CONCLUSION

Low land man ratio is a major feature in most of the Third World Countries. Most of the people here are attached with agriculture directly or indirectly and living below poverty line. Due to the scarcity of land and its concentration in the hands of a few there are tensions, violence and agrarian class struggles, erupting every now and then in different parts of these countries. West Bengal is one among the States within India where, excepting Calcutta and its adjacent small areas, the rest of the state is predominantly agrarian in nature. In this State, land was concentrated in the hands of a few ever since the British colonial intervention in land relations of Bengal through the enactment of the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793, and, the response of the different categories of tenants and landless cultivators was expressed through frequent out break of militant struggles throughout the colonial period and even after independence.

After independence, the Congress took steps to tackle this problem by passing so many land reform legislations in West Bengal and tried to implement those from above i.e., through administration. This politics of land reforms was aimed at checking agrarian struggles with populist rhetorics of equitable distribution of land. Congress never mobilized the peasant masses from below. Rather, it was dependent on a corrupt
administration which, with its inherent class character and social conservatism, stood against any radical measure in this sphere. The Congress, being a jotedar-zamindar-dominated party, remained a silent spectator only. Our survey in the two blocks of the district of Birbhum confirms this scenario and this has been substantiated by other scholarly studies on land reforms in West Bengal up to 1967.

Disenchanted with Congress populism, the discontented peasants took shelter under the umbrella of various Left parties and launched many political struggles against the sabotage of land reforms perpetrated by Congress rule. The politics of land reforms took a qualitatively new turn during 1967-69 when the Left dominated United Front Government came to power twice in quick succession, dismantling Congress hegemony for the first time in the State of West Bengal. This provided a unique political opportunity to poor peasants, sharecroppers and landless agricultural labourers to assert their rights. The United Front Government implemented land reform legislations rigorously through peasant mobilization from below and detected so many unscrupulous means adopted by the Congress leaders-cum-jotedars to conceal their landed property. 'Paper possession' of excess land by the Government came to light. Traditional wage rates for agricultural labourers and share of produce for the sharecroppers were changed effectively for the first time which inspired poor peasants to raise their hands against jotedars, zamindars and moneylenders. Various
left parties consolidated their base in West Bengal, specially in rural areas.

But after a short spell of rule, the United Front was dismissed and a revamped Congress, fortifying its base at the national level, also managed to recapture power in West Bengal after the State Assembly Election in 1972, reducing the united non-Congress opposition to shambles. The peasant upheavals which had rocked the whole country during the late 1960s, gave a caution to Congress leaders that the green revolution would turn into a 'red' one if Congress failed to implement at least a modicum of land reform measures, particularly in those rural pockets where it had completely alienated itself from the masses. Such a grim view was expressed by the then Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Gandhi, at a Chief Ministers' Conference held in New Delhi where she stated that the cause of social tension was lying in the chronic agrarian unrest.

Exposed to such a volatile political situation, Congress leaders at the national level and, a new genre of youthful and resurgent Congress leaders in West Bengal, gave emphasis on restructuring agrarian relations through land reforms to be enacted and implemented rigorously. In fact, the Congress organisation did not have any peasant wing of its own up to late sixty. Congress leaders passed and amended so many land reform legislations and emphasis was laid on their implementation rigorously from above i.e., through initiative of the
administration without any mobilization of the masses from below.

In fact, the Congress did not have any organizational control over different sections of the rural underdogs. The proposal passed by the Congress Working Committee in 1972 to form village committees to organize peasants by involving beneficiaries in the Committee failed to impress the State Congress leadership. As a result, the implementation of land reforms legislation was halfhearted and haphazard. The Congress leaders, through the misuse of administration and political control over the State, made a mockery of land reforms. They extended a network of political patronage which would enable their local contract men to retain hold over vested land or appropriate the produce from their chosen beneficiaries on whom patta rights were conferred. Many such cases of fake transfer of land, forged assignment of vested land and sabotage of land reforms by the favoured few in rural Bengal were detected after 1977 when the Left Front Government had come to power. Even some important office bearers of the Congress at the block level managed valuable patta land for their near relatives or for themselves. Some of the Block level Congress leaders admitted that they had never mobilized peasants in favour of Congress-sponsored land reforms programme like detecting and distributing excess ceiling land or enhancement of agricultural wages and share of produce for the agricultural labourers and the sharecroppers respectively. Similarly, they were indifferent to the implementation of

A prominent National leader and Central Minister of the Congress stated frankly that the Congress had failed to implement land reforms due to the domination of land owning classes within the party and for fear of losing their support. Similarly, a Pradesh Congress leader and the Congress Minister-in-charge of Home affairs in W.B., observed that the Congress use of administration to implement land reforms had primarily sought to safeguard the interest of the rural rich, without ever caring to translate the pro-poor populist programmes of the Congress into practice. According to a district leader of the same party in Birbhum, the programme of land reforms was carried on as a form of gift to land hungry peasants. There was no spontaneous effort by Congress leaders to enhance agricultural wages or record the name of bargadars. Their effort was confined only to mobilization of support by various factions of the party against one another in the internecine factional squabbles which constituted a marked feature of the political culture of Congress in West Bengal. All these observations have been confirmed by the detailed exploration of the two blocks which we have studied.

Quite naturally, the discontented peasants and sections of the middle class people overcame all sorts of fear and hesitation and heralded a 'Ballot Biplab' by the voting the CPI(M) dominated Left Front into State power with an overwhelming
majority in the State Assembly, in 1977. With their previous experience in 1967-69 and the newly attained grand victory of 1977 and also prompted by a resolute political will, the Left Front Government tried to implement land reforms legislations by plugging some of the major loopholes contained in land legislations, passed by the Congress regime, earlier. The Left Front used administration from above and mobilized peasants from below to carry out its programme of providing as much relief as possible to the rural poor. The Panchayats, the rural self-governing institutions which were revived and revitalized through direct elections and with the use of party symbols for the first time in 1978, became the pivot of implementation of land reforms programme. In fact, the collective effort of these organization in several places has enabled the peasants to reap the harvest on the lands they cultivated.

Today, peasants are in a most favourable bargaining position in relation to land owning classes. Due to the various economic assistance through institutional credit, sponsored by Panchayats, so many rural assets and mandays were created by way of implementation of NREP, RLEGP and other rural development schemes. Through strikes, boycotts and other forms of militant struggles waged by the rural poor, agricultural wages have gone up. Due to successful peasant mobilization and use of administration with a definitive, pro-tenant bias, so many unscrupulous means adopted by jotedars to evade
ceiling provisions have been detected and rectified. A large number of bargadars have recorded their names and are enjoying a better share of produce than what they could secure under the previous Congress regime. Now, in the event of forcible occupation of excess land by the land hungry peasants, jotedars are scared to approach either the Court of law or the local land and order authority. Though a policy of compromise in share of produce and agricultural wages is pursued at the behest of the Panchayats or the local leaders of the leftist parties for tactical considerations, yet the position of poor peasants is far better now. Today, the administration is not called upon to protect and promote the interest of the jotedars. Panchayats are wielding considerable amount of influence over local police stations and keeping a strict vigil that they are not used by the jotedars, as in the past. Our study of the correlation of political forces centering around the new politics of land reforms in the two blocks confirms this.

But irregularities in vested land distribution, distribution of small pieces of land to satisfy so many land hungry peasants, corruption in panchayat bodies, partiality in the distribution of pattas, even amongst poor peasants, and above all, compromises with some big landowners by relenting the pressure on them for raising the share of produce to share croppers or increasing wages for agricultural labourers, hired on their land, with an eye to electoral dividends, albeit
manifest at local levels in rural politics, have vitiated the sincere attempts at restructuring agrarian relations in West Bengal. Scholars like Ratan Khasnabish explain such deformities as shameless compromises with the state structure. Atul Kohli observes that ideology of the CPI(M) has shifted from a revolutionary to a reformist orientation which was more attuned to a policy of redistributive reforms or as opined by Ashok Rudra this was 'One Step Forward, Two steps Backward'. Ajit Roy suggested that 'the CPI(M) and the left parties never mobilized the rural masses by appealing to their class identities, these parties have neither seriously advanced the class struggle in the countryside, nor, apparently do they mean to do so in the next round'.

One should not forget the constitutional limitations imposed upon the Left Front Government, preempting any attempt on its part to launch a full scale class war which would attract the presidential intervention under Article 356 of the Constitution of India. This is precisely what had happened during 1967-69. The limitations of the socio-economic system was further stressed by an academician and marxist Parliamentarian, highly placed within the CPI(M). In his words, 'the vested interest do manage to extract support from substantial proportion of poorer section among the rural poor in the name of caste, religion, traditional loyalty, local level patriotism and so on in their fight against reform measures. Had this not been the case, had the entire poor people been
opposed to them and clearly understood their class interest. 'This would have satisfied the necessary conditions for an immediate revolutionary transformation'. The same view was shared by a veteran peasant leader and Minister-in-charge of land reforms in the present Left Front Government who said, 'we were not under any delusion that we would be able to change the situation overnight, we were convinced that it would be a great service to the rural poor even if we could do something for them by strictly enforcing the existing law with the active cooperation of the Panchayati bodies'.

With the induction of the Left Front Government, the domination of the rural notables has been halted. Today, for poor people the panchayat has brought a new vision through economic reform and democratization of state institutions as an instrument of rural mobilization and rural development. New classes of bargadars, patta holders, agricultural labourers, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes are controlling villages, and within the realm of local level politics, replacing Bhadraloks or Baroloks in the power structure of rural areas. The Chotaloke had become lok. As cited by lieten, this 'empowerment' has emancipated rural poor people from the clutches of exploitation and oppression by barolok though many miles have still to go. Jotedars now realize that the police will listen only to Comrades. If they lodge any complaint against the chotaloks, they will be boycotted socially. Administration will pay no heed to their complaints. So, a balanced verdict in favour of the peasants.
by the administration, as noted by lieten, is confirmed by our study also. All these have changed the power balance in rural areas and definitely reduced the dapot (arrogance) of village jotedars, money lenders, and sections of the high-caste, upper class gentry.

With a small piece of land and with the technological support, poor peasants may earn additional income and agricultural wages have increased in real terms. Productivity has increased, improving the economic security and survival capacity of small and marginal peasants as Neil Webstar observed in his study of Burdwan. He notes a 'quasi unanimous opinion' to the effect that economic condition has improved and many of the poor families regard the improvement as significant. 17 This would contradict Westergaard's observation that the Left Front Government is indifferent to technological innovations and has thus failed to bring about any improvement in the productivity as a way of security to small and marginal peasants.18

The rising waves of emancipation were further asserted by an old agricultural labourer. He stated, 'previously we were in dark; now we can say whatever we like; what we say, jotedar will accept it. The dapot of the jotedars has diminished'. 19 A similar impression has been offered to lieten by the rural poor of a neighbouring block of Birbhum district (Mahammed Bazar), studied by him: 'Earlier one did not have the right
to talk openly and state the truth; if the Bhadraloks were talking, they had to shut up; now a days they go where they feel like going even to the police Thana if necessary, and they have a'say in any discussion. The dapot is now on the side of the people, they feel, and their right to exist as human beings has finally been recognised.\textsuperscript{20} The credit of the Left Front Government is that the soft spot of rural change through land reforms, through peasant mobilization from below has been touched but this process has got to be accompanied simultaneously by improvement in the industrial sector and cottage industry as an essential precondition to establish justice and equity in this system.

Since our study was confined to the first five years of left rule in West Bengal, extending upto 1982, we are not in a position to go into details of new tendencies as well as countervailing tendencies, generated by the politics of land reforms pursued by the left. By way of postscript a few tentative observations are in order.

After 1982 Assembly election, 'red' rhetorics of the Left Front of the past have turned into 'pink'. Leader and cadre gap is widening day by day. Corruption in Panchayat and administration is in the offing. A new generation of Marxist leadership has come up with little political training and the sense of commitment to the cause of revolution, but endowed with considerable amount of power as well as local resources
in their command. A high level administrative official stated that jotedars are taking shelter within some Marxist parties and hindering administration from implementing land reforms programmes.\textsuperscript{21} An ex-Pradhan of a grampanchayat and a school Head Master narrated some incidents accusing the Left Front local leaders of abject surrender to the vested interest.\textsuperscript{22} Quite a few Gram Panchayat leaders and members of one of the blocks, we have studied intensively, were seen forcing bargadars to withdraw their applications for recording their names under the operation barga programme.\textsuperscript{23} Corruption in administration is assuming ugly proportions, as candidly stated by the ADLR, Government of West Bengal.\textsuperscript{24} In a word, a trend of decaying party ideology and moral bankruptcy are clearly discernible, in some cases at least. The dream of the poor peasants, the struggle for their emancipation and their empowerment are being adversely affected. This trend is already in the offing in the two blocks which we have studied.\textsuperscript{25}

But the illiterate, ignorant, poor peasants have scored their success and nothing can undo it. The empowered, emancipated and conscious peasants will stand against anybody who would stand against them, whoever he may be and whatever party be belongs to. If the left leaders turn into 'Babus' like the Congress leaders, they will revolt against it. This trend is visible. They will pay to the babus back in their own coin. This conscious militant peasant ultimately will liberate millions from the yoke of exploitation, misery and oppression.
under the banner of the Left. No everlasting result will come without change in the socio-economic system as such as some scholars have rightly suggested. But ultimately, these conscious, empowered peasants will change the society. That day is not very far off. This is a qualitative change or 'community gain' that has taken place in West Bengal during the Left Front regime.
NOTES AND REFERENCES

G.K.Lieten, Continuity and Change in Rural West Bengal, SAGE, New Delhi, 1992, p.133.


4. Interview with Pranab Mukherjee, an eminent Congress leader hailing from the district of Birbhum and an important Cabinet Minister in the Union Government at present, dated 30.5.88, cited in Chapter IV.

5. Interview with Motahar Hossain, Ex-Home Minister of West Bengal, during Congress rule 1972-77, dated, 3.10.90, cited in Chapter IV.


9. G.K.Lieten, 'Continuity and Change in Rural West Bengal', op. cit., p.130.


15. Ibid.

16. Interview with jotedars and congress leaders cited in Chapter IV.


19. Interview with old sharecropper - Pashupati Das, dated, 17.7.91, cited in Chapter IV.


21. Interview with Secretary, Board of Revenue, dated, 15.7.93, cited in Chapter III.

22. Interview with Krishna Chandra Banerjee, dated, 19.5.91, cited in Chapter IV.

23. Local Gram Panchayat and Panchayat Samiti member and Pradhan nominated by CPI(M), in the name of village harmony, forced all sharecroppers of village Dhondanga under Labpur G.P.II to withdraw their applications who tried to record their names as bargadars during 1984-85. Some sharecroppers cultivating the lands of G.P. and Panchayat Samiti members were evicted from land and turned into day-labourers.
24. Interview with Additional Directorate of Land Records and Survey (ADLR), West Bengal, dated, 15.4.92, cited in Chapter IV.