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AGRARIAN TRANSFORMATION, LAND REFORMS AND CHALLENGES TO DEVELOPMENT

Abstract

Against the backdrop of transition of agrarian society of India from colonialism to post colonialism and thereafter to post neoliberalism this paper endeavours to explain the broad processes of transition in the agrarian social structure in India as has taken shape with the introduction new agrarian policies and land reforms. It elucidates the interlinkages between the land reform and economic development within the framework of agrarian questions. The paper is presented in six interrelated sections. Section I is conceptual one discussing in brief the basic concerns of agrarian questions. Section II discusses the historical trajectory of agrarian transition in India . In section III the emerging facets of peoples movements and land reforms are discussed focusing on West Bengal. In chapter IV and V the emerging agrarian scenario and agrarian social structure at the grassroots of West Bengal are presented. Section VI is concluding one.

Keywords: Land reform, agrarian question, peoples movements, capitalism, operation barga.

I. The Conceptual Backdrop:

Capitalism has emerged out of industrial revolution, got its scope expanded with the expansion of industrialisation. It argued that traditionally capitalism has evaded direct investment in agriculture due to several traditional barriers like those of limited cycle of production and profits, limited scale of operation, dependency on weather etc. However over the centuries both capitalism and agriculture have changed their forms and directions of transitions within the newly emerged techno economic eco-systems. Hence to overcome the barriers of traditional agriculture capitalism has focused on agribusiness by way of controlling the pre- and post-production activities, even the production process through mechanization of agriculture. In recent years corporatization through expansion of capitalism in agriculture has brought new dynamics therein by way of affecting the lives and livelihood of agricultural work force and the agrarian questions therein.

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The agrarian question which was initially raised by in 1899 by Karl Kautsky, as to “What is the relationship between the structure of agriculture and the quality of life for producers and rural communities, or how does capitalism take hold of agriculture in wake of increasing corporatization of agriculture in Europe at that time, has acquired added significance among the academia in context of corporatization of agriculture under economic neoliberalism in the contemporary world (Kautsky, K.1899). Terry Byres (1995), Bernstein (1996) and many other have refreshed the agrarian question debate. Importantly they have focused on the poor and the developing countries. To Byres (1995) agrarian question is concerned with the ‘continuing existence in the countryside of poor countries of substantive obstacles to unleashing of the forces capable of generating economic development, both inside and outside agriculture. It represents a failure of accumulation to proceed adequately in the countryside – that impinging powerfully upon the town; an intimately related failure of class formation in the countryside, appropriate to that accumulation; and a failure of the state to mediate successfully those transitions which we may encapsulate as the agrarian transition (Byres 1995: 509).

To Byres (2003) agrarian transformation is a prerequisite for growth and development of a country, and that social class differentiation within the peasantry will produce capitalist farmers, and that this category of farmers will bring about capitalist development by generating surplus and developing markets. To him agrarian transformation would be facilitated by land reforms which may be conceptualized from the ‘social justice’ and ‘productivity perspective’. He points out that in short term redistributive land reforms, though appear just, very small farmsizes are counterproductive when seen from the angle of the need for an ‘unleashing of the forces capable of generating economic development’; that with the economies of scale of capitalist agriculture, linked to investments in new technology and machinery, larger farms become more productive by far than small farms, and that high-growth capitalist economy as both historically progressive and also as potentially leading to better conditions for the erstwhile peasants who may, eventually, find a better future in the modern non-agricultural economy than that offered by farming miniature plots within a stagnant, backward, agrarian economy (Byres 2003, cf. LERCHE, J. 2013 382-83).

Bernstein (1996) however argued that the agrarian question of labour has, classically been linked to the struggle for productive land reforms against feudal lords, which would benefit parts of the peasantry, and that now land reform is no longer an attainable goal in the wake of present-day capitalist development. With the arrival of neoliberal globalization, Bernstein (2006) further argues that now main agrarian issue has been the struggle by ‘the peasantry’ is against the international corporate food regime and that the foundation upon which the classical perspective on the agrarian question was based has changed and that political economy the ‘agrarian question of capital’

has been either been solved or bypassed (Bernstein 2006, 450–1), that the pre-capitalist peasant and landlord classes have, by now, been almost universally transformed into capitalist farmers, petty commodity producers and ‘classes of labour’, and all are existing within capitalist social relations (Bernstein 1996, 42–3, cf. LERCHE, J. 2013: 386). McMichael (2010) also argues that today the main struggle of the peasantry is the struggle ‘against the international corporate food regime., and that in the wake of WTO agreements, the liberalization of agricultural trade, the rolling back of the state from its prior role of supporting national agricultural development has become a reality. Herein the ‘class specific contradiction among peasants are getting transcended, and all types of peasant agriculture are becoming uneconomical (cf. LERCHE, J. 2013: 385)

India has been a land of enactment of rigorous land reform laws, green revolution induced capitalism in agriculture, and arrival of economic neoliberalism. As against these backdrops agrarian question is whether land reform has been able to unleash the agrarian work force capable to generate economic development? Whether it has given the peasantry the required capacity to accumulate and further reinvest in agriculture? What has been the role of the state in promoting such transformation? Has the relevance of agrarian question come to an end in the wake of economic neoliberalism? Do the agrarian transformations resolve the old agrarian conflict and bring about cross class/caste/ ethnic alliances at the grass roots?. This article will address these questions

II. Agrarian Transition in India

The agrarian society of India has borne witness to distinctive patterns of transition during the periods of colonialism, post colonialism and post economic liberalism. The colonial administration prominently introduced the intermediary system of land ownership through the Permanent Settlement of 1793 for the assured collection of land rents. Besides Zamindari, it also introduced Ryotwari and the Mahaldwari systems. The Zamindari covering 57%, Ryotwari covering 38% and the Mahalwari covering 5% of the privately owned agricultural land. These became the major land tenure systems by the middle of the 19th century colonial India.(NCA 1976: 76).Through these processes in all areas the colonial rulers produced layers intermediaries and unequal patterns of landownership. Furthermore by bringing in colonial industrial products, machines and technologies they also destroyed the traditional village and cottage industries of colonised India. However these neither paved the way for capitalist development in agriculture, in strict sense of the term nor industrialisation in the country. Rather these brought in sustained poverty, and unemployment and livelihood insecurity for the vast segments of rural and agrarian population. The plights of the rural poor was aggravated further with natural calamities like floods, draughts and manmade famines.

Land reforms and its failure: Post Independent India experienced the introduction of radical land reforms through the process of planned development of the country with centralised planning, control and command economy of the state, and increasing aspirations for a socialist society. Founded on a welfare state philosophy it emphasised on development with justice during the periods of early independence. The land reform, as initiated in the first Five Year Plan itself and introduced by all the Indian states and union territories, envisaged for the abolition of Zamindari/intermediary system of land ownership, per household ceiling restriction on landholding, distribution of surplus vested land among the landless, tenural security of tenants and sharecroppers and consolidation of land holding

However, the form and extent of implementation of land reform was not uniform in all the states in India. Vested interests, political pressures, lobbying by the land lords and their alliance with the local police and administration, lack of political will of the state to implement these laws on the one hand, and lack of knowledge about these laws among the intended beneficiaries, lack of their organisational strength and collective mobilisation on the other made the most of the provisions of land reform ineffective in most places. The land owner also took the benefits of the loopholes of land reform laws to evade land reforms and to terminate the sharecroppers and tenants from the land easily. Though intermediaries were abolished, large scale malafide land transfers, eviction of share croppers and tenants from land emerged to be important agrarian concerns (Singharoy 1990).

Radical Peasant movements: As against these backdrops as the rural poverty, unemployment, landlessness and livelihood security of vast section of rural people became rampant in late sixties radical peasant up rise, widely known as the Naxalbari movement, took place in the Naxalbari police station of Darjeeling District of West Bengal to identify, forcefully confiscate, occupy and distribute surplus vested lands among the land less poor by the radicalised local committee of the CPI(M). This movement quickly spread in many part of India including Orissa, Bihar, present Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra getting its support base among the landless rural poor, small peasants, and among a section of middle class and urban intellectual. Though this outburst of radical agrarian movement was seen as the law and order issue by the state, movement also compelled the state to rethink its land reform policy. The government revitalised the land reform in 1970s and formulated a national guideline to bring down the per household ceiling restriction in land holding to 17 acres, to ensure tenural security by making land tenure of tenants hereditary, to ensure fast distribution of surplus vested land, and to attach the rural poor peasants with the programme implementation of land reform programme at the grassroots (NCA 1976: 76).

Green Revolutions: While radical peasant movements and its rapid

spread shook the process of agrarian transition in the Eastern and some parts of southern and western states in India in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the agrarian drama of Northern and some parts of southern India started unfolding diverse transition. The conventional agricultural technology was unable to meet the challenge of the rapidly worsening food shortage. In 1964 India borrowed as much as 10 million food grains from USA. The Food problem became so grave that many foreign experts predicted that million would starve in India to death in 1970. It was in the midst of such dire warning that India evolved in 1965 the new strategy of agricultural Development, widely popularised as the Green Revolution (Maheswari 1985:76). The Ford foundation and Indian agricultural scientists led the process for intensification of agriculture through extensive use of advanced agricultural technologies, especially in Punjab, Western UP, Haryana, and selected areas of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Maharashtra.

The theme of land reform which figured prominently in the first decade after independence later receded into the background. When the Green Revolution arrived the policy makers quickly persuaded themselves that new technology had the key to the problem of slow economic growth and economic inequalities in the rural society; but within few years this proved to be an illusion as the Green Revolution remain confined to few pockets of northern and southern states and small number of crops and selected farming. However Green Revolution brought phenomenal changes in the form and extent of use of modern technologies, agricultural productivity, commodification of agriculture and also produced class differentiation in the pre-existing agrarians social structure. It produced courageous rich farmers who invested in modern agricultural technologies, got indulged progressively in the accumulation of profits and its reinvestment in agriculture. Scholars started intensively discussing the changes within the framework of changing modes of production in Indian agriculture from pre-existing feudal to semi feudal, or pre capitalists or capitalistic ones. The elements like pre-existing social organisation of production and change therein, change in the labour processes, and decline of family farms etc. Are put in place to illustrate these arguments. While the modes of production debate remain inconclusive, the dominant argument of social formation in Indian agriculture occupied a prominent place till late 1980s.

Economic Neoliberalism and Farmers Agitation: India experienced a phenomenal shift in its economic policy since early 1990s with the adoption of structural adjustment programme. It paved the way for liberalisation of India economy going away from the previous paths of import restriction and export promotion and control and command economy. The age-old agricultural policy related to agricultural subsidies in water, electricity, fertiliser, and other technologies took a reverse turn. The corporate intervention in agriculture became a reality. Experts asserted that with the GAT and GATTs under with neoliberal globalization, governments were to compromise in exercising its

power to implement policies on agriculture. Farmers' movement especially the Karnataka Rajya Rayutu Samgam (KRRS) came out against the government policies on globalisation of agriculture. It embarked on a series of protests during the 1990s under the leadership of Nanjundaswamy. They organised rally at the Boat Club in 1992 against the Dunkel Draft, attacked agribusiness multinational corporation (MNC) Cargill's office in Bangalore in 1992, and launched the Beeja Satyagraha campaign (freedom to save seeds). It further launched the global campaign, Operation Cremate Monsanto in 1998, where farmers' movements from France and Indonesia joined the KRRS in burning Monsanto's GM seeds in field trials. It organised the Bandi Yatra (Cart March) where farmers' movements of the country jointly threw away imported goods into the sea from the port in Mumbai as a symbol of protest against free trade agreements (FTAs). The Intercontinental Caravan (ICC) organised by the KRRS in 1999 was a landmark event where 400 farmers from India, along with representatives from other movements travelled across Europe staging protests at different sites, with slogans like "our resistance is as transnational as capital" (Featherstone 2003: 405). These were global campaigns, designed and planned solely by Nanjundaswamy to resist globalisation.⁽⁵²⁾ The Bharatya Kishan Union from Western UP, Punjab and Haryana supported most of the initiatives of the KRRS. However the Swatkati Sanghatana in Maharashtra supported vehemently the initiatives of the Indian state for economic liberalisation.

Importantly West Bengal showed a contradictory trend. The United Left Front government of West Bengal was conventionally known for its anti-globalisation stunt. However it took pro corporate stand by taking initiative of acquiring huge plots of agricultural land for Special Economic Zone in Nandigram and for the Tata Motor Factory in Singur. The All India Trinamool Congress of West Bengal launched prolonged campaign against the ULF initiative. Gradually anti-globalisation movements became people's movement in West Bengal and it brought down 35 years of unbroken Communist rule in West Bengal in 2011.

III. Land Reform and Operation Barga and Peoples Movements in West Bengal

West Bengal has got a long history of peasant movements and land reform. The demands for 'Land to Tillers' and two third of the produced as share of the share croppers were first propagated by All India Kishan Sabha in mid 1930s. Importantly the demands for two-third of the produce as share for the share croppers, who were forming more than 45% of the agrarian household in undivided Bengal, was endorsed by the Famine Commission 1938. Gradually the demand for two third (tebhaga) share for sharecroppers became very popular among the share croppers. As a Kishan Shaba supported candidate own the election from the Dinajpur district of West Bengal in 1946, demands for land to the tillers and two-third share for the share croppers got phenomenal

momentum in that area. Under the leadership of Bengal Kishan Sabha sharecroppers harvested and stacked the ripe paddy in their own court yards as against the will of the land lords. With the complaints of the land lords as the police came to arrest the sharecroppers and confiscate the stacked paddy, the sharecroppers objected to it. With brutal police action and firing on 14th of February 1947 in the Khanpur village of Dinajpur District of undivided Bengal 14 sharecroppers were killed and hundreds were injured. This movement spread quickly in many parts of Bengal. Though this movement was crashed as a law and order issue of the colonial state and administration, many of the ideas of land reform as emerged out of this movement were incorporated in the land reform programmes of Independent India .

The West Bengal Land Reform Act 1955 endorsed 60% share for the share croppers. It also spoke for the abolition of intermediary system of land ownership, ceiling restriction to 25 acres per household and distribution of surplus vested lands among the land less. However most of the noble provisions of these land reform act remained in the law book only till late 1960s. The aspirations and expectations of the Tebhaga Movement remained mostly unfulfilled. In the existing gap between enactment of land reform laws and their implementation, the powerful landowners took recourse to malafide land transfer. Eviction of sharecroppers went unhindered. The notified vested lands remained in the possession of the big land owners. All these resulted into continuing concentration of the agricultural population to the lower stratum of agrarian hierarchy (Singharoy 1990:60-61).

While the economic condition of the poor peasantry was deteriorating, the political happenings of West Bengal took a new turn in late 1960s. In February 1967 the fourth general election brought the 20 years unbroken rule by the Congress to an end , and an alliance of 14 political parties came to the power with two Communist parties-CPI and CPI(M) as its major constituents. Importantly the CPI and CPI (M) promised for the rigorous implementation of land reform laws. However after coming into power these parties started following the routinized approach for the implementation of land reform laws. The CPI (M) Darjeeling District Committee expressing disagreement with the routinized strategy of the Left Front Government radicalized their ideology and started to organize the peasants on a militant footing. They initiated direct action by the peasantry for identification, confiscation and distribution and taking possession of lands through their local Peasant Committees. These got lots of popular supports from the below especially among the rural poor, unemployed, poor peasant, sharecroppers and also among a section of educated middle class urban intellectuals. In the process as the authority of local administration gradually started getting ignored, they started aligning with the local *jotedars* (big land owners) to prevent the 'unlawful activities' of the quickly grown Peasant Committees. Police set up several camps to block their activities and started regular patrolling, indiscriminate arrest and harassments

of the poor peasantry. As the police intensified their activities in Naxalbari Thana of this district on 24th May 1967 local peasantry confronted the police with local arms like bows, arrows and clubs etc. On that eventful day 11 peasants and one police personal were killed and hundreds were injured. This Naxalbari movement spread like wild fire across Bengal, and in many parts of India quickly (SinghaRoy 2004:84-85).

The Naxalite adopted the strategy of Guerilla warfare, declared several liberated areas, Red zones. On 1st May 1969 the political organization of the Naxalbari movement was formed with the name called the 'Communist Party of India (Marxist-Lenist). The Gapiballypur area of Midnapur district emerged to be a strong hold of this movement. It formed Orissa, Bengal, and Bihar Coordination Committee and initiated extremist actions through guerilla warfare and annihilation of class enemy programme. However in March 1971 with the collapse of the United Front Government governor's rule was imposed in West Bengal and this movement was crashed quickly in West Bengal, though this movement went underground and continued in many parts of India including in West Bengal in radical form (For details see SinghaRoy 2019).

In the wake Bangladesh war of independence and formation of a popular Congress government in West Bengal in 1972 the land reform programme of West Bengal was radicalised keeping in view the guideline issued by the central government. However the process of implementation of land reform entered into a new phase with the formation of United Left Front government 1977 in West Bengal. It paved the way for strict implementation for land reform. It quickly identified the surplus vested land, distributed *patta* (surplus vested lands) among the land less and semi land less people and stood for a movement for the Operation Barga. Through the Operation Barga it ensured 75 % produce to the share croppers, right to inheritance for the tenants, mass mobilization for the implementation of land reform under ULF leadership at the grass roots.

The ULF government was very successful in bring 1682193 cultivators under the Operation Barga Programme covering 31% of the cultivators of the state in 2001. According to West Bengal Development Report by 2004 about 1.39 million acres of land have been acquired by the ULF government of which 1.4 million acres were distributed among 2.74 million *pattadars* (known as beneficiaries) in West Bengal. Overall the land reform programme (both tenant registration and land distribution) is estimated to have covered 41.3 % of the rural population of the state by 2002. However the average land received by *pattadar* is rather small, only 0.39 acres per house hold. Importantly of the total *patta* distributed 37.1% has gone among the Schedule Caste, 19.3 % among the Schedule Tribes and 43% among the others. So far as the certificate for *Barga* is concerned 30.5% has gone to the Schedule Castes, 11% to the Schedule Tribes and 58 % to others (Government of West Bengal 2004: 47-49).

Importantly the agenda of land reform that was a priority in 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and in early 2000, has gradually shifted into background in the wake of globalization and the economic neoliberalism. It was amply clear that the ULF government was against globalization and the Structural Adjustment Programme of the then Central governments. However since early 2005 the ULF government started showing interest in the private investment in the state. It approved proposal for especial economic zone in Nandigram in and Tata Motor plant in Singur.

In 2006 the seventh United Left Front (ULF) government created the West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation, and a new car factory for Tata Motors was proposed for Singur in the Houghly district, requiring close to 1,000 acres of land. Local peasants organized protests under the auspices of the Krishi Jamin Surakha Samiti (Committee to Protect Agricultural Land). The Trinamool Congress Party (TMC), which was the main opposition party at the time, took a lead in organizing the peasants in their struggle. Large sections of participants in Singur movement were peasants, including the owner cultivators, share-croppers both registered and unregistered, landless agricultural labourers and village artisans. Participants in the movement were mostly from the TMC, along with the poor agriculturalists who has been traditionally UF supporters. The agitation took the form of large-scale mass mobilizations and succeeded in generating a wide public and media reaction against Tata Motors. In the wake of increasing opposition and hostility against the Tata Motots' Nano factory, the factory was relocated to Gujarat by the Tatas. The movement against the Tata factory created a political divide between agriculture and industry and between rural peasants and urban workers, undermining the ULF government's support base.

The TMC under the leadership of Ms Mamata Banrejee has replaced the 35 year old ULF government of West Bengal in 2011. Over the years, institutionalized mass mobilizations have remained an integral strategy of the TMC. It has also simultaneously expanded its support base among the lower-caste groupings, religious minorities and women by initiating a variety of development initiatives. The Assembly election of 2021 demonstrated the mass appeal of its ideology and aspirations. In this context the TMC, has, for now, displaced the Left: the key fulcrum in this emerging political landscape is populist appeal rather than left-right political contention (SinghaRoy 2022).

IV. The Emerging Agrarian Scenario of West Bengal

Though the TMC has been successful in returning the land among the peasants of Singur, land reform has not remained a core agenda for the TMC in West Bengal as land reform has reached to a saturation stage there. Land reform, however has made significant impacts on the agrarian social structure of West Bengal. The agrarian society is also simultaneously experiencing increasing population pressure. While land reform has brought decentralization

in land holding, increasing population pressure has contributed to declining land man ratio of the state. In the following section we shall be discussing emerging agrarian scenario of West Bengal.

Declining Land-man ratio and Increasing Marginal Holding: Over the decades land man ratio has significantly declined in West Bengal. According to the NSSO report 2018-19 the average per household land holding has been to the extent of 0.17 hectare, and excluding the land less household this is 0.19 hectare only as against the national average of 0.51 and 0.56 hectare respectively. In West Bengal land less households comprise 11.6% household as against the national average of 8.2% of the total households (See Table 1)

Table 1: Land man Ratio in West Bengal

State/Group of NE States/Group of UTs	Average area (ha.) owned per household	Average area (ha.) owned per household excluding landless households	percentage of landless rural households
West Bengal	0.170	0.193	11.6
all India	0.512	0.558	8.2

Source: NSSO 2018-19

Related to the declining land-man ratio, there has been the proliferation of the marginal holding in West Bengal. As shown in Table 2, in 1970-71 marginal landowning household comprised 61.2% of the rural households covering an area of 24.8% of the operational area of the state. In 2018-19 the proportion of marginal cultivators has increased to 97.5% of the household owning 79.5% of the operational area rural West Bengal as against the national average of 83.5% and 34.5% respectively. The small, semi medium and the medium cultivators form 2.2%, 0.4% and 0.01% of the households and cover 15.2%, 0.4% and 0.6% of the lands of the state. There is no large cultivators in West Bengal. While at the national level the small, medium and the large cultivators cover significant areas (For details see table 2

Table 2 Changes in percentage distribution of operational holdings and area operated by size categories of operational holdings in rural areas in West Bengal and at all India Level

State	Year	marginal		small		semi-medium		medium		large	
		No of Holding	Area Operated	No of Holding	Area Operated	No of Holding	Area Operated	No of Holding	Area Operated	No of Holding	Area Operated
WEST BENGAL	18-19	97.5	79.5	2.2	15.2	.4	4.7	0.01	.6	0.0	0.0
	91-92	80.7	40.0	13.4	30.7	5.0	22.1	0.9	7.3	0.0	0.0
INDIA	70-71	61.2	24.8	22.8	28.9	2.9	31.1	3.0	14.6	0.1	0.6
	18-19	83.5	34.5	9.9	24.9	4.8	22.0	1.5	14.7	0.2	3.9
	12-13	75.4	29.8	10.0	23.5	5.0	22.1	1.9	18.8	0.2	5.8
	91-92	62.8	15.6	17.8	18.7	12.0	24.1	6.1	26.4	1.3	15.2
	70-71	45.8	9.2	22.4	14.8	17.7	22.5	11.1	30.5	3.1	23.0

Source: NSSO 2018-2019

Significant Presence of Sharecroppers: Despite the predominance of marginal holding, share cropping has remained an integral part of agricultural operation in West Bengal. As shown in Table 3 below, tenant holding comprises 29.5% of the total holding of the state occupying more than 22% of the operational holding of therein, while these are to the extent of 17.3% and 13% respectively at the all India level.

Table 3: Percentage of tenant holdings and percentage of area leased-in West Bengal 2018-19

State/Group of NE States/Group of UTs	percentage of tenant holdings	percentage of area leased-in to total area of the operational holding
West Bengal	29.5	22.3
all India	17.3	13.0

Source: NSSO 2018-19

Casualization of Work force: Decline in work participation in secured domain of activities, and increasing participation in insecure domain, not getting sufficient work, seasonal migration etc are important indicators of casualization workforce. In agriculture these widely reflected in declining in the category of cultivators and increasing in the category of casual agricultural labourers.

West Bengal has shown significant decline of the category of cultivators and increase of the category of agricultural labourers contributing to casualization of workforce. Table number 4 shows that in 1951 the cultivators constituted 49.67% of rural household, while in 1971 it declined to 43.7%, 1991 it declined to 38.40%, in 2000 to 19.18% and in 2011 it further declined to 14.72%. On the other hand agricultural labourers who formed 18.97% of rural household increased to 35% of the rural household in 1971. Work participation in agriculture as labourers is characterized by casual and seasonal nature of work. This increase is linked to large scale eviction of sharecroppers from their land who ultimately joined the rural workforce as agricultural labourers. In 1981 the agricultural labourers formed 32.9% of the labour force and in 2011 they formed 29.31% of the agricultural labour force. The marginal decline of the agricultural labourers was largely caused by the land distribution and the Operation Barga programme of the government of the West Bengal. However the proportion of agricultural labourers have remained significantly higher here in West Bengal than the category of cultivators in last two decades.

Table 4: Occupation wise Distribution of Rural Workers in West Bengal

Occupation	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	Total(000)	%
Cultivator	49.67	51.40	43.07	41.28	38.40	19.18	5117	14.72
Agri. Lab	18.97	20.24	35.00	32.95	32.27	24.97	10189	29.31
Non Agriculturalist	31.36	28.36	21.93	25.77	29.33	55.85	19451	55.96
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	34757	100

Source: Census of India: 1961, 1971, 1981, 1991, 2001 and 2011.

Table 5: Annual Growth Rates of Rural Workers (Occupation wise) of West Bengal in Different Census Decades

Occupations	1951-61	1961-71	1971-81	1981-91	1991-01
Cultivators	4.65	-1.19	1.99	3.44	-1.01
Ag. Lab	5.11	8.18	1.77	4.15	3.93
Non Agriculturalist	2.80	-1.95	4.85	6.44	24.27
All	4.15	4.94	2.54	4.44	8.00

It is important that due to declining man-land ratio, and phenomenal proliferation of marginal cultivators, a huge chunk of rural workforce has shifted from agriculture to non-agriculture sector. In West Bengal the proportion of non-agriculturist in the rural workforce has increased from 31.36% in 1951 to 55.96% in 2011. In the period between 1961 and 1991 there was a decline of work participation in non-agricultural sector. This is mostly because of the land distribution program and Operation Barga program of the government of West Bengal.

Along with the shifting of labour force from agriculture to non-agriculture sector there has been the phenomenon of further casualization of workforce in the form of increasing quantum of marginal workers and declining of the quantum of main workers in West Bengal. As shown in Table 6 the main workers who formed 30.23 % of the workforce in 1991, in 2011 they formed 26.3% of the workforce. For the male workers it has declined from 50.56% to 43.52% during the same period. For female work participation as main workers has marginally declined from 7.96 % to 7.90 % during this period. So far as their work participation as marginal workers are concerned in 1991 only 1.9% of the workers were the marginal workers (getting less than 180 days of work in a year), it increased to 12.15% in 2011. For the male workers it increased from 0.74% to 13% and for female from 3.29% to 10.9% during the same period. This figure indicate a quantum increase of unemployment, underemployment and poverty for a section of agricultural workers in West Bengal who are living at the bottom of the agrarian hierarchy.

Table 6: Percentage of Main and Marginal Workers by Sex in West Bengal

Year	Main Workers			Marginal Workers		
	Person	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female
1991	30.23	50.56	7.96	1.96	0.74	3.29
2001	28.75	47.32	8.86	8.03	6.91	9.22
2011	26.43	43.52	7.90	12.15	13.0	10.9

Source: Census of India, West Bengal, GOI

Migration: For long West Bengal was known as a favourite destination of the migrant workers from Bihar, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan and from many other states. However in recent years it has emerged to be a major senders in other states. 'Owing to squeeze on farm incomes, migration towards urban centres within the state as well as outside

the state has seen a quantum jump. Consistent decline of job opportunities in conventional centres like Kolkata, Asansol, Durgapur and others have started pushing away the inter-state migrants to other states. Based on the analysis of the 1991, 2001 and 2011 scholar points out that West Bengal has gone from being a net recipient of migrants to a net sender of migrants. As per 2011 census West Bengal has 6.1 cores of working-age of 15-59 years population that comprises 67% of state's population as against the national average of 63%. Importantly 34.4% population (31.4 million) in West Bengal experienced spatial mobility according to the 2011 Census. It is higher than the last two decades and of the total migrants, 92.4% (29.1 million) are intra-state (intra-district 22.8 million and inter-district 6.2 million) and remaining 7.6% (2.38 million) are inter-state. In recent years interstate migration has significantly increased especially for the employment reasons as 'the state is failing to create enough jobs for its own working-age population. Due to limited industrial growth in the state, people are moving out to other states even if states are far away' (Ansary, R., And Siddiqui, M. Z. 2021:102)).

Poverty and Indebtedness: However there have a steep decline of rural population living below the poverty line in West Bengal from 38.2% in 2005 to 22.5% in 2011-2012 (Govt of India 2021). According to Niti Aayog in 2022-23 nearly 15.15% of the rural population (head count ratio), 42.26% of the rural population of the state (intensity ratio) were multi-dimensionally poor (Niti Aayog 2021)

In West Bengal though a good section of people has been able to come above the poverty line, they have not been capacitated for surplus generation in the agrarian society. This has been reflected in the outstanding loans of the marginal cultivators in rural West Bengal

In West Bengal (See Table 7) the average amount of outstanding loan per agricultural household is Rs 26,452 as against the national average of Rs. 74,121.

Table 7: Average amount (Rs.) of outstanding loan per agricultural household and percentage of indebted agricultural households

State/Group of NE States/Group of UTs	average amount (Rs.) of outstanding loan per agricultural household	percentage of indebted agricultural households
West Bengal	26,452	50.8
all India	74,121	50.2

Source: NSSO 2018-19

In West Bengal 50.8% of the agricultural households are indebted as against the national average of 50.2% (See Table 8). Importantly 91% of the marginal cultivators, 7.4% small, 1.4% semi medium, 0.1% medium are indebted as against the all India level 63.6% marginal, 18.4% small, 12% semi medium and 5.4% medium and 0.6 large cultivators are indebted. As the sizes

of land holding decreases proportion of household with indebtedness also increases in West Bengal .

Table 8: Incidence of Indebtedness based on size of land possessed

State	% of Marginal Indebted	% of Small Indebted	% of Semi-Medium Indebted	% of Medium Indebted	% of Large Indebted
9. West Bengal	91.1	7.4	1.4	0.1	0
All India	63.6	18.4	12.0	5.4	0.6

Source: NSSO 2018-19

Table 9: Percentage distribution of amount of outstanding loans by sources of loan

State	Institutional sources					Non institutional sources					All
	scheduled commerial Bank	regio rural bank	co-operat ive society	co-operat ive bank	SH G (ba nk	Other instituti onal Agencies	Agricul tural moneyl ender	Professio nal moneyl enders	Relati ves and friend s	Other noninstit utional agencies	
West Bengal	42.7	2.8	9.4	5.7	12.4	5.6	0.8	7.5	7.7	5.6	100.0
all India	44.5	8.1	6.7	3.9	3.2	3.2	6.5	14.0	5.7	4.5	100.

Source: NSSO 2018-19

In rural West Bengal 78. 6% loans are taken from institutional and remaining 21.4 taken from non-institutional sources against the national average of 66.4% institutional and 33. 6 % non-institutional sources. It appears that non institutional sources of getting loans are active both at the state and the national level

Growth Rate in Agriculture

West Bengal has experienced significant degree of mechanization and green revolution since early 1980s onward in many areas of the state and in major crops production. West Bengal's growth rate in agriculture is 5.26% as against the national average of 3.3% in 2020-21, and it contributes 22.2 % of the state GDP as against 18% of the national average. Agricultural sector is growing in West Bengal. The gross state value added of agriculture and allied sector at current prices was Rs 11710585 lakh in 2011-12, it has increased to Rs 27083612 lakhs in 2020-21 showing a constant growth in this sector (GOI 2021:28). So far as the food grain production is concerned in the year 2019-20 a grain with an average of 2904 kg per hectare which is far above the national average of 2343 kg per hectare

Table 10 Change in Agricultural Production in West Bengal (Lakh MT)

Crops	1980-81	1986-87	1988-89	1999-00	2000-01
Rice	74.66	84.63	133.16	137.6	124.28
Foodgrains	82.82	96.26	143.67	148.46	138.15

Source: Economic Review, various issues, Government of West Bengal

West Bengal however has not given birth to the capitalist agriculture because of predominantly tiny sizes of land holding, high level of population concentration and gradual withdrawal of the large farmers from the process of commercialisation of agricultural activities. Our empirical data collected from four villages with 450 households of South Dinajpur District of West Bengal will strengthen this points

V. Emerging Agrarian Social: Structure at the Grassroots

South Dinajpur is located in the northern part of west Bengal. It is surrounded by Bangladesh Border from three sides. It has altogether 28% SC, 18% ST, Muslim 25%, Christian 2% population. The emerging agrarian social structure of the selected villages of this district has acquired stability after prolong tension and conflicts surrounding the implementation of land reforms. These villages have emerged to be occupationally diversified. Spread of literacy has been very high there with 100% rate of literacy among 8 years plus population. These villages are characterized by phenomenal access to ICTs, migration and a high degree of politicization of collective initiatives. Occupationally 98% of these village households belongs to the category of marginal and small cultivators including 18% sharecroppers holding Bargadar status under the Operation Barga programme, 22% cultivators cultivating lands under contact system.

Of the 450 households of these villages 76 households have got directly impacted by the implementations of the land reform programme. Of these 76 households 13 households were to give up surplus lands under ceiling restrictions. Initially they were under the rubric of six joint families. Due to land reform and several other reasons the number of these families have increased with decreasing sizes of land holdings. Similarly the numbers of families holding lands under Operation Barga and under the Patta distribution programme have also increased around doubly due to partition of their families. Currently of the total 36 households of these villages are the recipients of surplus vested lands (patta) (see Table 11) It has been but natural that sizes of per family land holding declined with the division of the families and the resultant division on land holding.

As it not economically viable to keep agricultural implements and required cattle to plough the land as self-cultivator, there has been an increasing phenomenon of getting the land cultivated through the contract system. An important sections of the marginal, small and medium cultivators employ contract cultivators (Chuktidars) for land cultivation as far as possible. Most of the contract cultivators use the family labour to work in their farm as owner/semi owner cultivators. They employ advanced biotechnology and hired modern technology to get maximum out put from these pieces of land and usually get a higher yields

Table 11. Number of Households impacted by land reforms, and land cultivation under contract system

Sizes of land holding	Subjected to Land ceiling	Operation Barga	Got Patta (Surplus Vested lands)	No of Household impacted by land Reforms	Taken land under Contract System	Give land under contact System	Total
Below 1 ha		11	36	47	20	7	74
1-2 ha		16		16		3	19
2-4 ha	2			2		-	2
4-7 ha	11			11		5	16
Total	13	27	36	76	20	15	110

Due to caste and cultural factors upper caste seldom participate in land cultivation. They predominantly employ either the hired labourers or contract sharecroppers for the for their land cultivation. Furthermore they have got associated with non-agricultural activities both within and around the village to further their economic interests. Many of the old big land owners are engaged in money lending at a higher rate of interest

While the small and medium upward looking land owners look for long term gain by investing in education of their children and buying commercial properties out side the village and investing in business, the hardworking enterprising marginal cultivators find an immediate gain and status enhancement in investing in village lands and maximizing opportunities out of it.

Relation between land Reform and Economic development: Whether land reform induced agrarian transformation has been able to unleash agrarian workforce to generate economic development both inside and outside agriculture?

For Large and Medium Land Owners: As the ceiling restriction has brought down higher land holding and concentration in land holding, the presence of large landowners owning 10 acres or more land has virtually disappeared from the scene in these villages. The medium category landowners are engaged in land cultivation employing hired labourers and contractual share croppers. Some as self-cultivators also employ modern technologies to a limited extent. Their previous status as jotedars are no more with them. Land reforms have converted the feudal land lords into petty producers. However it has brought down the scope of expansion of agriculture by their investment as most of them feel demotivated because of land reform. Even though they are engaged in agriculture, they see it as a source of 'side income'. These petty producers invest their proceeds in agi-business and in other business to generate profit from multiple sources. They stand far away from capitalist development in agriculture.

For the marginal and the small cultivators: They are not homogenous group in substantive terms as these are consisted of self-cultivators, non-

cultivation owners, share croppers, contractual cultivators, cultivators cum-service holders cum businessmen, marginal cultivators cum agricultural labourers etc. Many of the small cultivators have been able to generate surplus from business and been able to purchase land from other willing land owners. Though many of them hire casual labours, employ modern techniques on hiring basis, they only belong to the domain of petty producers. They have not been able to be the flag bearers of capital agriculture.

For landless: Land transfer among the landless has not been able to break the barriers of their marginality and below subsistence status. They are unable to go for capitalist or commercial farming due to tiny size of their land. They have come above the poverty line but not above to the extent to generate surplus. Since many of them have become migrant laborers, their dependency on landed gentry has reduced considerably. However they have emerged to be dependent on the political leader to become beneficiaries of the development schemes.

In general the agrarian scenario is characterized by phenomenal decline of patron-client relationship, the emergence of contractual relationship among the agrarian workforce, use advanced agricultural technology. However these has not been able to stop and substantiate use of the economic distress of agrarian labour force due increasing population pressure on agriculture, declining land man ratio, declining capacity of agriculture to produce employment and increasing inability to accommodate the over supply of supply of agrarian labour force. These have resulted into the shifting of rural work force to nonagricultural sector like trade, construction, manufacturing, transport etc and migration of a huge chunk of rural work force to urban areas both inside and outside the state. Though migration brings some immediate relief for the migrating members, these does not bring in a sustaining development agrarian society of rural Bengal as a whole.

VI. Conclusion:

The state of transition of agriculture in West Bengal come closure to Byre's (1996) observation on agrarian question. We find substantive 'obstacles to unleashing of the forces capable of generating economic development, both inside and outside agriculture; and this scenario represents a failure of accumulation to proceed adequately in the countryside and lack of class formation in the countryside, appropriate to that accumulation (Byres 1995: 509). It also comes closer to his observation that that in short term redistributive land reforms, though appear just, very small farm sizes are counterproductive when seen from the angle of the need for an 'unleashing of the forces capable of generating economic development'

Whatever agrarian transformation has taken place, it has neither contributed to the spectacular growth and development, nor to produce capitalist

farmers out of peasantry who would pave the way for a capitalist development in the countryside.

Poor peasants of West Bengal fought against the feudal land lords, the Zamindars and Jotedars and other intermediaries and big land owners for the implementation of land reforms. Now that land reform has reached to a stage of saturation in West Bengal, any further initiative to bring down the ceiling restriction would only be further demotivating for the farming community and would be counterproductive for the society as a whole as it brings further fragmentation in landholding.

West Bengal experiences the predominance of marginal and small holding many of which are uneconomical individually. The state has failed to bring land consolidation through cooperative farming so that these could have been viable for faster economic growth and development through introduction of advanced agricultural technology and intensification of land cultivation. Initiatives for the expansion of non-agricultural avenue of employment has also been very weak so as to accommodate the surplus man power within the rural ambience itself replaced by way of providing gainful employment.

For Bernstein (1996) and McMichael (2010) in the wake of neoliberal economic globalization, and WTO agreement struggle of the farming community has shifted against the international corporate food regime. Though this is true for agriculturally developed regions of the country, for an area that is predominantly characterised by petty producers aspirations, struggles and priorities of the agrarian work force are substantively different. Here a large chunk of the agrarian population are dependent on the state for support for land cultivation, agricultural subsidy, old age and widow pensions, for the social developmental initiatives like free rice, employment guarantee schemes, financial and other supports for children's education and varieties of other requirements.

To get benefits of developmental initiatives and state sponsored support system, they are to remain attached to ongoing political process by becoming active supporters of political dispensation mostly whom are in power. On the part of the political party as well there is also the need and urgency to keep the support base intact and expanding. Herein politics of populism and developing cross class alliances come into play very obviously. There has further emerged mutual interdependency among the agrarian categories. The landless labourers, marginal cultivators and the lower castes are no more dependent on upper castes land owners for information about the wider world or alternative avenues of employment due to their increasing access to ICTs. Old hostilities between the erstwhile jotedars and sharecroppers cum labourers are reduced with increasing interdependency among them because of overlapping economic and social concerns.

The agrarian population's encounter with the forces of globalisation takes place through variety of channels. They, the youth of the agrarian society, become consumers of ICTs, users of new and social media products, messages and information, adherents of global consumerism, global branded and duplicate fashion clothes, shoes, body attires, especially the youth. There has been phenomenal penetration of ICTs especially mobile phone, social and new media, new flow information, images and idea among the people. Commutation to the cities and migration outside the village has added more to it as these have changed their world view.

Importantly the agrarian society now experiences increasing fluidity in social life in the wake of increasing quantum of migration, economic diversity, penetration of ICTs and social media and incapability of agriculture to accommodate the available workforce in agriculture and to satisfy their aspirational world view. The fast spread of consumerism and political populism have added more to it. Since livelihood security based on agrarian economic structure has emerged to be a questionable proposition for the vast section of people, they look for non-agricultural economic options for the fulfilling of social needs.

The agrarian transition as engineered through the initiatives of land reform has widely produced casualization of workforce, fragmented landholding, shifting of labourforce towards the non-agricultural sector and migration with an increasing degree of economic and social uncertainty. Land distribution was of paramount importance to augment the process of social justice. However land consolidation, bringing the marginal cultivators under cooperative farming, developing new avenue of non agricultural employment in rural areas were of equal importance to address immediate agrarian concerns. In the absence of such initiative workers are pushed to move out of agrarian set up and also getting simultaneously pulled by urban areas and in agriculturally developed areas in other states where capitalism has paved the way for further economic development. Influence of capitalism is all encompassing. Its capacity to influence the life and livelihood of workforce goes beyond its immediate area of operation. In this sense agrarian question needs to address the issue of agricultural development in relation to its related areas and sectors too.

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The Blue Review

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RECEIVED: 13TH FEB 2024

REVISED: 08TH MAY 2024

ACCEPTED: 20TH JUNE 2024



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