

Political Economy of Agro-Based Transformation in West Bengal.

ABSTRACT

Agriculture plays a very significant role in the economy of the state of West Bengal from time immemorial. It is the primary source of food security, employment generation and social security. The land is the primary source of livelihood in the agricultural economy. Over the last two decades, a debate has centred around the issue of land acquisition in the state which has profoundly influenced political developments and electoral verdicts in the West Bengal. These differing visions on land acquisition are often streamlined into binaries or opposing camps: populist versus neoliberal; people-friendly versus business-friendly policies. As a result, the common discourse on land reforms and land Acquisitions remains have been polarised. At the core of the debate, there are serious matters of justice and reasonableness intertwined with economics and politics. These debates are not just prominent now but are expected to become more robust in the coming decades given the concerns over rural distress and the problem of livelihoods. Social, political and economic turmoil over agricultural land is likely to become more focussed as the state (West Bengal) struggles to address the serious encounters the aspirations of a burgeoning young population with a continuing lack of employment. Political assurances of doubling farmer's incomes within a few years also create a sharp focus on the issues of productivity, livelihood, and sustainable returns accruing from occupations fundamental to agricultural land. As agricultural land-based incomes become stagnant for rural communities, alternative options are required to be tried to find out the solution. Attempts were being made for the agro-based transformation of the rural economy to explore comfortable and steady livelihood for the rural community and alternative productive avenues and employment opportunities. The Left Front Government tried to implement such a course of development

through its policy of industrialisation based on agriculture. However, the policies adopted by the government after coming to power repeatedly in the first decade of this century (2006) came under serious attack from different segments including the farmers led by some political parties and the civil society. The situation resulted in certain changes and challenges involving social conflicts, populist policies, political legitimacy and change of political regime. Through judicial interventions sought to resolve the legal issues involved in the process, the issues of economic transformation and development have remained unsettled.

This study is a humble attempt to explore and analyse the course of development in the process of agro-based transformation of economy initiated by the Government of West Bengal. This is mainly an empirical study through linked with some historical reviews. In the study, besides explaining the course of developments in land reforms and land acquisition policies followed in both pre and post-independent period, attempts have been made to examine the policies and strategies pursued by the successive united front and left front governments in West Bengal with significant emphasis placed on the distribution of vested lands, registration of share-croppers, through '*Operation Barga*' and supports for the small and marginal farmers leading to agro-based transformation for industrialisation. For this purpose, Singur and Nandigram, the major theatre of implementation of this shift was chosen to understand the currents and cross-currents with the help of appropriate research methodology. Through the findings of the study cannot claim to be the final statement on the subject, it is nonetheless a serious attempt to focus the real problem at the micro-level which may provide, in conjunction with similar such studies, a clue to follow a realistic approach towards solution of multifarious problems of the political economy associated with policies of agro-based transformation of rural societies in developing countries.

The primary argument of this thesis is simple: The land debate must be refocused from its current preoccupation with acquisition and politics of state actions to include land markets,

sustainable development and public policies involving displacement and resettlement. It is observed that the focus on politics and political solutions to a deep-rooted problem of political economy has deflected attention from simply market-oriented approaches which, in many situations, could be more effective mainly because of the booming service sectors and development of real estate markets in the country. Land markets have become ever more salient as more of India urbanises and produces new political actors sustained by real estate, land brokerage, and mobile constituencies. It can be traced that the issues of social welfare and good welfare outcomes - including outcomes social justice can be materialised if land markets are integrated to the discussions and policy framework towards sustainable development involving egalitarian and accommodative connotation. Neither markets, nor competitive politics could provide solutions to a serious problem of political economy.

Keywords: Agricultural land, Acquisition, Political economy, Public policies