

Agrarian Basis of The Political Transformation in West Bengal C. 1947-1977

Tanmoy Mondal^{1,*}

Corresponding Author's email id. tanmoyhist@gmail.com

Cite as: Mondal, T., (2024), Agrarian Basis of The Political Transformation in West Bengal C. 1947-1977, The Yore: Research and Review, 1(1), pg. 32-50.

Abstract

West Bengal experienced a multifaceted metamorphosis from 1947 to 1977, significantly influencing the state's political landscape. This transformation was intricately tied to the agrarian sector, where agricultural and land reforms were crucial. The post-independence period marked the beginning of land reforms in West Bengal. Agrarian unrest, aggravated by extreme land inequality and oppressive zamindari systems, led to the establishment of a Communist-led coalition government in 1977. This paper demonstrates that the agrarian basis of the political transformation in West Bengal from 1947 to 1977 was instrumental in shaping the state's political trajectory. The shift from agrarian inequalities to agrarian reforms catalyzed a dramatic modification in the state's political landscape, ultimately shaping its socio-economic fabric and ideological outlook. Understanding this agrarian underpinning is essential for understanding the complex political history of West Bengal during this vital era. This paper highlights the role of West Bengal as a representative case study due to its demographic and historical relevance. The work also explores the dynamics of agrarian transformation, resource utilization, and the socio-economic structure in the post-independence years, particularly within the context of West Bengal. This case study will shed light on the interplay between political parties, land reforms, and refugee rehabilitation efforts, ultimately shaping the state's political course and the lives of its citizens.

Keywords: Political transformation, West Bengal, Post-Independence, Land reforms, Agrarian unrest, Socio-economic fabric

Introduction

It has been almost seven decades since the independence, we are heading towards a five trillion-dollar economy, having plenty of able-bodied men with the high intellectual quality to transform India into potential - at least in belief - 'Viswaguru', in every front of life. Whether we will become 'Viswaguru' or not is debatable but it is doubtless to infer that India has

^{1,*} Research Scholar, Department of History, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, West Bengal, India

certainly recovered its lost epithet – self-reliant.² This consolidation would have not been possible without the contribution of agriculture, since India had always been an agrarian country and remains so even today. The decisiveness of agrarian upheaval is well-established in determining the courses of colonial processes and events in India. In the wake of the independence, around seventy per cent of India's population was directly or indirectly dependent on agriculture (Census of India, 1951). Moreover, more than fifty per cent of the total gross domestic output used to come from the agricultural sector. Therefore, any discussion on the elementary years after independence that had consolidated the foundation of India on which she dwelled to become one of the global leaders must include the major components of the agrarian economy- the peasantry, zamindars, and other agro-political participants. Apart from an economic perspective, demographic strength and democratization made the peasantry politically viable and the most important factors in deciding the political future of India as well as, of its constituent units.

It is high time to have a critical, retrospective assessment and historical recognition of the events and processes of such importance and magnitude that had the potential to change the political course and lives of millions of Indians. However, due to the limitations of time and space, it is not possible here to explore all the decisive agrarian upheaval and their basis that happened across the breadth and length of India after independence. Hence, the paper will explore the hope, aspirations, disillusionment, and discontent of the agrarian communities that had decided the political and economic destiny, after taking one of the units of the union of India, West Bengal, as a case. The demographic homogeneity, comparability with many European countries in demographic terms, and uniformity of challenges within the territorial boundary of West Bengal make it a perfect contour of historical exploration. Grossly it is an effort to situate what Eric Stokes once said, that 'the balance of destiny in South Asia rests in peasant hands' (Stokes, 1978). The discourse on the break or continuity that had taken place in resource utilisation, depletion, and agrarian socio-economic structure in the years of transition to the republic, which had largely decided the political future of India – by allying with the left, right or centrist political parties - and the fate of millions of her citizens is extremely important. In West Bengal, where refugee rehabilitation efforts and impetus to redistribute land after ceasing and scraping the institution of Zamindari – that Cornwallis had created in the late eighteenth century- helped left political parties to gain mass support initially in urban areas and

² The terms like 'Viswaguru', and 'self-reliant' should not be taken at face value. These terms are used here grossly for analytical convenience and the path that led to self-reliance and 'Viswaguru' must be the subject of critical scrutiny and details research.

later in rural areas that had decided the political destiny of West Bengal for many years to come.

Review of Literature

The time and space under consideration have plenty of literature on it, mostly composed by contemporary observers from diversified fields ranging from journalists to sociologists to economists to political scientists. However, most of the works are unidimensional and have not taken into consideration holistic perspectives of the post-colonial socio-economic and political development. Furthermore, there lies a genuine dearth of literature on West Bengal as a unit of study. Whatever existing, although existing in good numbers, on post-partition reconciliation; partition-related horror; refugee-induced demographic upheaval; food scarcity related crisis and associated food movement; and Naxalite peasant movement since the late 1960s. More importantly, until a couple of years to a decade back, historians were reluctant to unearth this period from a sense of doubt on the historicity of this period.

Existing secondary literature has always served as a torchbearer in any historical research and this study is not an exception. Partha Chatterjee in one of his earliest accounts, *The Land Question*, has elaborately discussed the rent and revenue relationship along with the evolution of the land utilization process in a thematic manner (Chatterjee, 1984). Although this book has a focal period between 1920 and 1947, the elaboration on the evolution of two legal rights on land, i.e., the occupancy right and the right of proprietorship, has helped to contextualize the post-colonial legal land rights in West Bengal. More importantly, the inferences, on which he based the idea of agrarian history - that any social processes need to be interrogated at 'several analytical levels,' and there is hardly anything completely isolated; rather, social processes around the agrarian society are a combination of 'relatively autonomous' but intricately 'interconnected' structures - is extremely critical for developing the themes of further interrogation. It would have been better if he continued with the intricacies of *The Land Question* even after independence. However, the selective chapters on agrarian questions in *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism*, by Partha Chatterjee are very insightful (Chatterjee, 1997).

In Volume 2 of *The Agrarian System of Bengal*, which covers a period from Cornwallis to Bidhan Chandra Roy, from 1793 to 1955, Anil Chandra Banerjee, a well-known professor (Calcutta and Jadavpur University) of history, comprehensively and holistically employed the critical narrative on the agrarian structure ranging from agrarian legislation, the emergence of sub-infeudation, evolution of tenurial structure, resentment of locals and concerns of the

colonial authorities in Bengal (Banerjee, 1959). The author, Anil Chandra Banerjee, was living through the period which has been considered in this article, in other words, he was the direct observer of the contemporary events and processes. Therefore, the last four chapters, starting from the 'Agrarian Conditions (1928-1940)' to the 'Abolition of Zamindari System', are extremely important.

In the *Political Economy of Indian Agriculture*, Ashok Rudra detailed the political-economic perspective of agriculture after independence through, partly mathematical orientation, which is of no use for the present study, partly through theorization and partly through interpretation of surveys (Rudra, 1992). The surveys conducted and enumerated in this book, like those of the Pashupati Mondal and Nawaz Khoda of *Sian* village, are helpful in knowing the contemporary agrarian conditions (Ibid, pg. 446-448). This book, although from an economic perspective, finely woven the discourse on agrarian class formation, modes of production, the institution of tenancy, and the wage labourers and their conditions.

Food Movement of 1959 Documenting a Turning Point in the History of West Bengal is a collection of rich primary sources on food scarcity and debility, government concerns and initiatives, Communist critique of the ruling Congress party because of its failure to secure food for all, and mass movement (Das and Bandopadhyay, 2004). This monograph is like an archive on food movement on hands, where almost everything is readily available for researchers working on the food scarcity aspect of West Bengal. It contains documents like policy documents of the Left parties, speeches, writings and memoirs of Left leaders, debates in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly, print media reporting the food movement, etc.

Bhowani Sen's *Evolution of Agrarian Relations in India* depicts how the different facets of agrarian relations evolved in India through the ages, ranging from the earliest times to the post-colonial period (Sen, 1962). The existence of various modes of production and the reasons thereof are also discussed in this book. The causes of post-colonial sluggish growth and the role of the Planning Commission have also been enumerated in it. The book even discusses whether there was a feudalistic tendency in Indian agriculture even after independence. Overall, Sen has created a comprehensive masterpiece, covering a wide array of subjects relating to agrarian socio-economics existence. Another book by Bhowani Sen, *India's Land System and Land Reforms*, specifically focuses on land relations in West Bengal and the role of the Congress party in establishing land equalisation in rural areas and addressing the miseries of peasants (Sen, 1955). This book has also critically evaluated the conditions of tenants, and agricultural workers and how they were subject to exploitation in the absence of formal credit facilities and in the absence of adequate land.

Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-1947 and *Peasant Labour Colonial Capital: Rural Bengal Since 1770* of Sugata Bose are two rich accounts on agrarian history that raise some valuable questions and elaborate on some valuable, delicate, intrinsic facets of agrarian realities under the British and to some extent after independence (Bose, 2007) (Bose, 1993). In *Peasant Labour Colonial Capital*, Bose justified how the peasant history could be a labour history as well.

Decolonization in South Asia Meanings of Freedom in Post-independence West Bengal, 1947–52, is an important monograph by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay that explores the ‘academic no man’s land’-from the independence to the first general election in West Bengal (Bandopadhyay, 2009). This book shows the disillusionment of millions of common people who just turned into citizens from subject, with the coming of freedom and the transformation of the Congress from an anticolonial institution to an authoritarian disciplined political party. This book focuses on the real meaning of freedom to the people of West Bengal in a state of extreme food shortage, high inflation, disease, refugee problems and oppressive state action. The high politics, to gain or retain hold of the state of West Bengal, before the first general election amongst the political parties, especially the Congress and Communists neatly enumerated in this book.

In *The Spoils of Partition Bengal and India, 1947-1967*, Joya Chatterjee explored the disillusionment of the Hindu middle-class *bhadralok* after partition (Chatterjee, 2007). How the hopes and aspirations of the supporters of partition were completely shattered by the outcome of partition. Chatterjee has divided her book into three sections that start with the background and making of the partition, followed by the question of refugee rehabilitation. In the second section, which focuses on refugee rehabilitation, she highlights the adaptation capabilities of the refugees in a state of statelessness. The final section of the book focuses on the post-partition politics centred around refugees and shows how the Congress lost its relevance, paving the way for the emergence of Communists in West Bengal. The third section of this book is very interesting but it has inadequately explored the agrarian question in shifting the power base in West Bengal.

One thing is common in all the literature reviewed above, is that it lacks in proper enumeration of the agrarian basis of the politics after independence. This work, therefore, is an attempt to bridge that gap and to bring in numerically the most strengthful, agrarian communities into politics, to depict their importance in deciding the political fate of a region or political party, in changing circumstances where everyone is politically equal despite the existence of large-scale socio-economic disparities.

Methodology

This work is an inductive and qualitative historical research based on extensive consultation and cross-referencing of primary sources and secondary literature. This study is based on the consultation of various existing historical literature and empirical scholarly works of sociologists, economists, and environmentalists. The digitised version of the documents of the Central Secretariat Library, available at the Indian Culture Portal, a virtual library initiative of the Ministry of Culture, has been extensively consulted. Reports and documents on agrarian scenes of West Bengal within the study period have been consulted by the West Bengal State Secretariate Library and its digital initiatives. Various rare books on contemporary West Bengal agriculture that were written with field study or otherwise by various scholars during the study period were accessed from the National Digital Library of India (NDLI), a Ministry of Education, Government of India, initiative under the National Mission on Education through Information and Communication Technology (NMEICT) project. Contemporary newspapers and journals have also been consulted to corroborate or counter public sources.

Democratisation of the Peasantry and the Agrarian Politics:

In a densely populated state like West Bengal where most of the people are landless or holding uneconomic plots, where most of the produce had been siphoned off by the former landlords and *jotedars* in the form of rents or interests, the relationship between the landless and semi landowners and landlords had always been sceptical and susceptible to conflict, guided by mistrust and an attitude of disrespect for the later community by the former. Moreover, in water-secure areas or during a good monsoon and in areas of intense cultivation, production usually happened to be high, and the resultant appropriation by the big landowners had also been high because of the uneven distribution of land even after the land reform. This unevenness in the appropriation of production usually fuelled peasant unrest. Donald S. Zagoria has argued that ‘the possibilities for exploitation of the poor peasants are greater in crowded areas because of the concentration of scarce land and the existence of a large underclass of poor peasants competing for that land’ (Zagoria, 1971). The absence of the old ‘feudal-like’ landed gentry, who were substantial for blocking social mobility, like zamindars and *jotedars*, who had been replaced through land reform by moderately owned landed classes and were in conflict with each other, erased the conservative influence on the peasantry. Moreover, the production process in West Bengal helped the market to penetrate into the countryside to break the traditional local ties and mutual dependence. Elimination of conservative influences and relative mobility enabled peasants to form an allegiance with any

political party which they were looking for. Now Left parties have filled in that gap by offering an alternative to the frustrating congress politics ever since the independence.

Donald S. Zagoria, an analyst of communist politics of the United States from 1950 to 1960, undertook research to ascertain the correlation between various variables empirically (variables were termed as 'ecology') - for instance, dry areas versus wet areas, densely populated areas versus sparsely populated areas, and the peasant movement in Asia, including various parts of West Bengal, as he collected sample from here too. His conclusion can be corroborated in the case of West Bengal. He found out that the 'cross-cultural demographic and land tenure patterns' were highly 'conducive to peasant unrest and, in the absence of non-communist political parties which address themselves as the sources of that unrest, the peasants turn to the communists,' who organized movements to press for agrarian reform' (Ibid, pg.144). There was also a strong correlation between cultivation using irrigation, which many parts of West Bengal were lacking in, on the one hand, and concentration of population, dwarf and uneconomic tenancy and landholdings that had been ideal for the development of peasant unrest on which Communist depends (Ibid, pg. 144).

Revolutionary Challenges Within a Parliamentary Framework

As the Communist Party was committed to the parliamentary means of reformist politics, there was little scope apart from mobilising electoral support against the Congress government to initiate anything "revolutionary." If any revolution at all happened, it had to be a "revolution from above" by selective actions and not a "revolution from below" by mass actions. The class aspect of the Communist mass movement had been, as Gangadhar Adhikari (1898-1981), a leading Marxist politician wrote, the isolation of the ruling Congress and exposure of the ugly face of the capitalist development that depicted the dialectic of bourgeois interests and national aspirations (Adhikari, 1964). However, they succeeded very little in achieving their stated goals at least till 1967. With the land reform, the rich tenants acquired ownership rights and were dedicated to the improvement of land. They also became a large employer of agricultural labourers. Gradually, along with the former zamindars, this rich peasantry became politically influential in local areas. Therefore, the major political consequence of the agrarian reform was the filling up of the vacuum created by the zamindari abolition with the newly emerged upper peasantry and former zamindars.

Before the abolition of Zamindari, the upper peasantry was extremely vocal about the abolition of Zamindari and was involved in peasant mobilisation. However, after the passing of land legislation to eliminate intermediaries, it ceased to participate in the peasant movement. This

is evident from the prolonged period of silence in the countryside of West Bengal until the Naxalbari started. Zamindari abolition no doubt reduced the position of the zamindars but the acts were not so effective in completely neutralising them. These former zamindars by using various means continued to retain a substantial amount of land in a state of land scarcity and landlessness, and their rank had been joined by the upper and middle peasantry and rich tenants who had collectively been decisive in directing the political future of West Bengal. On the contrary, the lives of millions of poor and landless peasants did not change. More importantly, as the land reform stormed the rate of eviction to declare and retain land for personal cultivation and to evade the 25-acre ceiling, instead of raising peasant militancy, it actually reduced the number of organised peasant movements in the 1955-1958 period (Kotovsky, 1964). This dichotomous peasant behaviour was caused by the inability of the peasant political organisation and Left political parties to identify the changing nature of the class structure and their failure to mobilise the lower peasantry. The major opposition to the Congress in West Bengal Communist Party only directed its intellectual criticism against the bureaucratic method of land reform and offered an alternative of land reform implementation through peasant committees what they did during the 1967 United Front government under Hare Krishna Konar, without trying directly mobilising peasants. The warm undercurrent of peasant grievances was felt strongly before its eruption in North Bengal in the late 1960s.

Regional Variations in Communist Strength

The Communist base remained primarily strong in West Bengal since 1950, whereas in the other two important regions of communist influence, i.e., Andhra and Kerala, it had been organisationally disintegrated and faced with a strong counter-coalition led by Congress. There had been a correlation between the Congress domination and the absence of it during the national movement on the one hand and the strongholds of Communist parties on the other. The regions witnessed a strong Communist presence in post-independent India, where the Congress domination was weak during the national movement. Therefore, it has been argued that it is not the economic factors but rather the historical factors that paved the way for regional Communist strength (Brass, 1994).

Most of the Left parties took to a policy of class mobilisation that cut across all the classes and not just the poor and landless peasantry because of the opaqueness of class boundaries and their unique overlapping nature in the Indian context. Compared with the Congress, Paul R. Brass, a prominent American political scientist, has argued that Communist parties were relatively progressive as it was more serious and effective in land distribution, protecting tenants and *bargadars* or implementing land ceiling and giving lower peasantry and landless labourers

employment opportunities (Ibid, p.82). However, they had to work with extreme caution in front of an excessively powerful and dominating central government which had an inhibiting impact, apart from the lack of unity among the Left parties within the Left Coalition, on the pace of reform in Left-ruled states, especially in West Bengal.

The Congress won the first three general elections in West Bengal by mobilising a coalition of urban businessmen and rural-urban influencers of varied social origin. Using party patronage Congress party was able to attract the dominating men with commendable local influence, who could mobilise substantial electoral support. However, initially, the support for the major opposition party came from the disheartened urban intellectuals, who helped to dislodge the Congress that had a widespread organisational base in West Bengal. At this juncture, Communist parties had to devise a more pragmatic policy to attract the imagination of the majority of the masses. However, the Communist parties had failed to reach a consensus on the modes and means of mass mobilisation because of the differential opinions of different groups within the party. The most influential radicals within the party, many of whom were involved in the violent activities of 1930, argued that the party should follow an assertive revolutionary path instead of electoral aggrandisement. Another section within the party argued that the electoral support was about to come in the wake of the frustrating experiences of the masses under Congress and the Communist party just had to set in motion the class struggle in the countryside by eliminating the Congress influencers by turning landless against landed by turning peasant against former landlords and *jotedars* etc. Another section of communist intellectuals said that the Communist Party had to work within the existing social structure and beat Congress. At the same time, it may resort to a revolutionary spirit if and when needed.

Challenges in Peasant Mobilization in West Bengal

The backwardness of peasants of West Bengal, severe poverty and lack of literacy posed a serious challenge for the Communist Party of India to convince them and effectively mobilise them, at least till the mid-1960s. One of the scholars studying the Communist movement in India then found that in West Bengal majority of the peasants were less informed and aware of the objectives of the Communist Party. In response to the question of whether the Communist party had a pro-rich or pro-poor attitude, most of them replied with 'don't know.' He further said that 'where the actual daily experiences of life have a potentially radicalizing effect, it is the awareness of the possibility of change that can trigger this effect' (Zagoria, 1974). The social background of the leadership could greatly influence and mobilise the masses, most of whom were landless and lower peasantry. In Kerala, this "social distance" was minimal, but in the case of West Bengal, leaders did not make concrete efforts to bridge that gap. As one

scholar informs that the communist leaders of West Bengal ‘despite favourable ecological conditions, did not begin making inroads into the countryside until the late 1960s’ (Ibid, p.57). Since independence, apart from the Tebhaga agitation, West Bengal did not witness any large-scale mass movement of explicit peasant nature or a movement in which large-scale peasant participation was perceived until the Naxalbari uprising of late 1970 and that too was spatially demographically restrictive. This absence, however, does not reflect the absolute egalitarian peaceful and equitable social order where everyone was living without any discontent. Apart from the issues of national integration and other macro exigencies immediately after independence, there had also been a problem with the survival of the millions of people, often scholars categorically termed as economic uncertainties. Although, the many threatening problems disintegrated and were solved over time, the challenges to survive did not disappear quickly and perpetuated for many years to come and even today. The absence of any large-scale peasant movement in West Bengal can be found in the popular perception of peasantry where in the absence of Britishers and their corroborator zamindars, the perpetual exploiters, it was difficult for them to contextualise the common enemy they had to fight against. As a ruling party, the Congress had to mute itself but so far it has been the utmost vocal weapon against the injustice done by the British. The main opposition Communist Party also lacked a large-scale widespread organisational base. In the wake of all these, the peasants of West Bengal resorted to a strategy of muteness and forceful coexistence with the unidentified class enemy.

Pendulating Political Affiliation

After the first phase of the Tebhaga movement, the Communist Party concentrated on urban mobilisation before it restarted the Tebhaga agitation in the Kakdwip region, although in a more assertive and violent term. During this time, from early 1949, the Communist Party of India started demanding that all the land the produce be given to the person who tills the land and also encouraged people to seize harvested crops and government godowns that were filled with food. The centre of mobilisation during this time was the poor peasantry and the tribal people of inaccessible under-developed regions, especially people of the southern part of 24-Parganas, from Sandeshkhali, Canning, Lyalgunge, Kakdwip, Laiks of Bankura etc. The rural movement took to the Telangana model of Andhra Pradesh involved a number of murders of people who resisted communist seizure and the distribution of a pamphlet titled “Sishu Telenga” (Franda, 1971). However, the radical and more assertive display of communist members did not sustain for long in the face of brute police action, and by late 1950, most of the communist leaders accepted defeat. Communist Party, in a public meeting presided by Jyoti

Basu, decided to minimise the gap of communication between the party leaders and common masses and had pledged to form a strong Left Front to counter the Congress government through the parliamentary democratic form. Meanwhile, the Constitution of India came into force and the first general election to form the first democratic government for the country was declared, which might prompt the dominating faction of the communist party to abandon the militant ways of bringing in transformation and focus on democratic organised politics. The Communist Party of India formed an alliance with the Socialist Republican Party formed by Sarat Bose and Forward Block to offer the only effective opposition to the Congress in the 1952 elections and owned some of the important seats that had a chilling effect on the institution of landlordism. For instance, the CPI candidates had defeated the education minister, H.N. Chaudhuri and the Revenue Minister, B.C. Sinha and both of them were zamindars (Ibid, p.52). After the fall of the second phase of the Tebhaga movement, the main political agitations had been against the food insecurity of the people and executing the land reform acts and were sporadic in nature across all of West Bengal and did not take to the kind of large-scale violence of Tebhaga, until the late 1960s Naxalbari uprising.

The Naxalbari Uprising: Rural Roots and Urban Transformation

In late 1960 a class-based movement, rather uprising against the common class enemy *jotedars*, started in the northern part of West Bengal, centering the Naxalbari police station of Siliguri sub-division of Darjeeling district. The movement has been against the explicit concentration of resources in the hands of *jotedars* and their undue domination of the rural landscape. The movement had been led by the local peasant organisation with active support from the extreme Left wing of the major constituent of the Left Front government, the Communist Party of India (Marxist). The modes of resentment involved violent means to forcefully grab the land of *jotedars* - apart from taking over the hoarding stocks, bullocks, burning of registration and agreement deeds - who had been making mockeries of the ceiling laws and possessed land much higher than lawful sanction. (Sanyal, 1978) Precisely, the movement began in March 1967 but did not sustain for long in the local area because of severe repression through the “encirclement and suppression” campaign by fourteen party United Front government as Kanu Sanyal claimed, led by “Ajoy-Jyoti-Harekrishna-Biswanath” and later it transformed into an urban mobilisation by student activists (Ibid, p.203- 226). On 22nd May 1967, fifteen peasants were killed, and on 10th June, the first *jotedar* was assassinated. Although the spatial (Naxalbari, Phansidewa and Khoribari) and demographic spread of the movement was substantially limited and the movement was being suppressed by the government with brute force without taking much time, the psychological impact it had inculcated into millions of

minds has been tremendous. In urban areas, the radical student activist started to preach the doctrine of the annihilation of the class enemy *jotedars* authored by Charu Majumdar, who became the chairman of the CPI(M-L) party. The movement had resulted in a reduction in the number of sharecroppers in North Bengal, but the rank of landless labourers swelled, and the class differentiation was still clearly perceptible. However, in other areas of West Bengal, the class differentiation was not so explicit and it was not easy to identify the class enemy. Therefore, the appeal by the radical student units to annihilate *jotedars* did not yield much support in other areas, and the Naxalbari movement gradually degenerated and turned into a “campaign of terrorism in the urban jungle of Calcutta” (Bose, 1993).

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) the principal among the fourteen-party United Front government did not support the way the Naxalbari movement unfolded but was involved in the landgrab movement that recovered around three lack acres of land within 1969 from 24-Parganas, Burdwan, Midnapore, West Dinajpur and Malda. Harekrishna Konar the then Minister of Revenue of the Government of West Bengal, played a decisive role in the identification and confiscation of excess land from former *jotedars* and zamindars. One of the areas where CPI(M) launched the campaign was in Sonarpur area, the southern tip of the 24-Parganas district. The peasant struggle led by the Left parties received a temporary setback with the fall of the United Front government, because of internal conflicts, that paved the way for the Congress to return to power through the 1972 election.

Left's Ascendency to Power

Rural factionalism had been the driving force of the political behaviour of peasants. The various factions were represented by dominating landlords and rich peasantry and were subscribed by dependent poor peasants and landless labourers. According to Hamza Alavi, these poor exploited peasants and landless labourers had no class solidarity and class unity and were divided through individual allegiance to different factions. The objectively constructed allegiance to their master helped the poor peasantry during distress – by getting loans or employment (Alavi, 1965). The political initiatives, in pursuit of achieving greater political power, were decided by the faction chief and to be participated by the faction followers. Different factions were in conflict with each other. The dominating faction of villages used to get many benefits from the party in power and also had to help in electoral mobilisation during elections. These leaders of factions, essentially the ex-zamindars and *jotedars* and newly created independent rich peasants, were the major support base for the Congress until 1977. The opposing factions tried to attract middle peasants who were relatively independent of big landlords or even were in conflict with them. However, the dominating factions of rural areas

were able to keep the marginalised, deprived, landless poor peasants for almost thirty years since independence by using local kinship ties. The Left parties had failed to recognise such factional characteristics of the peasantry that helped Congress to rule so long by using those factional heads. However, the two United Front governments and radical land identification, confiscation and redistribution initiated by the Left parties greatly helped to burst the core of rural factionalism by dominating ex-zamindars, *jotedars* and rich peasants by dismantling the major source of authority, i.e., land, and paved the way for the establishment in West Bengal, one of the longest-served Left regimes in the world.

One of the important features of post-colonial peasant mobilisation was that the religion lost its significance as the unifying thread and mobilising force; instead, West Bengal showed strong class solidarity in peasant mobilisation, evident from the limited success of an attempt made by locals to revive the Tebhaga movement in Kakdwip region around 1948 and 1949 before it was severely repressed and legislation was initiated. I have mentioned multiple times about the ceiling laws with some inherent lacunas that had been passed in 1953 and reinvigorated in 1955, which had failed to neutralise the domination of former zamindars. At least a couple of decades after independence these rich peasants along with the big raiyats who were the former zamindars and lost their rent-collecting right with the passing of the West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act in 1953, but retained a sizeable proportion of land as 'khas khamar' or personal demesne for personal cultivation, continued dominating the countryside of West Bengal and lent formidable support for conservative congress to rule. However, in the late 1960s Communist-led popular land-grab movement and the electoral support by the middle and lower peasantry helped to dislodge the Congress Ministry and extinguish the influence of the disguised zamindars. The Ex-zamindar Congress nexus has been clearly evident from the amount of land that the Congress government recovered until the coming of the United Front government and what the United Front government recovered under the leadership of Harekrishna Konar, the then Minister of Land Revenue.

Urban Leadership and its Impact on Agrarian Struggles

The leadership of the class struggle came from the members of the rank of landowning communities who were gradually settling in and around urban areas, participated in the state-sponsored education system and ventured into urban professions after breaking the last ties with the land. However, they were not participating in this agrarian class struggle as a stakeholder but were inventing from outside of it in the cause of upholding and securing the rights of millions of pauperised peasantries. The rank of this leadership continued to swell and was even further enlarged by the immigrant Bengali *bhadroloks* from 'opar bangla', East

Pakistan. The influential organised left movement that had taken momentum from the 1950s was built on a peculiar agrarian class contest between landless labourers, small peasants and sharecroppers' interests and the interests of the big landowners and *jotedars* before independence in Bengal. The performance of West Bengal, despite many inbuilt loopholes, in executing land ceiling, identifying excess land, and vesting it with the state and later redistribution amongst landless was relatively better than other states. The credit of it goes not to the automated political will or executive expertise but to the pressure exerted in the peripheral regions of West Bengal by the organised Left political organisation through incessant demands of security of tenancy of sharecroppers against evictions. Moreover, Partha Chatterjee has orchestrated the achievement of the Left movement in West Bengal in even carving the capitalist development in agriculture and in sustaining the viability of the small peasant cultivators. According to Chatterjee, the Left movement that had been led by the urban middle class 'has succeeded in resisting, much more than in any other part of India, the emergence and domination of rich capitalist farmers in the countryside and sustained to a very large extent the continued viability of small-peasant cultivation' (Chatterjee, 1997).

An Expression of Regional Identity and Political Quest

A very pertinent question in this context that what made the Bengalis so inclined towards communism when most parts of India went with the traditional way of political expression. The decline of Bengal in the long twentieth century as a major politico-economic centre prompted the quest for an alternative regional identity and political power. Marcus F. Franda has observed that in this process, West Bengal had inclined towards communism. It is also evident from the Communist assertion of autonomy from the central politics or even the central government. The West Bengal government under the United Front, dominated by Marxists, proclaimed in response to the derogatory and discriminatory policies of the central government that 'the United Front must now be West Bengal's way of life. Our shield and our armoury is unity.' (Tribune, 1967) It is, according to Franda, 'the ability of Bengali revolutionaries to adopt communism and Marxism to their own regional traditions and perceived political needs,' that made them ardent practitioners and participants of communist politics (Franda, 1971). However, this time West Bengal had failed to serve as a torch bearer, as it used to do during the early colonial rule at least till the early twentieth century, since it failed to initiate an all-India Left movement involving all the states of India to offer effective opposition to Congress domination within the parliament or outside.

The drastic, forced, and decentralised land reform that had been initiated by the non-congress parties in West Bengal initially in 1967 and later since 1977 had improved the distributive

justice by bringing down the ‘Gini-coefficient,’ a typical economic measurement that determines the level of inequality, i.e., if the Gini-coefficient increase the level of inequality also increases, of distribution of operational holdings. Although the Gini-Coefficient reduced to 0.412 from 0.478, between 1970 and 1991, the average size of holdings, however, declined from 1.2 hectares to 0.9 hectares (Bagchi, 1998).

The Communist Party of India, after winning the election and dislodging the Congress forever from West Bengal in 1977, took to a conscious policy of consolidation of its electoral base amongst the middle peasantry and sharecroppers. The Left Front government gave West Bengal a relatively progressive but absolutely stable government. The recurrent electoral success of the Communist Party did not stem from the unanimous support of the landless labourer but instead from the support of the small independent peasantry. The issue of equitable distribution of land, based on which the Communist Party crossed the electoral voyages, did not materialise, as it had to be or at least claimed to be by the Communist Party while criticising the Congress, ever since the independence. Sugata Bose has described the Communist effort of land redistribution as nothing more than the ‘redistribution of poverty’ (Bose, 1993). The strategic selection of preference with respect to the agrarian reform in favour of sharecroppers later during the closing years of 1970 through “Operation Barga” Communist party had balanced the agrarian class equilibrium by not threatening the interests of the small peasantry at the same time by raising hope among the landless labourers that a reform might come to their way as well. However, the inability of the government to arrange other working capital, especially credits, defeated the very purpose of redistributive justice, as peasants still had to depend on the informal exploitative locals.

Conclusion

After consulting the possible primary and secondary sources and elaborating on the question raised in the introductory commentary, it could be said that uncertainties, pauperisation, landlessness, eviction, exploitation, and extreme disparity have dominated the post-colonial agrarian scenes in West Bengal. Most of these traits were the major characteristics of colonial agrarian history, that unfortunately continued well into independent India and took many years to completely shade off or perhaps continue to exist even today. The post-colonial agrarian history of West Bengal, in a nutshell characterised by the exogenous intervention through land legislation in the 1950s, the adoption of the new agricultural strategy to boost production in the 1960s and the growing state expenditure and expanding agricultural market and food inflation. The human capital formation and overall agricultural development varied after independence in accordance with the prevailing settlement system under the British. The state had failed to

establish an egalitarian, socialistic pattern of agrarian society, as evident from the sharp increase in disparity. Per-capita farm income grew at a much lower rate, coupled with extreme unevenness in the distribution. However, the most perceptible change that came about after independence, amongst others, was that agricultural income tax lost its prominence and that state governments across India were initiating legislation to erase the age-old institutions of revenue settlements - in West Bengal, it was the elimination of a parasitic zamindari class created or rather strengthened through the permanent settlement way back in the late eighteenth century.

Land reform was initiated with enlightened, egalitarian, and socialistic objectives, but the output did not turn out well. Documentations that were required to prove the claims of the peasants became detrimental to the output of enlightened democratic legislation. An elaborate arrangement had been made through the West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act 1953 to forbid zamindars to hold land (ownership holding) after a threshold of 25 acres with certain exceptions. However, the lacunas inherited in it on operational holding keep the possibility open for the concentration of land through other means. The positive aspect of the land reform and abolition of the zamindari was that it reduced the incidence of sub-infeudation - which took to the crisis proportion during the British - and eliminated intermediaries between the state and the tillers of the land. However, the relative, or perhaps absolute advantageous position of former zamindars that had been abolished in 1953 through the West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act because of the rural prominence and domination that they used to enjoy so far, accumulation of wealth through revenue farming and other means and appropriation of compensation in lieu of land acquisition after independence, helped them to consolidate further their position in post-colonial political and socio-economic fronts. It has been observed that the zamindari abolition did not materialise in real terms, as it happened to be, at least up to the coming of the first United Front government in 1967, because of their social prominence and influential political existence and dominance and use of malpractices. Zamindars existed in the major part of the study period in disguise. Only when the bureaucratic method of land reform of Congress was replaced with the community-based land reform by the United Front government that any tangible change in agrarian structure perceived, and that too on a limited scale. The politics around land redistribution and zamindari abolition had helped greatly in shaping the political future of West Bengal. The initial reluctance of the Congress government to dismantle the landed gentry because of political cause and clueless Communist parties on account of the modes of peasant mobilisation had shaped the socio-economic destiny of the agrarian classes and the long-term political destiny of the state of West Bengal. The compensation paid to the ex-zamindars out of the public exchequer impoverished the state's

capacity to invest in much-needed productive infrastructure like irrigation. As per the prevailed law, there should not be any intermediaries to collect revenue from cultivating communities as they used to do during the British. However, they were receiving the same, although through a different route – from public exchequer filled in by taxes of common people. Therefore, the land reform in post-independent West Bengal remained largely a ‘legal fiction’ and gave rise to marginal holdings, informal tenancy, and eviction.

With respect to the question that what perpetuated agrarian miseries and crises even after the depart of the unanimously accepted exploiters, the British; it would not be inapt to argue that the independence did not dismantle the historical dialects of domination and resistance in the agrarian landscape as evident from multiple instances, rather it has been continued along the lines of caste, clan and community. The organisational and ideological attachments of the peasantry were not something static over the years but have changed with the changing nature of the relation of production and exploitation. The promise of the freedom movement to end the relationship of exploitation and oppression did not materialise even after independence. The apparent transformation of subjects into citizens by the appropriation of colonial institutions was not more than just an illusion – starvation, deprivation, and marginalisation did not fade away from the fate of the millions of peasantries. They became citizens and realised political equality, but a long walk yet to undertake to realise socio-economic equality.

The major political consequences of the land reform and zamindari abolition were the upward mobilisation of the middle and upper peasantry, whom the remnant of old zamindari had joined to shape the political course of West Bengal and to silence any large-scale exclusive peasant movement until the late 1960s. Internal differences in opinion regarding the modes of peasant mobilisation within the Communist parties and the difficulty in identifying a common class enemy in the absence of the British delayed the political transformation in West Bengal. The political agendas of the Communist parties to isolate Congress and to reveal the ugly face of capitalism that depicted the dialectic of bourgeois interests and national aspirations did not turn out well until the community-based land reform and confiscation of unwarranted land were undertaken during the first United Front government under the leadership of the then Land Revenue Minister Hare Krishna Konar. That forced drastic and decentralised land reform initiatives broke the backbone of the landed domination, inhibited rural mass mobilisation in favour of Congress and helped to attain distributive justice to a greater extent, which eventually paved the way for the Left Front government to come to power in 1977, for more than three decades to come.

References:

- Stokes, E. (1978). *The peasant and the Raj: studies in agrarian society and peasant rebellion in colonial India*. Cambridge University Press.
- Chatterjee, P. (1984). *Bengal 1920-1947: The land Question*. (No Title).
- Chatterjee, P. (1997). *The present history of West Bengal: Essays in political criticism*. (No Title).
- Banerjee, A. C., (1959), *The Agrarian System of Bengal, Volume 2, 1793-1955*, K P Bagchi & Company, Calcutta.
- Rudra, A. (1992). *Political economy of Indian agriculture*. K P Bagchi and Company, Calcutta
- *ibid.*, Pp.446-448
- Das, S., & Bandyopadhyay, P. (2004). *Food movement of 1959: Documenting a turning point in the history of West Bengal*. (No Title).
- Sen, B. (1962). *Evolution of agrarian relations in India-including a study of the nature and consequences of post-independence agrarian legislation*. Evolution of agrarian relations in India-including a study of the nature and consequences of post-independence agrarian legislation.
- Sen, B. (1955). *Indian land system and land reforms*. (No Title).
- Bose, S., (2007), *Agrarian Bengal Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-1947*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Bose S., (1993), *Peasant Labour Colonial Capital: Rural Bengal Since 1770*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Bandyopadhyay, S. (2009). *Decolonization in South Asia: Meanings of freedom in post-independence West Bengal, 1947–52*. Routledge.
- Chatterjee J., (2007), *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967*, Cambridge University Press.
- Zagoria, D. S. (1971). *The Ecology of Peasant Communism in India*. *The American Political Science Review*, 65(1), P.159
- *ibid.* p.144
- *ibid.* p.144
- G. Adhikari (1964), "The Problem of the Non-Capitalist Path of Development of India and the State of National Democracy," *World Marxist Review*, VII (11), p.39
- Kotovsky, Grigori (1964), *Agrarian Reforms in India*, People's Publishing House, p.82

- Brass, Paul R. (1994), *The Politics of India Since Independence*, Cambridge University Press, p.81
- *ibid.*, p.82
- Zagoria, Donald S., (1974), “Asian Tenancy System and Communist Mobilisation of the Peasantry,” in Lewis, John Wilson. (Ed.) *Peasant Rebellion and Communist Revolution in Asia*, Stanford University Press, California, p.43
- *ibid.*, P.57
- Franda, Marcus F. (1971), *Radical Politics in West Bengal*, MIT Press, p.50-51
- *ibid.*, p.52
- Sanyal, Kanu., (1978), “Report on the Peasant Movement in the Terai Region”, in Samar Sen, Debabrata Panda, et.al (Eds.) (1978) *Naxalbari and after A Frontier anthology*, 2-Kathashilpa, pp.203-226.
- *Ibid*, pp.203-226.
- Bose, S., (1993), *Peasant Labour Colonial Capital: Rural Bengal Since 1770*, Cambridge University Press, p.177
- Alavi, H., (1965), “Peasant Revolution”, *Social Register*, Vol.2, pp.273-74
- Chatterjee, P., (1997), *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism*, OUP, India, p. 67
- *Tribune* (Sydney), Wednesday, 5th July 1967, p.8
- Franda, Marcus F. (1971), *Radical Politics in West Bengal*, MIT Press, p.268
- Bagchi, A. K., (1998), “Studies on the Economy of West Bengal since Independence”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33(47/48), p.2975
- Bose, S., (1993), *Peasant Labour Colonial Capital*, *op. cit.*, p.178