

Rural Development as a Political Process **Lessons from Marxist Rule in West Bengal**

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Introduction

The east Indian border state of West Bengal (area: 88 000 sqkm; population 1986: approx. 60 mio.) is worldwide the largest political entity ever to vote for a Communist government in free elections. On 23rd March 1987, the West Bengal populace returned its ruling Left Front (LF) coalition government for the third consecutive term since 1977. As in 1982, the Left Front again secured a 4/5 majority in the Legislative Assembly in Calcutta. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) - CPI(M) - is by far the biggest partner within the front and commands on its own a comfortable majority of 187 seats out of a total number of 294.

Of the opposition forces in West Bengal only the Congress Party - having ruled at the centre with Rajiv Gandhi as prime minister - has retained its significance. However, on account of the electoral system inherited from the British, proportional representation is lacking: the Congress has only 40 seats in the assembly (= 13%) despite its 42% share of all votes polled. The electoral system practised in India is not only responsible for distortions in parliamentary representation, but also to a great extent determines the strategy and tactics of the political parties. When aiming at successful electoral performance, the political forces have to ally in common fronts, which requires a complex adjustment of constituencies to be contested by the individual front partners. The unity among the major leftist parties in West Bengal under the supremacy of the CPI(M) is certainly a main factor in the present superiority of the Left in the state.

Apart from a brief historical account of the political alignment of West Bengal since the mid-sixties, this article will focus on the political implications of the most pressing socio-economic problem, i.e. the land question and the chronic rural poverty. As in other parts of India the economic situation in West Bengal is characterized by high employment pressure on scarce land resources. This is unlikely to ease in the near future, as industrial development

in the eastern part of India is seriously lacking in dynamism. Hence the entire complex of institutional land reforms, the promotion of agricultural production and the programmes designed for the alleviation of poverty are of outstanding importance for the population, the greater and poorer proportion of which inhabits the rural areas. Land problems in Bengal have a long history reaching back to the middle of the last century, as the massive transformations in agriculture were generally accompanied by militant peasant movements with the growth of involvement of the political left, i.e. the Communists.

Understandably the LF government has given priority to the social and economic problems related to agricultural production and set in motion a package of reform measures that is unparalleled throughout India. In the following, the agrarian reform programme of the LF will be discussed with particular attention to the historical dimensions of some of the issues.

The political success of the LF in electoral terms is not comprehensible unless this rural reform policy is taken into account. When the material achievements are considered, the assumption that the reform policy made a lasting impact on the voters decision, cannot be rejected. A closer look at the election results confirms that the political battle is clearly decided in the countryside: out of the 40 seats the Congress won, 26 are situated in urban areas. Yet 4/5 of the 294 constituencies are predominantly rural and there the opposition was hopelessly defeated.

Nevertheless things are not as obvious as they appear at first glance. The land reform policy has emerged as an instrument for winning elections. Electoral considerations may thus also limit the scope of land reforms. A preliminary inquiry into this intricate question will be attempted at the end of the paper by interpreting the election results against the background of class and interest conflicts in agriculture.

Naturally the explanatory value of such an investigation is limited since the party affiliation of voters in hardly any democracy is merely socio-economic. As in many developing countries, Indian society is to a high degree multi-cultural. The complexity of such a situation calls for the application of several levels of analysis which would go beyond the scope of this article. Even so, it will be necessary to look at least at some of the issues connected with the cultural segmentation of West Bengal society.

Milestones on the Way to Power

The establishment of Communist hegemony in West Bengal after 1977 in the wake of Indira Gandhi's emergency disaster was preceded by the two short-

lived United Front-governments in 1967 and 1969/70. These were forged mainly between the left parties and Ajoy Mukherjee's dissident Bangla Congress. It should be mentioned that the Communist movement has had a base in West Bengal throughout the history of modern India. The CPI, undivided up to 1964, had shared 28 seats in the first Legislative Assembly in 1952 and enlarged its representation to 50 seats in 1962. In those days the CPI was a city-oriented industrial workers' party based on the proletariat of Red Calcutta - a term which is nowadays not applicable in the same manner. The party's influence in rural areas only reached the adjoining districts of 24-Parganas, Howrah, Hoogly and Burdwan, which are traditionally closely interlinked with the Calcutta metropolis¹.

The assumption of office by the first non-Congress government in the state coincided with large-scale peasant unrest, paralleled only by the sharecroppers' Tebhaga-Movement in 1947. Following the failure of two consecutive *khari*-seasons (summer crop) in 1965-66 the peasantry faced great distress, amounting in West Bengal to famine-like conditions.

Moreover, the poor peasantry felt betrayed as the land reform legislation, enacted between 1950 and 1955, had remained virtually unimplemented and had resulted, if nothing else, in the mass eviction of the rent-paying sharecroppers (*bargadars*) and the reduction of their status to that of mere farm labourers. Due to the rapid population growth and the industrial stagnation, demand for land increased tremendously. In West Bengal the problem was particularly aggravated by the influx of millions of refugees into the state, caused by the civil war that raged in neighboring East Pakistan.

The unequal distribution of land (cf. Table 1), concentrating approx. 50% of the arable area in the hands of the upper 10% of the households, persists even today. The erstwhile intermediaries and large landowners, i.e. the landed gentry, whose power was generated through the colonial transformation of the Bengal land system, more or less succeeded in retaining their property despite the legal intention to restrict individual possession to reasonable limits.

The West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act 1953 (W.B.E.A.A.) and the West Bengal Land Reforms Act 1955 (W.B.L.R.A.) were not enforced thoroughly enough to prevent large landowners from concealing the actual size of their property. Legislative loopholes permitted transfer of nominal ownership to fictitious relatives (known as *benami*-transfers), or to religious foundations, or else the landowners just declared their surplus holding as orchards or fisheries, which were exempted from ceiling-legislation.

¹ The CPI presence was also felt in the central areas of the Tebhaga Revolt in North Bengal. But most of these areas were conceded to East Pakistan in 1947.

Table 1: Percentage Distribution of Household Ownership Holdings among Various Farm-Size Categories in West Bengal in 1953/54, 1960/61, 1970/71 and 1981/82

Farm-size	1953/54		1960/61		1970/71		1981/82	
	H	A	H	A	H	A	H	A
0.0 - 1.0	66.64	12.22	69.25	17.54	77.62	27.28	81.24	30.33
1.0 - 2.0	14.70	16.49	16.81	25.97	12.64	25.69	11.50	28.77
2.0 - 4.0	10.78	23.38	9.81	28.81	7.30	27.72	5.54	27.23
4.0 - 10	6.45	29.83	3.89	24.30	2.39	18.61	1.28	12.12
above 10	1.42	18.07	0.24	3.28	0.05	0.70	0.08	1.54

Notes: H = percentage of households
A = percentage of area

Source: A Note on Some Aspects of Household Ownership Holding, National Sample Survey (NSS) 37th round, Jan. - Dec. 1982, *sarvekshana*, Vol. XI (1987), No. 2, p. 12

Ultimately the landless and semi-landless strata of peasants resorted to forcible occupation of agricultural land, particularly those plots revealed to be *benami*-holdings. Generally they acted under the guidance of the Kishan Sabha, the CPI(M)'s peasant front. This land-grab movement reached its peak in 1969 during the second UF tenure and developed into a mass hunt for surplus land. This was in accordance with the intentions of the interlude UF ministry, which encouraged mass participation in the move to identify such holdings and to enforce the legal provisions secured to vest these lands with the government for the purpose of redistribution. About half a million acres (approx. 200000 ha) of West Bengal's 13.5 million acres arable area were vested with the government in 1970 alone. Approx. 400000 acres had already been vested, but had remained under the economic control of their previous owners. Of course a considerable portion - about one third of the land vested - was affected by court injunctions as the landowners frequently turned to litigation. Quick redistribution was thus severely impeded because many cases remained pending for years.

The late Harekrishna Konar, a deserving functionary of both the CPI(M) and the Kishan Sabha, was Minister for Land Reforms in both the UF governments. He hailed from the district of Burdwan which was a center of

the land-grab movement. He derived the political doctrines from the administrative experience the Communists had gained. Verbally they are still upheld by the CPI(M) today. Konar stated that real land reforms are meant to break the economic power based on big landownership. In his view it is this economic domination which is the worst obstacle to development. Whatever surplus created will be appropriated by the class of big owners utilizing these profits for unproductive purposes like money lending and hoarding of food stocks. Thus, they continue to subject the deprived sections of the rural population to destitution and exploitation². Unless the big holdings are not fragmented it will not be possible to unleash the productive forces inherent in India's peasant masses. The immediate goal is to equip the small and almost landless peasants with a minimum of social and economic security; in a further stage they may be convinced to join cooperative and ultimately collective means of production³.

According to the CPI(M) the solution to the land question would mean the emancipation of the rural masses. It is also a problem of great economic significance for the nation, as agricultural production in its present form can hardly play the role required for an overall, sound industrial development.

Konar further made remarkable strategic contributions: Indian agriculture languishes in deplorable conditions not because of the lack of legislation but due to the absence of an effective implementation. Even a government showing strong political determination to change the rural power structure will fail on the micro level against a landlord's influence combined with administrative inertia. These factors can only be neutralized if the peasants act unitedly to overcome the intimidation they are subjected to individually. Organisational efforts are required for this, which is the major task for the CPI(M) and its mass fronts. Only in this way will the peasants be able to forward their demands and to maintain their achievements in the long term. The government can assist the process by curbing police action and finding appropriate administrative approaches for a quick settlement and record of land reform measures.

During the second UF term, Konar's ministry managed the distribution of 250000 acres (approx. 102000 ha) within a few months. This became possible because hitherto existing institutional paths were bypassed. The new land settlements were arranged at the local level and conducted by newly formed committees consisting of peasant leaders and the low-level revenue officials - all familiar with the situation.

2 cf. Harekrishna Konar, *Agrarian Problems of India*, Calcutta 1979, p. 1979.

3 *ibid.*, p. 16.

The process of redistribution was of course not always peaceful. As the police were not permitted to intervene in land disputes⁴, armed gangs emerged on either sides and moreover, the Naxalite Movement, advocating immediate revolutionary action, added fuel to the rural violence. The CPI(M) itself was squeezed in between the vested interests and the ultra left militant wing which had left the party in May 1969 in protest against the seemingly obedient adoption of constitutional methods and the collaboration with bourgeois forces. Towards the end of the sixties West Bengal was stricken by widespread political bloodshed, and the second UF government fell after the numerous partners within the coalition could no longer bridge their differences. President's Rule was imposed in April 1970 as no stable government could be formed.

Notwithstanding the shortness of the UF interludes, they are crucial milestones in the history of the West Bengal left in transition to power. Firstly, the CPI(M) sorted out its ultra-left elements and "purified" into a constitutional party capable of effective electoral and parliamentary performance. Secondly, the CPI(M) realized the importance of the rural areas and proceeded further in the strategy of deep entrenchment in the villages, extending its base among the poor peasantry⁵. And, thirdly, the CPI(M) refined its strategic skill as revealed in 1977 when the party had a profound rural reform programme handy.

Before 1977, however, any ambitions had to remain shelved. In the 1972 elections the leftist parties were nearly routed. The CPI(M) shrunk to 15 seats only. The Congress party which was supported by the orthodox CPI erected a harsh regime under the Chief Minister Siddharda Sankar Ray, who is nowadays chief counter-insurgent in the Punjab. He quelled relentlessly all the political unrest in the state. A huge number of Naxalites as well as CPI(M) cadres were jailed and there was ample evidence of torture in West Bengal prisons. The CPI(M) went into hibernation and, particularly during the years of the emergency (1975-1977), the party could only exist underground.

Repression and Progressive Legislation

Between 1972 and 1977 land distribution suffered seriously from political repression. On the one hand the Congress government crushed the peasant

4 Jyoti Basu, LF Chief Minister, occupied the post of the police minister in 1969.

5 The then State Secretary of the CPI(M), Promode Dasgupta, known for his authoritarian leadership style, issued the slogan: the CPI(M) needs to have a unit in each village.

organisations, but on the other hand it passed some remarkable land reform laws.

The W.B. Land Reforms Amendment Act 1972 detailed the provisions pertaining to the ceiling on land holdings. Not on individual *raiyat* (meaning a person who holds land for the purpose of agriculture)⁶ was taken as the basic unit for the computation of land to be retained, but his family. By legal definition this is narrowly confined to its nuclear members. The maximum possession permissible is now 7 ha (9.8 ha respectively in the case of unirrigated land) in the case of a large family with more than five members⁷. Further legal ameliorations benefitted the sharecroppers. Their interest in agricultural land was acknowledged as a hereditary title and the share of produce payable by them to the owners was reduced to 1/4 only⁸. In 1975 the land reform laws were enriched by the W.B. Acquisition of Homestead Land for Agricultural Labourers, Artisans and Fishermen Act. By virtue of the decision of the district authorities small plots of land (max. 0.033 ha) occupied for dwelling purposes can be transferred against the payment of compensation. This act indeed helps to diminish the threat of poorer sections being rendered homeless by their employers in the case of economic conflicts.

Representatives of the Communist movement in West Bengal however maintained that this legislation was not really meant to be strictly executed, but rather as a pretext for the battle against poverty which the Congress governments had pledged in public (*garibi hatao*). In fact, to pass laws and to implement them are two quite different matters in India.

The Inception of the Marxist Decade

To fight the 1977 elections the CPI(M) forged a Left Front alliance, like in 1969 along with most of the non-communist left parties in West Bengal. This time with the slogan of a joint struggle against authoritarianism. The other parties were: the Forward Bloc (FB) founded in 1940 by Subhas Chandra Bose; the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) founded in the same year by members of the famous Anushilan terrorist movement; and further some very small parties out of Bengal's numerous leftist currents: the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCPI), the Forward Bloc (Marxist) (FB-M), the West Bengal Socialist Party (WSP), and the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP).

6 cf. West Bengal Land Reforms Act, Chapter 1, section 2, subsection (10). Cited in A.N. Saha, *The West Bengal Land Reforms Act*, Calcutta 1986⁷.

7 cf. *ibid.*, Chapter 2, section 14M as amended 1972.

8 cf. *ibid.*, Chapter 3, sections 15F, 16.

The orthodox CPI did not join the front until 1982 after its party congress in Batinda had decided to scrap the political line of cooperation with the Congress Party.

The ultra-leftists also remained aside. So the Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI) that holds two seats even today and indulges in a personality cult of its founder Subdish Ghosh, as well as the numerous groups and circles which still cling to the Naxalite ideology. In some scattered pockets they have established close ties to the tribal population. Their political influence is felt largely on the micro-level.

The Left Front secured 229 seats out of 294, 177 being won by the CPI(M). The victory was facilitated through the strong competition the Janata Party offered the Congress.

Unlike in 1967 the change of masters in Calcutta was not accompanied by any turmoil. The LF smoothly commenced its work with the deliberate concentration on the land question. In 1978 Debabrato Bandyopadhyay headed the Revenue Administration as Land Reform Commissioner. This able IAS official was the virtual architect of the LF's initial reform policy. In 1980 D. Bandyopadhyay pointed out that rural development cannot be ignited automatically by precipitate infrastructure investments, maintaining that, through the uncontrolled influx of money the existing social cleavages would only be widened by creating or strengthening the rural elites. In order to alleviate poverty and to remove economic deprivation a multidimensional approach is required, which includes, first, the proper identification of needy beneficiaries, secondly, compensating measures to support their economic struggle and to help them to maintain their benefits, and, thirdly, as fundamental prerequisite, the reorganisation of the rural power structure and administrative reforms.⁹

"West Bengal recognizes the critical deficiency of the traditional administrative approach. That is why an attempt has been made to remedy the situation by developing a broad support mechanism by establishing functional linkages with bureaucracy, elected self-government institutions and rural workers organisations."¹⁰

The single items of the West Bengal land reforms package are:

- recording the names of sharecroppers in order to safeguard their legal rights against eviction and for due share. This came into being under the name of Operation Barga.

9 cf. Debabrato Bandyopadhyay, *Land Reforms in West Bengal*, Calcutta 1980, p. 2.

10 cf. *ibid.*, p. 3.

- distribution of surplus land among landless and landpoor peasants in co-operation with local panchayati raj bodies (local-self-government bodies)
- detection of more surplus land (*benami*-holdings)
- revitalization of panchayati raj through regular elections and endowment of more financial and administrative power to the local self-government system.
- acquisition of homestead plots for the poorer sections
- credit assistance for land reform beneficiaries
- rural employment programmes to create infrastructure and to guarantee employment during the lean season.

Local Self-Government (Panchayati Raj)

In order to realize the entire programme the revitalization of the 3-tier panchayati raj system was an essential cornerstone: gram panchayat (village cluster level), panchayat samiti (block level) and zilla parishad (district level). In 1978 the LF-Government held a reelection of the panchayat bodies for the first time since the fifties. For several reasons these elections were a novelty in the history of local self-government in India. Never before had integrated elections for all the three levels of panchayati raj been held simultaneously on the same day and throughout a state. Considering the weak infrastructural conditions in many regions of West Bengal this meant an enormous organisational effort.

But politically of even greater significance was the participation of political parties in the electoral process. This issue caused acrimonious controversy among the opponents. Especially the Janata Party, which was committed to the ideas of partyless democracy developed by M.K. Gandhi and J.P. Narayan, accused the ruling LF of spoiling harmonious village life with the venom of class struggle. The perception of romantic village relations was rejected by the CPI(M) with the argument that it is merely a cloak to hide age-old forces of feudal exploitation.

Nevertheless, in these elections in which 56000 seats were contested, the countryside became intensively politicized since it was known that under the LF the panchayats would be given considerable new responsibilities. In accordance with the prevailing political climate the LF gained sway in the vast majority of the panchayat bodies throughout the state. (In 1983, when these elections were repeated, the LF lost ground but not its overall dominance. Whereas in the last elections in February 1988 the LF scored its biggest-ever victory.)

In West Bengal the panchayats are presently supposed to be the most important tool to realize the LF's policies at the grassroot-level. Billions of Rupees out of central or state funds are transferred to the panchayats, while project size and regional extension is met by the 3-tier structure:

"Thus the land reform measures indicated ..., backed up by regular Panchayati elections, and the planning and implementation of diverse rural development programmes by the elected representatives of the people in the Panchayats at the different levels, have been the basic framework on which the State Government has built its strategy of rural development."¹¹

Moreover, the panchayats shall be the mouthpieces of the village folk and *gram sabhas* (village assemblies) should be held regularly to collect proposals and complaints in order to facilitate grassroot planning.¹²

But after all the panchayats are elected, and hence political bodies not above contradictions and conflicts. The local units of the left parties constantly try to maintain their control over the self-government institutions and to harness them in pursuit of their broader political objectives. Nevertheless there are a number of cases reported of panchayat members who have shaken off the party discipline and are utilizing their power to extend their individual political bastions.

As stated earlier, the panchayats are important political institutions of present-day village life. Their influence is based on allotment of surplus land to individuals or their capacity to chose the beneficiaries in the various subsidy programmes, employment programmes, flood or drought restoration measures etc (some quantitative dimensions are given later).

Tenancy Reform

The attempt to impose a new morale on the traditional bureaucracy was most conspicuously undertaken during Operation Barga.

In West Bengal an estimated 10-15% of the cultivable area is still operated by roughly 1.5-2 million sharecroppers (*bargadars*). The Barga system, though there is some evidence that it already existed in pre-British India, became the

11 Government of West Bengal, Economic Review 1985/86, Calcutta (u.d.), p. 10.

12 West Bengal today claims to be the most advanced state of the Indian Union with regard to decentralization of planning as recommended in the Report of the Committee to Review the Existing Administrative Arrangements for Rural Development and Poverty Alleviation (CAARD), New Delhi 1986.

foremost mode of labour appropriation towards the end of the colonial period.

The colonial legislation did not recognize the *bargadars* but only those who had a hereditary, tenurial right (occupancy raiyat). Their number was quickly diminished through the pauperization process caused by the worldwide economic crisis. Most of them had to mortgage and finally sell off their lands, and found themselves reduced to the state of sharecroppers (a process that was accelerated by the devastating famine in 1943). The famous report of the last British Land Revenue Commission - presided over by Sir Francis Floud - expressed its deep concern about the steep rise of unproductive and exploitative *barga* arrangements and recommended the legal recognition of the *barga* rights.

In response to the sharecroppers' Tebhaga Revolt of 1947 the Bargadar Act was passed in 1950, giving the sharecroppers tenurial security and prescribing a share of 60% in favour of the tiller provided he is supplying all the inputs. The consequence was that the landowners resorted to a mass eviction of sharecroppers since it was a problem for the *bargadars* to produce the evidence of their rights. They remained tenants-at-will.

Operation Barga was essentially an administrative reform. The aim was to record the names of *bargadars* in the "record of rights" along with the plot number they operated. Previously this task was hardly done as the peasants did not dare to approach the officials out of fear of being chased away by their landlords.

For Operation Barga the revenue officials received a special training. Camps in rural areas were set up in which the officials were confronted with the village poor and thereby acquainted with the villagers' view of the issue¹³. They were to learn about what was called in official documents the "fear psychosis" of the dependent village people and help to encourage them to press for their rights. During the actual process of recording, the revenue parties resided for at least two days in the villages. In the night they assembled the villagers to explain the problem. Being in a group the sharecroppers could act collectively and mention the plots under their cultivation. The next day the *barga* relations were verified in the field and certificates were issued.

This approach necessitated committed and specially trained officials. It was accompanied by just one legislative change: the onus of proof in case of conflict was shifted to the landowner. This meant that a *bargadar* was regarded as lawful tiller of the land as long as the owner had not proved the opposite. This rid the *bargadars* of bearing costs and fees in a legal suit.

13 D. Bandyopadhyay, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

Within the first three years of the LF government the process of recording progressed quickly. The number reached 572700 by 31.1.1979, 945750 by mid 1980. But from then on the process languished and only slowly grew to 1.36 million in 1987.

Land Redistribution

The acquisition of arable land by the state government for the purpose of redistribution to the landless or landpoor peasants is the most drastic measure to alter a given socio-economic formation in favour of social justice, equity and, eventually, higher productivity. But no other instrument of land reform policy evokes as much resistance and acrimony as the expropriation of the landed classes does.

To break the concentration of landownership was the major aim of the agrarian struggle in the latter half of the sixties in view of the immense gap between the legal stipulations and the actual achievement of post colonial land legislation. It has taken West Bengal more than thirty years to so refine her land reform laws through numerous amendments that they can now be regarded as the most perfect in India.

The latest amendments under the LF-Government, enacted in 1981, received presidential assent in 1986, whereby they became law. The major changes caused by the 1981 Amendment Bill are the elimination of the orchard bonus which allowed the retention of 2 ha declared as orchard in excess of the ceiling. Even more important is that the division of non-urban land into different classes like agricultural land and land used for other commercial purpose has been done away with. Hence the amount of land subjected to the ceiling provisions has been considerably enlarged.

However, it is not yet clear to what extent the present LF government is determined to use the new laws. Its own estimations about the further scope of redistributive land reforms are rather modest. Also, the Government is apparently not interested in stirring up avoidable excitement in the countryside by the vigorous implementation of the Bill.

During my research in West Bengal I came across a very interesting case in northern 24-Parganas District. In the locality, right on the Bangladesh border, an area of about 120 ha has been vested with the Government. The area includes permanently inundated stretches which are used for fish breeding. Numerous peasants and fishermen eke out their living from the area, paying a produce rent to the owners. Despite the fact that those have filed a case at the High Court in Calcutta, negotiations are going on between the local CPI(M)

unit and the hitherto proprietors. According to a credible spokesman, the CPI(M) do not want the land to be fragmented by means of redistribution. So they are trying to convince the conflicting parties to form a cooperative society harnessing the investive capacities of the affluent owners. In this case the existing land reform laws are not being used to fulfil their intention but rather to exert pressure on the remaining large landowners to concede collective forms of production.

It is obvious that under the present LF rule, redistributive land reform has lost its flair of "revolutionary class struggle". It has become an instrument only selectively used and not at all designed to rock the political stability West Bengal had attained by the late seventies.

Table 2: Progress of Redistributive Land Reforms in West Bengal, 1967-1986

Year	Agricultural Land vested according to W.B.E.A.A. & W.B.L.R.A. (ha)	Agricultural Land distributed (ha)	Number of beneficiaries
up to 1967 ¹	163 000		
up to 1970 ²	202 000		
up to 1972 ²	385 000		
up to 1976 ³		230 000	
up to 1978 ³	432 200	253 000	
up to 1980 ³	490 500	275 500	1 194 176
up to 1981 ³	505 750	290 125	1 324 062
up to 1984 ⁴	759 010	320 544	1 521 365
up to 1985 ⁴	753 212	326 476	1 610 828
up to 1986 ⁴	768 746	335 220	1 691 203

Sources: 1 H. Konar, *Agrarian Problems in India*, Calcutta 1979, p. 5.

2 Ratan Ghosh, *Agrarian Programme of the Left Front Government*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 20.6.1981, p. A53.

3 Government of West Bengal (Board of Revenue), *Statistical Reports on Land Reforms I-IV*.

4 Government of West Bengal, *Economic Review 1985/86 & 1986/87*, Tab. 5.18, p. 83.

Table 2, compiled mainly from statistical reports, gives the official figures about the progress of redistributive land reforms. The total cultivable area in West Bengal is about 5.5 million ha. Hence the area covered by redistribution totals 6%, that acquired by the state 14%. These figures definitely earn West Bengal the leading rank in India as far as redistribution is concerned. However, the numerical proportions indicate that a fundamental change in relations has not taken place. The huge number of beneficiaries, 1.69 million, namely 60% of whom belong to the Harijan communities, reduces the parcel received by the individual to a very tiny plot of an average 0.2 ha. So as long as collective farming does not make big headway in West Bengal, redistributive land reform has to be seen as a specific variant of poverty alleviation which indeed has drawn a sizeable section of the rural population into its fold.

Another inference from these figures is that the achievements of the LF in land redistribution are not as impressive as those of the Uf governments in the sixties. About 100 000 ha distributed contrasts with approx. a quarter of a million twenty years ago. Further questions arise as to the growing gap between vested and distributed land. Either a large amount of land has come under legal dispute or is of only marginal quality, impossible to cultivate, unless soil improvement is undertaken and irrigation facilities are installed. But there are also political reasons conceivable: not rarely do the former owners of vested land continue to enjoy the benefits as long as the redistribution is not instituted.

Employment and Income Generation

Unlike in other Indian states where either the traditional bureaucracy or even contractors are employed, the panchayats in West Bengal, as elected and party influenced entities, have been entrusted with the implementation of the various rural development programmes like IRDP (Integrated Rural Development Programme), NREP (National Rural Employment Programme) and RLEGP (Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme) which are financed by the central as well as by the state governments.

These programmes combine several objectives: to create durable infrastructure like roads, culverts or school buildings, to increase agricultural productivity and to extend the multicrop area through the installation of minor irrigation facilities and to create employment for the landless sections during the lean season. Apart from this, schemes for the development of husbandry and, especially in Bengal, for pisciculture are supported mainly by IRDP.

Table 3: Aggregate Expenditure (mio. Rs.), Mandays Created (mio.), Families Assisted, through Income Generation Programmes in West Bengal 1978/79 - 1987/8

Year	RWP & FfW*	NREP		RLEGP		IRDP	
	Exp.	Exp.	Mand.	Exp.	Mand.	Exp.	Families Assisted
1978/79	390.45						
1979/80	90.84						
1980/81		97.914	12.72			8.053	37.415
1981/82		193.31	19.54			22.62	67.338
1982/83		342.37	36.022			74.73	95.607
1983/84		241.874	28.78			190.86	236.150
1984/85		228.561	21.187			239.233	280.841
1985/86		283.94	13.1	213.343	10.78	324.070	287.052
1986/87		433.51	21.56	463.71	21.97	367.95	243.921
1987/88**		380.00	20.0	420.00	19.0	400.00	250.000

* Rural Works Programm, Food for Work
 ** anticipated

Source: These figure were given to the author from the Director of Panchayats, Prasad Ray, in July 1987.

The concept of area development is also experimented with in West Bengal. The Drought Prone Area Programme (DPAP) is operated in the semi-arid plateau fringe shared by the southwestern districts of Purulia, Midnapore and Bankura. Next to this the State Government runs its own Comprehensive Area Development Cooperation (CADC) which covers 20 out of 335 development blocks.

The influx of money into the rural areas is considerable and makes the power wielded by the panchayats understandable. In 1980/81 the implementation of the employment schemes led to some alienation between New-Delhi and the Government of West Bengal. As the Congress Party did not want to contribute to the rising rural popularity of the CPI(M), the food grain allotments to West Bengal were drastically reduced¹⁴.

¹⁴ cf. K. Basu, Food for Work, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XVII, No 13 (27.3.1982), p. A9-A14.

Table 3 shows the aggregate expenditure for rural development programmes since the LF took over in West Bengal. About one third of the daily wages paid is in food grains, mainly wheat.

For the approx. 4 million landless agricultural labourers in West Bengal the NREP, IRDP, etc constitute the most important source of relief available to them. The total labour of 43.5 million mandays in 1986/87 represents an average employment of about 10 days per agricultural labourer. This is much less than 5% of the annual employment required for at least a meagre subsistence. Of course employment programmes are concentrated on February to June when agricultural activity slows down in most parts of West Bengal. A high organisational skill of the implementing agencies is needed to insure that the bulk of the money spent really reaches the poor. The average expenditure for one manday in 1986/87 amounts to 20.11 Rs. According to the Directorate of Panchayats the daily wages are 12.50 Rs. So 37.8% are diverted to planning costs or disappear due to corruption. In an All-India comparison this is quite a satisfactory rate. Contrary to some opinions the implementing panchayat agencies seem to be less prone to graft than some of the LF critics contend.

Electoral Situation in West Bengal

This survey of the LF's agrarian reform programme and its performance will now be reviewed in relation to the electoral situation in the state.

From Table 4 two trends may be ascertained. First, there is a steady increase of electoral participation and, secondly, an almost complete polarization between the two major power blocks has taken place. The growing turnout can be attributed to the rise in political awareness of the West Bengal populace. The second factor reduces the scope of political maneuvering for independent candidates, dissident groups and other parties like the Janata Party which has disappeared from the political scene of West Bengal.

The most interesting aspect for the 1987 election results is the difference in voting pattern between urban and rural areas.

Table 5 shows that the LF and the Congress are almost on a par with each other in urban areas where voter-turnout is generally low. In Calcutta proper and urban Howrah the Congress even has a lead of 4.64% and 0.04% respectively. The bulk of constituencies, however, is rural and there the picture looks quite different.

Table 4: Turnout, Percentages of Votes Polled in 1977, 1982, 1987

	Turnout	Congress	Left Front	Others
1977	54.39	23.40	45.25	32.35
1982	75.21	35.67	50.20	14.13
1987	75.66	41.81	52.95	5.24

Sources: Government of India, Reports on General Elections 1977, New Delhi (n.d.), pp. 915-947; Government of India, Reports on General Elections 1982, New Delhi (n.d.), pp. 237-297; *West Bengal*, Vol. XXX, No. 7, 1.4.1987 (Election Special Issue)

The turnout in rural areas is on average 78.44%, which is an amazing rate considering the weak infrastructure in many regions. State-wide the leftists have a lead of 13.5% in the rural areas.

In terms of absolute figures the proportions are as follows: out of a rural electorate of 26.88 million, 21.1 million went to the polls. The LF scored 11.263 million votes compared with 8.47 million for the Congress. The remaining 1.36 million votes were shared by a number of small parties of which only the Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI) retained its two seats; the Muslim League won a seat for the first time since the sixties. Many candidates were in the fray as independents, but in reality they represented the one or the other political group like ultra-leftists or regionalists or they were dissidents from either the Congress or the LF. The problem of lack of discipline generally plagued the Congress more.

Therefore, in the rural areas the LF has a lead of 2.8 million votes on which the dominance of the Left over the Congress depends. If all votes polled by parties, independents in opposition to the Left Front are taken together, this lead is reduced to 1.43 million votes, resp. 6.8% of all votes polled.

If the results are now scrutinized per district the Leftist's lead reveals some additional interesting characteristics.

Table 6 indicates that the support for the LF government is not evenly dispersed throughout the State. The granary of West Bengal, comprising the rural parts of Hoogly, Burdwan and the Bankura districts, is obviously an impregnable stronghold for the LF; especially the CPI(M) in this area. These districts are intensively irrigated through the Damodar Valley Corporation and the Ajoy and Mayurakhsi River Schemes. Agriculture is highly developed in this area and capitalist farming has made considerable progress. The state

wide highest lead is found in the Ausgram constituency in Burdwan District where the CPI(M) candidate scored 46.1% more than his Congress rival.

Table 5: Urban/Rural Voting Pattern in West Bengal 1987: Turnout, Percentages of Valid Votes Polled, and Number of Seats Gained

Rural/ Urban Areas	Turn- out	Left Front		Congress		Others	
		% votes	seats	% votes	seats	% votes	seats
Calcutta Urban Agglomeration (51 seats)*	70.58	40.87	29	46.94	22	4.19	-
Burdwan (7 seats)**	65.72	50.12	4	43.40	3	6.48	-
Kharagpur (1 seat)	59.64	39.91	-	54.39	1	6.7	-
Total Urban (59 seats)	69.77	48.90	33	46.59	26	4.51	-
Total Rural (230 seats)***	78.44	54.34	213	40.84	14	4.82	3
Total West Bengal (294 seats)	75.66	52.95	251	41.81	40	5.24	3

Notes: * The 51 seats of Calcutta Urban Agglomeration are computed of: Calcutta proper 22 seats, 15 seats from adjoining North- and South-24 Parganas, 8 seats from Howrah and 6 seats from Hoogly.

** The 7 seats from Burdwan regarded as urban are: Burdwan (Town), Kulti, Hirapur, Asansol, Raniganj, Ukhra and Durgapur II.

*** The small district of Darjeeling (5 seats and 2% of the electorate) has been omitted in this calculation due to an election boycott effectively enforced by the Gurkha National Liberation Front (GNLF).

Source: Compiled on the basis of constituency results published in *West Bengal*, Vol. XXX, No. 7 (1.4.1987)

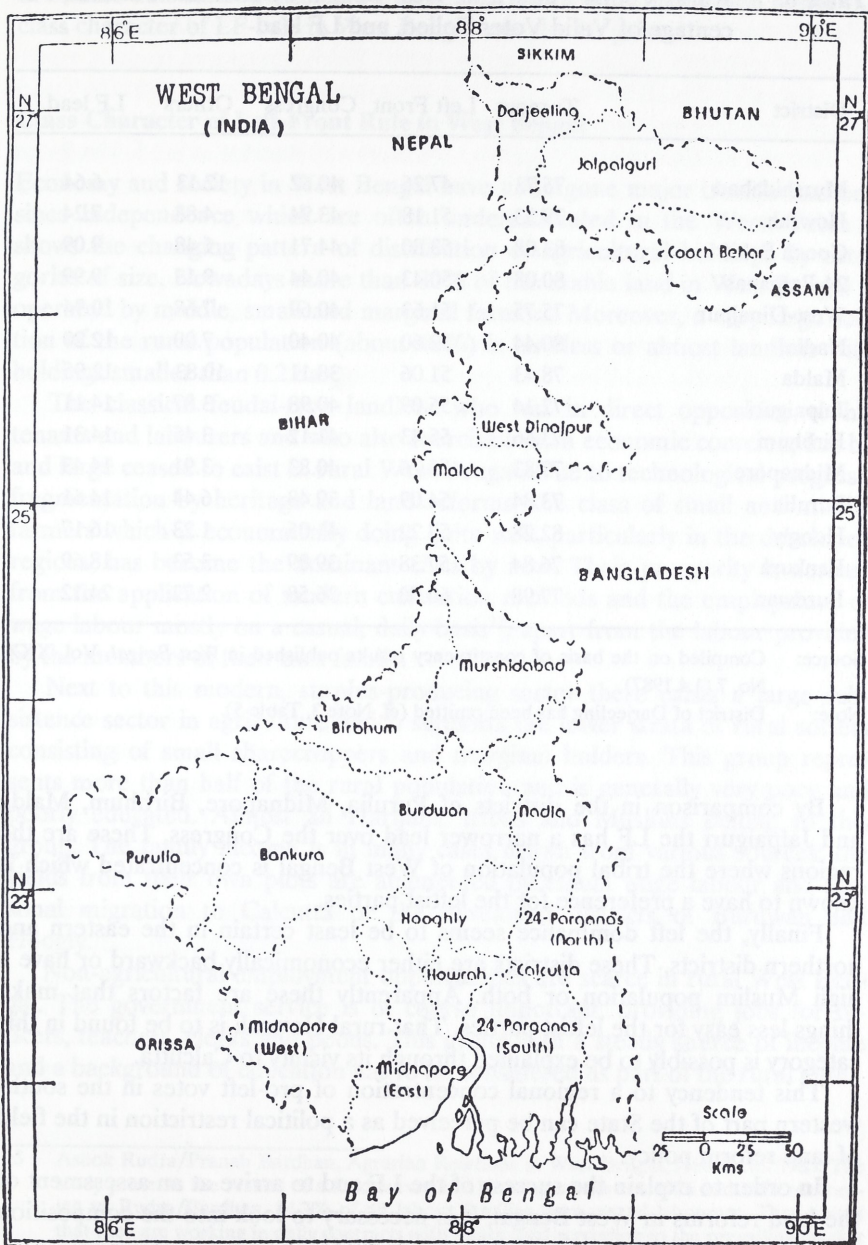


Table 6: Rural Voting Pattern in West Bengal by District: Turnout, Percentage of Valid Votes Polled, and LF lead

District	Turnout	Left Front	Congress	Others	LF lead
Murshidabad	76.73	47.26	40.62	12.13	6.64
Howrah	79.53	51.18	43.94	4.88	7.24
Cooch Behar	83.08	53.80	44.71	1.48	9.09
24-Parganas	80.08	50.43	40.44	9.13	9.99
West-Dinajpur	75.75	51.63	40.69	7.68	10.94
Nadia	80.44	52.60	40.40	7.00	12.20
Malda	78.43	51.06	38.11	10.83	12.95
Jalpaiguri	72.14	55.09	40.98	3.87	14.11
Birbhum	73.66	55.43	41.12	3.45	14.31
Midnapore	79.83	55.26	40.83	3.91	14.43
Purulia	73.84	54.09	39.48	6.44	14.61
Hoogly	82.28	57.22	41.05	1.23	16.17
Bankura	76.84	57.38	39.09	3.53	18.69
Burdwan	77.98	60.70	36.58	2.72	24.12

Source: Compiled on the basis of constituency results published in *West Bengal*, Vol. XXX, No. 7 (1.4.1987)

Note: District of Darjeeling has been omitted (cf. Note 3, Table 5).

By comparison in the districts of Purulia, Midnapore, Birbhum, Malda and Jalpaiguri the LF has a narrower lead over the Congress. These are the regions where the tribal population of West Bengal is concentrated which is known to have a preference for the leftist parties.

Finally, the left dominance seems to be least certain in the eastern and northern districts. These districts are either economically backward or have a high Muslim population or both. Apparently these are factors that make things less easy for the leftist parties. That rural Howrah is to be found in this category is possibly to be explained through its vicinity to Calcutta.

This tendency to a regional concentration of pro-left votes in the southwestern part of the State can be perceived as a political restriction in the field of land reform policy.

In order to explain the success of the LF and to arrive at an assessment of the land reforms in West Bengal, it is necessary to look into the composition

of classes and communities in rural Bengal. Hereby an impression about the class character of LF-rule in West Bengal can also be gained.

Class Character of Left-Front Rule in West Bengal

Economy and society in West Bengal have undergone major transformations since independence which are often underestimated in the West. Table 1 shows the changing pattern of distribution of agricultural holdings by categories of size. Nowadays more than 80% of the arable land in West Bengal is operated by middle, small and marginal farmers. Moreover, a very large section of the rural population (about 40%) is landless or almost landless with holdings smaller than 0.2 ha.

The classical feudal-type landlord who was in direct opposition to his tenants and labourers and who also exercised extra economic coercion, has by and large ceased to exist in rural West Bengal. Due to technological progress, fragmentation by heritage and land reforms, the class of small and middle farmers which is economically doing quite well, particularly in the developed regions, has become the dominant class by now. Their prosperity is derived from the application of modern cultivation methods and the employment of wage labour mostly on a casual, daily basis¹⁵, apart from the labour provided by the members of their own family.

Next to this modern, surplus-producing sector there exists a large subsistence sector in agriculture which supports the lower strata of rural society consisting of small sharecroppers and marginal holders. This group represents more than half of the rural population and is generally very poor and poorly educated. Almost all Harijans, tribes and Muslims belong to this group. The family income is in many cases drawn from various sources: the yields from their own plots are augmented by casual wage labour and seasonal migration to Calcutta or the developed districts of Burdwan and Hoogly.

Non-agricultural employment opportunities are scarce in rural West Bengal. The government service is of course important, providing jobs for officers, teachers, clerks and peons. This group with a steady source of income and a background of education has to be considered as part of the rural elite.

15 Ashok Rudra/Pranab Bardhan, *Agrarian Relations in West Bengal*, New Delhi 1983. The study presents the results of a field survey in 110 villages between 1976 and 1979. According to Rudra/Bardhan, 84.3% of all labour families were casual labourers. That means that they are working in daily contracts with wages paid according to the prevailing market rate (p. 7ff).

The handicraft and cottage industries are still very insignificant, not constituting more than 5% of the employment. Many more people sustain themselves in a sort of rudimentary third sector, which comprises trading, transportation and also illegal pursuits such as smuggling across the nearby international borders to Bangladesh and Nepal.

There is hardly anybody who does not have any interest in land. The *barga* system derives its resilience from the fact that many people do not part from their land even if they are engaged primarily in non-agricultural activities. Leased out land does not necessarily belong to a very affluent household; it is even possible for a poor farmer to find a lessee if he decides to lease out his plot during the capital-intensive winter-cultivation to a wealthier neighbour. This means that the *barga* system can no longer be treated in classical notions of class contradiction. This also applies to the problem of agricultural wage labour: a sizeable part of the employment is provided by small and middle farmers who cannot easily meet any demand for a wage increase.

Economic conflicts in agriculture have not simply vanished, but they have become very difficult to tackle for the ruling coalition due to its obligation to different rural classes. The Minimum Wages Act, for example, is far from being enforced in West Bengal and during its present tenure the LF has shown a conspicuous lack of action in this issue. Similarly, the traditional 50:50 ratio in *barga* contracts still persists almost everywhere in West Bengal despite the legal stipulation of 75:25 laid down in the Land Reforms Act¹⁶.

On the one hand it is evident that the social antagonism which existed about twenty years ago has eased to a great extent. On the other hand, however, the LF-Government is not yet ready to face the challenge that has been caused by a transitional class situation.

The LF, which is essentially the CPI(M), has for the time being adopted a strategy of compromise which avoids the risk of alienating any major section of the rural society. This is particularly true for the middle and small peasants. Their voice is very influential in the countryside and their progressive role in transforming rural societies has been emphasized by a number of theorists¹⁷.

It is therefore not surprising that the bulk of the rural leadership of the CPI(M) stems from the middle peasantry. Next to the wealthy farmers the school teachers have assumed a leading role in rural politics. The leftist par-

16 A. Rudra/P. Bardhan, *op. cit.*, p. 37. Also Nripen Bandyopadhyay et. al., *Evaluation of Land Reforms in West Bengal*, Calcutta 1983. A study which is generally sympathetic to the LF-Government.

17 Hamza Alavi, *Peasants and Revolution*, in A.R. Desai (ed.), *Peasant Struggles in India*, New Delhi et al. 1979, pp. 671-718; Eric Wolf, *Peasant Wars in the Twentieth Century*, London 1971.

ties have been very successful in drawing the rural intelligentsia into their folds by increasing their salaries and politicizing the educational institutions.

A random sample survey of 1446 gram panchayats in 1982 has revealed that 50.7% of the members were owner-cultivators and 14% school teachers¹⁸. Looking at the seat distributions it is obvious that these groups are heavily overrepresented whereas the low income groups (farm labourers, sharecroppers, artisans) are underrepresented with only 16% of the seats. But despite its biased leadership the leftist parties have a much stronger appeal among the poorer sections than the Congress Party.

The concept of class alliance between labourers, marginal/middle farmers and intelligentsia works best in the southwestern districts of Bengal. In comparison to other parts they offer more favourable conditions for agriculture and also have a more homogeneous population in terms of religion, caste, language and origin. Wherever there is less homogeneity the concept of class alliance may not be sufficient to generate a left majority. The results from Murshidabad or from Malda (cf. Table 6), both districts with a high Muslim vote, show that the LF was only successful because other parties drastically reduced the Congress vote. Rightist and communal forces like the Muslim League or the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are especially active there.

Perspectives of Land Reform

The success of the LF government in retaining its power depends on its ability to mediate between the conflicting interests of the various groups engaged in agriculture as regards wages, the remuneration of *bargadars* or the stricter enforcement of the ceiling legislation. Especially against the background of the elimination of big landlordism in the mid-sixties it was possible to forge together the poorer sections with the rural middle class.

But nowadays after the major enemies are eliminated, the scope of institutional land reforms is almost exhausted if a consent between the majority of the rural classes is to be maintained.

The situation becomes even more complicated in cases where communal divisions are superimposed on economic conflicts. In the multi-cultural set-up of Indian society the likelihood of ethnic or regional movements is always given. West Bengal also has to deal with such problems, as the Gorkhaland Movement in the Darjeeling hills or the emergence of the Jharkhand and Uttarbanga Movements shows. Inherent in such political developments is the

18 Government of West Bengal, *The Working of the Panchayat System*, Calcutta 1982, p. 42, Appendix VIII.

danger that certain groups very quickly surrender their existing political allegiances.

Under the circumstances described above the CPI(M) and its partners can hardly be expected to put their political fortune at stake by measures such as a further reduction of the ceiling or by transfer of ownership titles to registered *bargadars* as some people suggest¹⁹.

Consequently LF policy on land reforms has shifted its focus: while the emphasis at the beginning of the present tenure was on institutional reforms, poverty alleviation and promotion of agriculture as a means to promote social welfare gradually moved into the foreground. West Bengal agriculture doubtless still has an almost unsatisfiable need for investment: irrigation facilities are virtually non-existent in the northern part of the state and indebtedness is still a serious problem. Most of the marginal farmers, lacking capital, are still forced to pursue typical risk-avoiding strategies with the consequence of low productivity. The solution of these giant problems is impossible merely by means of what is understood in India as poverty alleviation.

The situation in fact calls for a profound social change to remove the cultural and economic obstacles to collective and cooperative ways of production and better utilization of the abundant labour reserves. Regrettably only little of this can be seen in West Bengal, which indicates that the Communist Movement has lost its character as a social movement and instead plays the role of a power broker.