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People, Politics and Protests VIII

LEFT FRONT GOVERNMENT IN WEST BENGAL (1971-1982)

**Considerations on “Passive Revolution”
& the Question of Caste in Bengal Politics**

Atig Ghosh

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Atig Ghosh *

The Left Front was set up as the repressive climate of the Emergency was relaxed in January 1977. The six founding parties of the Left Front, i.e. the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or the CPI(M), the All India Forward Bloc (AIFB), the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), the Marxist Forward Bloc (MFB), the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI) and the Biplabi Bangla Congress (BBC), articulated a common programme. This Left Front contested the Lok Sabha election in an electoral understanding together with the Janata Party and won most of the seats it contested. Ahead of the subsequent June 1977 West Bengal Legislative Assembly elections, seat-sharing talks between the Left Front and the Janata Party broke down. The Left Front had offered the Janata Party 56 per cent of the seats and the post as Chief Minister to JP leader Prafulla Chandra Sen, but JP insisted on 70 per cent of the seats. The Left Front thus opted to contest the elections on its own. The seat-sharing within the Left Front was based on the “Promode Formula”, named after the CPI(M) State Committee Secretary Promode Das Gupta. Under the Promode Formula the party with the highest share of votes in a constituency would continue to field candidates there, under its own election symbol and manifesto. CPI(M) contested 224 seats, AIFB 36, RSP 23, MFB 3, RCPI 4 and BBC 2. The Left Front won the election, winning 231 out of the 294 seats. CPI(M) won 178 seats, AIFB 25, RSP 20, MFB 3, RCPI 3 and 1 independent. AIFB and RSP won significant chunks of seats in northern Bengal. The combined Left Front vote was 6,568,999 votes (45.8 percent of the votes cast in the state). The electoral result came as a surprise to the Left Front itself, as it had offered 56 per cent of the seats in the pre-electoral seat-sharing talks with the Janata Party. Over the years, the Left Front, though joined by the Communist Party of India (CPI) in 1982, came increasingly to be controlled and micro-managed by the CPI(M), so much so that towards the end of its rule, Left Front and the CPI(M) had almost become synonymous in common use. However, the end of its rule did not come soon. Once it achieved its unexpected victory in 1977, the Left Front stayed in power for the next 34 years.

Till 2011, therefore, West Bengal had the longest ruling democratically elected Communist government in world history. Since 1977 the Communists governed a population larger than that of most western democracies. Its approximately 80 million people¹ re-elected the Communists

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repeatedly, indicating a continuing popularity and longevity not found by Marxists in any other democracy. The Communist electoral victory in one of India's most industrialised (at the time of independence) and strategically important states predictably created considerable interest and controversy over its performance in office. This performance was expressed in the first five years mainly through rural development initiatives.

Though development policy implementation was not the only Left Front endeavour, it was the most critical in providing a working example for the rest of India, and in consolidating Communist power. Electorally the rural areas with 74 per cent of the state population would be critical in maintaining Communist influence. For this reason rural development had priority over urban industrial development in determining the success of the Left Front government. It was also the area where the Communists had greatest constitutional authority as agrarian reform fell largely within state jurisdiction. Rural development will therefore take up most of the present essay. Since the present study will be concerned as far as possible with the Left Front's first term in government (1977-1982), special attention will be given to Operation Barga of 1977 and the panchayat elections of 1978. Land reform and decentralisation of administration were, indeed, the two key priorities in the first term. On 29 September 1977 the West Bengal Land (Amendment) Bill was passed. Through Operation Barga, in which share-croppers were given inheritable rights on lands they tilled, 1.1 million acres of land was distributed amongst 1.4 million share-croppers.² On 4 June 1978 three-tier panchayat local bodies were elected across the state, elections in which the Left Front won a landslide victory.³ Some 800,000 acres of land were distributed to 1.5 million heads of households between 1978 and 1982.⁴

The task facing the Left Front government on assuming office in 1977 was fraught with difficulties, despite its massive majority in the Legislative Assembly. The problems posed by the transition to socialism in the conditions of West Bengal were hardly amenable to easy solutions. The United Fronts of the late 1960s, under pressure from the Maoist left, had attempted rapid radical change only to be brutally repressed. This radical activity helped gain the CPI(M) a larger base, but the party's inability to stand up to state repression exposed its weakness in the face of a dictatorial government. Only the return of democracy after the Emergency enabled the CPI (M) to show that its popular following had been enhanced during the years of "semi-fascist terror".

Though the central Janata government formed in 1977 was not hostile to the Left Front, it could hardly be expected to countenance revolutionary change in a state government, nor was a successful revolution possible in one province alone. Having won the election, the Left Front could use its power either for radical polarisation of class forces, or for a more gradual incremental change designed to give longevity to the government: a longevity sufficient for its base to survive till revolutionary conditions in the rest of India caught up with West Bengal. These revolutionary conditions however would likely take decades to come, if they came at all. A state government intent on remaining in power for decades could hardly be expected to keep up a tempo of popular revolutionary fervour.

Surprisingly, and as we have already observed, even the Communists never expected to win all but sixty-three of the 293 assembly seats when they ran for election in 1977. They had gone to great lengths to form a seat adjustment with the non-Communist Janata Party then ruling the central government, but when rebuffed contested on their own and won a landslide victory. Their unexpected victory left them without an articulated strategy for directing their new-found power. However, their *ad hoc* reactions to problems indicated where their interests lay and the groups they were most oriented to promoting. It was these policies which insured their popularity and consolidated their base in the state.

It was Jyoti Basu, a man known for his precision of articulation, who, in holding up West Bengal as an example for the rest of India, made the most revealing statement about Left Front government policy in 1985:

The Left Front Government in the State of West Bengal has limited powers. It has to operate within a capitalist feudal economy. The Constitution, contrary to federal principles, does not provide for the needed powers for the States and we suffer from a special disability because the Union Government is ill-disposed towards our Government. In such a situation, we have been explaining to the people why we cannot bring about fundamental changes even though the ideology and character of our Government are different from those that characterise the Government at the Centre. But we do hold that by forming the Government through elections it is possible for us to rule in a manner which is distinctly better and more democratic than the way followed by the Congress party at the Centre and in many other States. It is also possible to give relief to the people, particularly the deprived sections, through the minimum programme adopted by the Left Front. We have been attempting to do so by motivating the people and enlisting their support and sympathy. Our objective is to raise their political consciousness along with giving them relief so that they can distinguish between truth and falsehood and friends and enemies, and realise the alternative path which will free them from the shackles of Capitalism and Feudalism and usher in a new modern progressive society. This is a difficult task and we have to traverse a long path. But we visualise success in our objective when large masses all over India will be imbued with the correct political consciousness and free themselves from *bourgeois* influence and ideology, particularly the working masses. They will arrive at the truth through experience and continuous struggles. The Left and democratic State Governments can help and expedite this process even with their limited powers. It is with such a perspective and objective that we are functioning in West Bengal.⁵

This Communist transitional strategy takes place in two stages. The first stage would create governments at the state level opposed to the ruling Congress, breaking its virtual monopoly of power, and enabling other popular parties including the Communists to make inroads. In such fluid conditions the Communists could eventually attain a dominant position in coalition governments at the state level. When dominance was achieved at a national level, the Communist takeover would be complete.

The first stage involving Communist participation in state governments would attempt reforms only as a means of developing a Communist political base. In its political practice, however, the reforms would not be much different from what Social Democratic parties might be expected to deliver, but which the establishment parties had proved unable or unwilling to implement. Therefore, the Communist state governments could not be expected to implement an immediate revolutionary programme. Rather their policy implementation could only be considered on the basis of (1) whether it used all avenues for reform available within the constitutional system, and (2) whether these reforms contained a potential for further radicalisation and expansion of the Communist movement towards the ultimate goal of a Communist revolution. A failure to implement reforms could be due to the constitutional system's allowing insufficient scope for reform along lines conducive to Communist growth, or because of inadequacies with Communist policy implementation. The final possibility is that while the reforms may succeed in their immediate objectives, they create interests inimical to more radical alternatives and supportive of a new status quo. This paper hopes to argue that while there was sufficient scope within the Indian constitution for reforms conducive to Communist growth in a revolutionary direction, these reforms were not undertaken. Furthermore what reforms were implemented furthered class and group interests hostile to more radical change, making the development of a revolutionary conjuncture less likely. As a result, reforms ground to a

halt, and their continued stay in office became counterproductive from a revolutionary Communist viewpoint, but helpful to the establishment they aimed at overthrowing.

The Communist state government had limited jurisdiction over many institutions and departments, having to operate within the constitutional constraints of the central government, which had the power to remove it from office by Presidential decree. With these limitations in mind, the policy implementation of the Left Front government may be analysed to determine its success in bringing about social and economic change, and to indicate groups that benefited from these reforms. Their electoral success was due to following policies that promoted rural middle- and upper-class interests, while distributing palliatives to the lower classes. In the urban areas the interests of the government clerical staff were promoted, as well as of those corporations still willing to invest in the state. The industrial and rural working class received few if any benefits from Left Front rule, and might have been better off had the Communists remained in opposition where they could have led strikes in pursuit of wage demands.

It will be argued that the Left Front failed, not primarily because of the limitations on its power and resources, but because it did not make appropriate use of the powers and resources that it had at its disposal. Rather than promoting the interests of the rural and urban lower classes, it gave primacy to the traditional rural and urban middle-class base of the Communist movement, which ultimately proved an obstacle to the further advancement both of lower-class interests, and those of the revolutionary Communist movement as a whole. The ruling CPI(M) which had been founded as a revolutionary alternative to the old “revisionist” Communist Party, became through its experience in office, no different from its parent party. It thus ceased to be revolutionary in its practice, and even to call it reformist would be overstating its achievements in office. The rural and urban vested interests which the Left Front promoted eventually made further change in both reformist and revolutionary directions more difficult, as these interests became more firmly entrenched than ever, and opposed to any change in the status quo which would threaten the newly created privileges the Left Front provided them with. While this distribution of patronage enabled the Communists to be an electoral success, it ultimately proved inimical to the advancement of revolutionary communism (an impasse out of which it is unlikely to emerge in the foreseeable future, even in its position now as opposition). By promoting various propertied class interests, it gave these groups a stake in the status quo, and made them more hostile to reforms that would benefit the society as a whole. These classes transformed from being the traditional advocates of reform, to being its most vociferous opponents. Among the non-partisan voices, there is general consensus about this. Dwaipayan Bhattacharya, prophetically analysing the initial electoral losses of the Left Front in 2008, through the theoretical optic of ‘party-society’, opined: “The preponderance of the party over the social space, the transformation of the party from a hegemonic force into a violative one and ultimately the ruptures in the ‘party-society’ have all gone on to loosen the dominance of the Left Front in West Bengal.”⁶ He has further expanded in his 2016 book that the CPI (M) was so caught up in the process of preserving power that it refused to reinvent a process of change that came about after the reforms it initiated in the 1980s. Rather than utilising the quotidian nature of its engagement with the people to further change — by expanding the benefits of land reforms to improve the status of landless agricultural workers; by organising and working towards the improvement of livelihoods in the unorganised sector; by focussing on primary education and health; by involving its cadre from the lower segments of society in a way that they could be taken into higher leadership — the party was merely reduced to an arbiter of sorts, with decisions taken in a top-down manner, leadership remaining ossified and dominated by the upper castes and the focus restricted to winning elections.⁷

On a similar vein, Ranabir Samaddar has explained the hubristic logic of the Left Front rule and the process of its inevitable collapse:

...party substituted for society, local bosses working as local barons substituted for the party, party committees substituted for government's intelligence wing, inviting speculative and comprador capital appeared as steps towards organic industrialisation of the state and protests began to be considered as conspiracies against Left rule...⁸

Samaddar, however, characteristically pushes the envelope and characterises the entire period of 1977-2011 as an era of “passive revolution”,⁹ and declares that this is an ongoing story of transition.¹⁰ In this, there is the implicit suggestion of the “lower classes” coming to power through electoral means by and in 2011 and the people practising “popular democracy in an epoch of passive revolution.”¹¹ Herein lies the source of much debate among the commentators. But, for my purposes, suffice it to say that both thinkers locate the *fons et origo* in the initial years of Left Front rule, albeit, to my mind, the former does so in terms of a declensionist process while the latter understands it as the foundational aporia of the parliamentary left. Be it as it may, contemporary observers and commentators in the 1980s failed to descry these processual lapses and/or structural faultlines owing probably to their historical propinquity in part and hopeful over-enthusiasm in part. This paper endeavours to make possible such an analysis within the time-frame of 1977-1982. Further, to land reform and local self-government, this paper wishes to add a third plank— that of coping with the refugee situation created by the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 and severe floods. In fact, the Left Front government often credited itself with an efficient management of these “problems”.¹² This claim could probably be put to test through a study of another momentous historical event in the first five years of Left Front rule: the Marichjhapi incident which refers to the forcible eviction in 1979 of Bangladeshi refugees on Marichjhapi island in the Sundarbans, and the subsequent death of thousands by police gunfire, starvation, and disease.¹³ The discussion on refugee resettlement will form the third, relatively short section following land reforms and Panchayat Raj. In the end, there will be occasion to offer a speculative conclusion on the Left’s understanding of caste in Bengal and how it played into their politics and probably accounted for many of its lapses.

Land Reform

Land reform is potentially the most significant programme the Communist government might be expected to undertake. As it is a state subject under the Indian constitution it was within the jurisdiction of the Left Front government. Though plaintiffs have recourse to court challenges and new legislation is subject to Presidential approval, the legal and extra-legal powers open to a state government are considerable. These include the use of the state police and administration, as well as the Left peasant organisations. Central government dismissal of a state government is constitutionally allowed, and has been used to dismiss previous Communist governments, placing limits on how far revolutionary methods can be taken.

At the macro-level the radical objectives of the state land reform programme appeared unambiguous in their devotion to helping the lower classes, especially in the West Bengal government’s Seventh Five Year Plan.¹⁴ However, by the time the Left Front came to power there had already been a gradual lowering and tightening of land ceiling laws to the point where the small minority of Zamindars and big landlords had been eliminated. Any further expropriation of progressively smaller landholding units would have antagonised increasing numbers of villagers in the

large and the middle peasant category. Any equalisation of landholdings would therefore have resulted in a very large minority of villagers being deprived of some of their land, thus threatening the Left's rural base. Greater political mobilisation of agricultural labourers and marginal cultivators with enforcement of land expropriations by the state government would have increased polarisation in rural society, resulting in a backlash which might have driven the Left Front from power earlier than 2011. Since organisation of the lowest strata was weak or non-existent, the safe option for the CPI(M) was to soft-pedal serious and meaningful attempts at land distribution. The radical alternative would have been the collectivisation of land. However, experiences in China and the USSR indicate decreased productivity under this system, aside from the violence that would have been required to implement it. Some economists argue that with the provision of credit and agricultural inputs, small peasants are more efficient and productive than their larger counterparts, thereby rendering collectivisation unnecessary and counter-productive. However, in Bengal this small peasant class lacked the financial resources to implement improvement schemes and the state's resources in 1977 were limited. The land-person ratio continued to deteriorate as cultivable area could not be significantly increased, and population growth continued unabated. Between 1961 and 1971 the land-person ratio decreased by 28 per cent from 0.444 acres to 0.321 acres.¹⁵

Any possible solution was bound to adversely affect a sizeable class in rural Bengal. The villages were not homogeneous and peasant unity only artificial if it could be developed at all. It was no longer possible to benefit the many by sacrificing the few large landowners. Complete or even partial expropriation would have antagonised a large number of people, many of them not particularly well-off. In an analysis of the antagonisms among the different strata of the Bengal peasantry, West Bengal Board of Revenue, in fact, highlighted the difficulty of choosing the expropriators from the expropriated: "Questions of what administrative or fiscal action benefits whom, how, why and where have grown in complexity and so have the consequences of these actions on shifting interest alignments and conflicts within the rural structure."¹⁶

While simplistic trends of Marxism tend to classify peasantry as exploiters and exploited according to whether or not they employ labour, in West Bengal there was a wide variation of employment patterns with a large intermediate class which simultaneously hires labour, works on their own land and hires themselves out as labourers. According to Utsa Patnaik, a class breakdown by landholdings in Bengal would classify poor peasants as owning less than 1.60 acres, lower middle between 1.61 and 4.60, upper middle as between 4.61 and 9.80, and the rich peasants and landlords as over 9.81 acres.¹⁷ With the decreasing land-man ratio and the increasing use of high-yielding varieties this might be considered slightly on the high side. For Bengal, P. Sundarayya's upper limit of 5 acres for the middle peasantry would seem more accurate for our time period.¹⁸

With varied local conditions any categorisation can only be an approximation rather than a definite classification. Even within West Bengal there are seven different agro-climatic regions resulting in wide variations in land productivity and cropping patterns.¹⁹ Any classification of landownership would have to take these productivity variations into account in a land reform programme. Another factor that must be kept in mind is the small absolute sizes involved.²⁰ In an equitable land reform, a third of an acre per person would have to be the maximum allowable. Supplementary income through outside work is very common in rural India and would have to be taken into consideration. Many small farmers must work elsewhere to make a living while leasing out their land.²¹ One Bengal survey found that marginal farmers (defined as owning less than 1 hectare) derived 68.9 percent of their income from property rather than from their own or family labour.²² Integration into the market economy is also considerable. Even landless agricultural labourers, according to this survey, spent 23.1 percent of their income on industrially produced consumption

goods.²³ Some crops such as jute were produced exclusively for the market while food crops were also traded extensively. Though private moneylenders remain the major source of rural credit, institutional sources have increased significantly, giving the state an increased role in the rural economy.²⁴

Most spectacular of all has been the green revolution, which has produced significant increases in fertiliser and High Yielding Variety use as well as in irrigation and output.²⁵ Though not as early and rapidly as in the Punjab, the 1970s show substantial increases in these outputs. This resulted in increased productivity and market surplus, which, because of the strength of the surplus farmer lobby, the government had to subsidise with higher food procurement prices than a free market might provide. Food self-sufficiency was achieved but *at a gain to the dominant segment of rural society*.

In categorising rural social classes the landless agricultural labour category is straightforward, but many minute landowners lease out land to bigger landowners and *vice versa*.²⁶ If one uses the employment of hired labour, rather than size of landholdings, as a definition of class, then by this definition there would be little land left to give to the tillers since only landholdings over 10 hectares used hired labour for most farm work.²⁷ Production of a surplus for a market is even more difficult to define as a class category since some crops like jute or sugar cane are only for the market, while rice, wheat, and potatoes can be for both, and the portion sold depends on seasonal prices and productivity. Furthermore, peasants with as little as 2 or 3 hectares were often connected to urban employment and have relatives completely integrated into the urban sector. A single criterion, even the most commonly used one of landownership, is therefore in itself inadequate. The use of hired labour and land leasing must also be taken into account as well as additional sources of income. A small farmer might be defined as having land or equivalent sources of income around the 0.321 acre per land-man ratio or about 2 acres per household, anything less than half this being defined as marginal farming. The middle peasantry, as commonly suggested, would be those who work their own land without normally employing non-family labour. This would be placed somewhat arbitrarily at 5 acres. The law of 12 to 17 irrigated acres current in the 1980s was more than this. Confiscation of land over 5 acres, which could be defined as rich peasant, and over the current ceiling limit as landlord, would provide 44 percent of cultivable land for redistribution and leave 87 percent of agricultural households either the gainers or unaffected by the reform.²⁸ This should have been the minimal first step towards land reform, a short-term goal that had to be followed at an opportune time by equalisation of land as the mid-term goal. This categorisation differs from the agricultural census definition, but has the advantage of including use of hired labour as a criterion as well as indicates what could have been a workable guideline for a land reform programme in 1977-82 that would have allowed large-scale land redistribution without alienating the vast majority of the agricultural population. The use of the 5-acre limit has been chosen because the number of households with more land than this is significantly less than those with less than 5 acres. Within this framework, therefore, there would have been less opposition to implementation than would have arisen from a lower ceiling limit.

According to Benoy Choudhury, the Communist Party of India (Marxist)'s Land Reforms and Land Revenue Minister during the Left Front government's first term, only the complete confiscation of all holdings over 10 acres would enable the agricultural labourers and marginal farmers to receive 1.5 acres per household. According to him, only 4.2 percent of households owned over 10 acres, controlling 33.3 percent of agricultural land or 4.53 million acres. With 3,751,000 landless and marginal farmer households, equalisation of landholdings at 1.5 acres per household would have required complete confiscation of all lands held by these largest landowners. The Land

Reforms minister stated that the biggest lacuna is allowing the landlords to retain land up to the ceiling limit. The basic land reform slogan (for Choudhury writing in May 1977) should be taking over all the land from feudal and capitalist landlords without compensation and distributing it among landless labourers free. All the land must be taken from the landlords, otherwise the *Ceiling Act* would end up as a farce and not enough land would be available to distribute.²⁹ This is, however, precisely what happened. The ceiling being too high, there was insufficient land available for a significant land redistribution, and whatever may have been the Land Reforms minister's view on the subject, the CPI(M)-led government showed no intention of changing the *status quo* in this regard or the Minister himself of implementing his own recommendations. When the CPI(M) first published Benoy Choudhury's booklet in May 1977 on the eve of the election of the CPI(M) to power, his position could be taken as a statement of party policy, but by its fifth reprinting in January 1981 (which has been cited here) it had ceased to have any meaning except to show how far short the political practice had fallen from its original policy.

The original CPI(M) position as formulated in the resolution of the Central Committee on *Tasks on the Kisan Front* of 1967 and on *Certain Agrarian Issues* in 1973 was far different from the CPI(M) policies in the Left Front government.³⁰ This difference reflected part of the general trend towards moderation in the CPI(M). The 1967 and 1973 documents bear the orientation of the then General Secretary P. Sundarayya who subsequently resigned from the party leadership and Politburo in 1976, when his positions were no longer being accepted in the drift towards moderation. Though these resolutions were repudiated in the late 1970s they illustrate the change that had taken place in party policy, resulting in the West Bengal government position post-1977. The difference on the agrarian question between the former Central Committee position and that of the West Bengal party members which later became the state government and CPI(M) policy is brought out in P. Sundarayya's explanatory note on *Certain Agrarian Issues*. Sundarayya's critique of the Bengal position is only a thinly disguised accusation of reformism in the West Bengal party and by implication of the post-1977 party position.³¹ "Some comrades in West Bengal argue that the ownership right to the tenants should not be campaigned for now ... as it would antagonise these sections" of landowners "and they would go away from the democratic alliance." That "these critics have gone to the extremely ridiculous position" of hesitating to raise popular demands when "the Congress itself is forced to come forward to satisfy ... the masses with such legislation, though only to cheat them, is something queer ... This attitude, if logically extended, would mean that we should formulate and advance demands of tenants in such a way as would be acceptable to the landlords."³² Sundarayya rejected the position of some West Bengal peasant leaders that a ceiling of 25 acres would be "a very big step." "With such an amount of ceiling ... no land will be available for distribution."³³ He reiterated the Central Committee policy of expropriating all the land of the landlords including that below the ceiling. To allow retention of land below the ceiling would only perpetuate landlordism, "cheating the agricultural labour and poor peasants," leaving the CPI(M) policy of distributing land free to the landless as an "empty slogan."³⁴

The reason for this wrong position in the CPI(M) lies, according to Sundarayya, in the rich and middle peasant composition of the party and their orientation to these classes. The CPI(M) Central Committee itself had earlier admitted peasant unity in the party was erroneously "based upon the middle and rich peasantry, instead of building it round the rural labour and the poor and ... organising these sections as the main backbone and driving force of the movement."³⁵ The Central Committee admitted this task would not be easy as the rich and middle peasant orientation was "deeprooted and long-accumulated" and because "the bulk of our leading *kisan* activists come from the rich and middle peasant class" rather than the poor peasants and agricultural labour.³⁶

Harekrishna Konar took the same position, noting that “today the old practice of building peasant unity based on the middle peasants is not useful for agrarian revolution but this old outlook still holds the activists of the peasant movement back.” Though he argued “particular emphasis” had to be “laid on the task of organising the agricultural labourers and poor peasants and making them conscious,” this was almost totally absent from the policy implementation of the Left Front government.³⁷

Given the acute land shortage and the elimination of the larger landowners over the years through land reforms, the only options left were collectivisation, which was politically untenable, or lowering the land ceiling, which would antagonise many of the Communist Party’s own supporters in the villages. When Santosh Rana, leader of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), suggested lowering the land ceiling, the CPI(M) Land Reforms minister described this as a provocation, which it certainly would have been, even among the CPI(M) supporters.³⁸ Faced with the choice between implementing significant land reforms to help the landless and poor peasantry, or helping the middle and rich peasantry by doing nothing of significance, *the Left Front chose the latter approach*, thereby preserving its most important rural base. The CPI(M) “central leadership wanted to abandon political action that would polarise the rich and the middle peasants on the one hand and the poor and marginal peasants and landless workers on the other. They practically abandoned meaningful struggle for land reforms.”³⁹ “In their eagerness to preserve all peasant unity in rural West Bengal the Government is probably shifting away from potentially the most active agents of agrarian reorganisation” namely agricultural labour and the poor peasantry.⁴⁰ This all-peasant unity could only be preserved by keeping the potentially most revolutionary classes inactive or subordinate, as they represented the greatest potential threat to the CPI(M)’s own vested interest in the middle and rich peasantry.

As a result, all the Left Front could offer the lower classes were minor concessions and palliatives, often through laws passed by the previous Congress regime but never implemented. The agency for this implementation was the existing state bureaucracy, with all the deficiencies that entailed. Unlike the Panchayats where the parties at least had to put up slates of candidates and participate politically, in the land reform programme, party participation was optional. Though the Communist peasant organisations were requested to assist the administration, the administration carried out the work at every step of the process.

In the Land Reforms Department the officials were about evenly divided between those originating from East Bengal and those from West Bengal. Though only those from West Bengal were often landowners, some of the East Bengalis retained a landed ideological orientation. In these circumstances the dedicated officers found it difficult to work in the administration. The few dedicated senior officials, often of left inclination, could *not* easily carry through land reform when junior officials in department offices and in the field were lacking in motivation and would not cooperate. The junior staff in the Land Reforms Department who often had the most contact with the common people also had the least sympathy with them. A publication of the Directorate of Land Records and Surveys even stated, that “the entire gamut of land reforms implementation is an open sesame for the dishonest employees is a widely known fact of life.”⁴¹ Though the legislation that the department was implementing had usually been in effect from the Congress period, the Left Front claimed greater dedication in carrying the programme through. The laws had been introduced by Congress but till the Left Front government came to power, they had largely been observed in the breach.

The Land Reforms Commissioner noted the deficiencies of the bureaucracy as an agency of social change.

Generally the Bureaucracy maintains a stance of hostile neutrality to the entire issue of land reforms. The reason lies in the age-old tradition of the administration of maintaining order, with or without law. The main burden of administrative ethos and procedure, general civil and original laws, judicial pronouncements and practices is the maintenance and safeguarding of existing property relationship in the rural areas. Hence it is natural for the bureaucracy to develop a bias against any action or an isolated law which aims at altering the existing socio-economic arrangements.⁴²

The “reactionary” rulings of the allegedly Congress-oriented Calcutta High Court resulted in 20,000 civil injunctions centring around land reforms, and the Land Revenue Courts had 27,000 cases pending, resulting in 180,779 acres being hit by court injunctions.⁴³ The acreage increased slightly from 164,733 acres under injunction at the end of 1978, indicating the backlog of cases was not being cleared. This was alleged to be with the connivance of Marxist lawyers who for personal gain prolonged cases at government expense.⁴⁴ Between 1977 and 1980, the Left Front government spent about Rs. 1.20 crores as fees to official lawyers, yet these suits were not cleared.⁴⁵ Those retaining their land through court injunctions and pending cases were earning over Rs. 4 crores per year.⁴⁶

The Indian Supreme Court, by contrast, proved to be more proactive in its orientation.⁴⁷ The Supreme Court Judgement of May 9, 1980 noted that “there is no substantial decrease in the limit” of ceiling land under current West Bengal law. The ceiling limit of “6.18 acres in the case of an individual, and 12.35 to 17.29 acres of irrigated land, in the case of a family ... in the Gangetic plains of West Bengal is not small by any standard.”⁴⁸ Such land reforms would leave all but the biggest landlords untouched and even they would be able to retain up to the ceiling, enabling them to remain in the landlord class. The surplus land above the ceiling was available for distribution to the landless and poor peasantry.

To satisfy the largest number of people the Left Front distributed the surplus into pieces all below an acre and averaging 0.54 acres. While good for acquiring a political base and helping to meet immediate peasant aspirations, which it did, this is by no stretch of imagination a radical land reform programme, let alone opening the road to collectivisation in the future.

It is perfectly understandable that if we want to maintain the *status quo* – or any other social order – we should try to involve as many people as possible in it so that at least a majority of the population acquire a stake in the *status quo* or the system in question. Keeping this in view, it is perfectly reasonable to distribute small bits of land however uneconomic to land hungry peasants and/or agricultural labourers so that they never look for any radical alternative to the present property system and stay eager to acquire some property. However to call it socialism is a sad travesty of truth.⁴⁹

The identification and distribution of this surplus land was almost entirely the work of the state bureaucracy. By 1982, 1,249,117 acres of agricultural land had been vested representing about 1/4 of the all-India total. The Left Front claimed that “West Bengal is the only state in India to have vested so much ceiling surplus agricultural land.”⁵⁰ According to Nossiter:

The LF ministries’ record on land redistribution is indubitably impressive, particularly when compared with other states in India. Some 4.4 million acres were ‘vested’ (expropriated and held) in government nationwide. Of this West Bengal accounted for 1.2 million acres of which 800,000 acres have been redistributed to the landless (Election Manifesto of the LF, 1987).⁵¹

This uncritical acceptance of Left Front land reform statistics is surprising since it is well known among both the land reform officials in charge of the redistribution and Indian scholars of the subject that these figures are the result of inappropriately including redistribution figures from the Estates Acquisition Act (1,049,221 acres till 1985) with that under the Land Reforms Act (184,049). As only the latter is comparable with land reforms in other states, the former being part of the zamindari abolition programme, “the performance of West Bengal with respect to ceiling laws cannot, therefore, be regarded as extraordinary.”⁵² At the end of 1978 1,005,148 acres had been distributed under the Estates Acquisition Act and 117,428 under the Land Reforms Act. But by the end of 1984 only 1,049,220 acres and 184,049 had been vested indicating only 44,072 and 66,621 acres had been vested in the first six years of Left Front rule, a rate no better than under the previous Congress government.⁵³ The Land Reforms Minister stated in the assembly that from the election of the Left Front till mid 1982 150,000 acres had been vested and 120,000 distributed, which meant that 1 million acres had been vested before the Left Front came to power and 630,000 acres distributed already.⁵⁴ The 799,224 acres distributed by the end of 1984 went to 1,572,531 persons or about 1/2 acre per beneficiary.

Though a Left Front government annual publication continues to make the claim West Bengal has vested 1/6th of the all-India total and distributed 1/5th, the same publication admits only about 200,000 acres have been vested over the first twelve years of Communist rule, leaving the majority of land being vested by previous Congress regimes.⁵⁵ As the 200,000 acres vested over the twelve years of Communist rule is only 0.92 percent of the total state area and 1.2 percent of the cultivable area, Nossiter’s claim that “the LF ministries’ record of land redistribution is indubitably impressive” is open to serious doubt. The West Bengal government blamed this poor record on central government delays in giving Presidential assent to land reform legislation and on previous Marxist governments having already distributed land in the 1967 to 1969 period. It neglected to mention that in these previous radical Communist governments the peasants were encouraged by the Communists to seize the land themselves without waiting for the administration. Harekrishna Konar was the leading figure then. It is a mark of the political distance the CPI(M) had travelled from its early revolutionary phase of the 1960s that the state bureaucracy was now left in the 1980s to do everything and peasant movements were discouraged, even when legislation waiting for central government approval is delayed giving time for “unscrupulous” land owners “to formulate strategy to evade the new ceiling provisions.”⁵⁶

In contrast to the land grab movements of Communist peasants during the Marxist governments of the 1960s, the 1977 government did practically nothing. According to CPI(M) Central Committee member Biplab Dasgupta:

During the brief United Front rule by the left-wing parties in 1967 and 1969-70, the village level committees of poor peasants and landless labourers helped to identify such *benami* land (that is land held illegally in excess of the permitted limit), took over 300,000 acres of such land and distributed it among the landless. While the legality of such action was disputable there was no denying the effectiveness of bringing about a change in the land relations in rural West Bengal. The beneficiaries of such populist land reform formed the hard core of the support which the Left Front received during the 1977 and 1982 elections.⁵⁷

Thus nineteen months of Communist rule in the 1960s achieved more through peasant land seizures than the twelve years of Communist rule since 1977 (300,000 acres versus 80,000 distributed till 1985). As this represents only 1.8 and 0.55 percent of cultivable land, the distribution of 2.35

percent of the land under all Communist governments does not indicate significant land reform. The redistribution can only be described as cosmetic, and in fact neither Congress nor Communist governments have carried out significant land reform since zamindari abolition. "With these land ceiling measures, and the abolition of landlordism and intermediaries, the power in the countryside was transferred to small landlords and rich peasants ... Their needs and priorities became, to the administrators and policy-makers, the needs and priorities of the village population as a whole."⁵⁸ Though Biplab Dasgupta refers here to the pre-Left Front period, the limited land redistribution since then indicates that their elite class position remains unchanged. There are indications of the opportunist members in this class supporting the Left Front parties, though no reliable party-class membership survey exists. As the rest of the country is no better than Bengal in redistribution, the all-India land reform effort appears also to be cosmetic.⁵⁹ The downsizing of reported land holdings is largely the result of generational subdivision and bogus transfers rather than state intervention.

Atul Kohli and Nossiter, in specifically examining and then praising the West Bengal land reform, do not point out its insignificance in terms of total cultivable land. Kohli specifically mentions the percentage of cultivable land redistributed for the other two states he examined (Karnataka 0.2 percent and Uttar Pradesh 0.7 percent), thereby supporting his thesis of their poor land redistribution performance.⁶⁰ Nossiter and Kohli are aware of the importance of this figure but omitted to mention it for West Bengal. The redistribution in twelve years of only 0.55 percent of cultivable land makes their whole thesis of the Left Front's "spectacular," "indubitably impressive," and "truly remarkable accomplishment" in land reform untenable.⁶¹ It would have taken the Left Front over a millennium at this redistribution rate to distribute the land above the 5 acres as originally advocated had it remained in power that long. That this redistribution was no longer party policy by the end of the last century is a measure of the political distance the CPI(M) had already travelled in the last quarter of that century.

By 1980 already, the West Bengal government Third Workshop on land reforms noted that the "progress made up to date was rather tardy and unsatisfactory in almost all the districts."⁶² Though recovery of ceiling surplus land was a priority item

it was felt that there was large scope for giving further attention to this matter at the field level and to speed up the vesting of surplus land ... It was pointed out that a very large quantity of ceiling surplus land was retained by the intermediaries by clandestine manner. The common *modus operandi* were *benami* transaction, creation of sham and fake tenancies, trusts and endowments.⁶³

In 1981 3.74 lakh acres of vested land had not been distributed with little having been done in the previous three years to expedite distribution, thus earning their illegal occupants Rs. 14 crores annually.⁶⁴ The Third Workshop found that one of the reasons these acres of vested land could not be distributed was that the elected rural institutions described these lands as "unfit for agriculture."⁶⁵ Though peasants were expected to help in detecting surplus land, the policy was that vested land be taken possession of only after "quasi-judicial and administrative processes" were complete.⁶⁶ The CPI(M) Land and Land Revenue Reforms Minister Benoy Choudhury concluded: "The achievement in the matter of distribution of vested land has not been satisfactory though highest priority was assigned to this job."⁶⁷ The Board of Revenue also found that they did not always get the desired degree of cooperation from the lower levels of the bureaucracy and the Panchayats. "It was thought that with their local knowledge the representatives of Panchayati Raj Institution would be able to make a breakthrough in the usual dilatory process of identification of vested plot and its occupier. The circular did not have the desired effect."⁶⁸ The Land Reforms Office in Burdwan stated that

surplus land was not always being distributed according to the allocation priorities of the Government, implying that those less deserving but more influential were receiving the land. The Additional District Magistrate (Land Reforms) therefore instructed the Junior Land Revenue Officers to ensure proper distribution and to “pursue the Panchayats, where necessary, for making distribution accordingly.”⁶⁹

The problems were similar in another major effort at land reform, redistributing illegally acquired land. Under the Restoration of Alienated Land Act, land which had been acquired through distress sales or under coercion was legally entitled to be restored to the original owners. However, implementation was “extremely tardy and unsatisfactory” with disposal of cases having come to a “standstill.” Only 15 percent of cases were disposed in favour of the aggrieved party, with an average area of 1 acre involved.⁷⁰ “It was found that not only restoration orders were passed in very few cases, but also most of these orders remained only in paper” with the party who had seized the land continuing to retain possession. Those disputes settled out of court also did not bring any benefit to the aggrieved party in a large number of cases.⁷¹ The State Government Workshop on Land Reforms noted that the backlog of pending cases presented “a major problem specially in areas where there was concentration of Tribals. This might result in rural tension. It was imperative to dispose of all pending cases, particularly the cases involving alienation of Tribal Lands.”⁷² With over 200,000 cases pending representing a large area of land this was difficult to achieve.⁷³ P. Roy Choudhury in an article in *Economic and Political Weekly* concludes:

the achievements of the Left Front Government in West Bengal in the matter of land reforms has not been such as warrant satisfaction. Whatever has been done, is to the credit of the much-maligned bureaucracy. The situation would have been far better had the political wing in the state been without link with land and landed interests.⁷⁴

The dichotomy between theory and practice in land reform continued even within CPI(M) publications. The CPI(M) Kisan Sabha leader, Shantimoy Ghosh, in an article in the CPI(M) theoretical journal “Marxbadi Path,” wrote of the need to expropriate the land of landlords and distribute it to the tillers. When the inconsistency of this with the Left Front and Kisan Sabha’s implementation programme was pointed out, Promode Das Gupta, secretary of the CPI(M) state unit, said that in West Bengal’s current situation this “slogan was pure phrase mongering” but was valid in an all-India agrarian revolution.⁷⁵ Since land reform was a state subject the distinction between the two phases seems dubious, unless the purpose is to hold up agrarian reform in West Bengal till the political mobilisation in the rest of the country catches up, thus preventing Bengal from being an example to the rest of India. Such radical reforms would presumably alienate landlords in the rest of the country, where the CPI(M) would hope for their support until they are themselves expropriated after the revolution. The strategy of not undertaking radical reforms in Bengal against sectors of society which are potential allies in less-advanced parts of the country is an interesting anomaly. This is not the reason the CPI(M) has given however. The party rather argues the limited powers of the state legislation as the reason for avoiding confrontational policies. The real reason, however, seems to be that the CPI(M)’s own mass base among the rural vested interests precludes a more radical strategy, so even in an area of its own jurisdiction with ample coercive forces at its disposal, it refrains from radical action.

Rather than making a radical redistribution of land, the Left Front was to put emphasis on ensuring security of tenure for sharecroppers, and providing them with a legally stipulated 3/4 share of crops. The Operation Barga for recording tenancy rights to sharecroppers has received the widest

publicity. That primary attention has been given to Operation Barga seems incongruous considering agricultural labourers outnumber sharecroppers and sharecropping is admitted, even by the proponents of Operation Barga, to be on the decline.⁷⁶ Even so, the objectives enshrined in the Operation Barga were to prove illusory, as I intend to demonstrate in the final paper I am supposed to prepare by December. The final paper will also look into, alongside agrarian reform, the building up of the Panchayati Raj as well as the various resettlement, poverty alleviation and redistribution programmes undertaken by the Left Front government during its first term.

In this paper, the endeavour has been to argue that, while agrarian reforms have not been outstanding compared to the rest of India or even past state achievements, in the political sphere power has shifted from the traditional pro-Congress elite to a new middle landed class. This class, while lacking the wealth of the traditional elite, is more numerous, and now with state patronage more powerful, than the rural Congress Party supporters. The socio-economic condition of the lower classes and their influence on policy have seen little or no improvement. The structural reforms that might have altered this situation were not undertaken, partly for fear of central government intervention, but mainly due to the influence of this new middle-class landed elite on the Communists who feared loss of their electoral support. This is equally true of the Panchayati Raj system which the Left Front government rigorously implemented from 1978.

The Panchayat Raj

Promode Das Gupta, writing after the Panchayat Election results of 1978, waxed eloquent: “The Panchayat election that was held a few days back in West Bengal has given birth to new inspiration, new enthusiasm not only in the hearts of the people of this state but also in the hearts of all Left and democratic people of the country. ... The people of this country are eager to learn: How the three-tier Panchayat of the state would work? What kind of powers will rest with all these Panchayats? How these Panchayats will struggle to bring change in the socio-economic life of the villages?”⁷⁷ The triumphal notes in Das Gupta’s declamation would soon be tested against the hard realities of implementation. However, the first Left Front government’s experiment with the Panchayats in West Bengal is important for showing the possibilities and constraints on attempting rural change in favour of the lower classes through the Panchayats. As the most radical state government in India of the time, its Panchayat experiment indicates the extent to which change is possible in Indian democracy, and the problems in attempting devolution of power to the villages and the lower classes. The way in which this was attempted has been studied by Rajarshi Dasgupta, among others, whose work on the two villages from Cooch Behar and Malda suggests a model for understanding how the CPI(M) “machinery” functioned to secure electoral power and ideological hegemony for the Left regime, especially at the panchayat level in everyday village politics. The protean capacity of the party allowed changes at the local level in pragmatic ways, serving incompatible interests without being seen as different formations. The CPI(M) was clearly adept in formulating different strategies for different tiers of the Panchayat system, calibrating their rivalries.⁷⁸ Dasgupta, of course, takes a long view spanning thirty years of Left Front rule in West Bengal. In what follows, attempt would be made to demonstrate that the pragmatic adaptability and shrewd *realpolitik* which Dasgupta speaks of/ hints at was already in evidence during the Left Front’s first term. Furthermore, it is possible to make the case that the Panchayati Raj was constructed as an institutional counter-strategy against the militancy of the Krishak Sabhas of the preceding decades, which threatened to destabilise any elected government not only from without (the Naxalbari uprising) but also from within (the militancy of Hare Krishna Konar in the late 1960s or the revolt of Land Revenue Minister Benoy Chowdhury

followed by his ultimate expulsion from the party). The SFI-isation of the CPI(M) leadership, if we could call it so, was evident by the 1990s, while militant peasant struggles had for the time being been pacified, in the technical sense of the term.⁷⁹ The “passive revolution” had worked for the time being and the spectre of Naxalbari exorcised. Meanwhile, a clientele of beneficiaries of the party was created in the rural reaches through the operation of the Panchayat system that helped keep the Left Front in power arguably more than any other factor and for more than three decades.⁸⁰

When in 1977 the newly elected Communist government in West Bengal decided to restructure the Panchayat system in its state, attention was drawn to this attempt at devolving power to the rural poor.

Many observers feel the CPI(M) has a realistic chance of bringing about genuine reform of local governments in the West Bengal countryside. The party is probably the best disciplined in India, has obviously made its new rural thrust its highest priority for the next five years, and has enormous incentive to succeed ... Should the CPI(M) be able to demonstrate that it can rule effectively and bring about meaningful reform at the local level in the West Bengal countryside, its appeal to the downtrodden in most Indian states would be considerably enhanced.⁸¹

This experiment appeared to have greater potential for success as a Communist government could be expected to override the rural vested interests and use its rural cadre organisation to ensure that not only was development aid actually delivered, but that it got to those most in need. Where previously Panchayat elections were held on the basis of individual nominations, now for the first time official party slates would compete against each other, bringing party politics formally to village government. The village Panchayats could give the Communists an organisational base from which to resist possible central government repression in the future. Decentralising the administrative apparatus would make it more difficult for the central government to impose Presidential Rule effectively, as much of the state powers would rest in Communist-controlled village organisations which, if self-supporting, could not be readily supplanted. As control of the village meant effective control of the state in electoral terms, no party could rule democratically without eliminating the Communist organisation in the villages. As has been pointed out, these partisan political objectives had important implications for the restructuring of Bengal politics.

The thirty-six-point programme of the Left Front in the 1977 assembly election stated that “elections to the Panchayats should be held immediately on the system of proportional representation with measures to be taken to confer more powers and resources on all local bodies.”⁸² After the Panchayat election during the floods at the end of 1978 the potential of the Panchayats for rural reconstruction was realised in its flood relief programme. Unlike in the past the relief work undertaken through the Panchayats prevented the usual rural migration to Calcutta normally associated with such natural calamities.⁸³ Their success in relief work prompted the Left Front to allocate more resources and responsibility to the Panchayats.

However, there was a catch: though the conception was promising and the public was told that the Panchayat would receive increased power and financial resources, its success as an agency for rural transformation would depend on the type of people elected to the village Panchayats and the direction the Left Front would give these bodies.

The 1978 Panchayat election gave the Left Front an overwhelming mandate. At the village level, out of 46,700 seats the CPI(M) got 28,105, the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) 1,674, the Forward Bloc (FB) 1,539, the opposition Congress-I 4,536, Congress-S 580, Communist Party of India (CPI) 825, and the independents 9,436. The Panchayat Samiti, grouping several village Gram Panchayats, gave the CPI(M) 5,596 out of 8,454 with the Congress gaining only 623, the RSP 353, FB

320, CPI 132, and Congress-S 105. The only substantial non- CPI(M) group in the Samiti were independents who got 1,323. Of the 647 district level Zilla Parishad seats, CPI(M) got 488, RSP 30, FB 44, CPI 5, Congress-I 23 and independents 53.⁸⁴ The Communist mandate was clear but the nomination of the Left Front's candidates was rather hastily and haphazardly done. Though the Panchayat election was held in June 1978, a full year after the Left Front came to power, the Left Front including the powerful CPI(M) lacked the cadre to nominate experienced party members to most of the posts. The CPI(M) had only 38,889 members in 1978, 10,000 having joined since the return of the Left Front to power in 1977.⁸⁵ In the selection the local influence of the candidates was often the prime consideration rather than political consciousness, and many relatives of CPI(M) members were chosen as party candidates.⁸⁶ (It merits noting here that the boastful claim that the CPI(M) was unlike other right-wing parties in that it never nominated or approved lateral entries into its electoral candidate list at any level, is a later invention, to say the least.) In the scramble to get nominations from the ruling state parties many influentials and even former Congressmen jumped on the Communist bandwagon and succeeded in obtaining seats.⁸⁷ The inclusion of these opportunists disgruntled some of the traditional Communist supporters who were left out of the nominations. The divisions among the Left Front partners resulted in their contesting against each other in about 6,000 seats.⁸⁸

An independent survey by the National Institute of Rural Development in Hyderabad on one Gram Panchayat each in the districts of Nadia, Midnapore, and Jalpaiguri found the educational level of Panchayat members "high enough to justify appreciation of the voters' judgement. There is no illiterate" Panchayat member.⁸⁹ Farmers made up 47 per cent, 24 per cent were professionals, 22 per cent businessmen, and 4 per cent service holders.⁹⁰ Only one person was a labourer, indicating that it was the village middle and elite class which controlled these Panchayats. The study found that while the Scheduled Castes and Tribes continued their traditional occupations, the upper castes which had dominated during the zamindari period had now branched out from their landed base into the services and professions where "their traditional literary skills, higher educational levels, and better linkages with urban areas (an aspect of the *bhadralok* syndrome) must have stood them in good stead."⁹¹ It was this occupational and educational elite which controlled the Panchayat government in these villages.

A larger sample survey of 100 village Panchayats by the Development and Planning Department of the West Bengal government found a similar occupational and educational distribution.⁹² Only 4.8 per cent of the Panchayat members were landless labourers and 1.8 per cent were sharecroppers though 44.28 per cent of agriculturists in Bengal were landless labourers.⁹³ Over half were owner cultivators, 71 per cent with less than 5 acres of land.⁹⁴

The dominance of the relatively well-educated section of the village community in the Panchayat was confirmed by the survey. The education of 78 per cent of members was between the primary and higher secondary level while 14 per cent were graduates. With only 8 per cent below primary graduation level, the underrepresentation of the illiterates, who form 67.03 per cent of West Bengal's rural population but 1 per cent of Panchayat members, was marked.⁹⁵ In spite of this, on the basis of the above survey the West Bengal Left Front government concluded that "judging by the evidence of this survey the members of the Panchayats by a significant majority, can be taken to represent the interests of the poorer sections in villages."⁹⁶ Given the class composition of contemporary Bengal villages this would appear to be something of a distortion, the opposite being closer to the truth. Using the same government statistics, P. Roy Choudhury argued that the Panchayats were dominated by "the same old class of rural vested interests including moneylenders."⁹⁷ "51 per cent belong to the landowning classes; the rest are classified as 'others' but

are themselves linked with landed interests.”⁹⁸ He refers to the Land Reforms Commissioner D. Bandyopadhyay claiming only 6.54 per cent of Panchayat members belong to the rural poor.⁹⁹ Atul Kohli, from a sample of sixty Gram Panchayat members, takes an intermediate position that “institutional power has, at least for now, been transferred from the hands of the dominant propertied groups to a lower middle stratum.”¹⁰⁰ As with all surveys which attempt to determine class land holdings, underestimation of holdings by landowners tends to place them in a lower class than is actually the case. In the Kohli survey 8.3 per cent of agriculturalist Gram Panchayat members have less than 2 acres, 69 per cent 2-5 acres, 19.4 percent 6-10 acres, and 2.8 per cent over 10 acres of land. Yet in this same group none use only family labour on their land, 83.3 per cent use hired labour, and 16.7 percent use sharecroppers. While reporting use of outside labour hiring is presumably considered safe to reveal, land holdings are not, as the stated small size of holdings would indicate that some at least would more efficiently use family rather than hired labour. Under-reporting of landholdings from fear of confiscation is more clearly revealed in an ILO study in West Bengal, where listing and agriculture schedules of leased lands revealed a close correlation of 4,645 and 4,436 acres of leased-in land but only 1,408 and 312 acres of leased-out land. As the figures of leased-in and leased-out land should be identical, landowners are clearly understating their ownership, a discrepancy which is too large to be attributed solely to landowner absenteeism.¹⁰¹ For this reason in-depth village studies by anthropologists are better able to reveal the true picture than large interview sample surveys by transitory outsiders, particularly on topics as sensitive as landownership and political affiliations. The in-depth studies would indicate that Communist leadership is rather more elitist than the lower-middle-class composition revealed by sample surveys. On the other hand the leadership is in conflict with the traditionally dominant village leadership, and it is therefore a fair assumption that it represents less economically powerful interests than the traditional village elite. It is therefore probably not quite the “same old class of rural vested interests” attributed to it by Roy Choudhury but rather more elitist than the lower-middle-class dominance found by Kohli.

Whatever the differences in class composition, the similarities appear to be closer to that of the class-caste composition under the previous Congress government. A 1974 village study of Panchayat leadership in Hooghly district showed that leadership in the Anchal and Gram Panchayats were respectively, rich holding over 15 acres, 25 and 11 per cent, upper-middle class with 7-15 acres, 50 and 56 per cent, and middle class with 2-7 acres, 21 and 25 per cent. There were no positions held below this level except for an 11 per cent landless share in the Gram Panchayat. In caste composition, the Anchal and Gram Panchayats were composed respectively of 25 and 11 per cent high caste, 50 and 67 per cent dominant agriculturalist caste, and 25 and 22 per cent other middle castes. There were no members outside these categories.¹⁰² In the Davis study, even though government requirements for ward representatives gave the low castes three of the nine seats, the members were nominees of the dominant faction on whom they were dependent.¹⁰³ Thus class-caste composition alone can often disguise the political controls exercised by the dominant elite over lower-class members who are their nominees. The Communist government exacerbated this tendency by changing the law to make appointments of Scheduled Castes and Tribes and women by the state government dependent on the nominees recommended by the local Panchayats, thereby increasing the control of whichever faction is locally dominant.¹⁰⁴ Thus even this small proportion can be assumed to represent some poor Scheduled Caste and Tribe members nominated by the richer landowners to fill the reserved quota and, therefore, cannot automatically be assumed to represent the interests of their class as they are indebted to and under the influence of the richer landowners.

Though not dominated by the biggest landowners who are few in number and allied more closely to the Congress, the Panchayats are composed of the middle strata of village society, whose interests are by no means synonymous with those of the poorer sections of the villages. The heavy bias towards small propertied owners, and the gross under-representation of the landless, however, was only to be expected, given the middle peasant and rural middle-class dominance in the CPI(M) rural membership. As the question of the landless organising and representing themselves through the Panchayats did not arise, given their token membership in the Panchayats, it was up to the rural middle class to represent their interests. Since according to Panchayat and Party officials 60-70 per cent of the CPI (M)'s own Gram Panchayat appointees had no grasp of Left theory, their ideological commitment to Left mobilisation of the poorest classes was limited. In tours with government officials to a number of Panchayats, a historian found, "the relative prosperity of members was obvious and most of their projects were of dubious value for the lower classes."¹⁰⁵

While the rural propertied classes failed to effectively represent the poorest classes, the poorest classes themselves were often unable or unwilling to assert themselves politically, making the task of the Communists more difficult. Their lack of education, indebtedness to the propertied classes, and their strenuous preoccupation with making a living gave the propertied and middle classes a significant political advantage. The organisers who came from outside the poorer classes were often unsuited to being their spokesmen and found greater affinity and ease of mobilisation among the rural middle class.¹⁰⁶

As such, though the Panchayat succeeded to a certain extent in devolving power in the villages to the next lowest rung of more numerous middle-class elements and consolidating their position, it did not increase the bargaining power of the lowest classes to any appreciable degree. By bringing a more numerically strong landed and professional middle class to a dominant position in village life, it made further mobilisation and radicalisation of the lower classes more difficult. Though the Communists' conception was for an alliance of the middle and lower classes, there is no evidence that this furthered the interests of the lower classes that the middle class Panchayat members supposedly represent. Though undoubtedly a more efficient and honest Panchayat system than in some other states, there was no evidence that they represented a qualitative or revolutionary break with traditional methods of operation. The failure of the Panchayats to deliver the goods to those most in need reflected the failures of the Left Front government in general to alter the balance of power in rural Bengal in favour of the lower classes. Exceeding the brief of this paper it may be suggested here, that after the Left Front was unseated in 2011 by agrarian protests which the Panchayat system had been designed to control and quash, it was not surprising that the same Panchayats, which had been the bulwark of the Left's enduring electoral success in the state, were unable — even unwilling — to put up resistance to the new state government. The legendary party "machinery" disappeared overnight, or rather easily segued into dole politics of the new regime — the logical step forward from what the members of the Panchayat Raj had been trained to do since 1977.

Refugee Resettlement

One of the biggest problems West Bengal had faced was the influx of millions of East Bengal refugees. Those from the middle and upper classes had the resources and connections to start a new life in West Bengal without being primarily dependent on government assistance. For the poorest refugees government assistance was necessary for their rehabilitation. When in January 1964 communal violence in East Pakistan resulted in a fresh influx of refugees, the Central Government in

consultation with the West Bengal Government decided that all those needing relief assistance would be settled outside Bengal under the care of the Central Government, while those who remained in West Bengal would be responsible for their own rehabilitation.¹⁰⁷ Inevitably it was the poorest classes who were forced to resettle outside the state in the Dandakaryana area bordering Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. Here they were subject to corrupt and capricious government and local officials. The Communists demanded that these refugees be settled in the uninhabited Sundarbans Ganges Delta of West Bengal. This helped the Communists to obtain a political following among these refugees as they had been unjustly treated by the Congress government. Now, this Communist commitment presented no difficulty as long as they were in opposition. On assuming power the CPI(M) had to live with its past commitments and the expectations it had raised while in opposition.¹⁰⁸

Nowhere was the CPI(M)'s switch of its role and policy on assuming power as sharp as on the issue of accepting the refugees from East Bengal. The refugees had been such strong supporters of the Communist Party and so dominant was the refugee influence in the Communist organisation that the Communists found it necessary to explain to the local West Bengalis that the CPI(M) was not just a party of refugees from East Bengal.¹⁰⁹ Even in the first Left Front government most of the top-ranking CPI(M) cabinet members traced their familial roots back to East Bengal, including Jyoti Basu, Ashok Mitra, Prasanta Sur, and Khrishnapada Ghosh. The State Secretary Promode Das Gupta was also originally from East Bengal. The CPI(M) had built up its base in part through taking up the cause of the refugees and demanding that they be settled in West Bengal rather than dispersed throughout the country as was the Congress government policy.¹¹⁰ Jyoti Basu had presented their case in the legislative assembly in the 1950s and early 1960s during the B.C. Roy government. As late as December 1974 Jyoti Basu had demanded in a public meeting that the Dandakaranya refugees be allowed to settle in the Sundarbans.¹¹¹ In 1974-75 leading members of the subsequent Left Front government, including Ram Chatterjee the Minister of State Home (Civil Defence) Department, had assured the refugees that if the Left Front came to power they would arrange their resettlement in West Bengal.¹¹² At a meeting of the eight Left Front Parties in 1975 it was resolved that the refugees be settled in the Sundarbans and a memorandum to that effect was proposed to be submitted to the Governor.¹¹³ At that point the Left's fortunes were perceived to be at a low ebb and the CPI(M) had defined West Bengal as being in a state of "semi-fascist terror." Three years later the Communists came to power and found their refugee supporters had taken them at their own word and sold their belongings and land in Dandakaranya to return to West Bengal. As the *Economic and Political Weekly* noted: "now that the Congress is out of power, would the refugees be far wrong in expecting the CPI(M) to practice what they preached?"¹¹⁴ The last thing, however, the Left Front wanted was a refugee influx which might damage the prospects of an economic recovery in the state and divert scarce resources from other development projects. The state government attempted to involve the Central Government in a large financial commitment to rehabilitating the refugees in West Bengal but this was turned down. At this point the CPI(M) could have made an issue of central discrimination against Bengali refugees, but the Janata Government was an ally of the CPI(M) government, which in turn was financially dependent on the centre for much of its development programmes and on Presidential assent for its legislation.

In all nearly 150,000 refugees arrived in West Bengal from Dandakaranya.¹¹⁵ Most were detained in camps set up by the Communist government and forcibly deported back to Dandakaranya. However, from May 1978 about 30,000 Scheduled Caste refugees under the leadership of Satish Mandal, President of the "Udbastu Unnayansil Samity," a former close associate of the Communist Party's refugee programme, managed to cross the delta area and set up a settlement at Marichjhapi.¹¹⁶ By their own efforts they established a viable fishing industry, salt pans,

health centre, and schools. The state government was not disposed to tolerate such settlement, stating that the refugees were “in unauthorised occupation of Marichjhapi which is a part of the Sundarbans Government Reserve Forest violating thereby the Forest Acts.” The refugees had come “with the intention of settling there permanently thereby disturbing the existing and the potential forest wealth and also creating ecological imbalance ... They forcibly went to Marichjhapi defying Government instructions and directions.”¹¹⁷ Whether the CPI(M) placed primacy on ecology or merely feared this might be a precedent for an unmanageable refugee influx from Bangladesh and loss of political support in the area is debatable. By then all the other recent refugees had been forcefully driven out of the state so the Marichjhapi refugees were at most a potential rather than an actual threat and their remaining was not a financial liability for the state government. Despite this, when persuasion failed to make the refugees abandon their settlement, the West Bengal Government started an economic blockade of the settlement on 26 January 1979 with thirty police launches. The community was tear-gassed, huts razed, and fisheries and tube wells destroyed, thereby depriving them of food and water. When the refugees tried to cross the river for food and drinking water on 30 January their boats were sunk and some of them drowned. On 31 January police opened fire killing thirty-six persons. With their food and water supplies cut off or destroyed, the refugees were forced to eat wild grass and drink from improvised wells. The Calcutta High Court ordered a two week lifting of the state government blockade but this was never properly implemented. In all thirty-six refugees were killed by police firing, forty-three died of starvation as a result of the blockade, twenty-nine by disease and 128 from drowning when their boats were scuttled by the police. All of these victims were listed by name and age in an appeal for redress from the Central Government.¹¹⁸

When these police actions failed to persuade the refugees to leave, the State Government ordered the forcible evacuation of the refugees which took place from 14-16 May 1979. One senior IAS officer reported that Muslim gangs were hired by the government to assist the police, as it was thought Muslims would be less sympathetic to the refugees. Several hundred men, women, and children were believed to have been killed by the police in the operation and their bodies dumped in the river to be washed out by the tide. Photographs were published in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* and the Opposition members in the State Assembly staged a walkout in protest.¹¹⁹ However, no criminal charges were laid against any of the officials or politicians involved. Prime Minister Morarji Desai, wishing to maintain the support of the Communists for his government, decided not to pursue the matter. Of the refugees who attempted the migration, “4,128 families perished in transit, died of hunger, starvation, exhaustion, and many were killed in Kashipur, Kumirmari, and Marichjhapi by police firings.”¹²⁰

Within the CPI(M) which had taken the decision there was some dissatisfaction with the way the party leadership had handled the matter. The CPI(M) cadre felt the leadership had handled the question in a “bureaucratic way” when it could have used the issue to develop a mass movement on behalf of the refugees and against Central government discrimination and neglect. The Communists had big refugee organisations which could have organised the refugees and brought them to Bengal. Instead of utilising the situation to rehabilitate the refugees and in the process develop a solid Communist base among them, only force was resorted to by the CPI(M). The CPI(M) cadre who were unhappy with the policy, however, could do nothing; no one on the CPI(M) State Committee opposed Promode Das Gupta on this issue. The CPI(M) State Committee *Political-Organisational Report*, in reviewing Marichjhapi, reversed previous Communist policy, stating that now “there was no possibility of giving shelter to these large number of refugees under any circumstances in the State.”¹²¹ The Land Revenue Minister Benoy Chowdhury made the unsubstantiated accusation that some foreign agencies were behind Marichjhapi.¹²² The CPI(M) blamed vested interests, reactionary

forces, Congress (I), and P.C. Sen for using the issue for political gain and claimed the CPI(M) had met the challenge at a political level for over a year, ultimately achieving success with the return of the refugees in May 1979.¹²³

Others, however, took a different lesson from the Marichjhapi massacre and questioned the bona fides of the Communists to represent the poorest strata of Bengali society. A journalist in the Bengali daily *Jugantar* noted:

the refugees of Dandakaranya are men of the lowest stratum of the society ... They are mainly cultivators, fishermen, day-labourers, artisans, the exploited mass of the society. I am sorry to mention that they have no relation with [the] elite of society. If it is a matter of any body of the family of a *Zamindar*, doctor, lawyer or engineer, the stir is felt from Calcutta to Delhi, but in this classified and exploited society, we do not feel anything for the landless poor cultivators and fishermen. So long as the state machinery will remain in the hands of the upper class elite, the poor, the helpless, the beggar, the refugees will continue to be victimised.¹²⁴

It was an ironic statement to make about what was a supposedly Communist government representing the poor and exploited. As a final twist to the episode, the CPI(M) settled its own supporters in Marichjhapi, as Promode Das Gupta had earlier advocated, occupying and utilising the facilities left by the deported refugees.¹²⁵ The issues of ecology and the Forest Act were conveniently forgotten.

A Professor of Community Medicine from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, who later visited the refugees in Dandakaranya, reported that those returning were now dispossessed, having sold their land and belongings to make the trip to West Bengal, while those who had remained behind were now better off. An air of gloom hung over the refugee colonies and the people went about their lives in a mechanical way without enthusiasm. The refugees did not mix with the local population and clung to their Bengali culture though prospects for return to Bengal were remote. Ironically by 1985 the Left Front was again taking up the issue of refugee rehabilitation but with little likelihood or expectation of success, indicating the programme was more for public consumption and potential political capital.

Concluding by way of Caste

The theme of caste runs through the foregoing narrative. This is not by design. Any study of the Left Front in its first term of government, as in any other term, is bound to be confronted by the vexed question of caste. Such is the case, at least in the present essay, because it seems that the Left Front between 1977 and 1982 helped consolidate a middle/ lower middle class power base, which while being far more numerous than the traditional Congressite upper class base also excluded the lowest of the classes. And these lowest classes inevitably show a great deal of congruence with the lower castes and tribes. As such, any consideration of the Left Front government involves us in the endeavour to figure out what caste meant to the Communists in Bengal.

For many decades, the Bengali intellectual was likely to deny that discrimination based on caste existed in West Bengal. Arun Ghosh, Member of the Indian Planning Commission and former Vice-Chairman of the West Bengal State Planning Board, for instance, claimed in 1989, that in West Bengal “no prejudice exists in relation to caste or creed.”¹²⁶ However, according to Rabindra Ray: “The Bengali Hindu population ... takes its religion, including caste (particularly in matters of marriage) as seriously as the rest of India. Ideas about pollution and untouchability are the same as elsewhere in India.”¹²⁷ In fact, under the Left Front’s government of 1977-82 even rural government

school feasts continued to be segregated, and this continuity of segregation has been definitively confirmed by village-level anthropological studies.¹²⁸

With the existence of segregation confirmed by scholars of rural Bengal, it is surprising that academics who have devoted part of their careers to development policy in West Bengal should be unaware of its existence. As this segregation represents a daily humiliation for millions of rural untouchables, it seems extraordinary that so many in the Bengali elite are still unaware of its continuance. This in part explains the failure of the Left Front to desegregate rural Bengal even though this untouchability has been legally abolished. As only 22 per cent of the West Bengal population are Scheduled Caste this is not sufficient to create a majority constituency in favour of actual (as opposed to formal) desegregation. According to one advocate of untouchable human rights, "The high caste Hindu Left leadership ignored the problem of Untouchables because it found the issue inconvenient. The very fact that in the Marathwada massacre and Gujarat caste war, no left party has sided with the Untouchables, verifies the total disenchantment of the Untouchables with the Indian Marxists."¹²⁹ Significantly the Left Front did not include desegregation in its election manifestos in the period of our study; there are probably more votes to be lost than gained on the integration issue. Though hardly a principled position, it is politically expedient.

Predictably, the Left Front government took a class view of the problems affecting the rural poor. The Chief Minister Jyoti Basu indicated that with this perspective of helping the rural poor the "Untouchable" Scheduled Castes will also be automatically helped, not on a caste basis but as members of the poorest and most exploited classes. Therefore as a large portion of the rural poor are Scheduled Castes and Tribes they will be major beneficiaries of the Left Front rural development programmes.¹³⁰ As we have seen, this was not exactly the case. Not between 1977 and 1982. And not later.

Nonetheless, it has to be admitted that there has been a certain ambiguity in West Bengal regarding the practice of untouchability. On the one hand, it had in the 1980s the second largest number of untouchables in India comprising 11.46 percent of India's untouchables. These 12,000,768 represented 21.99 per cent of Bengal's population, the third highest proportion in the country.¹³¹ However, as there was little intercaste violence aimed specifically at untouchables the problem was never taken very seriously. Compared with the thousands of murders and rapes in other parts of India, at the time the intercaste harmony of Bengal had appeared to confirm the impression of Bengalis being tolerant of intercaste differences. However the violence against the Scheduled Castes in other parts of the country was also a reflection of the increasing awareness and resistance of the untouchables to upper caste oppression which had hitherto been accepted as legitimate. The violence was indicative of the inability of the upper castes to legitimise their rule among the lowest castes, violence being the last resort of the upper castes determined to perpetuate their control in the face of their loss of moral authority. The lack of atrocities in West Bengal is therefore not in itself indicative of the absence of prejudice and discrimination or of its general practice. The anthropological studies of rural West Bengal conducted in the 1960s and 70s make it clear that untouchability was very much an accepted practice with enforcement of residential segregation, endogamous marriages, ritual ranking, and proscribed behaviour on the basis of caste.¹³² There has been no serious or concerted attempt by the Left Front to remove any of these prohibitions. Their elimination has never been an issue in the Left Front and the continued existence of casteism is just one of the givens of the situation. Though there are no legal constraints, the Left Front has left the issue of increasing social consciousness in abeyance. Their Marxist class analysis seems to have left this form of social discrimination that is peculiar to India beyond the scope of immediate government concerns. Further, though the law banning the practice of untouchability was

constitutionally within the Left Front's power to enforce, it did not implement the law because of the reactionary nature of its party and class base. However, this was not unique of the Bengal Left. This exclusion of untouchables from decision-making power within the Communist Parties was typical of other parts of India as well. The CPI and CPI(M) in the Punjab, according to Mark Juergensmeyer in 1982, "are dominated not by the proletariat but by the landowning and ruling castes ... Once incorporated, they effectively became the Communist movement in the Punjab, stamping it with an identity radically different from anything that seemed sympathetic to the Untouchables."¹³³

In essence the Communist strategy in Bengal and in India remained, to quote Achin Vanaik:

to give something to everybody, not to subtract resources and power from the rich and dominant classes and add them to the poor and oppressed classes. Otherwise the CPM [*sic*], for example, would have used the powers it already has to heavily tax rural kulaks and transfer substantial benefits to the poor. It prefers, however, to demand a rising share of centrally collected revenue with which to disburse patronage.¹³⁴

Such comments on the nature of the Indian Left are relatively rare, however, as most commentators assume rather than question the parliamentary Left's determination to emancipate the lowest classes. Through an interrogation of such assumptions, this essay sought to set out the impossibility of enforcing a radical programme from above, the inevitability of the burgeoning and consolidation of an interested power base of middle-class/caste in the rural areas, inherently reactionary in nature, and the consequential invisibilisation of the *dalits*.

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