

Some Aspects of Agricultural Labour in West Bengal

Dr. Kakali Barua

Department of Economics, Lady Shri Ram College for Women, New Delhi

DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2024.v09i12.015 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2024.v09i12.015>

Received: 22 November 2024 / Accepted: 12 December 2024 / Published: 25 December 2024

ABSTRACT

Most of the contemporary studies in West Bengal especially after the introduction of the land reforms by the LFG in 1977 concerns about the land reform measures in terms of success or failure, its impact on agricultural productivity and agricultural production. But has the economic condition of the agricultural labourers changed after the agrarian reforms have taken place in late 1970's?

Key Words: Land reform, operation barga, agrarian reform, land redistribution.

Introduction

Most of the contemporary studies in West Bengal especially after the introduction of the land reforms by the LFG in 1977 concerns about the land reform measures in terms of success or failure, its impact on agricultural productivity and agricultural production. But has the economic condition of the agricultural labourers changed after the agrarian reforms have taken place in late 1970's?

Land Reforms in West Bengal

“Operation Barga was launched in 1978 with the primary purpose of recording tenancy lease”.¹ According to Abhijit Dasgupta, “legislative measures were not enough to improve the living conditions of the sharecroppers. It was necessary to give them tenurial rights by some other methods. In order to do so the new government of West Bengal came out with a new method for the registration of the names of sharecroppers. The programme came to be known as Operation

¹ Sengupta and Gazdar (1997), 'Agrarian Politics and Rural Development in West Bengal' from *Indian Development, Selected Regional Perspectives* (eds) Dreze and Sen

Barga”.² LFG introduced the land reform in an attempt to provide tenurial rights to the sharecroppers and to redistribute ceiling surplus land among the land-less and land poor.

Atul Kohli (1987) in his book *The State and Poverty* argues that data on land shows that over the years larger landholdings have been breaking down. But this does not necessarily mean gains for the lower rural classes, nor do these trends mean that the family incomes for large landholders necessarily decline. The data provided by the government data source show that overall tenancy has declined. But inequality still exists in the sense that majority of the land is operated by big landowners. He further argues that Operation Barga did not significantly alter the sharecropper’s condition after registration.

Sengupta and Gazdar (1997)³ conducted a survey in the WIDER village, and found that land redistribution did not significantly alter the class relation between the land rich and the land poor. They argue that wage labor was the most important source of earning for the landless that were primarily dependent on it for their livelihoods. They argued that “the real test of the success of the campaign is its effect on the share of the produce that actually goes to the tenant”⁴. Though the evidence on crop share shows a mixed result across villages, Operation Barga has been able to extend security to the tenants and give that higher crop share even though they are lower than the stipulated shares. But to the question regarding the extent, to which land reforms were responsible for this growth in agricultural productivity, they argue “despite their wide coverage in terms of beneficiaries, the redistributive reforms have affected only a relatively small proportion of total cultivable area.

Ratan Khasnobis(1994) argues that operation barga has failed to provide an impact on cropsharing. In the survey he carried out in the villages of *Bardhaman, Medinipur, Nadia, Purulia*, he found that the recorded bargadars did not get any extra benefit than their unrecorded counterpart. “The result indicates that there does not exist sufficient evidence in favour of the fact that the recorded bargadar does get a better share proportion than his unrecorded counterpart”.⁵ Among others who do not support the positive aspect of the reform is Ross

² Dasgupta , Abhijit (1998):*Growth with Equity*, The New Technology and Agrarian Change in Bengal. Manahar Publication. New Delhi.

³ Sengupta and Gazdar (1997) : “ Agrarian Politics and Rural Development : in West Bengal” from *Indian Development Selected Regional Perspective* (Ed) Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Khasnobis, R (1994): “Tenurial conditions in West Bengal Continuity and Change”

Mallick as he puts it “A survey of 14 villages in West Bengal indicates that even among the recorded bargadars the legally stipulated three-quarter crop share as often an exception. Only one of the 11 villages where share proportions were specifically mentioned applied the three - quarters share even though villages had recorded bargadars”.⁶

However, others like Dipankar Basu (2002)⁷ argues that redistribution programme has slowed down after the LFG government came into power in 1977. In the same context, Rawal and Mishra (2002)⁸ argue that land redistribution programme has been a success but they pointed out that “land reform in West Bengal was a programme of limited reforms which could not radically alter the relations of productions. It did not completely do away with the baggage of the pre capitalist relation”.⁹

In one of the most exhaustive works done by G.K.Lieten (1992) in his book called *Continuity and Change in Rural West Bengal*, Lieten has shown that the land redistribution programme of the left front government has been successful in providing land to many families. He argues that “after the LFG government came to power, the average size of the plots allocated to the beneficiaries fell dramatically to hardly 1 bigha (one third of an acre from around 3 bighas in 1967)”.¹⁰ But the primer objective was to provide land to more and more families, so that their economic condition is improved.

He further argues that there has been a downward trend in real number of agricultural labourers, a process, which he calls “depeasantisation discontinued”. Due to the reform programme, poor households in West Bengal now suffer less deprivation and this is essentially due to the campaign of Operation Barga”.¹¹ As far as registration of bargadars is concerned, Lieten argues that the registration has speeded up many folds due to the initiatives of the LFG and in effect was successful in providing security to the tenant. Lieten further argues that due to Operation Barga,

⁶ Mallick, Ross (1992): ‘Agrarian Reform in West Bngal: The End of an Illusion’ *World Development*

⁷ Basu , Dipankar (2001), ‘Political economy of middleness behind violence in rural west Bengal’ *EPW* , vol 36 no, 16 April 21.

⁸ Rawal and Mishra (2002): ‘Agrarian Relation in Contemporary West Bengal’ from *Agrarian studies in Less Developed Countries* (Ed) V.K.Ramachandran and M. Swaminathan

⁹ *ibid.* page 334.

¹⁰ Lieten, G. K (1993): *Continuity and Change in Rural West Bengal*. Sage Publication. New Delhi.

¹¹ *ibid*

the personal income of the rural masses has increased due to rising share in produce. Thus, in essence O.B. from these viewpoints cannot be termed as unsuccessful in providing legal rights to the rural masses.

In a survey of villages in Nadia district by Abhijit Dasgupta¹² it was found that most sharecroppers managed to register their names. He found that operation barga did provide greater security to the sharecroppers; reforms did help in increasing production and raising the real wages of agricultural workers.

John Harris (1993), who surveyed villages in the Birbhum district, found that “the evidence from none of the three villages that he visited in Birbhum and Bardhaman supports the view that the agrarian reform policies persuaded by this government have brought any really significant change in the agrarian structure, or that the reforms have been instrumental in increasing agricultural production”.¹³ But broadly, he comes to the same conclusion as that of Lieten that “higher productivity and a better deal for small peasants and agricultural labourers have combined to reduce the extreme poverty and reverse the immiseration process”.¹⁴ Among others who are the advocate of land reform programme in West Bengal by LGF is Sunil Sengupta(1981).¹⁵

Dr T.Haque’s study reveals that almost 100 percent of the sharecroppers had a feeling of greater security due to recording of barga. In effect, he tries to argue that the security provided to the sharecropper due to the tenancy reform increased his incentive to undertake investments in land to increase his production as now he is entitled to a greater share of the output.

In a recent study by Banerjee, Ghatak and Gerler (2002) they have discussed that operation barga was to quite an extent successful in providing security and higher crop share to the sharecroppers. Evidence from their survey suggests that while shares rose both for registered and unregistered tenants, the increase was greater for registered tenants.

¹² Dasgupta Abhijit (1998) : *Growth with Equity*, The New Technology and Agrarian Change in Bengal. Manahar Publication. New Delhi.

¹³ Harris, John(1993): ‘ What’s happening in rural West Bengal’ *Economic and Political Weekly* , June 2

¹⁴ Lieten ,G.K (1993) : *Continuity and Change in Rural West Bengal*. Sage Publication. New Delhi

¹⁵ Sunil Sengupta (1981): West Bengal Land Reforms and the Agrarian Structure. EPW June. *Review Of Agriculture*.

Thus, so far, we have looked into the vast literature that existed on the agrarian conditions in West Bengal.

The above studies shows that there has been a very little attempt to link up land reforms with the material condition of agricultural labourers, and to what extent the redistribution of land has benefited the rural landless class of agricultural labourers.

To what extent have the land reform measures in West Bengal affected the rural labour. To examine this question, we will analyse to what extent was land re-distribution among land-less class.

Redistribution of Land

Table 1 shows that land distributed covered 30.3 percent of the land-less and land poor in West Bengal in 1981, 37.9 percent in 1991 and 36 percent in 2001. An average of one third landless and land poor have been covered by land redistribution.

Table 1: Beneficiaries of Land Redistributed as a Percentage of Landless and Land Poor

	As on 1981	As on 1991	As on 2001
West Bengal	30.3	37.9	36.0

Source: computed from Economic Review. Various issues. Govt. of West Bengal

Table2: Vested Land Redistributed as Percentage of Net Sown Area

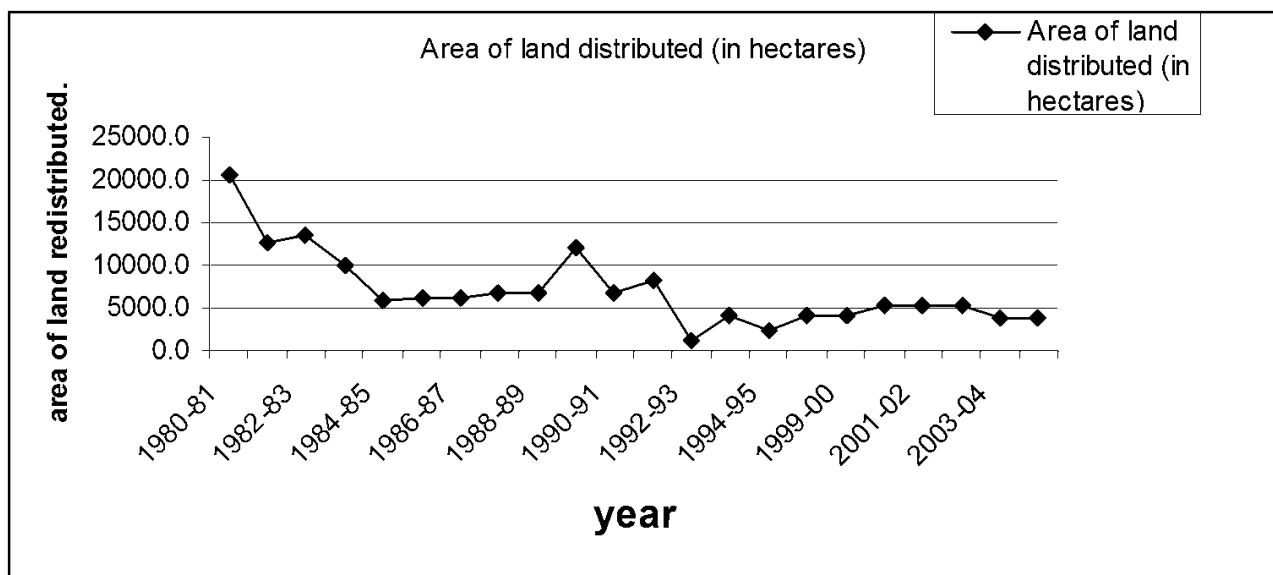
	1980 to 1991	1991-2005
Bankura	2.15	2.10
Birbhum	6.24	2.10
Burdwan	5.55	1.00
Cooch Behar	1.13	1.33
Hooghly	4.11	1.44
Howrah	3.92	4.11
Jalpaiguri	3.34	-1.43
Malda	4.19	3.24
Midnapur	2.55	1.45
Murshidabad	5.61	2.20
Nadia	3.18	3.16
Purulia	4.90	0.31
Twenty-four Paraganas	-1.06	-1.14

West Dinajpur	3.90	-0.39
West Bengal.	3.35	1.54

Source: Calculated from Economic review, various issues. Government of West Bengal. Statistical Abstract of West Bengal, Various years.

On the redistribution of land, table 2 shows that in West Bengal, compound annual growth rate of the additional amount of vested land redistributed as a percentage of net sown was around 3.35 percent in 1980-1990 which declined to 1.54 percent in 1990-2005. During the post reform period all the districts registered a decline in the amount of vested land redistributed, except Cooch-Bihar and Howrah. Some districts even had negative growth rate in the post reform period like Jalpaiguri, Twenty Four Paraganas and West Dinajpur, which implies that in absolute terms there was a decline in the redistribution of additional vested land in these districts.

Chart 2: Area of Land Distributed (in hectares) in West Bengal



Source: Computed from Economic Review. Government of West Bengal. Various Issues

Chart 2 shows that additional vested land redistributed has declined over the years. The land which is vested with the government is usually one which is not fit for cultivation or land which is very less productive. If we do a simple correlation between land productivity and vested land redistributed, then we find a negative correlation between these two variables, as on 1980, the correlation coefficient between land productivity and additional amount of vested land redistributed was -0.41, in 1990 it was -0.43 and in 2000 it was -0.45 (source: **Economic review. various issues**). This proves that vested land redistributed infact will have no impact or even a

negative impact on productivity. Over the years, there has been a slowdown in the land reform programme in West Bengal in term of recording of redistribution of vested lands.

“There have been recent reports of increasing land alienation by pattadars, and of eviction of bargadars, thus suggesting that the benefits of the land reform have been relatively short lived atleast for some rural labour households” [Human Development Report 2004 pp 401]

Agricultural Labourer’s Real Earnings

Redistribution of land has not benefited the rural landless class of agricultural labourers as a) decline in the amount of vested land redistributed b) and the vested land if distributed by the government is usually one which is not fit for cultivation or land which is very less productive. Economic conditions of agricultural labourers will depend upon the real earnings; real earnings in turn are affected by a) employment availability, b) agricultural wages and c) price of wage goods consumed by members of the household. These three factors together determine the economic conditions of agricultural labourers.

Rise in agricultural wages may not necessarily mean a rise in the earnings of agricultural labourers as, if this rise in the wages is accompanied by a fall in agricultural employment or a rise in the price of the wage goods consumed by the members of the household. This would mean a fall in the real earnings of agricultural labourers. Similarly, if a rise in employment is accompanied by a fall in the wages/rise in the price of wage goods then the real earning of the agricultural labourers will decline. So, no one economic variable is an indicator of the real earnings of agricultural labourers.

In addition to looking at the trends in the three variables that affect the economic conditions of agricultural labourers we will also have to look into the factors that affect the demand for labour and wage rates.

- Agricultural growth which is often accompanied by technological change may due to multiple cropping shifts the demand curve for labour upward which will lead to a rise in the demand for labour, this will lead to labour market tightening and put a upward pressure on the wages rates.
- Diversification of rural employment, i.e. expansion of non-farm employment will reduce the number of people dependent on agricultural for livelihood. This will lead to labour market tightening and increase the bargaining power of agricultural labourers.
- Level of organization among the agricultural labourers to bargain for higher wages, here the role of the peasant organization is important.

- Level of indebtedness, it is often argued that agricultural labourers take consumption loans from landlords to meet their current consumption. This sort of dependence often leads to unequal bargaining power for the employers where the bargaining power of the labourers is weakened. This process also leads to appropriation of surplus in the form of unpaid labour services by the landlords involving extra-economic coercion.

Conclusion

Redistribution of land has not benefited the rural landless class of agricultural labourers changed after the agrarian reforms have taken place in late 1970's. Thus, for labourers a) employment availability, b) agricultural wages and c) price of wage goods consumed by members of the household will determine the economic conditions of agricultural labourers.

References

1. Basu , Dipankar (2001), 'Political economy of middle class behind violence in rural west Bengal' EPW , vol 36 no, 16 April 21.
2. Dasgupta Abhijit (1998) : *Growth with Equity*, The New Technology and Agrarian Change in Bengal. Manahar Publication. New Delhi.
3. Dasgupta , Abhijit (1998):*Growth with Equity*, The New Technology and Agrarian Change in Bengal. Manahar Publication. New Delhi.
4. Economic review. various issues
5. Harris, John(1993): ' What's happening in rural West Bengal' *Economic and Political Weekly* , June 2
6. Khasnobis, R (1994): "Tenurial conditions in West Bengal Continuity and Change"
7. Lieten ,G.K (1993) : *Continuity and Change in Rural West Bengal*. Sage Publication. New Delhi
8. Lieten, G. K (1993): *Continuity and Change in Rural West Bengal*. Sage Publication. New Delhi.
9. Mallick, Ross (1992): 'Agrarian Reform in West Bengal: The End of an Illusion' *World Development*

10. Rawal and Mishra (2002): 'Agrarian Relation in Contemporary West Bengal' from Agrarian studies in Less Developed Countries (Ed) V.K.Ramachandran and M. Swaminathan
11. Sengupta and Gazdar (1997) , ' Agrarian Politics and Rural Development in West Bengal' from *Indian Development ,Selected Regional Perspectives* (eds) Dreze and Sen
12. Sengupta and Gazdar (1997) : “ Agrarian Politics and Rural Development in West Bengal” from *Indian Development Selected Regional Perspective* (Ed) Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen.
13. Sunil Sengupta (1981): West Bengal Land Reforms and the Agrarian Structure. EPW June. *Review Of Agriculture*.