

OPERATION BARGA: CHANGING SCENARIO OF NORTH BENGAL'S RURAL SOCIETY (1930-1982)

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Abstract

Geo historical background of North Bengal mixes with hill and plain lands. Apart from these intermingling of castes, creeds, religion and races represents a different picture compare to the rest of India. Northern part of North Bengal (Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, Kalimpong, Coochbehar and Darjeeling) and Southern part of North Bengal (Malda, Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur) bears distinct features in topography and history. Northern part had an ethnic character while the southern part of North Bengal was different. Permanent Settlement, zamindari and jotdari system changed the profile of the rural society. Moreover Tebhaga, Naxalbari and Adihars movement changed the land structure and rural society of North Bengal. Abolition of zamindari, jotdari system and implementation of Operation Barga Programme by the Left Front Government entered a new light in the life of share cropper, peasant and cultivators. Except some limitations, Operation Barga established the tenancy rights of the bargadars which formed a new class and changed the rural society of North Bengal.

Key Words: Permanent Settlement, Tebhaga, Naxalbari, Operation Barga, Zamindars, Share Croppers, Rural Society

North Bengal is a region where we found the mixture of caste, creed, religion and races. North Bengal comprised six districts (Dakshin Dinajpur, Uttar Dinajpur, Malda, Jalpaiguri, Coochbehar and Darjeeling). Later Alipurduar and Kalimpong were added to this list. In the geo-political atlas of India North Bengal, bear special features of the changing profile in the transformation of the rural society. Geo historical background of land of North Bengal was different. There were mixing of hills and plain lands. Different cultures developed and intermingling of caste, creed, and religion flourished throughout North Bengal. It is true that the structure of the rural society of North Bengal gradually changed with the passing of time. Several peasants' movement and government amendments changed the profile of the rural society of North Bengal. Actually Adihar, Tebhaga and Naxalbari movement changed the pattern of the rural society.

Moreover the roll of Kishan Sabha was very important. As the peasants learned the strength of collective action the Kishan Sabha were in a few provinces between 1933 and 1935.¹ In the maximum programme there was the demand for the abolition of *zamindari*, *talukdari*, *malaguzari*, *mahajani* systems. The minimum demands which were designed to appeal to the peasant masses included moratorium on debts, abolition of land revenue and rent from uneconomic holdings reduction of revenue and rent from uneconomic holdings, reduction of revenue and rent licensing of moneylenders, minimum wages for agricultural labourers, fair price for sugarcane and commercial crops and irrigation facilities.² The Kishan Sabha apparently sought to unite all categories of peasants.

During the Adihar movement (1938-39) and the Tebhaga movement (1946-47), the peasant cadres remained in the forefront along with the middle class leader's and mobilized the peasant masses. By the hands of Adihars, Tebhaga movement formed a new social structure in some parts of North Bengal especially in Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri and Malda. The role of the jotdars, bargadars of Tarai and Duars regions were different with the jotdars and bargadars' of Malda and Dinajpur. By the issue of the land structure, regulated and non-regulated region established separate platform among the people of North Bengal. On the other hand Thakurgaon and Rangpur were swept by the hands of Kishan Sabha. Rajbanshi, Mahishya, Kaibarta, Koch, Deshi and Poliya peoples were mixing in the social base of the North Bengal's rural society. Most cases land lords were Hindus and the peasants were Muslims.³ This divisions created a new structure into the rural society.

Tebhaga movement widely spread in the districts of Dinajpur, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri and some parts of Malda. Communist Party and Provincial Kishan Sabha organized the movement. By the middle of December, 1946, lakhs of bargadars in numerous villages in nineteenth districts had carried the entire crop to their *khamar*.⁴ In another North Bengal district, Darjeeling, the Tebhaga agitation spread to a few areas in Siliguri that included Naxalbari in which the tribal peasants were mostly involved. A new relation was set up and it created a new social dimension among the adihar, cultivators, peasants and farmers. On the other hand Bangio Pradeshik Kishan Sabha (BPKS) leaders, Communist leaders joined hand against jotdars, zamindars and money lenders.⁵ After the abolition of zamindari system, bargadar-adihar-tenant relationship reached to a new height and it played a significant role in the changing profile of the transformation of the rural society of North Bengal.

A new flavour added to the rural society when the Naxalbari movement broke out in the Darjeeling district of North Bengal. We turn now to the story of the armed struggle organized by the CPI (ML) between 1967 and 1972. The Naxalbari struggle spread three police stations of Phansidewa, Naxalbari and Khoribari in Darjeeling district.⁶ Apart from the Rajbanshis that constituted the majority of the rural population in this area, the tribal peasants mostly Santhals, Orawns and Mundas, formed a large proportion of the population. As in other North Bengal districts the bargadars that about 55% of the peasants in this area were ranged against the jotdars who remained as always, oppressive and rapacious.⁷

Since barga was pervasive in the three police stations, the number of agricultural labourers was small. What is noteworthy is that the tribal peasants who worked as tenants on landlord's land also worked in the tea gardens, so that the peasant movement could rely on the support of the tea garden labourers; in fact the peasant and labour movement often went hand in hand. It would be fatuous to think that the peasant struggle in Naxalbari suddenly flared up in

1967.⁸ The fact is that Naxalbari witnessed continuous peasant movement since 1946. There was an intermingling relation between Tebhaga and Naxalbari. Natures of these movements were different but the aim was same.⁹

Most of the leaders of the Naxalbari movement came from middle class. Kanu Sanyal, Sourin Bose, Kadam Mallick, Khokon Majumder, Charu Chandra Sanyal were prominent leaders. Indeed, the CPI (ML) leaders of Naxalbari were veteran peasant leaders, some of whom were sons of the soil. These leaders established relationship among the peasants and cultivators. Among the Naxalbari leaders, Kanu Sanyal has a close contact with the peasants and tea garden labourers.¹⁰ Throughout his life he maintained this relationship. Kanu Sanyal was clearly advocating a retreat from continuous movement centering on the immediate demands of the rural poor. In fact the mass movement rapidly teetered out.

There was a shift in the situation with the formation of the Second United Front Ministry in 1969.¹¹ The CPI (M) itself mounted the movement for the seizure of *benami* land and forcible harvesting of crops. In the winter of 1969, the RSP-led Krishak Sabha organized demonstrations demanding acquisition of surplus land; the CPI-led Krishak Sabha tried to organize forcible harvesting of paddy in benami lands.¹² Comrad Pramod Dasgupta and Jyoti Basu organized and motivated the volunteers for work in favour of the proletarians.¹³ During this time many CPI (M) leaders were arrested and murdered. Turmoil spread throughout North Bengal. As the movement was no longer based on '*urban-based youth*', the emergence of Charu Majumder as the foremost ideologue directly contributed to the introduction of the urban-elitist authoritarian-petty bourgeois bias in the conduct and style of the movement.¹⁴ From Tebhaga to Naxalbari, the traditional rural structure of North Bengal gradually changed. By the abolition of the zamindari system and passing of the Land Acquisition Act, rural society of North Bengal rapidly changed. The roll of intermediaries was very important at that time.

Apparently, it can be say that Tebhaga to Naxalbari these movements opened a new chapter of land settlements and agricultural economic crisis of West Bengal as well as North Bengal. Later, Government took the step of reform from the lesson of Naxalbari movement.¹⁵ After the defeat of Naxalbari, the basis of a new party was laid down by the rebels. It indicated that although the uprising was militarily a failure, its significance derived from the new light it shed on the country's socio-economic problems and the new turn it gave to Communist politics.¹⁶ The 1970's new Government of West Bengal cannot defy the burning problem of land reform measurement. In the five years experiences landless peasants, share-croppers try to organize themselves and it was not a fake idea. Later Government realized it.

Land Acquisition Act and the abolition of the zamindari system created a new reform in the land settlement of Bengal. The Land Revenue Commission in its recommendation in 1940 clearly pointed out that there was not enough land to go round for the growing population of Bengal.¹⁷ The right of the bargadars or share-croppers to their holdings should therefore be enfranchised and they should have a claim to two-thirds of the share of the produce at the time of harvest. Tebhaga's manifesto was that the change of agrarian structure of Bengal. By which rural society affected most. In 1950 Bargadar Act was passed but it became inactive as the abolition of zamindari received the priority in land reform at that time.¹⁸ In the bargadari system, jotdars had an important role. Jotdars came from moneylenders as well as from other classes.

West Bengal's land reform programme can be divided into three phases. The first phase (1953-1966), the second phase (1967-1976) and the third phase (1977 onwards). The Left

Front's most remarkable land reform measure was in launching Operation Barga, under which Government functionaries recorded. The name of bargadars in order to provide them with greater tenure security.¹⁹ Operation Barga was an attempt to distribute land among the landless peasants and cultivators. Government moto was that in West Bengal there should not be any landless peasants in the rural areas. But due to fulfill this programme, Government faced several crises.

In 1955 the West Bengal Land Reforms Act was passed for the protection of bargadar's right. Now the real picture of North Bengal's rural society came in front of us. Especially in Malda and West Dinajpur, zamindari system was abolished. Old zamindars were replaced by new zamindars in the rural areas.²⁰ Hereditary rights of the zamindars were in many cases changed by the formation of new class. Post independence relation between zamindar and bargadar had been changed. In spite of passing of laws, eviction continues. The Census of 1971 revealed that there were 33 lakhs of land less labour and cultivators mainly including bargadars no less than 39 lakhs and through land ceiling under the Land Reforms Act till 1977 total agricultural land vested in the state was 10,57,000 acres out of which 6,32,000 acres could be distributed as they were free from injunctions.²¹

In 1967 United Front Government came to power in West Bengal. They first started the land and land reforms movement of West Bengal. At that time Harekrishna Konar was the minister of land and land reforms of West Bengal.²² 67's land reforms movement broke down the economic social dominance of landed aristocracy.²³ Benoy Krishna Chowdhury wrote that, '*systematic effort to distribute the ceiling surplus land was thus made only during the tenure of the first two United Front Government of which was short lived*'. Mr. Chowdhury also discussed it in the Legislative Assembly.²⁴ Actually, at that time, Benoy Chowdhury reshaped the land and land reforms of West Bengal.

Some novels depicted the picture of rural society of North Bengal after independence. We knew that Naxalite movement of North Bengal hardly influenced young people from the middle class. Samaresh Majumder shows the story of North Bengal and associated matters through the story of Animesh in '*Uttaradhikar*' and '*Kalbela*'.²⁵ Animesh is sent to North Bengal to propagate their ideology and to organize labour union. After the rebellious movement in Naxalbari in 1967, the police became desperate. Animesh and his comrades had to go under cover. He feels that the North Bengal of his childhood has changed. Animesh is surprised to note that the middle class people of North Bengal are ignorant and in different to the Naxalite Movement. The party workers come from labour unions and poor and lower middle class families. Animesh feels they are alienated from the mass in North Bengal.²⁶ That is why when Animesh is on the run, he is attacked by the people in the station in Siliguri. He cannot convince them that he will do no harm to them and he is actually sacrificing his life for their subsistence. Actually party line was differed by different opinions. In reality, Kanu Sanyal disagreed with the unorganized annihilation policy supported by Charu Majumder.

Debesh Roy describes the socio-economic condition of North Bengal in the novel '*Teesta Parer Brittanto*'. He deals with sensitive issues like land settlements, movements etc. People from different economic strata like peasants, labourers and migrant people from former East Bengal, jotdars, Rajbanshis are related in many ways to these issues. '*Teesta Parer Brittanto*' also depicts the picture that in which way Rajbanshi society changed from the last quarter of 70's to the middle of the 80's.²⁷ From 1980 so called Rajbanshi jote and Rajbanshi standart culture break down. Moreover, lack of middle class intellengtsia made the Rajbanshi more marginalized.

Actually Rajbanshi society was fragmented with the passing of time by the land hungers. Rajbanshi constituted the majority of population in North Bengal. Socio-economic conditions of Rajbanshi changed radically.

In one side land reforms, on the contrary, Naxal movement, both these were amalgamated the agricultural economy of North Bengal. 'Uttarasha' (Fortnightly magazine of Jalpaiguri) reports in 1969 that in Banshihari of West Dinajpur, 20th West Bengal State Krishak Sabha Conference was held in 1969. Revolutionary leader Chaitya Ray raised the slogan-“we want unity among the cultivators.”²⁸ In 1978 it was estimated that there were no less than 30/35 lakhs of bargadars who needed protection. So the Government has launched a new programme of land reform since 1978 titled Operation Barga. From 1978-81, 1.2 million bargadars were recorded in West Bengal.²⁹ Hence, 67's land reforms movement broke down the economic-social stability of the landed gentry and Operation Barga completely erased it. Actually, Operation Barga weakened the domination of the socio-economic power of jotdars in North Bengal.

Before the comings of the Left Front Government, work of Settlement were already started in West Bengal as well as North Bengal. In the year 1975 on 26th June, Government of West Bengal by dint of an ordinance declared that the land less families residing on another man's land will be allotted the right to 5 *kotas* of land.³⁰ When Left Front Government came to power in 1977 amendment was made in the Act which protected the interests of bargadars (share-croppers).³¹ One of the major aspects of Operation Barga was the registration of bargadars. This was a stupendous task before the peasant organizations headed by the left forces. Operation Barga appears to be culmination of all the anti-feudal struggle of the past, the programme itself was a struggle-a movement which received state support, a state which had the political will to implement the laws. Operation Barga throws the light of fresh air in the life of share-croppers.

In North Bengal, implementation of Operation Barga made a rapid change in the scenario of the rural society. In spite of the implementation of the Operation Barga, North Bengal's cultivated lands were transferred. As a result of which many peasants and cultivators became landless. It is a burning problem. Moreover post independence North Bengal suffered large section immigration. Many people came from East Pakistan and were made their homeland in North Bengal. A section of people came after partition and after Bangladesh war i.e. 1971 many immigrants took shelter in North Bengal and most interesting is that migration still continues. When any crisis broke out weak section of people came from Nepal and Bhutan due to *Bongal Kheda Movement* in Assam many immigrants from Assam. Tibetan immigrants also took shelter in North Bengal.³²

Actually frequent separatist and ethnic movement in the North Eastern provinces also increased the immigration crisis. These immigrants took shelter in Siliguri, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Coochbehar district. Apart from these a slow migration continues from 1947 onwards. Any crisis broke out in Bangladesh people of Rangpur, Dinajpur, Rajshahi, Pabna, Nator; Mahadevpur etc. especially took shelter in Malda and West Dinajpur. So the question rose that who are the real inhabitants of North Bengal? Some family came two hundred years ago; someone came 500 years ago. After partition those who came from East Pakistan there were 30% Rajbanshi, 20% tribals and the rest of the 50% caste Hindu.³³ Most of the people came from East Pakistan i.e Bangladesh. Rural society of North Bengal changed by the coming of the immigrants and the abolition of the zamindari system.³⁴ The historian's interest lies in trying to understand the emergence and the evolution of a society in a historical perspective, where the

term society includes every aspect of a people's life. As a result of investigations the historian creates a picture of the society.³⁵ At the time of partition the total number of Hindu population in East Pakistan was at least 30%.³⁶ But now that number decreases day by day. Most of the immigrants took shelter in North Bengal and it is a historical fact.

Actually, Operation Barga swept the whole North Bengal. Malda and West Dinajpur also included in this venture. The society of Malda and West Dinajpur was composed of numerous and diverse social groups which belonged to different ethnic, linguistic and culture groups, to various creeds and religious communities. Rajbanshi, Deshi, Poliya and tribals like Santhal Orawn, Munda, Mahali and Muslims constituted a class of major population. The district in fact represented a prototype of colonized economy and society.³⁷ Operation Barga restricted the rural social and agrarian scenario of Malda. The population of Malda and West Dinajpur was distinctively agriculture. Like any other agrarian society, in Malda too, it was the control of land that was the crucial determination in locating political power. In the land tenure system of Malda, Ashok Mitra has shown that there were three intermediaries between the zamindar and actual cultivator.³⁸

The rural life of West Dinajpur was also deeply influenced by Operation Barga. Excess lands of zamindar and jotdar were vested. Excess lands of Patiram zamindar family, Thangamara Neogi Estate, Ator zamindar family were vested under the banner of Communist party.³⁹ At that time several general cases started in North Bengal about the right of land and illegal vest.⁴⁰ In 1968-69 a case starts in the Gutin mauja of Balurghat police station (present Dakshin Dinajpur). In 1970 another case was filed in West Dinajpur District Court and the case was that-*“Actually Government vested land wrongly. Owner of the land was Gopinath Shil. A case was filed between Gopinath Shil versus Susen Mardi. The land was situated at the Mulahati mauja of West Dinajpur (Present Dakshin Dinajpur) under the Hili police station. In this case Gopinath Shil won the case both in the District court and the High Court also. But the question is that the land is not yet evacuated. Tribal people of this locality build their houses. Officially the case was not yet solved.”*⁴¹

Northern North Bengal and Southern North Bengal both were deeply influenced by the Operation Barga. Then Leftist Government of West Bengal implemented barga system. This system changed the rural societies of North Bengal. Domination of jotdar and zamindar came to an end. Following table shows different pictures in Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Coochbehar.

Table No: 1 (Comparing the Record of Bargadar in the Three Districts (Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri & Coochbehar) of North Bengal in the old and the Operation Barga Methods (1974-1982)

District	Year	Old Method	Operation Barga Method
Darjeeling	1971-77	5899	x
	1978	x	1,943
	1979	360	380
	1980	640	725
	1981	457	x
	1982	640	98
		7996	3146

Jalpaiguri	1974-77	28,120	x
	1978	x	3,639
	1979	2,278	5,624
	1980	1,190	4,856
	1981	73	x
	1982	351	5,748
		32,012	19,867
Coochbehar	1974-77	21,063	x
	1978	6,683	6702
	1979	2,504	10,055
	1980	3,058	3,637
	1981	3,668	155
	1982	3,668	x
		38,403	22,549
Source: Todarmal, Land in West Bengal, Anima Prakashani, Kolkata, 1990, p.392			

From Permanent Settlement to Operation Barga land changed its character and scope. Relations between zamindar-jotdar-tenants had been also changed by the passing of times. After independence, land turmoil continues. To abolish the zamindari system, the West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act, 1953 was passed.⁴² One thing must have to mention that the Congress Government made no effort to distribute the land in West Bengal till 1967.⁴³ Unfortunately after the fall of Second United Front Government the zamindar and jotdar with the active support of the Congress Government tried to oust the poor agricultural labourers and peasants from the land. Sometimes land question became turned into communal issue. Most of the cases it was found in North Bengal that the owner of the land was Hindu but the peasant was Muslim.⁴⁴ It created lot of problem in undivided Bengal and North Bengal also. The Muslim League activists were not sitting on the provocation to intensify communalism to serve their vested interests. In 1977 Left Front Government came to power and implemented the Operation Barga. It changed the land politics. Following table shows the land reforms of West Bengal-

Table: 1.1 (Land Reforms of West Bengal)

LAND REFORMS IN WEST BENGAL AT A GLANCE		
	Upto March, 1995	Upto Dec, 1995
Total land vested	28.70 lac acre	28.82 lac acre
Agricultural land vested	12.71 lac acre	12.80 lac acre
Distribution of vested land	9.51 lac acre	9.82 lac acre
Total number of assignees of vested land	20.97 lac acre	22.71 lac
Share croppers recorded	14.64 lac	14.66 lac
Homestead beneficiaries	2.70 lac	2.71 lac
Source: Benoy Krishna Chowdhury, Land Reforms in West Bengal, Government of West Bengal, Kolkata, 1996, p.5		

The basic right to land in most parts of North Bengal was essentially an individual right. The perception of individual interest as collective interest was not easy to achieve. The peasant small holders of North Bengal lived under identical yet very fragmented conditions of economic existence. Especially implementation of Operation Barga changed the entire scenario of North Bengal. By the implementation of Operation Barga a large section of peasants were finally benefitted. But this system was not free from criticism. Many bargadars could not hold their barga lands due to financial problem. They could not maintain their lands. For these reason peasants, tenants and cultivators were compelled to sell their lands. It is to be noted that Operation Barga is not the permanent solutions. 'Langal jar jami tar' (The one who owns the plough is the owner of the land) this slogan could not implement by the Operation Barga.⁴⁵ Land actually treated by the hands of the party members. This was the sad plight of Operation Barga. Hence, Leftist Government's Operation Barga was challenged by various questions. In the rural areas of North Bengal it is seen that poor bargadars used Operation Barga as an arms against the influential land owners and mahajans.⁴⁶ Actually, Operation Barga changed the structure of the rural society of North Bengal with the passing of times.

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