

Chapter V

Ration Riots as Popular Politics in West Bengal

In the earlier chapters, we went through the ‘Hungry Bengal’ debate that began to re-surface in the state from the early 2000s. In this chapter, a descriptive and analytical study will be undertaken on the tumultuous protests in the districts of Birbhum, Burdwan, and Bankura that broke out in 2007 over the allegation of the ‘mal-distribution’ of food under the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS). These protests came to popularly know as “ration riots”. The chapter will focus more on the events of the two districts of Birbhum and Burdwan. After the course of the protests, a new turn in politics was noticeable: many gram panchayats and panchayat samity of the said two districts witnessed a change in guard in the panchayat elections in 2008. Attempts will also be made to understand if there was a correlation between these two, i.e., ‘ration riots’ in 2007 and the defeat of the left in the gram panchayats in the panchayat elections in 2008. in West Bengal. But before going into in-depth study let us understand the background of the ‘ration riots’.

5.1. The Background

Since its inception, the Public Distribution System (PDS) in India has had many loopholes. Irregular supply, distribution of a much lower quantity of commodities than the fixed quota, rampant corruption, improper distribution of ration cards, the remoteness of the Fair Price Shops (FPSs) from its jurisdiction area, the irregular opening of FPSs, etc. had been the perennial problems of the PDS.¹ To cement these loopholes, the government of India launched TPDS in June 1997. However, the problem persisted.

We have already discussed how the Right to Food case caught the attention of the people on the malfunctioning of the TPDS. It was found that the improper/inadequate procurement and distribution of the food grains caused gigantic food stock to rot down in the Food Corporation of India (FCI) warehouses. We have also discussed in the previous chapters the poor status of social security schemes especially TPDS and how it affected the people.

Now let us have a brief sketch of the condition of TPDS before the ‘ration riots’ broke out in the state in 2007. During the financial year 2006-2007, the government of West Bengal repeatedly claimed that there was a reduction in the allocation of wheat by the FCI. If we look into the allotment of wheat and rice for West Bengal the allegations made by the state government may be substantiated.

**Table 5.1: Monthly Average Allotments of Wheat and Rice for West Bengal
(2001-02 to 2006-07)**

	BPL	APL	AAV	Total
2001-02	104.5	75.4	9.2	189.1
2002-03	141.9	353.9	25.6	521.4
2003-04	141.9	340.8	25.6	508.3
2005-06	120.7	340.8	46.9	508.3
2006-07*	94.5	218.4	38.9	351.7

*2006-07 figures are up to December 2006. To make the Table compatible the authors converted them as monthly averages. Data for 2004-05 was not readily available.

Source: Bhattacharyya and Rana (2008)

Table 5.1 corroborates the fact that there was a sharp and sudden decline in the allocation of wheat and rice in the financial year of 2006-07. And, with the

reduction of the allotment of wheat under TPDS the price of wheat in the open market went high.

Table 5.2: Central Allocations and Open Market Price of Wheat

Months	2005		2006	
	Central Allocation of Wheat (in '000 Tonnes)	Open Market Price of Wheat (Rs per kg)	Central Allocation of Wheat (in '000 Tonnes)	Open Market Price of Wheat (Rs per kg)
January	374.4	7.79	180	8.49
February	370.5	7.75	179.5	8.54
March	370.5	7.45	179.5	8.36
April	371.1	7.31	172.3	8.32
May	371.1	7.34	172.8	8.63
June	371.1	7.46	108.9	8.78 (P)
July	370.8	7.5	114.7	9.02 (P)
August	164.5	7.75	114.7	9.67 (P)
September	164.5	7.79	-	9.48 (P)
October	165.3	7.83	-	9.8 (P)
November	179.5	8	-	9.67 (P)
December	180	8.3	-	10.05 (P)

P: Provisional

Source: Rana and Bhattacharya (2008)

Table 5.2 is showing that the allocation of wheat reduced considerably in 2005. In 2005, the allocation of wheat in July was 370.8 tonnes wherein in August it came down to 164.5 tonnes. As a result, the price of wheat in the open market went up so

much so that in a single year there was an increase of 25 percent (wherein December 2005 the price of wheat in the open market was Rs. 8.30/kg, in December 2006 it reached Rs. 10.05/kg). There were also dramatic changes in the price of rice.²

In table 5.1 and 5.2, we have seen how there was a reduction in the allocation of wheat which caused the open market price of it to shoot up which in effect guided the population under the Above Poverty Line (APL) category to the ration shops. Therefore, it created a heavy pressure on the TPDS.

**Table 5.3: Percentage of Off takes of Rice and Wheat
(2001-02 to 2006-07, up to December 2006)**

	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2005-06	2006-07
A Below Poverty Line (BPL)					
Andhra Pradesh	66.1	99.8	96.4	101.4	
Karnataka	98.9	98.3	95.6	99.9	97.8
Kerala	99.1	58.6	82.3	98.1	97.9
Maharashtra	55.5	59.6	68.9	86.0	83.7
Tamil Nadu	77.1	75.2	102.3	99.6	80.6
West Bengal	41.7	56.0	71.4	89.4	73.8
India	56.3	60.3	70.1	81.5	74.7
B Above Poverty Line (APL)					
Andhra Pradesh	35.9	15.4	19.2	66.4	67.3
Karnataka	81.2	27.0	40.6	43.1	54.0
Kerala	6.5	9.6	7.6	17.9	22.2

Maharashtra	0.4	0.4	0.6	2.7	6.8
Tamil Nadu	0.0	0.6	6.0	43.9	40.6
West Bengal	20.8	6.6	11.7	25.2	24.1
India	18.0	5.9	9.0	18.1	26.7
C Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY)					
Andhra Pradesh	102.5	89.7	97.8	98.2	100.8
Karnataka	96.1	89.8	90.0	92.8	94.9
Kerala	86.1	99.5	99.4	96.9	99.9
Maharashtra	87.5	86.4	86.7	88.7	86.5
Tamil Nadu	69.8	99.0	103.8	102.0	99.0
West Bengal	51.8	66.1	71.0	80.8	81.8
India	85.6	85.7	91.4	92.2	89.3

Source: Bhattacharyya and Rana (2008)

Though, in general, the off-take of West Bengal in both APL and Below Poverty Line (BPL) category was considerably good from the financial year 2001-02 when in the financial year 2006-07, the prices in the open market rose and the state government failed to lift the proper quota (As shown in table 5.3). Therefore, it was not possible to meet the demands of the people. This factor was accompanied by another one, i.e., the 'corrupt' image of the ration dealers in the popular mind.

Studies found that the majority of dealers had aimed to gain profit.³ But the margin of profit in TPDS was very thin. To supplement it, the dealers often opted for black-marketing, hoarding, cheating, and other malpractices. It implied that administrative arrangements, rules, procedures that determined the effectiveness

and viability of FPSs to serve the public were not recognised and evaluated fully by the implementing authorities of TPDS in the State. Dwaipayan Bhattacharya referred to a letter by a dealer to the Chief Justice of Calcutta High Court, which alleged that a monthly loss incurred by a dealer was amounted to rupees 7,000 and asked the Chief Justice that “if one added monthly family expenses of around rupees 10,000 to that how could a dealer be expected to earn without taking recourse to corruption?”⁴ A fascinating study conducted by Transparency International India titled *India Corruption Study 2005* reveals some probable factors that allowed the ration dealers/ FPS owners to choose the path of corruption.⁵

- 1) The transformation of PDS into TPDS in 1997 led to low profitability.
- 2) The credit provided to the ration dealers was very low so much so that they cannot even lift the entire quota from the government warehouse!
- 3) The ration dealers might also have to bribe the ration officials to get their quota delivered to the shops from the FCI. Moreover, they hardly had any control over the quality of food grains. An article in *The Hindu* found the same state of things in Kerala in 2013.⁶
- 4) The supplies from the FCI were uncertain and late coming.

5.2. Situating the ‘Ration Riots’

From the above discussion, we can deduct that at the state level the TPDS was not in good condition. Now pay attention to the contemporary political scenario in the state which will help us to situate the ‘ration riots’ in the broader context of erstwhile West Bengal politics.

In the year 2006, with a new slogan, *Krishi amader vitti, shilpo amader vobissyot* (agriculture is our foundation and industry our future) the Left Front (LF) led by the Communist Party of India, Marxist – CPI (M) had a landslide victory in the legislative election in West Bengal. This gave the Chief Minister, Buddhadeb Bhattacharya and his ministry confidence to push forward the New Industrial Policy (NIP) which was formulated in 1994, in the early years of the so-called ‘liberalisation’ of economy. Thus, a fundamental shift can be observed in the policy orientation of the government, switching its attention from agriculture to industry. Perhaps this massive electoral support espoused with new orientation in policies led the government to unilaterally, even without consulting to its peasant wing All India Kisan Sabha (AISK), acquire agricultural lands. The Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya almost emerged as the ‘poster boy’ of the party and his kind of politics as ‘Brand Buddha’ for the big industrial houses and the middle-class people of the state.

In 2006, contention over land acquisition intensified in Singur located in the district of Hooghly. The district of Hooghly is situated at the core of the Gangetic Bengal region famous for its multi-crop high fertile soil. In 2006, the government of West Bengal decided to take over 997 acres of land for TATA Motors for setting up the ‘world’s cheapest car’ factory.⁷ The initiative faced vehement criticism and uncompromised resistance from opposition parties especially from All India Trinamool Congress (AITC), erstwhile the main opposition party of West Bengal, helped to float the *Krishi Jami Raksha Committee* (The Committee for Protecting the Farmland), an organisation for carrying out the struggle against the government coupled with a 25 days long hunger strike by Mamata Banerjee, the leader of

AITC.⁸ The allegation of not giving adequate compensation to farmers was also surfaced against the government. The public uproar reached a zenith when the half-burnt body of an 18 years old girl Tapasi Malik who was at the forefront of this agitation found allegedly raped and killed ‘by some members of CPI(M)’ on 18th December 2006.⁹

On 14th March 2007, a violent event took place at Nandigram located in the district of Purba (East) Medinipur. The government decided to acquire 10,000 acres of land for creating a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) for Indonesia-based Salim Group. The farmers gathered themselves under the banner of *Bhumi Ucched Protirodh Committee* (The Committee of the People for Resisting the Eviction from Land) that blocked roads to Nandigram from January 2007 to March 2007. When on 14th March the police decided to enter the area with a massive troop of 3,000 personnel, a crowd of 5,000 villagers came to the entry point of Nandigram. As a result, there sparked violence in which 14 villagers were killed and many more injured.¹⁰

From this discussion, we can understand that the LF, which had a good reputation among the masses, especially in rural West Bengal, for their affection for the agricultural land and rural poor (manifested in the programs like Land reform and Operation *barga*), had begun to lose the popular trust. In the popular perception it was largely felt that in the ‘neoliberal’ time the LF was departing from its ideal that of “*Langol Jar Jami Tar*” (The Land belongs to the Tiller).¹¹ It was in this background that the popular protests, also known as ‘ration riots’, over the charge of ‘malpractice’ under TPDS broke out in the districts of Bankura, Birbhum, Burdwan, and Murshidabad.

5.3. The ‘Ration Riots’

Based on archival as well as extensive field study, in the following lines, we have narrated the events. During the archival study, we found a plethora of events that cannot be presented here keeping in the mind the scope of the research. Therefore, we have decided to describe some of the representative cases. These selected events discussed below bear all the features of ‘ration riots’.

Primarily the present study has been carried out in two districts of Burdwan and Birbhum. Nonetheless, with the help of targeted sampling, we have selected some of the gram panchayats (the lowermost tier of rural local government) and panchayat samity (the middle tier of rural local government). The logic behind the selection was, as we have already mentioned, that in some of the constituencies, where people came up to agitate in the said two districts witnessed a change in guard in the panchayat elections in 2008. So, with the help of an extensive study, the present researcher wanted to understand whether there was any relationship between the ‘ration riots’ and change in guard in the under study constituencies. Later in this chapter, we will present some exclusive case studies of some of the selected constituencies but now let us generally discuss the events in the said districts.

The unrest incepted on September 16, 2007 in the Bankura district before spreading to the adjoining districts of Burdwan and Birbhum like wildfire in no time. The news spread like a rumour: “In that village, people have attacked that corrupt dealer to get compensation [*kshatipuran*, in Bengali]”. Rumour has a significant role in

society. It is a long chain of fabricated speeches that circulates through words of mouth about a particular thing/s, individual/s, issue/s, or any other matter/s related to public concern. Rumours are indispensably related to riots or violent mass action. So much so that scholars like Allport and Postman posit an invariant rule that “no riot ever occurs without rumors to incite, accompany and intensify the violence”.¹² Eminent scholars like Ranajit Guha observed rumor as ‘insurgent’s communication’.¹³

It was around this time of anti-land eviction movements when 24 hours Bengali news channels like Star Ananda(later named as ABP), 24 Ghanta (later named as Zee 24 Ghanta) were launched. Apart from the newspapers, the real-time scenario presented by these news channels contributed a lot in spreading the protests. Therefore, apart from the rumour the print media and most importantly, the new electronic media also played a significant part in the whole episode.

Before we take a study of the tumultuous events in the two districts of the state, let us take a glimpse of the editorial page of *Anandabazar Patrika*, a leading daily in the state, dated 18th July 2007, two months before the first reported incident regarding the maldistribution under TPDS in the state. It ran as follows:

“Tons of food grains are lying in the warehouses but rice and wheat are not available in ration regularly. Rice, wheat, etc. are getting damaged in the warehouses, due to neglect. Rats, pests, fungus are damaging rice, wheat worth 850 crores in different governmental warehouses owns of the country. This huge monetary loss has led to a fuss at governmental levels. Thus, the central government has warned West Bengal and other governments. The

degraded rice and wheat have to be sold out at cheaper rates. As, a result, a loss of crores of rupees has to be suffered...Despite the states being reminded time and again, the goods of ration shops are not being raised according to the needs of the people...The center is supplying rice and wheat according to a BPL category, but the food grains are not reaching people as far as the state's BPL category is concerned. To get rid of this confusion, the state government has been asked to take the necessary steps...In the case of West Bengal, it is said that there has not been proper inspection in ration shops. The food grains are not being tested properly in the warehouses. In many cases, proper apparatus is not used even if the tests are conducted...''¹⁴

By now it has become clear to us that despite a proactive role by a section of the media, the state government was far from being active to take the necessary steps to carry out a facelift for the TPDS. Before discussing the particular events let us identify some of the common characteristics of 'ration riots'.

5.4. 'Ration Riots': Some Common Features

- a) During the year 2007, the popular perception among the masses was that they felt being 'cheated' for a long time by the ration dealers.¹⁵ To get the undelivered quota in the first place and almost in every case the villagers approached the 'corrupt' dealer for compensation. On many occasions, the dealers denied the allegations. However, some dealers were found to confess their guilt and promised the protestors to deliver their due quota. In the end, it was found that the promises were not kept.

- b) The denials of ‘misdoings’ and fake promises by the dealers made the villagers take violent steps. On several occasions as our study suggests the protestors manhandle the dealers, their family members, looted the warehouses and even domestic properties! It is worthy to mention that many dealers out of fear decided to surrender their licenses to the administration and some of them ended up committing suicide.¹⁶
- c) As the news spread like a forest-fire, every other dealer faced almost the same situation. To counter this, police and district administration came to play without any compromise with the protestors which included beating, arresting, and issuing a mass warrant against the protestors. On some occasions, the police allegedly fired on the mob that resulted in giving serious injury to them and even one allegedly died. It was alleged that the ‘corrupt’ dealers were sheltered by the ruling party which is why on some occasions the dealers did not get any serious damage and continue to enjoy the dealership after the course of the protests was over.¹⁷
- d) While there was an alleged nexus between the members of the ruling party and the dealers, the protests (although attempts were made) were not backed by any opposition political parties. Therefore, vertically controlled organisations were absent in these protests.

5.5. The Chronicle of ‘Ration Riots’

While the state politics in West Bengal was blooming with the issues of Singur and Nandigram the perennial problem of maldistribution coupled with a reduction in allocation in TPDS paved the way for the popular anger to break out in the said districts.

5.5.1. The Events in Burdwan District

On October 7, around 8:30 in the morning, a furious mob broke into the house of Sheikh Fakir Mohammed, one of the alleged dealers of Burdwan district who was also a rich farmer. The mob dragged the dealer out of the house along with his sons followed by a lam. Even the women of the house were not spared. The mob torched motor vehicles, damaged many electronic appliances, and furniture was set on fire worth Rs.12 lakh. Also, gold jewellery worth Rs.8 lakh and Rs.14 lakh in hard cash were looted. Shortly, a flock of CPI (M) activists, who appeared on the scene to rescue the dealer, were also beaten up by the crowd and their local party office was ransacked. CPI (M) leaders like Aurobindo Panja and Ganesh Chowdhury along with the other twelve CPI (M) supporters rushed to the Burdwan Medical College and Hospital to receive some treatments. The police resorted to *lathicharge* to disarray the mob and eight villagers were taken into custody.

However, the CPI (M) did not seem to be afraid of this outrage. Shortly after the incident, around two thousand CPI (M) supporters organised a procession in the village exhibiting their lathis, sword, and chains. In course of time, the ration dealer claimed that “the intruders were headed by Revolutionary Socialist Party of India (RSP) activists. Yesterday they had demanded Rs. 15 lakhs to spare the house of vandalism.”¹⁸ The district administration declared that there had been no complaint against the alleged dealer. The district CPI (M) secretary, Amol Halder said that the thugs are taking advantage of the current issue surrounding the PDS, and the dealer

is a supporter of the AITC, but since they were not addressing this issue politically, their party members went to rescue the dealer.¹⁹

According to *The Times of India's* account of 4th October 2007,²⁰ Bipadtaran Mandal, one alleged dealer of the Serenda village in Burdwan was also attacked by the mob. When the police wanted to disperse the crowd, they responded strongly, injured four policemen. The allegations on the dealer were that he had been depriving the villagers of their allocated quota for eleven months. They gathered on Tuesday (2nd October) to voice their demands but the dealer told them to come later. But when they revisited on Wednesday, the dealer was missing. However, when the dealer was found under attack, consequently, the police allegedly fired on the mob. Dhanu Das (45) lost his life along with 10 persons injured, one of them seriously.²¹ While the superintendent of police (SP) of Burdwan, Piyush Pandey claimed that they had fired six bullets in the air, the villagers said that police had fired 20 rounds. The SP further stated that the actual cause of death would be revealed in the post-mortem. He also added that ration dealers and their families were being given adequate police protection.²²

5.5.2. The Events in North 24 Parganas

The heat of the protests also reached Bithari village of Swarupnagar block of North 24 Parganas District where it was found that a large number of protesting men of Uttarpara locality were hiding in the paddy fields in the chilled fields of winter to evade arrest every night. They said that it was better to tolerate the cold than the police lock-up.²³ This remote village adjoining the Bangladesh border was one of these chaotic areas in West Bengal where people took the path of violence against the corruption in the PDS. On October 24, Bappa Mollah the alleged corrupt ration

dealer (who was once poor like the common villagers but then became the ration dealer and was living in a big concrete house and driving around in cars) appeared. The villagers asked several questions about the maldistribution'. Without being satisfied with his answer, an angry mob of about 3000 folks became violent and as a reaction, the police *lathi-charged*, which made the mob more furious, and it ended with the ransacking of the ration shop. A couple of vehicles were set ablaze; one child and two policemen were injured.

The police arrested six protesters and issued arrest warrants against another one hundred and fifty villagers. Since the villagers did not know who was on the arrest list, many of them fled and went to hide at different places (in the fields at night) to avoid the wrath of the police. Hajidullah Sardar (67) the father of Roshan Sardar (35), who was one among the six people arrested, asked: "how long we will continue to live like this?"²⁴ Meanwhile, the dealer with his family began to stay in another village while the police guarded the ration shop.

5.5.3. The Events of Birbhum District

On 20th September, a dealer named Kaji Abu Hossain's residence was subjected to a rampage at Shikarpur under the jurisdiction of the Parui police station. He got relief only after making the promise of giving Rs. 250/- to each deprived individual. On the next day, some people of the villages of Bonsanka and Haripur of Suri (II) block detained the ration dealers and agitated. The news of the same incidents also came from the villages of Rangapur and Sarbhasa of Sainthia block. An inspector of the food department was also detained. Later, Police went to rescue them.

Ashish Bandyopadhyay, the Birbhum District's President of AITC and the member of legislative assembly (MLA) from Rampurhat, alleged that "the Ration dealers have silenced the CPI(M) leaders with a handsome amount of money."²⁵ However, the CPI (M) district president, Dilip Bandyopadhyay denied such allegation by saying, "We don't run the party by dealer's money, but by mass collection."²⁶ He also ignored the instances of agitation by labelling them as 'scattered incidents'. According to Apurba Mandal the district Secretary of CPI(M), these were nothing but 'chaos'.²⁷

Birendranath Malakar the district Food Inspector argued that since the ration riots cropped up in the villages on the allegation of non-distribution of wheat under APL, he "did not get any complaint".²⁸ He added that a section of ration dealers told the customers that wheat was available in the open market at cheaper rates and of good quality.²⁹ That is why the APL customers did not take their quota of wheat from ration shops. On several occasions, although there was no distribution of rice the dealers allegedly showed the 'distribution' in the register fearing the cancellation of the dealership. In this context, it has to be mentioned that in the absence of the local level supervision committee, there was no provision to check the corruption in TPDS at the grassroots level. Rabilal Das, Secretary, of the district Marginal Ration Shop (MRS) Dealer Association, admitted that the shop level committee does not almost exist anywhere in Birbhum.³⁰ Therefore, incidents of attacking the dealers were reported from the diverse places of Birbhum like Bolpur, Nanoor, Labhpur, Sainthia, Dubrajpur, and Kochughor.

Allegations of corruption were also charged against Das. *Anandabazar Patrika* (26th September 2007) reported that on 25th September a memorandum was submitted to the Additional District Magistrate (ADM) and Kaminimohan Sarkar and the District Controller of Food and Supply Birendranath Malakar. The complaint was that Rabilalbabu had not been giving wheat and Sugar under the APL scheme for 18 months.³¹ The dealer made counter-allegations that some of the Forward Block (FB) members were hatching ‘conspiracy’ against him. The District Secretary of FB Rebati Bhattacharji said, “Why should we conspire? The members of every party were present at the agitation regarding ration”.³²

At Kochughor near Dubrajpur, a huge mob of seven thousand people broke out at the house of one alleged dealer named Swapan Sen followed by beating up his brother.³³ Soon, the Block Development Officer (BDO) came with the police force to rescue them. The police resorted to *lathicharge* to disperse the mob. One person was injured and admitted to a primary healthcare clinic. On the same day, the villagers of Beripur in Sainthia raged the Beripur Cooperative Samity, which was responsible for distributing ration in the area. The villagers from the APL category said that they did not even know that wheat was allotted for them too. They created pressure on the Secretary Swapan Kumar Chowdhury, who had confessed that he had sold some 80 quintals of wheat meant for the APL segment.³⁴

On 30th September, the infuriated villagers attacked the residence of the dealer, Bindubhusan Das, at Bagdanga village under the jurisdiction of Sainthia police station. Besides, they also looted sugar, kerosene, wheat, and rice from the dealer’s warehouse after beating up the dealer’s wife and son violently. The customers have

also looted two hundred sacks of cement from another warehouse of the dealer from where he used to do cement business. Such an agitation continued in the presence of police, and the dealer promised to give Rs. 1000/- per unit after the intervention of the police.

The heat of the protest also continued to the next month. To take the situation under control the BDO of Labhpur block Arnab Chattopadhyay summoned an all-party meeting at his office on 1st October 2007.³⁵ Accordingly, the residents of about 10 villages including Maheshpur, Gayeshpur, Laghata gathered near B.D.Os office. There had been around five thousand people. The members of the CPI(M), as well as the opposition parties, entered the office. The representatives of the agitators complained that the administration had not managed the ration dealers properly. The local people like Kajal Mondal, Binod Saha, Arup Das complained that the ration dealers had cheated them and the goods meant for them used to reach bountifully in the assembly of the party leaders and alleged anti-social elements harboured by the CPI(M) had been creating terror.³⁶ The administration had not taken any step against them.

The instant anguish led to the outburst. The large mob in the office compound had arson the car as well as the office of the BDO. The panchayat samity office was situated adjacent to the place, and five cars including the cars of the superintendents were set ablaze. Many of the bicycles parked on the stand had also not been spared. In such an atmosphere, the people had also set the car of the Circle Inspector (CI) of Nanur on fire.³⁷ The news reached the police stations of Bolpur as well as Suri. The fire had already spread in the offices of panchayat samity before the arrival of

the large police force from the police line of both the police stations. The stones had also been pelted. The police arrived with a large force and dispersed the mob by *lathicharge* and gunfire. The Rapid Action Force (RAF) had been launched at noon. Ten rounds of bullets had been fired.³⁸ But according to the District Police Superintendent, only 6 rounds had been fired.³⁹

On 3rd October, more than five hundred and thirty-three dealers surrendered their licenses in Suri and Bolpur subdivisions.⁴⁰ News of mass resignation also came from Bankura where 1,245 ration shop dealers submitted their resignations to the district magistrate (DM) Surendra Gupta who feared that the public distribution system would collapse soon.⁴¹ As a response, the General Secretary of the All Bengal Ration Shop Owners' Association, Mr. Biswambhar Basu, said, "Out of 20,372 ration dealers, over 10,000 had already surrendered their dealership to the authorities. But they will soon withdraw it."⁴² He further said that "there are many chains of middlemen, distributors, and wholesalers that start from the FCI godown [warehouse]. These are the people, who divert the subsidies".⁴³ According to the news of *Times of India* since ration riots erupted in the state, an armed group of Maoists surrounded the house of a ration dealer in Belpahari on Sunday night and distributed stock from his warehouse to villagers. An estimated Rs 40,000 worth of rice, wheat, and sugar was looted from the warehouse.⁴⁴ News also came that a protestor named Ayub Sheik was gunned down by police out of the block office in Labhpur.

In Birbhum, villagers assaulted one alleged Ration dealer named Chandrasekhar Narasundar and his son Utpal and looted their shops. The mob demanded

compensation of Rs. 2000/- to each cardholder that amounting to Rs.27 lakhs. While the dealer was negotiating with the mob Utpal went into the room and hanged himself, survived by his wife. Utpal ran a variety store adjoining his father's shop. The loan he had taken for his shop was also being looted.

The news of disturbances owing to corruption in TPDS was also coming from the Mallarpur village of Mayureshwar I block of Birbhum district. It was found that Anath Mandal, Ashis Roy, and Kanchan Panda who ran their three ration shops in the locality found guilty after the panchayat pradhan wrote to Anath Mandal asking him for information about the government quota of kerosene oil and food grains. It was exposed that Mandal used to distribute only 1kg of wheat per person instead of 1.8 kgs. per person according to government rules. Thus, each family was losing a considerable amount of ingredients from their allocated quota. Also, the quality of wheat was very poor and the quantity of kerosene was also less than the government quota. The villagers decided to organise a road blockade against the malpractices of Anath Mandal.

Many lower-level CPI(M) supporters also joined the protest. They also wrote to the local food inspector regarding this issue. No action was taken against the dealer, surprisingly they discovered that the food inspector had wiped out the names of the people who lodged complaints against Anath Mandal. This gave the ration dealer some amount of fuel that he started to misbehave with the people when they came to his shop to collect their dues. Goutam Panda a local CPI(M) leader and erstwhile member of Mallarpur village panchayat requested party bosses including the former MLA Braja Mukherjee, to take steps against Mandal and others with no success.

The malpractices in ration shops were continued in the locality. The news also came from the area under Suri municipality that the agitators blocked Suri- Dubrajpur road and Rabindrapally to have their demands fulfilled.⁴⁵

In Bolpur, nine police officials including the CI Kamal Das Bairagya were injured. Two of the police officers were admitted to Sian Hospital. The police fired five rounds of teargas on the spot.⁴⁶ The dealer was locked inside his shop in Mayureshwar by the agitated mass. Amulya Mandal, the dealer of Hatjora-Motipur under Suri police station admitted that he had been selling the wheat allotted for 18 months in the open market, after being assaulted by the customers from both of the villages.⁴⁷

Twenty people were arrested for the situation.⁴⁸ According to DM Tapankumar Som, “An abnormal situation has arisen in the district. The administration has decided that legal action would be taken against the dealers who are found guilty of corruption. 8 dealers have already been blacklisted. 3 dealers have been arrested. This would not be tolerated. Police surveillance has to be increased to control the situation. The Secretary of Home Affairs has been asked for an extra police force.”⁴⁹ The attack by the angry mob reached such a level that according to *Bartaman* (31st October 2007) a dealer committed suicide near Dubrajpur.⁵⁰ The incidents of attacking the dealers prevailed in the whole of October. Perplexed by popular anger, Abdul Jabbar one veteran leader of CPI(M) of Nabahat expressed his views by saying that in the food movement of 1966 people went crazy as there was no political party or administration that was able to respond to their grievances. But erstwhile they were (LF) in power then why people did have to turn violent?⁵¹

The party leaders termed these people as ‘misguided’. People like Asura Begam who had been the supporters of the ruling party for years felt betrayed by the CPI(M) found asking that the panchayat leaders never bothered to ensure their rations then why was the party poking its nose to resist them?⁵² It has also been stated that they had been voting for the party for many years and in return, the party was ‘backing’ the ‘cheaters’. Amal Halder, the party secretary of CPI(M) of Burdwan was justifying their stand on this issue by declaring that they cannot sit idly while their leaders and supporters were attacked by the criminals belonging to the opposition.⁵³

5.5.4. Events in Bankura District

In the meantime, although the chaotic situation in Bankura district had somewhat subsided, a serious allegation was made by one allegedly ‘corrupt’ dealer that he had been funding party programmes of CPI(M) otherwise it would become difficult to run the business.⁵⁴ Here it is worth mentioning that according to one source, in the districts of Burdwan and Birbhum, hundreds of ration dealers owed their allegiance to CPI(M), though only a few were its members.⁵⁵ As a response, one party source (who refused to be named) found saying that due to their strong organisational reach to the grassroots levels, the leaders of the CPI (M) were aware of the diversion of food grains to the black market and that it was not possible to carry out such misdoings on their own without any backup from the party.⁵⁶

On 23rd September, there had been agitation in Mejia in Bankura district. The twelve hours Bandh summoned by the Socialist Unity Centre of India (Communist) or SUCI and by the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) or CPI (ML)

created no chaos. Most probably, the CPI (M) did not come out on the streets to protest.⁵⁷ At Mejia, a memorandum was issued with the allegation that the CPI(M) panchayat pradhan, Lalchand Singha, and the other people of his party had joined hands with the corrupted ration dealers.⁵⁸

According to the news of *Times of India* (October 10, 2007),⁵⁹ two dealers in Bankura committed suicide and a dealer's son in Birbhum attempted the same while the incidents of attack on ration dealers continued unaddressed since the inception of the incident.

After conducting an extensive field study in the different villages in the said districts, which involved group interviews with the rioters ironically, it came up that the rioters were also the supporters of the ruling LF especially CPI(M). Many lower-level CPI(M) workers also protested during the agitation. The dealers affiliated with the opposition parties were also being attacked but in most of the cases, the rioters and the dealers belong to the same party this was perhaps because of the CPI(M)'s ubiquitous presence in rural West Bengal. Biman Bose, the state secretary of CPI(M), had summoned a 'people resistance' lead to form armed groups against the protestors.⁶⁰

Apart from the protestors who were once the supporters of the ruling regime and many ground-level CPI(M) workers also came up to register their protest with the villagers. These dedicated 'small' political actors used to congeal around the local level LF leaders were the sincere foot soldiers who worked tirelessly at the local level and played a significant part in the successive electoral renewals of the party

had always or condemned to remain as ‘ordinary tales of the unrecognised’. And this unrecognition in their *political life* combined with the deprivation in *biological life* turned the supporters into protestors against the ruling regime. The events like the ‘ration riots’ can be observed as an outcome of this popular anger.

5.6. The Party and the People: The Expanding Gulf

The previous paragraphs, revealed both the tumultuous events and the responses of the ruling party as well as the government. To cope with the crisis, the higher-level leaders of the party decided to disown the protestors many of whom were also the supporters of the ruling regime and termed the events as a conspiracy against the government. From the above study, it is also revealed that a gap between the party/government and the people was looming large in many districts of the state. And the gulf furthered due to the unsympathetic response of the party’s higher-level as well as local level leaders. In the following paragraphs let us search for some examples for this ‘gulf’.

After occupying power in 1977, as the decades passed, the ‘party’ (i.e., The CPIM) gradually failed to repossess the spirit of the old ‘movement-based politics’ of the 1950s and 1960s because governing the population on institutional lines became the primary goal of the regime. And this ‘inability’ of the LF, especially of CPI(M), drifted the organised domain of politics away from the *social* mode of power and become closer to the structural logic of *State* power.⁶¹ There is a huge difference between these two modes of power. While the foundation of organised domain of politics is founded on the popular consensus for establishing entitlements and rights over the material and non-material items, the structural logic of State power was

highly formalised, chauffeured by the *force* of law instead of *consent*. This probably had decayed the hegemonic appeal of the party which was born out of the marriage between the *pragmatic* reforms from the top and the culture of ‘movement-based politics’ guided by *ideology* at the bottom.

In the course of time, the ruling strategy of the LF had undergone a paradigm shift. The leaders got detached from the culture of the movement that is to make organic linkages with the people and became comfortable with the administrative power. This allowed the leaders to acquire bureaucratic habits and keep themselves confined to the strict limits of the permissible without striving to expand the boundaries of the possible. *Probably*, this reduced the party’s dialogic capacity with society to a minimum.⁶²

To hold their support base a different strategy was adopted by the Front. Scholars like Manisha Banerjee noted this as ‘party bureaucracy’ geared towards achieving absolute control over both public and private life of the people by bringing them under the direct control of various party committees *one-sidedly* presided by a particular leader.⁶³ This *unilaterality* had two negative effects on the whole equation of the relationship between the party and the people: a) it transformed the definition of political support into, in Banerjee’s words, ‘political enslavement’⁶⁴ and b) the party forgot to engage in dialogue with the society thereby creating organic linkages with the same. Therefore, in the absence of two-way communication between the party and the people coupled with successive electoral renewals a range of ‘accumulative and corrupt practices’ emerged, and

correspondingly the LF's especially the CPI(M)'s linkages with the everyday lives of the communities blockaded.

The governmental institutions such as the panchayats which once helped the Front to creatively respond to *popular claims*, over the years, despite undertaking several attempts of administrative reforms, became ineffective and dated. In this way, the LF found itself helpless to bridge the gulf and to articulate the new demands and aspirations of the population and thereby failed to hold the spontaneous moral consent of the people. Even, to enforce its control and maintain peace and order, the party became uncommunicative and non-participatory and, as Bhattacharya observed, "often acting in contravention to the *welfare of the population*".⁶⁵

[Emphasis added]

In the last years of the Left rule, the reproduction of hegemony shepherded by a new logic that helped to preserve a cold social peace in rural West Bengal orchestrated by the local powerful interest groups like the government contractors, the promoters, the moneylenders, the traders, the ration dealers—in some cases the same persons wearing multiple hats at once! This could probably explain why during the time of 'ration riots' the local level LF leaders were alleged of providing shelter to the 'corrupt' ration dealers.

5.7. The Responses of the Central and the state Governments

While the previous section was devoted to understanding the changing relationship equation between the LF and the people, this section will help to understand the different strands of the central and the state governments. According to the news

of *Anandabazar Patrika* (18th September 2007), the CM of West Bengal Buddhadeb Bhattacharya asked for a report on the events of the Bankura district. As a result, the Joint Secretary Gopinath Mukhopadhyay, and Deputy Director of the Food Department, Sukhendu Chakrabarty paid a visit to the district.

On 17th September, the Inspector General, Law, and Order (IG) Raj Kanojia stated that ‘30 arrests have been made. To watch the situation, the Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of the particular area has been sent.’⁶⁶ The Home Secretary told the reporters that “the police fired 8 rounds on the spot. Police said that they opened fire to control the situation, but the reason for the bullet inflicting wounds on the body, is to be investigated”.⁶⁷ In the meantime, the license of several ration dealers got confiscated. The CM told the LF leaders that he declared that ‘there would be increased surveillance at the level of ration shops too’. If the department of food had to do something, the CM would himself talk to the department of finance for financial aids for the same.

Besides, the decision of the state government to provide succour to the poor during the festive season (by making essential commodities at a subsidised rate through the TPDS) fell flat on its face when it came to light that there was no difference between the subsidised rates listed by the state Food and Supplies Department and the market price of these items.⁶⁸ However, the Food and Supply Minister attempted to save his government by saying that the government had to make small packages of 250 gm or 500 gm of these items. But the cost of packaging was also adding to the price, thus making it the same as the market rate.⁶⁹

Despite the assurance given by the CM to suspend some dealers, the tumultuous events in the state remained uninterrupted. *Dainik Statesmen* (5th October 2007) reported that on the issue of ongoing violence in West Bengal, the Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh anxiously asked for a report to the central agriculture minister.⁷⁰ The central Agriculture Minister, Sharad Pawar, accused the state government of West Bengal for its inability to check corrupt practices among the ration shop owners.⁷¹ He also alleged that after carefully examining the rationing system of different states, it is found that the rationing system of West Bengal was on its way to collapse.⁷² According to Pawar, as he found in a central level survey, among all the states, the instances of disappearance of rice are maximum in West Bengal.⁷³ The corruption was there in the food department of the state right from the topmost level to the bottom level. The role of the ration dealers was also being investigated. The central Agriculture Minister also alleged the state government of practicing favouritism while implementing the Mahatma Gandhi Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS).⁷⁴ He said that the wealthy CPI(M) cadres were being employed in this project.⁷⁵

As a response to the allegation made by the central government, the state officials said that the shortfall in allocation made by the central government is mainly responsible for this crisis. The Food and Supply Minister of West Bengal, Paresh Adhikary said that there were 8.35 crore ration cardholders in the state, almost 60 percent belong to the APL category, who used to buy their quota from the open market but the recent price hike forced them to lift their share from the FPSs but failed to procure allocated quota as there is no adequate supply hence they are the ones who are creating turmoil.⁷⁶ Mr. Adhikary also said that “a show-cause notice

had been issued to Bijendranath Malakar, the Birbhum district controller of food, and action would be taken against Madan Mohan Mandal, the Bankura district controller of food, who has recently retired”.⁷⁷

The CM also appealed that people should not take the laws into their hands and the state government would demand the supply of more wheat, rice, and other food supplies from the central government. According to one source,⁷⁸ he also had a meeting with the representatives of the shop owners and promised them protection. Meanwhile, Biman Bose, the State Secretary of the CPIM also stated that it was nothing but a “conspiracy” against the ruling regime.⁷⁹ However, people were hardly listening to that plea made by the Chief Minister or to the statement made by Biman Bose. Villagers had been attacking the houses of the dealers, torched the shops, looting the food grains.

Finding no way to deal with the protests by its party machinery, the state Public Works Department (PWD) minister Khsiti Goswami announced that “the ration corruption allegations should be probed by the state agencies immediately. We have to activate the anti-corruption wings of our state instead of always screaming for a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) inquiry”.⁸⁰ On 2nd October Amitkiran Deb, the Chief Secretary of the state said that the government would take steps to tackle the violent events coupled with an investigation about the whereabouts of the wheat in the ration.⁸¹

According to a report of *Bartaman* (29th October 2007), the Central Government advised the state to form a four-tier surveillance committee to curb the rationing

malpractices. To start such a system in the municipal ward, the block district, and state levels, the Central Ministry of Food and Public Distribution had sent a letter to the administrators of state governments and union territories. The letter by the Director of Food and Public Distribution, P Kalyansundaram reached the Department of Food and Supply about two and a half months earlier.⁸² However, no committees were formed by the state government.

The allegations and counter-allegations did not remain confined between the Central and state governments, rather friction sparked within the LF itself. The LF ally Forward Block (FB) which was in the charge of controlling the Food and Supply department blamed CPI(M) for this popular unrest as most of the panchayats were belong to this largest partner of the front. The senior FB minister Hafiz Alam Sairani claimed that whatever the stocks had been released by the FCI, cornered by the corrupted dealers with the help of panchayat machinery as the people belong from the APL category hardly withdrew their quota.⁸³

While FB held the CPI(M) responsible for the whole episode, the polit-bureau or the latter claimed that there were no food riots in West Bengal. Only some political elements wanted to form a '*Mahajot*' (The grand alliance) in the upcoming elections that were doing everything possible to incite violence on the issue of PDS and trying to disrupt the entire system.⁸⁴ It further claimed that there were huge amounts of cuts in the case of the APL population by the Central Government, bringing it down to over just 3 percent of the initial allocation.⁸⁵ Here it should be mentioned that the word '*Mahajot*' almost became a buzzword keeping in mind a

possible grand alliance in the upcoming legislative elections of 2011 in the state to fight the LF.

5.8. The CAG Report of 2006 and the Question of Participatory Democracy

The CAG report of 2006 found that a total quantity of 44.04 lakh MT (Metric Tonnes) of food grains meant for distribution under TPDS in the states of Assam, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Jammu & Kashmir, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and West Bengal were diverted.⁸⁶ Also, “Tamil Nadu and West Bengal continued to depend on FCI for distribution of rice under PDS as procurement of paddy in these States was up to 50 percent of the requirement for PDS during the period 2002-05...⁸⁷ Beneficiaries did not receive the benefits as either the identification process was incomplete or ration cards were not issued in West Bengal (9.30 lakh BPL & and 4.32 lakh AAY families). And also, there was abnormal leakage/ diversions of more than 25 percent of the total off-take of the BPL quota in West Bengal.⁸⁸ The report further told that 159000.00 MT of rice worth 47.86 crores meant for the APL population of the state were diverted. It remarked:

“In 16 districts, flour mills lifted 1.59 lakh MT of wheat from FCI during November 2004 to March 2005 at CIP of Rs 610.00 per quintal for conversion to whole-meal atta. However, no records were maintained and produced to disclose the position of atta distributed through FPS. Union Government paid total subsidy of Rs 47.86 core for 1.59 lakh MT of wheat, which was diverted by Food & Supplies Department resulting in undue benefit to Flour Mills.”⁸⁹

According to PDS Control Act 2001, Vigilance Committees at district, block, and village levels should be formed in all the states and union territories to monitor the functioning of the FPSs, however, the same report told that neither “in West Bengal, although monitoring committees at panchayats, municipalities, blocks, and districts level were formed, no monitoring or reporting was done” nor there was an effective inspection by the District Level Officers (DLOs).⁹⁰

Moreover, a previous Planning Commission inquiry had found that in West Bengal rice and wheat of worth Rs 1,913.76 crore had been stolen in the past year.⁹¹ Ms. Anuradha Talwar, Assistant to the Supreme Court Commissioners on the case of Right to Food, also observed, by referring to the same report that West Bengal had been lazy in procuring grains allotted to it and the off-take of food grains by the APL category varied from 2 to 40 percent in case of rice; and 6 to 51 percent in case of wheat: while the off-take of food grains for the below-poverty-line category ranged from 53 to 69 percent,⁹² However, contradicting the inquiry report the state officials said that “this year the Centre slashed West Bengal's monthly allocation for the APL section from 228,000 tonnes to 7,700 tonnes...that is mainly responsible for the shortfall”.⁹³

Based on this it can be said that the TPDS in the state was in poor condition. The state government was neither able to procure the whole quota nor properly distributed the commodities it had procured. And this revelation leads us to think of one of the fundamental duties of a democratic welfare State that is of securing the basic needs of food of its citizens, which, in this case, the state government had failed to achieve in many places of the state. It was in this regard that the initiatives

like social audit, *jan sunwai* (public hearings), were introduced to the social security schemes in India, especially in Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS).⁹⁴

5.9. The Role of the Opposition

Amidst the blame game between the central and the state governments, the main opposition party of the state, the AITC came up to support the protestors. On 4th October the leader of AITC Mamata Banerjee, who is also popularly called *didi* (the elder sister), paid a visit to Sonamukhi in the Bankura district where the protest had begun on September 16 and demanded some state-wide anticorruption programs on PDS.⁹⁵ According to *DNA*, a leading national news portal, she had also called for an immediate start for a second ‘food movement’ in the state.⁹⁶ She added that the limit of the common man’s patience had been exceeded and the police force of Buddhadeb Bhattacharya was firing bullets in response to the demand for food.⁹⁷ The Trinamool leader added that “in some cases, the CPI(M) was kicking up a row with the help of police. The LF had once come to power by launching a food movement. The Left leaders launched the movement for the martyrs of the food movement like Nurul Islam, Ananda Hait in 1966. They had raised the slogan of “*damdam dawai*” [random beatings] for their murderers. But today, under the governance of those Leftist leaders, the police are firing bullets if rice, wheat, flour, sugar, kerosene are demanded. [She also said] that the number of ration cards exceeds the population of the state. The cadres and dealers are sharing the money to be paid on this account, among themselves”.⁹⁸ Banerjee also demanded that the dealers responsible for rationing corruption and the CPI (M) leaders who were their aids should be dragged by tying ropes around their waists. She also took a dig at

both the central and state government by saying that the CPI(M) was a stakeholder in the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) which is why the LF was plundering in the state.⁹⁹

On the next day, Banerjee went to Birbhum. Where crowds gathered also from Murshidabad district, share their 'bitter' experiences with her. She went to the house of Ayub Sheikh who was allegedly gunned down by the police during the demonstration. Janufa Bibi, the widow of Ayub Sheikh was crying profusely. Banerjee consoled her and gave her Rs. 15,000/- and said, "keep this. I will talk later."¹⁰⁰ After that, she stated that "I demand CBI [Central Bureau of Investigation] investigation for the case of corruption in rationing. The families of both Ayub Sheikh and Dhanu Das, the men whose lives have been claimed by the bullets fired by the police, have been given monetary aid. We want food on every other hand, as we have called for a food movement."¹⁰¹

Here we can understand that the main opposition party AITC made efforts to take control of the spontaneous protests and tried to clothe it with the nomenclature of the 'food movement'. The protest that started with a *popular* demand inevitably went under the attempts of giving it a *political* colour. Though the AITC came to offer solidarity with the protestors and its leader Mamata Banerjee gave the call for a food movement, however, her party lacked adequate party machinery or organisational setting compared to LF to appropriate the agitation and guide it from the forefront. The character of the riots for food was so spontaneous and outstretched that it became impossible to find, or the rioters did not require, a high degree of organisation or political party to act as their locomotive. While the involvement of political parties compromised the autonomy of the spontaneous

protests seldom it can be effective to take the protests to the next level. In our case, the protests remained confined in some districts and especially in rural areas and did not become a state-wide affair. The reaction of both the ruling parties and the opposition parties was immediate given keeping in the mind the upcoming panchayat elections in 2008 anticipated to be hotly contested and lacked clairvoyance to solve the perennial puzzles at the different levels of TPDS in the state.

5.10. Ration Riot as Contentious Politics

So far we have studied both the repertoire and the discourse of ‘ration riots’. Now let us attempt a humble analytical inquiry by taking the factors like nature, claims, and organisational dynamics of the ‘ration riots’ into account with the help of analytical tools of *contentious politics*.

The term ‘contentious politics’ is a very eclectic one. It includes a variety of techniques like a riot, civil disobedience, strike, demonstration, terrorism even insurrection, and revolution! In essence, the disruptive techniques adopted by the people disturb the daily routine of politics for changing the policy of the government or to make a *political point* can be observed as a form of contentious politics. Scholars like Charles Tilly defined contentious politics as “interactions in which actors *make claims* bearing on someone else’s interest, in which government appear as *targets*, initiator of claims or third parties.”¹⁰² [Emphasis added]

Based on our so far study we can argue that the question of food is very much a political one. Under a welfare State the whole process of accumulation and distribution of food to the needy population solely depends on the political

authorities. Therefore, any obstacle in this process can be observed as an outcome of political failure. In this sense, any reaction, food riot in our case, to this political/food crisis can also be observed as a political issue. Food riots put the legitimacy of the State *power* into question because these protests reveal that the State has become unable to *manage* the biological life of its population thereby maintaining the *docility* of the same. So, we can understand that food security and the political security of the existing regime are very much linked together. In an interesting article, Charlesworth argued that in a general sense food riots have limited scope and claims but could escalate in a time of political crisis.¹⁰³ Keeping this in mind in this section we want to understand the event of ‘ration riots’ as a form of contentious politics.

Although the food riots have a long history they came to prominence during the 18th century in Britain. Studying the history of food riots one can find that the most common target of these contentious episodes has been the individuals, groups, or authority responsible for distributing or *managing* the food grains. After studying the repertoires of contention in Birbhum and Burdwan we have seen how the protestors perceived the individuals like ration dealers as their immediate targets while the ruling Front and the government were popularly perceived as complicit in their deprivation.

A central character of our instances of food protests was not only the *spontaneity* and acts of *random disruptive techniques* or violence rather it can also be viewed as a means of advancing specific claims against those in power. This somehow echoes Thompson who after studying the food riots in Britain in the late 18th century

observed that “[food riot] was highly complex form of direct popular action, disciplined with clear objectives.”¹⁰⁴ However, this does not imply that the food riots as a means to demonstrate dissatisfaction could not degenerate into *uncontrolled and widespread destruction and rioting*. In our case, although in the initial stages the villagers opted for a disciplined path of discussing their problems with the concerned dealers and asked them to sell the grains at the price determined by them when this initiative failed to meet the desired end, the protestors ended up by looting and seizing the food grains from the warehouses and set the dealers houses and other properties ablaze.

On a different take, the events of looting and seizing the food can also be seen, in the absence of proper action by the government against the alleged individuals or groups, as a popular conception of ‘retributive justice’ against food merchants, retailers, and dealers in favour of the deprived population. In this context, we can argue that *in specific times, specific cases, and in particular places* (we will linger this argument further in the conclusion chapter) the violation of distributive justice by the State can give birth to popular forms of ‘retributive justice’.

The looting, seizure, and destruction of the food by the villagers should not only be treated as a demand to access food but also reveals the *injustice* embedded in the food delivery mechanism under a welfare State that promotes distributive *justice*. In sum, the occurrence of food riots is not only the demands for food rather they showcase the dissatisfactions with the operation of existing political structures, and in the absence of avenues for participation in the political arena the congealed dissatisfactions expressed in direct violent action. Based upon this understanding

we can argue that food-related conflicts should be judged as a reflection of broader political contention rather than grievances particularly related to food insecurity. Therefore, the 'ration riots' can also be perceived as a means to increase democratisation thereby expressing the voices of the dissents against the prevailing socio-political order, particularly at the village/panchayat level. In this sense, the studied events contrary to popular perception were not only about hunger but contentious politics in diverse settings.

During the whole episode of 'ration riots' we have observed that the protestors hardly had and during the interview, the respondents said that they barely cared about any *vertical* guidance from the opposition political parties. Rather we have seen that how the corruption in the prime food delivery mechanism created *horizontal* connections among the protestors across the villages and districts. This horizontality perhaps one of the probable reasons that the sporadic riots did not become a full-fledged movement. Borrowing the concept from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari¹⁰⁵ we might call these protests 'rhizomatic' for their horizontal spread and thin articulation of convergences and commonalities cause loose networking that resists forming a strong organisation which would help us in long term movement building.

Taylor's study of organisational dynamics of the food riots also argued that in the case of food riots there was a generally *tenuous connection* between the formal political organisations and rioters.¹⁰⁶ Taking this cue further we can identify two factors behind the people partook in contention in the studied districts.

- First, the ‘ration riots’ were carried out not by the individuals but by the local masses that eventually gave birth to a sense of shared injustice thereby encouraged them to fight against it.
- And secondly, in the absence of ties with opposition political parties, the protestors were ‘free’ from any party's discipline and control. It also implies that in the absence of proper party links, the people were instigated towards more *direct actions*. And, this tendency to transcend the accepted political norms may have increased the chance of violence into a full-scale conflict between the protestors and the authorities.

Now let us summarise the whole episode of the movement following Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow. In their monumental study *Contentious Politics*, Tilly and Tarrow identified three types of claims floated during contentious episodes there are program, identity, and standing.¹⁰⁷ This analytical tool will provide us a better understanding of our studied events.

Program: It deals with the aim of the protest. More precisely it upholds the shared interest that is the basic demand of the protestors. In our case, the protestors only wanted to get their due quotas and punishment of the alleged ration dealers. Demands were also made to rectify the faulty Above Poverty Line (APL)/Below Poverty Line (BPL) list.

Identity: It deals with the identification of the group of people who are taking part in the movement. In our case, the villagers from the different villages of the studied districts who for a long time had been deprived of their share united against another group of people who were allegedly responsible for it. In this way, the ‘community’

became the political actor against the individuals or local level elites who were alleged of being corrupt and the main actors behind their deprivation.

Standing: It involves building ties with similar political actors. In our case, though the protests were started by the affected people at the village level as these gathered momentum connections with the other protestors of a similar profile were made by successively articulating the grievances though not enough to become a movement. Ironically many ground-level workers of CPI(M) leaving behind their political affinities also came to show their solidarity with the protestors.

In this way, one can find that the protests enjoyed an amount of ‘relative autonomy’ based on the spontaneous action by the people. However, in contrast to the food movements of 1959 and 1966, it failed to envelop a larger region of the state. The next section is devoted to understanding this.

5.11. Comparing the ‘Ration Riots’ with the Food Movements of 1959 and 1966

After studying the whole episode of ‘ration riots’ and the government’s and opposition’s reaction to it we can identify some factors that could *probably* explain why the ‘ration riots’ did not transform into a full-fledged food movement like those of 1959 and 1966.

- i) **Using the Legislative Space and Mobilising the Masses:** While in the case of the movement of 1959 the leftist and other opposition parties adopted a two-way strategy to fight the battle of the food movement; a) raising the issue of food crisis in the state legislative assembly as well as in parliament in New Delhi thereby drew the attention of the public and media, and b) mobilising the protestors through party machinery as well as Price Increase

and Famine Resistance Committee (PIFRC),¹⁰⁸ during the ‘ration riots’ the reaction and strategy of the opposition parties were not up to the mark and the protests were almost leaderless chaos. The opposition also failed to make the issue popular and mobilise the agitators in favour of them.

- ii) **The Different Strategy of the Opposition:** In the case of ‘ration riots’ although Mamata Banerjee, the leader of the main opposition party in West Bengal called for a ‘food movement’ the party lacked adequate and competent party machinery to disperse the protest across the state thereby garnering wide public support. But in 1959 the Left parties who were erstwhile in the opposition decided to organise street corner meetings in the different parts of the state. This strategy was to help them in two ways, first, garnering more public support, and second, maintaining pressure on the government for an impartial probe into the police atrocities, and demanding compensation to the families of killed and wounded.¹⁰⁹ During the events of ‘ration riots’ instead of mounting the pressure on the state government for providing compensation, the leader of the opposition Banerjee found compensating the families herself. This strategy of the opposition in 2007 stood in stark contrast from its counterpart in 1959.
- iii) **Involvement of Civil Society:** During the food movements of 1959 and, especially in 1966 we have seen the involvement of civil society in support of the protests. Many eminent personalities of the premier academic institutions of Kolkata (erstwhile Calcutta) criticised the government in the strongest possible words.¹¹⁰ Nonetheless, many citizens wrote letters to the editors of various newspapers to express their anger on the question of the food crisis and the government’s handling of the situation. However, during

our archival study on the 'ration riots' we have not found such type of involvement of civil society.

- iv) **Using the Urban Space:** While in 1959 the heat of the protest was spread to the districts after Left parties organised a rally in Kolkata the capital of the state and the nerve centre of state politics on 31st August in case of the food movement of 1966 the protests were started in the districts then the heat waves reached Kolkata.¹¹¹ In both cases using metropolitan space was common, which had not happened in the case of 'ration riots' in 2007.

Although the 'ration riots' did not become a state-wide food movement and faded away from the popular memory after some months of tumultuous events the protestors retained the spirit. They decided to take part in the upcoming panchayat election of 2008, which is worth discussing at length.

5.12. From Popular Politics to the Democratic Change

After traversing the whole episode of the tumultuous events, it appears that in a small span of time the protests stretched their radius across the villages and then districts thereby took more deprived population within its fold and bought a sense of discomfort for the ruling alliance which perceived to be a 'populist' one.

In the light of our above discussion, we can understand that 'ration riots' occurred when the existing food security mechanisms failed to deliver the requirement of the people. And the masses come forward to make their demands in the ways that the ideal structure of liberal constitutional democracy hardly permits. In our case, we can observe that the decision to take direct and instant, often violent, action against the corrupted dealers was widely accepted by the people.

The 'ration riots' as a form of the popular form of protest ignited the villagers against a 'corrupt' system of PDS in favour of the underprivileged or exploited ones and united the people to achieve a common goal. The language of the protest connotes that the villagers had perceived that their goals will be best met by the direct action of the masses. But the protestors most of whom belonged to the BPL category were able to draw anything from the 'own'/ruling party, popularly known as '*Goriber Dol*' (The party for the poor).

The 2008 panchayat elections in West Bengal witnessed some popular wrath against the political regime in this regard. Some of the panchayats and panchayat samity of the districts under study witnessed a change in the guard. These villages also witnessed the events of 'ration riots'. In the upcoming lines by focusing on exclusive case studies we will make humble attempts to understand was there any relationship between the 'ration riots' in 2007 and the change in guard in the 2008 panchayat elections.

5.12.1. Villages of Selarpur, Kuitha, and Jatra of Sahapur Panchayat of Dubrajpur block of Birbhum District

The Sahapur panchayat of the Dubrajpur block of Birbhum district was occupied by a party in the panchayat elections in 2008 which was not so much familiar till that date. Here the Left parties had a serious defeat in the whole Birbhum district in the 2008 panchayat elections.

Naresh Sadhu and Santi Sadhu were the two brothers, ran their ration shops from the same place with seven villages in their jurisdiction and had other businesses too.

Both were very rich and needless to say that it has been a tradition that in rural West Bengal rich people had command over the economy and politics. The two adjoining villages named Selarpur and Kuitha under the Sahapur panchayat of Dubrajpur block of Birbhum district where the villagers protested to show their anger against the malpractices done by the siblings. Villagers of Selarpur and Kuitha have told¹¹² that they were anticipating that something went wrong because the customers of other neighbouring villages were getting their allocations regularly while they were denied.

One night they had caught the accused brothers red-handed while they were trafficking the allocated rice of the ration shops by a truck to somewhere. It had been also alleged that the villagers hardly got their weekly allocated quota, besides, they were used to get trashy materials while the allocated ingredients were smuggled to the open market. “Several times, the commodities went to black-market from Dubrajpur (Block level) and also there was maldistribution in the district level too from where the dealers used to lift their shares for the FPSs. To cover it up the dealers used to provide pretexts to the common people”.¹¹³ To deal with the dealer brothers, people had decided to follow the same way the villagers of the adjoining village of Sahapur treated Rajibul Alam who had also been accused of doing malpractices. The villagers of Sahapur had physically assaulted the accused dealer and the presence of police forced him to promise them rupees 300 per APL cardholder.

However, as directed by Maulana Nazrul Haq¹¹⁴, a religious influential Table in the village of Kuitha and other adjoining villages who enjoyed a charismatic authority,

the villagers of Selarpur and Kuitha prevented themselves from taking any kind of violent measures. They went for a dialogue with the alleged dealers who were allegedly ‘backed’ by the CPI(M) as the villagers affirmed. Thousands of people gathered that easily transformed the dealer’s house into a ‘peoples’ court’. The accused dealers faced some serious queries and charges from the protestors regarding the rationing system and in the end, they confessed their misdeeds.

Under the direction of Maulana Haq, who had fought the assembly election of 2006 under the banner of Peoples Democratic Conference of India (PDCI), erstwhile unregistered under the Election Commission of India, the villagers had decided to gather themselves under the banner of PDCI to fought the panchayat elections of 2008. In meantime, the PDCI decided to form a conglomeration with all the opposition parties namely, AITC, Indian National Congress (INC) to fight against the ruling alliance. PDCI was able to win the highest share of the seats of Sahapur panchayat followed by INC while AITC hardly won any seats. The result of the panchayat election of 2008 of Sahapur panchayat is tabulated below.

Table 5.4: The List of the Winning Candidates at Sahapur Gram Panchayat

Seat Name	Wining Candidates	Party
I/1 Woman	Biva Kaibartya	Independent
II/2 General	Lakhiram Murmu	Independent
III/3 General	Ashnara Bengam	Independent
V/5 General	Runa Lilya	Independent
VII/7 General	Raihan Sekh	Independent

VII/8 General	Begam Mamtaj	Indian National Congress
IX/10 General	Abdur Sabar Sk	Indian National Congress

Source: West Bengal State Election Commission

The winning candidate from INC, Abdus Sabur Sk¹¹⁵ has told the present researcher that the TPDS scam was the main cause for the people to partook in the democratic political arena but not the sole one. He also alleged that ‘corruption’ by the ruling LF in other social assistance schemes namely, Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Mid-day Meal Scheme (MMS), MGNREGS, was also manifested in front of the people. The corruption in TPDS felt like salt on the wound and acted as a trigger to outburst the stacked popular anger. It also came up during the conversation with the villagers that they had to bear a huge amount of dissatisfaction for the ruling regime, especially dissatisfaction with the events at Nandigram. People like Raihan Sekh¹¹⁶ who was absent from the agitation won under the banner of PDCI previously not interested in party-politics stood up for the common cause.

Mrs. Ashnara Begam,¹¹⁷ an inhabitant of the adjoining Jatra village, the former panchayat pradhan from CPI(M) of Sahapur stood up as a candidate from PDCI and elected. But there is a story which yet to is explored behind her passage to PDCI. She had been enjoying the office since 1998, expelled on 20th December 2007 only after the motion of no confidence tabled against her by CPI(M). On 20th December she was informed by a letter on the motion of no confidence against her from Firoz Mirdha, the deputy chief of the panchayat including another nine members namely, Anil Bauri, Kanon Rojok, Madhabi Dome, Kaji Nasim Begam, and others. Although the party alleged her of being ‘corrupted’ but failed to prove it.

Erstwhile the Sahapur panchayat comprised 13 members, 12 from CPI(M), and one from Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP). Among twelve members from CPI(M), nine went against her. During the interview at her house with the present researcher, she recollected that it was nothing but a conspiracy against her by her party as she opposed them and tried to resist them from doing ‘corruption’ as well as ‘nepotism’ in social assistance schemes, especially in MGNREGS.

One higher-level leader of CPI(M), Dilip Ganguly stated that “she is not able to work in harmony with others”.¹¹⁸ He also asserted that she had linkages with PDCI. This statement resembles that made by Ashnara Begam herself that she was unable to work (complicit in ‘malpractice’) in harmony with the other members of her party but denied any linkages with PDCI when she was in CPI(M).

Gradually she became a thorn to her colleagues. She sarcastically remarked that “a voluminous book could be written if someone wants to count the misdeeds of four years made by Firoz Mirdha the deputy chief of the panchayat, Sanjay Singh the health executive of panchayat samity, Haidar Ali the member of the local committee, Shayampada Saha the work-loader of panchayat”.¹¹⁹ The former female leader of CPI(M) also said that it was her father Mr. Abdul Haq who became the first secretary of Dubrajpur block in 1978 who had contributed to building the base of CPI(M) in this area. Her father also raised his voice against the misdeeds made by the party. Later, Haq resigned from the party, drove by a suspicion of facing the motion of no confidence.

In the meantime, all the opposition parties came up to support her. To consolidate the public opinion in their favour they arranged a protest rally. The conclusion which emerged from the gathering was that to transform the ‘party-driven’ panchayat into a ‘people-centered’ panchayat, Ashnara made herself repellent to her party.¹²⁰ As a response, Haidar Hosen the secretary of the local committee of CPI(M) whom Ashnara alleged of being corrupted, issued a *fatwa* for boycotting the ICDS center which was under her jurisdiction on the allegation of stealing the allocated commodities like rice, pulse, edible oil of the respected Anganwadi Centre. But Abdul Hasid the BDO of Dubrajpur and Biplab Sen the Child Development Project Officer (CDPO) of the Anganwadi Centre said that they have no information regarding any kind of theft in the concerned center. The common villagers also kept faith in her. The CDPO further stated that to run Anganwadi Centre without any obstacles people should be involved. The former panchayat pradhan expressed her frustration in these words: “*Bam sorkarer kaj korte giye emon purosakar jutbe, vabini*”¹²¹ (I have never thought that I would get such a reward for doing the work for the LF government). Later on, the district secretary of CPI(M) accepted that she was innocent.¹²² In her struggle against the ruling party, the common villagers, all the opposition parties especially the PDCI stood beside her.

The panchayat election of 2008 was knocking on the door and fresh wounds of ‘ration riots’ indulged the masses to decide the former CPI(M) panchayat Pradhan as the aspirant from PDCI to fight against the ruling party which not much surprisingly led her to victory.

5.12.2. Abinashpur village of Suri (II) Block of Birbhum

Abinashpur is a multi-caste-and-community village of the Suri (II) block of Birbhum district with a population of 1500. While the Muslim and Schedule Castes (SC) have a large share in the population, Hindu middle castes like Sadgopes had a handful of shares. People from the BPL category had been deprived for a long time owing to their insufficient knowledge about the allocated grains. To make things worst many villagers did not know that they belonged to the BPL category.

Rumour here was also spread like a wildfire. Like other cases, the villagers approached the alleged ration dealer Sisir Bhandari at his residence from where he used to run his ration shop. After some scuffling, he admitted his misdeeds, malpractices which include retaining the cards, keep ghost ration cards, cheating, ill-treatment of the customers. However, he agreed to pay compensation in terms of giving each BPL cardholder an amount of Rs. 250/- within 15 days. In the meantime, police came to rescue him. There were also allegations of the CPI(M) leader's alliance with the dealer.¹²³

Like all other cases, the dealer quickly washed off his hands from his earlier promise. This made the furious mass reassembled. Earlier a date was fixed for distributing the compensation when the crowd arrived at the dealer's house he was not at home. The furious mass had started throwing stones at the dealer's house that caused some damages to the glass windows. Someone had conveyed this message to the dealer. As a result, he came back soon to his house followed by the sub-divisional food controller and the local cops. A meeting was held. Where it was decided that the dealer would only have to pay rupees 150 or 10 kg of wheat. But

the food controller declared that a fine could not be imposed; instead, the dealer would distribute the due quota. But the mob did not shake their heads in affirmation. In this case, also the CPI (M) and the local administration interfered with the motive of supporting the dealer. After some negotiation, another agreement came into existence by deciding that he would only have to pay Rs. 150/- to per APL cardholder with no success. In the meantime, his license was cancelled by the administration.

Table 5.5: The List of the Wining Candidates at Abinashpur Panchayat Samity

Seat name	Name of the Candidate	Category	Party
Abinashpur -PS/10	Dulal Besra	Scheduled Tribe	Independent
Abinashpur -PS/11	Satyaban Bagdi	Scheduled Caste	Independent

Source: West Bengal State Election Commission

The villagers decided to approached the democratic political arena which led them to form *Janaswartho Raksha Sangram Committee* (The Committee for struggling and Safeguarding the People's Interest), a conglomeration of the opposition parties like Congress, BJP, PDCI, SUCI to fight the CPI(M). In the panchayat election in 2008, however, the CPI (M) could retain the panchayat but lost the Gram Samsad which it had been occupying for a long time. It was Sanjit Dalui the chairman of the panchayat samity who was defeated by Satyaban Bagdi, the candidate from the newly formed alliance. Candidates from many other political parties were stood up as independent candidates under the banner of *Janaswartho Raksha Sangram Committee* and captured three seats including Abinashpur.

5.12.3. Khiruli of Sattor panchayat of Bolpur Block of Birbhum

It was Abdus Samad¹²⁴ who came forward to united the masses to crusading for their birth-right. The village of Khiruli of Sattor panchayat of Bolpur block had also witnessed turmoil owing to malpractice in TPDS. In June 2007, a rumor had reached the village like a wildfire that the local ration dealer had not distributed the entitled quota to the APL cardholders for about 11 months. The name of the ration dealer is Susanta Ghosh, who stays about one km away from Khiruli, is a declared RSP supporter.

Khiruli is a Muslim dominated village that has a population of 1000, with one Gram Samsad seat which was occupied by CPI(M) in the 2003 panchayat election. As a consequence of the rumor, the villagers went to the dealer for an explanation. Villagers of adjoining villages like Radhakestopur, Keshobpur, Bergram, Rahamatpur, Narayanpur, Mala, Debgram, Adibasipara, Baralpara also came to take part in the discussion. However, the discussion suddenly transformed into contention. To counter the popular anger in the presence of the police of Parui police station the dealer made the people assured of delivering the due quota. Moulana Abdus Samad decided to inform the other villagers of the meeting that led him to make an announcement on loudspeakers across the villages. As a result, he had litigation against him by the concerned dealer and the case is still (2017) on its way.

In the first instance, the dealer denied such allegations but, in the end, he accepted with an attitude of not being apologetic. This made the villagers furious with him, however, some local men had managed to keep the situation under control by

forcing the dealer to pay a cash penalty on the fixed date of 9th July 2007. Though oppositions like AITC, SUCI, and the Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Hind also tuned up their voices in the same cord but were hardly in the frontline in the whole episode.

On the fixed date, at a local high school ground of Bergram, the villagers accompanied by the supporters of different political parties including CPI(M), gathered for the meeting but the dealer instead of facing the villagers, as his wife said, went to attend a CPI(M)'s meeting. The crowd left the place to gather for one more time within two or three days but the dealer was continuously saying that the CPI(M) has told him not to keep the earlier promises. During the group interview, the villagers had told that the local CPI(M) leader Sukumar Das was his right hand. It was also alleged that the dealer got some support from the administration owing to his closeness with the ruling party. However, the CPI(M) directed him to pay back some entitlement in terms of grain but not in cash. After releasing some instalments for two months the story went to oblivion. But the spirit remained with the people found manifestation in the 2008 panchayat election when a seat won by the opposition candidate Rinu Bagdi of PDCI. Maulana Samad claimed that the resonance of the popular agitation regarding corruption in TPDS played a vital part in winning the PDCI candidate.

5.12.4. Amarpur gram panchayat of Ausgram (II) Block of Burdwan District

Amarpur gram panchayat of Ausgram (II) block of Burdwan district had witnessed a shift in power as a result of 'ration riot'. Bishnupur and Belemath were the villages under the dealership of Musha Molla who found guilty for his malpractices. There were several other social security schemes indicating errors. However, the villagers perceived that the scam in TPDS overtook the other malpractices and they approached the dealer to enquire into the entitlements of the cardholders and found that they had been cheated for a long time. As a consequence, they had demanded compensation from the dealer who was infamous for his harsh behaviour with no success.

Then the villagers by overnight have formed an organisation named *Gonoandolon Committee* (The Committee for people's movement) and approached the BDO of Ausgram (II) block, food inspector, and district controller of food and supply of Burdwan to file a deputation. The memorandum which was precisely reflected an irregular working of the TPDS was signed by 500 villagers representing all the households of the villages. But they did achieve any support from the administration. The villagers gathered themselves for a common cause and appealed to the different levels of bureaucratic setups of TPDS with no success. And, after a few days, some local leaders of the ruling party arranged a victory procession in support of the alleged dealer.

Then the organisation of the villagers decided to democratically fight the ‘evil alliance’ of the dealers and ruling party members. During the open-ended interview with the present researcher, Sheikh Bahadur told that they got support from INC, PDCI, and the local social activist Ms. Manisha Banerjee. However, the people joined any of these political parties rather they settled with their newly formed organisation.¹²⁵ In the upcoming panchayat election in 2008, the villagers nominated Debdas Mete, Ashir Molla, and Sekh Bahadur who stood up in the election as independent candidates and won.

Table 5.6: The Election Result of Amarpur Gram Panchayat

Name of the Seat	Total Electors	Votes Polled	Votes Rejected	OSN	Name of the Candidate	Name of the Party	Votes Secured
II/2 SC	983	840	18	1	Jayanta Biswas	CPI(M)	313
				2	Debdas Mete	Independent	509
IV/5 General	711	637	6	1	Arfan Sekh	CPI(M)	307
				2	Sekh Bahadur	Independent	324
V/6 General	1343	1204	13	1	Abul Kalam Sekh	CPI(M)	545
				2	Ashir Molla	Independent	646

Source: West Bengal State Election Commission

After the election was over, not surprisingly the sudden change in local power structure put pressure on the ration dealer that made him pay a compensation of Rs. 66,780 shared by the 742 cardholders, each cardholder got Rs.90/- to her/his share.¹²⁶ But the story continued, in the upcoming months, the committee had reopened a market near the Bishnupur bus stand and a *haat* (village market) which

was shut down by the ruling party goons 22 years ago. The same type of defeating story¹²⁷ of the ruling party also emerged from Sitalgram of Birbhum where the CPM failed to secured enough votes.

In the above discussion, we have seen how the corruption in various social security schemes especially in TPDS made the villagers furious to fight against the ruling regime. While the corruption in TPDS acted like a trigger to take bold steps the events at Nandigram had a considerable amount of influence on the villagers' minds. The demands raised by the people were not satisfied with the party. Therefore, the anger was remained with the populace and found a way out in the panchayat election of 2008. The violation of the social right more specifically the right to food led the people to use their political right which successfully cornered the ruling Front, particularly CPI(M).

5.13. Understanding the Change: The Metamorphosis of the Party and the Atmosphere of Protests of Popular Demands

In the previous paragraphs, we have discussed the political fallouts of 'ration riots'. We have seen how the candidates of CPI(M) failed to hold popular trust. In the next lines by taking an analytical position we will try to understand how the support base of the party deteriorated.

During the agitations, there had been several instant responses from the ruling party/government. First, in some places the local ruling party members 'sheltered' the alleged dealer. Secondly, the police and the administration appeared on the stage only to back the dealers. Therefore, the dealers did not have serious damage.

Therefore, we can observe that the government adopted the logic of domination instead of negotiation and any attention paid to the local democratic impulses.

However, one might remember that it was the Left in West Bengal which connected the masses and organised the popular movements during the '50s and '60s, made two brief attempts, and in 1977 emerged victorious after an almost decade long Congress rule.

Popular protests like 'ration riots' can be seen as a sign of the growing dissatisfaction of people that offered them a uniform pattern across the localities, villages, districts owing to a shared structural origin. In the absence of an organic link with the people, the government decided to handle it through administrative mechanisms. It was the same bureaucracy depending upon which in its initial years the LF implemented the populist policies like land reforms and operation *barga* and mobilised the masses on these policies and through party machinery, which helped them to build a huge support base among the rural poor.

However, a chasm gradually grew between the party and the people. In the absence of two-way communication with the masses, during the 'ration riots', the party to sought to describe the 'ration riots' as 'conspiracy' and the party had no control over these events. The disenchanted masses now discovered the presence of the party as an obstacle to their biological survival. As a result, these social groups started to search for new alternatives/substitutes to continue their transaction in the governmental process. And the alternatives were found in the form of ad hoc organisations like *Janaswartho Raksha Sangram Committee*, *Bhumi Ucched Protirodh Committee*, *Gonoandolon Committee*, *Krishi Jomi Raksha Committee*

(The Committee for Saving the Agricultural Lands), and political parties like PDCI at the local level and AITC at the state level. The latter gained the majority in the 2011 West Bengal assembly elections and formed the new government.

Another factor that could probably help us to understand the change was the ongoing political scenario in the state. The events of Nandigram and Singur and ‘ration riots’ should not be treated differently rather these movements/protests had some features in common.

The common features are:

- First, these popular actions were issue-specific, thereby;
- secondly, many ad-hoc issue-based organisations were formed;
- thirdly, and most importantly the demands of the people were strictly related to the *basic necessity to maintain life*, i.e., land and food.

However, the protests had own autonomy. Taking these factors into consideration, we can argue that the snowballing of popular demands (food, land) of the people made the popular politics reappear (after the decade of 1950s, 1960s) in the state in the last years of Left rule. And this reappearance of popular politics signified that the ruling regime became unable to address the popular demands. As a result, the LF had to face defeat in the legislative elections in 2011.

5.14. Summary

During the years of 2006-07, the state politics of West Bengal was on the boil on the issues of Singur and Nandigram. In the financial year 2006-07 while there was a sudden decline in allocation under the TPDS the state government was also unable

to lift the allocated quota coupled with a price hike of the food commodities in the open market directed the APL population to the FPSs thus created heavy pressure on the TPDS. For a long time with the help of ruling party leaders, the ration dealers had been doing malpractices in the TPDS. And, in this time of extra pressure on the TPDS, they failed to satisfy the population by delivering their entitled quotas.

The ration dealers were always subjected to doubts in the popular eyes and during this time when their misdoings came to prominence the deprived people, in the absence of proper punishments of the alleged dealers by the administration and lack of sympathy from the LF particularly CPI(M), decided to engage themselves in direct collective action popularly known 'ration riots' that later suppressed by the government.

The protests were spontaneous and spread horizontally across the villages and the districts. Although attempts were made to bring the protests under the vertical clutches of seasoned politicians the same remained the 'peoples' protests' in the true sense of the term and did not become a full-fledged movement. After some months of tumultuous activities, the protests calmed down but the protesters retained the spirit. In the meantime, many ad-hoc non-political organisations were floated and the villagers decided to fight the next panchayat election of 2008 as independent candidates.

In 2008 it was found that in some of the gram panchayats and panchayat samity the candidates from CPI(M) lost against the independent candidates. The protests in Singur, Nandigram, and over the 'corrupt ration system' occurred during the same

time although they had their own autonomous spaces. The basic demands of all these protests were strictly related to biological survival (land and food) that signified that the ruling regime was not any more concerned about the biological needs of the people. As a result, the LF tasted its maiden defeat in the 2011 legislative elections in West Bengal.