

## LAND REFORM AND THE LEFT IN WEST BENGAL, 1977-1982

Despite the periodic (and debatable) unreliability of the urban vote, the rural vote dependably re-elected the Left Front government for subsequent terms in West Bengal from 1977 onwards for 34 years. It is common to explain this sturdy support of the rural vote as the consequence of the land reform undertaken by the Left Front in the years following 1977. This paper wishes to look into the nature of this land reform and assess the character of the rural vote-base that it created. At the very outset, let us begin by clarifying that land reforms does not mean— and cannot be subsumed— under the singular study of the *Operation Barga*, though it is this measure that has received the widest publicity. As such, today we set aside the Operation Barga to look at the wider gamut of agrarian reforms that the Left Front government undertook during its first term in West Bengal. In doing so, we grapple with the crisis that the CPI(M) faced in transforming itself from a revolutionary party to a party saddled with the responsibility of running a government and, probably more importantly, staying in power. What did this change of role betoken in terms of the ideological commitment of the party?

Now, land reform is potentially the most significant programme the Communist government might be expected to undertake. As it is a state subject under the Indian constitution it was within the jurisdiction of the Left Front government. Though plaintiffs have recourse to court challenges and new legislation is subject to Presidential approval, the legal and extra-legal powers open to a state government are considerable. These include the use of the state police and administration, as well as the Left peasant organizations. Central government dismissal of a state government is constitutionally allowed, and has been used to dismiss previous Communist governments, placing limits on how far revolutionary methods can be taken.

At the macro-level the radical objectives of the state land reform programme appeared unambiguous in their devotion to helping the lower classes. According to the West Bengal government's Seventh Five Year Plan:

The basic reason for initiating rural development through the poor is as follows. There is a remarkable evidence, available from all districts of the state, that the highest record of production, taking into account per acre yield of the crops and also the cropping intensity is obtained not from the land of the big and the middle farmers but from the poor farmers. What these poor farmers do not have by way of implements

and other inputs, they over-compensate by fuller application of their labour. It follows therefore that if the ceiling surplus land is distributed to the poorer farmers and then they are assisted in terms of non-land inputs, then not only the inequality between the farmers gets lessened, but a definitive move is also initiated to increase the level of production.<sup>1</sup>

By the time the Left Front came to power there had already been a gradual lowering and tightening of land ceiling laws to the point where the small minority of Zamindars and big landlords had been eliminated. Any further expropriation of progressively smaller landholding units would have antagonized increasing numbers of villagers in the large and the middle peasant category. Any equalization of landholdings would therefore have resulted in a very large minority of villagers being deprived of some of their land, thus threatening the Left's rural base. Greater political mobilization of agricultural labourers and marginal cultivators with enforcement of land expropriations by the state government would have increased polarization in rural society, resulting in a backlash which might have driven the Left Front from power earlier than 2011. Since organization of the lowest strata was weak or non-existent, the safe option for the CPI(M) was to soft-pedal serious and meaningful attempts at land distribution. The radical alternative would have been the collectivization of land. However, experiences in China and the USSR indicate decreased productivity under this system, aside from the violence that would have been required to implement it. Some economists argue that with the provision of credit and agricultural inputs, small peasants are more efficient and productive than their larger counterparts, thereby rendering collectivization unnecessary and counter-productive. However, in Bengal this small peasant class lacked the financial resources to implement improvement schemes and the state's resources in 1977 were limited. The land-person ratio continued to deteriorate as cultivable area could not be significantly increased, and population growth continued unabated. Between 1961 and 1971 the land-person ratio decreased by 28 per cent from 0.444 acres to 0.321 acres.<sup>2</sup>

Any possible solution was bound to adversely affect a sizeable class in rural Bengal. The villages were not homogeneous and peasant unity only artificial if it could be developed at all. It was no longer possible to benefit the many by sacrificing the few large landowners. Complete or even partial expropriation would have antagonized a large number of people, many of them not particularly well-off. The difficulty of choosing the expropriators from the

expropriated was illustrated in the West Bengal Board of Revenue's analysis of the antagonisms among the different strata of the Bengal peasantry.

The old straightforward classification of the landed as one group or class and the landless as another group or class no longer holds good. As a matter of fact it is often the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> strata (less than 1 hectare to three hectare or slightly more) that now find themselves in deadly antagonism to the 5<sup>th</sup> stratum of sharecropper or the 6<sup>th</sup> landless stratum. Even the sharecropping sections in stratum 5, particularly if they are engaged in multiple-cropping, identify their destinies with stratum 3 and 4 and not with the pure agricultural landless labour or the single-cropping sharecroppers of stratum 5. The battle for finely graded security or the absence of it is sharpening class or interest antagonisms, further complicating the problems of area planning, decentralised decision taking, bureaucratic and political accessibility and efficiency, extension activity and the distribution of institutional benefits ... Questions of what administrative or fiscal action benefits whom, how, why and where have grown in complexity and so have the consequences of these actions on shifting interest alignments and conflicts within the rural structure.<sup>3</sup>

While simplistic trends of Marxism tend to classify peasantry as exploiters and exploited according to whether or not they employ labour, in West Bengal there was a wide variation of employment patterns with a large intermediate class which simultaneously hires labour, works on their own land and hires themselves out as labourers. According to Utsa Patnaik, a class breakdown by landholdings in Bengal would classify poor peasants as owning less than 1.60 acres, lower middle between 1.61 and 4.60, upper middle as between 4.61 and 9.80, and the rich peasants and landlords as over 9.81 acres.<sup>4</sup> With the decreasing land-man ratio and the increasing use of high-yielding varieties this might be considered slightly on the high side. For Bengal, P. Sundarayya's upper limit of 5 acres for the middle peasantry would seem more accurate for our time period.<sup>5</sup>

With varied local conditions any categorization can only be an approximation rather than a definite classification. Even within West Bengal there are seven different agro-climatic regions resulting in wide variations in land productivity and cropping patterns.<sup>6</sup> Any classification of landownership would have to take these productivity variations into account in a land reform programme. Another factor that must be kept in mind is the small absolute sizes involved.<sup>7</sup> In an equitable land reform, a third of an acre per person would have to be

the maximum allowable. Supplementary income through outside work is very common in rural India and would have to be taken into consideration. Many small farmers must work elsewhere to make a living while leasing out their land.<sup>8</sup> One Bengal survey found that marginal farmers (defined as owning less than 1 hectare) derived 68.9 percent of their income from property rather than from their own or family labour.<sup>9</sup> Integration into the market economy is also considerable. Even landless agricultural labourers, according to this survey, spent 23.1 percent of their income on industrially produced consumption goods.<sup>10</sup> Some crops such as jute were produced exclusively for the market while food crops were also traded extensively. Though private moneylenders remain the major source of rural credit, institutional sources have increased significantly, giving the state an increased role in the rural economy.<sup>11</sup>

Most spectacular of all has been the green revolution, which has produced significant increases in fertilizer and High Yielding Variety use as well as in irrigation and output.<sup>12</sup> Though not as early and rapidly as in the Punjab, the 1970s show substantial increases in these outputs. This resulted in increased productivity and market surplus, which, because of the strength of the surplus farmer lobby, the government had to subsidize with higher food procurement prices than a free market might provide. Food self-sufficiency was achieved but *at a gain to the dominant segment of rural society*.

In categorizing rural social classes the landless agricultural labour category is straightforward, but many minute landowners lease out land to bigger landowners and *vice versa*.<sup>13</sup> If one uses the employment of hired labour, rather than size of landholdings, as a definition of class, then by this definition there would be little land left to give to the tillers since only landholdings over 10 hectares used hired labour for most farm work.<sup>14</sup> Production of a surplus for a market is even more difficult to define as a class category since some crops like jute or sugar cane are only for the market, while rice, wheat, and potatoes can be for both, and the portion sold depends on seasonal prices and productivity. Furthermore, peasants with as little as 2 or 3 hectares were often connected to urban employment and have relatives completely integrated into the urban sector. A single criterion, even the most commonly used one of landownership, is therefore in itself inadequate. The use of hired labour and land leasing must also be taken into account as well as additional sources of income. A small farmer might be defined as having land or equivalent sources of income around the 0.321 acre per land-man ratio or about 2 acres per household, anything less than half this being

defined as marginal farming. The middle peasantry, as commonly suggested, would be those who work their own land without normally employing non-family labour. This would be placed somewhat arbitrarily at 5 acres. The law of 12 to 17 irrigated acres current in the 1980s was more than this. Confiscation of land over 5 acres, which could be defined as rich peasant, and over the current ceiling limit as landlord, would provide 44 percent of cultivable land for redistribution and leave 87 percent of agricultural households either the gainers or unaffected by the reform.<sup>15</sup> This should have been the minimal first step towards land reform, a short-term goal that had to be followed at an opportune time by equalization of land as the mid-term goal. This categorization differs from the agricultural census definition, but has the advantage of including use of hired labour as a criterion as well as indicates what could have been a workable guideline for a land reform programme in 1977-82 that would have allowed large-scale land redistribution without alienating the vast majority of the agricultural population. The use of the 5-acre limit has been chosen because the number of households with more land than this is significantly less than those with less than 5 acres. Within this framework, therefore, there would have been less opposition to implementation than would have arisen from a lower ceiling limit.

According to Benoy Choudhury, the Communist Party of India (Marxist)'s Land Reforms and Land Revenue Minister during the Left Front government's first term, only the complete confiscation of all holdings over 10 acres would enable the agricultural labourers and marginal farmers to receive 1.5 acres per household. According to him, only 4.2 percent of households owned over 10 acres, controlling 33.3 percent of agricultural land or 4.53 million acres. With 3,751,000 landless and marginal farmer households, equalization of landholdings at 1.5 acres per household would have required complete confiscation of all lands held by these largest landowners. The Land Reforms minister stated that the biggest lacuna is allowing the landlords to retain land up to the ceiling limit. The basic land reform slogan (for Choudhury writing in May 1977) should be taking over all the land from feudal and capitalist landlords without compensation and distributing it among landless labourers free. All the land must be taken from the landlords, otherwise the *Ceiling Act* would end up as a farce and not enough land would be available to distribute.<sup>16</sup> This is, however, precisely what happened. The ceiling being too high, there was insufficient land available for a significant land redistribution, and whatever may have been the Land Reforms minister's view on the subject, the CPI(M)-led government showed no intention of changing the *status quo* in this regard or the Minister himself of implementing his own recommendations. When the CPI(M)

first published Benoy Choudhury's booklet in May 1977 on the eve of the election of the CPI(M) to power, his position could be taken as a statement of party policy, but by its fifth reprinting in January 1981 (which has been cited here) it had ceased to have any meaning except to show how far short the political practice had fallen from its original policy.

The original CPI(M) position as formulated in the resolution of the Central Committee on *Tasks on the Kisan Front* of 1967 and on *Certain Agrarian Issues* in 1973 was far different from the CPI(M) policies in the Left Front government.<sup>17</sup> This difference reflected part of the general trend towards moderation in the CPI(M). The 1967 and 1973 documents bear the orientation of the then General Secretary P. Sundarayya who subsequently resigned from the party leadership and Politburo in 1976, when his positions were no longer being accepted in the drift towards moderation. Though these resolutions were repudiated in the late 1970s they illustrate the change that had taken place in party policy, resulting in the West Bengal government position post-1977. The difference on the agrarian question between the former Central Committee position and that of the West Bengal party members which later became the state government and CPI(M) policy is brought out in P. Sundarayya's explanatory note on *Certain Agrarian Issues*. Sundarayya's critique of the Bengal position is only a thinly disguised accusation of reformism in the West Bengal party and by implication of the post-1977 party position.<sup>18</sup> "Some comrades in West Bengal argue that the ownership right to the tenants should not be campaigned for now ... as it would antagonise these sections" of landowners "and they would go away from the democratic alliance." That "these critics have gone to the extremely ridiculous position" of hesitating to raise popular demands when "the Congress itself is forced to come forward to satisfy ... the masses with such legislation, though only to cheat them, is something queer ... This attitude, if logically extended, would mean that we should formulate and advance demands of tenants in such a way as would be acceptable to the landlords."<sup>19</sup> Sundarayya rejected the position of some West Bengal peasant leaders that a ceiling of 25 acres would be "a very big step." "With such an amount of ceiling ... no land will be available for distribution."<sup>20</sup> He reiterated the Central Committee policy of expropriating all the land of the landlords including that below the ceiling. To allow retention of land below the ceiling would only perpetuate landlordism, "cheating the agricultural labour and poor peasants," leaving the CPI(M) policy of distributing land free to the landless as an "empty slogan."<sup>21</sup>

The reason for this wrong position in the CPI(M) lies, according to Sundarayya, in the rich and middle peasant composition of the party and their orientation to these classes. The CPI(M) Central Committee itself had earlier admitted peasant unity in the party was erroneously “based upon the middle and rich peasantry, instead of building it round the rural labour and the poor and ... organizing these sections as the main backbone and driving force of the movement.”<sup>22</sup> The Central Committee admitted this task would not be easy as the rich and middle peasant orientation was “deeprooted and long-accumulated” and because “the bulk of our leading *kisan* activists come from the rich and middle peasant class” rather than the poor peasants and agricultural labour.<sup>23</sup> Harekrishna Konar took the same position, noting that “today the old practice of building peasant unity based on the middle peasants is not useful for agrarian revolution but this old outlook still holds the activists of the peasant movement back.” Though he argued “particular emphasis” had to be “laid on the task of organizing the agricultural labourers and poor peasants and making them conscious,” this was almost totally absent from the policy implementation of the Left Front government.<sup>24</sup>

Given the acute land shortage and the elimination of the larger landowners over the years through land reforms, the only options left were collectivization, which was politically untenable, or lowering the land ceiling, which would antagonise many of the Communist Party’s own supporters in the villages. When Santosh Rana, leader of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), suggested lowering the land ceiling, the CPI(M) Land Reforms minister described this as a provocation, which it certainly would have been, even among the CPI(M) supporters.<sup>25</sup> Faced with the choice between implementing significant land reforms to help the landless and poor peasantry, or helping the middle and rich peasantry by doing nothing of significance, *the Left Front chose the latter approach*, thereby preserving its most important rural base. The CPI(M) “central leadership wanted to abandon political action that would polarise the rich and the middle peasants on the one hand and the poor and marginal peasants and landless workers on the other. They practically abandoned meaningful struggle for land reforms.”<sup>26</sup> “In their eagerness to preserve all peasant unity in rural West Bengal the Government is probably shifting away from potentially the most active agents of agrarian reorganization” namely agricultural labour and the poor peasantry.<sup>27</sup> This all-peasant unity could only be preserved by keeping the potentially most revolutionary classes inactive or subordinate, as they represented the greatest potential threat to the CPI(M)’s own vested interest in the middle and rich peasantry.

As a result, all the Left Front could offer the lower classes were minor concessions and palliatives, often through laws passed by the previous Congress regime but never implemented. The agency for this implementation was the existing state bureaucracy, with all the deficiencies that entailed. Unlike the Panchayats where the parties at least had to put up slates of candidates and participate politically, in the land reform programme, party participation was optional. Though the Communist peasant organizations were requested to assist the administration, the administration carried out the work at every step of the process.

In the Land Reforms Department the officials were about evenly divided between those originating from East Bengal and those from West Bengal. Though only those from West Bengal were often landowners, some of the East Bengalis retained a landed ideological orientation. In these circumstances the dedicated officers found it difficult to work in the administration. The few dedicated senior officials, often of left inclination, could *not* easily carry through land reform when junior officials in department offices and in the field were lacking in motivation and would not cooperate. The junior staff in the Land Reforms Department who often had the most contact with the common people also had the least sympathy with them. A publication of the Directorate of Land Records and Surveys even stated, that “the entire gamut of land reforms implementation is an open sesame for the dishonest employees is a widely known fact of life.”<sup>28</sup> Though the legislation that the department was implementing had usually been in effect from the Congress period, the Left Front claimed greater dedication in carrying the programme through. The laws had been introduced by Congress but till the Left Front government came to power, they had largely been observed in the breach.

The Land Reforms Commissioner noted the deficiencies of the bureaucracy as an agency of social change.

Generally the Bureaucracy maintains a stance of hostile neutrality to the entire issue of land reforms. The reason lies in the age-old tradition of the administration of maintaining order, with or without law. The main burden of administrative ethos and procedure, general civil and original laws, judicial pronouncements and practices is the maintenance and safeguarding of existing property relationship in the rural areas. Hence it is natural for the bureaucracy to develop a bias against any action or an isolated law which aims at altering the existing socio-economic arrangements.<sup>29</sup>



The “reactionary” rulings of the allegedly Congress-oriented Calcutta High Court resulted in 20,000 civil injunctions centring around land reforms, and the Land Revenue Courts had 27,000 cases pending, resulting in 180,779 acres being hit by court injunctions.<sup>30</sup> The acreage increased slightly from 164,733 acres under injunction at the end of 1978, indicating the backlog of cases was not being cleared. This was alleged to be with the connivance of Marxist lawyers who for personal gain prolonged cases at government expense.<sup>31</sup> Between 1977 and 1980, the Left Front government spent about Rs. 1.20 crores as fees to official lawyers, yet these suits were not cleared.<sup>32</sup> Those retaining their land through court injunctions and pending cases were earning over Rs. 4 crores per year.<sup>33</sup>

The Indian Supreme Court, by contrast, proved to be more proactive in its orientation.<sup>34</sup> The Supreme Court Judgement of May 9, 1980 noted that “there is no substantial decrease in the limit” of ceiling land under current West Bengal law. The ceiling limit of “6.18 acres in the case of an individual, and 12.35 to 17.29 acres of irrigated land, in the case of a family ... in the Gangetic plains of West Bengal is not small by any standard.”<sup>35</sup> Such land reforms would leave all but the biggest landlords untouched and even they would be able to retain up to the ceiling, enabling them to remain in the landlord class. The surplus land above the ceiling was available for distribution to the landless and poor peasantry.

To satisfy the largest number of people the Left Front distributed the surplus into pieces all below an acre and averaging 0.54 acres. While good for acquiring a political base and helping to meet immediate peasant aspirations, which it did, this is by no stretch of imagination a radical land reform programme, let alone opening the road to collectivization in the future.

It is perfectly understandable that if we want to maintain the *status quo* – or any other social order – we should try to involve as many people as possible in it so that at least a majority of the population acquire a stake in the *status quo* or the system in question. Keeping this in view, it is perfectly reasonable to distribute small bits of land however uneconomic to land hungry peasants and/or agricultural labourers so that they never look for any radical alternative to the present property system and stay eager to acquire some property. However to call it socialism is a sad travesty of truth.<sup>36</sup>

The identification and distribution of this surplus land was almost entirely the work of the state bureaucracy. By 1982, 1,249,117 acres of agricultural land had been vested representing about 1/4 of the all-India total. The Left Front

claimed that “West Bengal is the only state in India to have vested so much ceiling surplus agricultural land.”<sup>37</sup> According to Nossiter:

The LF ministries’ record on land redistribution is indubitably impressive, particularly when compared with other states in India. Some 4.4 million acres were ‘vested’ (expropriated and held) in government nationwide. Of this West Bengal accounted for 1.2 million acres of which 800,000 acres have been redistributed to the landless (Election Manifesto of the LF, 1987).<sup>38</sup>

This uncritical acceptance of Left Front land reform statistics is surprising since it is well known among both the land reform officials in charge of the redistribution and Indian scholars of the subject that these figures are the result of inappropriately including redistribution figures from the Estates Acquisition Act (1,049,221 acres till 1985) with that under the Land Reforms Act (184,049). As only the latter is comparable with land reforms in other states, the former being part of the zamindari abolition programme, “the performance of West Bengal with respect to ceiling laws cannot, therefore, be regarded as extraordinary.”<sup>39</sup> At the end of 1978 1,005,148 acres had been distributed under the Estates Acquisition Act and 117,428 under the Land Reforms Act. But by the end of 1984 only 1,049,220 acres and 184,049 had been vested indicating only 44,072 and 66,621 acres had been vested in the first six years of Left Front rule, a rate no better than under the previous Congress government.<sup>40</sup> The Land Reforms Minister stated in the assembly that from the election of the Left Front till mid 1982 150,000 acres had been vested and 120,000 distributed, which meant that 1 million acres had been vested before the Left Front came to power and 630,000 acres distributed already.<sup>41</sup> The 799,224 acres distributed by the end of 1984 went to 1,572,531 persons or about 1/2 acre per beneficiary.

Though a Left Front government annual publication continues to make the claim West Bengal has vested 1/6th of the all-India total and distributed 1/5th, the same publication admits only about 200,000 acres have been vested over the first twelve years of Communist rule, leaving the majority of land being vested by previous Congress regimes.<sup>42</sup> As the 200,000 acres vested over the twelve years of Communist rule is only 0.92 percent of the total state

area and 1.2 percent of the cultivable area, Nossiter's claim that "the LF ministries' record of land redistribution is indubitably impressive" is open to serious doubt. The West Bengal government blamed this poor record on central government delays in giving Presidential assent to land reform legislation and on previous Marxist governments having already distributed land in the 1967 to 1969 period. It neglected to mention that in these previous radical Communist governments the peasants were encouraged by the Communists to seize the land themselves without waiting for the administration. Harekrishna Konar was the leading figure then. It is a mark of the political distance the CPI(M) had travelled from its early revolutionary phase of the 1960s that the state bureaucracy was now left in the 1980s to do everything and peasant movements were discouraged, even when legislation waiting for central government approval is delayed giving time for "unscrupulous" land owners "to formulate strategy to evade the new ceiling provisions."<sup>43</sup>

In contrast to the land grab movements of Communist peasants during the Marxist governments of the 1960s, the 1977 government did practically nothing. According to CPI(M) Central Committee member Biplab Dasgupta:

During the brief United Front rule by the left-wing parties in 1967 and 1969-70, the village level committees of poor peasants and landless labourers helped to identify such *benami* land (that is land held illegally in excess of the permitted limit), took over 300,000 acres of such land and distributed it among the landless. While the legality of such action was disputable there was no denying the effectiveness of bringing about a change in the land relations in rural West Bengal. The beneficiaries of such populist land reform formed the hard core of the support which the Left Front received during the 1977 and 1982 elections.<sup>44</sup>

Thus nineteen months of Communist rule in the 1960s achieved more through peasant land seizures than the twelve years of Communist rule since 1977 (300,000 acres versus 80,000 distributed till 1985). As this represents only 1.8 and 0.55 percent of cultivable land, the distribution of 2.35 percent of the land under all Communist governments does not indicate significant land reform. The redistribution can only be described as cosmetic, and in fact neither Congress nor Communist governments have carried out significant land reform since zamindari abolition. "With these land ceiling measures, and the abolition of landlordism and intermediaries, the power in the countryside was transferred to small landlords and rich peasants ... Their needs and priorities became, to the administrators and policy-makers, the

needs and priorities of the village population as a whole.”<sup>45</sup> Though Biplab Dasgupta refers here to the pre-Left Front period, the limited land redistribution since then indicates that their elite class position remains unchanged. There are indications of the opportunist members in this class supporting the Left Front parties, though no reliable party-class membership survey exists. As the rest of the country is no better than Bengal in redistribution, the all-India land reform effort appears also to be cosmetic.<sup>46</sup> The downsizing of reported land holdings is largely the result of generational subdivision and bogus transfers rather than state intervention.

Atul Kohli and Nossiter, in specifically examining and then praising the West Bengal land reform, do not point out its insignificance in terms of total cultivable land. Kohli specifically mentions the percentage of cultivable land redistributed for the other two states he examined (Karnataka 0.2 percent and Uttar Pradesh 0.7 percent), thereby supporting his thesis of their poor land redistribution performance.<sup>47</sup> Nossiter and Kohli are aware of the importance of this figure but omitted to mention it for West Bengal. The redistribution in twelve years of only 0.55 percent of cultivable land makes their whole thesis of the Left Front’s “spectacular,” “indubitably impressive,” and “truly remarkable accomplishment” in land reform untenable.<sup>48</sup> It would have taken the Left Front over a millennium at this redistribution rate to distribute the land above the 5 acres as originally advocated had remained in power that long. That this redistribution was no longer party policy by then end of the last century is a measure of the political distance the CPI(M) had already travelled in the last quarter of that century.

By 1980 already, the West Bengal government Third Workshop on land reforms noted that the “progress made up to date was rather tardy and unsatisfactory in almost all the districts.”<sup>49</sup>

Though recovery of ceiling surplus land was a priority item

it was felt that there was large scope for giving further attention to this matter at the field level and to speed up the vesting of surplus land ... It was pointed out that a very large quantity of ceiling surplus land was retained by the intermediaries by clandestine manner. The common *modus operandi* were *benami* transaction, creation of sham and fake tenancies, trusts and endowments.<sup>50</sup>

In 1981 3.74 lakh acres of vested land had not been distributed with little having been done in the previous three years to expedite distribution, thus earning their illegal occupants Rs. 14

crores annually.<sup>51</sup> The Third Workshop found that one of the reasons these acres of vested land could not be distributed was that the elected rural institutions described these lands as “unfit for agriculture.”<sup>52</sup> Though peasants were expected to help in detecting surplus land, the policy was that vested land be taken possession of only after “quasi-judicial and administrative processes” were complete.<sup>53</sup> The CPI(M) Land and Land Revenue Reforms Minister Benoy Choudhury concluded: “The achievement in the matter of distribution of vested land has not been satisfactory though highest priority was assigned to this job.”<sup>54</sup> The Board of Revenue also found that they did not always get the desired degree of cooperation from the lower levels of the bureaucracy and the Panchayats. “It was thought that with their local knowledge the representatives of Panchayati Raj Institution would be able to make a breakthrough in the usual dilatory process of identification of vested plot and its occupier. The circular did not have the desired effect.”<sup>55</sup> The Land Reforms Office in Burdwan stated that surplus land was not always being distributed according to the allocation priorities of the Government, implying that those less deserving but more influential were receiving the land. The Additional District Magistrate (Land Reforms) therefore instructed the Junior Land Revenue Officers to ensure proper distribution and to “pursue the Panchayats, where necessary, for making distribution accordingly.”<sup>56</sup>

The problems were similar in another major effort at land reform, redistributing illegally acquired land. Under the Restoration of Alienated Land Act, land which had been acquired through distress sales or under coercion was legally entitled to be restored to the original owners. However, implementation was “extremely tardy and unsatisfactory” with disposal of cases having come to a “standstill.” Only 15 percent of cases were disposed in favour of the aggrieved party, with an average area of 1 acre involved.<sup>57</sup> “It was found that not only restoration orders were passed in very few cases, but also most of these orders remained only in paper” with the party who had seized the land continuing to retain possession. Those disputes settled out of court also did not bring any benefit to the aggrieved party in a large number of cases.<sup>58</sup> The State Government Workshop on Land Reforms noted that the backlog of pending cases presented “a major problem specially in areas where there was concentration of Tribals. This might result in rural tension. It was imperative to dispose of all pending cases, particularly the cases involving alienation of Tribal Lands.”<sup>59</sup> With over 200,000 cases pending representing a large area of land this was difficult to achieve.<sup>60</sup> P. Roy Choudhury in an article in *Economic and Political Weekly* concludes:

the achievements of the Left Front Government in West Bengal in the matter of land reforms has not been such as warrant satisfaction. Whatever has been done, is to the credit of the much-maligned bureaucracy. The situation would have been far better had the political wing in the state been without link with land and landed interests.<sup>61</sup>

The dichotomy between theory and practice in land reform continued even within CPI(M) publications. The CPI(M) Kisan Sabha leader, Shantimoy Ghosh, in an article in the CPI(M) theoretical journal "Marxbadi Path," wrote of the need to expropriate the land of landlords and distribute it to the tillers. When the inconsistency of this with the Left Front and Kisan Sabha's implementation programme was pointed out, Promode Das Gupta, secretary of the CPI(M) state unit, said that in West Bengal's current situation this "slogan was pure phrase mongering" but was valid in an all-India agrarian revolution.<sup>62</sup> Since land reform was a state subject the distinction between the two phases seems dubious, unless the purpose is to hold up agrarian reform in West Bengal till the political mobilization in the rest of the country catches up, thus preventing Bengal from being an example to the rest of India. Such radical reforms would presumably alienate landlords in the rest of the country, where the CPI(M) would hope for their support until they are themselves expropriated after the revolution. The strategy of not undertaking radical reforms in Bengal against sectors of society which are potential allies in less-advanced parts of the country is an interesting anomaly. This is not the reason the CPI(M) has given however. The party rather argues the limited powers of the state legislation as the reason for avoiding confrontational policies. The real reason, however, seems to be that the CPI(M)'s own mass base among the rural vested interests precludes a more radical strategy, so even in an area of its own jurisdiction with ample coercive forces at its disposal, it refrains from radical action.

Rather than making a radical redistribution of land, the Left Front was to put emphasis on ensuring security of tenure for sharecroppers, and providing them with a legally stipulated 3/4 share of crops. The Operation Barga for recording tenancy rights to sharecroppers has received the widest publicity. That primary attention has been given to Operation Barga seems incongruous considering agricultural labourers outnumber sharecroppers and sharecropping is admitted, even by the proponents of Operation Barga, to be on the decline.<sup>63</sup> Even so, the objectives enshrined in the Operation Barga were to prove illusory, as I intend to demonstrate in the final paper I am supposed to prepare by December. The final paper will also look into, alongside agrarian reform, the building up of the Panchayati Raj as well as the

various resettlement, poverty alleviation and redistribution programmes undertaken by the Left Front government during its first term.

Today, I have endeavoured to argue that, while agrarian reforms have not been outstanding compared to the rest of India or even past state achievements, in the political sphere power has shifted from the traditional pro-Congress elite to a new middle landed class. This class, while lacking the wealth of the traditional elite, is more numerous, and now with state patronage more powerful, than the rural Congress Party supporters. The socio-economic condition of the lower classes and their influence on policy have seen little or no improvement. The structural reforms that might have altered this situation were not undertaken, partly for fear of central government intervention, but mainly due to the influence of this new middle-class landed elite on the Communists who feared loss of their electoral support.

## ENDNOTES

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