaker.

Subhash Naskar started his comments by questioning the absence of the concerned Ministers from the floor of the House. He mentioned the Amendment which the LFG had tried to bring in the LRA in 2006 and which was opposed by the TMC in Opposition. The Bill in 2006 was referred to the Select Committee and then due to a lack of consensus among the members present, was ultimately dropped. Naskar highlights this fact to show that the Bill opposed by the TMC in Opposition was being brought in by the TMC when in power. This he said showed the 'lack of principle' which guide decision making. He points out that the opposition had promised that two or three cropped fertile land would not be acquired for industry, power etc. But the Bill was silent regarding these issues.⁵⁸

The Bill removed the ceiling limits for land to be used for industry or for other purposes. But the Bill was silent regarding the ceiling limit of land to be offered to the corporate houses. The Bill gave rights to the owners of land to keep land above the ceiling limit in future. Naskar takes his chance to mention that Zamindari was abolished and whatever remained was abolished by way of the land reforms carried out under the LFG. Even successive Prime Ministers had praised West Bengal's efforts in this direction. He said that the TMC was trying to bring in the old Zamindari system through the hands of the corporates. Despite protests at Singur and the fasts which had shaken West Bengal politics, the TMC had used the opportunity to bring in this Bill to favour the corporates as it was silent on acquisition of double or triple cropped fertile land. He brings in the issue of the TMC promising the dispossessed persons of rehabilitation and compensation along with a job. But the Bill was silent regarding the issue of compensation also. Panchayats, municipalities, government companies could acquire land exceeding the ceiling limit also. The effect of the proposed amendment would be to 'alienate' people from the positive achievements of the land reform projects carried out by the LFG. He says that the Opposition at times said 'good things'. He says that under the instructions of Chief Minister Banerjee, the Vidhan Parishad Bill that was

⁵⁷ West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceeding: Official report, Vol.140, No. 2, March-April 2012 (Government of West Bengal).

⁵⁸ Ibid pp. 648-49.

discussed in the Select Committee for two months was shelved 'in a second'. An issue which is as complicated as land should not be passed after only an hour long discussion. He ends his speech by expressing his disapproval of the Bill.

The next Speaker Kalipada Mandal opined that the Bill was extremely important and that the previous Speaker had confused the House regarding the intentions of the Bill. He says that the Land Reforms Act of 1955 gave exemptions to the ceiling limit to tea estates, towns that had grown up beside tea estates, dairy, poultry and factories were brought under ceiling exempted entities.

The exemptions were granted under Section 14Y. The amendment was brought in so that exemptions could be extended in the fields of biotechnology and information technology. So industry and technology was 'not compatible' with the present ceilings which were thus extended. Jobs were going to be created and thus the Government had exempted certain industries from the ceiling limits.

Another rationale given for the Amendments was that under the LFG the industrialists had to run from pillar to post of the Land Reforms Department and without contacts and bribery given at the Writers Building, work could not be done. The amendment was brought in to remove corruption. The 'promoter raj' would also be wiped out and Mandal drops the example of the Vedic Village incident at Rajarhat. The exemptions given to the promoters would be taken away by the Amendment.

The lands which were lying unused for more than 3 years were to be confiscated by the Government and thus there was less chance of land being misused like under the LFG. He then reads out the list of entities that were exempted from the land ceiling provisions. In addition to Panchayats and the municipalities, the WBIDC and Government companies could also keep land upto 24 acres without the permission of the Land Reforms Department. The Government would not acquire land for the industrialists. The industrialists would have to purchase land from their own and the Government would give the requisite permissions. But the promoters were not exempted from the land ceiling. He gives the reference of Rezzak Mollah who had said that a person who couldn't catch a '*hele*' snake was trying to catch a cobra in the wake of the Singur agitation.

He then concludes his speech by saying that the LFG acquired land forcefully and often when middle and the marginal farmers had given land and shown interest for industry, they had stymied such moves. He gives the example of one Murarimohan Manna who had given 32

Bighas of land for the construction of an ITI but the LFG had used that space to lodge their supporters during Operation Barga.⁵⁹

The next Speaker was Chowdhury Mohammed Hidayatullah. He started by criticising the Amendment by saying that under the new rules, companies with 49% private capital could keep land outside the ceiling limits. KMDA, HIDCO could also without inspection of the Land Reforms Department keep land outside the ceiling limits. This would encourage the 'promoter raj' in West Bengal in the name of abolishing it. This would lead to a situation of food insecurity as existed before 1977 when people got to eat only when Milo came from outside. Land ceilings had expanded the food market and food security in West Bengal and now under Section 14(8) when provisions were made for abolishing the ceiling limits, then land would be concentrated in a few hands again. Hidayatullah objects to the Bill saying that it would change the very character of land. He drops the reference that when the LFG had brought the Bill in 2006, it was sent to the Select Committee due to pressure from the opposition. He demands that the Bill in 2012 be referred to the Select Committee again. He brings in his perceptions of Singur by saying that the Government didn't give any direct rights on the land to the Tatas. The land was acquired by the WBIDC and then given to the Tatas. He criticises the TMC Government's stance that there would be no state acquisition of land on the grounds that most of the land was owned by marginal farmers owning 12 *shatak* or 1 *Bigha* of land as a result of the land reform measures. So, it would be very difficult for the private capitalists to acquire land on their own in the face of difficulties. The flight of industry would be 'very dangerous ' and in this situation state acquisition of land was necessary for industrial development. In the absence of state intervention in acquisition, the middlemen would acquire land at any price and the owners of land would be cheated. The scope for agricultural activities would reduce as exemptions from the ceiling limit were granted to industrial hubs, industrial parks, industrial assets, warehouse, agro industry, thermal power generation centres, film cities, tourism centres, medical colleges, food parks, airports etc. Government companies would carry out construction companies and then sell off the land to private players. Ponds would get filled and as in recent times in Bali a TMC leader was murdered. Criminal trends would increase. He refers to these as signs of public disapproval of the TMC. However, this speech is welcoming for industry while not deviating from the official Left position on land reforms.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Ibid pp.650-52.

⁶⁰ Ibid pp.653-54.

Deboprasad Roy of Congress started his speech by supporting the land reform Amendments which had been brought in. He recites Tagore and says that the metaphorical owner in Tagore had wanted to buy land but the LFG had forcefully acquired land and two 'historic' struggles were seen in Singur and Nandigram. Since the present government had its support base in these movements, it was expected that it would tread carefully on the issue of land and land reform. He then dwells on the relation between land movements and land reform in West Bengal. During the Tebhaga movement the slogan that a peasant would should get two thirds of the produce reverberated throughout West Bengal from the seas to the hills. He then gives the reference of Abani Lahiri who in his book *'Tirish Chollisher Bangla'* (Bengal of the 30s) had opined that the history of Bengal would have been different if the Communists had not sided with the British and instead supported peasants like Kansha Halder. So the Land Reform Acts had a particular context. After Independence, Acts were framed and Amendments were brought in to make the Act more people friendly. The present Amendments reducing the ceiling limits were one such step which would make the Act more suitable for the times. Roy praises another provision in the Act which stipulated that a land lying empty for more than three years would be taken over by the Government as this would end the rule of the land mafia. He then puts forward two suggestions. The first suggestion related to the fact that the words 'acquire' and 'acquisition' were anathema for the public in the present political context and thus be removed from the Bill. He also elicits a reply from the Minister on the fact that allowing a private entity to give a lease to the *raiyyat* would create a class between the Government and the *raiyyat*. He then says that like the land was returned to the unwilling peasants in Singur, in the same vein, land should also be returned to the peasants of Jalpaiguri two of whom had succumbed to police bullets in 2003 while protesting the acquisition of land for a project. He says that Jalpaiguri had seen Tebhaga struggle but the situation was different now. He says that in Jalpaiguri, people like the land owners, Power Grid officials and the District Administration were waiting with bated breath for the passage of the Bill and when informed that the Government would not acquire land, there was a sigh of relief. The Power Grid to be set up on 180 acres' land at a cost of Rs. 4000 crore would bring in electricity and a wave of development for the local people who had willingly given up their land for the project.⁶¹

The next Speaker Tarun Kanti Naskar said that Justice Shamsuddin Ahmed had declared section 4 of the Land Reforms Act unconstitutional and that the matter was sub-judice in the

⁶¹ Ibid pp. 654-57.

Supreme Court. He questions whether the Government could bring in an amendment at this juncture. He also says that the Bill would negate much of the purposes with which Land Reform Acts were framed, namely to prevent the concentration of land ownership in the hands of *Jotedars* and big farmers. As the LFG had amended Section 14Z of the Act, attempts were made to sell -off lucrative government businesses to private hands. So now the capitalists would try to grab and manipulate whatever was lying and this would negate the purposes of the Land Reform Acts.⁶²

The next Speaker Udayan Guha started his speech by referring to the speech of DP Roy that there were some reasons why the LFG was reduced to the opposition from a ruling coalition. He mentioned that Chief Minister Banerjee had said that land would not be acquired forcefully from peasants and that industries would not be built on agricultural land. Section 4 of the old law stipulated that the ownership of a piece of land would change only by means of heredity or when a *raiyat* sold off the land. But the new law allowed the *raiyat* to lease out the whole or a part of the land to industrial hubs or bio tech parks or food parks after the project report was vetted and approved by the concerned Government Department. He says that the Bill is silent regarding the nature of land that can be leased out. Whether a *raiyat* could lease only mono cropped land or whether multi cropped land could also be leased out was something that the Bill remained silent about. He said that in West Bengal the tribals could not lease out land to non tribals. The Bill was silent on the issue of whether tribals could lease out land to the non tribals. If a lease was for a period of 999 years, then there remained no chance of change in ownership. And through the Amendments the government had created an opportunity for the land sharks to grab the land. The entire community depended upon agricultural land and whether the lease allowed for in the law was relevant for the food security of 9 crore people of West Bengal was an important issue. The Government had expanded the list of exempted entities from the ceiling limits of 24 acres of non-irrigated land and 17 acres of irrigated land. He asks whether the definition of a person would include any individual or a firm, company, an institution or a body of individuals. He says that in a Government company upto 49% of the shares were held by the private sector and that the Amendment would help in opening up the land for the private sector even though the government was saying that it was the PPP model that would create new work places. He says that Partha Chatterjee had referred to the creation of land use maps. According to Guha, the land use map would contain details of whether land would be used for industry, or

⁶² Ibid pp.657-58.

whether land was required for water bodies or forested areas etc. But rather than creating a land use map, the ceiling limits on land were relaxed and if land was lying unused for more than 3 years it would be auctioned and sold off. Work would be done at an incremental pace per year on the land to show that it was not lying unused. If a bank said that the land was used as a mortgage for a loan, then also not could not be taken by the government after 3 years even if it lay unused. Even after auctions, land could not be returned to the peasants as the 'character' of land could be changed after submission of fees under Section 4C. He said that it would have been good had the Chief Minister been present in the House that day and that she should listen to 9 crore people of West Bengal rather than her party men only as the Bill had ramifications on the food security of the entire state. He ends his speech by mentioning what he sees as the 'hypocrisy' of the TMC as they had tried to stall a similar Bill when it was brought by the LFG in 2006 and subsequently it was dropped after being referred to a Select Committee.⁶³

The next Speaker Becharam Manna opened his speech by attacking the LFG on a sarcastic note by saying that the land reforms carried out during the LFG had reduced them to the opposition from the ruling party. He says that under the LFG the land of the TMC supporters were converted into *khas land* and *pattas* given not legally but through use of brute force. He said that the LFG was trying to obstruct whatever 'good work' was being done by the TMC. In this case the passage of the Bill was being delayed by being referred to the Select Committee.

He attacked the charge brought against the TMC that food security of the state would be affected on the grounds that the same was done by the LFG when multi cropped land was acquired for industry in Singur and in Nandigram in 2006.

He says that before a peasant could lease his land for any industrial park, industrial establishment, Foods Park or any bio technology park, the permission of the Government authorities was then needed. And he repeated the oft quoted statement from the Chief Minister that multi-cropped fertile land would not be acquired for industry and the lands of the 'unwilling peasants' would not be acquired. He gives the picture of Tapasi Malik who was raped and murdered during the Singur fiasco. He says that the Bill would stop the illegal activities of promoters who had filled up water bodies near Kolkata under the LFG and even changed the character of land in many cases. He said that the LFG had raised many kinds of

⁶³ Ibid pp.658-61.

slogans regarding industry and agriculture but the state required the progress of industry and jobs. So the TMC was following its 'own policy'. So he repeats the list of exempted entities from the provisions of the land ceiling Act. He said that land was acquired for building a food park at Dankuni under Jyoti Basu but it was lying unused. We learn from his speech that ceiling surplus land acquired from Hindustan Motors was sold off but the land was unused. So the Amendment had fixed limits on the ceiling which was 17.3 in irrigated areas and 24.22 in non irrigated areas but after submitting a project report then the government would allow exemptions from the ceiling. The next charge brought by Manna against the LFG was that of corruption when he said that project reports were not submitted and there were underhand dealing which benefitted the relatives of many LFG leaders. The present Bill would stop all this. As regards the charge that a similar Bill was brought in under the LFG and then opposed by the TMC, Manna says that the present Bill differed much from that Bill. The present Bill under the *Ma Mati Manush* Government would help in industrial development and bring in jobs in the future. Agricultural activities would flourish along with industry. He says that in self-governing areas like the Panchayats and the municipalities, the Government companies had limited the private shares at 49%. He says that the Opposition provided by the Left was against Mamata Banerjee meaning it lacked principles.⁶⁴

The next Speaker was Surjya Kanta Mishra who repeated his earlier argument that the Bill must be referred back to the Select Committee. He did not go into a discussion of the similarities which the present Bill had with the Bill brought in by the LFG.

Mishra then says that it was a rule that societies would embark on the path of industrialisation from agriculture. A country dependent on agriculture would eventually make the shift towards an industrialised economy which would be much more 'developed' and that would benefit the people who were dependent on agriculture also. The shift would be from the 'village to the city' but the village would not remain underdeveloped. In this model, the villages would also be much more developed than in an economy dependent on agriculture. He gives the examples of villages in the developed countries where infrastructure was developed and prosperous persons resided as their land was situated there. So striking the 'balance' between the village and the city was important. If any error was committed in the balance, repercussions would follow and that's why Mishra feels that the Bill needed more discussions. He felt that the present Bill given its huge scope could not be discussed within the short span of time given by the Assembly. When the LFG had brought the Bill it was

⁶⁴ Ibid pp. 661-64.

withdrawn after opposition members objected to the contents in the Select Committee meetings. It was good that the new TMC Government had revived the Bill which required discussion as it dealt with balance. He tries to draw continuity here. He says that there were two ways of acquiring land for industry. First land could be acquired. Second, an individual could buy land from peasants. In this case the Bill allowed the peasants to lease land to the industrialists. Mishra objects to this as he feels that if the Government removed itself from land acquisition then a new class of middlemen or *dalals* would be created. He uses the terms land sharks or land mafia. He says that he had brought in an amendment when he was the Minister that educational and medical institutions would be exempted from the land ceiling limits. This Amendment was later withdrawn. He gives the example of Singapore where he says that medical institutions are multi-storeyed. So he feels that the demand of the Medical Council of India that a medical institution would need 25 acres of land was flawed. Medical institutions should not be exempted from the ceiling limits.

He says that 'thousands of acres' of land were being acquired in West Bengal for educational institutions and this also should stop. He questions the definition of 'person' in Clause 3 Subsection 6 and asks whether an individual would also be included within that definition. If that was the case, then he says that the entire project of land reform carried out by the LFG under provisions of the Estates Acquisition Act, Land Reforms Act, and Ceiling Acts etc. would be negated. So, the Bill required further thought.

He points out a few errors in the language of the Bill in the phrase 'Government may by rules prescribe, acquire' wherein he says that if the term 'acquisition' was used then it would be construed to mean that the land would vest in the state. Land was a technical issue and so required extensive discussions. He ends by giving the example of the murder of a TMC leader at Howrah over allegations of filling up of watery bodies in the face of a movement after a High Court order and the locals demanded a CBI inquiry into the same. So, land was a very complicated issue.⁶⁵

The next Speaker was Industries Minister Partha Chatterjee who begins with an attack on the Left by saying that was it serious about the slogan that agriculture was the foundation and industries are the future? He says that the lands of the peasants were grabbed forcefully in Singur, Nandigram, Netai and Bhangor using the administration and party cadres. Peasants were raped and even killed. He says that the Government was working on the definitions of

⁶⁵ Ibid pp. 664-66.

the terms 'acquire' and 'acquisition' in accordance with the principle of the Government that no land would be acquired forcefully. He then attacks the hypocrisy of the LFG by saying that while it had sent the Bill to the Select Committee for considerations, lands belonging to the peasants were forcefully grabbed. He says that two points required consideration. The first point was that those capitalists who had invested in West Bengal on land acquired by the Government but felt derided as operations did not ensue. The second issue was regarding those capitalists who wanted to invest in West Bengal. He says that Subhas Naskar had raised the issue of 'unlimited quantum holding' of land. Making a political point, Chatterjee says that the Bill would be considered by a Committee of Ministers at the helm of which sat Mamata Banerjee herself. Any Bill would be vetted through this Committee which would function with the principle of saving peasants as well as bringing in industry. The LFG had killed peasants while the TMC had fought for the peasants. Chatterjee then asks whether in the 1960s anybody had heard of concepts like 'industrial hubs', 'financial hubs' or even a 'food processing park'. So keeping in tune with the times, the definition of what constituted industry would change while not harming the interests of those dependent on agricultural activities. So the concept of a *raiyyat* being permitted to lease out his land for industry was included in the Act and not the legal concept of a 'transfer'. As for what constituted the upper limit of a ceiling for those exempted, the decision taken by the Committee of Ministers under the Cabinet would be final. He asks why D P Roy had not mentioned the issue of thousands of tea gardens but based his talk only on the issue of a few tea gardens of Jalpaiguri. DP Roy at this juncture mentioned the use of the word 'acquire' in Paragraph 2. Chatterjee answered that the lease of land was permitted only under specific circumstances and that the Land Reforms Act was not a substitute for the Land Acquisition Act. Chatterjee again repeats that no land would be acquired forcibly and an agreement of lease was allowed only on certain specific items. He responds to Subhas Naskar who had raised the issue of the compensation clause in Section 4 being sub-judice by saying that the issue of compensation being referred to was payable when land was vested. Compensation of such a nature was provided in Section 14V. He responds to Mishra's allegation that the Bill provided for a one-time conversion of land by saying that the TMC Government was paying the price for the 'sins' committed by the LFG. The present Bill was very sensitive and TMC leaders had fought for peasants. The TMC wanted industry and was not against industrialisation. Chatterjee claimed that the party had taken this stand even in the face of revolting peasants when it faced charges of being against industry. However, industry was needed not on multi-cropped land but on land meant for industry and agricultural activities would thrive on agricultural land. He

refutes references to the Food Movement made by Opposition speakers by saying that the present Bill was needed only to strike a 'balance between industry and agriculture'.⁶⁶

A lot of time had already been wasted since the 1991 liberalisation reforms and industrialisation was the priority for West Bengal. Real estate would not take the place of industry. The Government wanted to have oversight over the kind of land that was chosen by private capitalists for industry and for those coming in at the present; provisions were made for Project Reports, Detailed Project Reports within 3 years, and details of the investment and job creation prospects. The Committee of Ministers would look into the issue. The aim was to save agriculture, industry and create jobs.

The Bill was put to vote and Mishra's demand for the Bill to be sent to the Select Committee was rejected by 152 to 46 votes.

In the last chapter we have described the two major amendments having bearing on land that was brought in after the Trinamool Congress was voted into power in 2011. The Land Reform Acts were further amended in 2016 and 2017 again and we shall describe those in this chapter. We shall also analyse the events around the experiences of land acquisition for the open cast coal mine at Birbhum district till 2021 when the time period selected for our research ends.

Land Acquisition for Coal Mines in Birbhum

We shall start with a quick recap of the major incidents. The DVC had sent a letter to the Ministry of Coal for identification of captive coal blocks to meet the power requirements of the proposed Maithan left bank power project. In pursuance of the letter, the coal blocks of Barajora (N), Khagra -Joydev and Kasta (E) that were under the command area of the ECL were allocated for captive mining for Mejia extension unit 4 and 5 and 6 and also The Durgapur Steel TPS to the Damodar Valley Corporation in 2005 under the recommendations of the Steering Committee. The DVC was to contact the State Government for necessary formalities to complete the lease agreement. However, the allocation of the coal blocks could be cancelled if there was 'unsatisfactory progress' in the development of the coal mining project and also in implementation of the end use TPS.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Ibid pp.666-70.

⁶⁷ Letter No. 47011/4/2003-CPAM/CA, Government of India, Ministry of Coal to Damodar Valley Corporation, Kolkata, 03.03.2005.

There are reports of illegal mining being done at the spot but those remain unverified. A public hearing was held on 25.11.2008 at the Office of the Birbhum Land and Land Reforms Officer. Environmental Clearance was obtained on 22.6.2009 and the project was declared as a 'green field' project.⁶⁸ About 1215.14 hectares of land was required for the project to be used for open pit mining. 814.34 hectares was agricultural land, 285.6 hectares was forest land, 44.58 hectares was forest land and 82.88 hectares was comprised of land of other types.⁶⁹ The population dependent on land in the area consisted of marginalised farmers; 'khetmajur' or agricultural labourers and both recorded and unrecorded 'bargadars'. Many of the landless workers went to adjacent Burdwan district to work.⁷⁰

Protests started at Loba not over the allocation of blocks but over the amount of compensation that the concerned persons had received for the land which was acquired. The next important incident was the Meeting that was held between the local inhabitants and the DVC and EMTA group in 2010 on 15.11.2010. We look at the proceedings of the meeting to get an idea of the demands placed by various affected persons before the District Magistrate of Birbhum.⁷¹

Sisir Rana placed the demand on behalf of the 'agricultural families'. We come to know that it had been settled with the local people that the rate of land was enhanced at least 10% over the land value. The Record of Rights should be updated based on physical verification. Agricultural 'marginal' labour would receive Rs. 1 lakh as compensation. Employment would be given to at least one person from a land loser's family. The fishermen were to be treated as a 'bargadar'. Artisans like potters, ironsmiths and wood workers who would lose their business as a result of the open cast colliery should be paid a compensation of Rs 1 lakh. Right of the *Patta* should be treated as *raiya*. In other words, even if the land changed hands and was utilised for coal mining, the *bargadars* would have to be treated as owners of land and could not be evicted. The names of the land loser should be listed to the employment exchange. 50% of bonus amount would have to be given to each *bargadar* on 40% compensation overhead. The *bargadars* and the *pattadars* would be involved in labour intensive work at the project site. As for rehabilitation, hygienic facilities, drinking water and facilities for education should be given to the displaced persons at the place of rehabilitation

⁶⁸ Purba Kolkata Nagarik Mancha, *Loba: Ekti Todontomulak Anusandhan*, (Kolkata, Anisha, 2012), p16.

⁶⁹ Ibid p.17.

⁷⁰ Ibid p.6.

⁷¹ Proceedings of the meeting held at Prashashan Bhavan, Birbhum Collectorate regarding Rehabilitation and Relief Package for establishing coal mines through negotiations between DVC-EMTA and local inhabitants under Dubrajpur Block Land and Land Reforms Officer, 15.11.2010.

the cost of which would be borne by DVC and EMTA. The project authorities would have to purchase land from the sand bank areas like Palashdanga and Debipur where the inhabitants would not be able to make a sustainable living once the coal mine became operational. In the 'Diara' plots real cultivators would have to be listed up and they would be paid the same amount of compensation as paid to the other land owners. Ujjal Ghosh who was the President of the Loba Panchayat from the TMC suggested that EMTA should purchase land in an area just outside the periphery of the proposed coal mines belt for the sake of health, hygiene and good agricultural atmosphere. Khelapat Hossain who was the Saha Sabhapati of the Dubrajpur Panchayat Samiti pointed out that some farmers had still not been recorded as *bargadars* and that they had no papers in support of their occupation or cultivation rights. Some recorded landowners were untraceable for years and those who had occupied the land were getting 'cent percent share' from the land. The Pradhan of the Loba Panchayat expressed the viewpoint that the progress of preparation of Record of Rights by the Block Land and Land Revenue Officer was to be taken up in a targeted manner within a time frame and that more man power needed to be introduced for this purpose. At this point the District Magistrate of Birbhum suggested that the proposals made by the various persons seemed to be justified and should be taken up by the authority of DVC and EMTA. He also advised the BLLRO of Dubrajpur to record all problems faced in issues like updating of the Record of Rights, determination of unrecorded *bargadars*, marginal labourers, fishermen, forcible occupiers, conversion of land etc. Appropriate steps were to be taken to mitigate these issues at the earliest considering their gravity. The need for imparting of modern training to the youth of agricultural workers, marginal labourers, *bargadars* etc. for their employment was stressed upon by the DM. There was a suggestion that the EMTA authorities should give the 'top priority' for employment amongst the local skilled and unskilled labour as far as practicable. After this the Director of DVC-EMTA N C Mukherjee opined that the rate of land had been fixed 'after a long discussion and negotiation' lasting 'two years' with the 'local people and Panchayat'. The rates were Rs. 10 lakhs per acre for high class agricultural land (two or more crops per season), Rs. 8 lakhs per acre for middle class agricultural land that was mono cropped and Rs. 4 lakhs per acre for sandbanks. Since the rates were 'already declared settled', the issue of 10% raise and 50% additional rate of bonus amount should be discarded. He said that places of worship would be built up as per the necessity of local persons. He also assured that the health, hygiene and the benefits of the agricultural family would be considered while building up the main project. 50% of the land value was to be given to an occupier of land if no claimant appeared from the side of the recorded owner of

land. A modern township having all amenities would be built at the new rehabilitation site. Each family would be provided at least 550 square feet of house and 5 decimal of land irrespective of the quantum of land they held previously. Families who held larger areas of land would be given valuation as per government rules and given the same amount of home stead land. A market complex would be built so that the land losers would get employed and the existing hawkers and traders would get the first priority. Existing shopkeepers and traders would be given a onetime grant of Rs. 30000 to run their business. A modern and well equipped fifty bed hospital would be built for the local people. A secondary and a higher secondary school would be built. A bridge would be built over the Ajoy River for better communication between Burdwan and Birbhum. 50% of the acquired land was to be returned after 8 years after appropriate steps were taken to make the land fit for agriculture. These proposals were in addition to the earlier rehabilitation package that was 'already circulated for public hearing'. The DM expressed satisfaction regarding the outcome of the meetings. The meeting had no proper representation of the affected villagers.⁷²

On 26.11.2010 we find evidence of a letter sent by the *Loba Krishijami Raksha Committee* (Save Farmlands in Loba) (LKJRC) to Samir Putatundu of the Party for Democratic Socialism in which it was mentioned that for the purposes of acquiring land for the coal mine, the private company was using 'dishonest government officials' and 'middlemen' or *dalals*. As a result, the 'poor villagers' were being deprived from getting a proper price for their lands as the prices were not determined. Land was already being acquired through this process. Despite informing various Government Departments and the local Panchayats, the situation had not changed. It was being spread that there were 'mass hearings' but there was no official Government notification and the peasants who had cultivated their land for generations were being kept in the dark. He then mentions certain demands of the persons who were carrying out the movement. First, the authorities of DVC- EMTA would have to take the opinions of the persons whose lands were being acquired. Second, the entire amount of land, 'vastu' land and villages would have to be acquired at one time. Third, if the compensatory amount was adequate then the villagers had no problem in parting with their lands. Fourth, the *bargadars*, *dinmajur* or daily wage labourers, the *khetmajur* or agricultural workers and fishermen would have to be given adequate compensation. The letter concludes

⁷² Ibid.

with the plea that it must be seen that the villagers get a just amount of compensation for their land.⁷³

On 18th February, a representation was made before Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya by the *Loba Krishi Jomi Raksha Committee*. After the change in Government the affected persons did not give up their demands and a letter was sent to Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee for the ‘proper compensation’ to the ‘unwilling farmers of ten *mouzas* regarding forcible purchase of land to set up an open cast mine’. The DVC-EMTA was purchasing land ‘illegally’ through an agent. The affected persons were not ‘against industrialisation’ and that for the land looser to have a job, a cooperative body needed to be opened and run.⁷⁴

JCB machines were brought in on 18th December to start the process of acquisition of land. The local people staged a sit in demonstration and even the police could not retrieve the machines in the face of the protests. It was then that the Sub Divisional Officer called a tripartite meeting to sort out the issues.⁷⁵

A meeting was held at the Office of the Sub Divisional Officer at Suri (Sadar) Birbhum on 22nd December, 2011. As we can glean from the Resolution adopted at the meeting, Joydip Mazumdar, who represented the KJRC submitted his allegations against the DVC-EMTA that the resolution adopted at the last meeting that land which was to be purchased would be properly demarcated before any mining operation could be carried out was not followed.⁷⁶

At the meeting, the authorities of DVC-EMTA opined that they would ‘clearly demarcate’ the land before digging or mining operations in the interest of safety of life and ‘transparency’. At this meeting the Officer in Charge of Dubrajpur Police Station was directed to take appropriate legal action regarding the issue of ‘illegal activities’ by EMTA regarding stoppage of the natural course of Hinglow in pursuance of a FIR being lodged by the SDO. The LKJRC opined that they were willing to sell their lands subject to the condition that a ‘fair agricultural market rate’ would be followed as ‘per the Government policy’ and the DVC-EMTA would implement the provisions of the rehabilitation package as had been said in their project report. The OC of Dubrajpur PS was also requested to take appropriate steps following the law if the KJRC despite repeated requests by the DVC- EMTA did not release

⁷³ Letter (From Krishi Jomi Raksha Committee to Samir Putatandu), 26.11.2010.

⁷⁴ Letter (From Krishi Jomi Raksha Committee to Chief Minister, Government of West Bengal), 6.6.2011.

⁷⁵ Letter (From Krishi Jomi Raksha Committee to Chief Minister, Government of West Bengal), 5.1.2012.

⁷⁶ Resolution of the Meeting held with DVC-EMTA and Krishi Jomi Raksha Committee in the Office Chamber of the Sub Divisional Officer, Sadar, Suri, Government of West Bengal, Office of the SDO, Suri (Sadar), Birbhum, 22.12.2011.

the JCB machines from their captivity by the next day. The KJRC also demanded that a meeting be held with the representatives of the Company. The Resolution had accepted that the demands of the KJRC be added as an annexure. We take a quick look through the demands. The KJRC submitted a memorandum containing the proposed cooperative comprised of the villagers who were dependent on the land that was being acquired for the mining project. The name of the cooperative was *Lobama Shilpa Samabay Samiti Limited* and these were the demands as is found in the paper submitted at the SDO office. The entire amount of land of 3353 acres would be acquired by the cooperative. The landowners, *bargadars* and *pattadars* would be the shareholders of the cooperative. The task of rehabilitation would be carried out by the cooperative. The affected areas would be provided with potable water and also water for irrigation purposes. Roads, drains and electricity would also be provided. A 50 bed hospital with ambulatory services and doctors available through the day would be built by the cooperative. Subsidies would be provided for the education of children in the affected areas. The price of one acre of land was decided at Rs. 24 lakhs. The *bargadars* would get 25% over what the landowners had received for an acre that amounted to Rs. 6 lakhs per acre. The *pattadars* would get the same amount of compensation that the landowners received. The landless 'peasants' would receive work for which wages would be paid at Government rates. The cooperative would on the lines of Coal India Limited create employment opportunities as for merit in it. The excavated coal would be transported on vehicles for which a cooperative would be formed. The cooperative would help in creating a market in the area. The cooperative would for the next 40 years pay its members Rs. 10000 as pension on a yearly basis and the amount could be increased every three years on the advice of the Board. The cooperative would provide for health insurance up to Rs. 1 lakh for the next forty years. The cooperative would take steps to prevent the destruction of the environment like deforestation and soil erosion etc. The cooperative would follow all the relevant government rules and after excavation was over, the soil would be filled up and the recovered soil would as far as possible be distributed back. For purposes of carrying out the entire work, technology and skilled manpower from outside could be made a part of the project.⁷⁷

On 9.1.2012 we have evidence of a letter being sent by the *Loba Krishijomi Raksha Committee* to Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee through Shatabdi Roy who was the local Member of Parliament. In that letter it was mentioned that the area consisting of 10 *mouzas*

⁷⁷Ibid.

had 3353 acres of land with coal beneath the surface. The coal was to be acquired for use at the Durgapur and Mejia steel plants. EMTA had not consulted the 'landowners' before the process of acquisition started. At the behest of the DM, some government officials and only one middleman had held a public hearing. After the meeting, the process of land acquisition started and certain lands were acquired through the middlemen. After acquiring these lands (the entire land was not acquired), the task of cutting the ground started and the affected persons were scared by the middlemen that the task of cutting the ground would entail creation of a 200 feet pit and that would force the villagers to sell off their lands at throwaway prices as they would be at the mercy of the Company. The middlemen were acquiring lands at prices fixed arbitrarily over the past '4 or 5 years'. The issue was brought to the notice of the then CM Bhattacharya and the opposition leader Mamata Banerjee. Even after the meeting at the DM office the situation remained unchanged. The KJRC was invited for a meeting with the present Minister of Labour, Purnendu Bose in a school at Siuri but the representatives of the KJRC were turned away from meeting him by some 'political leaders'. Even after the TMC came to power the representatives wanted a meeting with Bose again. The issue was brought to the notice of Gram Panchayat, the BDO, SDO, DM, SP and the BLRO. The affected persons received no solution and every Department replied that the 'higher authorities' would be informed. The authorities of DVC-EMTA had carried out a *Bhith Puja* on 14th October and on 7th November a JCB machine had entered the fields to excavate the mines. The owners of the land as well as the KJRC had filed FIRs but no action was taken to stop the excavations. The work of filling up the Hinglo River and building a road continued. On receiving the complaint from the villagers, the SDO Irrigation had filed a FIR against DVC- EMTA and noted environmentalist Subhas Dutta had visited the site and complained to relevant persons as industrial waste was being emptied into the Hinglo River. Given this backdrop when the Company forcefully entered with the machines, the villagers surrounded the machines and started a demonstration. A huge police contingent came to the site to 'recover' the machines. In the face of fierce resistance, they were however forced to leave. After this incident a meeting was held at the SDO office. The letter concludes with an appeal to the CM for her analysis and a request for a physical meeting and that her involvement in the issue would save the villagers from danger.⁷⁸

⁷⁸Letter (From Loba Krishi Jomi Raksha Committee to the Chief Minister, Government of West Bengal,), 9.1.2012.

On 17.1.2012 the KJRC on behalf of the persons affected by the project in the 10 *mouzas* wrote to the OC of Dubrajpur Police Station. The letter which can be treated as a FIR is also a reiteration of the facts that were mentioned in the letter to the CM. The letter states that despite the KJRC writing to the police about the concern of ‘all levels of villagers’ about the activities of DVC-EMTA who felt deprived, the latter had allegedly entered the villages with ‘big machines’ and this created a tense atmosphere. The villagers obstructed these illegal activities. The machines were surrounded by the locals who refused to let the operators use them. After this we have reference to the meeting held in the SDO office where it was mentioned that despite the activities of DVC-EMTA being branded as ‘illegal’, the police were in cahoots with them in harassing the villagers rather than take legal action. The letter makes the demands that the persons engaged in ‘illegal mining’ be arrested immediately and that rather than ‘harassing’ the villagers, the police must aid in the proper settlement of the tense atmosphere which was created by illegal mining. The letter ends with reference to the JCB that was seized by the protestors when it was engaged in ‘illegal’ activities and says that justice was expected from the police.⁷⁹

The issue made its debut in national politics when we find reference of an unstarred question raised in the Lok Sabha on 28.3.2012. The question required the Government to answer whether any study had been carried out to evaluate the financial loss as well as lives due to illegal mining and theft of coal. Further, question was asked whether a high level surveillance wing involving the police, CISF and intelligence departments was constituted to check the rampant illegal mining of coal in various states including West Bengal and Jharkhand. The details and the reasons for illegal mining in the country were to be given by the government.
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We come to know from the reply given by Minister of State for Coal, Pratik Prakashbapu Patil that the Government of West Bengal had formed State and District level task force groups involving the police, officials from Coal India Limited and intelligence departments to check the rampant illegal coal mining with an expectation of curbing these activities. Another unstarred question was placed in the Lok Sabha demanding that the Coal Minister state the names of the public and private companies to whom coal and lignite blocks had been allocated along with the date of allotment, their location and the quantum of coal reserves in

⁷⁹Letter (From Loba Krishi Jomi Raksha Committee to the Officer in Charge, Dubrajpur Police Station, Birbhum), 16.11.2011.

⁸⁰ Unstarred Question No. 2408 in Lok Sabha, 28.3.2012. Government of India, Ministry of Coal.

these blocks on a State wise basis. The details of the coal and lignite blocks and the names of companies who had developed the coal blocks according to norms were also sought on a company and state wise basis. The names of companies who had not started work on developing the mines and the action taken ergo against them were also sought. The time by which production could start in these blocks was also asked. The Minister replied that the responsibility of developing a coal block lay with the company which has been allocated the block and in cases of wilful delay in developing the coal block and setting up of the end use project, the Government would take steps to de-allocate the respective block. The companies had to submit bank guarantees which remained valid till the time the production from the coal block reached its peak capacity. The Central Government had requested the State governments to form a Monitoring Committee headed by the Chief Secretary to facilitate expeditious development of coal and lignite blocks. The office of the Coal Controller monitored the achievements of different milestones regularly. The Central Government monitored the development of allocated blocks and the end use plants by conducting Review Meetings. Show cause notices and advisories were issued to companies where delays were noticed to proceed with the production as per the milestones chart. The Government took steps to de-allocate a coal block based on the reply received to the show cause notices. 25 coal blocks and 2 lignite blocks were de-allocated. Out of 195 coal blocks, 29 coal blocks had started production and out of 29 lignite blocks, 12 blocks had started production. The remaining coal blocks that had not started production were in various stages of obtaining statutory clearances and mining lease, preparing a mining plan, land acquisition, procuring machinery and other equipment for mining purpose as well as for the end use project. An annexure was attached with the names of companies to whom coal and lignite blocks were allocated on a state wide basis along with the status of production. We come to know from the Annexure that in Khagra Joydev block which had geological reserves of 196.15 million tonnes of coal, production had not yet started.⁸¹

In a pamphlet published by the KJRC in Loba for circulation in Birbhum, we find a similar narrative of 3353 acres of land being acquired in the *mouzas* of Loba, Palashdanga, Barari, Joflai, Kota, Khoj Kamalpur, Jhirul, Birbhadrapur, Debipur and Kamalpur without the affected persons being consulted adequately. To protect the interests of the owners of land, the *bargadars*, agricultural labourers and for the overall development of the region, the LKJRC was formed. Despite the government not actively acquiring land, the pamphlet

⁸¹ Ibid.

describes the role of the government in the process somewhat by saying that a meeting was held with the DM in which the land owners were not represented and the land owners did not know what prices were fixed for their land. After acquiring some amount of land, the task of excavation started. The government officers were informed of illegal mining and also that the Hinglo River was being filled up. After the 'big machines' were brought in, the agitated villagers organised protest demonstrations. The KJRC intervened on behalf of the villagers and a meeting was fixed at the SDO office on 22nd December. The demands of the villagers was that of a just price being offered for their lands. Despite the Resolution being adopted that illegal mining would stop, no concrete follow up action was taken by the administration. The pamphlet goes on to make the point that the villagers wanted that the mining project should proceed through cooperatives that would comprise the landowners from the locality. The price of land should be fixed in consultation with the landowners. In addition to the landowners, the *bargadars*, the *pattadars*, the agricultural labourers and everybody depending on land should be given the guarantee of rehabilitation. The State Government should intimate the villagers of the steps taken for the development of the region and for the work to proceed; persons involved should take the lead. The pamphlet ends by saying that it was not a question of livelihood but also of channelising 'development in the proper direction',⁸²

Other than the distribution of pamphlets, the KJRC which had some amount of political support, carried out discussion camps over two days with the affected villagers on 15th June, 2012. Another camp was held in those villages which could not be covered in the first phase. The aim was to organise the political activities in a way that people would be made aware. Permission was obtained from the police to use microphones in the campaign. It was claimed that these protests were sought to be countered politically by the local TMC as the KJRC was asked not to carry out the protests. During one such protest at Amuri village, a huge police contingent was brought in. The TMC brought out a counter protest to celebrate the win in Siuri Municipal elections with only 6 local people participating and 15 others being brought in from outside the village. However, the LKJRC proceeded with the protests despite facing provocation from the TMC. The active participation of the villagers was there but by this time there was political involvement.

⁸²Pamphlet printed for circulation, '*Loba sangrami manusher pashe daran*', 2013, Loba Krishi Jomi Raksha Committee, Dubrajpur, Birbhum.

A meeting was held in July 2012 in the face of agitation carried out by the villagers regarding the amount of compensation they were to receive for parting with their lands. The meeting was attended by the Industries Minister, the local Sub Divisional Officer and the Panchayat functionaries. The meeting was not attended by members of the other political parties.⁸³

From 23rd August, the KJRC started spreading the message in every village that for purposes of excavation of coal, the landowners were being forced to part with their lands at throw away prices. After the propaganda campaign was carried out, the KJRC held a protest meeting despite attempts to 'break the unity' among the protestors in a speech given at the meeting Anuradha Deb said that the movement for preserving livelihood and getting a just price for land that was being carried out had reached the ears of the Government and the prominence of the movement was proven by the fact that the Industries Minister had come to a protest site and listened to the demands made by the protestors.

A request for an enquiry was made under the Right to Information Act to the DVC authorities by Joydip Majumdar on 12/10/2012 to obtain information on whether any lease deed agreement existed between the DVC and EMTA Coal Mines Limited on Joydev Khagra Coal Block and also of the rate at which DVC Coal Mines Limited shall supply the mined out coal from Joydev Khagra Coal Block.⁸⁴The DVC replied that it does not have any lease deed agreement with EMTA Coal Mines Limited and that the transfer price of coal from Coal Mines of DVC-EMTA was 19.5% to 25% below the CIL notified price.⁸⁵

The next major event that was widely reported in the media were the events of 6th November 2012 when the police 'opened fire upon and lathi-charged' and also 'tear gassed' the villagers which led to a tense atmosphere in the village. However, the police denied reports of firing.⁸⁶The Superintendent of Police was sent on leave and an administrative enquiry was ordered into the incident.⁸⁷The villagers among whom were a large chunk of Adivasis retorted by sitting in the fields and reportedly a rumour was spread that the arrows which were being used by them were infected with lethal poison. Initially a JCB machine was brought in but the reaction started after more machines were brought in to the spot.

⁸³The Telegraph, 7th July, 2012.

⁸⁴Form A, Application For Information Under Right To Information Act, 2005 to the Public Information Officer, Damodar Valley Corporation, Kolkata by Joydip Mazumder, 12/10/2012.

⁸⁵ Damodar Valley Corporation, Letter No. Sectt./CPIO/RTIA-05/12 (J.Mazumdar),1640, November 16,2012

⁸⁶ IANS, '33 injured in clash over West Bengal land acquisition', <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2012/Nov/06/33-injured-in-clash-over-west-bengal-land-acquisition-423032.html>, 7.11.2012.

⁸⁷ DHNS, 'Birbhum SP told to go on leave over clash', <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/birbhum-sp-told-go-leave-2372338>, 8.11.2012.

We find evidence of a letter being sent to the Minister for Industries, Government of West Bengal, Partha Chatterjee, in the aftermath of the skirmish which says that the local district and block level authorities and even the CM and Industries Minister were informed in writing of the happenings on earlier occasions. The demands raised in this letter were that the police actions of 6th November would have to be investigated upon by a judicial commission. The persons who were injured in the lathi charge and had sustained bullet injuries had to be provided proper facilities for treatment as well as adequate compensation. The cases filed against the villagers who had participated in the movement had to be withdrawn. The most important demands were that the Government must facilitate proper meetings between the villagers and the Company through which the price of land, the compensation given to the landowners, *pattadars*, *bargadars*, fishermen and agricultural labourers would be discussed along with plans for the overall development of the region. The Chief Minister denied that there was police firing on the villagers. The Industries Minister stated that the instigations by the opposition parties namely the CPIM and the Congress were the genesis of the incident. The Home Secretary denied reports of the alleged police firing. However, the Superintendent of police was transferred within a few hours of the incident.⁸⁸

On 8th November a delegation from the Left Front Legislative Party visited the area and claimed that the villagers had reported to the delegation that the police firing was carried out at the 'insistences of the District President of the All India Trinamool Congress'. The team also met the injured persons admitted in the hospital.

A delegation of the Left Front Legislature Party met the Governor M. K. Narayanan on the issue of deaths caused by alleged police firing.⁸⁹ The letter submitted to the Governor mentions that the 'police took armed action' with 'direct help' from the 'leaders of the ruling party' in the face of 'mounting pressure' from the 'Ministers and local leaders of the ruling party'. The statements by Government functionaries were an 'attempt to influence the enquiry before it started' and the incident should be 'enquired impartially' and the 'culprits punished'. 'Adequate compensation and free treatment' should be provided to injured persons and the Government must ensure that the 'land losers are not deprived of proper compensation and rehabilitation'. All the criminal cases against the villagers must be dropped and the 'atrocities

⁸⁸ Letter (From Loba Krishi Jomi Raksha Committee to Minister for Industries, Government of West Bengal), 9.11.2012.

⁸⁹ Letter from 'Left Front Legislature Party', West Bengal Legislative Assembly to Hon'ble Governor West Bengal, 12.11.2012, Communist Party of India (Marxist) pp. 80-2.

should stop'. But strangely enough we do not find any evidence of demands that the project be scrapped on any ground.

On 24.11.2012, the representatives of the *Loba Krishi Jomi Raksha Committee* demanded that the State Government act as a mediator in the land dealings of the local people with DVC-EMTA.⁹⁰

At this stage there was an attempt to make the movement prominent at the state level by organising protests in Kolkata. We find evidence of another pamphlet being printed after this.

On 13th December, 2012, a protest and demonstration was held in Kolkata on Rani Rashmoni Road, the site being one of the most prominent sites for visibility in the city.⁹¹ The parties, organisations and individuals who supported the movement were greeted. The issues that were raised at the meeting as comes out from a reading of the proposals were that the movement at Loba was going on from 19th December 2011 and that the immediate reason for the demonstration was the police firing on villagers on 6th November 2012. At the meeting it was said that the state government was taking steps like opening fire to retrieve the JCB involved in 'illegal mining' but was not doing anything to see to the fact that villagers were not harmed. The letter that was sent to the Industries Minister on 9th November was not replied to till the time the meeting was held. The injured persons would be given Rs. 25000 as compensation but the villagers were not happy with the way compensation was being given. There is reference to Mamata Banerjee's visit to Loba on 4th December, 2012 but she did not listen to the local people. Her convoy passed by the street where the demonstrators were sitting but she did not stop. The coal mine project was related to decisions of the Central Government and also the Power Department. The demonstration sought to end the deadlock that prevailed in the area so that the project could resume. The gathering ended with a demand for a judicial enquiry. Facilities for treatment had to be arranged for the injured persons and adequate compensation granted. The persons associated with the firing had to be punished and the charges brought against the villagers had to be withdrawn without any conditions. To facilitate the construction of the coal mine, the owners of the company had to sit with the villagers at the initiative of the government to sort out issues related to the price

⁹⁰ Own Correspondent, 'Loba seeks govt role in land talks', The Telegraph, 24.11.2012, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/loba-seeks-govt-role-in-land-talks/cid/368391>.

⁹¹ Pamphlet published for circulation by Loba Krishi Jomi Raksha Committee at Kolkata, 13.12.2012.

of land, compensation to the land owners, *pattadars*, *bargadars*, fishermen and agricultural labourers and others dependent on land.⁹²

However, the movement seemed to have lost its appeal from 2013 as we don't find any significant records of any major protest activity. However, the members of the LKJRC met Minister for Urban Development, Government of India, Deepa Das Munshi to highlight the situation at Loba and adjoining villages.

TMC and the new Central Legislation

Mamata Banerjee seemed to be reluctant to accept the rates of compensation set by the Central Government for those persons whose lands were acquired by the State. The agitations at Singur and Nandigram were a major factor that had led the Central Government to replace the colonial era legislation with a new law. In the Parliament, the TMC had opposed the law on the grounds that concurrence of 100% of the landowners whenever land was to be acquired must be obtained. Earlier the provisions on unused land in the Bill were changed after the TMC members raised objections. However, after the Bill was passed in both the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha without taking into account the point raised the TMC, the issue was kept on the boil. The Government of West Bengal wrote to the Central Government in August 2014 suggesting that certain changes be made to the Bill.⁹³ The letter sent by the Law Minister Chandrima Bhattacharya said that the issue of compensation was a reason for West Bengal refusing to implement the new law. The law required that compensation of four times and two times the market value of land being acquired in the countryside and around towns be given. The contention of the State Government was that the state government would pay four times the market value only if the land was at least 120 kilometres from a town. The compensation would follow the rates set for towns if the distance was lesser. The reasoning was that the price of land in rural areas in the vicinity of the city was already 'quite high'.

Realising the fact that industrial projects could be stopped due to want of land, the first steps towards implementation of the Land Acquisition Act, 2013 were thought of in 2016 when the 'rules and manuals' were being framed to fine-tune a Central Act keeping in mind the ground level situation. A Report in the Telegraph mentioned that the Chief Minister wanted to 'fast track' several Government projects that were stuck due to non-availability of land.

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Probal Basak, 'Mamata wants to pay less for land near cities, Business Standard, 08.08.2014, https://www.business-standard.com/amp/article/economy-policy/mamata-wants-to-pay-less-for-land-near-cities-114080800033_1.html.

Some of the projects were the North South corridor which linked NH6 Mechhogram in East Midnapore with NH34 in Murshidabad, widening of state highways in East Midnapore, Burdwan and Hooghly, repair of damaged embankments in Aila affected areas and more than 15 bridges that were ready but could not be commissioned because land was not available to build an approach road. The north south corridor project was the worst hit by unavailability of land as in the first phase the corridor would connect Mechhogram to Burdwan and required 500 acres of land. But the district authorities had informed the Government that 30% of the landowners were not willing to sell off their plots. Without land being acquired, funding from the Asian Development Bank was not available. But mere adoption of the Central Act would not reduce the complexities as West Bengal had an agrarian structure that might not find a parallel in other states. One such issue was that of the *bargadars*. The Central Act stipulated grant of compensation to the landowners and the landowners had to give their consent. However, the prevalence of *bargadars* with fragmented landholdings was something peculiar to West Bengal. So, if direct purchase faced problems to the extent that important infrastructural projects were stalled, the State could invoke the provisions of the 2013 Act. The project at Loba could not be continued due to protests. However, even the 2013 Act stipulated that the Government should take the consent of 80% of the landowners and so private players had to buy that land directly.⁹⁴

The Government decided before the Panchayat Polls in 2013 to give back 10000 acres of land back to original owners in Haldia, Kalyani, 24 Parganas and Howrah.⁹⁵

Land Acquisition at Deocha-Pachami

In this context it is also relevant to bring in the issue of land acquisition for the coal mines at Deocha Pachami. The Ministry of Coal in 2012 through a Notice invited applications for the allocation of Deocha- Pachami-Dewanganj- Harisingha coal block to suitable Government Companies and Central Public Sector undertakings. Accordingly, six companies belonging to different states were allocated the coal blocks. The West Bengal Government created a Special Purpose Vehicle Bengal Birbhum Coalfields Limited to develop the mine at Deocha-Pachami. From 2018 till 2020 the State Government had not started the work. West Bengal Power Minister Sobhandeb Chattopadhyay during the Fifth Bengal Global Business Summit said that companies from Poland had expressed desire to study the coal block that had 500-

⁹⁴ Pranesh Sarkar, 'Govt.'s first step towards enforcing land act', The Telegraph, 23.6.2016, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal-govt-s-first-step-towards-enforcing-land-act/cid/1322493>.

⁹⁵ Pranesh Sarkar, 'Land return, eye on polls- Mamata to give back 10000 acres', The Telegraph, 23.5.2013, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/land-return-eye-on-polls-mamata-to-give-back-10000-acres/cid/297173>.

metre-thick layer covering the coal seams. Investments of Rs. 12000 to Rs. 15000 crore would be required to start the project.⁹⁶ State Finance Minister Amit Mitra alluded to the employment generation of more than a lakh jobs and boost to socio-economic development.⁹⁷

In July 2021, the Chief Secretary Rajeev Sinha visited the area and said that the State Government would start the ‘exploration work’ at Deocha Pachami coal mine immediately after Durga Puja. However, West Bengal was allocated the entire coal block in 2018 which was to be a greenfield project. Of the total proposed area of 11222 acres required for the project, 9100 acres or 81% belonged to tribals. The Central Government entered into an Allotment Agreement with the West Bengal Power Development Corporation Limited in 2019. Land for the coal mines have been acquired by procuring consent from the individuals through a written consent. The provision through which consent was acquired was a Memorandum published by the Government of West Bengal in 2016. The Government did not initially invoke the provisions of the Land Acquisition Act of 2013. Thus though a Social Impact Assessment or an Environment Impact Assessment was not carried out by 2021 when the period of our research ends, yet the Government managed to secure consent from 2000 households of the total 4000 households.

However, we find evidence of protests against the mining project starting from 2019. A CPI(M) publication called the mining project *dongsher ponchomukh* (five faces of destruction). Stress was laid on the environmental impact of the project on the lives of tribals and the fact that an Environmental Impact Assessment was not carried out before land acquisition. The Government owned very little land and so the LA Act had to be applied.⁹⁸

The order of the Department of Power of the Government of West Bengal dated 16th November 2021 gives us an idea of the formation of discourses during this time. It is mentioned that land would be acquired as per the ‘extant provisions’ of the Government but before the decision of land acquisition was finalised, a relief and rehabilitation package for the ‘land owners and other sufferers’ would have to be finalised. The benefits that were to

⁹⁶ Press Trust of India, ‘Bengal to get DeochaPachami coal block running with support from Poland’, <https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/polish-tech-support-for-deocha-pachami-coal-block-in-bengal-119021000104-1.html>, 10.2.2019.

⁹⁷ Statesman News Service, ‘DeochaPachami coal block to play catalyst for WB’s growth’, <https://www.thestatesman.com/cities/deocha-pachami-coal-block-to-play-catalyst-for-wb%C2%92s-growth-1502703460.html>, 1.11.2018.

⁹⁸ Bhaskarananda Roy, *Deocha Pachami: Dhongsher Poncho Mukh*, (Kolkata, Neoradical Publications, 2021), pp1-5

accrue from the project were that ‘more than a lakh people’ would be provided ‘direct and indirect employment opportunities’, ‘socio-economic development’ of the area, increase power generation and assurance of the supply of power at cheaper rates that would go hand in hand with the overall ‘industrial growth’ of the state and that there would be a ‘complete economic transformation’ of West Bengal as investments would be attracted from allied fields.

The relief package was announced on ‘consultation with all stakeholders’ after ‘preliminary’ social impact assessments were carried out and this would be ‘the best’ among the packages being given by other companies like NTPC, CIL and other ‘Central Government organizations’.⁹⁹ We now discuss the features that were announced in the rehabilitation package. The package was meticulous as per the classification of the affected persons. For the 3010 families losing both their houses and land, the price of land would be Rs. 10 lakhs to Rs. 13 lakhs per *bigha* or Rs. 50000 to Rs. 65,000 depending on the category of land, for the structures that were built on land compensation would be based on the value as per the PWD schedule or Government bodies, compensation for trees would be based on the assessment of the Forest or Horticulture Department, Rs. 25,000 would be the allowance that each family would receive for cattle sheds, Rs. 1 lakh would be provided to each family as shifting allowance, Rs. 5000 would be given to those who would build their own house, Rs. 10000 would be provided as subsistence allowance to each family per month for one year and employment would be given to one member as a junior police constable. Each of the families would get a constructed house in the proposed colony of approximately 600 square feet super built up area consisting of 2 rooms, a kitchen and a bathroom. A family was also given the option of taking the equivalent amount of Rs. 5 lakhs instead of the house. Around 1838 families would lose land only and for them Rs. 10 lakhs to Rs. 13 lakhs per *bigha* or Rs. 50,000 to Rs. 65,000 per *katha* would be given depending on the category of land, one member of the family would get employment to the post of Junior Police Constable irrespective of the amount of land that was lost and the minimum qualifications would be relaxed by the Government. Other compensation would also be given against loss of trees and crops as per the assessment of the Forest/ Horticulture Department. The recorded *bargadars* numbering around 104 were entitled to Rs. 2.5 lakh to Rs. 3.25 lakh per *bigha* or Rs. 12500 to Rs. 16250 per *cottah* depending on the category of land. For loss of trees and other

⁹⁹‘Compensation to residents’, Deucha-Pachami and Coal Mining – Preliminary Factsheet, Nagarik Mancha, Kolkata, 2022.

perennial crops, 1/4th of the value computed by Forest/ Horticulture Department would be given and one member of the family would be employed as a junior police constable. Around 24 families resided on rent and if they were created by tenants, they were entitled to compensation as per the PWD schedule. Rental assistance would be given to the tune of Rs. 5000 for a period of 6 months, Rs. 1 lakh would be given as shifting allowance, a house would be constructed under the Bangla Awas Yojana to the tune of Rs. 120000, a subsistence allowance of Rs. 10000 per month would be provided to a family for one year and each family would be provided Rs. 5000 as assistance for tube well sinking. Around 285 persons who were owners of stone crushing units would be given Rs. 50000 to Rs. 65000 per *cottah* depending on the category of land, monetary compensation would be provided for affected assets like structures built on the land based on the PWD schedule of rates, Rs. 50000 as shifting allowance and Rs. 3 lakhs would be provided for setting up of new crusher units. For resident encroachers who numbered around 15, Rs. 5000 would be provided per month for 3 months, a shifting allowance of Rs. 10000 would be given, and Rs. 120000 would be provided in cash or for building a house and Rs. 10000 per month would be provided to each family for a year. For the active stone quarry owners who numbered around 9 to 10, Rs. 50000 to Rs. 65000 would be provided per *cottah* depending on the category of land and compensation as per the Public Works Department(PWD) schedule would be provided for any structures on the land. Around 3000 persons worked in the stone crushing units and they would be provided a one-time grant of Rs 50000 and a subsistence allowance of Rs. 10000 per month per family for a year. Around 39 persons worked as shop owners and they would get Rs. 50000 to Rs. 65000 per *cottah* as price of land depending on its category. The price of shop or the business would be as per the PWD schedule in addition to the shifting and resettlement allowance of Rs. 1 lakh and the subsistence allowance of Rs. 10000 per family per month for one year. Around 150 to 160 persons worked as *khetmajur* or agricultural labourers and they would be provided a onetime grant of Rs. 50000 and subsistence allowance for 500 days at MGNREGA rates amounting to Rs. 1 lakh.

The houses under the Relief and Rehabilitation package would be provided in a newly built colony that would have all basic and civic amenities like roads, health centres, drinking water connections, electricity, ration shops, bank, play grounds, community centres, and places of worship for all communities and also a burial ground on Government land adjoining the coal block. The Power Department referred the rehabilitation package to the Finance Department for approval and after the subsequent in principle approval, the package was referred to the

Cabinet which in its meeting held on 9th November, 2021 accorded approval on the package on ‘consent basis’ for the acquisition of approximately 2267.44 acres of private land.

In November 2021 the CM announced in the Vidhan Sabha that the Government would not do anything on the lines of ‘what had happened in Singur’. The Chief Minister opined that no land had been taken forcefully at Deocha and what differentiated it from Singur was that ‘hundreds’ of ‘local boys and girls’ were getting jobs and that the project was an indication of the investment coming into West Bengal.¹⁰⁰ The project would start on Government land and the ‘pro people’ government would not do ‘things by force’. Of the total area of 3.04 lakh acres, 1 lakh acres of land was owned by the Government.

The State Government would invest around Rs. 35,000 crores in the project. According to the official version, the rehabilitation package stipulated three or four times the prevailing market price of land and the cost of structures on land as per the LA Act, 2013. Jobs for those affected, maintenance allowance for a certain period and dwelling units were facilities offered to the land losers so that the project did not face any resistance at the grassroots and the Opposition parties did not get a chance to build up a movement. Among those affected by the project that were put at 21000 as per Government figures, 3602 persons belonged to Scheduled Caste Communities and 9034 persons belonged to Scheduled Tribe Communities. They accounted for 28% of the electorate and a wrong message would be sent throughout the country if they were forcibly evicted. Thus we find electoral calculations based on identity also coming up here. This was absent under the LFG. The project would also cut down the cost of electricity and the expenses on coal. Basically, the rehabilitation package was announced before the project had started and ‘windows were kept open to modify the project based on demands from the local people’. The project would start on Government land and the future would depend on how the locals would accept the rehabilitation package and there was no scope for confusion among the affected persons.¹⁰¹

In December 2021, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee announced that the Deocha- Pachami coal mine would ‘solve the State’s coal and power demand’ for the next 100 years and will ‘create one lakh jobs’. The website of the West Bengal Power Development Corporation says

¹⁰⁰Jago Bangla, ‘Singur-Deocha Ek Noy’, <https://jagobangla.in/not-the-same-of-deocha-pachami-singur/?fbclid=IwY2xjawE5VMxleHRuA2FlbQlXMQABHcm-lckAg3hcelSUuTM-gOV24n3o8SSRT3n11aWW7wLcA8y2jyfrbF76A-aem-ELB6Z6q5-wFwfukLE-xEQ&sfnsn=wiwspwa>, 21.10.2022.

¹⁰¹Singdhendu Bhattacharya, ‘Deocha-Pachami coal mine: Industry, displacement and CPI(M)-TMC role reversal’, 27.12.2021, <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/deocha-pachami-coal-mine-industry-displacement-and-cpi-m-tmc-role-reversal-1065125.html>.

that the supply of coal from the open cast mine would mark a ‘paradigm shift’ and in the ‘new era’ the WBPDCCL would be ‘self reliant’ and not dependent on ‘external agencies’. ‘Viable economic activities’ would also be created for the ‘local population’. The State Government claimed to have given the villagers hard copies of the compensation and relocation package written in Bengali and Santhali language.¹⁰²

The issue of displacement was a prominent topic among the protestors and activists opposing the project. According to some estimates, 21000 persons would be displaced out of which 9034 or 43% would belong to the Adivasi or the Santhal community. Other estimates put the number of displaced at 70000 overall.

The project was to be inaugurated in December 2019 in the presence of the Chief Secretary of West Bengal but the ceremony had to be dropped in the face of protests by the local Adivasi population.

As we have already seen West Bengal had not adopted the Land Acquisition Act 2013 but over time economic exigencies forced the government to rethink its initial stance.

Assessment

The absence of a meta narrative in dealing with ground level realities did not mean that there are no distinctive discourses that have developed in this period. In fact, we can reinterpret it as a modification of the socialist legacy with strong continuities. In fact, the rise of the BJP meant that the Government had to show its difference from both the CPIM and the former. Mamata Banerjee’s image of what Raychowdhury calls ‘political asceticism’ was an important part of the strategy to navigate the above issue. Political asceticism in India is identified with the figure of Gandhi and the bodily manifestation is evident ‘in a rhetoric of anti politics through the ascetic mode of power’ and leadership is envisaged as an instrument to give voice to the ‘moral indignation’ of a ‘pure and righteous people’ against ‘political corruption by the established elites and social decay’. Political asceticism identified with the figure of Gandhi has tended to focus on men only. The figure of Mamata Banerjee has not been challenged by other leaders within the party or outside it. However, given the lack of a long term economic policy as we have seen in the context of land, political exigencies seemed to dictate the policy decisions. Given the backdrop of the LFG rule we can see a

¹⁰²ET Bureau,’ ‘Coal mine project: Mamata announces Rs. 10000 crore compensation package for land losers’, 9.11.2021, <https://m.economictimes.com/news/india/coal-mine-project-mamata-announces-rs-10000-cr-compensation-package-for-land-losers/articleshow/87605827.cms>.

counter force to socialism developing in the representation of asceticism which builds on the tropes and idioms borrowed from the previous regimes but changes the discourse to deal with complexities as and when they emerge. So a class distinct from the 'bourgeois landlord' alliance is not sought to be built at the level of the State but even if issues arise that are based on class they are dealt with on an individual basis as our analysis shows. To deal with the situation the Government has adopted a number of schemes which provide short term relief to the people.

In fact, Maitreesh Ghatak estimates that a large number of people have been pulled out of poverty in West Bengal. This has meant an expanding rural consumer market the effects of which have spread even to the urban areas.¹⁰³ Personal instructions have been given to officials who manoeuvre the existing laws to meet local demands. For purposes of political mobilisation, the rhetoric has tended to focus on issues of identity also. The slogans used in elections all draw upon this analysis.

The existence of 'a people' is the trademark of populism. In later years, 'the people' has been defined not against the elites but also as an aspiring population that has agreed to development namely industrialisation. For economic populism the trademark is rejection of constraints. As is borne out by facts, West Bengal breached the fiscal deficit from the early 2000s and it continues under the TMC Government. Asceticism as a mode of political action is essentially about representation and its operation might be determined by various factors. It's the element of time and space that is important and political judgement must not move too far away from the action.

Acquisition and Protest

We can also briefly discuss certain cases of protests regarding land acquisition in this context that happened in the period of TMC rule. In most of the cases land was acquired under the LFG and the TMC as the main opposition supported the movements against acquisition of land. But after coming to power these movements lost their momentum as the TMC did not bring up the issues as matters requiring major political intervention. For example, 302 acres of land were acquired in Thiknikata and Kawakhali in Darjeeling district and Porajhor in Jalpaiguri and the Siliguri Jalpaiguri Development Authority (SJDA) was entrusted with the responsibility of developing the land. The local landowners started protests against the LFG

¹⁰³ Maitreesh Ghatak, The story of Bengal's economy, Hindustan Times, 15.4.2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/elections/west-bengal-assembly-election/the-story-of-bengal-s-economy-101618471498847.html>.

and this was supported by the TMC. About 52 landowners carried on the movement and the case that was filed reached the Supreme Court. After being elected in 2011, the unwilling farmers withdrew the case as the Government has promised that the land would be returned.¹⁰⁴ In 2017 Mamata Banerjee mentioned that the land would be returned to the unwilling farmers. However, till 2018 the process of returning back the land had not gathered much steam and the protestors organised themselves under the *Thiknikata Kawakhali Land Owners Association* with the demand that if the land was not returned, they would grab the land and distribute it among themselves. The administration maintained that of the 52 unwilling farmers, 15 plots were ready to be handed back whereas in 7 plots there remained legal hurdles as the ownership was not proved. The protestors called this an error on the part of the administration. So despite the opposition parties bringing up issues that touch on issues of daily governance, there was not much of a disagreement on issues regarding the discourse on land.

TMC's Economic Policy

To understand the land policy of the TMC, we need to take a brief look at some economic policies. Over the years the TMC has brought in a number of schemes that have been described as populist by scholars and political analysts. In the light of the above discussion, we shall see how the land policy qualifies for the populist tag. Populism is described as the lack of adherence to any particular ideology but managing political exigencies as and when they arise.¹⁰⁵

First, as is evidenced from a perusal of policy documents and the Assembly Proceedings, the TMC does not relate issues related with land to the concept of class. This is indeed a break from the Leftist notion of land. Here the TMC avoids any 'call to lower classes to defend the government'. Phrases associated with the Left are out of the political lexicon.¹⁰⁶ However, we might point out at this juncture that even the CPI(M) could not come out of the trap between its discourse and rhetoric which has been described in Chapters 3 and 4. For example, in a book printed by the Hooghly District Committee of the CPI(M), we find a narrative of the incidents at Singur in 2006. The narrative uses the words *shilpabirodhi (opposed to industrialisation)* to describe the TMC. Work was stopped due to the frequent *bandh* called

¹⁰⁴Special Correspondent, Singur like land return demand, The Telegraph, 13.9.2016, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/singur-like-land-retrun-demand/cid/1525446>.

¹⁰⁵ Ashutosh Varshney, 'Populism and Nationalism: An Overview of Similarities and Differences', *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 56(6), June 2021, p.15.

¹⁰⁶Ranabir Samaddar, *Imprints of the Populist Time* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2022), p. 108.

by the TMC and that attacks carried out by the TMC led to many factory workers getting injured or for that matter the farmers at Singur wanted industrialisation. We find a palpable support for industrialisation and there is no reference to a class struggle.¹⁰⁷

But there is definitely a conception of the people that emerges under the TMC rule. It is not that the Leftist rule was devoid of populism but it has become more striking. We explain the nature of this new kind of populism and the role of rhetoric in facilitating this transition. Under neo-liberalism a new form emerges where ‘people are set against the populists’. Populists are projected as ‘naïve’ and ‘less aware to the reality of social war’ as they do not practice ‘dialogic politics’ often indulging in ‘illegal activities’.¹⁰⁸

Another component connected with populism is the creation of a ‘visual experience’ which affirms the ‘joy of co-existence’. Tapati Guha Thakurta locates the celebration of Durga Puja as the birth of a ‘new civic event’.¹⁰⁹

The populists spoil the consensus against the ‘economy of punishment’ in the neo-liberal era. Populists are led by ‘momentary considerations’ ‘spend excessively on the economy’. Business groups have not been given unbridled access to a growing and ‘lucrative land market’ where the State would act as a mediator. But this does not mean that the State does not want to attract industry. Bengal Global Business Summits are being held every year with great fanfare. Successive budgets show that the State Gross Domestic Product and growth rates are among the highest in the country. However, the debt of the State is also huge and the liabilities account for 33% of the GDP. In this situation, West Bengal is one of the highest producers of paddy, vegetables and poultry in the country. The state spends on social infrastructure like education, health, housing, food supply and communication. The basic idea is that structural issues in the economy can be bypassed to create a rural market encompassing both the organised and the unorganised sectors to focus on productivity driven agriculture. There has been continuity in the growth of MSMEs that started in the later part of the 2010s. As Samaddar notes, rural growth is led by contract farming and private finance with the presence of a ‘range of intermediaries in the circulation of agricultural commodities’. The focus on self-help groups, welfare, protection, facilitating small production and improving social infrastructure like education and health are opposed to the neo-liberal economic ideas. These deal with the ‘rural, small and the dispersed’. Thus, the idea is that of

¹⁰⁷ Bhaskarananda Roy, *Singurer itihash ek mithyar mohojal*, (Kolkata :Neo-Radical Publications,2023),pp. 30-2.

¹⁰⁸ Ranabir Samaddar, *Imprints of the Populist Time*, op.cit., p.194.

¹⁰⁹ Tapati Guha Thakurta, *In the Name of the Goddess: The Durga Pujas of Contemporary Kolkata*, (New Delhi: Primus Books,2015), pp.77-117.

emphasising ‘the idea of justice over economic precepts’ by focussing on creating ‘a set of particularly situated responses’ in ‘accordance with the possibilities that present relationships demonstrate’. The response of the Government to each case of land acquisition has been different. Economics is not seen as a strategic discipline. Here the role of wisdom is important as seen in the delivery of services and protection of the poor.¹¹⁰

According to Laclau, populism is a ‘rhetorical ontology predicated on discourse and its radically unstable foundations’. The fact that land is not a part of any discourse has been demonstrated in my thesis. It is within the broader framework of populism that the land policy is to be situated. But here since the TMC did not have any need to show continuity with the LFG, the new ‘*poriborton*’ (development) is shown in manifesto.

Commentators have also attributed the electoral success of the TMC to certain schemes that seek to directly transfer money into the accounts of beneficiaries like *Lakshmir Bhandar*, *Sabuj Sathi* etc.¹¹¹

We shall focus on *Lakshmir Bhandar* as through this scheme money is directly transferred into the account of women in the age limit. Such schemes have been adopted in other states in India also. The debate brings us to the necessity of adoption of a Universal Basic Income (UBI). UBI is opposed mainly on grounds of lack of adherence to norms of fiscal prudence and on moral grounds. Pranab Bardhan calculates that if all persons are given an amount of Rs 5000 in India, then that would take up 10% of the Gross Domestic Product.¹¹² Amartya Sen and John Dreze question the ability of the citizens to spend the income in proper directions like education or health or in agriculture. So, the State must focus on other means of ensuring welfare like development of infrastructure.¹¹³ Hyman Minsky also emphasises the need to create jobs that can give honour to the worker.

However, the proponents of UBI like Annie Lowrey argue that ‘UBI would end poverty not just effectively but also efficiently’ as it ‘contains within it the principles of universality, unconditionality, inclusion and simplicity and it insists that every person is deserving of

¹¹⁰Ranabir Samaddar, *Imprints of the Populist Time*, op.cit., pp. 227-30.

¹¹¹Shoaib Daniyal, ‘Cash transfers, votes from women and Muslims: 7 reasons why Mamata Banerjee crushed BJP in Bengal’, 2.5.2021, <https://scroll.in/article/993899/cash-transfers-votes-from-women-and-muslims-7-reasons-why-mamata-banerjee-crushed-bjp-in-bengal>.

¹¹²Project Syndicate, ‘Pranab Bardhan Says More’, 11.4.2023, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/an-interview-with-pranab-bardhan-india-oligarchy-china-ubi-2023-04>.

¹¹³Kate McFarland, ‘Amartya Sen: India not ready for a basic income’, 06.03.2017, <https://basicincome.org/news/2017/03/nobel-laureate-economist-amartya-sen-india-not-ready-basic-income>.

participation in the economy, freedom of choice and a life without deprivation'.¹¹⁴ Tony Atkinson argues that UBI embodies both the ideas of distributive justice as well as an ethical concern for the weaker sections of society.¹¹⁵ The Economic Survey of 2017 supports UBI as a 'radical and compelling paradigm shift in thinking about both social justice and a productive economy'.¹¹⁶

It is the application of UBI in the Indian context that we look into. Rather than 'open ended' conventional economic schemes, the UBI defines a target group as the intended beneficiary. In the case of *Lakshmir Bhandar*, the target group is comprised of women below the age of sixty years who are not pensioners, employed or tax payers and who are enrolled in the *Sasthya Sathi* health insurance programme. They shall get an amount of Rs. 1000 every month and if they belong to SC/ST, an amount of Rs. 1200 shall be paid. On June 19, 2021, it was announced that the scheme would cover 'around 1.6 crore beneficiaries'.¹¹⁷ *Lakshmir Bhandar* would be carried out at *Duare Sarkar* camps. The intended effect is to intervene in the social structure where women are often 'confined to the domestic sphere' and where 'fundamental inequality between men and women' is reinforced.¹¹⁸

Reverse Tenancy

It is in this context that we shall discuss the issue of tenancy in agriculture in West Bengal. Tenancy is a trend which started rising in Indian agriculture. As we have discussed there are only two modes of legally recognised cultivation in West Bengal namely personal cultivation and cultivation by the *bargadar*. But cultivation under tenancy takes place on the basis of a verbal or an oral contract. So, this kind of cultivation is not recorded by the administration and the cultivator is not protected in case the oral contract is not honoured.

The area of leased in land has doubled in West Bengal from 2 lakh hectares to 4 lakh hectares between 2001 and 2011. In 1975, the share of leased in land to total cultivated land was 14.8. The share now stands at 14.6 to 15.4 in winter in 2013. 52% of people give money in advance to rent land as compared to 41% at the all India level. According to NSSO figures, in the *rabi* season, only 28% of the land was being cultivated by *bargadars* and 41% of the cultivators

¹¹⁴ Annie Lowrie, *Give People Money*, (London: Crown, 2018), Preface.

¹¹⁵ Tony Atkinson, 'The 15 Proposals from Tony Atkinson's 'Inequality-What Can be Done?', <https://www.tonyatkinson.com/the-15-proposals-from-tony-atkinsons-inequality-what-can-be-done/>.

¹¹⁶ See for details, Economic Survey, Ministry of Finance, Government of India, chapter 9.

¹¹⁷ Press Trust of India, 'Bengal's LakshmirBhandar Scheme to include 1.6 crore beneficiaries: Official', https://m.economictimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/bengals-lakshmir-bhandar-scheme-to-include-1.6-crore-beneficiaries-official/amp_articleshow/83662905.cms.

¹¹⁸ Pratichi(India) Trust, *Flow as Security: An Assessment of Lakshmir Bhandar Scheme*, 2023, p.7.

operated on some kind of a lease.¹¹⁹ The Census figures on the other hand show a rise in the number of landless persons. The system of lease is preferred by both the landowner as well as the cultivator who works on the farm. The reason for this can be inferred to lie in the framing and the implementation of the Land Reform Act. As discussed earlier, the law stipulates that the *bargadar* must be a resident of the locality where the land was situated with the aim to prevent absentee landlordism. But the cultivator who cultivates on land without a proper contract can operate in any district and cultivate any quantum of land. The landowner on the other hand is loath to part with land because of the assumption that the price of land might increase in future. R Vijay in the *Economic and Political Weekly* wrote in 2012 that the 27% of the landed class in West Bengal do not use land for cultivation. The Government response in West Bengal has roughly aligned with the response of the other state governments and the central Governments.¹²⁰

These measures look at the efforts made at land reform through tenancy laws as a kind of impediment to increase of productivity in agriculture. Thus, these reforms seek to remove restrictions on the sale and on the lease of land. V K Ramachandran points out that genuine land reforms were offset by ‘market based land reforms’ which do not take the issue of redistributive justice into account.¹²¹

The issue of tenancy in agriculture does come up in the mid-term review of the Tenth Five Year Plan in 2005. The Report opines that rather than imposition of conditions on tenancy farming, a new law could be brought in which would set limits on the upper ceiling of land which a tenant could get based on the practise of oral lease. The suggestion also refuted the implicit suggestion or the embedded imagery of a weak and marginalised farmer suffering at the hands of a powerful *Jotedar* as 96% of the peasants belonged to the small and marginal category in West Bengal as compared to 86% at the all India level.

Another very significant instance of the issue of tenancy being discussed in Government circles is that of the Report of the Expert Committee and Model Law on Agricultural Land

¹¹⁹ ‘Household Ownership and Operational Holdings in India’ NSSO 70TH Round, Report 571, Ministry of Statistics, Planning and Implementation, Government of India, pp. 546-47.

¹²⁰ R Vijay, ‘Structural Regression and Rise of New Landlords in Indian Agriculture: An Empirical Exercise’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 4th February, 2012, p.41.

¹²¹ V K Ramchandran, ‘Classes and Class Differentiation in India’s Countryside’, *World Review of Political Economy*, 2(4), p.670.

Leasing published by the NITI Aayog in 2016 which sought to give some kind of legal validation to what we have discussed as reverse tenancy.¹²²

These measures look at the efforts made at land reform through tenancy laws as a kind of impediment to increase of productivity in agriculture. Thus, these reforms seek to remove restrictions on the sale and on the lease of land.

CREATION OF AN AGRICULTURAL MARKET IN WEST BENGAL:

As Saha and Swaminathan show, agricultural productivity in West Bengal started to increase from the 1980s and there was a steady increase in *boro* rice cultivation in this period. However, the impact of Operation Barga on increasing productivity needs to be studied in greater detail.¹²³ Continuing this trend, various steps have been taken for increasing the productivity of land *vis a vis* various administrative measures. These measures mostly relate to the inputs used in agriculture. In places where there is a trend towards reverse tenancy, a study by IIT Kharagpur shows that excessive use of fertilisers spoils the health of soil.

The usage of seeds constitutes an important part of agriculture. As of 2020, there were 12 seed farms over 2500 acres of land, seeds were sold by 6 cooperatives along with 50 companies through 16000 dealers, 90000 farmers created seeds through contract farming, about 220000 (both certified and non-certified) seeds were sold in the market and the creation of laboratories for seed creation.¹²⁴ For transportation of cash crops like vegetables to the market, refrigerated vans are provided under the *Sufal Bangla* scheme. The attempt is to control the prices of items like potatoes and onions. Mobile counters started in 2014.¹²⁵ Concerning the issue of recognition of the tea lands, as of 2021, though there are small plots engaging in tea cultivation, the State Government has not allowed the conversion of these lands into agricultural lands thus recognising the cultivators. Another intervention of the State government in the field of agricultural inputs is that of the *Jal Dharo, JalBharo* programme where till 2015, about 1,50,000 ponds had been cut or repaired for use.¹²⁶

The use of shallow tube wells have increased since the 1970s and in 1994, about 5 lakhs deep tube wells were in use. In 2005, permission was required from the Department of Irrigation to

¹²² Report of the Expert Committee and Model Law on Agricultural Land Leasing, 2016, NITI Aayog, Government of India, New Delhi, pp.8-9.

¹²³ Anamitra Saha and Madhura Swaminathan, 'Agricultural Growth in West Bengal in the 1980s: A disaggregation by Districts and Crops', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Mar. 26, 1994, Vol. 29, no.13, p.10.

¹²⁴ For details see Report of the State Agriculture Infrastructure Development Plan 2017-20 and NABARD Consultancy Services.

¹²⁵ For details see <https://www.sufalbangla.in/sufalbanglaPortal/>.

¹²⁶ For details see https://www.wbwridd.gov.in/jal_dharo_jal_bharo.

set up a shallow tube well in arsenic contaminated zones. Meters were added in 2008 and the rate of diesel or electricity was fixed according to the time of usage. Under the TMC, there is no need of permission for tube wells below 5 Horse Power in areas that are not arsenic contaminated. As a result, the number of shallow tube wells has increased.¹²⁷

A State Agricultural Management and Extension Training Institute has been set up at Ramakrishna Mission Narendrapur to impart a one-year training course to dealers. In every district there is a *Krishi Vigyan Kendra*, there are two State Agricultural Universities and seven *Krishi Prashikhyan Kendras* in West Bengal.¹²⁸

As for the marketing facilities, there are 515 Notified Markets and 2900 village *Haats* in West Bengal. *Krishak Bazaars* were created by the State Government to provide ‘modern marketing facilities’. As of now, there are 186 *Krishak Bazaars* in West Bengal.¹²⁹ However, since 83% of the farmers have small landholdings with an average income of Rs 7756 per month, it remains doubtful as to how they are able to access the market.

State level procurement has a limit given the problem of storage. In 2019, the *Bangla Sashya Bima* was started and in Murshidabad alone in 2021, more than 4 lakhs farmers were enlisted. This was included in *Duare Sarkar Camps* and only information from the Panchayat Pradhan as to how much land a farmer cultivated is needed to ensure that crops are insured. A look at the State Budget of 2020-2021 makes our point clear. The State Budget spent an amount of Rs. 283.9 crores for the development of agriculture and in 2020-2021, Rs. 156.8 Crores was allotted for the same. Rs. 977.7 crores was spent on farmers through schemes in 2019-2020 and Rs. 795.5 crores was allotted in the budget in 2020-2021. The *Krishak Bandhu scheme* gives benefits to 59 lakhs women and this is relevant because the male member of the family might work outside the farm.¹³⁰

In the above discussion we have traced the initiatives being taken to integrate the farmers into the agricultural market. As the discussion shows, there have also been efforts not to stop neo-liberalism but to provide some kind of a safety net to individuals. As a study by the Government shows, the amount received from *Laskhmira Bhandar* can act as a stimulus to bring in persons within the capitalist fold as they are still left at the mercy of market forces or it can also be seen as a hedge against market forces.

¹²⁷ Swati Bhattacharjee, ‘*Fosholer rajniti: Banglar chasir bortoman o bhobhishyot*’, (Kolkata: Anustup Publications, 2021), pp. 107-13.

¹²⁸ Ibid. p.119.

¹²⁹ For details see <https://wbagrmarketingboard.gov.in/>.

¹³⁰ Demand for Grants for Agricultural Marketing Department, West Bengal State Budget, 2021-22, pp. 37-86.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen how the land policy of the TMC develops as a socially situated response. This is the rhetorical stance. As we have seen, no major changes were brought in the tenancy laws and no provision has been made for rehabilitation of persons displaced by land acquisition. However, the lack of discourse also limits the functioning of the TMC as the party organisation is ad hoc and the Party relies on 'patronage networks' to secure support.¹³¹ As we have seen the TMC attempted to bring about changes in the Land Reform Acts. The reason can be read as an attempt to increase the productivity from land with the trickle-down benefits accruing to the population dependent on land. Thus, the land policy becomes a part of the overall economic policy of the Government. No new discourse on land is attempted and rhetoric is attempted as a socially situated mechanism to mediate in the relationships among different sections of the population. Thus, the issue of land is not seen as completely an economic issue as the sphere of politics is not divorced from that of land.

¹³¹ S P Basu, '*Ma-Mati-Manush Mamata Bandopadhyayer jonopriyotabadi rajnitir avyontore*' in S P Basu and R Ray (ed.) *Populism: Bharote jonopriyotabadi rajnitir utthan*, (Kolkata: Calcutta Research Group, 2019), p.166.

Conclusion to the Thesis

Any account of politics in West Bengal remains incomplete without a reference to the land question. Land has remained a sensitive issue determining the contours of politics in West Bengal. Scholars trace this to the enactment of the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793. A new class of settlers called Zamindars were given permanent rights of occupation on land similar to the system which prevailed in Great Britain at that point in time. The Zamindar was responsible for the collection of revenue from land. However, a large section of the population was dependent on land and the issue of relations among those dependent on land was not dealt with in the colonial era. The Bengal Tenancy Act, 1885 recognised the rights of the under-tenants in agriculture but the issue of the rights of the *bargadars* was not adequately addressed by the Act. In the years leading to Independence, the Floud Commission raised the issue of rights of tenants on land and recommended that the *bargadars* be given legally stipulated rights as to their claim on the share of the crop cultivated by them. The Tebhaga struggle led by the Communists demanded that the *bargadars* receive two-thirds of the crop cultivated by them from the landowners.

After Independence, the priority was accorded to increasing the productivity from land and also addressing the question of social justice as land was concentrated in the hands of a few people. M K Gandhi's slogan of 'land to the tiller' belonged to the latter priority. In the context of West Bengal, the abolition of intermediaries with payment of compensation and the issue of legal protection to *bargadars* on land were considered as essential both from the point of view of social justice as well as productivity. The Zamindari Abolition Act was passed in 1950 by the Central Government.

In West Bengal, the West Bengal Bargadars Act was framed in 1950 to fix the share of the crop which the *bargadar* would receive from the landowner. The West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act, 1953 was framed to take over the ceiling surplus land of the *Jotedars* and to address the question of compensation. However, the evictions of the *bargadars* continued and to tackle the issue the West Bengal Land Reforms Act, 1955 was passed which was a more comprehensive piece of legislation.

The thesis has made a humble attempt to argue that the politics surrounding the process of land reform was created using certain phrases and metaphors like rights of the *bargadars*,

personal cultivation, land ceiling limits, compensation, vested land, redistribution, etc. The bureaucracy was the instrument through which the process of land reform was sought to be implemented. However, land reform was a priority among other priorities like increasing productivity through adoption of better farming techniques by farmers.

With the formation of the United Front Government in 1967, the emphasis was more on the struggle through which the *bargadar* could acquire his rights. In this process, a singular peasant identity emerged. The binary of a weak *bargadar* being placed against a strong *Jotedar* was the symbolism that was used to carry out the struggle. Other sections of the population dependent on agriculture in the villages like the *khetmajur* were to join the bargadars in their struggle against the ‘bourgeois-landlord’ State. Under Land Reforms Minister Harekrishna Koner, the land seizure movement in villages put primary emphasis on the seizure of ceiling surplus land of the *Jotedars* even before completion of legal formalities. The Naxalite Movement went a step ahead to realise the promise of ‘land to the tiller’ by focussing on annihilation of the class enemy and encircling the cities. However, the movement was contained with police force both by the United Front Government and the Congress Government that was formed in 1972.

After the Left Front Government came to power in 1977, the emphasis was on redistributive justice. A state wide programme (Operation Barga) to record the *bargadars* and also redistribution of ceiling surplus land was carried out. OB was carried out with the objectives of recording of rights of the *bargadars* and also redistribution of land to the landless. The emphasis was on redistributive justice in the decades of the 1970s and 1980s with the involvement of the local population through the Krishak Sabha and the Panchayati Raj Institutions. Agricultural productivity would increase after the issue of redistributive justice was addressed. Several studies have shown that OB managed to change the power structure of the rural areas to an extent as the erstwhile *Jotedars* were left bereft of their political and economic clout. However, the implementation of a programme of land redistribution within a democratic framework had its limitations and complexities in social relations in rural areas were not captured by the binary between the strong *Jotedar* and a weak *bargadar*. For example, the landless segments of the village society were largely left out of OB and landlessness increased. A broad consensus existed among the various political formations regarding the economic efficiency of redistribution of land.

After the liberalisation of the economy in 1991, the priority shifted to attract investment for industrialisation. I have studied certain select documents like the Policy of Industrial Statement that was tabled in the Vidhan Sabha in 1994, the critique of the GATT Treaty, speeches of Chief Minister Jyoti Basu, a document called Destination West Bengal and the implementation of a Township project at Rajarhat to understand the change. Land reform is shown to be a successful project in the above documents. The peasant is not sought to be empowered through a process of struggle but rather becomes an appendage to the process of industrialisation. So, OB had increased the purchasing power of the rural population and this was one reason why West Bengal could attract investment.

After Buddhadeb Bhattacharya became the Chief Minister in 2000, the emphasis shifted from land reform to that of land acquisition and the process was set in motion after 2006 with greater momentum. Newer arguments were put forward to create a consensus in favour of the changes. The arguments that emerged in this time were that agriculture was becoming less profitable, land holdings were fragmented and marginal and that people in the villages themselves wanted to come out of agriculture. The agenda of redistributive justice associated with OB does not come up as a priority in this period. Land reforms is projected as a successful activity of the past. The future lay in industrialisation and it was in their own interests that the people should support this new priority. A binary between agriculture and industry came to dominate public discourse in this time period.

However, it was with the aggressive pushing forward of this process of industrialisation that popular resentment arose against the LFG in places like Singur, Nandigram and Haripur among others. Land was required to be acquired for industry and the LFG carried out the process without consulting the local *Krishak Sabhas*. In this process, spontaneous movements arose against the LFG that were later joined by political parties belonging to the Opposition camp. The economic logic behind the newly discovered need for industrialisation could not be balanced with the political motives of maintaining a support base among the peasantry in the rural areas. In the face of complexities of rural society, the process of acquisition of land encountered widespread resistance and these incidents are widely believed to have contributed to the electoral setbacks suffered by the Left Front Government in the 2011 elections to the Vidhan Sabha where it lost to the Trinamool Congress. The LFG was left with no option but to respond to the opposition using a mix of force as well as attempt to gather consent from the general public.

The Trinamool Congress came to power in 2011 on the slogan of Ma-Mati-Manush which was developed in the heyday of the popular movements in Singur and Nandigram. The slogan was coined to protect farmlands. Over the years, the emphasis has shifted to increasing the productivity from land but without abandoning the security of the tenants and also without changing the laws related to land reforms. The TMC did not use the category of class to analyse society. Thus efforts to increase productivity from agriculture can be said to follow the logic of the trickle down effect. The TMC Government tried to bring in an element of participation and inclusivity in matters related to land acquisition and the rehabilitation packages were planned in ways that were suited to a particular context.

The thesis has attempted to answer whether discourse surrounding land in West Bengal and the rhetoric used have been able to capture the rural complexities. The impact of this process on industrialisation has also been studied. Based on the above exposition, questions were articulated and the answers have been teased out through a detailed study in the chapters of this dissertation.

The research questions raised in this thesis are as follows:

- 1) What are the significance of discourses and rhetoric in understanding politics in general and West Bengal in particular?
- 2) What and how laws and policies related to question of land ownership, distribution and land use in India have evolved?
- 3) What were the distinctive aspects and policies of the Left Front Government on issues related to land over the decades?
- 4) What were the reasons for the opposition against the Left Front Government on land issues and how political narratives were shaped by the LFG and the Opposition?
- 5) What were the distinctive aspects of the laws and the policy decisions taken by the Trinamool Congress Government on issues related to land?

The research questions mentioned above have been analysed in detail in the five chapters of my thesis. The findings from my research are summarised below.

Research Question 1: *What are the significance of discourses and rhetoric in understanding politics in general and West Bengal in particular?*

The purpose of rhetoric is to persuade a target audience to the speaker's point of view. Even if the listener is not persuaded by the speaker's point of view, rhetoric still remains important as

a method of communication. As discussed, the notion of truth has been used as a yardstick through which rhetoric is evaluated and truth was considered as an external benchmark. Rhetoric involves another external component in so far as it involves an audience who are involved in the particular speech act. This conception of rhetoric was carried forward from the ancient to the medieval ages and till the beginnings of the modern era when the truth was fixed with certain concepts. Truth was to be found in the application of categories like sovereignty, liberty, freedom or class or society.

However, when truth is fixed then the problem arises as to the nature of truth that is contained in these categories. It is here that the role of discourse comes in. Truth is believed to be something that is produced through social interactions rather than something which is an objective category. The study of discourse involves a study of the nature of social interactions and the patterns of power. Discourse in contrast to rhetoric has an internal component as it does not need to be justified to an audience but is internalised through usage of certain symbols and signs, among which language is primary. The application of discourse that involves the circulation of power is to be studied at the local level.

The thesis at hand deals with land and since the issues related to land and more specifically the process of land reform is taken as rooted in the principles of economics, it can be treated as a discourse that has been brought alive by the symbolism of a strong *Jotedar* against the weak *bargadar*, the amount of vested land, compensation paid and the amount of land redistributed. Laws that are enacted carry forward this purpose of circulation of a discourse as a law implicitly implies consent of the governed population.

However when a Government is unable to create a discourse, the role of rhetoric assumes crucial importance in lending legitimacy to the ruling dispensation.

Research Question 2: *What and how laws and policies related to question of land ownership, distribution and land use in India have evolved?*

The issue of land comes up very early in the policy agenda of the law makers both at the Central Government and also in West Bengal. Several pieces of legislation were framed in the years after Independence mainly to tackle the issue of unequal land ownership.

Adopting the basic Gandhian slogan of ‘Land to the tiller’, the Central Government enacted the Zamindari Abolition Act with the purpose of abolishing the intermediary rights of

ownership but the issue got entangled in Courts when the former landowners filed cases as Right to Property was a Fundamental Right under Article 31 of the Indian Constitution.

In West Bengal, legislations passed in this period included the Bargadar Act, 1950, the Estates Acquisition Act, 1953 and the West Bengal Land Reforms Act, 1955. The emphasis on land was a product of the knowledge built up during colonial rule and also land based movements like the Tebhaga movement in the aftermath of independence. In these Acts, the focus was on abolishing the intermediary rights of ownership of land and recording the rights of the dependents on land, in this case the sharecroppers or the *bargadars*. A ceiling was set on the amount of land that an individual could own and land held in excess of the ceiling limit was to be distributed among the land poor segment of the population. The related question which came up was that of the compensation to be paid to those landowners whose land was confiscated. This was the accepted position among all the political formations in West Bengal including the Congress, the Communist Party of India and later on even the Communist Party of India (Marxist). The emphasis was on laws to bring about the desired social change.

However, with the end of Congress rule in West Bengal and the formation of the first United Front Government in 1967, the attitude towards land underwent a change under Harekrishna Koner of the CPI (M) with emphasis being laid on grabbing land rather than the completion of legal formalities. It was alleged that legal formalities were being used to protect the landlords who formed the support base of the Congress in rural areas. The peasants were drawn into a struggle against the machinations of the 'bourgeois- landlord' state. Importance was given on developing a movement to mobilise the peasants using Communist ideology. Otherwise laws had no significance. The Krishak Sabha was to play a leading role in organising peasant struggles in the rural areas to capture ceiling surplus land of the *Jotedars*.

The trend continued in the Naxalite struggle when the land of *Jotedars* was seized and the cities were sought to be surrounded. There were differences among the Naxalites regarding the methods to be followed in the struggle. For example, there was a debate over the question of annihilation of the class enemy and whether the Naxalites should concentrate their work in urban areas or in the villages. The question of whether an educational institution should be attacked was also contested within the Naxalites.

Meanwhile in office, Koner had realised that the revolutionary zeal had to be curtailed and this resulted in a parting of ways with the Naxalite leaders. The police were sent to deal with the situation.

Despite the differences the movements brought in, a conception of the peasantry emerges as a unified and a singular entity imbued with an autonomous interest. An analysis of the writings of Harekrishna Koner shows that the UFG was aware of the tensions that existed among various sections of the peasantry and wanted to involve the landless in the struggle. But the aim was to form peasant unity. Even the Central Government Reports refer to the necessity of political will in carrying out the process of land reforms. Under Siddhartha Shankar Ray's Congress Ministry in 1972, the Land Reform Acts were made more stringent towards securing the rights of the sharecroppers and in keeping with the Green Revolution, efforts were made to introduce measures that could augment agricultural growth.

Thus throughout this period the debate between the major political formations was not on the economic efficiency of land reform but rather the method of implementation. Phrases like 'land to the tiller', 'rights of sharecropper', 'ceiling limit' and 'compensation' recur in the Acts, Assembly Proceedings and in political speeches and writings linked with 'land reforms'.

Research Question 3: *What were the distinctive aspects and policies of the Left Front Government on issues related to land over the decades?*

The Left Front Government was voted into power in 1977. The stress laid on carrying out the process of land reform gathered impetus during the initial years of the Left Front regime. The 'peasant' is situated in the context of land. One of the most significant changes that were brought to the Land Reform Laws was that the onus of proving whether a person was a *bargadar* or not was shifted to the landowner and non-payment of receipt to the *bargadar* on collecting the crop was made a criminal offence. The definition of *bargadar* and personal cultivation was also amended. The *bargadar* had to reside in a locality to get the benefits of OB. The most distinctive step towards the implementation of land reforms was encapsulated through 'Operation Barga'. The methodology of Operation Barga was decided through consultations at the local village level and the feedback of the local people was incorporated as seen in the issuance of several orders of the Board of Revenue seeking to implement the same. Much of the work of recording *bargadars* was completed in the first five years of the LFG.

The Land Reform laws were amended in 1977, 1978, 1980 and 1986 to plug the loopholes which could frustrate the aim of recording the rights of the sharecropper and the redistribution of land to the land poor sections of society.

The LFG was shown to be furthering the interests of the peasants. The rallying cry was that the peasants would be empowered through OB and thereafter in the future a revolution would be built up against the 'bourgeois-landlord alliance' ruling the Indian State. The peasants would join the Trade Unions, women, youth and other Party Fronts in the struggle. In addition to this process of 'othering' the political opponent who were depicted as powerful and morally deficient, OB entailed a legal process which used certain phrases like recording of rights, vested land, rights of sharecroppers and evasion of ceiling limits continuously through both political and administrative jargon. Through these measures, the subject of the peasant would be protected from repression by the *Jotedars* acting in tandem with opposition political parties.

It is through the usage of certain terms mentioned above that the notion of truth emerges. The weak *bargadar* was involved in the process of getting his own self recorded at the local camps. The LFG won three elections to the Vidhan Sabha till 1991 mainly dwelling on the successes of OB.

However, as has been shown the discourse that was built up in the 1970s and 1980s began to peter out by the decade of the 1990s. OB had its limitations and after the adoption of a New Economic Policy, we find a distinct shift in the attitude towards the peasant and land. As has been discussed, documents like the Industrial Policy Statement, the Discussion opposing GATT in the Assembly, Destination West Bengal show the willingness of the Government to bring in industry mark a distinctive shift in the discourse. The notion of the empowered peasant disappears and is replaced by a stress on an increasing rural market. West Bengal could attract investment by virtue of the large and expanding rural market. The GATT Treaty was critiqued in the Vidhan Sabha on grounds that it would raise the cost of inputs. During the process of land acquisition in Rajarhat, the presence of recorded *bargas* was seen as a hindrance to the process of creation of the new township. Over time a party society was created in rural areas to mediate between the local population and the Party. Sections of the unified peasantry like the landless agricultural labourers eventually moved out of the umbrella of the CPI (M). However, I argue that notwithstanding these fissures that can be

interpreted as signs of emerging cracks in the discourse, no large scale political change was in the offing as the new initiatives towards industrialisation were not carried out aggressively.

Research Question 4: *What were the reasons for the opposition against the Left Front Government on land issues and how political narratives were shaped by the LFG and the Opposition?*

The shift in the discourse that had started in the 1990s did not draw much resentment because the State did not identify itself with the process of industrialisation and not much of an effort was made for implementing the same. After Buddhadeb Bhattacharya was made the Chief Minister and more so in his second term after 2006, a distinct effort was made towards furthering industrialisation in West Bengal. The leaders of the CPI(M) close to Bhattacharya like Nirupam Sen, Gautam Deb, Anil Biswas and others repeated certain arguments to support an aggressive push towards industrialisation like the decreasing profitability from agriculture, the marginalisation of landholdings and the desire of the people to welcome industrialisation. An attempt was made to create a new discourse that would amalgamate the practises of the earlier efforts with the new found priorities. So OB was shown as a successful venture of the past that had improved the standard of life in the rural areas thus creating a new market. Due to a rise in the cost of inputs after the New Economic Policy, farming had been made unprofitable and landholdings were marginalised in rural areas. Industrialisation was shown to be a process connected with the future and the involvement of peasantry in the process towards industrialisation is shown to be as a process that was internalised. The process of othering of the capitalist classes that had been a part of the LFG stance was absent. Rather than redistributive policies in agriculture, the move was towards increasing productivity in agriculture. The future lay in industrialisation.

Ultimately the moves generated widespread resentment against the LFG that saw it getting voted out of power in the Assembly elections of 2011. That such activities were linked with the processes of land acquisition is evident from the fact that the LFG suffered electoral losses in the 2008 Panchayat elections and the 2009 Lok Sabha elections as well. We see the efforts as a strategic management of these situations by the LFG and thus it is rhetoric. The local wings of the Krishak Sabha were not consulted at any stage of taking the decision to acquire land and the LFG did not side with the peasants who constituted its primary support base in rural areas.

However, as the chapter describes, when land acquisition actually began they were marked by widespread protests. All the movements described started primarily through mobilisations of local persons dependent on land. The movements are a testimony to the fact that the intended discourse could not produce truth. It was at a later stage that the political parties involved themselves in these protests that had already built up a popular support base. With the involvement of a 'rainbow coalition' outside those immediately affected, the movements were characterised by a two-way political communication between the urban areas and rural areas and also with other political formations outside the state which created a 'industry-agriculture' binary.

The government responded through police action in tandem with local party cadres and simultaneously handed over cheques to the willing farmers in an effort to convince people of the benefits of industrialisation. It was not the capitalists but the Opposition parties led by the TMC that was othered as law breaking persons who were opposed to development. We read such speeches and political activities as an attempt at strategic management of the changed situation in the aftermath of popular movements against the LFG. As my thesis shows such speech acts are identified as rhetoric as they were not internalised but had an external component in so far as they attempted to manipulate the target audience.

The rhetoric here tries to project application of Marxist principles as an economic rather than a historical doctrine. The attempts at creation of a disciplinary society tried to tilt the self-reflexive process of dialogue in favour of one side of the self through the rhetoric described above. The rhetoric followed is based on the discourse of the earlier eras as it tries to build a bridge between the old and the new keeping in mind the fact that the LFG had to defend the policies followed since 1977. The other side did exist but it was suppressed through the use of force. In this context an effort has been made to show that the process of discourse formation did not reach its conclusion. It is out of the denigration of the unstable discourse that the use of rhetoric emerges. In the absence of a well-entrenched discourse, the LFG resorted to rhetoric to justify its moves.

Research Question 5: *What were the distinctive aspects of the laws and the policy decisions taken by the Trinamool Congress Government on issues related to land?*

The TMC Government was voted to power with the electoral slogan of 'Ma-Mati-Manush' that was a direct fallout of the involvement in the struggle against the process of forced acquisition of land. After coming to power the attempt at giving the land back to the

unwilling peasants at Singur through legislation was a symbolic attempt to show that the Government was true to its electoral promise.

Although the TMC Government did not bring about changes in the Land Reform Acts, it did exempt entities from the ceiling limit. No new policy was framed for land acquisition. Where land acquisition did take place, it was through a process of consultation with the local population on a scale much higher than had happened under the previous LFG. Novel packages of compensation were announced. The commitment of the Government towards ensuring security of tenure is seen in the fact that the Government did not amend the provisions of the Land Reform Acts dealing with transfer of land belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. At the same time, steps were taken to increase agricultural productivity and it was believed that such steps would have a trickle-down effect on those dependent on land.

Though the concept of class has been abandoned, yet the state has not openly taken the side of the capitalists in the process of acquisition of land. The overall economic policy of the TMC in carrying out implementation of schemes like *Lakshmir Bhandar* that move away from conventional economic policy by identifying benefits with select social groups have been described as populist in the sense that they do not adhere to any particular ideology. The land policy of the TMC is described in my thesis as part of the broader economic policy that it is not strictly identified with the tenets of any particular ideology or the creation of a new discourse is attempted to be created through use of phrases or metaphors that would be universal in their application at the local level. Rather as new situations arise, new methods are devised to deal with the changed circumstances. Rhetoric is not confined merely to the ornamental use of language. In this context the role of rhetoric is of utmost significance in carrying out the task of socialisation and thus the mobilisations for popular action are justified through the use of rhetoric. Thus, the socially situated character of land gives rise to a distinctive form of rhetoric under the TMC Government.

Limitation and Future Research Agenda

The study of rhetoric focusses on the role of the speaker and the audience. In my thesis, an attempt has been made to study rhetoric from the point of view of the speaker. The reception of the speeches by the audience has not been dealt with in my thesis unless the speaker was challenged. The time period followed in my thesis is quite expansive and this makes an ethnographic study difficult. The use of newspapers in my research has been limited. This is a

limitation as forms of speeches might differ in spaces of organised politics like the Legislative Assemblies and unorganised spaces like on the streets. However, the emerging forms of rhetoric in response to the land issues is a topic that will attract future researchers to deep delve into the intricacies, nuances and multidimensional interaction of the formulation of discourses and uses of rhetoric on the one hand and politics, its narration and its practice in a democracy on the other.

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