Chapter VI

Conclusion

The journey of the present research began with the goal to understand the relationship between hunger and politics and the importance of Right to Food, especially in the context of the Indian state of West Bengal. In the introductory chapter, attempts were made to understand and define the matter theoretically as well as mentioned the concrete instances of three cases: a) the alleged 'hunger deaths' at Amlasol and b) at the tea gardens of Dooars; and c) 'ration riots' that broke out in some central districts of West Bengal. The present researcher has sought to understand the theoretical research questions based on these case studies, elaborated later in three separate chapters.

In the second chapter, we have undertaken a study of some of the famines in different parts of the world. After traversing through the famines particularly, the two Bengal famines of 1774 and 1943, we observed that how bad policies by the colonial State had forced a million lives to perish. Also, in the case of other famines under the study, we have understood how the states have direct or indirect roles behind the occurrence of the famines. This study helps us to understand that despite differences in political systems, whether it is monarchy, colonial rule or post-colonial democracy, famines have always been a common feature in all the cases.

Our discussion on famines was followed by a discussion on two turbulent food movements of 1959 and 1966 in West Bengal. In this discussion, we noticed how hunger/food scarcity ignited popular anger across the state. These two food movements can also be observed as the beginning of politics of hunger in the post-

independent West Bengal. During the food crisis apart, the Left parties mobilised the masses on a host of diverse issues. The question of food was foremost among them as it is related to the biological survival. These food movements along with other popular movements in the 1950s and 1960s remained very instrumental in garnering the popular support against the Congress government that helped them to win the 1977 assembly elections. After occupying the power, the Left Front (LF) government took many 'pro-poor' initiatives.

After that, in the three consecutive chapters, we have concentrated on the three areas where we have found that how the governmental social security schemes failed to achieve their desired goal as a result the question of 'hunger' reappeared in the state and the alleged incident of 'hunger deaths' took place, which generated different political fallouts across the places during the last phase of Left Front (LF) rule in the state.

6.1. Hunger, Acts and Legal Mechanisms in India

Before taking an in-depth study of the three study areas, we have also discussed the multiple initiatives that the government of India had undertaken to provide social security to its citizens. The state had framed several social security schemes like targeted public distribution system (TPDS), Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), Mid-day Meal Scheme (MMS), Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) etc. The schemes sought to address the issue of hunger in multiple ways.

However, during our study it is found that although the formal structure of the Indian State promotes welfare, the ground reality remains different. Our findings have also revealed that the State had failed to secure the right to food which is the prime among the social rights of its citizens. According to the Indian constitution, violation of Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP) are not justiciable in court, therefore, the state cannot be held accountable or dragged down to the court in the case of infringement of DPSP. But in case the State failed to safeguard the fundamental rights of the citizens, Article 21 (Right to Life) in our case, then the citizens can seek redress.

It was on this ground, the Supreme Court of India, which is the apex court in the country, came forward to safeguard the fundamental right of the citizens, when it was revealed in 2001 that food wastage and hunger were going hand in hand. And the case was taken up to the level of the Supreme Court by the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), which kick-started a historical journey towards the *right to food*. We have also discussed how the apex court issued orders for securing the Right to Food and appointed Commissioners to make the court aware of the ground level scenario.

The importance of the constitutional provisions of the right to food, in this context, can hardly be overemphasised. The Indian Constitution is the theoretical ground upon which the modern Indian state was built. An attentive reading of the Indian constitution, especially of the DPSP (part IV, Article 36-51), would help us to understand that the Indian state is a welfare state. It is reflected not only through the DPSP but also through the Fundamental Rights (part III, Article 12-35).

The welfare state is a system of government in which the state takes up initiatives to do the welfare of the people by protecting and promoting the social wellbeing of the citizens. In his magnum opus *Citizenship and Social Class and Other Essays* (1950), Thomas Humphrey Marshall argued that the right of citizenship must incorporate civil, political as well as social rights.[1] Therefore, it is desired from a welfare State that it should provide its citizens with the right to food and adequate employment opportunity in the broader context of social justice.

6.2. The Questions of Entitlement and Distributive Justice

We have tried to understand our research problem by the theoretical framework of distributive justice as envisaged by John Rawls. Nonetheless, we also opted for the entitlement approach offered by Amartya Sen as a complementary tool to distributive justice. After that, we conceptually divided the social security schemes in India into two broad categories. On the one hand, there were schemes like Targeted Public Distribution Scheme (TPDS), Integrated Child Development Service (ICDS), Midday Meal Schemes (MMS) that are designed to directly deliver food to the citizens and on the other, there was employment generating schemes like Sampoorna Grameen Rojgar Yojana (SGRY), later, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Schemes (MGNREGS) to make the citizens capable to achieve their entitlements. Using these two axes then we focused on our three case studies. In the case of Amlasol, we found that how the conditions of both kinds of social security schemes were in shambles owing to lack of political and public monitoring. Therefore, the villagers were almost solely dependent on the adjoining forests to earn money to buy food. Since the meagre TPDS was not enough for them, and they

lacked in money to buy it from the ‘open market’, they had to mostly depend on inedible forest products. That too became difficult, after the Central Reserved Police Force (CRPF) encircled the village and other villages of the area including the adjacent forests, to deal with the Maoist insurgents: they were prevented from using their sole resource for food. Perhaps, this was the reason behind the alleged incidents of ‘starvation deaths’ in Amlasol.

We have also found that how the closed tea gardens of Dooars region also shared the same destiny as Amlasol. Before the closure of the gardens, the tea labours were entitled to weekly rations and other basic facilities like medical care, education provided by the garden owners under the plantation labour act, 1951. Once the owners left the gardens, the workers began to face serious obstacles to buy food because they were not entitled to TPDS and other employment generating schemes of the government of India. Moreover, owing to the scarcity of jobs in the locality and the same condition faced by almost all the gardens the workers and their family members struggled to find any alternative jobs. So, we can observe how all the doors of income were closed for the tea garden workers and their family members. In the meantime, the Supreme Court of India and the state government of West Bengal came up to secure their right to food but as the governmental data and field study show none of these had the positive outcome. Perhaps this was the reason behind alleged ‘hunger deaths’ of the tea plantation labours and their family members. Although, there had been no reports of ‘hunger deaths’, we have also seen: how ‘ration riots’ in some districts broke out over the charge of “maldistribution” of food grains in TPDS.

From the above findings, it is clearly evident that in these cases, a large number of the population had suffered to get access to basic condition to lead a healthy and active life under a liberal democratic system whose constitution secures the right to life. To realise the right to food it is essential to create conditions that can help the citizens to become capable to access their entitlement. In our areas of study, we have not found any significant measure that could pull the citizens out of the condition of hunger. Therefore, the citizens, in these areas, had failed to realise their right to food, since realising the right to food under a welfare State is a matter of *just distribution* of food. Rights can also be observed as claims of the individuals that the State must secure by recognising and thereby creating conditions that can make the individuals enjoy the right.

However, the findings of our study suggest that there were many loopholes in the social security schemes, especially in TPDS in West Bengal (2000-10) clouds over the question of distributive justice during this period. Our study of the history of West Bengal, especially the events of food movements in 1959, 1966 has shown us how problems in PDS can ignite popular anger and can become a game-changer (which had its reflection in the state assembly elections of 1967). We found a small-scale repetition of 1967 in the events of 'ration riots' in 2007. Very recently, during the present (2020) pandemic conditions, news of disturbances in TPDS and subsequent contentious activities by the common people also came up from various parts of West Bengal.[2] This leads us to think that although the State has accepted the principles of just distribution, on many occasions, things remain different at the ground level.

6.3. Liberal Governmentality and Biopolitics

We have also tried to understand our research problem with the theoretical lens of biopolitics offered by Michel Foucault. This line of inquiry offered us a different perspective to understand the functioning of modern welfare State particularly in the neo-liberal age.

The notion of biopolitics helps us to understand the arrangement of power in the different spheres of life including the biological sphere. Governing the population on this line gave birth to a new set of techniques; technology of rule. These were census, surveys and biometric identification of the population.

In the present study, we have focused on the biological sphere of the population. It is this sense we can say that the process of determining calorie norms (in our case 2400 kcal for rural areas and 2100 kcal for urban areas in India) for the human body, delivering it to the population and calculating it through statistics is an art of government that is the governmentality. In other words, in contrast to a disciplinarian power, it puts emphasis on moulding thereby governing/controlling the peoples' conduct by positive means. The aim is to provide stability to power/State by the interpellation of the Reason of the State in the population through various positive means that ensure consent of the governed. Besides sovereign and disciplinary powers, the modern State is also concerned with the management of life and treats people as resources to be fostered and optimised.

From a Foucauldian viewpoint, the social security schemes of the modern State (the Indian State in our case) implemented by following certain procedures can be seen

as a technique to surveillance, manage and disciplining the population thereby by maintaining the docility of the same. This process is known as biopolitics.

6.4. Hunger and Popular Politics: Tracing the Location of Protest-Culture in West Bengal

In the third chapter, we have discussed on the politics of 'starvation deaths' at Amlasol. In the case of Amlasol, our findings suggest that there are many interrelated causes that *most probably* created the situation of hunger in that area. In the fourth chapter, we have studied the events of tea gardens at Dooars. During the same period as Amlasol news of alleged 'starvation deaths' in tea gardens of North Bengal also began to hit the front pages of the leading dailies. In our study on the tea gardens in the Dooars region, we have found how the dilapidated conditions of tea gardens and the improper working of the social security schemes coupled with the shrinking job opportunity in the local market created the situation of hunger in the gardens. Though there were some clashes between the trade unions of the Left Front (LF) the events remained local.

In both the instances, we have witnessed the same reaction from the government. The government claimed that the people did not die of starvation but by diseases. The government had also denied their responsibility and blaming the opposition political party and garden owners at Amlasol and in Dooars respectively for the events. On the other hand, the opposition parties also failed to make the issue of 'starvation deaths' a strong political point of protest movement. This is a point that demands our attention. The reactions of the opposition parties in both the above cases remained confined to that of paying a visit to the areas and criticising the

government. The opposition parties, in contrast with the food movements of 1959 and 1966 in the state, failed to transform these local issues into a state-wide affair. Therefore, it caught less attention of the public across the state and thereby the issue of 'starvation deaths' failed to become a larger political issue by which opposition politics can effloresce.

A major part of the present research was devoted to understand how hunger can play a very vital role in igniting popular protest and altering the matrix of power. To understand this, we have focused on the tumultuous events in the districts of Birbhum and Burdwan in 2007 and subsequent panchayat elections in 2008. If we intend to summarise the main arguments of the thesis then it emerges that both the incidents being taken place in peripheral districts (Paschim Medinipur and Jalpaiguri), the political fallouts remained confined largely in the discourses/practices of the localities. But politics is not all about the discourses but also the repertoire of actions. And, in our case, the popular action occurred in 2007 as a reaction to the alleged 'rampant corruption' of the ration dealers.

In this case, the underprivileged section of the population in some southern districts took to violent means, which transformed the character of politics of hunger in the state and became physical: *material*. Nonetheless, once the common people approached the arena, the issue slipped from the hands of the political parties whether the ruling or the opposition. Therefore, as our study suggests, the protests remained sporadic, spontaneous, horizontal and detached from any vertical organisation of political parties. It is in this sense, we can submit that in the time frame of our study, the 'ration riots' were the only moment when the politics of

hunger became ‘popular’ in the true sense of the term and eventually assumed a political character. This transformation in the character of politics of hunger is worth explaining at length. To understand this better, in the following paragraphs we will undertake a study of three factors namely, a) geographical factor, b) demographical factor and c) temporal factor.

6.4.1. The Geography of Empathy

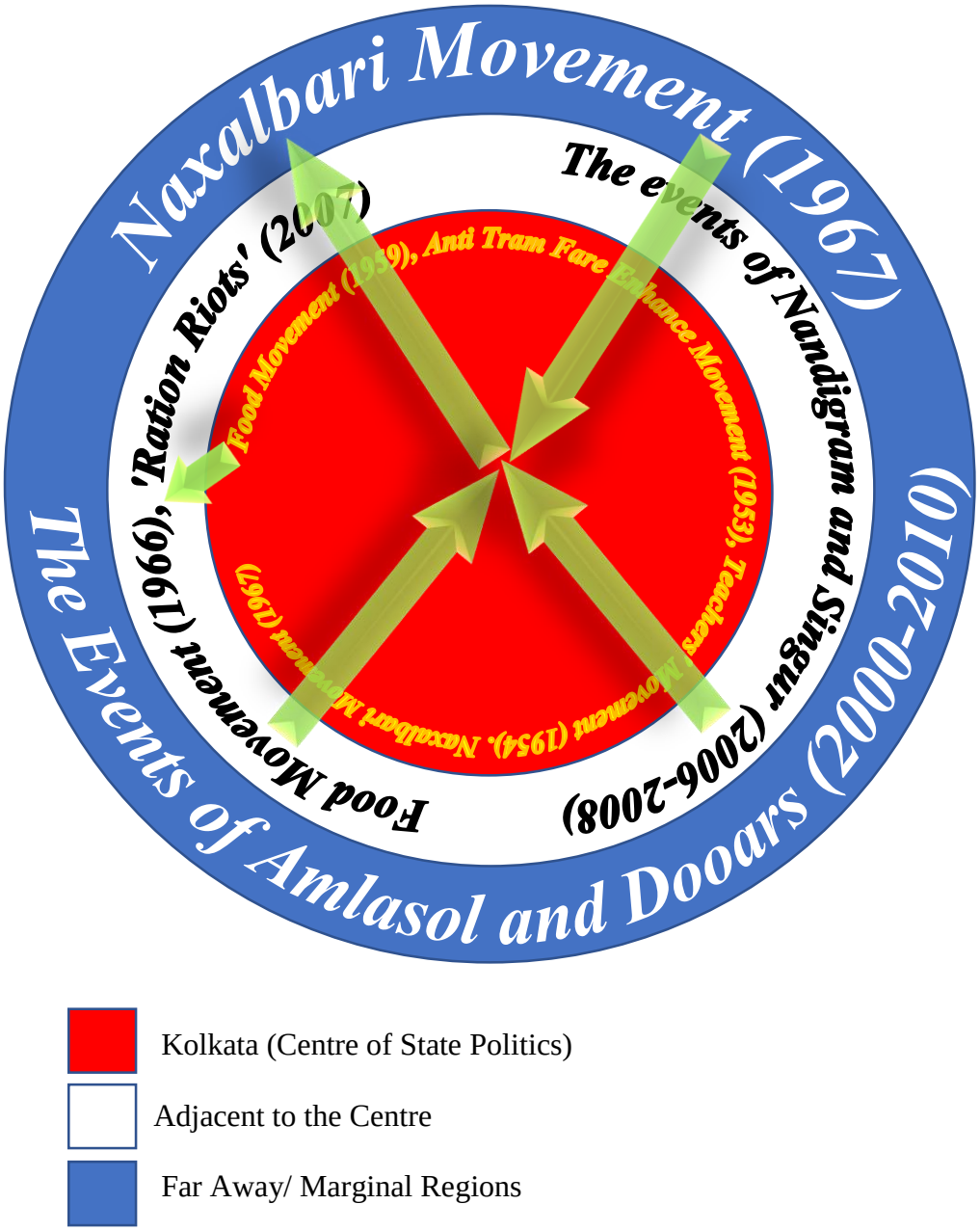
The ‘ration riots’ had occurred in in the districts of Burdwan, Bankura, and Birbhum 2007. Geographically, these districts are situated in the *central zone* of the southern parts of the state. These districts are within a radius of around 150 km from Kolkata, whereas Amlasol (211 km away from Kolkata) is remote and were almost ‘inaccessible’ at the time of the incidents. Dooars is also situated about 591 km away from the state capital. Therefore, compared to the other two places, the people of Burdwan and Birbhum are more politically and physically connected with Kolkata, the nerve centre of state politics. But question may arise that what makes people of the ‘ration riots’ affected districts more politically conscious? The answer to the question lies in the pre-independence as well as the post-independence history of these areas.

Between 1946 and 1947, the peasant organisation of the Communist Party of India (CPI) launched a peasant movement against the landlords demanding to reduce landlord share to one third.[3] The movement had a serious presence in the districts of Birbhum and Burdwan because these two districts, particularly Burdwan, had a huge amount of fertile lands. During those days the members of CPI whether it was the veteran leaders or the students used to approach the villages, stayed there and

mobilise the masses against the landlords. In a nutshell, a sense of protest/resistance was sowed in the popular mind.

After independence, in 1977 the LF ascended to power. The new ruling conglomeration took many 'pro-poor' initiatives, mainly related to lands. Once again, these districts of West Bengal underwent a dramatic change in terms of land ownership. The policy of operation *barga* (giving three fourth of the produce to the registered tiller) was carried out which provided legal protection to the sharecroppers from the eviction by the landowners. As an outcome, two things can be observed. First, a good political consciousness among the common people grew up and second, the Left parties were able to acquire a huge support base. And, with the passage of time these districts popularly became the 'red castle' of the LF for their electoral hold. And, in 2007 when the ruling CPI (M) leaders allegedly 'sheltered' the corrupt ration dealers, the villagers with a legacy of 'protest-culture' disgorge their anger against the government. This leads us to think is there any *location* of 'popular movement'/ protest-culture? It is a fact that the popular movements do not grow everywhere. Let us reconsider our present argument with the help of a *conceptual map* of the state.

Figure 6.1: The Geography of Empathy in West Bengal



Graphical representation by the present researcher

In this conceptual map, the geography of West Bengal has been divided into three different conceptual spheres. The blue one represents the marginal regions like North Bengal and Junglemahals. The white one is the areas that are adjacent to the

centre like the districts of North 24 Parganas, Burdwan, Birbhum, Nandigram and Singur. And the red one is the urban centre that is Kolkata. Here we can find that the movements/issues that were able to garner social as well as political sympathy were either travelled to centre or occurred in the centre.

Let us here also take the example of Naxalbari Movement that broke out in the far away conceptual region of the state. But it became able to garner sympathy because its news reached Kolkata at a time when the left-radicals had formed the First United Front Government. Moreover, it was being led by a radical section of the CPI (M), which had connections with the urban left, and especially the students of Kolkata. The activism among the students in various colleges in Kolkata, especially in the Presidency College *bridged the chasm* (under the ideological influence of Mao Ze Dong) between the town and the country and inaugurated a new radical politics in post-independent West Bengal, which later influenced other parts of India.

In contrast to the Naxalbari movement, the alleged incidents of 'hunger deaths' in Dooars and Amlasol, which belong to the same conceptual region as Naxalbari, did not become popular because its 'waves' did/could not reach the urban centre. Although in both the cases of Naxalbari Movement (1967) and the incidents of Amlasol (2004) there was the involvement of Left radical parties, there were huge differences in terms of their strategies. While the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) CPI (ML), the break-away radical section of the CPIM (which is also popular as 'Naxals') decided to carry forward the movement by 'breaking the barriers' between the town and the country, the CPI(Maoist), on the other hand,

emphasised the importance of guerrilla tactics against the Indian state and remain mostly confined to the hill and jungle infested rough terrains of India: in the case of West Bengal, in the 'junglemahal'. In Amlasol and the adjacent areas they are also known as the Jungle ('Bon' in Bengali) Party. Thus, the *connectivity* that existed during the period of Naxalbari movement was not found in the case of Amlasol.

We can also observe that in contrast to Dooars and Amlasol, how the food movements of 1966 and the 'anti-eviction from land' movements of Singur and Nandigram (2006-07) became popular because they were able to catch the attention of the metropolitan centre. It also explains why despite being turbulent in different localities of the districts why 'ration riots' could not become a full-fledged popular movement in the state. It is also noteworthy that other popular movements that broke out in Kolkata became popular and had spread to other regions like the food movement of 1959. Thus, although the violent protests over the 'corruptions' in PDS in the districts caught some attention, especially after the changes in some rural local bodies' elections, in the case of Dooars and Amlasol, situated in the faraway regions, remained almost unnoticed and protest-less compared to the movements occurred in the urban centre or the regions adjacent to it.

Therefore, it appears that the city has always been the arena, where popular protests get due attention, recognition and become effective. From Paris Commune to Occupy Wall Street to the Arab Spring, history has shown us how cities played a huge task in gathering the masses; where deeper currents of social change rise to the surface. In more recent times, the farmers' protests (2020-21) against the new

'Farmers' Law' (Indian Agricultural Acts, 2020) on the borders of New Delhi, India's capital again testifies our position. Hence, it can be argued that a popular protest may grow at far away regions but if it has to have a wide range of attention and ultimately achieve some amount of 'success', then there must exist some kind of 'connectivity' between the social movement and the nerves of the urban centre: when it happens, a social protest can amplify itself both in terms of intensity as well as magnitude.

6.4.2. The Populace and the 'Serious Politics' of 'Ration Riot'

"The millions-strong masses—and politics begin where millions of men and women are; where there are not thousands, but millions, that is where serious politics begin..."[4]

This is how Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov Lenin (1870-1924) narrated the role of masses played in history. The more the masses involve the more the politics becomes 'serious'. If we perceive the mass involvements in 'ration riots', it would be easier to understand the principal difference between this protest and the politics of hunger in Amlasol and Dooars. Undoubtedly, the former assumed the character of 'serious politics', while the latter ones did not. In the case of 'ration riots', a large number of the affected people played very significant role in igniting and spreading the protest. On the contrary, the situations at the closed tea gardens and at Amlasol, did not affect the population in such a huge magnitude as in the case of the protests over 'maldistribution' of food under TPDS. Moreover, the political culture/political consciousness of the affected people also varied to a great extent across the places.

Therefore, we can understand that a large population of the said districts came under the same umbrella to fight against shared experiences of biological deprivation.

Based on the above arguments one can understand that popular protests have a locational dimension. It does not break out anywhere and the geographical, demographical and political culture play a vital role. Thus, generally speaking, the culture of protest and political and social sympathy are not universal in nature: it has its *locations* in every society. Another major factor, which also plays a significant part in fuelling a popular protest, is that of *time*, i.e., various favourable factors embedded in *particular times*. In our case, the *time* of 'ration riots' matched with the larger temporal frame of Singur and Nandigram movements (2006-07). Below, we will elaborate this point.

6.4.3. Understanding the Time: The Temporal Factor Behind the 'Ration Riots'

During 2006-08, the state politics of West Bengal was witnessing a new phase of popular protests. The incidents like Lalgarh movement (against alleged 'police atrocities' on the common people in the name of 'curbing the Maoists') in West Midnapore and the anti-land grab movements in Nandigram and Singur posed serious questions about the 'pro-poor' image of the LF in popular perception. Therefore, the popular discontent was growing against the ruling regime. It was in this backdrop that the protests over the 'maldistribution' of food burst into the scene and addressed unsympathetically by the government. And the unsatisfied demands/popular anger, as we have discussed in one of our chapters, had found a way out in the next panchayat election of 2008. So, it can be argued that in the

atmosphere of protests the popular anger was already there in place and the maldistribution of food acted as a trigger. Moreover, with all the other ongoing events, the ‘ration riots’ was also that went against the LF. The LF failed to fulfil the various new aspirations of the people. And these unfulfilled demands were rhetorically tied together into a chain of equivalence by the opposition parties mainly All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) that went against the LF in 2011 assembly elections in West Bengal.

6.5. Hunger and Politics: A Dialectical Relationship

Based on our discussions and analyses so far, it can be argued in conclusion that there exists a dialectical relationship between hunger and politics. One determinate the other. In many cases, the failed political management/decisions of the State causes hunger and in turn, in some cases, hunger ignites social protest movements. But only the presence of hunger does not always generate politics because the culture of protest is not universal. It is locational as well as temporal, therefore, not everywhere and in every time, hunger triggers politics. Hunger is universal but its political fallout is particular/local as well as temporal.

6.6. Validating the Hypotheses

At this very moment of concluding our thesis let us recall our hypotheses.

Our first hypothesis was:

The failure of the state government in West Bengal in terms of procurement and distribution of food and implementation of other welfare schemes led to the food crisis and the alleged ‘starvation deaths’ in the decade (2000-2010) of our study.

To interrogate this hypothesis, we have opted for quantitative analysis undertaken in the respective chapters, by gathering data from both primary and secondary sources. After these exercises, it can be said that the data in this regard, found and discussed so far, have validated the first hypothesis.

Our second hypothesis was:

The corruption in TPDS and mal-distribution on one hand and the failure of the state government to check the corruption and ensure fair distribution on the other led to the 'ration riots' in few districts of West Bengal.

This hypothesis has been examined both from a quantitative as well as qualitative point of view. This has also been validated because all the data from field study and their analyses have confirmed the second Hypothesis.

Our third hypothesis was:

The mismanagement of TPDS in some southern districts followed by popular protests and disturbances had impacts over the results in the election of a few panchayat constituencies in 2008, which in the larger context of anti-eviction movements in Singur and Nandigram, also signalled shifts in the rural support base of the LF.

To verify the above hypothesis, attempts were made theoretically and analytically based on data collected by our field studies as well as from archival sources. In addition, in the concluding chapter, we have also taken the help of a conceptual

picture (drawn by the present researcher). All these have enabled us to validate the third hypothesis.

Thus, in the final analysis, it can be humbly claimed that as a whole, through a large quantitative and qualitative data and their analyses, the hypotheses, developed in the beginning, stand validated.