

Paper VI: Long March or Garden Path? The Left Front's First Term in West Bengal (1971-1982)

Presented by: Atig Ghosh

Discussants: Prasanta Ray is President, Calcutta Research Group & was Emeritus Professor in Political Science and Sociology, Presidency University. **Dwaipayana Bhattacharyya is Professor** is Professor at the Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Prasanta Ray, one of the discussants, started the panel discussion by enquiring into the inability of the Left Front Government to implement a radical land reform programme. The obstacles that he mentioned are – fear of a backlash by the middle-class people, the fear of opposition from the Central Government, too much dependence on bureaucracy and other governmental organs. He noted that the paper addressed the issue of such failed initiative but he also advised to put such issues in the bigger perspective of party ideology and governmental administration. He also suggested to probe into the role of the Coalition Committee, its efforts in the establishment of a leftist Government and its inability thereafter to positively affect the lower bureaucracy; Ray noted that in order to establish this link, it would be necessary to look at labour formations. Dwaipayana Bhattacharyya, the other discussant, reiterating the basic premise of Ray's criticism, opined that such literature have existed for a long time now and requires a new and different perspective to facilitate a better understanding of the Left front regime in West Bengal. In the case of land reforms, he urged for a complicated and more nuanced understanding of land and power relations. The other point he raised, and asked for a detailed exploration was the issue of "middle peasantry". With regard to the question of class support that the paper raised, Bhattacharyya stated that there are statistical evidence to show the important role played by middle peasants and school teachers in the mobilisation of the Party.

Prabhu Mahapatra observed that the framework has to be reworked and move beyond the motifs of betrayal and radicalisation. His suggestion was to perceive the shift in the logic of land reform itself. In the period post 60s-70s, he stated that there has been a macro-shift which requires greater deliberation. Bhattacharyya took forward the dialogue and added that a demographic shift had occurred. Professor Samaddar, citing the differential treatment that the Left front Government doled out to the land reforms and *Operation Barga*, and the functioning of landlords and *jotdars* in 60s and 70s Bengal, suggested that the paper probe deeper into the functioning of the Left front Government in the first few years, its policies such as that of appeasement and its subsequent shift. Atig Ghosh, in response, argued that the basis and method of land reform is complicated for a lot of reasons. Migration patterns, sometimes from one village to another, in search of employment was an important factor. On the question of labour and industrial labour, he answered that it is an area that requires research. He further opined that *Panchayati Raj* and *Operation Barga* was instrumental in taking attention away from land reforms. These land reforms, as he explained, did not result in land holdings for landless agricultural workers. *Panchayati Raj* was used for the abolition of peasant organisation.