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Politics of Populist Policies in West Bengal

Santi Sarkar

2022

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Santi Sarkar *

Under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee, West Bengal has been witnessing a new height of populist politics.¹ A new series of welfare schemes like *Swasthya Sathi*, *Duare Sarkar*, *Paray Samadhan*, *Lakshmir Bhandar*, etc., are going on along with the older schemes like *Khadya Sathi* (food security to all through PDS), *Kanyashree* (scholarship for the girl child's education), *Rupashree* (social security policy provided to needy families for daughter's wedding), *Sabooj Sathi* (cycle for students in classes IX-XII) were introduced.² Apart from these, a series of special package schemes for tribal people in the Jungle Mahal areas of southwestern parts of the state, recognition of ethnic identities (in some areas) for fulfilling some special needs and many others were introduced. All these have made everybody wonder: what's next? And here lie both the possibilities and fault lines of populist politics in general and the current regime in particular. Flaggering off newer popular schemes, mostly for the poor and the marginal sections of society almost every year is not an easy task in a fund-deficit economy. These schemes, which may be associated with Foucauldian 'biopolitics'³ since these try to garner political support and maintain control of a large population by fulfilling some of their basic needs for survival, also usher in a new radical democracy because with every scheme grows the expectations and demands for more, which in turn is bound to enhance the scope of public scrutiny/gaze of the process of distribution. It might culminate in radical democracy similar to what Laclau and Mauffe theorised if in the future the common people who are the beneficiaries of such schemes are brought into participation in planning from the grassroots.⁴

Two recent field studies, undertaken in Amlasol (of the erstwhile Paschim Medinipur, now of Jhargram district in the Jungle Mahal) and in some tea gardens of Dooars region of Jalpaiguri districts of North Bengal, reveal the above reality. Both these places made headlines in the first decade of the twenty-first century for hunger deaths, lack of basic amenities, and a dearth of welfare schemes. After Trinamool Congress came to power in 2011, people started receiving the benefits of the welfare schemes initiated by the new regime and now they are looking for more. Moreover, the flow of migrant labour to other parts of the state and outside and human trafficking have not stopped. Thus, the force of populist politics is not exhausted but rather renewed continuously in states like West Bengal which might compel the ruling party to implement more welfare schemes along the line of new popular demands. If pushed more and more such populism might even see its own limit in the structure of the liberal welfare state.

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History of Tea in Dooars Region

The term Dooars is derived from the word doors in English and *dwar* in Sanskrit/Bengali. Literally, the region has eighteen passages or doors to the hills of Bhutan.⁵ The region is located across the Indian states of Assam and West Bengal at the foot of the east-central Himalayas. The region stretches picturesquely from the river Sankosh in the east to the river Teesta in the west covering roughly an area of 5,200 sq. km. in West Bengal, located in the districts of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar.⁶ The western Dooars falls under the state of West Bengal and is a portion of the Terai, a lowland belt connecting the plains regions with the Himalayas. A large part of the Dooars is in the district of Jalpaiguri. Crisscrossed by the river Teesta, the region is fused with dense forests and green tea gardens. The economy of the Dooars region depends on the three 'T's—Tea, Tourism, and Timber. The tea gardens of Dooars started their production in the second half of the nineteenth century. The cultivation of tea in India began in the 1820s when the British East India Company initiated large-scale production of tea in Assam.⁷ The tea industry rapidly expanded in the region by the beginning of the 1850s and by the turn of the century, Assam became the leading tea-producing region in the world.⁸ During the 1840s, the tea industry of Bengal was established in Darjeeling by British planters. During the Anglo-Bhutan War of 1864-65, the Dooars were forcibly ceded by the British from Bhutan. In 1869 the district of Jalpaiguri came into being. By 1874, a tea garden near Gajoldoba was established by Richard Haughton. The tea industry started in the district in 1874-75 and the first lease was issued to 22 gardens in 1877.⁹ Most of the labourers working in these tea gardens are tribals whose forefathers hailed from Bilaspur, Chotanagpur, Jungle Mahal, Santhal Pargana, and Nepal. The tribal communities found here are mostly the Oraon, Mahali, Kharia, Munda, Chik Baraik and Santal. It was the British who hired these tribal people to work in the newly established tea gardens as labourers since the local Rajbanshis were not willing to work in tea gardens as coolies. The mainstay of the locals has been agriculture. Therefore, it became necessary to import labour from outside. It was during the 1947 Partition of Bengal as a result of the independence of India and the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971, that the region witnessed the influx of Bengali refugees in the region.

The Beginning of Crises: Some Probable Reasons

After 1990, with the advent of globalisation and the New Economic Policy (NEP) adopted by the Government of India, Indian tea was made to compete in the global market. The arrival of the free trade agreement paved the way for the free flow of goods across international borders. In this period, the tea planters of Dooars and some other areas resorted to blending Indian tea with low-quality tea imported from neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka for export to the world market.¹⁰ This practice led to a decrease in demand for 'original' Indian tea. To cope with this problem—to survive in the new competitive market, the tea planters of Dooars, adopted a cost-minimising strategy by notably reducing the labour cost. This resulted in irregular or non-payment of wages, no bonus for the workers, irregular supply of rations, prolonged dues in gratuity, non-deposition of a certain amount of money which is deducted from the salary for provident fund, and so on. Moreover, the costs of fuel, medical facilities, education, fringe benefits, and other welfare initiatives for the workers, which according to rules and practices, had been the responsibilities of garden owners were also compromised. Roy and Biswas have identified four factors behind the poor condition of the tea gardens and the closure/abandonment of the same—a) cost of production, b) trade barriers, c) poor quality of tea bushes, d) traditional machinery and methods.¹¹ The main

problems faced by the workers after the closure/abandonment of the gardens in Dooars are more substantial to their survival like suspension of the ration supply or electricity, non-payment of daily wage or wage cuts, no/poor medical facilities in the garden hospitals, absence of clean drinking water supplies etc.

The *Report on Hunger in Tea Plantations in North Bengal, 2004* found that 22 plantations were closed/abandoned or have been declared sick since 2002.¹² The total number of permanent workers in these 22 gardens was 20,487 and the total affected population was 94,347 people. Apart from it, the temporary '*bigha*' workers also lost their jobs in the gardens. Wages in West Bengal and Assam are lower compared to other states especially those in south India. The Government of West Bengal had no minimum wage regulation for the tea industry since 1956-57, while in contrast even in Assam, the minimum wage for the labourers existed, which shows the reluctance/negligence of the Government of West Bengal to improve the economic conditions of the tea workers, who were mostly tribal in origin. However, subsidised ration was given to workers in Assam and West Bengal's tea estates. Compared to it, the tea workers in South India (Tamilnadu, Kerala, and Karnataka) did not get subsidised ration but their cash wages were higher—INR72 in Tamil Nadu, INR78.04 in Kerala, and INR71 in Karnataka in 2003-04. While workers in Dooars used to get INR45.90 only. In West Bengal, the tea workers got subsidised rations worth INR10 per day, which if added to their wages, the amount would be INR55.90, which is still comparatively lower than the daily wages available in the southern states of the country. Rations were denied on holidays or if the worker was on leave.

During 2003-04, several tea gardens stopped functioning and their workers faced starvation. It was estimated that over 500 workers and their family members had died of starvation.¹³ So, they decided to go on a strike, which came to the employer as a shock because the strike broke out at a time when the industry had begun to stabilise. However, the strike was called off after 16 days by the unions. Before the new agreement, the daily wage of a tea labourer was INR45.90 but a study conducted by the Right to Food Network revealed that in the reopened gardens, workers (at least in 6 gardens) were not receiving the negotiated wage of INR45.90.¹⁴ During the negotiations in 2005, when the workers again called for a strike, their demand was for a hike of INR42.50 whereas the employer associations (mainly Indian Tea Association and Tea Planters' Association of India) only offered an increase of INR1 and claimed that the industry was not in good condition to increase the wage of the workers. The employers also told that the labour cost was already too high and any hike in wages without an increase in productivity would cause further losses.

The employers' claims might have some factual truth, but several other factors led to the worsening situation of the gardens and for which the employers/management were no less responsible. These include replenishing and caring for the age-old bushes in order to increase productivity and also expand the area of tea cultivation. In Dooars and Terai, over 50 per cent of bushes were more than 50 years old in contrast, in Tamil Nadu bushes were less than 20 years of age, therefore the rate of productivity was much higher. Therefore, it would be wrong to put the responsibility on the worker alone. In Dooars, practically no step had been taken (to date) for rejuvenating the tea bushes.¹⁵

Several policies were drafted and measures were taken to ease the difficulties of the tea plantation labourers. Although such schemes were meant to cover the basic sustainability of the labourers, but in operation, they proved to be inadequate. Some of the initiatives undertaken were;

a) The Formation of the OMCs: To deal with the unemployment crisis, the Operation Management Committee (OMC), an amalgamation of local politicians, trade union leaders and administrative officials, was formed. After the formation of the OMCs at different gardens and at different times, the workers reinstated their leaf-plucking works. But that did not bring any

substantial relief from the suffering, since the welfare benefits (like rations, firewood, medicine, and other fringe benefits) that the garden owners used to provide as per Plantation Labour Act, 1951, were not restored.

b) Financial Assistance to the Workers of Locked Out Industries (FAWLOI): The crisis intensified in the non-plucking season. Another factor behind the poor financial conditions of the workers was the mistiming of FAWLOI. There was an irregularity as well as a discrepancy in the payment of unemployment allowance. The study conducted by the advisors of the Supreme Court's commissioner found that unemployment allowances were given to the workers up to February 2005. And from March to September 2005, there was no deposition of allowance in their surveyed gardens, which meant a backlog of INR3,500 for seven months per person.¹⁶

c) Supreme Court's Direction of Incorporating the Closed Gardens in the Right to Food (RTF) Network: As the food crisis reached its pinnacle in the closed gardens, in 2004 the Supreme Court spelled some orders regarding the incorporation of the closed tea gardens into the right to food machinery.¹⁷ Previously, only the garden owners had the responsibility of providing their workers with life-sustaining materials like weekly rations, water, medical facilities, and proper housing condition. The supply of these essentials stopped after the closures. In the absence of these, the Supreme Court of India took a step forward to safeguard the rights of its citizens and instructed the Government of West Bengal to take the following measures:

- i. Directed the state government to declare that the plantation workers of the closed gardens in the region as belonging to the Below Poverty Line (BPL) category.
- ii. The tea labours would be provided with *Antyodaya Anna Yojana* (AAY) food grains at INR2 per kg of wheat and INR3 per kg of rice.
- iii. For the medical care of garden workers, the state government would send a medical team comprising doctors, nurses, and a pharmacist with medicines at least twice a week to each garden.
- iv. To make sure that in each garden the workers would get an unemployment allowance of INR500 per month and 15 days of work in a month will be provided under *Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana* (SGRY).

d) State Government's Initiatives to Extend Social Security Schemes to the Gardens: To deal with the crises, the West Bengal Government announced that the Labour and Labour Relations Department would take steps to ensure the immediate regularisation of the new plantations (belonging to small growers mainly) including those that involve vested lands and putting the abandoned gardens to open bid from promoters.¹⁸ Moreover, to manage the demands of the working population, the state government also decided to extend the schemes like supplementary nutrition programme under Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), cooked mid-day meals under the School Education Department, drinking water arranged with the help of the Public Health Engineering (PHE) and rural water supply under the Zila Parishad. However, allegedly, the performances of the above schemes were not up to the mark.

The Question of Labour Migration and Human Trafficking in Tea Gardens in Dooars

With the above historical background in mind, let us now take a deep look into the question of labour migration and human trafficking in the different tea gardens of Dooars. In 2011, the Left Front was defeated in the assembly elections in West Bengal. The new government of All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) with Ms. Mamata Banerjee as the Chief Minister has paid attention to the perennial problems of tea gardens. In this regard, two steps are worth mentioning— a) the incorporation of all the tea gardens under the National Food Security Act, 2013 (NFSA, 2013) and, b) the extension of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Schemes (MGNREGS) to the gardens. In the last 10 years, All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) has introduced several populist programmes all over West Bengal, for instance, Kanyashree, Sabooj Sathi, different schemes for artisans and folk artists; monetary donations to local clubs for celebrating different festivals. In December 2021, the daily wage in the tea gardens surveyed for this study was INR202. In January of the same year, the Government of West Bengal announced a hike of INR26 which is still not implemented during our study time.¹⁹

It is in this context of new developments the paper seeks to understand whether these populist schemes have been able to arrest outward labour migration or not by focusing on the selected tea gardens in Dooars in North Bengal and selected villages in the Jhargram district. Even a cursory glance over any tea garden brings forth that along with poverty and unemployment, problems such as malnutrition, illiteracy and diseases are rampant. To counter this, there has been a pressing need for alternative employment opportunities. However, the ‘enclave economy’ of Dooars provides very limited opportunities to these semi-literate and unskilled girls and boys. As a result, two things can be observed—first, labour migration, and second, activation of human trafficking networks. The tea industry in Dooars has not followed the rule of minimum wages. The wages are paid in two ways. The first one is in cash and the second one is in terms of housing facilities, drinking water facilities, and a medical facility for persons under 18 years of age. However, the latter one is irregular. Therefore, they have to solely rely on cash wages. Previously, the rationing facility was included in the second category. But after the inception of the NFSA, the gardens were included under the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS). Although it came to light during the present study that various Non-Governmental Institutions (NGOs) are looking after the matter of medical facilities but that is not enough to meet the requirement. There is scarce alternative employment opportunity in the local job market. Collecting the riverbed materials is one of them. If one collects 200ft³ of riverbed materials, they will be paid INR300. However, every tea garden does not have rivers nearby. Before the Covid-19 induced lockdown, employment in Bhutan was another source of employment. Once the lockdown started that too went out of hand. In Dooars trafficking of children and women and undocumented migration of different kinds of cheap labour (skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled) to various destinations through a variety of pathways within and outside the country are on the rise. Analytically, in this paper, migration has been distinguished from human trafficking. The United Nations defines human trafficking as:

Human Trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit. Men, women and children of all ages and from all backgrounds can become victims of this crime, which occurs in every region of the world. The traffickers often use violence or fraudulent employment agencies and fake promises of education and job opportunities to trick and coerce their victims.²⁰

Here, we must draw a line between migrant labour and trafficked person. In the case of labour migration, we have noticed a few ‘advantages’ which allure them to migrate like good working conditions, a satisfactory amount of salary, the opportunity to send remittances, visiting, and having telephonic conversations with the family at regular intervals, etc. Therefore, following the above standards, an individual can be considered migrant labour if the person is in regular contact with their family members and has not reported any form of assault both verbal and physical in their workplace. But when it comes to trafficking the end purpose is exploitation. The denial of food, shelter, and clothing; complaints regarding money not being paid as promised; excessive work pressure; verbal abuse and physical assaults; no opportunity of maintaining contact with family members are the main features. In reality, this ideal distinction between migration and a trafficked person often goes blurred. It can be seen that on several occasions the individuals who begin their journey ‘on their own’ in the end found themselves being trafficked. Das rightly commented, “We are living at a time when the conventionally drawn distinction between labour migration of women, sex work and trafficking seems to have disappeared and all these categories are as it were rolled into one”.²¹

Table 1: Garden-wise Data of Labour Migration in Chamurchi

Name of Respondent	Entitled Schemes	Family Unit	Migrant Members	Destination	Type of Job	Monthly Income (INR)	
						Family	Migrant
Name of the Garden: Kathalguri							
Sanjoy Lohar (25, M)	Khadya Sathi, Lakshmir Bhandar	M-1 F-2	Sanjoy Lohar (25, M); Surani Munda (24, F)	Srinagar (Kashmir)	M-Gardener; F-Domestic help	9,000	9,000
Anoj Lohar (22, M)	Khadya Sathi, Lakshmir Bhandar	M-2 F-1	Anoj Lohar (22, M); Sibani Lohar <23, F>	Sikkim	M-Employed at a grocery shop; F-Domestic help	9,000	13,000
Tanoj Lohar (33, M)	Khadya Sathi, Lakshmir Bhandar	M-6 F-6	Tanoj Lohar (33, M)	Srinagar (Kashmir)	Cook at a hotel	5,000	8,000
Rekha Lohar (40, F)	Khadya Sathi	M-1 F-7	Rekha Lohar (40, F)	Srinagar (Kashmir)	Domestic help	5,500	7,000
Ankit Lohar (25, M)	Khadya Sathi	M-3 F-2	Ankit Lohar (25, M)	Chennai (Tamil Nadu)	Worker at a car spare parts factory	6,000	10,000

Name of Respondent	Entitled Schemes	Family Unit	Migrant Members	Destination	Type of Job	Monthly Income (INR)	
						Family	Migrant
Name of the Garden: Redbank							
Sujit Oraon (28, M)	Khadya Sathi, Swasthya Sathi	M-3 F-3	Sujit Oraon (28, M)	Kerala	Worker at a cloth mill.	4,500	8,500
Dinesh Oraon (25, M)	Khadya Sathi, Swasthya Sathi	M-2 F-6	Dinesh Oraon (25, M)	Kerala	Worker in bakery	4,700	12,000
Uma Oraon (27, F)	Khadya Sathi, Swasthya Sathi, Kanyashree	M-2 F-6	Uma Oraon (27, F)	Bangalore (Karnataka)	Domestic help	4,700	15,000
Ajar Ahir (28, M)	Khadya Sathi, Swasthya Sathi, Lakshmir Bhandar	M-2 F-4	Ajar Ahir (28, M)	Bangalore (Karnataka)	Worker at a press	4,500	10,000
Ajay Munda (30, M)	Khadya Sathi, Swasthya Sathi, Lakshmir Bhandar	M-5 F-5	Ajay Munda (30, M)	Kerala	Worker in a brick factory and later on a construction site	5,000	12,000
Uttam Banik (38, M)	Khadya Sathi, Swasthya Sathi, Lakshmir Bhandar	M-2 F-1	Uttam Banik (38, M)	Dhubri (Assam)	Worker in a grocery shop	5,000	5,000

Source: Field visit to Chamurcbi, 2021 [M: Male; F: Female]

In the absence of adequate employment opportunities in the local area there has emerged a tendency for outward migration. Victor Basu, one of the members of *Dooars Jagron*, speculated that almost 30 per cent of the workers and their family members from the different gardens in Dooars are now labour migrants. Presently, the per day wage of tea labour is INR202. Only one person from a family is eligible to work as tea labour in the garden. In a month, a worker gets a maximum of 24-25 days of work and is not paid in the holidays. Thus, their monthly income is INR5,050. During interviews, many respondents said that they are not getting an adequate amount of work under MGNREGS with occasional delays in payment resulting in outward migration.

There is a high tendency among male workers to work in the textile industry, heavy industry, and construction sites in the urban and metropolitan areas in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Kerala [Table.1]. Some also work as cooks in hotels and barrages in Sikkim, and Srinagar in Kashmir. Skilled labourers often go to Delhi and Punjab to work in the hosiery-garment industry. While women are working as domestic help, men are working as workers in factories and as housekeeping staff in hotels. In general, it reflects that households are highly dependent on remittances from urban migration. It has been found in almost all the households which we studied, that without remittance money it is very hard to procure two square meals a day, and that the remittance also depended upon

the informal sources of income in the urban economy, which could not grant socio-economic and medical securities to these families. Many of them lost their jobs during the Covid-19 pandemic. Many of them had to travel miles after miles to reach home after losing their jobs. This helps in understanding that economic distress is the prime factor behind leaving their home.

Table 2: Occupational Scenario of Tea Labourers

Name of the Tea Estate	Sampled Household	Remittance	Mining and Quarrying	Daily Wage Labourers in Towns
Dheklapara Tea Estate	30	14	08	04
Bandapani Tea Estate	30	11	10	06
Madhu Tea Estate	30	10	08	12
Birpara Tea Garden	30	12	06	10

Source: Chhetri and Nuruzzaman, 2018²²

Almost 35-40 per cent of the studied households in all four selected tea gardens have at least one member who is engaged in activities outside the garden [Table.2]. They are either engaged in mining activities in the different mines in North East India or they have migrated to urban areas in the different parts of the country from where they send remittances to their families. In most cases the conditions laid down by the Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979 are not being followed. Therefore, migrant labourers are not getting adequate life and job security. As a result, the chances of trafficking have increased. They undertake such journeys at their own risk and their income solely depends on their bargaining capacity with the local placement agent. If the rules are followed the labours will not have to pay for travelling and have job security. Almost on a regular basis, women become prey to trafficking. Between 2011-13, as one study reveals, about 180 women were missing permanently from the tea gardens.²³ Chakraborty estimated that every year approximately 675 women and girls are trafficked into brothels in the neighbouring district of Jalpaiguri.²⁴ In this context, it is also pertinent to mention that on several occasions many children are sold off as slave labour or abandoned by their parents for not being able to feed them. Many from the latter category end up as 'railway children'. The platforms of railway stations of New Jalpaiguri, Jalpaiguri Road, Siliguri, Banarhat, and Malbazar become their 'new homes'. In most cases the parents refuse to take their children back.²⁵ Therefore, abandoned children become the easy targets of traffickers sooner rather than later. The children who stayed back in the gardens with their parents (since they are neither sold off nor trafficked) were subjected to chronic hunger and malnutrition.

Women and men are taken by trains and buses to workplaces such as Kerala, Bangalore, Kashmir, Sikkim, Delhi, Haryana, and Bhutan. The trafficking route varies with the destinations. In most of the cases, there is a local 'placement agent' or middleman who is to be contacted if one wants a job. Often these individuals approach the needy ones from the gardens. If they cannot bear the travelling fare, the agents do. But that has to be paid back after getting remuneration. In reality, these agents work as 'sub-placement' agents who get a fair amount for supplying labour. In this context, it is very much understandable that a chain of intermediaries is in operation for maintaining the flow of labour. After reaching the destination, the new recruits are taken to different 'placement offices' and kept there for some days or weeks before employing them in their workplaces or handing them over for redistribution. But during the present study, it came to notice that on several occasions, the government generated identity cards, mobiles, and other necessary documents are

forcefully confiscated in the ‘placement offices’ by the employers to prevent the recruits from returning home. Perhaps, this is the prime reason behind the segregation of labourers. If they want to return then they have to reimburse the same amount of money to the employer that they paid to the local ‘placement agents’ as incentives. Often these new recruits are not being employed in the type of job and place they were promised earlier and are forcefully sent to other locations, where they have to work without any payment until the employer is recompensated. Some recruits may luckily find a good employer but this is often not the case. In those cases, food and shelter are provided by the employer and therefore, these workers can send a good amount of money to home. But when the workers have to arrange shelter and food on their own, the remittance is naturally reduced. Moreover, there is no guarantee that they will be paid every month. During the Covid-19-induced lockdown, they did not get their salary and were only provided with food and shelter in their working places.

However, there are no signs of strong agitations and protests from the community members and parents of trafficked persons. As a result, the traffickers have been provided with ample opportunities to build strong networks across the gardens thereby making Dooars a zone of human trafficking in North Bengal. Despite the presence of human traffickers both inside and outside the garden, not all parents are fully aware of this. This also reveals the general lack of awareness among the people of this region. Moreover, a lack of knowledge about the world outside makes them fall prey to the fake promises of the traffickers. Whenever a woman or child stops contacting their family members, the local agents float different stories to deceive the family. Thus, apart from the push factors such as unemployment and poverty in the local community, the lure of better living conditions elsewhere paves the way for trafficking especially of children and women. Sometimes, the lure of fancy clothes and make-up act as the driving factor for the girls to fall into the trap.²⁶ On several occasions, if a woman, particularly an unmarried girl, who has been physically exploited (even raped) returns home, the parents generally do not want to publicly share their experiences, and even on some occasions, do not accept the victim woman of the family out of the fear of

Table 3: Number of Missing/Trafficked Children from Tea Gardens in 2010

Tea gardens	Status	Boys	Girls	Total
Indong	Sick	5	6	11
Grassmore	Sick	5	4	9
Red Bank	Sick	7	5	12
Chulsa	Good	5	4	9
Nayasaili	Sick	5	5	10
Samsing	Sick	5	4	9
Bharnobari	Sick	5	1	6
Dheklapara	Closed	6	3	9
Radharani	Sick	4	3	7
Rahimabad	Sick	2	1	3
Raimatang	Sick	5	4	9
Satali	Good	2	5	7
Total		56	45	101

Source: Ghosh, 2014

losing social prestige.²⁷ Since the question of caste and ethnicity is very much active in the tea gardens, therefore, if the victim belongs to a ‘lower caste’ and the alleged agent is from a dominant

caste, the family of the victim chooses to remain silent. Thus, no movement or protest against trafficking has gained momentum in the gardens. This helps us to understand how caste and patriarchy go hand in hand. In this context, it is also pertinent to mention that amidst others, the question of ethnicity was also a factor that acted as an obstacle in launching a wholesale movement against the government and tea garden owners when alleged news of ‘starvation deaths’ surfaced across the gardens during the period of 2000-10.²⁸ As soon as a garden is declared ‘sick’, there grows a mass urge for migration. The situation is even worse in the closed gardens. It is in such a situation that the agents offer lucrative employment opportunities to the needy ones. The victims, other family members, and parents often find it very hard to resist such temptation. In this context, it is noteworthy to mention that alcoholism acts as a major push factor behind this. The intensity of the problem increased during the latter part of the Left Front’s rule [Table.3]. However, during this study, although several populist schemes by the state government were operational, the question of trafficking existed.

Table 4: Number of Missing/Trafficked/Rescued Children from Tea Gardens

2016-17														
Sl.	Tea Gardens	Incident Identified	Trafficking Prevented	Trafficker Held	No. of Victims				Victims Rescued			Victims Mainstreamed		
					M	F	T	P	M	F	T	M	F	T
1	Carron	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.00	0	0	0	0	F	0
2	Debpara	1	0	0	0	1	1	0.02	0	1	1	0	0	0
3	Diana	2	0	0	0	2	2	0.05	0	1	1	0	0	1
4	Karballa	1	1	0	0	0	0	0.00	0	0	0	0	1	0
5	Katalguri	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.00	0	0	0	0	0	0
6	New Dooars (Div)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.00	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total		4	1	0	0	3	3	0.07	0	2	2	0	0	1
2017-18														
1	Carron	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.00	0	0	0	0	0	0
2	Debpara	2	0	1	0	2	2	0.05	0	0	1	0	1	1
3	Diana	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.00	0	0	1	0	0	0
4	Karballa	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.00	0	0	0	0	0	0
5	Katalguri	1	0	0	1	0	1	0.02	0	0	0	0	0	0
6	New Dooars (Div)	1	1	0	0	0	0	0.00	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total		4	1	1	1	2	3	0.07	0	0	2	0	1	1

Source: Survey on Human Trafficking in Tea Gardens, Dooars Jagron, 2019
 [M= Males; F=Females; T=Total; P=Percentage]

During conversations with political leaders and civil society members it was found that often parents encourage their young daughters and sons to do something to support their families thereby creating a huge pressure on them to seek any kind of employment. It is during this time that the traffickers approach the stage. In tea gardens, most of the parents lack adequate foresight and

without consulting the local learned person they send their children to the unknown world. These transactions often involve monetary incentives to parents. Once their children go missing, they realise their mistakes. Victor Basu said that in 2018, there were approximately 200-250 trafficking agents active in the Dooars region each with a specific area of operation.²⁹ He also added that migration is a regular phenomenon in the region but in most cases, it ended up in slavery and since the administration is non-cooperative, the rate of rescue is very poor. On some occasions, police become reluctant to take up cases of missing persons. Majority of the victims were not adults and were trafficked to the adjoining state of Sikkim followed by Delhi [Table.5].

On several occasions it is found that the agents have resources and links to the persons in power, therefore, allegations have been made that often police adopt a ‘bureaucratic approach’ towards the family members of the victims and are ‘partial’ in handling the cases.³⁰ Nonetheless, the parents sometimes even

Table 5: Case-wise Details of Trafficking

Sl.	Name	Age	Sex	Fathers Name	Address	Trafficked To	Year	Status
1.	Sabita Oraon	17	F	Fagu Oraon	Upper Line, Diana Tea Estate, PO & PS: Banarhat Dist - Jalpaiguri.	Sikkim	2017-18	No FIR lodged. Still working in Sikkim.
2.	Madhu Turi	14	F	Anil Turi.	Hatath Colony, PO & PS: Banarhat, Dist: Jalpaiguri.	Delhi	2017-18	FIR lodged without a receipt copy. Now back at her home.
3.	Gulnaj Khatun	20	F	Jamil Ansari	Chamurchi Check post, PO: Chamurchi, PS: Banarhat	Delhi	2017-18	FIR lodged.
4.	Manjeeta Gowala	14	F	Ambu Gowala.	Factory Line, Debpara Tea Estate, PO & PS: Banarhat, Dist - Jalpaiguri.	Sikkim	2017-18	Brought back home. Going to school
5.	Sima Oraon	14	F	Binod Oraon.	Garah Line, Debpara Tea Estate, PO & PS: Banarhat, Dist.: Jalpaiguri.	First Sikkim then to Delhi.	2017-18	Missing.
6.	Kali Paswan	24	F	Swapan Nayek	Hospital Line. Debpara Tea Estate, PO & PS: Banarhat, Dist: Jalpaiguri.	Delhi.	2017-18	Still missing.
7.	Malita Nayek	19	F	Karmu Nayek	Upper Line, Diana Tea Estate, PO & PS: Banarhat, Dist - Jalpaiguri.	Sikkim	2017-18	Missing.

8.	Akash Oraon	16	M	Bisram Oraon	Division Line 2, Karbala Tea Estate, PO & PS –Banarhat, Dist - Jalpaiguri.	Sikkim	October 2015	FIR lodged without a receipt copy. Now back at her home.
9.	Anuj Lohar	16	M	Bhagru Lohar.	Sorno Line, Kathalguri Tea Estate, PO & PS: Banarhat, Dist.: Jalpaiguri.	Ghaziabad, UP	June 2015	No FIR was lodged.
10	Sabitri Karmakar	16	F	Harikrishna Karmakar	Upper Line, Kathalguri Tea Estate, PO & PS: Banarhat, Dist: Jalpaiguri.	Delhi	2015	No FIR lodged.
11	Deepankar Ashoor	16	M	Deepak Ashoor	Division Line, Kathalguri Tea Estate, PO & PS: Banarhat, Dist: Jalpaiguri.	Pahelgoun, Kashmir	2014	FIR lodged without receipt copy. Still missing.
12	Motilal Lohar	30	M	Fagu Lohar	Division Line, Kathalguri Tea Estate, PO & PS: Banarhat, Dist: Jalpaiguri.	Jammu & Kashmir	February 2017	No FIR
13	Pawan Naik	14	M	Ramchandra Naik	Naik Line. Debpara Tea Estate, PO & PS: Banarhat, Dist: Jalpaiguri.	Sikkim	2015	No FIR
14	Fulmoti Lohar	8	F	Mukul Lohar	Fataktari, PO & PS: Nathua, Dist: Jalpaiguri.	—	—	FIR not received by the Police Station on 1 May 2017
15	Badri Oraon	12	M	Late Budhu Oraon	Munsi Line Tulsipra Tea Estate.	Sikkim	5 January 2010	Rescued and FIR lodged
16	Pralad Oraon	12	M	Jaug Munda	Munsi Line Tulsipra Tea Estate.	Sikkim	5 January 2010	Rescued and FIR lodged
17	Kapil Oraon	11	M	Bandhan Oraon	Munsi Line Tulsipra Tea Estate	Sikkim	5 January 2010	Rescued and FIR lodged
18	Kishore Oraon	15	M	Rampriti Oraon	Munsi Line Tulsipra Tea Estate	Sikkim	5 January 2010	Rescued and FIR lodged

19	Lalit Oraon	11	M	Tija Oraon	Munsi Line Tulsipra Tea Estate	Sikkim	5 January 2010	Rescued and FIR lodged
20	Dinesh Oraon	18	M	Lal Oraon	Munsi Line Tulsipra Tea Estate	Sikkim	5 January 2010	Rescued and FIR lodged
21	Firoj Lohar	17	M	Chatur Lohar	Munsi Line Tulsipra Tea Estate	Sikkim	5 January 2010	Rescued and FIR lodged
22	Bikash Munda	15	M	Daffid Munda	Gongatia Tea Estate; Kalchini Police Station	Sikkim	5 January 2010	Rescued and FIR lodged
23	Bharat Oraon	17	M	Ruja Oraon	Gongatia Tea Estate; Kalchini Police Station	Sikkim	5 January 2010	Rescued and FIR lodged
24	Sujit Oraon	6	M	Prem Oraon	Kalimandir Line, Karballa	Sikkim	5 February 2014	Trafficker brought Sujit back home on 18 February 2014

Source: *Survey on Human Trafficking in Tea Gardens, Dooars Jagron, 2019*

[M: male; F: Female; PO: Post Office; PS: Police Station; Dist: District; FIR: First Information Report registered at Police Station]

fear naming the agents. Inadequate authentic information regarding the movements and activities of the agents across the region and lack of strong formal complaints against them make the traffickers safe from legal bothering. Most of the parents of victims are illiterate, hence, they fail to produce authenticated documentation for proper police investigation and tend to file a missing diary instead of a case under the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956 making their complaint very weak. While social prestige and lack of solidarity owing to ethnic and caste differences are the reasons behind the absence of protests against trafficking, Ghosh found that apart from these factors 'lack of police support' and 'fear of police' are also the reasons due to which parents do not generally protest. To bridge this chasm between the inhabitants of the tea gardens and the police and administration, political parties, trade unions, and NGOs can play a vital role. However, there are some sporadic instances like the success stories of Dooars Jagron that came up during the field study.

Narratives of Trafficking: A Few Case Studies

I

Hamid Ansari (62) a worker at Chamurchi tea garden was promised a job as a construction worker somewhere in Delhi. He was previously working in Bhutan and adjoining riverbeds to support his family. Due to Covid-19, these two doors were shut. A woman (60) from an adjoining garden offered him a job. She made the same promise to two other persons also and took them to New Delhi. She bore the travelling fare which would be returned later. After reaching New Delhi she handed them over to another agent who kept them separately for taking them to Srinagar in

Kashmir. The group objected and in turn, was threatened to pay INR25,000 for setting them free. Their cell phones, wallets, and other necessary documents including governmental identity cards were confiscated. The other two persons managed to escape with the help of relatives in New Delhi. But Hamid was trafficked to Srinagar without any warm cloth. After reaching Srinagar, another new agent came onto the scene and took Hamid to Ganderbal. There Hamid was forced to do domestic as well as menial work with no fixed work time and also without pay. He could not return home and had to live without warm clothes until the paid amount of the actual employer who was the last in the chain was repaid. Meanwhile, Hamida (60), his wife had asked that woman several times to bring her husband back but returned empty-handed. She had then complained to the police and the alleged woman fled. She also alleged that three and half months have passed but the police are not looking after the matter seriously. Since Hamid remembered his wife’s mobile phone number, he stealthily talked with her over the phone of any Samaritan passer-by once a month. After seven months, Hamid was set free with the trivial amount of INR1,500. When he returned home by train, only INR500 was left in hand.

Table 6: Garden-wise Data on Trafficking in 2021

Name of Respondent	Entitled Schemes	Family Unit	Monthly Family Income [INR]	Migrant Members	Place of Destination	Type of Job
Hamida Begam (60, F)	Khadya Sathi, Lakshmir Bhandar	M-3 F-2	5,000	Hamid Ansari (62, M)	Delhi-Srinagar (Kashmir)- Ganderbal (Kashmir)	Domestic Labour, Scavenger
Munjia Khatoon (24, F)	Khadya Sathi, Lakshmir Bhandar	M-3 F-1	5,000	Anwar Ansari (30, M)	Delhi-Srinagar (Kashmir)- Ganderbal (Kashmir)	Housekeeping staff at a hotel

Source: Field visit in Chamurchi, 2021
[M: Male; F: Female]

II

On 5 May 2014, a couple named Niranjana Lohar and Gita Lohar, residents of Factory Line, Debpara Tea Estate lured two poor girls named Puja Gowala (15 years.), daughter of Lt. Shankar Gowala; and Gopi Soonar (23 years.), daughter of Maila Soonar—both also residents of Factory Line, Debpara Tea Estate—to work in Delhi with a handsome salary. The victims left home without informing their parents. The traffickers took them to hand over to Mithun Barua of Grassmore Tea Estate who is regarded as the main agent in the deal. During the settlement of the transaction among the traffickers, Gopi Soonar sensed foul play and decided to flee from the spot. The duo was intercepted by Dudhiram Nutt who promised to offer them shelter for a night and took the victims to Saran Tosa, a friend of Dudhiram. Both then took the victims to a nearby forest and raped them injuring Gopi in the neck. After the incident Puja Gowala managed to talk to her aunty in Siliguri about the event. Puja’s aunt rushed to Grassmore Tea Estate. and informed Nagrakata Police Station. Nagrakata Police arrested Mithun Barua and Saran Tosa, while Dudhiram was still absconding. Niranjana Lohar and his wife Gita Lohar, hiding in Redbank Tea Estate. were traced with the effort

from Dooars Jagron after an interaction with the community groups of the local area. They were arrested from Redbank Tea Estate on the next day. Dooars Jagron visited the house of the victims and counselled and motivated them to be vocal in the court and the media. The traffickers were booked under IPC370. All the leading newspapers of the region carried the incident in the headlines. The victims were handed over to their parents on 7 May 2014.

III

Kusum Lohar of Katalguri Tea Estate found a girl wandering in Chamurchi Bazar on 16 August 2015. She brought the girl to the office of Dooars Jagron. A conversation with the girl revealed that her name was Mamata Nagasihya (13 years). Her father's name was Jitan Nagasihya and her mother was Durgi Nagasihya. They were a resident of Khawar Line in Torsa Tea Garden in Alipurduar district within the jurisdiction of Jaigaon Police Station. Victor Basu took the girl to the police station and contacted Mr. H. Khan, the Sub-Inspector of Jaigaon Police Station. Mr. Khan investigated the girl's family and told them to report at Banarhat Police Station. After examining their voter's card and residential certificate, Mamata was handed over to her parents. Kusum Lohar had been involved in human trafficking. But she has been counselled by Dooars Jagron for two years (2017-2018) which made her get away from trafficking.

IV

An incidence of trafficking was identified in Diana Tea Estate. Anisha Naik (14 years.), daughter of Bishun Naik and Rukmini Naik and resident of Shanti Sangh Line in Diana Tea Estate was trafficked in January 2015. She was rescued and rehabilitated but went missing again on 11 March 2016. During the house visit in the first week of April 2016, Dooars Jagron staff Ms. Romi Kujur came to know the matter. She was also informed by the neighbours that Anisha was trafficked to Darjeeling to work as a maid by an agent with the consensus of her father. Immediately Ms. Kujur informed the matter to Project Holder-Mr. P.P. Basu and he phoned the CHILDLINE, Jalpaiguri asking for their assistance in this regard. As a result, she was rescued and sheltered at CHILDLINE Home in Hakimpara, Siliguri and on 15 April 2016 Anisha returned home. She has now been re-enrolled in class VI at Debpara Tea Estate Junior High School.

V

Sita Naik (16 years) daughter of Jagan Naik and Lt. Rukmin Naik, resident of Naik Line, Debpara Tea Estate was missing from home since 10 June 2014. The Dooars Jagron staff intervened and contacted the linkman to produce Sita from Jammu and Kashmir or face legal consequences. The linkman named Suresh Naik, Gangotia Tea Estate, Kalchini escorted her home on 11 May 2016.

VI

Sugi Gowala (44 years), wife of Ambu Gowala (55 years) was a resident of Factory Line in Debpara Tea Estates with their two daughters Manjita Gowala (12 years) who was a student of class IV and Sanjita Gowala (9 years) who was a student of class II. While Sugi worked as a casual labourer at Debpara Tea Estate, Ambu Gowala was unemployed. On 16 March 2017, Sugi Gowala said to Dooars Jagron staff that Manoj Oraon (an agent), son of Fauda Oraon who lived in Gara Line in

Debpara Tea Estate, brought the whole family to Sikkim on 19 February 2017 when Manjita was recruited as a maid in the house of Gajing (Sikkim) and Sugi and her husband had been recruited in a farm at another place. Due to heavy work, they were unable to continue the job and wanted to come back after a few days, but the master of Manjita didn't agree to release her because he had given INR8,000 to Manoj Oraon for her. So, her family members left Sikkim leaving Manjita there. The Dooars Jagron staff sent Sugi Gowala to the Dooars Jagron office after consulting with the Project Holder immediately and on 18 March 2017 an FIR was lodged against Manoj Oraon at Banarhat Police Station. On 26 March 2017 a staff reporter of *Uttar Banga Sambad* visited their (Sugi and Ambu) house and the next day the incident was printed in the news. Manoj was arrested by the police and was sent along with Sugi and Ambu to bring back Manjita. Eventually, on 28 March 2017, Manjita was brought back home and on 30 March 2017 she was readmitted to Debpara Tea Estate Bangla Primary School in class IV.

VII

On 12 January 2018 a staff of Dooars Jagron was informed that a woman named Usha Minj of Mandir Line neighbourhood, New Dooars Tea Estate (Div.) convinced the guardians of a dropout child named Arpita Surin (10 years), daughter of Lt. Sandeep Surin and Basanti Surin, Mandirline, New Dooars Tea Estate to bring her to Delhi. Immediately the Dooars Jagron staff along with some other people rushed there to handle the matter and after a long conversation, he was able to prevent the attempt of trafficking. On the next day, the child was readmitted to class IV in New Dooars Tea Estate (Div.) Primary School.

Populist Schemes and the Politics of Migration in Jhargram

The above case studies force us to ask, why despite the inauguration of so many schemes, which surely have helped to a certain extent to overcome the phase of 'hunger deaths' that happened one and a half decades before, could not stop migrants and trafficking in the region? Secondly, can populist schemes really become an alternative to steady employment? The differential impact of the populist schemes of the government and the differences in expectations thereof becomes more apparent in the Jhargram district of the Jungle Mahal areas of southwest West Bengal. The literal meaning of Jungle Mahal (a British coinage) is 'jungle estates'. The area comprises of the districts of Birbhum, Bankura, Jhargram, Paschim Medinipur, and Purulia, which is a part of the Chhota Nagpur plateau. The present study is based on field studies in some villages of two blocks namely Binpur I and Binpur II in the Jhargram district which is located in the Jungle Mahal (the forested southwestern area) of West Bengal. After bifurcating from the Paschim Medinipur district, the district of Jhargram was formed in 2017. The entire area is drought-prone and the laterite soil is next to infertile. According to the *Census of India 2011*, 96.5 per cent of the total population was rural and 29.37 per cent of the total population belonged to the Scheduled Tribes.³¹ Even after a long period of LF rule, the Jungle Mahal region remained backwards in terms of accessing basic amenities for the people. Most parts of the region remain underdeveloped due to the government's apathy, uneven rough terrain, less rainfall, and last but not the least, infertile soil. A 2011 study suggested that almost 36 per cent of the population in the region are tribal and marginal workers.³² Owing to economic backwardness, the Communist Party of India (Maoist) started their activities in different parts of the region. Since 2001, the region has been disturbed due to Maoist activities. The Maoists often chose their base surrounding the poverty-stricken villages and mobilised the villagers to join the party. In

the later stages of Left Front rule, the region witnessed a conflict situation between the State and the Maoists.³³

Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee is often credited with restoring peace, law and order in the region. After coming to power in 2011, on her first visit to Jungle Mahal, she asked the Maoist rebel to put down their weapons and assured them compensation. She remarked: “friends, return to the mainstream and the government will look after you. I have faced guns. What is mightier, guns or the people? If there is no peace, development cannot take place. You cannot procure food with guns...”. She also added that a decision has been made by the government to provide jobs to 10,000 persons from Jungle Mahal in the police and National Volunteer Force (NVF) also in special police constable posts, rice per kg at INR2 to the families whose annual income was up to INR42,000 (later extended to all families in the region) and the women who bore police atrocities will be given one-time compensation of INR100,000.³⁴ Banerjee also assured to upgrade health care facilities and education, particularly for the students who studied in *Ol Chiki* script. Later, the Central Government of India approved a special package of INR8,750 Crore for the development of Jungle Mahal. The package was expected to cover issues like safe drinking water, rural employment, rural road construction, and watershed.³⁵ Apart from these exclusive schemes, the general schemes are also implemented at regular intervals in the region. Despite framing different policies for the region, migration patterns have started to emerge from Jhargram over the years primarily because of unemployment due to a lack of industry and also a decline in soil fertility and low rainfall. The question then may arise: What are the ‘limits’ of the populist schemes? Why and how these have failed to address the outward labour migration.

The villages of Amlasol and Kankrajhore located on the West Bengal-Jharkhand border are part of the Banspahari Gram Panchayat of Binpur II Block are socio-politically and economically marginalised as is its geographical location. Most of the young men from these villages are going to work in the borewell drilling industry in the different parts of the Indian states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. They depend upon news of employment from close individuals who have previously worked or are presently working in that particular place. The migrants from the villages like Amlasol and Kankrajhore catch trains from Ghatshila rail station since it is in close proximity to their places compared to Kharagpur rail junction and bear the travelling cost later reimbursed by the employer at the workplace. They sent remittances over bank accounts although not everyone has it. So, they have to depend on others to send their remittances home. Not having a bank account is a perennial problem in these marginal villages that become a major obstacle in getting

Table 7: Data on Labour Migration from Binpur I & II

Name of Migrant	Presently Entitled Schemes	Family Unit	Monthly Income [INR]		Destination	Type of Job	Village
			Family	Migrant			
Rabi Sabbar (20, M)	Khadya Sathi	M-3 F-3	3,000	6,000	Karnataka	Boring well industry	Amlasol (Binpur II)
Lakshmikanta Sabbar (32, M)	Khadya Sathi, Swasthya Sathi	M-3 F-1	1,500	6,000	Karnataka	Boring well industry	Amlasol (Binpur II)

Budhu Sabbar (20, M)	Khadya Sathi	M-3 F-3	2,500	6,000	Karnataka	Boring well industry	Amlasol (Binpur II)
Pradip Muda (38, M)	Khadya Sathi, Swasthya Sathi, Lakshmir Bhandar	M-2 F-2	2,500	7,500	Karnataka	1) Boring well industry 2) Worker in a cold drinks factory	Amlasol (Binpur II)
Akhil Muda (28, M)	Khadya Sathi	M-2 F-3	1,500	7,000	Tamil Nadu	Boring well industry	Kankrajhore (Binpur II)
Bakul Muda (32, M)	Khadya Sathi, Swasthya Sathi, Lakshmir Bhandar	M-4 F-4	3,500	6,000	Kerala	Rubber factory	Kankrajhore (Binpur II)
Sanjay Mahato (26, M)	Khadya Sathi, Swasthya Sathi, Lakshmir Bhandar	M-2 F-1	6,500	14,000	Raipur, Chhattisgarh	Plumber	Sarisabasa (Binpur II)
Prafulla Mahato (32, M)	Khadya Sathi, Swasthya Sathi, Lakshmir Bhandar	M-5 F-3	4,500	10,000	Chennai, Tamil Nadu	Iron melting	Sarisabasa (Binpur II)
Shaktipada Ghosh (19, M)	Khadya Sathi, Swasthya Sathi, Lakshmir Bhandar	M-4 F-2	3,000	10,500	Bangalore, Karnataka	Chicken farm	Dahijuri (Binpur I)
Bharat Mahato (45, M)	Khadya Sathi, Swasthya Sathi, Lakshmir Bhandar	M-2 F-1	3,000	9,000	Kerala	Centring	Dahijuri (Binpur I)
Tufan Mahato (22, M)	Khadya Sathi, Swasthya Sathi, Lakshmir Bhandar	M-2 F-2	9,000	10,000	Hyderabad, Telangana	Medical chemical industry	Bindukata (Binpur I)

Source: Field Visit to Binpur I & II, 2022

[M: Male; F: Female]

facilities from the government. At present, the situation has become better since it is mandatory to have a bank account to receive payment for work done under MGNREGS. But the majority of the bank accounts are held by males. Therefore, schemes like Lakshmir Bhandar that require a bank account held by a woman have not been fully implemented here. Nonetheless, many women in these

villages have their bank accounts in the neighbouring state of Jharkhand which also disallows them to be eligible under the said scheme. The migration scenario in Binpur stands in stark contrast with Dooars in two perspectives—firstly, the negligible number of single woman migrants who are mainly seasonal migrants from these marginal villages and; secondly, the male migrants are going to a destination in groups of at least seven to eight individuals. In other words, groups like Sabar, Muda, Mahato tend to travel in groups. On most occasions, work is prearranged and the employer has a long-term relationship with these particular communities and villages [Table.7].

The pattern of woman migration is worth discussing. In the case of Dooars, the relationship between labour and job opportunities in the local areas is asymmetrical thus making the former cheap. There is very limited alternative employment opportunity outside the gardens and the supply of labourers (both male and female) is considerably huge which weakens the bargaining capacity of the labourers with the local employer. But, in the context of the Amlasol and Kankrajhore, the two forests encircled villages, the villagers are traditionally dependent on forest resources. Although in present days cutting wood in the adjoining jungles is prohibited by the government, they collect and sell other non-timber forest resources. Moreover, many families from the Muda tribe harvest *babui* rope but the Sabars do not have lands. However, earnings from the forest and *babui* rope are very low but instrumental in restricting the outward flow of female migrant labour. Apart from that, when various governmental schemes (Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Gramin Awas Yojana) are being implemented in the area, they would negotiate with the contractor to refrain from bringing labour from outside and instead provide work to the local people. While in the sample villages of Binpur II Block we have found that there are no women migrants, in the villages studied under Binpur I Block there are a considerable number of women who are going for seasonal work during harvest season in the districts of Purba Midnapore, Hooghly, Burdwan. Due to fertile land, canal irrigation and groundwater expansion, these regions produce huge volumes of rice, particularly in the district of Burdwan. Seasonal migration during rice harvesting season can be perceived as a segment of the regional labour market in West Bengal.³⁶ During this time both workers and employers try to use it to ensure their welfare. Many affluent landholders have built labour quarters to accommodate them free of cost. But women have to bear their food expenses. They stay in the workplace until the present contract is over. Apart from working in farmlands, women also go to work in different rice mills at Galsi and Ausgram in the Burdwan district. Without mothers, childhood is getting lost. Girls are getting married before time and the boys are quitting studying and inevitably becoming a part of the informal economy. If someone does not want to migrate, she/he has to depend on two sources, first, masonry labour in the neighbouring towns of Jhargram, and second, stone crushing at the surrounding hillocks which hardly let them live with dignity even after being supported by populist schemes.

To understand the variations, in terms of demands/expectations from the government and the flow of labour, a study was conducted in different villages under the Binpur II Block. At Sarisabasa village under Belpahari Panchayat, there exist variations in demands from the government and the nature of work in the workplace. The difference in literacy rate perhaps explains the differential demands from the villages. The literacy rate in Amlasol is 56.55 per cent and Kankrajhore is 54.15 per cent and the demand of the villagers is more or less confined to proper implementation of government schemes that are framed to address the basic needs of survival like housing, water etc. Some respondents from the Sabar tribe also demanded land for cultivation and complained that rice provided under the Khadya Sathi scheme is not adequate in terms of quantity because the local food habit is eating rice three times a day. But in Sarisabasa, with a literacy rate 72.72 per cent, the

respondents demanded government jobs and upliftment of farmlands etc. During group interviews with the people of Sarisabasa, it was found that they are demanding industrial development in the local area. The nearest industrial area is Kharagpur which is 77 km away from Belpahari. Another thing that came up during the conversation with the educated youths is that they are not seeing the schemes as something which can secure their future. Apart from literacy rate, other factors like migration cycle and work conditions in different urban areas which led to a different level of socialisation could be a reason behind diversity in demands. The Sabars spend four to six months in the workplace and have a tendency to return home as soon as the present contract is over, Muda and Mahato have a tendency to spend time outside the home and are prone to circular/repetitive migration between home and host areas. In this context, it is worth mentioning that since Mudas and Mahatos have lands, they are comparatively better off than the Sabars. The possession of land by these two tribes sometimes gives them the liberty to bear the travelling cost that the Sabars do not have.

Conclusion: Limits of Welfare Populism

Jungle Mahal is not a single entity. The study in Dooars and Jhargram shows that there are heterogeneous demands of the people in the region. What is common and basic in these demands has perfectly been understood and targeted by the Government thereby unleashing a range of welfare policies in West Bengal targeted to encompass almost every basic need of life, say, food (Khadya Sathi), housing, education (Kanyashree, Sabooj Sathi), health (Swasthya Sathi), and electricity. Some of these were readjusted and started in the wake of the present health and economic catastrophe due to Covid-19. Sometimes, the timing of the launch of these policies coincided with the electoral phases in West Bengal. In 2021, just before the legislative election, Mamata Banerjee introduced the 'Maa' common kitchen, which provides subsidised prepared meals to the needy and impoverished for INR5. The study of the different villages in the Jhargram district suggests that there is very limited livelihood opportunity in the region. Temporary ministrations like framing different populist policies seems to be inadequate for the wholesome development of the people in the area. Moreover, policies are subjected to administrative red-tapism and difficulties in the proper identification of beneficiaries. Many respondents alleged that regarding the issues in the governmental schemes they visited Block Development Office several times with no success. During the interviews with women both in Dooars and Jhargram, it came to light that Chief Minister Banerjee is very much popular among them, especially, for the various popular policies framed with the motive of women's empowerment. While the schemes like Kanyashree and Rupashree are targeting particularly women, the schemes namely Swasthya Sathi is for the whole family but has to be registered in the name of a female family member. On a theoretical note, the Government's tactics are both individualising and collectivising. In other words, the Government has successfully brought the question of biological existence into the domain of politics; biopolitics which is supported, framed and legitimised by populism, thus, can also be called 'bio-populism'.³⁷

Despite the Government's pervasive welfare outreach, there have been allegations of rampant corruption and selective distribution in those schemes. The opposition parties particularly the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), during the legislative assembly election campaigns in 2021 in the state of West Bengal repeatedly tried to make these corruptions specifically regarding money or illegal commission (which became infamous as 'cut money') as an issue of the election. The opposition also took a dig at the government for disproportionately favouring the religious minorities of the state and tried to make 'development', 'save democracy', and 'corruption', an election agenda against

welfare populism practised by the AITC government. But these agendas appear to be hallowed in front of what Samaddar calls 'subalternisation of politics' in West Bengal.³⁸ Critically speaking, while at the individual level, the liberal mantra of development aims to provide long-term economic conviviality in terms of employment, populist policies are makeshift and hence insufficient as the present study suggests. For instance, a scheme like *Lakshmir Bhandar* can ensure biological survival when there is no employment as during the Covid-19 induced lockdowns but not enough to check the flow of outward labour migration. Hence, although populist policies can be instrumental in winning the next election, these cannot be part of a long-term strategy for social transformation. Moreover, reliance on schemes does not provide an individual with an opportunity to realise her/his freedom. Instead of framing several schemes on the charitable ground, the State should adopt a rights-based approach and thus create conditions to promote the freedom of choices of its citizens. In this sense, the populist model of development is limited.

At the social level in the last 10 years, there is an increase in the government's development work in the villages, especially, visible through the building of pucca roads, culverts, and deck-bridge. Among various schemes, TPDS and MGNREGS are two prime instruments for social security. While in the former case, the State Government's achievement is praiseworthy, West Bengal has also performed quite well in MGNREGS.³⁹ Despite the allegations of malpractices, as manifested in the state legislative elections the political returns from these populist schemes remain praiseworthy. The primary technique of governance is to deliver some basic amenities to a large section of people that somehow help them in their daily life.⁴⁰ A recent survey conducted among 600 families in 100 villages in the region reveals that the scheme called Lakshmir Bhandar has helped people in their daily life. Under this scheme, those belonging to Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) receive INR1,000 per month, and families belonging to the general category receive INR500 per month. Under this scheme, those belonging to Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) receive INR1,000 per month, and families belonging to the general category receive INR500 per month. The money received under this scheme was primarily spent on purchasing groceries and utensils (43 per cent), agricultural needs (23 per cent), tuition fees for children (10 per cent), rearing livestock (7 per cent) LPG cylinders, and bank savings (5 per cent), repaying small loans (4 per cent) and miscellaneous (3 per cent).⁴¹ The AITC promised a similar initiative for the women of poll-bound Goa, increasing the dole to INR5,000.

Bhattacharya has observed that AITC is mostly banking on (apart from Muslim votes in bulk) the beneficiary base created by the government's social welfare schemes.⁴² Thus, it can be said that a populist government that tries to solidify its edifice on populist schemes must reinvent itself in terms of newer schemes. If it does not perform in this way then probably it will face questions/demands from the people it represents. And, to fill this vacuum the other populist parties will come to articulate differential demands of the society through a series of schemes. This is the fate of popular sovereignty. Chatterjee rightly cautions that once politics enters a spiral of competitive populism, there is no easy return to pristine liberalism.⁴³ Given the present poor condition of employment in the state of West Bengal,⁴⁴ these populist schemes are doing a great deal in accommodating popular demands and acting as a major factor in successive electoral renewals. Therefore, if the present government wants to govern the state in this particular way of governing through welfare schemes, then it has to learn the art to reinvent itself again and again. And, in the context of the present study, it is clear that addressing the issues of labour migration and human trafficking is a tough challenge to the populist government in West Bengal. We have to ask whether it is at all possible to address these burning issues through scheme-based governance; or, does it signify the limit of populism?

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Notes

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² ‘Swasthya Sathi’ is a health insurance scheme provided by the Government of West Bengal. It was launched on 17 February 2017. For details, see: <https://swasthyasathi.gov.in/>; ‘Duare Sarkar’ is an initiative of the Government of West Bengal, for the delivery of services and welfare schemes at the doorsteps through outreach camps. These camps are organized at the level of the *gram panchayat* and municipal ward level. For details, see: https://ds.wb.gov.in/Portal_New_Default.aspx; ‘Paray Samadhan’ is an initiative by the Government of West Bengal to deliver administrative solutions at a hyper-local level. For details, see: <https://wb.gov.in/government-schemes.aspx>; ‘Lakshmir Bhandar’ scheme was launched by the Government of West Bengal to provide financial assistance to the female head of the family; ‘Khadya Sathi’ is an initiative by the Government of West Bengal to ensure food security in terms of storage, procurement, and distribution of food to eradicate malnutrition. For details, see: https://food.wb.gov.in/About_Category.aspx?page_id=9; ‘Kanyashree’ is a conditional cash transfer scheme initiated by the Government of West Bengal and instituted in 2013. It targets adolescent girls in the age group 13-19 and provides a two-tier scholarship. For details, see: <http://wbcmo.gov.in/kanyashree.aspx>; ‘Rupashree Prakalpa’ is a West Bengal state government initiative that provides a one-time financial grant of INR25,000 for economically stressed families at the time of their adult daughters’ marriages; ‘Sabuj Sathi’ is a scheme for distribution of bicycles to an estimated 40 lakh students studying in classes IX to XII in Government and Government Aided Schools and Madrasahs of the State by the Government of West Bengal, <https://wbsaboojsathi.gov.in/v2/>

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