

ISSN : 1815-2163

Bangladesh Sociological Studies

An International Biannual Journal

Volume 2, Number 2

September 2006

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Institutional subscription: Per issue BDT. 250. 00 (Taka two hundred fifty) and annual BDT Tk. 500 (Five hundred) only. Per issue US \$ 30 (thirty) only and annual US \$ 60 (sixty) only.

Individual subscription: Per issue BDT. 200.00 (Taka two hundred) and annual BDT Tk. 400 (four hundred) only. Per issue US \$ 20 (twenty) and annual US \$ 40 (forty) only.

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Published by : Chief Executive, Bangladesh Institute of Social Research (BISR)
Printed at : Aroma Printing Publication
9 Nilkhet Babupura (2nd Floor), Dhaka -1205.
Phone: 9675188

ISSN: 1815-2163

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Changing Trajectory of Agrarian Crisis in West Bengal: Challenges and Opportunities

Debal Singha Roy*

The contemporary world has been conspicuously marked by the emergence of new economic, social and political processes and arrangements. Significantly, these newly emerging processes and arrangements have not totally replaced or eliminated the pre-existing ones; rather there have been their coexistence with a variety of contradictions. The parts of the economic processes are now conspicuously delineated in the emergence of new avenues of employment and a sharp decline in the traditional sources of livelihood security, migration and occupational mobility. The societal processes have also been widely marked by the fragmentations of pre-existing groups and communities and formation of new collectivities and articulation of multiple identities. As a corollary new form of collective mobilizations, protests and politics are in the making. As against this backdrop, this paper aims to examine the emerging facets of agrarian crisis in West Bengal, focusing on the interconnected economic and social processes, their implications for the agrarian social relations in general and on the collective mobilisations in particular. This paper lays its foundation on the secondary sources of information and focuses on those contemporary social processes, which have got durable social roots.

Agrarian Reforms on West Bengal: Few Success and Many Paradoxes in the Issues of Land and Food Security

In most part of the democratic world state apparatus tries to control the broad socio-economic processes at times generating alternative social processes so as to ensure social development of the largest segment of the population and thereby to ensure its control on them. In the process several old institutions get dissolved and new institutions emerge with alternative mechanisms of social change and social control. Paradoxically, many important socio-economic processes, which have emerged out of these policy interventions of the state, may not be desired and may not remain within the control of the state, as the state can not appropriate and dictate all directions of change and movement of the society.

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The agrarian society of West Bengal has been widely known for the successful implementation of the land reform laws, uninterrupted rule of the United Left Front Government, and regular mass mobilisation of the lower strata of the society. However, the issues of decline in the per household land holding, rural poverty, increase in the rural unemployment, persisting vulnerability of the marginalised sections of the rural society and their socio-political ramifications are seldom described. In this section we shall examine some of these features of this society.

Successful Implementation of the Land Reform Programme

Coming into power in 1977 the United Left Front (ULF) Government has set in motion several new processes in the agrarian society. Some important of these processes and the institutional arrangements are those of the rigorous implementation of land reform laws, especially the distribution of surplus vested lands and ensuring tenancy reforms under the *Operation Barga* programme, demolishing the pre-existing arrangements of landownership, rejuvenation of the Panchayati Raj institutions to institutionalise collective mobilisation at the grassroots, instituting several employment generation programme like 'food for work' in the rural areas, etc. Some of the important areas of success are as follows:

- The United Left Front government of West Bengal has distributed 1.04 million acres of surplus vested land (covering 7.8 per cent of the arable land of the state) among 2.54 million (34 per cent) of the agricultural households. Again it has provided tenural security to 1.5 million tenants under the *Operation Barga* programme who altogether constitute 20.2 per cent of the agricultural households. Moreover, 1.1 million acres (covering 8.2 per cent of the arable land of the state) are brought under the tenancy reform (Government of West Bengal, 2002).
- There has been the report on the substantial increase of the productivity of the land due to efficient land management under the small land owners. The productivity in rice cultivation has been substantially increased from 1086 kg per hectare in 1973-74 to 2178 kg per hectare in 2000 (CMIE 2002).
- There has been again a substantial decline in the landless households in the state from 10 per cent in 1961-62 to 6.2 per cent in 2003 (NSSO 2005).
- Uninterrupted mobilisation of the poor peasantry through the institution of Village Panchayet has been the main vehicle for the

successful implementation of the land reform programme in West Bengal.

These processes and the institutionalized initiatives, though have been able to keep the poor peasantry attached to the culture of collective mobilizations of the Leftist political parties, have not been able to ensure livelihood security of a vast segment of these population there. The successful implementation of land reform programme however, has been accompanied increasing vulnerability of a large segment of the agrarian population now which reflected in the decline in per house hold land holding, increase in the semi landless and marginal holding, increasing rates of unemployment, stagnation of large section of the rural population in poverty and livelihood insecurity. Let us examine the extent of this problem

Decline in the Per Household Land Holding

Of the total land of West Bengal 62.8 per cent is arable, 14 per cent under forest, 4 per cent protected areas and the rest are for other purposes. A careful scrutiny of the National Sample Survey Reports shows that there has a sharp decline in the per household land ownership in West Bengal from over 1.00 hectare in 1962 to 0.29 hectare in 2003 as against the national average of 0.79 hectare per household in 2003.

Phenomenal Increase in the Semi-landless and the Semi-marginal Land Owning Households

The decline in the land-man ratio has been accompanied by a phenomenal increase in the category of *semi landless* (possessing less than 0.040 hectare of lands) forming 37.4 per cent of the rural households. The NSSO report shows that 98 per cent of these semi landless households possess only homestead lands. The *semi-marginal* land owning households (possessing 0.041 to 0.50 hectare sizes of land) form another 36.7 per cent of the rural households and the *marginal* landowning households with 0.51 to 1.00 hectare sizes of land form another 12.41 per cent of the households there. If one takes into consideration all the landless and the landowning household having land up to 1.00 hectare, they altogether form 92.7 per cent of the rural households there in West Bengal who are highly economically unsecured with a different intensity though.

Problems of Land Consolidation and Introduction of Commercial Farming

As most of the semi-landless and the marginal holdings are scattered, and it is not possible for these poor peasantry by themselves to introduce sophisticated mechanised techniques of cultivation until and unless these are brought under extensive cooperative farming. So human labour intensive activities continue in agriculture for these categories of households that provides them the scope of some employment and not full employment throughout the year. It is found that many a time the marginal landowners rent out tiny piece of land to the commercial cultivators or even sell out their plot to meet the immediate food requirements of the family. A report shows that more than 13 per cent of the peasants received surplus land has been dispossessed of their lands mostly for economic reasons. Again, it is not possible to keep drought cattle for marginal sizes of land holding. Most of these households look for employment in other avenues in larger part of the year. Table I shows the emerging patterns of land holding at the bottom of agrarian hierarchy and the nature of their economic vulnerability in agriculture.

Table I. Proportion of Economically Vulnerable Households of West Bengal, 2003

Categories Economically Vulnerable Agrarian Households	Proportion of Rural Households	Extent of Economic Vulnerability within Agriculture
Landless	6.2 per cent	Extremely high
Semi landless .002-.040	37.4 per cent	Extremely high
Semi marginal 0.041-0.50	36.7 per cent	Very high
Marginal 0.51-1.00	12.4 per cent	High
Total	92.7 per cent	

Source: Compiled from NSSO, 2003.

Successful implementation of land reforms is indeed not a guarantee for increase in the employment opportunity, increase in household income, change in the consumption pattern and assurance to livelihood security of the agrarian poor. The phenomenal increase in the semi-landless and semi marginal households pushes a vast section of them to look for alternative avenues of employment. The non-agricultural activities have also remained to be seasonal and mostly unstable.

Increasing Food Insecurity

These households are again highly unsecured so far even as their minimum food requirement is concerned. The fact that even with higher agricultural yield of around 22 quintals (the average per hectare rice productivity in West Bengal) per hectare 49 per cent rural households (having land between 0.041 and 1.00 hectare with less than 0.40 hectare average sizes of holding) get in an average, 5.5 quintals of crops. The average size of rural house hold in West Bengal is 5.6 persons. This production is indeed very insufficient even to meet the basic food requirement of the household even if all these households have got the highest average yield.

According to the 61st Round NSS report (2004-5) the percentage of rural households not getting enough food in some months of the year, is the highest in West Bengal (10.6 per cent). And the percentage of the households does not get sufficient food everyday in any months of the year is the second highest in West Bengal with Orissa (1.3 per cent each).

Persistence Poverty

Though over the years there has been a progressive decline in the proportion of population living below the poverty line in West Bengal from over 73 per cent in 1973-74 to less the 28.3 per cent in 2003-2004 (NSS 2003), in rural areas a vast section of the population still leave in abject poverty. It is reported that more than 35 per cent of the rural population live below the poverty line there.

Vulnerability of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Population

The situation of the ST and SC in the agrarian economy of the state is very precarious. Around 94 per cent of the rural households of these social categories belong to the categories of landless/semi landless/marginal cultivators. A glimpse of the status of the SC, ST, other backward classes (OBCs) and others in the state is given in table 2.

Table 2. Emerging Patterns of land Holdings among Various Social Categories in West Bengal in 2003

Sizes of landholding (in Hectare)	Scheduled Tribes	Scheduled Castes	Other Backward Classes	Other	All Categories
Landless	14.0	5.9	1.5	5.8	6.1
0.002 to 0.040	31.2	44.7	26.6	35.6	37.4

Table 2. (Continued)

0.041 to 0.50	31.3	33.6	39.5	38.7	36.7
0.51 to 1.00	16.1	9.3	20.6	12.6	12.4
1.01 to 2.00	5.8	5.3	9.8	5.4	5.7
2.01 to 4.00	1.7	1.1	1.9	1.5	1.4
4.01+	0.00	0.1	0.2	0.3	0.2
All Sizes	100	100	100	100	100

Source: NSSO, 2003.

The STs are having the highest extent of landlessness among them (with 14 per cent) followed by the SCs (around 6 per cent). This phenomenon is the lowest among the OBCs with only 1.5 per cent landless households among them. Though all these social categories have the households with high concentration in the semi-landless, semi-marginal land owning households, the OBCs have a relatively better representation so far as the marginal and above categories of landholdings are concerned. However, notwithstanding these variations, the fact remains that agricultural and other labourers are mostly drawn from these sections of the society who are pushed to work there for a subsistence living. It is again that the extent of unemployment and poverty is high among these sections of the population.

Decline in the Large and Increase in the Small Land Holding

Over the decades, there has been a phenomenal decline in the large, medium and small land holding in the state. Table 3 shows that the semi-medium, medium and the large cultivators, who were altogether comprising more than 9.75 per cent of the rural house holds and occupying more than 47 per cent of the rural agricultural lands in 1971-72, comprise only 1.6 per cent of the rural households and possess only 15.9 per cent of the lands in 2003. As a corollary, the proportion of the categories of marginal cultivator has increased from around 78 per cent to 92 per cent and the areas covering under such holding from 27.28 per cent to 58.2 per cent during the same period.

Significantly, there is a contradictory trend so far as the small sizes (1.00 2.00 hectares) of owning households are concerned. Though the proportion of these households has declined from 12.64 per cent to 5.70 per cent, the area covering such holding has remained constantly around 26 per cent during the same period showing an increase to above 28 per cent in between 1982 and 1992. It is mostly because a very small section of the rural households have remained attached to land and invest in land for commercial cultivation, take the advantages of mechanisation of agriculture more than the other sections of the agrarian society as they

are threatened by the land ceiling act. Many of the large and medium landowning households have joined this category as an impact of the break in the joint family system and the implementation of the land reform laws.

Table 3. Changing Patterns of Ownership of Land in WB by Categories of Landholding (In Hectare)

Categories of landholding	1961-62	1971-72	1982	1992	2003
Marginal (0-1.00)	(17.45)	77.62 (27.28)	81.6 (30.33)	85.88 (41.29)	92.06 (58.23)
Small (1.01-2.00)	(25.97)	12.64 (25.69)	11.5 (28.77)	9.48 (28.11)	5.70 (25.71)
Semi medium (2.01-4.00)	(28.81)	7.30 (27.72)	5.54 (27.23)	3.94 (22.98)	1.40 (11.88)
Medium (4.01-10.00)	(24.30)	2.39 (18.61)	1.28 (12.12)	0.71 (7.62)	0.20 (4.02)
Large (10.00+)	(3.38)	0.05 (0.70)	0.08 (1.54)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Total	100 (100.00)	100 (100.00)	100 (100.00)	100 (100.00)	100 (100.00)

Note: Figures in parentheses are percentages of the area owned by each category

Source: NSS, 1961-62, 1971-72, 1982, 1992 and 2003

Work Participation: Increasing Complexities of Unemployment, Casualisation and Seasonal Migration, Horizontal Mobility and Occupational Diversification

West Bengal is experiencing a phenomenal decline in work participation in agriculture. According to the census data, in 1971 West Bengal 58.43 per cent of the total workers were employed in agriculture (both as cultivators and agricultural labourers) while in 2001 it had declined to 44.15 per cent. In rural West Bengal this declining trend of work participation has also been more conspicuous. In 1971 more than 78 per cent of the rural workers were engaged in agriculture. In 2001 the extent

of rural work participation in agriculture had declined to 58.6 per cent. This phenomenon has been accompanied by several other trends like unemployment in agriculture and casualisation in work participation.

Increasing Rate of Unemployment in Agriculture

Between 1987-88 and 1999-2000, West Bengal has witnessed a decrease in the growth of employment in agriculture by 9.48 per cent in spite of growth of income in agriculture. It is to mention here that West Bengal has the second highest rate of rural unemployment in the country, with 17 per cent as against the national average of 7.20 per cent. The current status of unemployment among the rural youth (15-29 years) is as high as 26.60 per cent in 2004 (Planning Commission 2004).

Casualisation of Rural Workforce

Rural society of West Bengal has been conspicuously marked by the process of casualisation of the work force which is widely marked by decline in work participation as owner cultivators, increasing work participation as labourers, and increasing in the category of marginal workers in the rural society. With the decline in land man ratio and the rise of predominantly marginal sizes of landholding, a large section of rural main workers of rural West Bengal has either been downwardly mobilised or moved to other sector the economy for a living. In 1961 more than 51 per cent of the rural (main + marginal) workers of West Bengal were cultivators; in 2001 it had declined to 25.52 per cent. And the work participation as agricultural labourers had increased from 19.59 per cent in 1961 to 31.12 per cent in 2001. Data shows that the extent of work participation as agricultural labourers has been higher among the SCs, STs, and OBCs and also among the women of these categories. For example, in West Bengal 31 per cent of the tribal main workers are cultivators while 49 per cent are agricultural labourers; again, 61 per cent of the tribal women work force work as agricultural labourers. Work situation of the agricultural labourers in West Bengal, as in most parts of the country, is widely characterised by lack of employment security, seasonal nature of employment, low wage, seasonal and gender based wage variations, unspecified time schedule of work, lack of all kinds of social security and non-implementation social welfare measures. Despite rigorous grassroots mobilisations, gender based wage variations continue unabated in West Bengal. According to the latest NSS report, the average daily wage for a casual male labourer is Rs 49.96 and Rs 40.36 for a female labourer (NSS 2003). In many parts of the state women labourers still get half of the wage of their male counterparts. As the scope of upward mobility has been limited among them due to lack of

literacy, training and other resources, they keep on stagnating in agriculture for a livelihood.

Along the line there has been a phenomenal increase in work participation as marginal workers (who get less than 183 days of employment in a year) in rural West Bengal in recent years. In 1981 only 2.2 per cent of the total population of the state was the marginal workers, in 2001 it increased to more than 10 per cent.

Increasing Incidences of Seasonal Migration

As there has been increasing pressure of population in agriculture, a section of the poor peasantry is pushed to seasonally migrate from agriculturally backward areas - not only in the developed parts within West Bengal but also outside the state. According to the NSSO Report, in 2000 there were 19.2 million migrant people in West Bengal and the net migration rate was 27 per one thousand population. According to the West Bengal Human Development Report, there have been a quantum increase in the phenomena of out migration in West Bengal. The economic reason is also the maximum for such migration. Even at the local level the practice of *Namal* (seasonal migration of the agricultural labourers) in Bankura, Purulia and Midnapur is in the increase. One can easily find migrant Bengali labours working in large numbers as construction labourers, rack pickers, vendors, maid servants, etc. in Delhi, Punjab, Haryana, Gujrat, Goa, Mumbai and other places of the country who are mostly from the peasant backgrounds.

Horizontal Mobility and Occupational Diversification

In West Bengal there has been an increase in the rate of literacy in the rural areas from 30.63 per cent in 1971 to 63.42 per cent in 2001. Though more than 36 per cent of the rural population of West Bengal is still illiterate, spread of functional literacy and mass communication networks in the rural areas has made a large section of the population aware of the alternative sources of earnings. In rural West Bengal of the total population 41.8 per cent has education up to primary level and 12.55 per cent up to middle level and 7.65 up to secondary and above level. In December 2002 there were around 3.5 million 10th and above standard pass registered jobseekers in West Bengal which is the highest in the country (Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India 2002). This newly educated population finds it difficult in getting them absorbed in agriculture culturally and economically. Hence, there is an urge to these segments of the rural youth to look for employment outside agriculture.

In West Bengal there has been an increasing significance of the tertiary sector in the state economy. West Bengal today, as in many other parts of the country, stands in the threshold of explosion of a service driven knowledge economy. In 2003, the service sector of the state produced 52 per cent of the SDP (State Domestic Product), while industry and agriculture produced 22 per cent and 27 per cent of the SDP respectively. According to the latest CIME report, the service sector of West Bengal has produced 53 per cent of the SDP of the state. Thus a transition of the economy and transition of the workforce even in the rural areas towards non-agricultural sector is conspicuously visible. According to the NSS report, of the *total rural households* of West Bengal, 34.7 per cent are reported to have non-agricultural activities as primary occupation with 22 per cent as self-employed and 12.4 per cent as labourers. Again, of the *total working population*, 41.2 per cent are employed in the non-agricultural sector with 18.8 per cent in the primary and 21.3 per cent in the tertiary sector. With the decline in the land-man ratio and the phenomenal increase of the skimpy marginal sizes of landholding a significant section of the rural households is now pushed to look for alternative avenues of employment outside agriculture. Studies conducted at the village level show that in the rural areas though non-agricultural activities have emerged as alternative avenues of employment, all of these activities are not potentially rewarding to ensure livelihood security (Singharoy 2004).

Increasing communication networks have also promoted the scope of horizontal economic mobility to a section of the rural working force. For example, a semi-marginal cultivator or an agricultural labourer starting to work as a rickshaw puller, run a betel shop, becoming a milk men or a petty paddy husking activity taking loan from bank etc. Many of them also migrate to the urban areas in many parts of the country to work as construction labourers, stone cutters, etc.

Tradition of Peasant Movements and Strong Collective Mobilizations:

During the last six decades or so the agrarian society has borne witness to the proliferations of multifaceted social movements and collective mobilisations a large part of which were manifested under the auspices of the Left organizations and leadership of various ideological/strategic orientations (radical/institutionalised). There is a lineal continuity in the culture of collective mobilisation of the state which has emerged out of popular protest from the below. The Tebhaga Movement, 1946-47, Naxalite Movement 1967-71, sustained and uninterrupted mass mobilisation of the peasantry mostly by the United Left Front

Government since 1977 to implement the land reform programme, instituting the village Panchayets as tool for sustained mobilisation are some of the examples of these processes. However, the recent protest of the peasant under the organisation of Krishi Jami Siraksha Committee (Committee to Protect Agricultural Lands) in Singur and the Bhumi Uched Pratirodh Committee (Committee to Resist Eviction from Land) in Nandigram, with the explicit support of the Trinamool Congress, several Naxalite groups, intellectual forums, and minority ethnic groups like Ulema E-Hind, etc., are to be seen within the changing context of agrarian society of West Bengal. The emerging nature of the protests and the responses of the state, civil societies and the political parties towards it are indeed constructed in terms of the intertwining of these forces with the emerging social processes therein.

In the wake of sharp decline in the land man ratio, a vast section of the agrarian population look for non-agricultural activities as the immediate and alternative support livelihood security. However, the emerging avenues of the non-agricultural activities by itself are unable to ensure the livelihood security of the lowest segments of the agrarian population due to lack of proper knowledge, training and education. Though the rate of rural literacy has increased, it does not automatically ensure access to proper knowledge, information and training required to exploit the opportunities unleashed by the changing economy of the society. In this backdrop, even though there has been no convergence between the increase in the quantum of the semi-marginal holding and the livelihood security, the lowest segment of the agrarian population finds in agriculture an amount of employment which are socially, culturally and economically engaging. In a process of socio-economic decontextualisation, (as caused by increasing quantum of migration, lack of livelihood security, increasing unemployment and lack of proper integration with the emerging avenues of employment etc.), attachment to land till provide them sense of social belonging to the collectivities with common identities, keep them culturally rooted to several festivities, rituals and symbols and provide them a minimum levels of economic security by way of getting employment, loans, benefits of developmental schemes and so on. The initiative to facilitate the Special Economic Zones, IT parks, food and biotec parks, automobile industries, business processing zones has threatened the immediate sources of social, cultural and the economic security of these sections of the population. In the process of neo-liberal industrialization, the threat of losing the immediate source of livelihood security looms large and the process of integrating them with the changing economy apparently looks blink as they have the proper skill, training and technology to cope with the emerging challenges.

In West Bengal the dominant processes of collective mobilisations are initiated by the institutionalised political parties. Indeed, the gap between the political parties and the state has been minimised and most of the civil societies have been co-opted by the state. People's voice in collective mobilisation has mostly emerged to be routinised in nature. The process of routinisation has been partly conditioned by the process of socio-economic transition of the society. Sustained livelihood insecurity has promoted a variety of dependency relations of these sections of the agrarian populations on the political leaders. They are pushed to remain attached to political mobilisations. Within the culture of persistence insecurity of the agrarian people the state has been widely successful to co-opt the civil society activism, and also to eradicate the gap between the state and the political party at the grass-roots on the one hand, and to harness the support of the national and the multinational business houses on the other.

A serious contradiction however has taken shape due to the shift in the processes of political mobilisation of the workers and peasantry in the state. The ULF political parties have always mobilised the peasantry and the workers against the landlords and the capitalist/industrialists. Now the land is acquired by the state for the capitalists/industrialists who were conventionally designated in the Marxian vocabulary as class enemies. A paradoxical role reversal indeed! In this backdrop, roles and reactions of political party workers in the Nandigram and Singur village clearly delineate the emerging nature of neo-liberal state of West Bengal that have emerged to be more hegemonic than ever. It is interesting to observe that in a globalised world none of the social, economic and the political processes is autonomous in nature. Rather, these are widely linked the wider processes. Even the local peace processes were not locally circumscribed. The peace processes in Nandigram and Singur are decided in Kolkata and elsewhere. So also the economic processes are to be linked to the wider economic context of the society.

As the economy of West Bengal is changing along with the changes in the wider world and it is responding to emergence of the knowledge economy and occupational diversification, there is also an immediate need to expand the bases of higher and technical education and vocational trainings in the rural areas of the state so as to provide opportunities for capacity building to all sections of the population. In view of the emerging agrarian scenario, it is rather imperative to go for *conscientious industrialisation* and expansion of the bases of service economy in rural West Bengal. The process of conscientious industrialisation should ensure people's participation and their alternative capacity utilization in the process of introducing industries in the rural areas. These initiatives are also to be accompanied by long term

perspectives to effectively integrate agrarian economy with the secondary and the tertiary sectors by way of (a) bringing the small and marginal holdings increasingly under mechanised commercial farming, (b) promoting more and more technical, professional and training institutes of all areas of specialization and emerging opportunities in the rural areas to enable the rural population to develop their capacity as per the emerging need of the society, (c) promoting the opportunities for quality lifelong learning for them, and (d) generating opportunities for employment and livelihood security of the rural population within the emerging arrangements. These integrated initiatives are indeed prerequisite to set in motion new sets of social processes to integrate the excluded within the processes of inclusion.

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