

**CLASS, POLITICS AND PARTICIPATORY RURAL  
TRANSFORMATION IN WEST BENGAL**

*SUDIPTA BHATTACHARYYA*

**READER IN ECONOMICS  
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICS  
VISVA-BHARATI UNIVERSITY. SANTINIKETAN 731 235  
WEST BENGAL. INDIA**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Based on primary field survey and secondary sources of information, this study analyses the West Bengal experience of participatory rural transformation as a direct fall out of the changing class structure of the rural society and the rise in class-consciousness among the rural poor. This study strongly refutes the neo-liberal and neo-populist idea of the social capital and the civil society as a source of 'people's participation'. The myth of the participation of the people is imagined, as if the 'people' is an undifferentiated, homogenous and rather a de-politicised community. In our view the 'people's participation' is a meaningless concept, since the 'people' as a category includes different classes with conflicting interests. There was a populist theoretical tradition that propagated the idea of an undifferentiated rural community undermining the highly differentiated class character. This tradition includes, first of all, Chayanov-Sen idea of the peasant economy based on family labour farm vis-à-vis the capitalist farm (Chayanov 1966, Sen 1966). Lipton (1977) and Georgescu-Roegen (1960) also extended the idea of the homogenous peasantry. Secondly, the same tradition also includes the Subaltern theorists' idea of the 'subaltern' as a nearly homogenous community against the 'elite' (Guha 1988). Last but not the least, we can mention about the neo-classical theorists' flat generalisation of the traditional economy against the modern one or the simple division between the principal and the agent in a utility maximising model (Stiglitz 1987). The neo-liberal idea that the participation of a depoliticised and homogenous group of 'people' in an atmosphere of inactive / apathetic state is not very far from the above ideas in favour of a monolithic rural society. The convergence of the two apparently contradictory ideas is observed, where the neo-liberal (World Bank) concept of social capital almost synchronises with the 'radical' post-Marxist formulation of civil society (Putnam 1993, Fine 2001).

West Bengal's agrarian reform may be described, first of all, as an attempt to ensure an effective right to the tenants in the form of 'operation barga' (recordation of the name of tenants on spot). Secondly, it involves an effective acquisition of the ceiling surplus land and distribution of the same among the rural poor. Thirdly, it is a process of implementation of the minimum legislative wage rate for the landless labourers. All these measures had been

implemented in the framework of a grass root level local self-administration, ie *Panchayat Raj*. The process of participatory rural development in West Bengal started in late seventies, long before the neo-liberal and neo-populist put a special emphasis on participation. Since the introduction of the *Panchayat Raj Institution* (PRI) the bureaucratic Block Level Administration was subordinated to the elected *Panchayat*. Since 1978 there has been regular elections at five years interval. The *Panchayat* system has three levels - *Zilla Parishad* at the district level, *Panchayat Samiti* at the block level and *Gram Panchayat* at the grass root level covering on an average 10 villages. As an institution the *Panchayat Raj* is the doorway of state intervention. The *Panchayat Raj* was the key factor in breaking the 'agrarian impasse' in West Bengal and as a result rural poverty declined significantly (Sen & Sengupta, 1995, Mukherjee & Mukhopadhyay 1995, Sen 1996). The 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment of the constitution empowered the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) categories to represent in *Panchayat* according to their respective shares in the population. Also the same constitutional amendment made provision of reservation of 30 per cent of the total *Panchayat* seats for female candidates. About half of the rural development budget and the amount allocated to various poverty alleviation schemes of the state are spent through the *Panchayats* at various levels. The *Panchayats* not only organise villagers for infrastructural developments, but also deal with most of the village level disputes, which includes the disputes relating to wage rate and crop share. Constitutionally the *Panchayat* has no judicial power, but people find it more convenient to settle their disputes through the *Panchayat*. In 1994 two additional tiers had been introduced namely *Gram Sabha* and *Gram Sansad* respectively. All the electors of a *Gram Panchayat* and *Panchayat Samity* are members of the *Gram Sansad* and *Gram Sabha* respectively. It is mandatory that one tenth members should present the meeting as quorum. It is also mandatory that at least two meetings of these two bodies must be held in a year. The village level plan that includes prioritisation of schemes and the identification of beneficiaries are to be initiated at the level of the *Gram Sansad*. The *gram sabha* accommodates all plan proposed by all *gram sansad* and prepares a block level annual plan.

In this paper, we put forward three hypotheses to test. First, 'peasant economy' of West Bengal is a highly (class) differentiated, and far from the idea of a monolithic homogenous community, advocated by the populist writers. Secondly, for the viable social transformation the development has to be participatory. This participation must be based on conscious and organised class action instead of de-politicised network norms advocated by the Social Capital theorists. Thirdly, the limits to such transformation come from the attempt to form a politically 'stable' rural society with an assured electoral mandate undermining the class struggle.

## **2. DIFFERENT CONCEPTS OF CLASS**

The concept of class and the question of class struggle in the context of our analysis is indeed a complicated subject to address. There are three issues here: the necessary and sufficient condition for defining class-in-itself, the question of class for itself and the question of class struggle. First, the criterion of labour use defines class-in-itself and not class-for-itself. The participation or non-participation in manual labour and the relative dependence on rent and hired labour constitute the necessary condition for characterization of classes and not the sufficient condition even for class-in-itself, viz. class defined on objective conditions regarding the position of the households in the system of production relation. For example the exclusive dependence on hired labour is not a sufficient characterization of 'capitalist' production. In addition to labour hiring, which is the necessary condition, the condition of accumulation and productive investment must be satisfied. The concept of classes is thus an analytical concept and not an empiricist one.

Secondly the concept of class-for-itself is different from class-in-itself. The members of a class (defined even using sufficient conditions) will not necessarily be conscious of themselves as belonging to a class with a common interest, i.e. be a class-for-itself. The question of consciousness is itself the outcome of class-struggle. It might be mentioned that in a situation like West Bengal where the pre-capitalist ties have been loosened significantly but capitalist development is not observed in its full scale, the

question of class-for-itself remains indeterminate. Lukacs (1993) pointed out in the 'History and Class Consciousness' that 'for pre-capitalist epochs and for the behaviour of many strata within capitalism whose economic roots lie in pre capitalism, class consciousness is unable to achieve complete clarity and to influence the course of history consciously.' (p.55).

### **3. CLASS-IN-ITSELF AND THE PATTERN OF DIFFERENTIATION OF THE PEASANTRY**

This analysis is based on a field survey conducted in the year 1993-94 in two parts of Bankura district among 210 sample households. Of which 110 households belong to the advanced and remaining 100 households to the backward block<sup>1</sup>. The straightforward generalization of acreage grouping as the proxy for economic status within the peasantry is to some extent confusing. Such a simplistic generalization is propagated in the methodology adopted by the organizations of the Government of India like Agricultural Census of India and National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO)<sup>2</sup>. Such a proxy would be a miserable failure in an economy like West Bengal where due to a limited land reform people are not allowed to hold land in excess of the ceiling limit. Particularly NSSO 48th round data revealed a liquidation of the size group 10 hectares and above in the year 1991. The acreage group criterion obscures the simple fact that the West Bengal rural economy has diversified a lot during the recent period and class differentiation is still going on based on tiny land but increasing command in the hands of higher classes over asset, irrigation, input, output and product marketed.

We are, therefore, in need for a second criterion that will reflect the economic strength of the household and indicate economic classes of the households in proper. We classify our total sample households on the basis of Patnaik's (1987) labour-exploitation criterion (E-criterion) side by side with the usual acreage criterion. The labour-exploitation index of Patnaik (1987) attempts to give an empirical approximation to the analytical concept of the class status of the household. The class-status of a household is determined by the fact that whether the household employs wage labour from outside or whether the household sells its

labour power to others or whether the household is a self-employed one i.e. neither employs nor sells the labour power. In our study we use the following form of Patnaik's E-criterion in order to classify the households.

$$E = X/Y = \{(Hi-Ho) + (Lo-Li)\}/F$$

where Hi = Labour-days hired on the operational holding of the household

Ho = Family labour days hired out to others

Li = Labour days worked on leased in land (whether by family or hired labour)

Lo = Labour days similarly worked on land leased out by the household

F = Labour days worked by household workers on the operational holding.

Classes within the cultivating peasantry are identified by looking at the degree of working for others or of employing others' labour, relative to self-employment. For this purpose certain limits are set upon the values of the E-ratio, which are given in the Appendix.

It is observed from the cross-classification of sample households according to two criteria that, first of all, while the two criteria are associated, as we would expect, they are not identical<sup>3</sup> since we get positive non-diagonal elements, especially above the diagonal, not so much below. The number of landless households is relatively small (This category is identical in both the classifications). Only 10 households or 4.76 per cent of the sample was found to be landless in the proper sense of the term, owning neither any land, nor operating any land. This in itself seems to reflect the small incidence of immiserization and landlessness in the sample villages. Secondly, the modal farm size is below 2.5 acres, with 138 out of 210 households, or 65.72 per cent of the sample falling in this group. This high concentration of farms in the smallest farm size group, reflects the fact that a large number of landless households had moved up to the 0.01 to 2.5 acreage group by receiving the vested ceiling-surplus land during the Left Front period after 1977. The majority of the households in this acreage group are poor peasants, since we find that 71 out of the 138 or a little more than half fall in this category. However a sizeable minority, 40 households or nearly 29 per cent are small or middle peasants, who are mainly self-employed and do not need to sell their labour power to any great extent to the wealthy households; in fact the middle peasants are by definition small net employer of others. Interestingly we find as many as 27 households, or

20 per cent of the total in this size-group (0.01-2.5 acre), fall in the rich peasants and landlord category (mainly or wholly using non-family labour) despite the relatively small size of their farms. They make up nearly 44 per cent of all rich peasants and landlords.

The extent of the differentiated structures as found from our sample households is presented in Table 1 and 2. The work participation rate is a key concept to understand the household structure and the problem of the differentiation of the peasantry. It is the ratio of worker to member in a family. It is just over 50 per cent in the backward region compared to only one-third in the advanced region, the overall average being 41.58 per cent. This is perhaps to be expected as the families in the backward region are likely to have a lower income per worker, and more members in the family must work to obtain a minimum family income. In short participation rates will be inversely related to economic well being.

This tends to be broadly confirmed when we look at the variation by class and size, of the work participation rate, is higher than average for the poorer classes and declines to lower than average as the economic position improves. As the economic position of the household improves it becomes possible for even adult members of working age to withdraw from work, and enjoy leisure, which is reflected in lower participation rates. By farm size too we find higher than average participation rate in the holdings below 5 acres and lower than average rates on the holdings above 5 acres.

In Tables 1 to 2 we have also summarized the on-farm and off-farm employment, and outside labour hired in on wages. It is observed that landlords hire in all labour they use per farm not working themselves for a single day in the fields. However, the rich peasants rely on hiring in for 77 per cent of their labour input and the remaining 23 per cent being contributed by family workers. The middle peasants hire in 30.25 per cent, contributing 69.75 per cent by way of family workers' labour. The small peasants and poor peasants hire in only negligible proportions 5.27 per cent and 4.66 per cent respectively of their total labour input, contributing family labour to the extent of 94.73 per cent and 95.34 per cent respectively. The poor peasants hire out around 84 per cent of the total labour days they work and only 16 per cent work on own farm. These households are, therefore, better thought of as agricultural labour households with some land. As regards the small peasants, they rely on hiring out to

the extent of 21.77 per cent of total days worked, while middle peasants have a very small extent of hiring out of only 1.4 per cent of the days worked. The rich peasants can also in principle have some hiring out (often this is complementary to hiring of equipment). But in this particular sample there is zero hiring out by rich peasants. The farm size grouping also shows a broad direct association between the size of farm and the percentage of total labour hired in and a broad inverse relation between the size of farm and the proportion of family labour days hired out on wages. However the range is much smaller and there is no clear relation in the higher farm size ranges.

The same table shows that the labour hiring classes, namely the rich peasant and the landlord dominates over all means of production and overall production structures, namely asset, land, irrigation, input, output and product marketed. It is clear from the Table 2 and 3 that the distribution of the variables shows a uniform pattern of concentration, where 60 per cent or more of each variable is cornered by the labour hiring classes, who constitute around 29 per cent of the total holdings. On the other hand, the exploited classes, being 39 per cent of total holding commanding 11 per cent at the most. The self-employed classes on the average have 25 per cent of the resources. However, the distribution of institutional credit does not follow this uniform pattern. The exploited classes account for over 27 per cent and the labour-hiring classes around 40 per cent of institutional credit, giving a relatively less inequality than other resources. The distribution of institutional credit, therefore, does not follow the blind logic of the market economy, but there is a clear bias towards the labour hiring classes in the existing pattern of credit disbursement.

### **Table - 1 and 2**

Looking into the Gini Coefficients of different variables it is observed that the institutional credit registers the minimum value of Gini coefficients (0.138) while the product marketed exhibits the highest concentration (0.534) followed by non-land assets (0.502). The size group wise distribution shows that despite the largest concentration of households (65.71 per cent) in the size group 0.01 to 2.5 acres, the size groups above the 2.5 acres appropriates



more than 60 per cent of irrigation facilities, input, output and product marketed. However, the non-land assets show a large concentration, where 63 per cent of the same belongs to the marginal size category, 0.01 to 2.5. The institutional and non-institutional credit registers a greater concentration for this size group (0.01 to 2.5 acres); 48.54 per cent and 63.31 per cent respectively. This reflects an emerging aspect of the rural economy of West Bengal. A new class of rural rich emerges in West Bengal, who have tiny possession of land but have the largest possible concentration of the other resources. This gives further justification for choosing the labour exploitation criterion as a device for classifying the households.

A comparison between the advanced and the backward region shows that economic class wise distribution of the variables forms acute kind of inequality in the advanced region. The Gini coefficients for most of the variables in the advanced region are higher than that in the backward. This is owing to the higher level of capitalist development in the advanced region. It is well known fact that with the development of the capitalist relations the self-employed classes are dissolved into two broad classes - bourgeois and proletariat. This is why the advanced region has only a meager proportion of all variables for the self-employed classes (e.g. small and middle peasants) in comparison to the backward region.

Like any market economic regime, West Bengal's agrarian economy also experienced a rapid class differentiation with the advent of advanced technology. This does mean a greater concentration of ownership in the structure of asset, irrigation, output and product marketed in the hands of a few belongings to higher economic classes. The lower economic classes who are large in number, under unrestricted operation of the market, are increasingly losing control over the means of production and pushed back into the ranks of the proletariat. However West Bengal is a unique case of class differentiation under state intervention which is a pro-poor intervention. The limited agrarian reforms in West Bengal, by moderating the effects of the market, has had a positive impact on the economic condition of the poorer classes. Such a pro-poor intervention helped to stabilize the petty peasants' production. It has helped to stop the market-led process of immiserisation and has made differentiation itself more broad based - giving an upward impetus to more people. But these positive changes are not

sufficiently strong to stop the process of differentiation altogether or to alter the concentration of means of production in the hands of a few. Therefore we can expect a consistent pattern of the distribution of assets, irrigation, output and product marketed, which are likely to be biased towards higher economic classes.

In summary, the peasantry in West Bengal as revealed by our field study is a highly differentiated and experienced an active state intervention. It is far from the monolithic homogenous rural community.

#### **4. ECONOMIC CLASS AND INTERACTION WITH CASTE, TRIBE AND RELIGION**

In the Indian polity some leading political parties actively engaged in projecting the caste, tribe and religion as a homogenous community. The Census of India 1911 defined caste 'as an endogamous group or collection of some groups bearing a common name and having the same traditional occupation, who are so linked together by these and other ties, such as the tradition of a common origin and the possession of the same tutelary deity, and the same social status, ceremonial observations and family priests, that they regard themselves, and are regarded by others, as *forming a single homogenous community*' (Census of India, 1911, p. 367. Italics mine). The strong association among the members within a demographically homogenous caste / tribe with the norms of reciprocity network and mutual help is one the most important sources of 'bonding Social Capital' according to the World Bank theorists (World Bank 2001). With the conviction that the SC and ST communities are homogeneously backward, the national policy makers in India made the scheduled castes and tribes as the target beneficiaries of policies ensuring social justice. As a result the notion of economic class has been undermined. In effect hardly any policy had been implemented to lift economic conditions of the lower castes and tribes who actually belong to the category of lower classes. For example the programme of land reform was a miserable failure in most of the states in India. The poor scheduled castes and tribes remain the victim of the social and economic oppression. Only the policy of job reservations are adopted which in effect serve the creamy layer of the SC and ST population.

The cross classification of economic classes and distribution of various categories of population between scheduled caste, scheduled tribes and general category of Hindu and Muslim households is shown in Table 3. The overall impression is that first of all, to a limited extent the castes/tribes and classes are overlapping and these categories are strictly not identical to each other. For example, of the 10 landless households, except one, all households belong either to SC or ST category. Of the 73 poor peasant households, 65 households or 89 per cent belong to the SC and ST categories. On the other hand, of the 67 households belonging to the general category, 72 per cent belong to the rich peasant and landlord households. Secondly, the tendency is sharp in the advanced region, and not so acute in the backward. In fact the distribution of the general category shows the largest concentration in the self-employed category. Though the scheduled tribe population shows a concentration towards poor peasants. Thirdly, in spite of that we observe that there is a sizable representation of SC and ST population in higher economic classes. Particularly, such a creamy layer in the SC / ST population registers a greater proportion in the backward region. In both the regions the educational status of these households in the creamy layer are greater than that the SC and ST population belong to the lower economic classes. Finally, the Muslim category shows relatively egalitarian representation among all economic classes, though the representation among the poor peasant is the highest.

Our general observation is that it is not possible to identify any 'community' on the basis of caste, tribe and religion constituted who are also economically homogenous. As a policy making exercise the backward caste / tribe reservation in job in effect serves the creamy layer shown in our sample survey. The SC and ST population belonging to the lower economic classes continue to be under the same level of misery and deprivation. Our result has been supported by Chaudhury (2000 ). Chaudhury considered the inverse of work participation ratio as the class status. Chaudhury challenged the 'perception that caste and class were identical and/or the caste system was essentially rigid' (p.24). He showed that the economic status of various castes had changed as a consequences of the changing economy. According to him:

‘Many ritual groups were highly heterogeneous in terms of the economic positions of their constituent castes. There was a great deal of difference in the economic status of castes which were called untouchables or backwards. Most of the poorest did not belong to the ritually lowest castes. Conversely, most of the castes placed at the bottom of the social ladder were not among the poorest. On top of all this, there was strong evidence that castes were highly heterogeneous in terms of occupations and economic status of their members’.  
(p.25)

### **Table 3**

## **5. CLASS-FOR-ITSELF, CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS AND PARTICIPATION**

In West Bengal the peasant history of the state preceding the Left rule is the history of a relentless class struggle against the landlord, where the state always protected the latter. The struggle for Tebhaga immediately after the independence, where peasants demanded two third of the crop share was the beginning of a radical peasant movement in independent India. Though the Congress government in the Centre and the State, ruthlessly suppressed the movement, it became clear that any further suppression of peasant movement would erode the credibility of the ruling class among the electorate. In effect the government passed many laws in favour of the poor peasant but could not implement them at all. In the fifties there was a acute food shortage in the country. The left peasant organisations successfully developed food movement and mobilized a large section of poor and middle class population in Bengal on this issue. The peasant movement in Bengal peaked up in second half of sixties when a Left-Centrist alliance, the United Front successfully dislodged Congress Party from power. During the second United Front Ministry some kind of ‘radical land reform from below’ took place, where the local peasants recovered more than 5,00,000 acres of *benami* land (name of the land ownership was changed to a fictitious one by its real lord to evade the ceiling law) and distributed it among the landless. This was a kind of forced land reform, undertaken outside the government framework, more or less spontaneous through popular participation with the support of the United Front parties. The Naxalbari peasant struggle which originated in West Bengal and spread over a number of states in late sixties and

early seventies also contributed to this transformation. This was the background on which the Left Front government came to power with a huge mandate in 1977. The early phase of the agrarian reform in the state under the Left Front government since 1977 is characterised by the state intervention from above and mobilisation of poor people from the below. A distinguished subaltern scholar portrays the agrarian reform in West Bengal as a 'so-called operation barga' led by the urban middle class (Chatterjee, 1997). This opinion reiterates the 'subaltern' interpretation that the recent agrarian change in West Bengal is the elite perception of history that does not touch the subaltern. This is an unhistorical position that has discarded the history of peasant struggle and the consciousness of the poor classes in developing a political hegemony. In this section we will look into the basis of political mobilization and its limitation in achieving participatory decentralization.

### **5.1. PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL ACTION AND CONSCIOUSNESS**

It has been seen that in Table 4, the households belonging to the CPI(M) affiliation rules the roost in the village. Among the total of 210 households, 133 or 63 per cent of household belonged to the ruling CPI(M). Of the remaining 77 households, 58 or about 28 per cent of household reported that they did not have any affiliation at all. Therefore only 19 or 9 per cent of total households had the affiliation to the right opposition politics. The percentage of CPI(M) supporters households was the highest (79 per cent) among the poor peasant households. As one moves to the higher classes, the percentage of CPI(M) supporters households declined steadily to 64 per cent of all households belonging to small peasant, 66 per cent for the middle peasant, 48 per cent for rich peasant and 41 per cent for the landlord. The presence of the 44 per cent of labour hiring households (taking the rich peasant and the landlord together) among the CPI(M) support base is something to be noticed with care. It is our observation that a big proportion of labour hiring classes, some of them were erstwhile masters of the villages and also have a command over a huge resources, are surrendering everyday to Left politics. This surrender is due to the failure of any viable anti Left platform in rural Bengal on the one hand and 'notorious' stability of the ruling Left Front on the other. In fact more than one third of the CPI(M)

supporters household had admitted that their support to the CPI(M) is to honour the majority support in the society.

A comparison of the advanced region and backward region shows that though the CPI(M) supporter households are nearly equal for both, the proportion of opposition support base is higher in the advanced region perhaps owing to the relatively greater impact of the information and electronic media, a majority of which is anti-left in nature.

Table 5 describes the extent of political consciousness and participation. First of all, it is evident that almost all households cast their vote in the election - from Parliamentary to *Panchayat*. Secondly, the 91 per cent of households attend political meetings of different political parties. A good proportion of households (66 per cent) listened / watched news and political analysis from the Radio / Television. A sizeable proportion of households among literate population read newspaper. For the obvious reason, the higher classes are more media friendly. The percentage of population among poor peasants read the newspaper is 14, while the same for the landlord class is 52. Of the 210 households, 149 or 71 per cent of total population directly associated with political parties and in favour of them they participated in procession. Of the total households 56 per cent of them participated in big rally generally held in Kolkata. The attendance of the political conference of any political party is obviously small, 25 per cent. As this requires much active involvement with the political parties. The reader of political literature is also small, 23 per cent, owing to the low level of effective literacy. In spite of that the relative participation of the lower classes viz. landless and poor peasant is comparatively higher in comparison to the labour hiring households in both advanced and the backward region.

#### **Table 4**

#### **Table 5**

The causes for the political affiliation by the peasant households are described in Table 6. It may be noted that the supporters of the anti-ruling party could not describe any particular reason for their affiliation. Almost all the households reported that it was their

political commitment. Only one household reported that it was due to the expectation of some personal benefit. Of the 133 CPI(M) households, 60 or 45 per cent of households reported that their support was due to the greater democratic right and freedom of expression during the Left Front period. The majority of the landless and poor peasant classes subscribed this view. About 15 per cent reported that their support is due to the economic upliftment of the poor during the Left Front period. Another 15 per cent gave the opinion that they want to keep up with majority. About 13 per cent reported that they intend to grab some personal benefit by supporting the ruling party.

The freedom of expression and democratic right is a very important factor for the poor classes that they think as secured under the Left Front rule. When they were asked in which way they found this was secured under Left Front rule compared to the past regime, they narrated some incidences that they experienced during the Congress regime. First, the poor villagers found a dead goat in the forest and arranged feast among themselves. The landlord in the village hid his own goat and declared that the villagers killed his goat after stealing the same. He fined the villagers an exorbitant amount as a punishment, beside the price of the goat. Second, when a poor villager protested on the incidence that the landlord's cow ate his vegetable tree, the landlord instead of being apologetic and expressing sorrow, blamed that his cow became terminally ill from the previous night, and he was sure about the fact that the poor villager intentionally poisoned the vegetable tree in order to kill his cow. Thus the villager was fined an amount equated to the price of a new cow. The poor villager didn't have enough cash to meet the amount. Thus the landlord stormed the house of the villager with his armed followers and snatched the plough, cooking utensils, ornaments as mortgages. However that 'terminally ill' cow was ultimately sold by the landlord after a several years of that incident, but the 'mortgaged property' was never recovered. Third, it was a common practice of the landlord to enter the locality of the poor classes and impose some fine for wild allegations. For example, there was a quarrel among the husband and wife in a poor scheduled caste family one night. In the next morning the landlord entered that locality and asked who made noise in the previous night that didn't let him sleep. He fined some amount to that family.

## **Table 6**

The general opinion of the villagers was that there have not been a sea change occurred in their standard of living during the Left Front rule. However, there are two basic departures that they could demarcate between these two regimes. First, under the Left Front rule the poorest of the poor in the village at least get two meals per day throughout the year, which was beyond the imagination even for the middle peasant under the Congress rule. Secondly, the extra-economic coercion by the landlord like that described above has been stopped. The poor classes in West Bengal has achieved a higher degree of class consciousness to resist the onslaught of extra economic coercion, but that is not sufficient enough to start the second phase of agrarian reform in the state based on high level of educational attainment, gender justice and above all co-operative movement.

### **5.2. EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND GENDER DIVIDE**

Let us look into the class wise distribution of educational attainment of the age group above 7 years for both male and female population (Table 7). We also divide up the households according to the school going age group (7-18 years) and adult age group (18 years and above). Our observation is that first of all, Bankura is a district which has officially been declared as one of the districts with 100 per cent literacy. But our field survey reveals that as high as 28 per cent of the population are illiterate. Secondly, there is a keen gender bias in this regard. In both the regions among the school going age group (7-18 years) the percentage of illiteracy is nearly double for the female. Among the adult population (above 18 years age) the female illiteracy is about 2.5 times the male population. Thirdly, higher the education level, lower is the proportion of the attainment of the female education. For example, at the lowest level of attainment of education, i.e., at the just literate or pre-primary level, the male and female ratios are close to each other. But at the primary level and above, the adult male-female ratio is about 2, though the same is considerably low for the age group 7-18 years. At the level secondary and above, the discrimination is great for the age



group 7-18 years. Among the graduate and the above category, the male-female ratio is as great as 33 : 5. Fourthly, the gender discrimination is greater in the backward region in comparison to the advanced. Particularly, at the levels secondary and above and graduate and above, the representation of the female population in the backward region is negligible. Fifthly, the class wise distribution of the population according to the educational status shows a direct association between levels of attainment of education and higher class status. In other words, at the higher levels of educational attainment, there is a concentration of a greater number of population for both the male and female categories belonging to the higher classes. Conversely, the lower classes of people are associated with the higher proportion of illiteracy, and pre-primary level of education. The male female discrimination is also sharp for the lower classes. **Table 7**

### **5.3. PARTICIPATION IN ADMINISTRATIVE DECISION MAKING**

The major weakness of the 25 years of the Left Front rule in West Bengal is that the robust form of political participation does not get translated into participation at the grass root level administrative decision making. As mentioned earlier government made it mandatory that at least two meetings of the *gram sansad* and *gram sabha* have to be conducted annually. Since the landless, poor peasants and small peasants remain the majority in a village (60 per cent in our sample) the active participation of these classes in the Gram Sansad meeting is the most important aspect of the class struggle and class based rural transformation. The macro level picture about the *gram sansad* and *gram sabha* meeting is given in Table 8. The overall picture in this regard is very much demoralising. First of all, since 1996, not in a single year, the proportion of the meetings held had touched 100, in spite of the fact that it is now mandatory. In the latest year 2002, May and November the percentages were as low as 71 and 54 respectively. Secondly, the attendance of the *Gram Sansad* and *Gram Sabha* meeting is abysmally low and that too declined over the years. The decline was as great as from 18 per cent in 1996 and 1997, to 16 per cent in 1998, to 13 per cent in 1999 and 2000 and then stuck to 11 per cent in 2001 and 2002. The latter is just above the requisite quorum 10 per cent. The decline was sharp for the *Gram Sabha* meeting. The percentage of attendance was

around 30 per cent till 1998, after that it collapsed to around 5 per cent. Thirdly, the most striking is the attendance of the female population. We have figures for the year 2002. The percentage of attendance of female population was as low as 2. This has shown that in spite of the reservation of 30 per cent of *Panchayat* seats for the female candidates, the attendance of female population in *Gram Sansad* remained abysmally low. The highest level of political mobilisation with lowest level of participatory governance of the rural poor indicates the lack of political will to decentralize the power at the grass root level. In other words the establishment of the political hegemony of the poor has not yet been supported by the decentralized decision making process.

### **Table 8**

The poor participation in Gram Sansad meeting is the reflection of the complacent attitude of the CPI(M). A big majority of them may start to believe that a favourable political equilibrium in terms of the electoral gain is much important than the task of intensifying class struggle. Thus instead of intensifying the class struggle by acquiring the remaining ceiling surplus land (still 1,09,000 acres of distributable land remains) and by other means, the CPI(M) tries to appease the other sections of the peasantry. Class war has been reduced to discriminatory favouritism towards a section of the rich peasants and landlord. The particular rich peasants and landlords were kept in good humour in relation to labour hiring, or not to implement ceiling law, those who have surrendered and declared their affiliation in favour of the Left parties particularly the CPI(M). In some cases to express the authenticity of their allegiance they openly cast their vote in favour of the left. The class consciousness and the attitude of the poor classes towards the CPI(M) led *Panchayat* is confined with the idea that it is a benevolent organisation that extends dole to them. They fail to recognise themselves as a self-financed decision making units. Our criticism in this regard is supported by Mukherji and Bandyopadhyay (1993), the Committee appointed by the West Bengal government.

#### **5.4. PROBLEMS OF CO-OPERATIVES**

The prime problem of the Co-operative movement in our country is that they are not at all self sufficient in term of mobilization of resources. They are almost totally dependent on the fund provided by the Central Co-operative Bank. They lack the will, incentive and initiative to tap the local fund for promoting local production or deposit mobilisation. Rabindranath Tagore (1960) pointed out about a century back, that the co-operatives in our country is by and large confined to moneylending. The same tradition is going on even now. In our sample not a single household is associated with the co-operatives in any connection other than borrowing of loans.

The co-operative sector lags behind even in the field of moneylending,. The relative position of the Co-operative society / bank in West Bengal and India exhibit a decline. Both in West Bengal and in India the percentage of institutional loan to total loan expanded to a great extent since 1971. This expansion in agricultural credit was due to the nationalization of the main commercial bank in 1969. It has been seen that during period 1981 to 1991 the share of the institutional credit expanded in greater amount in West Bengal (from 65.30 per cent to 82.00 per cent) than in India as a whole (from 63.20 per cent to 66.30 per cent). However, the share of the co-operative society / bank declined both in West Bengal(from 24.80 per cen to 23.70 per cent) and India (29.80 per cent to 23.60 per cent). Therefore co-operative sector in the country as a whole has undergone a process of retrogression. In the absence of any effective intervention from a co-operative sector, the professional moneylenders has been able to expand its influence in all India level from 7.80 per cent to 10.70 per cent. The same tendency, though, has been resisted in West Bengal, but moneylenders still exist in West Bengal. In our view this is owing to the weak existence of the co-operative credit institution. The co-operative credit is a phenomenon of periodical supply of non-subsidized (though low interest) loan. Since the rural people used to get subsidized IRDP or other loan (almost in the form of dole), the co-operative credit does not attract them. But the fact that the former form of credit is a disbursement system of once and for all. Therefore, unless the co-operative credit system

spread among peasants, it would not assist them in the sustained process of agricultural development. The question is a bigger one. The agrarian reform and *Panchayat Raj* has created a small farm economy based on personal initiative. Therefore it is quite difficult to develop a Co-operative principle based on the collective consciousness.

In our survey households, the institutional credit outstanding is 37.67 per cent against 62.33 per cent of non-institutional. Within the institutional credit, Co-operative Society/Bank registers only 2.26 per cent against the Commercial Bank's share at 34.48 per cent. In our field survey, households who are the members of the co-operatives constituted around 37 per cent of the total households in the combined region, with backward region has a comparatively higher percentage. There is an distinct positive relation between proportion of co-operative membership and the ascending class status representing a clear hegemony of the upper class of people on co-operative institution (Table 9).

#### **Table 9**

### **CONCLUSION**

This study seeks to analyse the interrelation between the village level class structure in a differentiated economy and the participation of different classes into the political process of decision-making. We refute the populist and neo-liberal ideas of a homogenous peasantry and their mutual reciprocity in a depoliticized environment with inactive state as a source of decentralized rural transformation. The primary level data of rural West Bengal suggests that like any market economic regime, development of capitalist relation in agriculture brings out a process of differentiation of the peasantry in the agrarian economy of West Bengal. However the differentiation of the peasantry in West Bengal is associated with a process of a strong pro poor state intervention. As a result the nation wide process of immiserisation has been halted in West Bengal and the process of differentiation has become more broad based. There are three elements involved here: class-in-itself, class-for-itself and the class struggle. Since the Indian independence, a series of peasant movement took place in West Bengal, through which there was a transformation from class-in-itself into class-for-itself. During this

transformation it gave rise to class consciousness and class struggle. This was the foundation on which *Panchayat Raj* was established in West Bengal and Kerala. The West Bengal experience is nothing but agriculture based development led by the direct class action and the interventionist state. This is an alternative model of development contrary to the neo-liberal orthodoxy of withdrawal of the state in a depoliticized environment. We have shown that whatever achievements occurred in West Bengal that was an outcome of the political process of class struggle. Though the poor classes in West Bengal has achieved higher level of class consciousness to resist extra economic coercion and their political participation is much greater, the participation of them at the grass root level administrative decision making is much weak. This is because of the lack of political will and complacent attitude of the CPI(M). The issue of the short-term electoral benefit is given priority undermining the class struggle. The *Panchayat Raj* has so far been failed to initiate the second phase of institutional reform in the state on the basis of some unfinished agenda, like education, gender justice, and above all the co-operative movement.

## NOTES

1. We have chosen Kotulpur (as economically advanced) and Khatra-II (as economically backward) blocks from two topographically and demographically opposite zones of Bankura.

2. NSSO has prepared five broad size classes in the direction given by the Agricultural Census of India. These classes are:

marginal holdings - those of size less than 2.5 acres  
 small holdings - those of size 2.5 to 5 acres  
 semi-medium holding - those of size 5 to 10 acres  
 medium holdings - those of size 10 to 25 acres  
 large holdings - those of size larger than 25 acres

### 3. Cross Classification of the Number of Households

	Landless	Poor Peasant	Small Peasant	Middle Peasant	Rich Peasant	Land lord	Total
0.00	10	0	0	0	0	0	10
0.01-2.5	0	71	27	13	12	15	138
2.5-5	0	1	11	6	10	8	36
5-10	0	1	4	5	2	9	21
10-15	0	0	0	0	1	2	3
15 & Above	0	0	0	0	2	0	2
Total	10	73	42	24	27	34	210

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## APPENDIX

**TABLE – A.1**

The following limits are specified to the value of E in order to classify households into a set of mutually exclusive and all-exhaustive categories (sub-categories not specified here are not ruled out)

Class	Defining Characteristic	Value of $E = X/F$	Reason	
1. Landless labourers	No self-employment; working entirely for others	$(E \rightarrow -\infty)$	$F = 0$ $X < 0$ and large	PRIMARILY EXPLOITED BY OTHERS
2. Poor peasant (Poor tenant and labourer with land)	Working for others to a greater extent than self-employment	$(E \leq -1)$	$F > 0$ , $X < 0$ , $ X  \geq F$	
3. Small peasant	Zero employment of others or working for others ; and working for others to smaller extent than self-employment	$(0 \geq E > -1)$	$F > 0$ , $X \leq 0$ , $ X  < F$	PRIMARILY SELF-EMPLOYED
4. Middle peasant	Smaller employment of others' labour than self-employment	$(1 > E > 0)$	$F > 0$ , $X > 0$ , $X < F$	
5. Rich peasant	At least as large an employment of others' labour as self-employment	$(E \geq 1)$	$F > 0$ , $X > 0$ , $X \geq F$	PRIMARILY EXPLOITING LABOUR OF OTHERS
6. Landlord	No manual labour in self-employment , large employment of others' labour	$(E \rightarrow \infty)$	$F = 0$ , $X > 0$ , and large	

Source: Utsa Patnaik (1987), Peasant Class Differentiation: A Study in Method with Reference to Haryana, Delhi, Oxford University Press.



**Table 3**  
**Economic Class, Caste and Religious Cross Classification of the Households**

Economic Classes	SC	ST	General	Muslim	Total
All Region					
Landless	7	2	1	0	10
Poor Peasant	38	27	3	5	73
Small Peasant	10	23	7	2	42
Middle Peasant	5	7	10	2	24
Rich Peasant	3	2	22	2	27
Landlord	6	0	26	2	34
Total	69	61	67	13	210
Advanced Region					
Landless	3	2	0	0	5
Poor Peasant	35	1	3	5	44
Small Peasant	8	0	3	2	13
Middle Peasant	1	0	2	2	5
Rich Peasant	2	0	14	2	18
Landlord	1	0	22	2	25
Total	50	3	44	13	110
Backward Region					
Landless	4	0	1	0	5
Poor Peasant	3	26	0	0	29
Small Peasant	2	23	4	0	29
Middle Peasant	4	7	8	0	19
Rich Peasant	1	2	6	0	9
Landlord	5	0	4	0	9
Total	19	58	23	0	100

**Table 4**  
**Economic Class wise distribution of Political Participation of Households**

Economic Classes	CPI(M)	Cong.	BJP	Jharkh.	Others	No Affln	Total Hhs
All Region							
Landless	5	0	0	0	0	5	10
Poor Peasant	58	0	0	0	0	15	73
Small Peasant	27	0	3	1	0	11	42
Middle Peasant	16	2	0	0	0	6	24
Rich Peasant	13	5	0	0	0	12	27
Landlord	14	7	0	0	1	11	34
Total	133	14	3	1	1	58	210
Advanced Region							
Landless	4	0	0	0	0	1	5
Poor Peasant	38	0	0	0	0	6	44
Small Peasant	9	0	2	0	0	2	13
Middle Peasant	4	0	0	0	0	1	5
Rich Peasant	8	3	0	0	0	7	18
Landlord	8	7	0	0	1	9	25
Total	71	10	2	0	1	26	110
Backward Region							
Landless	1	0	0	0	0	4	5
Poor Peasant	20	0	0	0	0	9	29
Small Peasant	18	0	1	1	0	9	29
Middle Peasant	12	2	0	0	0	5	19
Rich Peasant	5	2	0	0	0	5	9
Landlord	6	0	0	0	0	2	9
Total	62	4	1	1	0	32	100

**Table 5**  
**Political Consciousness & Participation: Economic class wise distribution of Households**

Economic Classes	Vote	News Paper	Radio/ TV	Political Mtg	Proces sion	Big Rally	Confer ence	Pol. Literat ure
All Region								
Landless	10	1	4	9	9	8	1	1
Poor Peasant	73	11	42	67	62	53	19	13
Small Peasant	41	13	27	41	32	23	11	13
Middle Peasant	24	9	15	20	16	13	7	9
Rich Peasant	27	9	21	25	17	10	6	4
Landlord	34	16	29	30	13	10	9	8
Total	209	59	138	192	149	117	53	48
Advanced Region								
Landless	5	1	4	4	5	4	1	1
Poor Peasant	44	6	29	42	40	36	16	9
Small Peasant	13	3	10	13	11	6	4	5
Middle Peasant	5	1	5	3	2	2	1	1
Rich Peasant	18	7	14	16	13	7	4	3
Landlord	25	13	23	21	10	9	7	6
Total	110	31	85	99	81	64	33	25
Backward Region								
Landless	5	0	0	5	4	4	0	0
Poor Peasant	29	5	13	25	22	17	3	4
Small Peasant	28	10	17	28	21	17	7	8
Middle Peasant	19	8	10	17	14	11	6	8
Rich Peasant	9	2	7	9	4	3	2	1
Landlord	9	3	6	9	3	1	2	2
Total	99	28	53	93	68	53	20	23

**Table 6**  
**Causes for Political Participation: Economic class wise distribution of Households**

Economic Classes	CPI(M) Hhs	Dem. Right	Ec. Dev.	Majority Support	To grab benefit	Others	Total Hhs
All Region							
Landless	5	4	1	0	0	0	10
Poor Peasant	58	31	8	7	6	7	73
Small Peasant	27	10	5	3	5	4	42
Middle Peasant	16	6	2	3	3	1	24
Rich Peasant	13	5	2	2	2	1	27
Landlord	14	4	3	5	1	2	34
Total	133	60	21	20	17	15	210
Advanced Region							
Landless	4	3	1	0	0	0	5
Poor Peasant	38	19	7	6	1	3	44
Small Peasant	9	4	1	1	2	0	13
Middle Peasant	4	2	2	0	0	0	5
Rich Peasant	8	3	2	2	0	1	18
Landlord	8	4	2	1	1	1	25
Total	71	35	15	10	4	5	110
Backward Region							
Landless	1	1	0	0	0	0	5
Poor Peasant	20	12	1	1	5	1	29
Small Peasant	18	5	4	2	3	3	29
Middle Peasant	12	4	0	3	3	1	19
Rich Peasant	5	2	0	0	2	0	9
Landlord	6	0	1	4	0	1	9
Total	62	24	6	10	13	6	100

**Table 8**  
**Percentage of Meetings held and attendance in Gram Sansad and Gram Sabha**

Year	Percentage of Gram Sansad Meetings held in May	Percentage of attendance in Gram Sansad Meetings held in May	Percentage of Gram Sansad Meetings held in November	Percentage of attendance in Gram Sansad Meetings held in November	Percentage of Gram Sabha Meetings held in December	Percentage of attendance in Gram Sabha Meetings held in December
1996	NA	NA	89	18	63	30
1997	79	15	88	18	21	30
1998	29	NA	99	16	83	29
1999	97	12	98	13	89	5.5
2000	95	12	96	13	92	5
2001	97	12	95	11	75	NA
2002	71	12 (2)	54	11 (2)	NA	NA

Note: Figures in parentheses represent the percentage of female population.

Source: 1. Govt. of West Bengal, Annual Administrative Report 2001-2002, Department of Panchayat and Rural Development. 2. *Panchayati Raj Samachar* (in Bengali) Jan-Feb, 2003.

**Table 9**  
**Membership of the Co-operatives**

Economic Classes / Acreage Groups	All Regions	Advanced Region	Backward Region
Landless	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Poor Peasant	18 (25)	8 (18)	10 (34)
Small Peasant	20 (48)	6 (46)	14 (48)
Middle Peasant	14 (58)	2 (40)	12 (63)
Rich Peasant	15 (56)	11 (61)	4 (44)
Landlord	10 (29)	7 (28)	3 (33)
<b>Total</b>	<b>77 (37)</b>	<b>34 (31)</b>	<b>43 (43)</b>
0.00	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
0.01 - 2.5	47 (34)	24 (29)	23 (29)
2.5 - 5	16 (44)	6 (46)	10 (46)
5 - 10	12 (57)	4 (50)	8 (50)
10 - 15	1 (33)	0 (0)	1 (100)
15 & Above	1 (50)	0 (0)	1 (50)
<b>Total</b>	<b>77 (37)</b>	<b>34 (31)</b>	<b>43 (43)</b>

Note: Figures in parentheses represent the number of member households as a proportion of the total households in respective regions.