1. INTRODUCTION

Human civilization began with the invention of agriculture. Agriculture enabled people to settle in one place. Surplus food enabled some people to pursue non-agricultural pursuits. Despite rapid industrialization and urbanization, India still lives in its villages. Nearly 80 per cent of its population is rural. While 45 per cent of the world’s population is engaged in agriculture, in case of India, in percentage terms, 70 per cent of the population still depends on agriculture. The 2001 census showed that 15 crore families in India are directly dependent on agriculture.

Agriculture is a key variable in economic development. It provides increased food supplies to the growing population, helps, expands the secondary sectors of the economy, increases rural incomes and improves the overall quality of life of the rural people. The increase in per capita incomes in villages increases the purchasing power of the masses. It also increases literacy and in the process stimulates industrialization. The release of surplus labour from agriculture can also develop industry.
Agrarian relations in West Bengal have been characterized by exploitations of peasants by the zamindars and the colonial state. In 1953, the Government of Independent India abolished the zamindari system which was responsible for economic degradation of peasants. But the Government stopped short of completing the process of land reform. This is one of the reasons why peasants became discontented. The Naxalbari movement which originated in the sixties grew out of the discontent of the peasantry. Though the Naxalite rebellion was put down in the seventies by the State, it has arisen phoenix like and now covers large parts of West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Chattishgarh. Obviously, something has gone wrong with agrarian policies of the Governments in these States. My main objective is to study the changing agrarian system and its impact on rural Bengal during the Left Front regime in West Bengal which has been in power for 29 years.

Before I proceed further, I would like to present a historical perspective on land relations in West Bengal.