17. CONCLUSION

Continuing the above study and research, I have come to the conclusion which are given below:

The evolution of agricultural system of Bengal has passed through many ups and downs. In Bengal the colonial agrarian system which brought out the implementation of Permanent Settlement Act (1793) came to an end with the enforcement of Estate Acquisition Act in 1953, Land Reform Act in 1955 and Land Ceiling Act in 1970 respectively. These laws abolished the Zamindari system, which was a feudal intermediary between the peasants and their colonial rulers. It was based on the manor system of England.

The Tebhaga movement in mid 1940s and the Naxalbari Movement in mid 1960s are two instance of agrarian insurgency which had deep impact on rural Bengal.

The constant influx of the refugees from East Bengal (Now Bangladesh) to West Bengal after independence, the subsequent civil war in Pakistan (1971) and increasing population of the state created food crisis. But the introduction of land reforms programmes, extension of irrigation, high yielding varieties, fertilizers, pesticides etc. have completely changed the agricultural system.

It is true that in the last 30 years the foodgrains production has increased tremendously in West Bengal but the claim of the Left Front leaders that West Bengal has attained self-sufficiency in foodgrains production is not supported by any Government documents. The draft of New Agricultural Policy presented by Left Front Government in April 2002 made no claim regarding the self-sufficiency in foodgrains production. On the contrary they have accepted the fact that in case of wheat, pulses and oil seeds etc. there exists a significant deficiency between the production and demand. In 2001 the foodgrains production was 148.46 lakh tones for 8.02 crores population in West Bengal but the actual foodgrains demand was 155.76 lakh tones.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foodgrains</th>
<th>Production</th>
<th>demand</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wheat</td>
<td>10.59</td>
<td>19.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulses</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>11.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oil-seeds</td>
<td>5.60</td>
<td>14.49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source : Economic Review-2001-02, Govt. of West Bengal
The Left Front leaders claim that the land reforms programmes is one of the reason for the increased in foodgrains production but the Government records shows that the land reforms programme in West Bengal has touched around only 15 per cent of the land; the rest 85 per cent land ownership remained outside the land reform measures.

It is a very much known fact that Left Front Government carried on propaganda of “success” in land reform during their regime in West Bengal. But the data shows that upto September 2001, the Left Front Government distributed 10.58 lakh hectare of land. Most of these lands (6.26 lakh hectares) were distributed before 1977, i.e., before the Left Front Ministry came to power. Moreover, out of these distributed lands majority were handed over during the period of peasant movement of late sixties. Therefore, the Left Front Government distributed only 4.32 lakh hectare of land during the last 30 years!(Source : Economy and Politics of West Bengal, Ajit Narayan Bose).

The West Bengal Government’s much advertised and ‘respected’ programme of vested land distribution accounts for 25.44 lakh of landless and poor peasants. The amount of land distributed is 0.41 acres per head (Source : Economic Survey 2001-02). This small plot of land is economically non-viable and of inferior quality in general. Still, the motive can be best understood through a Government Report. The report stated that “It is perfectly understandable that if we want to maintain the status-quo we should try to involve as many people as possible in it so that atleast a majority of the population acquires a stake in the status –quo or the system in question. Keeping this 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 be eager to acquire some property. However to call it socialism is a sad travesty of truth” (Source : West Bengal Board of Revenue, statistics cell, Land Reforms in West Bengal : Statistical Report VII (Calcutta : 82).

Some experts opine that the reason of the increase in production in Bengal is due to Green Revolution. To combat the nation wide food crisis in 1966-67 the Central Government was forced to import wheat from America along with high yielding varieties, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides etc. as a part of the PL-480 (hidden?) agreement. This type of modern technology had reached to West Bengal at the end of 1970s. In 1977-78 only 26 per cent of the total cultivation area of Bengal used high
yielding technology and in 1998-99 it was extended to 90 per cent of the total area. 50 per cent of the land in state came under the irrigation programme, out of it almost 2/3rd consisted of small irrigation system till today. The submersible tube wells have exceeded from 21 thousand to over 1 lakh within 1981-2001.

The Agrarian economy in West Bengal continues to be a small peasant economy, the total cultivation land of West Bengal is 54.72 lakh hectares (Source : Economic Review, 1999-2000), here the 71.72 per cent cultivable land is in the hands of consists 93.25 per cent small and marginal peasants. It is also be keep in mind that 130 lakh agricultural workers in the state out of them 74 lakh agricultural workers are completely landless. Most of them hardly managed the jobs for only 100-130 days a year. The “food for work” programme under which 100 days work is to be provided by the panchayats, is very much absent in many areas. Wherever the scheme is being implemented, it is marred by partisan sectarianism, nepotism and corruption.

The minimum wage fixed by the State Government for the agrarian labourers is Rs.62.10, with some regional variations. But to get it in reality remains a dream for agrarian labourers everywhere. Generally they get Rs.35 to Rs.50 plus 1 kg. of rice, and in some places the wages are as low as the above mentioned amount.

According to the National Sample Survey in 2001, While 58.3% rural poor families, comprising mainly the families of agricultural workers or sharecroppers, owned only 6% of the land in India. In West Bengal the poor peasants’ families comprising 55.4% owned only 3.9% land. In “Marxist”-ruled West Bengal in 2001, 39.2% agricultural families had no land. The same survey states that the all India figure of the landless peasants was 35.1% in that year (Source : Ajit Narayan Bose, Paschimbanglar Arthaniti o Rajniti).

The peasants in West Bengal face big problems of preservation and distribution of foodgrains. In the state there are only 342 cold storages. It is impossible to preserve a large part foodgrains, as a result a percentage of production is spoilt. Ramchandra Nayak, assistant secretary, West Bengal Cold Storage Association, said potato farmers were queuing up before cold-storage units. “But we have no space left” (The Telegraph-23/3/08). A bumper crop in the districts of Hooghly and Burdwan had forced many
cultivators into distress sale of their potatoes at about a third the cost of growing price. As a result, some potato growers killed themselves for being debt-ridden.

A new elite class has emerged in the rural Bengal. Mainly they control the rural economy and rural market with the help of middlemen. They are money lenders (gramin mahajan) in rural areas, by their terms and conditions, usually; the peasants are forced to sell their crops at a lower price than the market price which known as “distress sale” and peasants are being forced into “debt trap”.

During the new economic policy which is the part of globalization was started in India in 1990. Its adverse affects also reached on agrarian sector in Bengal. In 1970s and 1980s the food grains production was increased average on 0.80 per cent and 5.84 per cent but in 1990s this was decreased to mere average on 2.39 per cent. During this period the cost of production has increased due to increase of harvesting items. This period 1990-97, the cost of irrigation has increased to 174.72 per cent, the fertilizers has increased to 78.36 per cent, the insecticides to 78.1 per cent and other harvesting prices at a same rate. During the past two decades the consumption of chemical fertilizer has increased from 35 kg./hectare to 129 kg./hectare. Thus the natural fertility and productivity of land has decreased extensively and it has also affected on bio-diversity and ecological balance. Depletion of ground water and for various reasons, the 4 crores rural people in 12 districts are now affected by arsenic poisoning.

The present agricultural scenario in West Bengal is not bright; as a result a large number of peasants are opting to other occupations for their livelihoods. A recent study made by the West Bengal Government itself regarding the legitimate right of the bargadars is being exploited by the landlords. This study reveals that “15% of the beneficiaries of ‘Operation Barga’ mere dispossessed of their land in last two decades. Moreover, though 75 : 25 is the norms fixed by the Act, nearly 19% of sharecroppers deliver 50% share to the landlords while another 13% of them deliver 40% of share” (Source : Institute of Panchayats and Rural Development, kalyani, Government of West Bengal, 2003).

The cultivable land is also being used for non-agricultural purposes. The Left Front Government has amended the Land Ceiling Act. Now one can easily acquire more agricultural land for use for other purposes. According to Govt. records last, in the 5
years 1.20 lakh acres of agricultural land have been used for non-agricultural purposes. In near future more and more fertile land would be acquired for non-agricultural purposes, industrialization etc. declared by the Government. At this very moment the Left Front Government is ready for the implementation of Mckinsey Report where it has suggested that we undertake contract farming which transforms the present traditional crops to commercial crops. As a result the marginal, poor and agricultural labourers will be affected as a greater extend because they are the major portions in rural Bengal and the rural economy will become fragile.

According to the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) report, 2004-05, there are more than 12 lakh families in West Bengal who do not get adequate food during various months in a year. Among the rural population particularly the toiler peasants’ including agricultural labours are in deep crisis. 106 families out of 1000 families remain starved or semi starved in this Left rule rural Bengal. The report also stated that especially from the month of November to March, the food crisis becomes acute in rural Bengal. The data given in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>No. of families spent in starved condition</th>
<th>No. of families in Semi starved condition throughout year</th>
<th>Per head foodgrain production per year (ton)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andhra Pradesh</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bihar</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orissa</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Bengal</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source : National Sample Survey Organisation, 2004-05)

In the 1980s in West Bengal the position of Agriculture and Economic condition of the farmers, especially the small and marginal peasants had improved due to Land Reform Programme. But in 1990s, with the introduction of New Economic Policy which is the part of Globalisation, the socio-economic conditions of these small and marginal peasants including agricultural labourers had deteriorated considerably and its impact can be seen on the overall condition of the rural Bengal.

According to my survey in the aforesaid two villages, where I have noticed and collected the data where the two village’s features are likely same as the other parts of rural Bengal.
In the Economic Structure of Backward Agriculture, Prof. Amit Bhaduri analyses the chief characteristics of backward or pre-capitalist structure. Backward agriculture leaves most peasant households perpetually in debt, especially for fulfilling consumption needs. Caught in the meshes of debt to the moneylender, who is often also the local merchant, the bulk of the peasant masses, who are lower middle and poor peasants, are forced into exchange relations which are wholly unequal. Immediately after the harvest, the peasant is forced to make ‘distress sale’ of a large portion of his output. Later, he is again forced to take consumption loans either in foodgrains or in cash at a usurious rate of interest. As Bhaduri writes, “the consequences of such accumulating debt arising from persistent deficit in cash- or kind-account of a small peasant” are far from “confined only to the market for agricultural produce…but tend to affect their involuntary positions in all other markets. These result in forcible transactions of labour, land and other means of livelihood of small peasants used as collaterals against loans”. The surplus is extracted through the mechanism of debt not only in the market for foodgrains but also in all other markets. The poor peasant cannot offer securities as collaterals to banks or other financial institutions to obtain loans at moderate interest. It is because of the personal power over the borrower that the local money lender accepts as collaterals “standing crops, promise to render future labour services, already encumbered land, revision of tenurial arrangements in case of default”, etc., which are not marketable as collaterals elsewhere. The moneylender invariably undervalues them. Gradually, the peasant-debtor is expropriated from the land he has owned. In the West, the process of primitive accumulation, that is, expropriation of the peasant from his ties to the land and from all feudal obligations, created conditions for his absorption as a wage-labourer in industry. In an industrially backward, underdeveloped country like India, the peasant, expropriated from his land, has no such alternative prospect, cannot escape from many of his feudal obligations and sinks deeper into the abyss of poverty and destitution, and the debt bondage grows heavier.

I conclude with some policy recommendations for the West Bengal Government. These recommendations have emerged out of this author’s own field and archival research done over the period of last five years.
(1) To protect the future of the peasants’ and rural economy in West Bengal, it is essential for the Left Front Government to carry out the *Land Reform Programmes* at a greater extent.

(2) To secure the legal rights of the Bargadars as because there are being evicted from the land.

(3) Preparatory studies of ground-level realities, particularly the reasons for lack of land reform implementation and methods by which landowners evade land reform legislation. The government then used these assessments to improve the land reform implementation methods.

(4) Conducting public camps or meetings in the villages to explain the land reform objectives, process, and benefits. The meetings should be conducted at a time and in a manner to facilitate maximum participation by bargadars, landless and near-landless farmers.

(5) Meaningful and extensive inclusion of peasant organizations, village panchayats, and land reform beneficiaries in the implementation process. Nearly all successful land reform examples have involved beneficiaries and local, grass-roots bodies in program administration.

(6) To arrange cheap and adequate credits on demand to small and marginal farmers; 50% or more of cooperative credit to Dalit and OBC small and marginal farmers;

(7) Abolition of usurious non-institutional credit by moneylenders and merchants.

(8) Adequate and concessional/free power supply, irrigation facilities to small and marginal farmers.

(9) Distribution of free seeds, fertiliser and pesticides to small and marginal farmers and subsidized power-tillers.

(10) Government support to farmers against distress sale.

(11) Crop insurance to all crops without premium for all small and marginal farmers.

(12) Setting up of a competent authority for the registration of all agricultural labourers.

(13) Trade union rights for agricultural labourers.

(14) Security of employment and employment guarantee schemes with at least 100 days of assured employment.
(15) Strict implementation of minimum wage formula and more effective implementation machinery.
(16) Equal wages for men and women agricultural labourers.
(17) Redistribution of homestead land to the landless agricultural labourers.
(18) To take legal action against the corrupt panchayat members.
(19) To develop primary education system in rural Bengal effectively.
(20) To develop the rural medical facilities immediately.
(21) Not to implement ‘Mackinsey Report’ at all.
(22) The West Bengal Government should make a clear-cut ban on the take-over of fertile agricultural land for industries.
(23) To take initiative to set up agro-based industries on a large scale.
(24) If land acquisition becomes inevitable after searching the entire possible alternative, then a pre-acquisition socio-economic impact assessment (SEIA) survey should be made and priorities should be fixed to rehabilitate the worst affected and marginalized groups of the society through the Panchayat and Civil Society/Human Rights Organisations.
(25) Emphasis on allocating vested land in smaller plots in order to increase beneficiary pool, especially in more recent years. In the later phases of the land reform, the administrators began allocating the vested land in smaller parcels. Given the fact that large numbers of landless households still remain in the countryside and the evidence indicating the benefits of owning even a very small parcel of land, this implementation policy made good sense. Consider expanding the homestead allocation program, both in terms of number of recipients and size of homestead plots. Research in other countries and in India itself indicates the substantial economic and social benefits that accrue to landless laborer households when they receive homestead-cum-garden plots. The West Bengal government might consider allocating much or all of the remaining undistributed vested land to landless households for homestead-cum-garden plots of approximately 0.1 acre.

I think that the conditions of the poor, marginalized peasants and agricultural labourers will be considerably improved. But in many cases, we find that Government has excellent policies on paper which are either not implemented or implemented improperly due to lack of political and administrative will. What is urgently necessary is
to tone up the rural administration and make it an effective delivery mechanism. Chief Minister of West Bengal, Shri Budhadeb Bhattacharya’s slogan ‘do it now’ should not merely remain a slogan.

‘Do it now’ policy should be followed by all administrative departments. The Government should also urgently tackle the problem of corruption, favouritism, nepotism and the disbursement of rewards and punishments to people on political grounds. Only then, can the idea of progressive social change be translated from a mere idea or pious wish into a social fact.