

Agrarian Relations and New Challenges in West Bengal

Anil Biswas [19th May 2002]

I feel honoured to be present here at the occasion of death anniversary of Comrade P. Sundarayya, one of the most outstanding leaders of the communist movement in India. PS, as he was fondly called, was a revolutionary throughout his life who contributed immensely in the formulation of theoretical understanding as well as building up the organisation to implement those understandings. He, truly, was a concrete embodiment of theory and practice.

Comrade PS, as you may know, was deeply involved with the Party and the mass movement of West Bengal. He had very close relation with not only the stalwarts like Comrade Promode Dasgupta, Comrade Jyoti Basu but many of the younger leaders in the sixties in particular were enriched by his direct guidance and affection. PS personally knew many comrades in different levels of the Party and he was even acquainted with their families. PS stayed at the then CC office in Lake Place in south Calcutta and directly supervised the building of the Party in the state. We still remember how he used to sit for hours at the site when the new printing machines were being assembled at the Ganashakti press. With the familiar dress, wearing khaki shorts, he was a surprise to the Chinese engineers who were involved there. He was known for his appetite for perfection and tried to teach other comrades as well in the fashion. In such an episode, in 1967, there was a huge rally in Calcutta protesting the sacking of United Front Government and PS not satisfied with reports from comrades about the exact size of the gathering went out himself in the next morning to Sahid Minar Maidan to gauge the full capacity of the ground.

The expansion of the CPI(M) and the left in West Bengal was intrinsically linked with the movement for land reforms. The popular base of the Left Front Government and its continuing advancement with tremendous mass support is also integrally related with the land reforms measures it had initiated. As you know, these measures have been noticed not only within the country but also attracted international attention. I will try to deal with some of these aspects today. What I want to say at the outset is that PS was one of the leading figures who contributed in the initiation of the popular movement for land reforms in West Bengal. With his immense experience of the Telangana uprising, PS involved himself in the detailed study of the

West Bengal scenario including the class stratification, the social forces in the rural areas, the pattern of agricultural production etc. He used to visit the villages, particularly in the then 24 Parganas, Burdwan, Midnapore and the districts in North Bengal, stayed with comrades there and gathered socio-economic information. PS suggested the basic framework and the tactical approach for the land movement in the state. His guidance was an enlightening factor in the development of the militant peasant movement in the sixties.

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The most important colonial intervention in India's agrarian structure was the introduction of Permanent Settlement in Bengal Presidency in 1793. Its intellectual origin was the British Physiocratic belief that a capitalist land ownership on the model of the English landed aristocracy could be established on the fertile soil of Bengal though it was only a deformed system badly superimposed. Marx noted that the consequence of this transplantation was no more than 'a caricature of large scale English landed estates' (Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 3, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971, pp. 333-334) was reproduced in Bengal. The result was that the traditional landlords in Bengal had to sell off their estates to more commercially oriented landlords and the new genre served the purpose of colonial masters. Some additional measures empowered them to intensify coercive measures against tenants to collect rent from them. Later some steps intended for small peasants were introduced but the hierarchy of renter interests was ever expanding. On the one hand, the depeasantisation became a common feature. On the other hand intense poverty coupled with regular famines were prevalent throughout the colonial period.

The colonial Bengal, in the nineteenth century too, witnessed frequent peasant unrests, in some cases culminating into revolts. During 1920-s and 1930-s. share croppers movements were particularly evident first in western parts of the province, then spreading into north. The demand of *tebhaga* (two-thirds share of the produce) arose from these movements. Then, in 1946 onwards the *tebhaga* movement engulfed large sections of the peasantry and with the intervention of Krishak Sabha and the Communist Party the movement gradually turned into the movement for protection and furthering of share croppers' rights. The movement with its militancy and upward political content became a major milestone in the history of Bengal.

It was the force of the peasant struggles, which compelled the Congress government after independence to initiate some tenancy legislations. The abolition of Zamindari was coupled with the acts defending the share croppers' rights. Notwithstanding the passing of these acts, the concentration of the ownership was not dismantled; neither the eviction of the share croppers and refusal of their due share was stopped. Deliberate loopholes and exemptions in the acts provided continuation of exploitation in various ways.

It was only during the United Front governments in 1967 and 1969 that serious political-administrative effort at implementing a number of land reform legislations were initiated in the state. Significant progress in respect to implementation of land reform was made during the period. Hare Krishna Konar, the Revenue Minister in the 1967 United Front government will always be remembered as a man who gave a call of occupying lands vested with the government and *benami* lands. This was followed by virtually a mass upsurge of the peasantry in the countryside. It was then that the masses of the peasantry united under the leadership of the left in the struggle for implementing land reform.

The two United Front governments formed in the late 1960s were, however, short lived and could not complete the task. After 1977, when the Left Front Government came to power the state support and the peasants' movement converged to widen and hasten the process. Land reforms in West Bengal were aimed at changing the correlation of class forces in favour of the rural toiling masses.

The land reform implemented by the Left Front government in West Bengal had two major components: tenancy reforms and redistribution of land.

Implementation of tenancy reforms was made possible firstly by an amendment in the West Bengal Land Reforms Act brought about in 1977. This amendment provided the legal basis for the movement popularly known as 'Operation Barga'. The amended legislation outlined clear procedures for identification of *bargadars* and laid down very strict conditions for preventing eviction of them. At the same time, it clearly stated that the burden of proving would lie with the landowner. With this legislative backing, public meetings were organized, with the help of *panchayats* and mass peasant organizations, to mobilize sharecroppers to register their names in the land records. It was a huge success.

The second important component of the land reform in West Bengal was redistribution of land to the poor and the landless. About 14 lakhs acres of land were acquired by the state government, which constitutes about 18 per cent of the total land acquired in India. Of the total land acquired by the state, about 14 lakhs acres were distributed to around 24 lakhs landless and marginal-cultivator households. This constitutes about 20 per cent of the total land distributed in all the states of India under land reform.

It must be emphasized that the process has been carried out despite the onslaught of economic reform and liberalization. Between 1993 and 1999, about 95,000 acres of land were acquired in West Bengal and about 94,000 acres were distributed under the land reform programme. This accounts for almost all the land acquired in the country as a whole and 42 per cent of the land redistributed in the country in this period. In fact, in India as a whole, the data do not show any increase in the land acquisition, indicating that in some of the other states land was actually given back to the landlords.

The process of land reform was accompanied by important institutional changes brought about with a radical reorganization of the system of local government. A system of democratically elected local governments was established at three levels. Elections to the local bodies were held in June 1978, after a gap of eighteen years. West Bengal today is the only state that has the distinction of having had regular elections to local bodies every five years, for the last twenty five years. The *panchayats* in West Bengal were given a substantial share of the state's resources and a range of responsibilities that were earlier assigned to the district-level bureaucracy. The participatory nature has been reinforced by introducing ideas and legislations from time to time.

I refer here to Suryakanta Misra's analysis where he characterizes the institutional changes brought about by the Left Front government as a 'policy of walking on two legs', that is, a two-pronged strategy of development: implementation of land reform and establishment of democratic institutions of local government. These, are interlinked and both require strong political will. A well-organized peasant movement and a system of people's participation in local government are crucial instruments for the implementation of land reform. While, on one hand, the democratic institutions of local government are very important instrument in the strategy of implementation of land reform, their involvement also helps strengthen

these institutions by making them a platform for struggle by historically oppressed classes and castes.

These had their impact on agricultural production. West Bengal emerged as a forerunner state from a long period of agrarian impasse. In the 1980s, the rate of growth of food grain production in the state was the highest among the major foodgrains-producing states of India. The compound rate of growth of food grain production was about 6 per cent in West Bengal in the 1980s. Detailed analysis by different economists has revealed that the high growth-rate was noticeable in most crops, was widespread across districts, was not associated with higher instability and was not only on account of weather conditions. Cropping intensity in West Bengal has increased steadily from 136 in 1980-81 to 180 in 2000-2001, the second highest in the country, next only to Punjab.

The post-land reform period has been associated with large-scale expansion of irrigation. According to NSSO data, the net irrigated area in West Bengal increased by about 115 per cent between 1975-76 and 1992.

In the 1990s, West Bengal had the highest growth of per capita net state domestic product in the whole country. Between 1991-92 and 1998-99, the rate of growth of SDP in West Bengal was 6.88%, higher than for example, Maharashtra (5.14%) and Gujrat (4.81%). This overall growth was coupled with reduction in poverty, increased nutritional level of the poor people and higher human development index.

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The land scenario and the class stratification in rural West Bengal has undergone a sea-change in last two decades. The traditional structure is no more there and therefore the issues relating to land struggle and other areas of peasant movement have also changed. This however has to be borne in mind that whatever has happened in West Bengal is not the complete, basic or radical land reforms which is impossible within the bourgeoisie-landlord state structure. The slogan of a radical land reform is, in the main, a slogan for campaign in the present context. The slogan for concrete agitation and achievement is the land redistribution within the ceiling limit. This task has been achieved to a great extent in West Bengal though problem areas like identification, huge numbers of court cases etc. remain. Even then, as I have

said earlier, more than 24 lakhs of landless have been benefited by the distribution of 14 lakhs acre vested land among them.

The most important feature is that the agriculture in West Bengal is no more dominated by the big landowners. Because of the continued and strong land reforms movement and the natural division of families with time the pattern of land owning has changed heavily in favour of small and marginal holdings. **As per the latest data, there are 11 lakhs and 7 hundreds small holdings (i.e., 16.81 per cent of total holdings), 50 lakhs and 4 thousand marginal holdings (76.82 per cent of the total), 4 lakhs and 42 thousand middle-level holdings (6.75 per cent of the total) and only 1152 holdings or 0.2 per cent can be called big holdings owning more than 10 acres. Apart from that, almost 15 lakh share-croppers have functional right over 11 lakh acres of land out of the total holdings.**

Though the process of land reforms is not yet complete, new laws to identify more lands for vesting are being drafted, land tribunals for quick disbursement of disputes have been set up and various kinds of pre-capitalist fetters are still there, it is natural that the movement for fetching and distribution of land can not create passion and militancy as before. The objective reality has been changed through land reforms itself. The emphasis is now on other aspects of agricultural production and the emerging production relations in the rural society.

I want to deliberate on some aspects of this emerging scenario.

If one looks at the results of land reform and the other aspects of rural development during the Left Front regime, one must admit that its benefits have been distributed across most sections of the society. High agricultural growth and substantial development of irrigation have taken place in districts that were the most underdeveloped. Of the various classes in rural society, agricultural workers, marginal and small peasants, even upper sections of the peasantry and other non-peasant sections have all benefited from agricultural growth in different ways. Marginal and small cultivators have been engaged in more intensive cultivation. It has been documented that much of the demand for purchase of irrigation water comes from marginal and small cultivators.

However, one can not deny the fact of high degree of fragmentation of landholdings. According to data from the NSSO for 1980-81, the average

size of a parcel of land in West Bengal was 0.346 acre, while the corresponding figure for India as a whole was 1.01 acres. There has been possibly more fragmentation during the last decade. The small plot-size creates problems for mechanization of operations. There is a growing trend of a sort of functional consolidation through jointly hiring a tractor and sharing tube wells to overcome these limitations.

The question of land consolidation has been discussed within the peasant movement from time to time. But, the worldwide experience and the concrete realities in our country show that it is highly difficult to consolidate while maintaining the small or marginal ownership. In these heydays of liberalisation, consolidation under corporate firming is being propagated. We have proved earlier that agricultural growth was possible under the small and marginal ownership. Now the challenge before us is to protect those classes, their ownership while moving forward to growth of production. The Left front Government has decided to follow the principle of “small firm management”.

The major need of the peasantry in the face of liberalisation and globalisation relate to provision of non-land inputs, institutional credit and infrastructure and support in terms of prices.

The first question is to expand the availability of institutional credit. The low supply of institutional credit in West Bengal has been noted to be a problem by various scholars and official committees. The credit-deposit ratio in the state has been very low and has been declining. The credit-deposit ratio in West Bengal was lower than the all-India average throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Commercial banks have been mobilizing savings in rural West Bengal and investing them elsewhere. In 2000, only about 24 per cent of the amount mobilized from rural West Bengal by the scheduled commercial banks was lent out in the state. The decreasing trend of investment in agriculture throughout the country has thrown a big challenge to the state.

The low supply of institutional finance has led to continued domination of informal sources of credit in the countryside. Although the old types of money lending have declined in the post-land reform period, their space has been taken by new types of moneylenders. There has been a large increase in the interlinked credit transactions between peasants and traders.

To meet the challenge, there has been some effort to expand the network of cooperative banks. The state has devised a system of universal membership of cooperatives. As a result, the post-land reform period has seen a change in the management of cooperatives. Small and marginal farmers now have greater representation in cooperatives and roughly two-thirds of the agricultural credit from cooperative banks now goes to marginal and small farmers; in comparison, in India as a whole, only about 30 per cent of the credit goes to marginal and small farmers.

A more recent response has been to promote the organization of self-help groups. Midnapore district already has about 21,000 self-help groups and their savings are close to Rs.7 crores, increasing by Rs.1 crore every month. Although micro-credit cannot be alternative to rural banks in satisfying all the requirements of credit, it can be a means of temporary support in meeting the requirements of small amounts of consumption credit. In this era of globalized finance, it gives the poor some control over their savings.

Along with it, the Left Front has now decided to strengthen Agricultural Services Co-operatives for supplying non-land inputs to the peasants and defend them from the onslaught of the increasing prices of fertilizers, pesticides, tractors and other necessary inputs.

The pressure of liberalization on the agricultural growth rate has already been felt in the state. Consequently there is increasing risk of price-fall that has been already witnessed in the case of rice in this season also. Therefore, the question of crop variation is an important issue. The peasantry has to be mobilized towards this. Public policy needs to address this issue because changes in cropping pattern in favour of non-food grain crops has to be done without threatening the food security of poor households. An important task in this respect is to organize proactive land-use and crop planning. The state government has initiated serious steps in this regard.

Another important issue is adequate state intervention in agricultural marketing. Historically, West Bengal has had inadequate public infrastructure in agricultural marketing. The lack of market facilities has, however, become a cause of distress to the peasantry in the last few years as a result of the opening up of international trade. The policies of the union government have resulted in enormous financial pressure on West Bengal, and the state needs to find creative ways of meeting the demands of the peasantry. A decentralized procurement, storage and public distribution

system could be some of the ways. Also, popularising bio pesticides, bio fertilizers and integrated pest management can make our agriculture more competitive and ecologically sustainable.

For the share croppers, production relationships have changed in a major way. The amended land reform legislation provides for permanent and heritable right of cultivation to the registered bargadar. Eviction and threats of eviction have become a thing of the past. Notably, this is true not only for registered bargadars but also for those who have not registered. The political environment in post-land reform West Bengal – in the state as a whole and in a majority of the panchayats and the local – level power relations have changed so significantly in favour of the poor and the working people that eviction of even unregistered bargadars is practically unconceivable.

In recent years, there has been an increasing trend for landowners and sharecroppers to enter into mutual agreements by which ownership rights of the sharecropped land are given to the sharecroppers. In some cases, the sharecroppers are leaving the land for other jobs and in some other the landowners are eager to sell the lands. The Kisan Sabha has entered into negotiations to protect the interests of the sharecroppers.

A large number of **agricultural workers** have gained land in the post-land reform period, and they now have important land base. Agricultural workers were the major beneficiaries of the land redistribution programme: about 15 lakh households among the beneficiaries were previously landless. It is noteworthy that the proportion of male agricultural labourers in the total work force declined in West Bengal between 1981 and 1991 by 1.75 percentage points. In the same period, the proportion of male agricultural labourers increased by 2.35 percentage points in India as a whole. But, the increasing countrywide crisis will inevitably contribute in the increase of the number of agricultural workers in West Bengal too. Some sections of poor peasants also work in others' lands seasonally. The questions of wages are paramount for this class.

In the period of high agricultural growth that followed land reform, agricultural workers also benefited from the increased demand for employment in agriculture. Soon after the Left Front came to power, the Kisan Sabha launched a state-wide movement to enforce payment of minimum wages in agriculture, and there has been substantial increase in agricultural wages in West Bengal in the 1980s. Data from Agricultural

Wages in India show that the growth rate of average real daily wages of male agricultural workers between 1979-80 and 1992-93 was the highest in West Bengal among all the Indian states (Rawal and Swaminathan, 1998).

Wage increases in the post-land reform period have to be seen in the context of the high growth of agricultural output achieved during this period, as well as the fact that the agricultural work-force in West Bengal is organized and there is organized mass action to demand periodic wage revisions. In most places wage-levels are determined through collective bargaining in which Panchayats and mass organizations play a prominent role.

Employment creation was an important outcome of agricultural growth in the post-land reform period. West Bengal had the highest employment elasticity of state domestic product between 1983 and 1993-94 among the fifteen most populous states of India. This has to be judged from the perspective of the jobless growth that is being experienced all over the world.

While substantial growth of wages and employment took place in the 1980s in West Bengal, the 1990-s created much more acute problem. Suryakanta Mishra and Vikas Rawal have mentioned in a recent article that agricultural wages as well as the days of employment available to rural labourers tended to stagnate in the 1990s, with a decline in real wages after the mid-90s. Many factors are likely to have contributed to this stagnation and decline of wages. These include the fact that agricultural growth in this decade was low, resulting in increasing pressure on the peasantry against the growth of wages. (Misra, Rawal, Agrarian Relations in Contemporary West Bengal and Tasks for the Left; Agrarian Studies, 2002.) CPI(M) and the Kisan Sabha have self-critically admitted that there is a lack of enthusiasm in building up the wage struggle at different levels of the organization. This is one of the major lacunas of the peasant movement in our state.

Other very important issues for this class are the deprivation in terms of lack of mass adult literacy, schooling among children and access to public health services. Addressing these forms of deprivation has become an important developmental agenda for the state. In the last state conference of the CPI(M) in February 2002, the document on “Left Front Government and our tasks” has been adopted. One of the major thrust areas of the document is to initiate new steps to ensure those basic services for the poorest of the poor. We have decided to emphasise our class priority in planning and resource

spending and the beneficiaries would be obviously the poor sections of the rural mass.

As we are talking of rural classes, **we must mention that the post-land reform period in West Bengal has seen the emergence of new strata of the rural rich.** The impact of land reform on the upper sections of landowners has been two pronged. On the one hand, these sections of the society lost land and therefore bore the brunt of the rise of the working class and the peasantry. Implementation of land reform and establishment of democratic institutions of local government undermined, in a major way, the social and political power enjoyed by this class in the countryside.

At the same time, however, these sections continued to be economically powerful. Although their land-base was weakened in absolute terms, a good number of them continue to have the larger holdings in the villages and the economic value of the land they have been left with has gone up substantially. Also, these sections were an important beneficiary of the expansion of productive forces that was unleashed in the post-land reform period. In some sense, political pressures have forced this class to move out of traditional forms of surplus extraction. These pressures weakened a number of landlords and some of them perished, but a good number of them moved into capitalist forms of investment in land and in other areas of village economy.

Such landowners may not have big holdings in terms of size but they cultivate their land more intensively. They are now engaged in a variety of occupations. In the post-land reform period, they have invested in the non-farm and service sectors. A household from this class may have only a medium-sized land holding but members of the family may be engaged in trade, transportations, in salaried jobs too.

Agricultural growth in the post-land reform period was associated with this class of the rural rich taking advantage of a variety of opportunities that opened up. One such important area was agricultural trading. A related area of investment was the establishment of cold storages. These were also the classes that were the first to invest in tubewells and they continue to own a majority of the tubewells. These tubewells are used not just to irrigate their own lands but also to sell irrigation water to others. They also own tractors and power-tillers, which they rent out.

These traders trade in agricultural inputs as well as produce. Rawal, in a study of Kotulpur in Bankura, found that the number of traders in the block increased from about twelve in the mid-1970s to over 150 in the mid-1990-s. They emerged as an important source of production credit in rural West Bengal.

The displaced landowners, along with this new rich have become a source of political tension in the rural areas. They strive to disrupt the unity of the rural poor. It was this section that provided the impetus to Trinamul Congress – led terror campaign in parts of Midnapore, Bankura and Hooghly districts in the 1998-2001 period.

In conclusion, it may be said that the changed scenario has posed new challenges before the Left movement and the Left Front government. Three streams of development planning, refinement of programmes and strengthening mass struggles are to be converged.

(Read at Sundarayya Vignana Kendram, Hyderabad, on 19th May 2002)