

CHAPTER - 3

LAND REFORM AND LAND ACQUISITION IN WEST BENGAL

3.1. Introduction

Programmes of land reforms and Land acquisition have always been conflict-prone in areas in India where it was implemented. This is due to the fact that before independence no serious attempts were made for land reforms by the government. The issue of land reforms before independence was based simply on the extent and appropriation of the collection of revenues. Moreover, the policies adopted by the British raj was not uniform throughout the country. The states in India had also a heterogeneous character in Land Reform.

West Bengal along with Punjab had to suffer a lot due to partition. Large-scale influx continued till 1971 in West Bengal across the border from Bangladesh which caused the population density of the state to shoot up to 906 per square kilometre from 698 per square kilometre and this is almost three times of the national average of 323 per square kilometre. West Bengal has a negligible share of 2.7 per cent of the total cultivable land of the country while 9 per cent of the Indian agricultural produce comes from West Bengal alone. The proportion of agrarian land in the state of West Bengal has grown up to 62 per cent of the total land. As a result, there is only 1 per cent is fallow land now as against the national average of 17 per cent. Production and productivity in agriculture have gone up significantly. Astonishingly, 78 per cent of the agricultural land in the state is being owned by small and marginal farmers.

The land reform programmes which started in the brief period of 1967 and 1969 under United Front Governments were consolidated through the introduction of the new Panchayat raj System in 1978. Through this process, the poor and marginal farmers were empowered through

ownership of land¹ with the help of local self-government. The role of governments across the developing countries in acquiring farming land on behalf of industrialists has gained much attention in recent times. In numerous cases, there has been stiff resistance to these state-sponsored acquisitions by peasants and agrarian labourers whose livelihood is threatened by the transformation of agricultural land for industry, development of infrastructure and real estate. A specific case in the state of West Bengal which has witnessed since 2006, is the conflict between unwilling farmers and the state regarding the acquisition of agricultural land at different part of the state including Singur and Nandigram which came to the limelight due to different perspective. Since time immemorial, agricultural land is an essential resource of the rural economy of developing countries; it is the major factor that plays a vital role in the livelihoods of the rural population. Moreover, due to discrimination in agricultural income, ownership of land and its usage causes a difference in the agrarian society, division of class is based on the use of land. To reduce the gap of economic inequality, it is necessary to eliminate property ownership which is the root cause of economic and social discrimination. It has been proved that proper policies of land reform play a key role in social and economic justice. Thus land reforms directly linked to productivity, elimination of inequality, eradication of poverty, local governance along with social capital in rural areas, and enabling the society to function effectively. Even in the State of West Bengal, which takes pride in implementing Land Reform Measures, the land acquisition had taken place more rapidly during the last phase of the Left Front Government than land reforms. Land reform is such a socio-political process and simultaneously an activity whose primary purpose is to transform and eradicate the age-old

¹A plot of land was considered to be owned by the household if permanent heritable possession, with or without the right to transfer the title, was vested in a member or members of the household. Land held in owner-like possession under long term lease or assignment was also considered as land owned. A plot of land might be leased out to others by the owner without losing the right of permanent heritable possession. Plots possessed by a tribal person in accordance with traditional tribal rights from local chieftains or village/district council, were considered owned by the tribal person.

feudal system. Implementation of policies to raise the economic and social status of the landless peasant community. However, land reform measures exist in the operation of the state as well as in the policy of acquisition of land. The state does not apply two types of contradictory power at the same time and the same speed due to various political reasons. Thus we observe that sometimes land reforms were emphasized and on another occasion, land acquisition is given importance.

While the state-led land acquisition has been going on in other states but West Bengal deserves mention for its well-known history of executing several land reform measures in the Left Front Government period. This chapter deals with land acquisition scenario in the context of land reform programmes implemented by the state, which bears a deep-rooted link to the past. With a thorough examination of the implementation and impact of the reform programmes, it highlights some of the significant challenges for the rural economy of West Bengal. It discusses the implications towards the move for industrialization by the Left Front Government on historical view.

3.2. Importance of Land Reform

The land reforms programme mainly deals with four things. Firstly, land reforms deal with land ownership or possession rights on the land. The land can be redistributed through the renovation of ownership rights.

Secondly, land reform is the renovation of tenancy rights. The owner of the land can give his property to somebody else for cultivation. The person who took the land on lease or agreed to pay a share after cultivation is called *Praja*. The said leasehold land or the land on which a share has to be given to the owner of the land after cultivation is defined as the tenancy of said land. The objective of tenancy reform is to remove the middlemen in-between the state and the

actual farmers, to stop the eviction of the people from their right to cultivate the land and to ascertain the rate of rent assessment.

Thirdly, land reform deals with necessary changes related to the areas of holding so that newly integrated areas of holding will be economically benefitted. Thus the importance of land reform programs include the following activities:

1. Termination of intermediaries in-between the state and the actual farmers,
2. Tenancy reform and peasant protection
3. Redistribution of surplus land
4. Integration of smallholding

Broadly, land reforms can be delineated as an essential annexation of the land, generally by the state, from the major landowners and farming of the land in an appropriate way to spread the benefits to the man and their land relationship. The state may sell or give rent of such land to smaller units for private farming and to fulfil the needs of more satisfactory distribution. It could be shared, through collective or co-operative management (Lipton, 1974).

Thus, land reform is a kind of equalizing strategy. It may give rise to better yield and progress, but the principal incentive is to diminish inequality, and thereby poverty. The distribution and collectivist means may go together with land reform methods and act as tools to eradicate the problem of poverty. Altering the landholding structure will not decrease inequality if the alteration is only involved in the conversion of feudal holdings into capitalist holdings of the same size (Lipton, 1974).

Land reform can be perceived both in terms of financial and socio-political aspects. In the book 'The Economic History of India' eminent historian Romesh Chandra Dutta highlighted land reform in a broad sense as changes in the agricultural structure including marketing, credit and other financial aspects (Dutta R. C., 1986). Late Binoy Kumar Chowdhury the Land Reforms minister of Left Front Government whose ideas played a crucial role in land reforms in West

Bengal, defined land reforms as a process of redistribution of land in favour of the landless and small cultivators as well as tenancy reform (Chowdhury, 1977).

The decision to opt for land reform as a development policy seemed to have been necessitated by several considerations:

- (a) The recognition of a growing agrarian problem characterized by significant disparities in the distribution and control of land by various rural groups, resulting in a skewed distribution of the benefits (Dasgupta S., CPI(M)'s Hobson's choice: Politics of Post Barga Reform, 1986);
- (b) The political need of having to deal with a peasantry which has begun to initiate, or threatens to start, the holding of land by large landowners, resulting in increased agrarian crisis (Ghosh & Nagraj, 1986);
- (c) The growing realization that the rural poor have enormous political significance, and hence, care should be taken to manipulate them in the political power balance;
- (d) The consciousness that land reform is essential on the grounds of equity and efficiency. The reverse relationship between farm size and output per hectare is well established, as the production per unit of land is higher on small farms (Ghosh T. K., 1983).
- (e) The realization that there is a high positive association between the per cent of the rural population below the poverty line and the degree of concentration of landholdings. A study of rural poverty has shown this (Chakraborty, 1983).

Tenancy reform comprises typically the granting of one or more of the following rights:

- (a) Limited rent, usually to one-third of the value of gross output, instead of the prevailing levels of 50-75 per cent;
- (b) Security against eviction, lousy farming or non-payment of legal rent.
- (c) Conversion, at the tenants' discretion, from crop share to fixed rental (Lipton, 1974).

Third Planning Commission of India summed up the goals of land reforms as the elimination of all elements of exploitation and extension of social justice within the agrarian system and to

provide security to 'the tillers of the soil' (Venkatasubramanian, 2013, p. 67). The goals of Land reform can be explained in two ways. It may give importance to more production by discontinuing fragmentation of land utilizing better fertilizers and seed and providing advanced irrigational facilities. This type of reform aims to increase farm productivity and the growth of farming regions. A further characteristic of land reform is to reach the agrarian population by altering the rural socio-economic structure and to provide for better utilization of land. The means by which these aims could be fulfilled are by tenure changes introduced by the government. These changes encompass both re-distributive programs (e.g., land re-distribution and tenancy reform) and developmental programs (e.g., cooperative farming and publicly instituted land settlement). The first set of applications seeks to allocate equitability in the sources of agricultural income. In contrast, the second one aims at the improvement of farming efficiency and expansion of farming areas.

In rural regions, the most important means of production is land, and as Griffin places, it is the only way to ensure access to land is to own it (K.Griffin, 1979). Inequality of land ownership is the most significant agrarian problem in developing nations and alteration in the land distribution system by taking suitable measures may prove short-lived. Safety and Security of tenure and rent-reduction measures will come to nothing and cannot be imposed without programs of land redistribution (Ladejinsky, 1965).

Land redistribution affects essential agrarian change. As Badruddin Umar observes, "If this is absent, all else may prove short-lived, including the security of tenure and rent reduction measures tough to enforce" (Umar, 1983, p. 99) Tenancy reform is also significant as it seeks to provide security to the tillers of the land. In the entire process of land reform and its intention incompleteness-the role of government is decisive.

In the entire procedure of land reform – from beginning to completion- the role of the state is indispensable. Land reform, in the practical and actual sense, is a political issue. 'Land to the

tiller' is the most uttered slogan in recent times. This slogan becomes active through re-distributive reform measures. However, land reform is not only a direct issue for legislation and execution, but it also comprises the interest of the political party in power. As a matter of fact "it is prompted by the interaction of socio-political considerations on the part of the policy-makers, including ideological motives and pressures from below" (Dutta P. K., 1988, p. 3).

The most significant means of production in rural areas is land, and the only way to ensure access to it is to own it (Bandopadhyay, 1986) Of all land reform programs, land redistribution is the most important because the most severe agrarian problem in developing countries is the inequality of land ownership. To be effective land reform programs require not only government sponsorship, but also government compulsion. In the early 1960s, several Latin American countries passed many land reform laws and created land reform institutes to implement them. However, nothing could be achieved because the laws specified that re-distribution of land should be done through 'amicable arrangements', 'voluntary transfer' etc. (Bandyopadhyay D. , 1980).

Finally, land reform entails drastic changes. It is frequently said that land reform is major surgery and not like removing pain without dealing with the condition. It is in this sense that John K. Galbraith said, "In fact, land reform is a revolutionary step; it passes property, power and status from one group in the community to another. If the government is dominated or strongly influenced by the landholding group...no, one should expect dynamic land legislation as an act of grace". (Basu & Bhattacharyya, 1963, p. 10)

Land reform is not a straight forward issue of enacting the law and its enforcement through government apparatus but is much more complicated. It is prompted by the interaction of socio-economic and socio-political considerations on the part of the policy-makers, including ideological motives and 'pressures from below'.

3.3. Different Models of Land Reform

What is particularly important in the field of the planned development of agriculture is to decide whether land should be cultivated in enlarged holdings or should be cultivated in smallholdings that are scattered or fragmented land. Depending on the type of landholdings, land reform methods should be implemented. If it is decided that land should be cultivated on smallholdings, then the upper limit should be tied up on the ownership of the land and the land which is above the limit will be distributed to the landless peasants by acquiring land. On the other hand, if the decision is taken that cultivation should be done on extensive holdings, then there is no requirement for the upper limit of holdings. If the upper limit of the holding is decreased, then the size of the holding will be reduced, and it would be contrary to cultivation in extensive holdings.

How much land a farmer or his family could keep is enacted by law then on that event, the farmer cannot keep land above the land ceiling. This concept of land ceiling depends mainly on two criteria: 1. Individual ownership 2. Family ownership.

In the case of individual ownership, an individual could keep ownership of land below the land ceiling. However, in the case of family ownership, it has been decided how much land a family could hold, and the description of the family is to be well defined.

The measures that should be taken to protect the interests of the peasantry depends on which model is being adopted. If the model is of smallholdings adopted, then it is necessary to protect the marginal farmers from eviction. The government has to make laws so that the landowners cannot evict the marginal farmers. On the other hand, if the model of the large holding is accepted then on that event, it is not necessary to prevent the eviction of marginal farmers because consolidation of large holding takes place by the process of uniting small plots of land owned by the marginal farmers.

1. West Bengal Model (small land is the holding model)

2. Punjab model (large land is the holding model)

3.3.1. West Bengal(Small Landholding) Model

In West Bengal, the land reform process provided land to the farmers who were landless by acquiring land from the landholder who had ownership of land excess of land ceiling. It also introduced necessary rules and regulations to secure the rights of the small landholders and create an environment for cultivation and give them freedom from exploitation. About land reforms, this policy or procedure to establish legal rights on small landholding motivated the marginal farmers. After adopting this method of land reform in West Bengal, especially after the formation of the Left Front government and due to their political will along with administrative activity the said process of land reforms got significant success. In adopting this method of land reform, the state of West Bengal had become a model state in India. In this model of land reform, there is a provision for securing the rights of the *bargadars*. The *bargadars* got the opportunity to secure their rights, and at the same time, they fulfilled their livelihood through intensive labour in their land.

3.3.2. Punjab (Large Landholding) Model

The model of large holding has been adopted for land reform in Punjab benefitted the cultivation of large-scale farming. Scattered and fragmented holdings are consolidated into a large holding that gave success in Punjab. This programme of integration is also observed in Haryana. As a result of the adoption of this type of reform model, the Green Revolution has achieved quite a success in the states of Punjab and Haryana. It is necessary to point out that due to the increase in the size of the agricultural holding this model of land reform helped to increase production due to the use of advanced agricultural technology, better irrigation facilities and the use of other modern farming equipment. It has also been observed at the same

time that *bargadars*, small farmers lost their land due to the eradication of the boundary of the land.

3.4. Phases of Land Reform in West Bengal after Independence

After independence land reform in West Bengal can be divided into the following phases:

3.4.1. First Phase(1950-1966)

In West Bengal, land reforms measures included in the introduction of basic legislative measures between 1950 to 1966 the West Bengal Bargadar Act (1950), followed by the West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act(1952) along with the West Bengal Land Reforms Act(1955) were introduced by the State Government led by Congress which run the state. In West Bengal, 3,00,000 acres of land much above the prescribed ceiling was distributed. This figure is less than 3% of the land that yields crops in the state. It has been observed that intermediaries retained much above the ceiling land by evasive transfers to friends, relatives, and fake persons (*Benami* transactions)

3.4.2. Second Phase(1967-1977)

From 1967 to 1977 it could be termed as the second phase of land reform in West Bengal. During this period the United Front consisting of the leftist and centrist parties came to power in short phases in the years 1967 and 1969. During the year 1967, the coalition government between the left parties and centrist parties known as the United Front came into power. During this period, there was serious social unrest and militant peasant movement. The then United front government distributed more surplus land to improve the condition of *bargadars*. The rights of *bargadars* were unrecorded so they were not evicted from land. During the year 1967 to 1970, additional 6 lacks acres of ceiling surplus land was redistributed. In the year 1970 president's rule was imposed in West Bengal and the period of United Front rule ended. During

this period, land reforms act offered the potentiality to improve the overall condition of the *bargadars* in West Bengal.

But the new amendment failed to solve the age-old problems of the *bargadars*. It has been observed that those who wanted to implement their rights according to the laws were very often evicted and the surplus land which was acquired during the year 1967-70 was taken back by the previous landowners subsequently. West Bengal's acquisition of homestead land² was introduced in the year 1975 to safeguard the interest of agricultural labourers, fishermen and artisans. This unique Act aimed at providing 0.08-acre land as homestead land for poor and landless agricultural labourers, fisherman and artisans. The land reforms policy of The United Front Government had two principal characteristics. The first one is to break the hold of landlordism by the process of implementing ceiling laws and the immediate redistribution of surplus land among the poor peasantry and the landless labourers. (Dasgupta S. , 1986) and secondly a ban on the eviction of share-croppers from cultivable land without consultation of representatives from the peasant's community and members of the Gram Panchayat along with members of the legislature. (Dutta P. K., 1988).

The long-standing demand of the Kisan Sabha (peasant organisations) placed before the 'flood commission' regarding the security of the *bargadars*. The commission wholeheartedly accepted the need for such clauses to safeguard the security of *bargadars*. In the later years that is West Bengal Land Reforms Act, 1955 was more inclusive and it emphasized the abolition of intermediaries and the imposition of ceiling on landholding. An amendment was made to this act by which the cultivation right of *bargadars* was made heritable in 1970. Hence

²Homestead of a household was defined as the dwelling house of the household together with the courtyard, compound, garden, out-house, place of worship, family graveyard, guest house, shop, workshop and offices for running household enterprises, tanks, wells, latrines, drains and boundary walls annexed to the dwelling house. All land coming under homestead was defined as house site (homestead land). It might constitute only a part of a plot and as such, gardens, orchards or plantations, etc. adjacent to the homestead and lying within the boundary walls were not considered as homestead land.

cessation of *barga* contact was made difficult. The share of the *bargadars* with input contribution was made 75% in the year 1965. During the first decade of the post-independence period, the Congress government did not take any step to establish the rights of the *bargadars*. In the year 1955 it was the Congress government introduced land Reform in West Bengal. The *bargadars* frequently faced the problem of eviction and exploitation. The landlords always tried to downgrade the status of the tenants to treat them as agricultural labourers. The sole aim of the landlord was to prevent the rights of the *bargadars*, which was granted to them by legislation. Due to frequent eviction of the *bargadars*, technological progress along with capital investment in relation to the cultivation of *barga* land was severely hindered.

In the year 1970, it had become obligatory for the government to acquire vested land in the face of furious 'Naxalbari movement'.

In the year 1977, the left front government which came to power followed the land reform policy, which was similar to the procedures adopted by the previous Congress government. There was only one amendment to the last Act to safeguard the security of *Bargadars*. According to the said amendment, it was the landowner who had to prove legally that the *bargadar* was not the temporary leaseholder of specific land. The land reforms took concrete shape mainly in the areas of redistribution of vested land and securing the rights of tenancy which already existed in previous laws. The left front government started universal registration of tenants which popularly came to be known as '*Operation Barga*'. The government also introduced the West Bengal Landholding Revenue Act, 1979 and the revenue rules, 1980, which provided crucial modification in the system of share-cropping. In addition to these changes, the land ceiling on large landholdings and the abolition of intermediaries between the landlord and the cultivator along with reinforcement of administrative measures changed the organisation of rural society in relation to the share-cropping system. These changes ensured social equality, self-confidence, which strengthened the political position of the poor people in

rural Bengal. The reforms introduced by the left front government in the year 1977 emphasized economic development significantly accompanied by decentralization and democratization of political power in rural West Bengal.

The reforms policy in West Bengal had vibrant economic social and political intentions. The main objective was to weaken the supremacy of landlords in rural West Bengal. To achieve this goal the left front government started redistribution of land to landless peasants, the security of share-croppers in respect of their tenancy, create a market in rural areas by increasing the purchasing power of the peasants. With the achievement of the above goals, there was a development of rural industries, trade and commerce associated with other services. Due to these changes, there was an expansion in literacy and public health. Thus the weaker section of society such as the Schedule caste, Schedule tribe and women were empowered to some extent and the balance of class forces in the state was shifted in favour of working people generally.

3.4.3. Third Phase (Operation Barga-1978-1982)

The communist parties and other left forces have been following the policies of educational measures for empowerment of peasants, poor and working people of the state and this political stand was highlighted in their election manifesto and campaign. As a result, the left parties including the communist parties gained in the state election held in the year 1977. After coming to power in 1977 the left parties took several measures to eradicate hunger, poverty, eviction from land, insecurity of tenure, illiteracy and unemployment mainly in rural areas of the state. The bargadars along with agricultural labourers have always played the most crucial role in agricultural production in West Bengal and were the backbone of agriculture in the state. The Left Government started a campaign for *operation barga* in 1978. Provisions were laid down to solve the problems faced by the *bargadars*. It has been observed that the rights of the

bargadars were recognized even during the British rule. At the end of the *Tebhaga* movement a movement to safeguard the interests of *bargadars*, the government had to introduce 'The Bengal Bargadars Temporary Regulation Bill' From the year 1950s to 1970s, several other laws and amendments were made to protect the rights of the *bargadars*. *Operation Barga* was an outcome of the provisions of existing laws. After Left Front Government came to power in 1977 it started to implement operationalization and registration of *bargadars*. The peasant organizations guided by the left forces mainly all India Kisan Sabha accelerated the speed in the process of *Operation Barga* in an organised manner. In West Bengal, there was a system of zamindari settlement based on the system of oral contacts, and there was no written system of documentation. The most important mission of the peasant organizations was to identify the *barga* land in such a situation. The relationship between *bargadars* and landlords changed entirely with the introduction of the programme of registration and protection of *bargadars* from their eviction. *Operation Barga*, which received legal and administrative support from the state government, was a struggle and a movement to put an end to the anti-feudal confrontations. Eight thousand (8,000) camps were organized and registered 6,75,000 *bargadars* in between the year October 1978 to June 1982, throughout West Bengal. (Sen A., 2002)

In these camps in addition to recording the names of *bargadars* certificates were issued and delivered to them. These certificates acted as documentary evidence of their right and gave them legal security on their tenancy, but the real success of *Operation Barga* came much later. It has been observed that due to poor living conditions of share-croppers, they were compelled sometimes to sell their certificate (*patta*). The Government strengthened the system of institutional finance to eradicate rural poverty and to stop the loopholes of the system that caused poverty and misery. The crop sharing pattern was settled in the ratio of 3:1, where the *bargadar* was providing significant input in farming. With the security of tenure, many other

economic and non-economic obligations which the *bargadars* were tied to the landlords were released. The prevailing condition gave the bargadars freedom from the clutches of landlords. It is to be noted that the major demands of the *Tebhaga* movement, Naksalbari movement and the Kisan sabhas that is ‘land to the tiller’ (*Langal Jar, Jami Tar*) were realized to some extent through these measures. Under the changed scenario, share-croppers who cultivated the land for several years could now register their names in the department of land revenue which would give them permanent inheritable right to cultivate the same. The onus of refuting *bargadari* rights were put on the landowners. This provision gave security to share-croppers of their tenure, livelihood and motivated them to make improvements by putting hard labour, together with access to formal agricultural credit facilities. These increased the level of production which in turn led to higher income for both the tenant and landlord. (West Bengal Human Development Report, 2004)

It has been observed that political involvement played a vital role to implement the policies of land reforms. The success in implementing this policy varied from district to district depending upon the strength of the ruling political party. According to the report of land and land reforms department, the Government of West Bengal as of 2005, the total number of recorded *bargadars* was 20.2 per cent, amounting to 1.53 million agricultural households representing 8.2 per cent of arable land in the state comprising 1.1 million acres.

The following table presents the picture of the benefitted sharecroppers:

Table 3.1. District-Wise Recording of Bargadars & Percentage of the Total Cultivator

Districts	Numbers of <i>bargadars</i> recorded by 2005	Total cultivators in 2005(%)
Bankura	116674	26.4
Bardhaman	133739	40.2
Birbhum	111654	43.1
Cooch Behar	84906	23.4
Darjeeling	12879	15.6
Dinajpur	103796	23.4
Hooghly	113924	25.7

Howrah	42754	6.1
Jalpaiguri	61356	23.4
Malda	81877	30.3
Medinipur	318291	28.8
Murshidabad	85609	23.1
Nadia	64490	20.5
North 24 Parganas	74202	27.3
Purulia	9274	2.6
South 24 Parganas	113791	32.7
Total	1530757	40.3

Source: Land and Land Reforms Department, Government of West Bengal

According to the West Bengal human development of report-2004 out of 1.4 million *bargadars* out of which 11 per cent were scheduled tribe, and 30.5 per cent were schedule caste. About 1.1 million acres of land was permanently given to the *bargadars* with their rights. This report also conveys that out of the total number of *pattadars*, there were 37.1 per cent scheduled Castes and 19.3 per cent scheduled Tribes.

Table 3.2. Distribution of Land Reform Beneficiaries

Per cent of total	Scheduled Caste	Scheduled Tribe	Others
<i>Pattadaras</i>	37.1	19.3	43.6
<i>Bargadars</i>	30.5	11	58.5

Source: Human Development Report- 2004

Table 3.3. Distribution of Vested Land

Congress Government (up to 67 elections)	3.76 lakh acres
United front government(9 months + 13 months)	2.50 lakh acres
In 1977 and after	4.26 lakh acres
Total	10.52 lakh acres

Source: Ajit Narayan Basu, Paschimbanbger Krishi Niti, page-64

Table 1.4. Cumulative Numbers of Bargadars Registered

Year	Cumulative Nos. Registered (Cumulative % to total)
Up to 1978(Pre OB)	0.25 Million(11%)
1981	1.20 Million
1984	1.31 Million
1991	1.43 Million
1995	1.47 Million
2003	1.51 Million

Source: Economic Review,2003-04

3.5. Land Reform and Sustainable Development under the Left Front Government

The Left Front Government was voted to power through election for seven consecutive terms, and it is extensively believed that the electoral base of the Left Front Government had been primarily in the rural segment in which agriculture has continued to play the significant role. When it was voted to power in 1977 for the first time, the Left Front Government immediately embarked on a set of agrarian reform programmes which involved decentralization of rural governance, comprehensive tenancy reforms, as well as land redistribution. The success of the left alliance was primarily due to its rural electoral support based on its pro-poor redistributive policies. Therefore it is not surprising that agricultural reform featured prominently on the agenda of the Left Front Government. In the first few years after 1977, numerous necessary steps were taken in this path:

An absolute redistribution of ceiling surplus land among the landless and land-poor. Large scale land reforms, entitled *Operation Barga* whereby sharecroppers were officially registered by the state and given lawful permanent right of farming. It also permitted the sharecroppers to increase their share in the total produce vis-à-vis the landlord.

An elaborate and very effective policy of decentralized governance (*Panchayati Raj* organization) starting at the village level, which bestowed substantial monetary authority on the local governments to carry out developmental schemes.

Of the three vital steps related to agricultural growth or rural development, tenancy reform programme is unquestionably the most important. The land redistribution programme undertaken by the Left Front Government can at best be called limited with merely 3.5 per cent of the sown area being redistributed between 1977 and 2003 (Gazder and Sengupta, 1997). The transformation of the *Panchayat Raj* structure of local governance has been comparatively successful, there have been regular elections Since 1978 to the three-tier local government

bodies at the village³, block and the district level. There has been substantial evidence of active participation of the rural deprived in local self together with helping the bureaucracy in implementing the agricultural reform programmes in the initial years of the Left Front Government rule (Government of West Bengal, 2004).

The most important feature of West Bengal agriculture since the Left Front Government came to power in 1977 is the significant growth in agrarian production. The history of the development of productivity had been gloomy for a long time until the end of the 1970s in West Bengal. James K. Boyce has assessed that the growth rate of agricultural production was 1.74 per cent after the partition period between 1949 and 1980 in West Bengal. The rates are lower in comparison to corresponding population growth rates during the same period (Boyce, 1987). This tendency itself is a continuation of a prolonged period of agricultural stagnation that affected Bengal in the colonial period. Nevertheless, since the 1980s West Bengal experienced a structural break and arose on a period of high agrarian development. Though there is no unanimity between economists about the particular causes as well as the precise degree of growth (Bose, Rogaly, & Barbara, *Sonar Bangla?: Agricultural growth and agrarian change in West Bengal and Bangladesh*, 1999, pp. 18-20), it is generally accepted that there was a turnaround in agricultural yield from the early 80s. The 1990s have seen a steadily falling agrarian progress rate in the state of West Bengal.

In table 3.5 below, some indication regarding the growth rates in agriculture for the two decades. We have used figures for the growth rate of food grains as a proxy for agrarian growth. This is not unsuitable given the importance of food grains in West Bengal agriculture (at least 70 per cent of the total cropped area is under food grains) (Gazdar & Sengupta, 1999). The boom that prevailed in West Bengal farming in the 1980s seems to have tapered off during the

³ The lowest tier in the local government system is the Gram Panchayat or the village council which typically serves a cluster of 10-12 villages rather than a single village

1990s. Whether agricultural reforms accounted for the high growth in the 1980s and if the subsequent slowdown indicates some limit to these programmes have been intensely debated.

Table 3.5. Food Grain Production Growth Rate in West Bengal

Period	Growth Rate in Food Grain Production(Per Cent)
1970-71 to 1980-81	1.38
1980-81 to 1990-91	5.15
1990-91 to 1999-2000	2.39

Source: (Bandyopadhyay D. , *Land Reforms and Agriculture: The West Bengal Experience*, 2003)

There has been much debate about nature and scope as well as the impact of the agrarian reform programme. The commonly held view is mostly positive about land reforms programmes with several scholars arguing that reforms were instrumental in bringing a boost in agricultural productivity (Bardhan, *The Avoidable Tragedy of the Left in India-II*, 2007), achieving the social goals in reducing poverty and ensuring a higher standard of living (Lieten, 1996). There are also voices criticising this dominant view, wherein various limitations of the reform measures in terms of the scheme as well as its procedure of implementation and its final effect have been raised (Rudra, 1981).

In order to continue the move towards long-term development and growth, success in agriculture is required and it is to be followed up with a drive towards industrialization⁴. However, that did not happen in West Bengal. While most of the land reform measures implemented in the mid-80s, there was no decisive move to kick start investment in the industry either through public or the private sector. When the Left Front came to power in West Bengal in the year 1977, there was a trend towards deindustrialization in the state. It was viewed to be a reaction to the militant trade union activities organized by the labour group of the left parties as well as the prevailing anti-capitalist stand of the new government.

⁴ The nature of industrialization is of course very important as we shall see (in section 4) in the context of the current policy of the Left Front Government.

In Indian economic framework, the starting of the decade of 1990s marked the beginning of market-friendly, export-oriented economic reforms, which gave special emphasis to attract foreign investment in industry and services (Bhaduri and Nayyar, 1996). Although the Left Front Government has been a strong opponent of economic liberalization since the beginning, its ideological position started changing quite rapidly after they were being re-elected for the 7th time in 2006. By this time there was a widespread view among observers that the state economy was in a crisis due to steady decline in agricultural growth and employment in the existing industrial sector which was moving towards saturation. The government's response began to move in the opposite direction compared to its earlier stand. There was an all-out move to attract capital (both foreign and domestic) for investment in the state. Packages were formulated which included the allocation of land in prime locations at below-market-rate as well as exemption of taxes for attracting private investment. The first significant round of land acquisition was started in Singur for an automobile small car factory where 997 acres of prime agricultural land was selected and acquired by employing a colonial land acquisition act⁵. Since then there have been further attempts at acquiring agrarian land in various parts of the state including Nandigram where the government issued landowners notices (of acquisition) without any prior intimation or discussion. The reaction was a protracted episode of protest led by a group of farmers (also joined by the anti-left forces and a few ultra-leftist political groups) who were not ready to part with their farmland for industries.

If we go into the details of the social and political upheavals that were traced in rural West Bengal as an outcome of the land acquisition drive by the Left Front Government we find that the foundation of three decades Left Front Government rule in the state was shaken and

⁵ There have been other cases of land acquisition before Singur (See Guha, 2004) but they were not part of a conscious change in the industrialization policy of the state which started in 2006. Moreover, Singur was the first case when such huge area of land was acquired.

ultimately forcing the government to retreat from some of its most aspiring projects. It is also well known that the Tata Motors Company that made investments in Singur for a large-scale automobile project was forced to leave the project before its completion.

Any discussion on the present situation in West Bengal will be incomplete without a close look at the experience of land reforms in the era of Left Front Government as well as an understanding of how the present agricultural situation had appeared concerning these reforms.

A short description of the agrarian economy following the periods of radical movements of land reform is presented. Left Front Government abandoned the method of 'political mobilization from below' for successful implementation of reform laws in the early eighties after the ruling of the Calcutta High Court that discouraged such mobilization (Khasnabis, Operation Barga, limits to social democratic reformism, 1982). Since then, land reform in West Bengal lost its radical character, and consequently, it became a mere bureaucratic affair managed by both government officials and panchayat functionaries.

Thus, it seems that land reform is a dying issue in the post-liberalization policy regime, and there is little interest on the part of the government to consider this particular program more than mere poverty alleviation program.

The left-wing government of West Bengal attempted to implement the land reform program 'within the existing legal parameters'. The government of West Bengal publication, 'Land Reforms in West Bengal', included ten-point agenda of reform:

- Quick recording of the names of sharecroppers (*bargadars*) to secure the hereditary rights of land they cultivate.
- Distribution of already available surplus lands to the marginalized section of the agricultural population with active cooperation of Panchayat, the elected bodies at the grass-root level.

- Detection of more vested land by applying quasi-judicial investigative instruments along with peasant organization and Panchayat.
- Ensuring additional credit to the beneficiaries to bring an end to the exploitation related to the credit market.
- Assigning permanent titles as permissive possessors to all landless agricultural workers including artisans and fishermen.
- Providing small sources of irrigation to *pattadars* through tube wells and dug wells with a substantial subsidy from the state.
- Giving financial assistance to the beneficiaries for land development.
- Abrogation of old revenue system inherited from the colonial period. It replaced it with a new measure under which revenue is assessed on landholding above a specific valuation on a progressive rate, and small and marginal farmers are exempted from revenue.
- Restoration of alienated land provided that the purchaser himself is not a poor peasant (who owned a plot of land less than one acre).
- Designing food for work program to build a rural infrastructure that would primarily benefit the poor peasants and agricultural workers in lean seasons (Khasnabis, Operation Barga, limits to social democratic reformism, 1982).

It is evident from the above-specified ten-point agenda that at the beginning of the program the objective of the Left Front Government was to create a 'class' of self-sufficient independent peasant working as economic agents for agricultural development. Hence, the focus was to create an atmosphere encompassing different aspects of production, including both land and non-land inputs. However, in the later stage, the critical subsidiary agenda related to the main

program is either dropped, or the responsibility was shifted to the other departments. Thus, the all-inclusive character of the reform program has been eroded to a great extent.

Many scholars and research institutes have theoretically and empirically examined operation barga in West Bengal. It has been argued in many studies that the legal support of cultivation and guaranteed entitlement to the share of produce must have motivated *bargadars* to intensify their way of cultivation using deploying more labour and capital for every unit production of output. This resulted in increased production in lands coming under *barga* arrangement in West Bengal. In a study conducted by The Socio-Economic Research Institute, Kolkata during the early eighties it was found that –

- 40 per cent of *bargadars* households in the sample, reported an increase in the yield,
 - 65 per cent of the sample households reported a slight improvement in their economic status. The study also brought out the fact that *Operation Barga* helped these *bargadars* to have comfortable and better access toward the non-land inputs.
- However, there are a good number of studies that contested this *barga* recording program, as such *barga* recording which in effect gave rise to legal support of cultivation to *bargadars* in the land of their owners, ultimately embittered the relation between the two. As a consequence, as these studies suggested, landowners were not interested in advancing production and consumption loans which they did before *Operation Barga* to the *bargadars* resulting in a downfall of farming productivity. So, whether *Operation Barga* has increased the productivity of *barga* cultivation is indeed a debatable issue. However, one thing is beyond doubt that *Operation Barga* has undoubtedly raised the bargaining power of the *bargadars* with traditional money lenders and landowners, which the *bargadars* had never enjoyed before. However, the question remained to be answered in this context is that whether the land reform

program which is constrained a narrowed space designed in the mainstream property-based definition failed to release the forces of transformation to the long-cherished goal of egalitarian agrarian economy or it could only reshuffle the age-old land relations in a new dimension which is more disaggregated in nature.

The two major land reform programs implemented in West Bengal are the distribution of land titles to the landless, and registration and execution regulation about tenancy contracts. An earlier study on the West Bengal land reforms have shown evidence of 4 per cent increases in farm productivity due to the tenancy registration program, and a 20 per cent increase in rice production at the district level (Banerjee et al., 2002). On the other hand, Pranab Bardhan and Dilip Mukherjee were of the view there is no significant effect due to the land distribution program on the productivity of farm or wage rates for hired workers for either program (Bardhan & Mukherjee, 2014).

3.6. A Review of the Land Reforms Programme

The official statistics that were available (covering the period till September 2003), 439,585 hectares of land have been reallocated and 452,370 hectares of land have been recorded under the programme of *Operation Barga*. constituting 8.21 per cent and 8.45 per cent of the cultivable area of the state successively. Thus the total analysis in terms of area is vital that is 16.66 per cent. Concerning the number of beneficiaries, in the same period, 21.16 per cent of the population involved in agriculture are (cultivators and agricultural labourers) in 2001 had received land due to the land redistribution scheme while 11.68 per cent have registered themselves as *Bargadars* as a portion of the *Operation Barga*. Thus together a substantial 32.84

per cent of the population involved in agriculture has been beneficiaries of the reform scheme in West Bengal⁶.

However there is a component of upward bias in the above data since much of the land redistributed in West Bengal happened before 1977, that is before the Left Front government came to power. Most of the land distributed (roughly 58 per cent) occurred before 1977. Thus, with the reforms introduced by the Left Front, merely 3.5 per cent of the net sown area has been redistributed and 13.6 per cent of the population involved in agriculture have been benefited from it. If we add this number to the extent of land reforms in the form of *operation barga* programme (exact figures in the last paragraph), we have full coverage of about 12 per cent of the net sown zone and 25.3 per cent of the agrarian people.

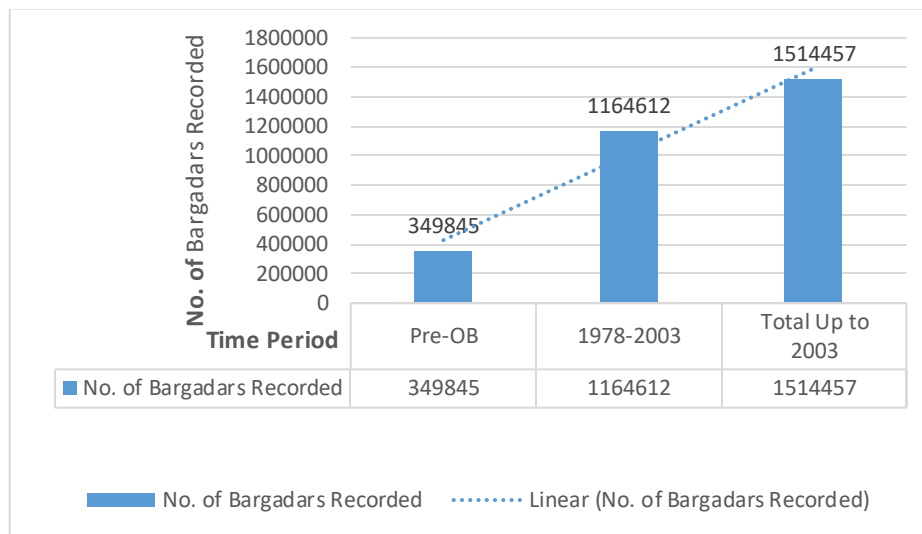
To be precise, we need to make some adjustments to the statistics for *Operation Barga* as well. As is evident from governmental documents, the statistics for the number of *bargadars* recorded under the *operation barga* involve sharecroppers registered under the provisions of the West Bengal Land Reforms Act earlier to the Left Front Government⁷. Even though it is hard to obtain a definite estimate of the number of sharecroppers recorded before *Operation Barga*, combining several sources that use government statistics it is calculated that the number is around 350,000 (see Figure 3.1). This brings down the percentage of population under agriculture strictly covered by *operation barga* to be about 9 per cent and when 13.6% is added to the land redistribution beneficiaries we arrive at a much lower estimate of 22.6 per cent of the population under agriculture who have been affected directly by the reform measures of the

⁶ The percentage of population covered by the reforms may appear to be underestimating the real coverage as the number of beneficiaries is likely to be an indicator of households while the agricultural population refers to individuals. However, given that the average household size in rural West Bengal for the time period in question was about 5 and the work participation rate was 38 percent and the percentage of agricultural workers in the total workforce was 58 percent, the average number of agricultural workers per household is approximately 1.1. Thus our figures are likely to be accurate indicators of the coverage of the reforms.

⁷ It has been pointed out by several authors (for example, Bandyopadhyay (1980) and Bhaumik (1993)) that the tenurial reforms of the Left Front did not require any new legislation but involve the first serious implementation of some of the existing legal provisions.

Left Front. Nevertheless, it is to be remembered that ineffective nature of the earlier governments in respect to reforms in tenancy, the assistance that tenancy acts provided for recorded sharecroppers in terms of tenure security and higher crop share were not likely to be realized before the Left Front came to power and the *Operation Barga* programme was extremely started.

Figure 3.1. Extent of Recording Sharecroppers in West Bengal



Source: *Economic Review, Government of West Bengal (2003-04)*, Calculated using Bandyopadhyay (1980), Table 5.1 in Chakraborti (2003) and *Economic Review*.

Operation Barga is often referred to as an extremely fruitful programme of tenurial reforms in West Bengal (Gazdar & Sengupta, 1999). As mentioned before, some papers have studied the possible long term effect of the *Operation Barga* on productivity, there has been very little research on the effectiveness of the reforms in meeting their immediate objectives of providing security of tenure and a higher share of the crop to the *Bargadars* (Banerjee, Gertler, & Ghatak, 2002). One of the main reasons is the scarcity of data about the beneficiaries of *Operation Barga*. Most of the available papers contain case studies covering specific selected areas of West Bengal and it was difficult to obtain a robust outcome for the entire state even when the results of the case studies are combined. However, the West Bengal State Institute of Panchayats and Rural Development has issued a comprehensive study (Chakraborti, 2003) of

the beneficiaries of agrarian reforms. This study report, based on a sample survey carried out in 2000, has a state wise representative coverage similar to other aggregate government surveys but focuses specifically on the straight beneficiaries of the land redistribution programme (who are called *Pattadars*) and the *Operation Barga* (the sharecroppers or *bargadars*). This study is to discuss the direct effect of the *Operation Barga* and as a rough benchmark of the pre-reform condition of the tenants, we will also use (Bardhan, 2007), which is a reasonably comprehensive research study of tenancy contracts (among other aspects of the agrarian economy) in rural West Bengal that was started in 1976.

The foremost aspect of tenancy reforms to be observed is security of tenure. The threat of eviction has generally been used by landlords to grip their tenants and one of the most important objectives of OB was to provide tenants(recorded) who were with the state government, with the security of tenure. There are no figures available in the pre-reform time (up to 1977) that describe directly to the security of tenure. Pranab Bardhan and Ashok Rudra (1983) description from their field study survey in 1976 that 76 per cent of the tenancy contracts had a duration of only one year and the remaining 24 per cent were effective for less than a year. That's, none of the tenancy contacts were effective for more than one year. Therefore, on paper, long term security of tenure was absent in West Bengal. There may have been informal understandings among landlords and tenants that tenants were expected to cultivate the same plot of land on a long-term basis, but these informal understandings (to the extent that they existed) did not give tenants any legal right to cultivate the land; they were entirely dependent on the landlord to provide them with land every year. *Operation Barga* sought to change this situation by giving lawful rights of cultivation to the tenant. According to the (Chakraborti,2003) report, the subject of security of tenure has been calculated in two ways.

First, there is a distribution of Share-croppers (*bargadars*) according to their possession of the sharecropped (*barga*) land that they recorded. At the state level, 85.6 per cent of the

Sharecroppers are stated to have held on to their *Barga* land while the residual 14.4 per cent lost possession of the land due to multiple reasons. The level of dispossession differs sharply from one district to another that is above 30 per cent of the *bargadars* losing land from their possession in South Dinajpur, North Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, and Cooch Behar. All of these are backward agricultural districts in Northern part of Bengal. The occurrence of dispossession is less than 10 per cent in Purulia, Malda, West Midnapore and Nadia. Interestingly it has been found that majority of *Bargadars* who lost their land after registering it, apparently were not evicted from it. Only 24.1 per cent of dispossessed *Bargadars* (i.e. about 3.5 per cent of the *Bargadars* in total) stated eviction as the cause for losing their land. Eviction is significantly above the state average in the former district of Midnapore (now divided into West Midnapore and East Midnapore) and North Dinajpur. For 66 per cent of the dispossessed *Bargadars*, there is no precise reason for dispossession. Few of the probable reasons under this category are natural causes like diluvium, the surrender of *Barga* rights and forcible dispossession by someone other than the landlord) was stated in the available report. The report has also scrutinized a second way of assessing the security of tenure, namely, by examining the *Bargadars'* perception. About 74 per cent of the *Bargadars* reported a sense of security about their tenancy rights, while the other 26 per cent did not feel a sense of security. It is curious that, although 85.6 per cent of the *Bargadars* had retained their registered land according to the survey in 2000, only 74 per cent felt secure under their tenancy rights. Although individual observation may not always be based on objective reality, a significant 10-12 per cent gap between the actual reality in terms of dispossession and the sense of insecurity that was perceived may specify that there was a real threat among some *Bargadars* that they may lose their tenanted land. It is to be noted that a very high proportion of *Bargadars* in some districts who feel insecure about their rights as tenants were named in the districts of Darjeeling (47 per cent), Hooghly (48 per cent), Jalpaiguri (47 per cent) and North Dinajpur (48 per cent).

Guaranteeing a higher share of output for the sharecropper has been one of the essential provisions of the *Operation Barga* programme. If executed effectively, it is also the most directly redistributive part of the scheme since it wanted to shift the distribution of gross output in favour of the tenant by reducing the amount of output obtainable to the landowner. According to Land Reform Act (amended) in West Bengal, the legal basis of the *Operation Barga*, *Bargadars* were entitled to 75 per cent of the produced crop except in cases where the landlord provided all non-labour inputs. In such instances, the tenant's share was reduced to 50 per cent of the yield⁸ (Chakraborti & Mukhopadhyay, 2003). From the legal provision is clear that crop sharing is linked to the arrangements regarding cost-sharing in production. Historically, cost-sharing in West Bengal was a rare phenomenon where tenants provided all the inputs in traditional agriculture. However since the 1970s, with the arrival of the so-called 'Green Revolution' technology, there arose cost-sharing arrangements between the sharecropper and the landlord about the 'new' inputs such as chemical fertilizers, high yielding variety (HYV) seeds, and pesticides (Rudra, 1981). Therefore, in 1976, 66.7 per cent of the tenancy contracts in rural West Bengal contained some cost-sharing between the landlords and tenants (Bardhan and Rudra, 1983). One of the central criticisms of *Operation Barga* put forward by some economists (especially Rudra, 1981a, 1981b) concerns the possible termination of cost-sharing arrangements as a result of the legal provisions regulating crop under the *Operation Barga* scheme. According to Rudra, in the absence of cost-sharing, the condition of *Bargadars* could be worse, even if they receive the mandated 75 per cent of the yield. This is because financing expensive inputs may be impossible for poor *Bargadars* without the landlord's help. Consequently, the tenant's net income could fall along with productivity in their land, even if he received a higher percentage of the total output. It is easy

⁸ Even in cases where the landlord and the *Bargadar* share the cost of inputs (i.e. the landowner is not providing all the non-labour inputs), the *Bargadar* is entitled to 75 percent of the produce.

to perceive that a *Bargadar* could be worse off with a higher crop share in the absence of cost-sharing arrangements because of the gain from the higher share outweighed by the loss arising from it, the higher input costs that now occurs has to bear alone. Thus, to calculate the effectiveness of *Operation Barga*, one must simultaneously consider changes in cost-sharing along with the crop sharing data.

Table 3.6. Distribution of Share Cropping Contracts According to Different Crop and Cost-Sharing Arrangements, 1976-2000 in Percentage

Time-Period	Crop Sharing(Tenant's Share)		Cost Sharing by the landlord			
	Less than 50 per cent	50 per cent	More than 50 per cent	75 per cent	Does not exist	exists
1976	19	66.9	14.1	6.4	33.3	66.7
2000	0	19.2	80.8	49.2	90.8	9.2

Source: 1976 figures from Bardhan and Rudra (1983), 2000 figures from Chakraborti (2003)

Note: 1976 distribution relates to the proportion of the total number of tenancy contracts, but the 2000 distribution relates to the proportion of the total number of Bargadars.

The table above contains a summary of the data about crop and cost-sharing from the two assessments conducted in 1976 and 2000, in some respect. Since the 1976 assessment captures a period before the *Operation Barga* programme was executed, it delivers us with a reference against which one can relate the data for 2000, when the programme was almost finished. If we observe the distribution of crop shares and how that changed between 1976 and 2000, we see an unambiguous move towards a higher share of produce for the tenants or share-croppers. While only 14.1 per cent of the tenants received more than half the yield in 1976, by the year 2000 the figure is 80.8 per cent. At the other end in 1976, about 19 per cent contracts indicated less than half of the yield being received by tenants, in 2000 none of the tenants received less than half of the total product. Moreover, in 1976 only 6.4 per cent of contracts ensured the legally stipulated 75 per cent of the produce for the tenant. In contrast, by 2000, about 49.2 per cent of the tenants received 75 per cent of the output, and an extra 19.1 per cent received the

entire output from their holdings and paid no rent⁹. Although this means that about 32 per cent of the *Bargadars* did not receive the 75 per cent share to which they were lawfully entitled.

However, as stated, this in itself does not indicate betterment in the economic condition of the tenants. This is because of a decline in cost-sharing over the same period. Although in 1976, there was some form of cost-sharing in two-thirds of the cases, the proportion had declined to a negligible 9.2 per cent by 2000. There is some ambiguity about the net gains to the tenants as a result of the *Operation Barga* and its legislation accompanying crop sharing. Assuming that input usage in 1976 was retained or increased by 2000, the tenants were better off only if the value of the new crop that they received was higher than the extra cost of inputs that they have to bear as cost-sharing arrangements disappeared. This calculation is a complex and the results are sensitive to changes in terms of trade the tenants faced i.e. the price of the crop relative to the price of inputs — also a significant change in total output and the use of inputs. The facts are further illustrated in Table 3.6, which refers to the survey in 1976. It is clear that cost-sharing is rare in cases where the tenant receives more than 50 per cent of the products and this is true both in the pre and post-*Operation Barga* phase. We also see that a higher proportion of tenants are getting more than 50 per cent of the total production in the post-*Operation Barga* years. Thus, 14 per cent tenants in the *pre-Operation Barga* period received more than 50 per cent of the output. In contrast, in the period after the implementation of *Operation Barga*, the proportion of tenants who received more than 50 per cent of the yields increased substantially.

⁹ To what extent this group actually remained legal *Bargadars* without fulfilling their rental obligation is unknown. But it does underscore the basic point that a sizeable majority of *Bargadars* are now receiving their stipulated crop share.

Table 3.7. Association between Cost Sharing and Crop Sharing in West Bengal, 1976¹⁰

	Cost Sharing Exists	Cost-sharing is absent	Total
Tenant's share is more than 50 per cent	10.4	89.6	100 (14)
Tenant's Share equals 50 per cent	69.4	30.6	100 (67)
Tenant's share less than 50 per cent	98.5	0.5	99 (19)
Total	66.7	33.3	100

Source: 1 Source: Bardhan and Rudra (1983)

In a paper, (Dasgupta & Pellegrini, 2009) NSS household survey data has been analysed to study the impact of *Operation Barga* on the standard of living of tenants. The authors found that between 1983 and 1993 there is no significant difference statistically in the growth of actual per capita consumption expenditure between non-tenants and tenants. This result is exact after controlling for different household-level characteristics. Covering roughly the same period for which Banerjee et al. (2002) found a substantial impact of *Operation Barga* on agricultural production and its positive impact on the tenants.

3.7. The Effect of Land Redistribution

About 186,029 hectares of land has been redistributed by the Left Front Government since 1977 to 1,760,383 beneficiaries. This volumes to roughly 3.5 per cent of the net sown area of the state distributed among 13.6 per cent of its agricultural workers (labourers and cultivators). The redistributed amount of land was 0.11 hectare per beneficiary. Although it is not apparent that redistribution to this limited extent resulted in a significant change in the spreading of land ownership.

3.7.1 Changes in Distribution of Land in the Ownership

¹⁰ The figures in brackets in Table 3.7 are the percentages of the respective group of crop share in the total number of contracts. The percentage figures in the first row do not add up to 100. There is no obvious explanation for this provided in Bardhan and Rudra (1983).

National Sample Survey (NSS) is the only source of data on ownership holdings which is based on decennial surveys operated since the early 1950s. Though there have been slight changes in the survey mechanism as well as the number of class sizes used for classification over the years, the data are widely comparable over time except for the last phase in 2003-04 (Sharma,1995, Rawal, 2008, Venkateswarlu,2003). In this section, the focus on the last four phases of household surveys (1971-72, 1982 and 1991-92, 2002-03) which includes the relevant period for the Left Front Government land redistribution programme.

The information (Table-3.8) on the distribution of households and area owned in class size, it is noticeable that the growing concentration of households in the lower class sizes and an enhancement in the area held by these households indicates 1 hectare or less has increased from 77.62 per cent in 1971-72 to 81.6 per cent in 1982 and further to 85.88 per cent in 1991-92 financial year. The corresponding area was taken by these households also improved during this time from 27.28 per cent in 1971-72 to 30.33 per cent in 1982 and a substantially higher 41.3 per cent in 1991-92. However, hidden in these figures is the increasing trend of landlessness. According to the NSS (National Sample Survey) figures for rural West Bengal, landlessness increased dramatically (by almost 80 per cent) in the 1970s and early 1980s (till 1982) which comprises the initial years of the Left Front Government regime when land redistribution was occurring in full swing. As mentioned before, according to the documents of Government of West Bengal 56,849 hectares of land was distributed among 4,72,443 beneficiaries in the period between 1977 and 1983. Going by the total number of households estimated for 1982 in the National Sample Survey (NSS), this amounts to a substantial 6.1 per cent households in total getting land in the first six years of the LFG era. The increasing landlessness simultaneously occurring with land redistribution are contradictory results which are hard to reconcile.

Table 3.8. Distribution of Ownership Holdings in Rural West Bengal 1971-72 to 2002-03¹¹

Class Size of Ownership Holdings	Year							
	1971-72		1982		1991-92		2002-03	
	Hou seho lds(%)	Area (%)	Households (%)	Area(%)	Households (%)	(%)Ar ea	Households (%)	Area(%)
Landless	9.78	-	17.21	-	10.98	-	34.69	-
Sub-Marginal (0.01-0.4 Ha.)	46.7 4	6.83	47.03	9.42	54.11	12.57	42.71	20.04
Marginal (0.4-1 Ha.)	21.1	20.4 5	17.36	20.91	20.79	28.73	15.81	37.77
Small (1-2 Ha.)	12.6 5	25.6 8	11.5	28.77	9.48	28.11	5.4	26.95
Medium (2-6 Ha.)	9.01	39.2 7	6.62	36.7	4.5	28.55	1.3	13.05
Large (> 6 Ha.)	0.72	7.77	0.28	4.2	0.13	2.04	0.09	2.2
Total	100. 00	100. 00	100.00	100.0 0	100.00	100.0 0	100.00	100.0 0
Gini Ratio	0.67		0.70		0.67		0.74	

Source: Rawal (2008), Sharma (1995) and NSS Report 399(1996). Gini ratios are calculated using the detailed distribution for each year.

In between 1971 and 1982, there is an increase in landlessness, the inequality of land distribution also increased marginally during these years. This is obvious from the slightly higher value of the Gini index ratio in 1982 in comparison to 1971. The inequality reverted to the original level of 1971 in the latest assessment for 1991 with a corresponding apparent reduce in landlessness in comparison to 1982. Therefore in the twenty years between 1971 and 1991, which covers the most active period of land reforms under the Left Front Government,

¹¹ Source: Rawal (2008), Sharma (1995) and NSS Report 399(1996). Gini ratios are calculated using the detailed distribution for each year.

inequality in the land distribution has remained the same. It is to be noted that 116,229 hectares of land being redistributed among 1,009,584 beneficiary households between 1977 and 1991. Another remarkable finding is the alarming increase in landlessness (almost 35 per cent) in the survey of the last round in 2002-03. Though it is not clear if the description of landlessness is the same in this round of the survey, this increasing trend of landlessness is consistent with an enlargement in the number of agricultural labourers in relation to cultivators (which include tenants also) in the population census. Worsening the Gini ratio in the last period which followed from the trend of landlessness which was increasing.

3.7.2 Changes in the Distribution of Operational Holdings

Based on the analysis of ownership, it appears that there has not been any major equalizing effect due to the land distribution programme implemented by the LFG. However, since a significant part of the agrarian reforms in West Bengal consisted in the legislation of tenancy reform, it is required to consider the distribution of operational holdings. Operational holdings are different from ownership holdings because it is taken into account the area leased out or leased in which is in addition to the area owned. Thus data on the distribution of operational holdings is useful to know tenancy pattern changes if any, along with changes in ownership.

There are two significant sources of data and information on operational holdings for West Bengal: Agricultural Census (five-yearly) published by the Government of West Bengal and the decennial Survey of Landholdings conducted by the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO). In this section data provided by both the agencies in order to identify changes in rural West Bengal due to the distribution of operational holdings. Table 3.9 contains data on the operational holdings that are distributed.

The census data give a clear hint that the distribution of the operational holding became significantly more equal between 1970-71 to 1995-96. The Gini ratios developed from the

distribution of operational holdings show that the degree of inequality declined noticeably between 1970-71 and 1995-96 with the curve for 1970-71 dominating that for 1995-96.

Table 3.9 Distribution of Operational Holdings According to the Agricultural Census, 1970-71 to 1995-96

Size Class (in ha.)	Year											
	1970-71		1976-77		1980-81		1985-86		1990-91		1995-96	
<1	59.97	21.5	66.5	27.25	69.69	29.16	70.97	31.27	73.83	36.5	76.42	42.93
1 – 2	22.33	25.7	20.55	28.54	19.55	31.21	19.09	31.07	17.62	29.95	16.81	29.06
2 – 4	13.23	28.9	18.36	27.09	8.84	25.26	8.39	24.5	7.28	22.45	5.83	18.73
4- 10	4.38	19.2	2.55	13.25	1.9	10.71	1.53	8.61	1.26	7.52	0.92	5.66
>10	0.09	4.6	0.04	3.97	0.02	3.66	0.02	3.55	0.02	3.58	0.02	3.62
Gini Ratio	0.52											0.44

Source: Statistical Abstract of West Bengal, 2001-02. Gini ratio is calculated for the two years for which detailed distribution was available

However, the picture is slightly different when one analyses the NSS estimates about the distribution of operational holdings. The period between 1970-71 to the early 2000s, the NSS has done four Landholdings Survey for India, the latest was conducted in 2003 (the last survey has altered the mode of data presentation and collection is not comparable strictly with the past ones.

The outcome of the reforms would not appear to be favourable if one views only the National Sample Survey statistics in isolation. First, if the data are to be believed, there was a decrease in the distribution from 1971-72 to 1982 and a marginal improvement in 1991-92. Inequality in 1991-92 was significantly higher than in the early year. The tendency is consistent with what was viewed for the distribution of ownership holdings for this time period, except that the dis-equalizing tendency was much more prominent for the first period in the case of operational holdings with the Gini Ratio increasing from 0.490 to 0.597. Since the significant difference between the two sets of distributions (operational holdings and ownership) can be traced back to the existence of tenancy in agriculture, let us examine the particulars about sharecropping, the dominant form of tenancy in the state of West Bengal.

If we go through the statistics stated in the Table 3.10 below, we will perceive that sharecropping had dropped severely during the 1970s and in the initial part of 1980s. This period includes the first four years of *Operation Barga* when registration of sharecroppers was proceeding with full vigour. One of the distinct possibilities that explain the data is massive scale eviction of sharecroppers at the start or just before the tenant registration programme. Nevertheless, there is no evidence to show such a phenomenon of forcible eviction in the pre-reform time period. On the contrary, there are trustworthy sources which claim that such evictions were prevented successfully by the effective implementation of the programmes related to tenancy reform (Bandyopadhyay D. , 1980).

Table 3.10 Incidence of Tenancy in Rural West Bengal 1971-72 to 2002-03

Period	Holdings reporting share tenancy(%)	The area leased in under share tenancy(%)	Holdings reporting fixed rent(%)	the area leased in under fixed rent(%)	holdings reporting leased in the area(%)	the area leased in(%)
1971-72	30.64	17.34	1.37	0.64	34.56	18.74
1982	11.01	6.85	2.68	1.82	23.1	12.3
1991-92	8.51	4.83	3.72	2.11	14.4	10.4
2002-03	4.9	3.1	7.85	5.1	14.1	9.3

Source: NSS Reports on Landholdings, various rounds and Sharma (1995)

It is quite difficult to prove that reforms in tenancy were responsible for the increase in the distribution of operational holdings and the decrease in share tenancy, it is obvious from the figures that the tenancy reforms (which intended to affect the *Bargadars* or sharecroppers positively) were implemented during the period when the incidence of sharecropping was falling sharply. Furthermore, this tendency continued until the 2000s. This phenomenon requires to be examined more carefully to know out the actual conditions which made the people to withdraw from sharecropping.

Based on a thorough investigation of the land reform programme in West Bengal presented in this section, now give rise to a few critical queries about the agricultural situation that existed in West Bengal and its relevance for industrialization drive by the then Left Front Government.

3.8. Land Reclamation and Land Acquisition of West Bengal

Land reform and land acquisition are the two different processes that the state implements simultaneously. However, these two processes are not applied at the same speed due to historical and political reasons. Sometimes emphasis has been given on Land reform on other times emphasis is given on the acquisition of land. No significant studies have been found that identifies the relationship of land acquisition with land reforms. The importance of land acquisition concerning land reforms is of considerable significance, especially in West Bengal. The model of Land reforms adopted in West Bengal is entirely different from states like Punjab, Haryana. In comparison to land reforms of other states, the success of land reforms in West Bengal is due to the importance given to small and medium farmers in this state. The number of *bargadars* and share-croppers in West Bengal is significantly high in comparison to other states in India. Since 1977-78 West Bengal emphasized on the policy of land reforms and recordings of *bargadars*. Thus the rights of small farmers, *bargadars* were increased considerably; in other words, it could be said there was the empowerment of small farmers and *bargadars* in West Bengal. It is necessary to mention that there is a tremendous impact on land due to land acquisition because of the population density in West Bengal is very high, the primary section of the population in West Bengal is dependent on agriculture thus the demand for agricultural land is much higher than its supply. In brief, it could be said there is a shortage of agricultural land in comparison to its population density and demand in West Bengal.

If we analyse the two processes Land Acquisition and Land Reform about legal and administrative measures, the land acquisition process begins from the highest level of government administration in any state. The land acquisition proposal was first passed in the cabinet meeting of the ministers of state. Then it was published on the gazette notification by the direction of the Governor. In the next phase, the state government gives directive to the

district collector of the concerned district in which land acquisition will take place. Till the Gazette notification is published the district administration or the Panchayat does not have any significant role in the acquisition of land. The acquisition of land is a legal and administrative process that comes down from the top of the administration.

On the other hand, the land reforms process starts from the block level, and the Block identifies the land which was to be distributed among landless people. Then with the help of Panchayat, the families living below the poverty line who were landless are identified. Later land rights (*Patta* of land) are distributed among landless families.

An analysis of the issue of land reform and land acquisition process reveals that the speed of land acquisition is generally much more than land reform. Again land reforms are much more democratic and peasant-friendly than land acquisition. If land acquisition and land reforms start at the same time we will observe that land reforms will soon be behind the success of land acquisitions in a short interval of time, we noticed that after the 2006 assembly elections the process of land acquisition started for rapid industrialization. The compensation package of the *bargadars* was calculated on the market price of the crop. Acquisition notice was sent to the owner as well as *bargadars*. In order to calculate the compensation of the *bargadars*, three types of information were taken by the officials of the district land acquisition authority. First of all, it is to be detected if there is a record of *bargadars* and the share of the crop between the owner of the *bargadar*, etc. The land officials wanted details of production in the last three years of the land that is being acquired. Thirdly prices of various crops in the previous three years of the land that is being acquired determined by the office of Agricultural Product Marketing. The quantity of production made by the *bargadars* in the previous three years and the average price of such products based on market price, which is calculated on the ratio 75:25 or 50:50 to compensate the *bargadars*.

It is learned from various studies that sharecropping is not more than 20 per cent of the land. Naturally, 80 per cent of land in West Bengal is free from the impact of *Operation Barga*. It must be mentioned here that '*Operation Barga*' has not dislodged the landowners or stripped them of their title to their lands. In its place, avoiding all risks and production cost, they enjoy at least 25 per cent of the produce in the semi-feudal formation by being a landowner's parasitic class. It is learned from numerous studies that share-cropping is mainly limited to rice cultivation and a share-cropper earns in a month as much as a contract labourer in a factory; the only difference being that sharecropper is family-based, but factory labourer works as an individual.

A paper 'On the future of sharecropping in West Bengal' presented by Suryakanta Mishra, Minister of West Bengal and Vikas Rawal, an expert on the agrarian economy where they wrote: "In the recent times, landowner and sharecropper entering into a mutual agreement under which ownership right on, 25 to 30 per cent of the sharecropped agricultural land is given to the sharecropper. Farmer organizations have been debating whether this should be accepted. For a long time, the stand of Kisan Sabha has been not to enter into or encourage such negotiations because (in that case) all the sharecroppers will ultimately get evicted. However, with this increased urbanization, the cost of land in the vicinity of the urban areas and even in city urban agglomerations has been increasing very much. So if even the cost of, say, 10-20 per cent of land is given to the sharecropper, he will get more return from the interest of the amount than from cultivating the land. It is clear that the non-involvement of the peasant organizations weakens the bargaining power of the sharecroppers in this respect (Basu A. N., 1991).

3.9. Analysis of Land Acquisition Versus Land Reforms

Both land acquisition and land reforms involve legal and administrative actions to be undertaken by the government. These again are issues that relate to governance and allocation of power. However, there are crucial differences between land acquisition and land reforms in terms of the allocation of power to different segments in the ladder of governance. The differences are noted in the following order:

- By land acquisition, the government acquires legally owned private land for a public purpose. Land Acquisition Act cannot be employed to confiscate land beyond the limits of the ceiling. Thus Land and Land Reforms Act empower the poor and the landless, the Land Acquisition Act decrease the powers of the farmers for a public purpose.
- Land Acquisition and Land Reforms Act differ at the level of the government administration from which they begin their operation The land reforms process starts at the district level, and the major part of this lengthy procedure takes place at the block where the updated records about ownership on land are preserved. While the distribution of land to landless is a purely block-level with approval of the sub-divisional officer (SDO).
- The land acquisition on the other hand primarily starts at the highest level of the administrative structure and thus it is a centralized and top-down administrative process while land reforms operate in a more decentralized manner.
- Land reforms and land acquisition processors deal with local Panchayat bodies in a markedly different manner. The Land Acquisition Act does not require consultation with the Panchayats for land acquisition for a public purpose. In West Bengal, a screening committee consisting of a member from the elected *Panchayat Samity* are formed to consider the proposals from the requiring bodies involving land acquisition. However, in the screening committee majority of the members belong to the administration viz., the Collector, Additional District Magistrate and Land Acquisition

Officer. Moreover, the screening committee does not have any statutory or legal backing. It is merely an administrative appendage of the office of the District Collector.

In matters of hearing objections from land losers and the fixation of rates of compensation, the District Collector holds the highest power.

The implementation of the various stages of land reforms requires not only the mere presence of Panchayat members but also their active participation. One of the most vital affairs of the land reforms process is the distribution of government land through *patta* to the landless families. It has certain stages which begin with the preparation of *Math Khasra*. *Math Khasra* is a kind of survey conducted by the Block Land and Land Reforms Officer to enquire into the actual possession of land by the cultivators which have to be distributed among the landless families. The Land and Land Reforms Act stipulates that *Math Khasra* has to be done jointly by the panchayat and the government employees of the Revenue Inspector's Office at the gram panchayat level. This study, which is a necessary step towards the distribution of land to the landless and this cannot be done without involving the panchayat. In addition to this, the list of beneficiaries, i.e., landless persons (to whom land would have to be distributed) is also prepared by the gram panchayat.

The above comparison between land acquisition and land reforms reveals that the former is a centralized and bureaucratic procedure through which the eminent domain of state acquires private land in India. The implications of this comparative account for the Left Front Government (LFG) in West Bengal are essential. Because, when the LFG came to power in 1977, it gave top priority to land reforms which were linked with decentralized planning through the involvement of the elected Panchayats. In the following section, an account is provided in relation to the thrusts given by the LFG in developing its policy on land reforms and decentralized rural development focusing on the various district of West Bengal.

3.9.1. Reverse Sale of Barga Lands.

One cannot deny market forces for a long interval of time. That seems to be the circumstance with the Left Front Government. It has drafted a Bill – West Bengal Land Reforms (Amendment) Bill 2006 – which facilitates the selling of *barga* lands and also land acquisition, which is a U-turn from the days of *Operation Barga*.

Selling off *barga* land was unthinkable till the late seventies. For, the government then had established the right of the *bargadars* (tillers) after a prolonged peasant movement since the sixties. The right to till the land was treated at par with ownership rights. The provision became the bedrock of Left support in villages because the *bargadars* felt that landowners could not evict them from land at will.

However, with the demand for land rising, the same government is formalizing the sale of *barga* land. Under the provisions of the Bill, a landowner can agree with the *bargadar*, by making him the owner of half of the land he tills. This incentive will enable the landowner to free the other half from the tiller. The *bargadar* gives up his tilling rights and ceases to be *bargadar*. This arrangement will allow both to sell their lands without any strings attached.

The draft Bill arrange for that the tiller “by the execution of a mutual agreement, surrender the right of cultivation in respect of 50 per cent of the land cultivated by him as a *bargadar* if the owner of the land conveys the right and title in respect of the remaining 50 per cent of such land under the same mutual agreement to such *bargadar*” (Banerjee N. , 2006, p. 1).

3.9.2. Decline in Food Grains Production

The State of West Bengal had witnessed a boom in food production in the 1980s when the growth rate of food grain production jumped to 5.8 per cent a year; this rate slowed down to 2.13 per cent in the 1990-95 period (Rawal & Swaminathan, 1998). This near-stagnation in the growth rate continued in the decade of the 1990s when the annual growth rate registered was

2.28 per cent as food grains production increased from 11.270 million tons in 1990-91 to 13.815 million tons in 2000-01 (Statistical Hand Book of West Bengal, 2004, 2004) (Ref: Statistical Handbook of West Bengal, 2004, BAES, Govt. of West Bengal). While stagnancy in the growth of food grains output has been continuing, the net cropped area in the state was reduced from 54,63,424 hectares in 1990-91 to 54,17,382 hectares in 2000-01. This trend continued until the recent period, as we have seen earlier. According to experts, the state of West Bengal has not yet attained real food security. It produces 40 per cent of surplus vegetables and 11 per cent surplus rice. However, it has 50 per cent deficient in wheat production, 75 per cent deficient in pulse production and has to buy 60 per cent of its oilseeds requirement from other states (The Telegraph, June 28, 2006).

Abhijit Banerjee and et al. in the article observe that it is, therefore, no surprise that the growth rate has been slowing: "Cereal production rose by 28 per cent between 1985-86 and 1990-91. In the two successive five-year periods that followed, this particular growth rate fell to 14 per cent and then 11 per cent. Similarly, the growth rate of total agricultural output fell from a high of 15 and 16 per cent (over the periods 1985-86 to 1990 -91 and 1990-91 to 1995-96 respectively) to 9 per cent over the period 1995-96 to 2000-01" (Banerjee, et al., 2002).

In West Bengal the main food grain production is rice. According to Economic Review, 2003-04 food grains production has also declined. The production of *Aus* rice declined from 8.42 lakh tones in 2001-02 to 7.97 lakh tonnes in 2002-03, and its yield rate also declined marginally during the same interval of time. The production of *Aman* rice declined from a record of 100.00 lakh tonnes in 2001-02 to 93.94 lakh tones in 2002-03. In this case, also the yield rate declined from 2374 kg./ha. in 2001-02 to 2319 kg./ha. in 2002-03. The yield rate of *Boro* rice cultivation also declined from 3034 kg./ha. in 2001-02 to 2986 kg./ha. in 2002-03, so that production of *Boro* rice declined to 41.99 lakh tones in 2002-03 from 44.15 lakh tones in 2001-02 (Government of West Bengal, 2004).

The other main production in West Bengal is Jute. The production of jute declined from 88.36 lakh bales in 2001-02 to 85.06 lakh bales in 2002-03. The yield rate of jute, however, declined from 13.56 bales/ha. in 2001-02 to 13.37 bales/ha. in 2002-03. The area under jute declined from 6.52 lakh hectares in 2001-02 to 6.36 lakh hectares in 2002-03 (Government of West Bengal, 1989).

Total rice production in 2002-03 declined to 143.89 lakh tones from 152.57 lakh tones in 2001-02. This was because the area under total rice cultivation declined from 60.69 lakh hectares in 2001-02 to 58.42 lakh hectares in 2002-03. The yield rate of total rice declined to 2463kg./ha. in 2002-03 from 2514kg./ha. in 2001-02. The production of total rice in 2002-03 was significantly higher than the production achieved in 1999-2000 and 2000-01 (Government of West Bengal, 2004).

The then Left Front Govt. started acquiring agricultural land from the peasants in the name of industrialization. On 4th August 2005, the State Assembly resolved to pass the West Bengal Land Reforms (Amendment) Bill, Section 14(q) (West Bengal Land reforms Act prohibits ownership of more than 18 acres, including those in the homestead category, in irrigated areas; the limit is 24 acres in non-irrigated areas) where Govt. wanted to legalize and encourage the process, and accordingly, section 14(q) of the Amendment Bill proposes to lift the ceiling to attract investment in the name of promoting cash crops, plantations, contract farming, tourism, infrastructure, urban construction, and renewal, etc.

The Left Front Govt. thought of rewriting land reform laws and handing over arable land to those who come across the world in search of thousands of acres of land with a promise to promote a new and modern West Bengal.

3.10. The Role of Land Reform in Agricultural Growth

Many of the experts and even the foreigners who are not very familiar with the situation in West Bengal have expressed their opinion on the positive impact of land reform on agricultural growth in the state. Some of the facts stated below contributed to their opinion. In the post-Independence period, many land reform measures had been undertaken, first with the abolition of Zamindari system, then by the Bhoodan and Gramdan movement of Vinode Bhave in 1951 and thereafter by enacting land ceiling acts and the establishment of people's organizations such as *Panchayati Raj*. The Land reform in West Bengal relating to sharecropping (*Bargadar*) by way of giving land to the actual tillers of the land – 'a right to cultivate' was initiated in 1972 but got the Presidential assent only in 1977. This study deals with *Bargadar* system, or the nature of rights the actual tillers would enjoy or the nature of sharing of produce between the landowner and the tillers in this system. However, in brief, the main features of the system are to empower the actual tillers or *Bargadar* with the right to cultivate the land even though they do not own it.

The sharecroppers cannot be evicted easily from the land registered in their name except through a process of litigation and when decided by a court of law.

- It is claimed that more than 1.4 mn. sharecroppers have been registered with the public authority earning them the security of tenure and a series of new rights in the land and credit markets,
- The surplus land over the ceiling framed was distributed among 42.5 mn. households,
- Title deeds to house site lands were given to 5,00,000 households,
- 4,00,000 women got the title deeds of agricultural lands,
- About half of the rural households were direct beneficiaries of land reforms since 1977,
- Rural agricultural wages have been increased substantially.

The Govt. has remained silent about the amount of agricultural land distributed and the quality of such land – whether cultivable or not. West Bengal is a land of small and medium farmers.

It is widely claimed that agricultural growth in West Bengal has been brought about by the small and medium farmers who could invest in agricultural inputs from their own income. It is true that agricultural growth elsewhere has been brought about by the feudal landlords (kulaks) and large progressive landholders who could cultivate profitably the commercial crops (rice is a commercial crop in Punjab and Haryana) with capital investment. In West Bengal, the small and medium farmers could bring prosperity in rice cultivation (trying to produce three types of rice and three times in a year – *aus, aman and boro*) and vegetables with high technological inputs. Below the belts, the marginal farmers who could ill-afford costly technological inputs have been farther marginalized and have become agricultural labour in their own lands by changing hands with the small and medium farmers and have become wage earners. They can earn only if the landowner cultivates the land and earn a profit after making the labour cost. Naturally, the landowner has the option to cultivate or not depending upon his assured profit. The landless agricultural labourer has no option except to work in other's land. There has been a steady increase in their number since land reform and technological input based cropping pattern was introduced. Although per capita availability of food in West Bengal is not better than an all India average, it has hardly increased to 400 gm per capita per day (against the norm of 500 gm per capita per day). The industries in West Bengal have declined and non-agricultural employment has not increased, hence agriculture alone cannot solve the problem of low purchasing power of people. Statistically, it has been shown that the poverty level in West Bengal has come down from 35.66 per cent in 1993-94 to 27.02 per cent in 1999-2000 still out of 80 mn. People, 22 mn. are below the poverty line which is an alarming figure for a small state like West Bengal. Land reform was a necessity but not a sufficient condition for agricultural growth as the amount, quality and location of the vested land distributed vary from one agro-climatic zone to the other. The marginal sharecropper could not cultivate because of their incapacity in purchasing costly technological inputs. In many cases reverse sharecropping

has been taking place, i.e. in reality, small and medium farmers cultivate the sharecropper's land in which the sharecropper is labour. If the sharecropper land falls within irrigated areas, they can share irrigation facilities with others but if the plots are in the un-irrigated zone, cultivation is entirely dependent on the success of monsoon. In majority cases, the land remains unused or is sold to meet the domestic liabilities. There are no restrictions imposed in disposing of the allotted land. With low purchasing power, the poor people can hardly purchase their food even at the subsidized rate or at the minimum support price; hence surplus distress is being generated.

3.11. Ground realities of land acquisition in the perspective of land reforms

The following observation gives a view of the land sanctioned to the investors for their purposes :

The most controversial debate in West Bengal was the allotment of agricultural land to the Salim Group and Tata Motors. The two investors have chosen the agricultural lands in the multi-cropped areas. The 44,000 crores investment promised by the Indonesian Salim group by developing entertainment Park, urban constructions, knowledge city, hospitals, road constructions, etc. In 5,100 acres and 15000 acres for a chemical hub and the land to be handed over to them in Bhangar (South 24-Parganas) and Purba Medinipur. The Tata Motors demanded 1000 acres of land in Singur (Hooghly) which is also a multi-cropped area. They would be assembling motor cars. As a result, a large section of peasants and their families would lose their traditional livelihoods and homes. The ecological balance will be hampered. The conversion of agricultural lands to non-agricultural land may endanger food security in future. According to Govt. report since the last five years 1.20 lakh acres of agricultural land

has been converted to non-agricultural land and Left Front Govt. was planning to acquire more than 1 lakh acre of agricultural land for industrialization in the next five years.

The Cultivable land of the State between the 1960s and 1990s has lost 5.89 lakh hectares due to various reasons (Government of West Bengal, 2004).

The present phase of land acquisition in West Bengal started with the coming of the Left Front (LF) Government in May 2006. The main election slogan of the Government was the industrialization of West Bengal. So, it was no wonder that the Government would go all out to fulfil its election promise by reinvigorating the process of industrialization in a state that was one of the first to be industrialized in colonial India. The problem started immediately after the polls with the government's intention to acquire 1,000 acres of prime agricultural land in Singur of Hooghly district for setting up of a motor car plant by Tata Motors. When on 25th May, Tata Motors officials visited Singur, the villagers registered their protest against land acquisition.

On the same day that is (May, 25), Nirupam Sen the state industry minister announced that the state government was going to acquire 32,000 acres of land in the surrounding districts of Kolkata as a primary step to set up new industries. He also specified that the government would acquire land wherever the industrialists would like to set up their industrial units (Ananda Bazar Patrika, May 26, 2006). The same newspaper also quoted the report of the secretary of the state land reforms department as saying that landlessness was increasing in the state of West Bengal. The number of landlessness in the state was enlarged by 2.5 million in between 2001-2006, amounting to a total of 7.4 million. He also stated that agrarian land was reduced by 1,20,000 acres during the same period, an average of 24,000 acres a year. Thus, it was not unnatural that peasant resistance would begin to take shape at different places in different ways. However, Singur and Nandigram became the focal point of peasant agitation against the acquisition of agricultural land.

These areas are inhabited mostly by marginal and small farmers who constitute a population which is more than 50 per cent. A sizeable section that is (25-30 per cent) of bargadars and landless people who mostly belong to the scheduled caste (SC) category. Being located from Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal, at a distance of only 40 km, the people of Singur are linked closely with the life in the city. Many of the landowners are engaged in business and services, while their lands are tilled either by the landless or by the *bargadars* and marginal farmers leasing-in those lands. A segment of the poor people in Singur is frequently in touch with a nearby town, being employed in factories, shops and small businesses. Some of the youths have migrated to cities like Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore principally as construction workers or goldsmiths. There were numerous cases of reverse migration when people came back to their villages after the closing down of the industries where they were working or finding it more profitable to work on the land than to work in small industries or business, drawing a paltry sum instead of hard labour. Therefore, the people here are quite aware of the present situation in the industry; the only car factory situated in the same district, i.e., Hindustan Motors is known to have reduced its workforce almost by half over the years and is still in crisis.

The land selected for the Tata Motors small car project is fully irrigated by both canal water (a Damodar Valley Corporation canal passes through the villages) and groundwater, having 27 mini deep tube wells and two deep tube wells. The agricultural land here is fertile enough, with a yield rate of 2,436 kg. rice Per hectare and 26,604 kg. potato per hectare, the main cash crop of the area. While the yield rate for rice is little less than the state average of 2,504 kg. per hectare, Potato yield is higher in this area than the state average of 24,711 kg. Per hectare (Hooghly District Statistical Handbook,2004, 2004). The other main crops that grow in abundance are jute and vegetables in this area.

3.12. Peasant Movement in Singur and Nandigram

The weaker sections of the peasantry, in the process of land acquisition for setting up industries the worst sufferers, were at the forefront of the movement. In Singur, they were organised under the banner called '*Krishi Jami rakshasa committee*' seeking help from all those coming forward in support of their cause. Singur has not only become the assembling ground for all anti-Left Front forces, but it has also been able to draw the attention and support from different quarters like social and human rights activists, intellectuals and academicians from Kolkata, as well as those from other parts of India and abroad.

Nandigram was another epicentre of anti-land acquisition movement in West Bengal is located in the District of Purba Midnapore. Nandigram, a multi-crop area was identified by the Left Front government as the site of a 15,000 acre agricultural land for Special Economic Zone (SEZ). Police have attacked demonstrators, lobbed tear-gas at them, ransacked their dwellings, took protesters including young girls to custody. The violence climaxed on 14th March 2007; the several reports say that at least 15 people were reportedly shot dead by the police and at least 150 persons were injured in the shooting and other incidents. Farmers and villagers had promised not to leave their agricultural land at any cost. Subsequently, the State Government declared the abandonment of the project of setting up Special Economic Zone (The Salim Group) in Nandigram. Farmers and villagers in Nandigram rose in protest in early January 2007 against the local Haldia Development. The concerned Authority served notice that it will start the process of taking land for the proposed SEZ. Villagers blockaded bridges and roads, clashed with police who mounted lath-charges and fired the gun in that region.

3.13. Conclusion

The Left Front Government and its supporters had come up with their own justification for the move towards industrialization. In this sense, the present stance is merely a continuation of the earlier land policy of the state rather than a significant change in course.

When the Left Front Government after embarked on its land reform programme in 1977, due to two main reasons. First, there was an obvious need to create employment opportunities and to deliver instant relief to huge sections of the rural poor that were suffering from the various crisis. This priority was taken up with the ultimate goal of a socio-economic change which could be attained immediately. Thus the goal of providing relief was the vital task in uprooting the exploitative social structure in a primarily agricultural society. Second, land reform or more precisely agricultural reform (in the sense of institutional change in the agrarian structure) was to provide the basis of an alternative broad-based development strategy for the state. Land redistribution and the pro-tenant changes in terms of sharecropping were supposed to improve the rural income distribution in favour of the poor and create new demand for goods and services for small and cottage industries in the rural and semi-rural areas. Furthermore, with agricultural growth resulting from the newly endowed peasantry, linkages were to develop with the urban organized sector through increased demand for agricultural inputs as well as necessary consumer goods (Mitra, 1978). In many ways, the development policy conceived by the Left Front Government was similar to the East Asian countries like South Korea and Taiwan where successful industrial growth was based on the fruits of extensive land and tenancy reforms in the post-war period(Kay, 2002)¹². Whether the strategy of the Left Front

¹² The comparison with East Asia should not be pushed too far. For example, the kind of export led industrialization that was instrumental in the success in East Asia was hardly what the constituents of the Left Front had in mind for West Bengal. There is also the problem of comparing sovereign countries with a state like West Bengal which is not in charge of macroeconomic and trade policy.

Government towards industrialization was a vision of development is an interesting question to be asked. This analysis in the last section has raised several concerns about the agrarian nature of West Bengal and how it is related to massive industrialization.

First, tenancy, especially sharecropping as an institution is declining in West Bengal. While the national surveys are known for underestimating the incidence of tenancy, there is no reason to expect a systematic partiality that would explain the downward trend. The reduced presence of tenancy contracts is not a reason for concern, especially if we know that sharecroppers or other tenants are voluntarily choosing to stay out of it. Although there is scant evidence of tenants buying ownership rights of their occupied land informally or paying no rent (effectively becoming owners), this is far from being established as a general phenomenon. Moreover, since the transaction of *Barga* land is still not permitted officially, it should not be reflected consistently in the National Sample surveys. The results from (Chakraborti & Mukhopadhyay, 2003), on the other hand, indicates the state level, dispossession of *Barga* land is not uncommon with the circumstances being especially critical in some backward districts of North Bengal with more than 30 per cent of *Bargadars* having lost their agricultural land.

Secondly, the evidence concerning the change in share-cropping contracts and the increased burden of costs of cultivation on tenants raises some doubt about the impact of operation *barga* on their income. The absence of any significant impact of operation *barga* on tenant's standard of living (Dasgupta & Pellegrini, 2009) reinforces this doubt. It challenges the widely accepted view of *Operation Barga* being instrumental in increasing the well-being of its beneficiaries. One possible aspect of driving the above outcome could be the deteriorating relative price between agricultural inputs and output. As Ratan Khasnabis describe, the rate of return from rice farming has been gradually declining through the 1990s in the state. More recent figures at the national level indicate that the situation has not improved since (Khasnabis, 2008).

Thirdly, the limited land redistribution programme has not been fruitful in forming a class of independent cultivator producers. Because of the very rare supply of land above the land ceiling, the average quantity of land redistributed for the period of the LFG regime was only 0.11 hectares or nearly a quarter of an acre. The land reform beneficiaries have not been capable to live off their land in the post-reform time period. This is shown in the study by (Chakraborti, 2003), which finds that more than 90 per cent of new land recipients do not find year-long employment on their land. The comparable figure for *Bargadars* is 83.5 per cent. Most of these people are agrarian labourers who work for bigger landowners for wages¹³. It is not surprising, hence, to find that there has been an unprecedented increase in the number of agricultural labourers in the rural population of West Bengal. Indeed labourers constitute a majority of the agrarian population for the first time in 2001. The crisis in the agricultural sector is summarized by data that indicates the share of agriculture has dropped from 34.45 per cent to 26.42 per cent between 1999-2000 and 2004-05, its share in the workforce has remained almost stagnant (47.76 per cent to 46.35 per cent in the same interval of time).

The official stance of the Left Front Government, as well as of its dominant partner, the CPI (M), has been somewhat unclear regarding its move towards industrialization. It was an attempt to justify the strategy to attract industrial capital as a continuation of the earlier focus on land reforms, i.e. in some sense, following the actual model of development that was believed by the LFG at the starting time of its rule in the 1970s. In this narrative, the emphasis is on the spectacular growth in agriculture since the inception of the reforms and how that growth has been translated into the increased purchasing power of the rural peasantry and created the basis for broad-based industrial development (Bhattacharya B. , 2007). The recognition of the severe crisis approaching in the agricultural sector, which makes it necessary to look beyond farming

¹³ Some of these cultivators may also earn a livelihood in the rural non-farm sector. Recent figures do show a sharp increase in the level of rural non-farm employment.

for economic growth and employment was given importance. The blame for the crisis was thrown squarely on the agrarian policy pursued by the Central Government in how they have made agriculture unviable for small producers by eliminating subsidies as well as downsizing public investment in farming.

While it was true that neo-liberal development a broad agenda followed by the Indian State has had definite implications for the crisis in farming, it is not clear how the condition of the small and marginal farmers is different in West Bengal compared to other states due to the three decades of agrarian reforms¹⁴. Moreover, there is also a question regarding the best response in the face of the crisis. The Left Front Government's move towards corporate-led industrialization has justifiably come under much attack in this respect (Bhaduri, 2007).

Singur has a thriving farming community in the State. It's around 20,000 inhabitant's mostly small peasants, agricultural workers and small traders. The process of economic development has become the focal point for the government at various point of time. The projects undertaken for development purposes are never space neutral. To carry out this process the acquisition of land under Land Acquisition Act, 1894 has provided ample scope for the acquisition of private land for the non-agricultural purpose resulting in the large scale of displacement of peasants and changing of cultivable land for industrial developments. Singur is not exceptional to that. In the post-colonial period about in 1978's when the left government in Bengal distributed lands among the landless peasantry and consequently made ceilings on land holdings which were a successful memory for all. As a result, the productivity increased in many folds but all the small peasants fell in the yoke of political parties with the assurance of getting back the ownership rights of the distributed lands. This expectation only was oxygen for smallholders that keep them to support continuously to Marxist parties for three decades which ultimately

¹⁴ I am consciously limiting myself to the economic conditions facing the agricultural population, the question of political empowerment in a Left ruled state may of course be raised.

was found to be a myth. Original landowners are still enjoying their rights having some underground understanding with Marxist parties which unnecessarily creates confusion among the peasantry. As usual tenants and labourers depend on the original landowners for consumption credit to tide over lean seasons or lean years or to meet social obligations involving lumpy expenditures; the possibilities of usury are also open to the landlord. Under such condition, the landlord may be more interested in maintaining the system of usury and other ways of extracting surplus than in exploiting the possibilities of increasing incomes through higher production. In such a situation transfer of ownership rights to the tiller, grant of secure occupancy rights to tenants and ensuring a reasonable level of rents are deemed crucial to create an environment favourable to innovation and growth in one direction and another direction is the proper registration of *Bargadars* which was halt in 1980's leaving a substantial number yet to be registered; the law has not eliminated sharecropping, only the composition of lessors and lessees have changed.¹⁵ Altogether tenancy reform has not made any striking impact on the distribution of land even in this State. Part of the reason is that though the number of household benefitted is large, the extent of the area involved is relatively small. Tenants who acquired ownership were not always small cultivators. It is also believed that to a substantial extent it was successful to evict tenants by owner cultivators and growing reluctance to report tenancy arrangements accurately and the same picture is found for share-croppers also.¹⁶ On the other hand, the green revolution in 60's affected mostly small peasantry in this region to use high breed seeds, multi-cropping culture, use of pesticides and fertilizers in large scale etc. made the peasants patronage to market players and rich peasantry also.

¹⁵ See Mukherjee and Bandopadhyay. 2000. Survey Report, The statesman, West Bengal, Sep 25,26.

¹⁶ This and other limitations of the reforms should and however detract from the fact that the socio acquisition of secure land rights by large numbers of people at the lower end of the economic spectrum has made a significant difference in the rural polity of both State and Central.

As an outcome, the small cultivators started borrowing funds from money launders frequently in the markets to meet the escalating rates of outputs and it became a challenge for them to gain substantial profit out of their cultivation.¹⁷

¹⁷ Marginal farmers are forced to take loan from money lenders due to input cost became beyond the control of farmers as discussed in CPI(M) sixth Zonal Conference held in pandua,,Hooghly. in Dec 2001