3. REVIEW OF HISTORICAL LITERATURE

Land Reform, especially tenancy reforms under the Left Front regime in West Bengal has evoked considerable interest amongst the scholars in the country and abroad because the Left Front Govt. has initiated an unconventional measure known as Operation Barga (O.B). There has grown up a good crop of literature on the different facets of land reforms. The major substantive areas covered in this study include:
(a) the historical roots and modus operandi of land reforms especially Operation Barga;
(b) the linkage between productivity and land reforms on traditional sources of finance;
(c) the inherent limitations of a “reformist” measure like Operation Barga;
(d) the political economy of land reforms; and
(f) the effect of land reform and rural development in West Bengal.

In the area of the historical roots and modus operandi of land reforms especially Operation Barga, a number of Research papers/articles have been published (Ghosh, R, 1984; Ghosh, T.K. 1986; Bandopadhyay, N., 1981; Ghatak, M; and Chattopadhyaya, B; 1986; Guha Roy, J; 1995; Sarkar, B. 1995; Chowdhury, B.K. 1993; Dutta, P.K; 1988 among others). T.K. Ghosh (1986) in his Book entitled Operation barga & Land Reforms : An Indian experiment has presented an overview of the different facts of operation barga, viz; existing laws, programmes design, implementation machinery, assessment of the programme; structural changes in the rural sector, etc. P.K. Datta (1988) in his notable work on Land Reform Administration in West Bengal has attempted to find out to what extent changes, if any, have taken place in Land Reform bureaucratic organization in West Bengal and also examined the role played by politics in land reforms implementation. The study demonstrates that the concept of organisation needs to be broadened. One has to look for changes and/or innovations not so much in the traditional bureaucratic organizations as in the other organisations such as Panchayat Raj Institution (PRI), Peasant Organisations and the success of unconventional land reforms programmes depends largely upon the role played by these parasite and non-bureaucratic organizations. N. Bandyopadhyaya (1981) in his article captioned Operation Barga and land Reforms Perspective in West Bengal has evaluated the progress of land reforms
connected with ascendance of left wing political forces in the State culminating in a juridically comprehensive enactment. The main observations made by the author are as follows: (i) adverse land-man ratio, (ii) Sharp decrease in the pace of industrialization, and (iii) lack of proper linkage between industry & agriculture. Jaytilak Guha Roy (1995) in his article entitled *Role of Panchayats in Land Reforms: The West Bengal experiment* reviewed the role played by panchayats in West Bengal long before enacted of the constitution (73rd amendment) Act, 1992. For effective implementation & success of the land reform programmes, political will is the first and foremost prerequisite. In the paper entitled *Bargadars in West Bengal and Operation Barga*, Bikaram Sarkar (1995) states that so much was done for the raiyats and under raiyats, the sharecroppers (Bargadars) were left outside the pale of active consideration despite the agitation in different parts of the state & therefore, large-scale participation of the rural masses in improving their lot and in effecting any meaningful development is suggested. M. Ghatak and B. Chattopadhyaya (1986) in their paper entitled *Sharecroppers of West Bengal: A New Deal?* have discussed some of the problem relating to share-croppers in West Bengal since thirties and the subsequent legislative measures to protect their interests. They also emphasized that merely a legally cognizable right cannot take the sharecroppers very far, and cannot even prevent their expropriation by the sheer operation of market forces, but if, with rights recorded, they can be brought under the purview of a broad-based co-operative movement, without being dependent on the consent of their land owners.

In the area of the linkage between productivity and land reform on traditional sources of finance a few studies were done by the *Socio-Economic Research Institute, Govt. of West Bengal* (1981) in the village Labhpur in Birbhum district in 1978-79 at the instance of ICSSR. The enquiry was conducted among a sample of 48 cultivators or Raiyats – big, medium and small according to the size of holdings. The second and third phase enquiry was conducted among 30 share-croppers and 32 agricultural labourers households. It was revealed that share-cropping was still one of the principal forms of tenurial relation between Raiyats and Tillers. A majority of Raiyats have no connection with the physical process of production. B. Chattopadhyaya, etc. all in their study entitled *Operation Barga in West Bengal: A study dealt with the impact of Operation*
Barga, on production increase, the role of the panchayats and peasants organizations and the reactions of the landowners and beneficiaries in 56 mouzas in 15 districts of West Bengal.

In the third area, i.e. the inherent limitations of a ‘reformist’ measure like Operation Barga, existing literature indicates how the measures to reform land relation are creating a situation which, instead of improving the proprietary status of the vast bulk of the lower layers of cultivating tenants, are on the contrary creating a very dangerous trend, viz., that of enabling the old land owing classes to still retain their basic hold over land with only a small section of the upper tenants who are capable to purchasing the land benefiting by these reforms. It further creates a situation where in the bulk of the lower tenants being uprooted as tenants and having lost tenancy protection are being transformed into land-tenants and having lost tenancy protection are being transformed into landless, unprotected, sharecroppers leading sometimes to the creation of tenancy by backdoor, Kalyan Dutta (1981) in his paper entitled Operation Barga Gains & Constraints has stated that in the W.B, the agrarian policies of the Left Front Government has enabled to poorer sections of the rural population to become more conscious of the rights but it is misdirected. It is still not clear if these policies are intended to bring about a small peasant proprietary economy/or whether these aim at a mixed economy where the agricultural labourers and poor artisans will have communal ownership of land, with the govt. extending support to small producers co-operatives. Such lack of clarity of aims is perhaps due to the fact that the leading partner of the Left Front govt. has under estimated the degree of penetration of usury and merchant capital in rural economy and overestimate feudal exploitation. Ratan Khasnobis (1981) in his paper on Operation Barga limits to social democratic reformism has observed that the experience of the Left Front Govt. in the matter of tenancy reforms lays bare the limitations of reformist measures adopted by the Left Front Government sought only a slight rearrangement of property relations in the rural areas, within the limitations imposed by bourgeois property rights, they have faced formidable obstacles. At the initial stage, Operation Barga was marked with spectacular success. But the overall success has not satisfactory. Out of the estimated 2 million bargadars the land records dept. could register the name of about one million bargadars only. The reason behind this is they feared to record their rights.
In the fourth area e.g. the political economy and land reforms, a number of articles have been published. Among them mention may be made of Buddhadev Bose. *In agrarian programme of Left Front Government in West Bengal*, Buddhadev Bose (1981) have demonstrated how political will of a ruling party, even with the limited powers of a state govt. & in the teeth of formidable opposition and sabotage from all sides, can achieve results. Due credit must be given to Asim Mukhopadhyaya and Asoke Rudra for their notable works in this area. Asim Mukhopadhyaya (1979) in his work *Operation Barga* has explored that instead of bringing about any definite change in the economic condition of the downtrodden. Operation Barga has become the hot-bed of violent factional politics and has drawn thousands of peasants in to the whirlpool of such politics. The author observes : (i) a plot already under cultivation of a genuine record holder, is often registered in the name of one, two or more person. This sort of multiple recording is very common in the Bhangar area in 24 pgs. (s); (ii) in the irrigated zones, infighting among poor peasants is over a different issue. Landlords in these areas generally grow one additional crop and employ different share-croppers for the two crops. This makes conferring of share-cropping right difficult because both the share-croppers have legitimate claims and under the provisions of operation Barga both are to be registered. As for example, in parts of Burdwan, Birbhum, Hooghly which have a canal network of irrigation, such conflicts have already led to a number of clashes which have often taken a political colours; (iii) of the 46 lakh operational holding in West Bengal; 19 lakh belong to small peasants. However, in order to get rid of fake share-croppers many small peasants have started selling their lands. In an another paper on *one step forward, two step backward*, Asok Rudra (1981) observed that if a political party aims at majority support among the agricultural population, it cannot but in the ultimate analysis betray the most exploited and the most oppressed sections of the rural masses.

The main observations of the author are as follows :

(i) as long as there is private property with unequal distribution, social power would gravitate to the handful of those was posses the bulk of social wealth.

(ii) supporters of Left Front seem to be suffering from an optical issusion, situations are being judged by them not in terms of class but in term of party affiliations.
(iii) sweeping victory of people declaring affiliation to the left parties is being interpreted as a sweeping victory of the exploited classes.

(iv) tenants belong to one party are being evicted to give place to tenants belonging to another party. Landless labourers belonging to different parties are fighting each other for little shares of the little land available for a distribution among them. Evidently there is hardly any detailed study on the land reforms structured, processes and the behaviour of the land reform bureaucracy in the state. Nor there is any study on politics of land reform in state. Rudra’s study is the first full blown empirical study in the 5 districts in West Bengal which will examine the scope of integrating the land reform beneficiaries with other rural development programmes.

In the last areas of effect of land reforms & rural development in West Bengal, a series of research papers and articles have been published. Some of them have been discussed here:

**Sugata Bose (1993)** in his paper ‘The development of agriculture in Bengal and the evidence for a turnaround’ shows mainly the post independence agricultural system in Bengal. Between 1920 and 1980 the regional trends converged: stagnation in agricultural production co-existed with rapidly increasing population. In particular there was slow growth in the yields of *aman* paddy, which accounted for about half the gross cropped area in both East and West Bengal.

**G.K. Lieten (1993)** in his paper *Development, Devolution and Democracy: Village Discourse in West Bengal* where the author presents his finding in a straightforward manner. Some of the major points of criticism against Left-led panchayats are identified in the introductory survey of existing literature. These are then scrutinized in the subsequent chapters in the light of the author’s empirical findings as well as supplementary data and observations collected from sundry sources. In the process many allegations are refuted while most others are presented as objectively inevitable or even justifiable under present circumstances.

**James K Boyce (1987)** in his article *agrarian impasse in Bengal* has emphases the potentiality of irrigation in West Bengal. He argues that the growth of agriculture in West Bengal during the left front period is due to spread of irrigation facilities in rural Bengal.
Sonar Bangla? Agricultural growth and agrarian change in West Bengal & Bangladesh edited by Ben Rogaly, Barbara Hariss-White and Sugata Bose (1999)

where this Book is divided into three parts dealing respectively with agricultural growth, poverty and well-being policies and practices; and changing agrarian structures. Among the issues discussed are:

1. The extent to which the West Bengal government’s agrarian reform were responsible for rapid agricultural growth.
2. The outcomes of this growth for poverty and well-being in the State.
3. The liberalization of agricultural inputs markets and growth in West Bengal.
4. The impact of the recent agricultural growth on structures of land and water ownership; on caste-based ideologies; on markets for produce; and on migrant wage-workers.

Ben Rogaly’s paper (ibid) ‘Dangerous Liaisons? Seasonal migration and agrarian change in West Bengal’ draws on reports from bus drivers & from village level ‘Integrated Child Development Scheme’ workers, suggesting that migration for agricultural work involves hundreds of thousands of men and women (as well as some children) moving south and east into the intensive rice cultivation areas of the central southern districts. Reports of migration for agricultural work in these areas stretch back at least 100 years; the scanty data currently available indicate that it increased rapidly with the recent fast growth in production of rice (the transplanting and harvesting of which remain highly labour intensive).

Rogaly’s paper recognises seasonal migration (and the contractual arrangements involved) as part of the agrarian structure. Its central problematic is how seasonal migration, boosted by the growth in demand for hired workers associated with increased production, in turn brings about wider changes in agrarian structures.
Ajit Narayan Basu (2002) in his book Paschim Banger Arthaniti O Rajniti showed the features of present condition of peasant community especially the agricultural workers or more especially on land less agricultural labourers in West Bengal. He argued that in Left Front period the number of landless agricultural workers has been increased vigorously.

From these studies, we may conclude that in the 1980s the position of agriculture and economic condition of the farmers, especially the small and marginal peasants in West Bengal with some exception had improved due to Land Reform Programme. But in 1990s, with the introduction of New Economic Policy, the socio-economic condition of these small and marginal peasants had deterioted considerably and its impact can be seen on the overall conditions of the rural Bengal.