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## INTERVIEWS

### Contextualising Land Reform in West Bengal An Interview with Benoy Konar

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In 2010, I interviewed Benoy Konar on the peasant movement and land reform in West Bengal. My primary research was on household incomes in rural West Bengal, and, subsequently, on issues of land use, land use statistics, and institutions of local self-government in the State. In 2010, in the course of research on the impact of land reform on the landholdings of Dalit and Adivasi households in West Bengal, it was clear to me that the process of land reform could not be understood unless contextualised within the history of the peasant movement in the State, in particular the history of the West Bengal Krishak Sabha (peasant union). Since its formation in 1936, the Krishak Sabha, which is the West Bengal representative of the All India Kisan Sabha, has been the major force in agrarian struggle in the State.

In order to understand this history, I turned to two of the most senior members of the Krishak Sabha then alive, Benoy Konar, the legendary peasant leader from Barddhaman district, and Shibdas Bhattacharya from South 24 Parganas district.

I met and interviewed Benoy Konar on November 4, 2010, at Muzaffar Ahmed Building in Alimuddin Street, Kolkata. I had conveyed my questions to him in a telephone conversation prior to the interview. On the day of the interview Benoy Konar was prepared with notes and statistics, and I had little need to repeat or explain further any of my questions.

In the course of the conversation, Benoy Konar described the main features of the peasant movement in Bengal from the 1930s onwards, and placed land reform firmly in the context of the development of the organised peasant movement.

At the time of this interview, West Bengal was going through a new and significant political churning. The Trinamool Congress was gaining popularity, and the policies of the Left Front government, particularly the land acquisition in Singur and police firing in Nandigram, were being widely attacked in the Right-wing media and by

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political opponents. Party workers from the Left were also facing violent and brutal attacks by the Maoists in Jangalmahal districts. These issues also find some resonance in the latter part of the interview.

Below are extracts from the interview. The original interview was conducted in Bengali. I have organised the extracts into sections based on the major issues that were discussed.

#### *THE INTERVIEW*

I have worked for forty years in Barddhaman district, and have gained practical experience from working in different regions of the district. After having been elected to the State Committee of the Krishak Sabha, I have worked with the movement at the State level.

#### *The Krishak Sabha Before Independence*

The origins of the peasant movement led by the Krishak Sabha in our State can be traced back to 1931-2. That was the time when some revolutionaries who were committed to Marxism and Marxist politics were released from prison and began to contribute to building the peasant movement. The first few organising committees were formed in the districts of Hooghly, Barddhaman, and 24 Parganas. The first organising committee of the Bengal Pradeshik Krishak Sabha was formed in 1936, and its first conference took place in Bankura in 1937.

The issues and struggles that were taken up at that time were largely part of the struggle against the British. These struggles raised economic demands: one example was the demand to build a river embankment in a flood-prone area. This was a demand of the peasantry, and was directed against the ruling British colonial power. There were also struggles, for instance, against the canal tax that was imposed in Barddhaman during colonial rule. In order to protect the Grand Trunk Road and railway tracks in Barddhaman, an embankment was built along the Damodar River. The Damodar canal was constructed to channel the runoff caused by the embankment. In 1938-9, the canal tax was raised from 2 rupees and 56 paisa to 5 rupees and 50 paisa. A huge, and ultimately successful, movement was organised against the increase in the canal tax.

During the Bengal Famine of 1943, the Krishak Sabha was engaged in extensive humanitarian relief operations across West Bengal. Large numbers of people were offered food at community kitchens organised by the Krishak Sabha.

Mass mobilisation of the peasantry also took place in specific regions and locations where the peasants faced severe exploitation by *zamindars*. When the Bengal Famine occurred in 1942-3, that is, before World War II, the phenomenon of hoarding took on

a new form. Big landlords (*jotedars, zamindars*) stored the year's harvest in *marai*, granaries made of straw [the allocated land where *marai* were constructed was called *gola bari*; each *gola bari* typically held up to thirty *marai*]. The number of *marai* a person owned denoted his social standing, and had no necessary connection with the year's output or profit. The more the number of *marai*, the richer the person. At the time of marriage negotiations, for instance, the number of *marai* owned by the family was an important criterion for assessing the social standing of a prospective groom or bride. In 1943, the price of rice increased from 5 rupees per *maund* to 40 rupees a *maund*.<sup>1</sup> Nineteen lakh (1,900,000) people died in the Famine.<sup>2</sup> It was at this time that new forms of hoarding — that is, the practice of landlords themselves keeping paddy in stock and selling it when market prices rose due to the shortage of supply — came into being.

Usually the landlords stocked their *marai* with paddy. In times of crisis, they loaned grain to sharecroppers. Such loans were known in Bengali as *bari* loans. Rice was lent to the sharecroppers on the condition that, at the time of the repayment, the interest on the grain would be 25 per cent — that is, equivalent to an amount of about 10 *seers* per *maund*, or 25 kilograms per quintal of rice.<sup>3</sup> However, at the time of the Bengal Famine, *zamindars* stopped extending *bari* loans. They found that selling their stocked paddy at the prevalent market prices was more profitable than lending paddy at 25 per cent interest. At this time, militant movements against the *zamindars* were organised in several places. These took the form of Gandhian movements: large crowds of people would surround (*gherao*) the *zamindar* or *jotedar* and demand *bari* loans of paddy.<sup>4</sup> Peasants would tell the *zamindar* or *jotedar* to note down their names against their loans, assuring them that the loan would be repaid on time.

Other kinds of land movements emerged in different parts of the State. In contrast to the situation today, there were very few regular marketplaces at that time. Village markets (*haat*) to which cultivators took their agricultural produce for sale took place once or twice a week. Wholesalers came to these village markets and bought produce to sell in other places. These village markets were owned by *zamindars*. Whoever brought their produce for sale in the market had to pay a commission to the *zamindar*; usually, the commissions were quite high. Besides the *zamindar*'s commission, producers had to pay additional fees for security guards, for *haat* maintenance, and as tribute to the *zamindars*. As a result of the high costs of selling produce in village markets, there was discontent among the peasants, and

<sup>1</sup> A *maund* comprises 40 *seer*, and 1 "bazaar *maund*" (after metrification) is 37.255 kilograms. A *seer* is another traditional measure of weight used in Bengal. A *seer* is often taken informally to be the equivalent of 1 kilogram.

<sup>2</sup> According to Amartya Sen's estimates, excess mortality in the famine period, that is, from 1943 to 1946, was 908,000 to 1.016 million in West Bengal. In East and West Bengal combined, the excess mortality was 2.622 million to 2.730 million (Sen 1981).

<sup>3</sup> See footnote 1.

<sup>4</sup> A form of protest where the protesters surround the person they are protesting against, thus restricting his movements.

movements and struggles were organised on this issue in different parts of Bengal. In many places, the Krishak Sabha was successful in setting up its own village markets. Through these movements, the peasants' fear of the *zamindar* and his power was, to some extent, curtailed.

The Krishak Praja Party came to power in 1937. Fazlul Haq headed the first elected Ministry of Bengal. Fazlul Haq was sympathetic to the peasants' cause. His greatest contribution was to help protect the land rights of peasants in debt. Many indebted peasants lost their land to *zamindars* and moneylenders because they could not repay their mortgages. Fazlul Haq passed a law preventing the interest on any loan taken by mortgaging agricultural land from exceeding the principal. The rule was to be applicable for a period of 15 years, after which a Tribunal would be set up to moderate the case. This rule proved to be of advantage to indebted peasants. However, there was a flip side to the law. As the government could not repay a loan in the event of default, the *zamindars* refused to give loans against written mortgage deeds. Loan contracts associated with land mortgages became oral contracts.

Fazlul Haq also set up the Floud Commission (headed by Sir Francis Floud) to study land-related issues in Bengal. The Krishak Sabha submitted a representation to the Commission in 1940. Later, Krishak Sabha representatives were asked to meet the Commission. The findings of the Commission were in favour of the rights of the *raiayats* (peasants). The Commission proposed extending the rights of the *raiayats*. However, the Commission did not give the *bargadars* (sharecroppers) the status of *raiayats*, but did say that *bargadars* should receive a two-third share of the produce.

In 1944-5, there were attempts — making use of the Floud Commission's proposals — at building a sharecroppers' movement. The movement peaked by the end of 1946. That was the time when communal riots occurred all over Bengal. At the same time, mass uprisings raged across India. The sharecroppers' movement had thus to be seen in the context of developments all over India. There were peasant and workers struggles in Malabar and Travancore. The movement of sharecroppers in Bihar began in an organised way in the 1930s and continued into the 1940s. In Bihar again, the police struck work in 1942 (Ramanand Tiwari led the movement) and many were imprisoned. The Worli revolt (1945-7), the struggle of the ratings of the Royal Indian Navy (1946), the great postal strike of 1946, and the mass struggle of the rural working people in Telangana were part of the upheaval of the times.<sup>5</sup>

In Bengal, the Krishak Sabha took the decision to begin the Tebhaga movement. The Tebhaga movement was the first organised land movement in Bengal.

<sup>5</sup> Interviewer's note: In the interest of clarity, I have placed the struggles listed by Benoy Konar in chronological order.

The Tebhaga movement grew stronger wherever there was a concentration of *bargadars* in the 19 districts of the present State — such as in the districts of South Bengal, including 24 Parganas, Midnapore, some parts of Birbhum and Hooghly, and Howrah, but more significantly in the districts of North Bengal and East Bengal. The demands of the Tebhaga movement were the right of the sharecropper to two-thirds of the produce, and the right of the sharecropper to thresh the harvest on his own, rather than on the landlord's, threshing-floor (*khamar*).<sup>6</sup> The second demand was important because once the output was taken to the landlord's threshing floor after harvest, the sharecropper was unable to take away two-thirds of the crop. The Tebhaga movement, based on these demands, spread across Bengal.

The Muslim League government that was in power at the time attempted to suppress the Tebhaga movement with a policy of repression. The first police firings were in Chirir Bandar in Dinajpur district. Two *bargadars* were killed. Nevertheless, the movement continued to spread, and this made the *zamindars* fearful. The movement forced the League government to announce that they would introduce new legislation, and to publish in the Gazette the text of a Bill to stall illegal evictions of *bargadars* and ensure their rightful share of produce.

The Muslim League government betrayed the masses: they did not pass the Bill. The government used brutal force against the movement. In a village near Khanpur in Dinajpur district, a village now apportioned between Bangladesh and West Bengal, twenty-two people were killed in police firing over two days. A total of eighty-six people lost their lives. The peasants had the strength to stand up against the *zamindar*, but they did not have the resources to resist the machinery of the state. The Tebhaga movement came to an end in the face of immense state repression (although some militant action continued in the districts of Howrah, Hooghly, and 24 Parganas until 1948–9, that is, in the early years after Partition).

In 24 Parganas district, a coastal district, there were no survey numbers assigned to plots of land. The *zamindars* in these regions were known as *latdars*.<sup>7</sup> *Latdars* were mainly absentee landlords living in Calcutta; being away from the rural countryside, they had relatively less control over their tenants. Taking advantage of this situation, the Tebhaga movement continued in 24 Parganas, though many lives were lost. There were even instances where pregnant women were killed in the indiscriminate police firings. These incidents are said to have inspired the lyrics of the song, “Ahalya ma

<sup>6</sup> Harvested crops would usually be brought to the landlord's threshing floor, and the product divided between the landlord and sharecropper after threshing.

<sup>7</sup> New land brought under cultivation was allocated in *lots* to owners in the estuarine regions of 24 Parganas. The *latdars* were the owners of these *lots*.

*tomar santan janma nilo na, ghare ghare shei santaner bisarjan*" (Ahalya, mother, your child could not be born/your sacrifice echoes in every home).<sup>8</sup>

### *On the Mobilisation of Oppressed Social Groups among the Peasantry in Pre-Independence Bengal*

East Bengal's population was predominantly Muslim, but the majority of *zamindars* were Hindu. *Bargadars* were mainly Muslims, and poor. People from the Scheduled Castes, such as from the Rajbanshi and Namasudra castes, and the Muslim population were the major fighting force. The population of people belonging to the Scheduled Tribes in those areas was relatively small.

In south Bengal, the population of people belonging to the Scheduled Tribes was relatively large. Rainfall in Bengal is quite good, contributing to more productive agriculture than in neighbouring regions. Historically, Adivasi people from the neighbouring regions of Jharkhand and Bihar came to Bengal in the harvest and sowing periods to work as agricultural labourers. These migrant populations began slowly to settle in new regions of South Bengal. There was already a substantial tribal population in the regions of West Bengal that are an extension of the Chhota Nagpur plateau. There is now some presence of people belonging to the Scheduled Tribes in all districts. In West Bengal, people belonging to the Scheduled Tribes form about 5 per cent of the total population. In Purulia that proportion is about 19 per cent, and in Medinipur, 14 per cent. This population became a part of the land struggles not specifically because of their tribal or community identity but by class association and allegiance. The Scheduled Tribe population, together with the Scheduled Caste and Muslim poor, formed an alliance with the rest of the poor peasantry in peasant struggles. In the peasants' movements in West Bengal, caste identity as such did not gain separate significance.

The Tebhaga Movement was not completely successful, but neither was it unsuccessful. We can say that it was through the Tebhaga movement that the Communist Party established its identity as the only party drawing its support base from the agrarian poor. At that time the *jotedars* called the Communist Party the "Chhotolokder Party." The Bengali word *chhotolok* refers to the Dalit people. In colloquial usage in Bengal, the rich were called *bhadralok* and the poor *chhotolok*. The rich called the Communist Party the "Chhotolokder Party," intending the term to be pejorative; this very term, however, helped the Communist Party consolidate its support among Dalits, and strengthened its commitment to the poor.

<sup>8</sup> The lyrics to the song were written by Abhijit Bandopadhyay and were based on the poem "Pashani Ahalya" by Salil Chowdhury. "Ahalya Das was killed in police firing in Chandanpuri, Kakdwip, in 1948. She was leading a procession of sharecroppers against the *latdlars* in the village. Almost 250 women and 1000 men had joined the procession under the leadership of Jogen Das, Adha Das, and Ahalya Das. Many women were shot and injured in the incident and Ahalya and Batasi lost their lives." (Gupta 1989; see [http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/14015/14/14\\_chapter%208.pdf](http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/14015/14/14_chapter%208.pdf)).

*The Krishak Sabha and Peasants' Movements  
in Bengal after Independence, 1947–68*

The country became independent in 1947. In March 1948, the Communist Party was declared illegal. A total of 800 comrades lost their lives. There were open firings at a rally of the Communist Party that demanded the freeing of political prisoners, and many people were killed. In the elections of 1946 in undivided Bengal, the Communist Party won three seats in the Legislative Assembly, Ratanlal Brahman from the workers' constituency of the Darjeeling tea gardens, Jyoti Basu from the railway constituency, and Rup Narayan Rai from Dinajpur (the Dinajpur constituency went to the erstwhile East Pakistan after Partition in 1947). In the general election of 1952, the Communist Party won 29 seats in West Bengal.

The condition of the poor in Bengal was deplorable. Agricultural development in the State was backward, and agricultural production was deficient. The poor found no employment after the sowing season. The price of rice had been very high from the time of World War II. Paddy was harvested by the month of *Poush* (December–January). By the beginning of the kharif season, that is, by July–August, the price of paddy would double. By this time, *bari* loans were no longer advanced: the new terms on which loans were given to peasants involved a rate of interest of 25 per cent, valued at the price of paddy in the month of *Bhadra* (August–September), which is when paddy prices peaked. In addition, the quantity of paddy borrowed had to be paid back in the same quantity, at peak prices. This meant that the borrower had to pay double or more the amount of paddy borrowed. These were the circumstances in which the Food Movement was started by the Krishak Sabha from 1953 onwards.

At that time, the British policy of Test Relief was still in place. Under this scheme, the Government was to provide employment to the poor during famines, in order that the poor could earn enough to eat. However, the Test Relief policy defined famines as periods when people were forced to eat leaves and grass in order to survive. The Food Movement of the Krishak Sabha raised the demand, every year, for relief and work for the able-bodied under the Test Relief scheme. At the same time, struggles against illegal evictions of *bargadars* also gained strength. Over this period the peasant movement worked in solidarity with other democratic movements, including the student movement, the teachers' movement, the white-collar workers' movement, the movement (based on the demand for linguistic States) against the unification of Bihar and Bengal, the movement for the inclusion of Purulia in Bengal, and the trade union movement.

Around this time, nine workers were killed in police firings in Burnpur.<sup>9</sup> A protest rally, in which people walked from Burnpur to Calcutta, was organised; camps were also organised in different areas. The peasant movement gained strength along with

<sup>9</sup> Burnpur is an industrial town in Barddhaman district where the IISCO (Indian Iron and Steel Company) steel plant was established.

all these movements. Simultaneously, the Left and democratic forces started becoming a powerful force in Bengal politics. We are talking of a time when 70 per cent of the population was rural, and the majority of the rural population was dependent on agriculture (56 per cent of the population is still dependent on agriculture). The role and participation of peasants in the general democratic movement was thus crucial.

The Krishak Sabha had to face much attack. In 1962, most of our leaders were in jail. I was a district committee member of the Krishak Sabha then and was also arrested. Our offices were captured. During the India–China war of 1962 and the India–Pakistan war of 1965, we raised slogans for peaceful dialogue with China and Pakistan. We were labelled as being Pakistan's spies and arrested. None of this, however, deterred the growth of peasants' agitations in the countryside.

The food insecurity situation was worsening. We were dependent on food grain imports from the United States, the public distribution system was in shambles, and in 1965, rice, sugar, and kerosene disappeared from the markets.

This led to large-scale people's demonstrations against the Congress government. The demonstrations were so intense and widespread that Congressmen were unable to come out of their homes. This was in 1965–6, when Gulzarilal Nanda was Union Home Minister. He came to Calcutta, visited the prison, and had a discussion with Pramod Dasgupta, Jyoti Basu, and Hare Krishna Konar. He informed Krishak Sabha leaders about the government's intention to start a ration system, and asked for their cooperation in quelling discontent in the countryside. He also gave an assurance that all political prisoners would be released. Around June 1966, all of us were released from prison.

In 1967, State elections took place. In all the elections that had taken place in the meantime, the strength of the Communist Party and the Left parties had increased. There were emerging fissures within the Congress. In the elections of 1968, a Congress faction under the leadership of Ajay Mukherjee formed the Bangla Congress party. We tried to form a united front against the Congress. But that did not materialise, and two fronts emerged: one was the Left Democratic Front (LDF) which included the Communist Party of India (Marxist), and the other was the Peoples' United Left Front (PULF), which included the Bangla Congress, CPI (Communist Party of India), and the Forward Bloc.

The Congress Party, weakened by internal divisions and fissures, was defeated; it lost its absolute majority in eight States. Thus, judging by the anti-Congress mood of the masses, the two fronts against the Congress had to unite under one common platform to form the government. The CPI(M) was then the largest party within the united front, with 44 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs). Next was the Bangla Congress with 30 MLAs. Although by democratic principle Jyoti Basu should have been Chief Minister, for the sake of building a united front, Chief Ministership was offered to Ajay

Mukherjee of the Bangla Congress, and Jyoti Basu became Deputy Chief Minister. He was also given the office of Home Minister. Hare Krishna Konar, who was then the General Secretary of the All India Krishak Sabha, was made the Land Minister. With this development, West Bengal's peasant movement took a new turn.

*Peasant Movements During the Period of the  
United Front Government in West Bengal, 1968-71*

[On being appointed Home Minister] Jyoti Basu announced that the State police would not intervene in peasants' movements against landlordism. He said that the role of the police was only to maintain law and order. The police were to take action only in situations of violence. Hare Krishna Konar held that successful land reforms could not be implemented through the bureaucracy. The slogan of the movement was to identify and occupy ceiling surplus land.

In the early stages, the poor peasantry often did not have the boldness to occupy ceiling surplus land. To take an example, there were occasions when a Junior Land Reforms Officer (JLRO) announced in advance the date and time for distribution of ceiling surplus land and licences to poor peasants. The JLRO would also request the Krishak Sabha to ensure the presence of the concerned peasants. We would be present on the appointed day, as would the JLRO and the peasants. But then would come the landlord to intimidate and threaten the peasants: "Which one among you has the temerity to claim my land? If I see any of you anywhere near my land, your houses will be destroyed." The peasants would then leave the place without claiming any land.

At that time we had to work really hard. We had to work with fewer peasants — only those who had the courage to stand up against the landlords. We trained them to use lathis and bows and arrows — not to use them for violence, but because, as Hare Krishna Konar would say, the knowledge of using a lathi or a bow increases self-confidence. The Krishak Sabha would then organise these peasants, and identify and occupy the ceiling surplus land of the landlords. Through such acts of forcible occupation of ceiling surplus land, the peasants' fears gradually waned.

Earlier, the *zamindar*, through his economic control over land and property, exerted an overpowering control over all aspects of village life. When the *zamindar* crossed the road, the poor would move aside, bow down, salute, and make way for him. There were a lot of social restrictions on peasants. In those days, in the absence of cars, landlords used to travel in elaborately decorated bullock carts. Everyone was expected to stand still when the landlord's entourage passed by. A person walking by the landlord's house was not allowed to comb and part his hair. Nor was anybody allowed to ride on a bicycle past the *zamindar*'s house. No matter how rich a peasant was, he was not allowed to build a house bigger and taller than that of the *zamindar*.

Therefore, when the land movement became stronger, even the middle peasants and sections of the rich peasants, who would not have otherwise benefitted from land redistribution, supported the movement, if only to break down the feudal control of the *zamindar*. Sections of the middle peasantry, who had by then attained education and developed a sense of self-respect, could not bear to bow down before the feudal, illiterate *zamindars*.

The United Front government was dissolved within 13 months of its formation. There were elements within the United Front that did not want the land movement to progress. After the government was formed, the United Front had approved a memorandum on the tasks to be taken up, which included, among other things, the implementation of land reforms, and the policy that the police would not intervene in democratic peasants' movements. Congress governments had also passed anti-*zamindari* and land reform legislation, but they were only on paper and nothing was implemented. However, with the election of the United Front government, the peasants themselves were involved in the implementation of the land reform process. This made the sections within the United Front that supported landlords — *zamindars* and *jotedars* — uncomfortable. In order to disrupt the process of land reform, they walked out of the government, leading to its fall.

The first United Front Government also passed an Ordinance that prevented the eviction of sharecroppers, and the eviction of people from their homestead land.

In 1969, the second United Front Government came to power. In that election, the CPI(M) won 80 seats.

The Krishak Sabha's main political agenda at this time was to identify and take over *benami* land. By this time, the takeover of vested land was almost complete. It needs to be mentioned here that during the United Front government, no amendments were made to the Land Reforms Act. Whatever ceiling surplus land was acquired was according to law enacted under Congress rule. That law had set the ceiling at 25 acres per head. With respect to orchards, the ceiling was 15 acres per person. There was also the Tank or Water law, which was outside the purview of the Land Reforms Act.

The law in our country was such that when somebody sold land, the presence of the seller was all that was required during the registration of the deal. The land revenue office only checked whether the seller was the actual owner of the land. The identity of the buyer held no significance during the registration process; nor was the buyer's presence required during the registration of the transaction. *Zamindars* took advantage of this loophole to get their lands registered under the names of distant relatives and fake identities, and some even in the names of their cattle. They did so to evade land ceiling laws.

The Krishak Sabha led a campaign that demanded that land ceilings be applicable to households and not to individuals. The Krishak Sabha's demands — to identify and occupy *benami* land, and to redefine ceiling limits in terms of household ceilings rather than per capita ceilings — received mass support. It was recognised that the demand that the ceiling law be applicable to households was a logical and practical demand. Here lay the achievement of the Krishak Sabha: to have made, by means of an organised movement, the ceiling law applicable to households even before any amendments were made to the actual legislation in this regard.

#### *Political Ascent of the Left Parties in Bengal, 1971-7*

In the elections of 1971, the CPI(M) won 113 seats. Taken together with the seats won by its allies, the total number was 125. The CPI and other Left parties won 26 seats. If the two fronts were to have come together, Siddharta Shankar Ray's terror regime of 1972 would not have been part of history. But the other Left parties, including the CPI, Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), and the Forward Bloc, refused to accept Jyoti Basu as Chief Minister; as a consequence, the Left government could not be formed. Within four or five months, the Assembly was dissolved, and, in 1972, large-scale semi-fascist terror began. Only in 1977 was that situation reversed.

Meanwhile, between 1972 and 1977, the political situation across the country was volatile. The Emergency was declared across the country. Semi-fascist terror was unleashed in West Bengal. Jayaprakash Narayan led a movement, of which we were also a part, against the Emergency. The Allahabad High Court's historic judgement against the Emergency, the rejection of Indira Gandhi's injunction, and the defeat of the Congress were events that followed. In the 1977 elections, the CPI(M) initially had an alliance with the Jayaprakash Narayan-led Janata Dal at the centre. However, at the State level, the alliance broke down. The CPI(M) had offered the Janata Dal 55 per cent of the seats and the Chief Minister's position, while keeping 45 per cent of the seats for itself. But the Janata Dal refused such an alliance. The CPI(M), the Janata Dal, and the Congress fought elections separately.

We explained to the people that we tried very hard to form a united front, and that it was the Janata Dal that had to be blamed for it not materialising. In the elections, the people defeated both the Janata Dal and the Congress. But we also did not receive more than 45 per cent of the vote share in the 1977 elections. We were able to win a majority of seats because the Janata Dal and the Congress ate into each other's votes.

#### *The Left Movement and Some Questions of Caste and Class in West Bengal*

In West Bengal, untouchability is an obsolete practice. It might seem unbelievable to many in the rest of the country, but in West Bengal that is the reality. Untouchability as a practice has been crushed. The breakdown of untouchability took place because of the land movement, when the poor peasants became the leading force in the

movement. The poor peasants in the village are not the owners of land, but they are the owners of labour power. Through their labour power, they have the capacity to influence production.

Through [the agrarian] movement and the land movement at large, poor peasants attained some social standing in the village. Earlier, during the festivals of Durga Puja organised by the rich peasants or *zamindars*, the poor peasants were only called on the last day to help in the immersion of the idol. They were paid money to buy alcohol. The poor peasants stayed away from all social functions in the village. The situation has changed now. Now poor peasants are in the forefront of all meetings in the village. They have become the decision-makers.

Thus it was through an anti-feudal, economic, and social struggle, directed by a class struggle, and not through any specifically anti-caste movement, that the Left was able to bring an end to untouchability and other forms of caste-based discrimination in rural West Bengal.

#### *Land Reforms Implemented by the Left Front Government and the Question of Caste*

Quoting figures from two years ago, the people of the Scheduled Tribes constituted 5 per cent of the population and 18.6 per cent of the beneficiaries of land redistribution. Similarly, people of the Scheduled Castes constituted about 24 per cent of the population and 37.4 per cent of the beneficiaries of land reforms. In terms of registered *barga* land, people belonging to the Scheduled Tribes occupied 10.9 per cent of the land; those belonging to Scheduled Castes occupied 30.8 per cent of the land, and Muslims also occupied a substantial share of *barga* land.<sup>10</sup>

As I have already indicated, the Adivasi population in West Medinipur, Bankura and Purulia is, respectively, 13, 14, and 19 per cent of the total population. People belonging to the Scheduled Tribes constituted 25.3 per cent of the beneficiaries of land redistribution in West Medinipur. In Bankura the figure was 20.3 per cent, and in Purulia it was 35.3 per cent.

Within the limits of the given constitutional framework, some ceiling surplus land is being identified and redistributed even today. The land reform undertaken in West Bengal cannot be equated to the revolutionary land reform undertaken in China — here, we had to work within a constitutional structure. In India, there are many people who have sources of earning other than land and do not need earnings from land for their livelihood. According to the law, though, they can own land up to the ceiling limit; we cannot seize their land.

<sup>10</sup> Although separate data were not collected in the early stages for Muslim beneficiaries, Krishak Sabha sources estimate the corresponding share among Muslim sharecroppers to have been about 18 per cent.

### *On the Constraints and Limitations Faced by the Left Front Government*

In India, we have not been able to achieve many things. At the present juncture, a movement for better agricultural wages is of importance, and we are trying to take up the issue. Even while we are in government, we have failed to see the issues of economic and social development with respect to education, health, and housing as part of the larger class struggle. We have not been able to associate the question of social development with class struggle. These long years of running a government within a bourgeois society have had negative influences even on our cadres. We are heading the government at all levels — including the panchayat and the municipality. Thus, the onus of undertaking any agenda [for development], negative or positive, rests solely with us.

Earlier, when we were not in government, I, together with other comrades, would wage struggles, and mobilise the masses to conduct *gheraos* and demonstrations. When we won a demand through these struggles, the poor would identify us as their leaders. Today, I represent the municipality chairman or the panchayat president who signs proposals for the poor peasant's development. The relation has now changed to that of the giver and the receiver, the donor and the recipient. If the relation is to change to that of a donor and the beneficiary, then class consciousness is dissolved. Therefore, based on this self-criticism, we have to think of ways of continuing with class struggle while representing a democratically-elected government within a bourgeois state. Also, we need to think about and understand the role of a democratic Left government within a country where democratic forces are still weak and the influence of the bourgeois media in shaping public opinion is overarching.

For this, we need the help of researchers to help understand the present social scenario, the present characteristics of social classes, and class relations. While old forms of *zamindari* no longer exist, a new landed class has emerged. We need to know the new avenues in which these new classes operate. How will we carry forward the class struggle in this changed situation? To understand these matters, we need more academic engagement. The new slogans that we have to raise must be based on an objective understanding of reality. We are thankful to scholars like you and your colleagues and to organisations such as yours for contributing to our understanding.

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## *GLOSSARY*

<i>bargadar</i>	Sharecropper.
<i>bari</i>	Paddy loan.
<i>benami</i>	The term for land held by a person in another, often fictitious, name.
<i>Bhadra</i>	The fifth month of the traditional Bengali calendar.
<i>gherao</i>	A form of protest where the protesters surround the person they are protesting against, thus restricting his movements.
<i>gola bari</i>	Land allocated for the construction of granaries.
<i>haat</i>	Village market.
<i>jotedar</i>	Landlord, or land-holder.
<i>latdar</i>	Leaseholder.
<i>lathi</i>	Baton, typically used by police to control large crowds.
<i>marai</i>	Straw granary.
<i>maund</i>	A measure of weight; 1 <i>maund</i> equals 37.255 kilograms.
<i>Poush</i>	The ninth month of the traditional Bengali calendar.
<i>raiyat</i>	Peasant cultivator (also <i>ryot</i> ).
<i>seer</i>	A traditional measure of weight used in Bengal; one seer is often taken informally to be the equivalent of 1 kilogram.
<i>zamindar</i>	Statutory landlord.

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