Chapter -2

The Imaginary Institution of Society in West Bengal: the Shifting Domain of Politics

The main argument in this chapter is that West Bengal cannot be completely accounted for in the all-encompassing idea of Indian society. West Bengal has a history of its own as much as it shares this history with the whole of India. It is common for people to hear about categories like bhadralok, the 'gentle', the 'respectable people', in everyday speech in West Bengal. 'Class', rather than 'caste' is the usual preoccupation in politics, and, there is leftist politics, which stands for the 'preletariat', as against the 'bourgeoisic'. All this sounds somewhat strange in the all-India context, but West Bengal seems to have its way. These differences, it is observed, have to be traced to both the society as it existed prior to the establishment of colonial rule, and the nature of colonial intervention in West Bengal. These differences, it is contended, explain the different turn that politics took in West Bengal after independence. This, indeed, amounts to taking a rather long-term view of the present political trends in West Bengal. But it is felt that the institution of society as an ensemble of distinct and well-defined elements, which have a determined relation between them, are situated in a social -historical temporality. Politics, as one mode of social
institution, has thus to be seen in a social-historical temporality, so that its relations to other modes of institution of society becomes clear.¹

Absence of 'Civilizational Centres' and Discrete Castes

West Bengal did not have 'civilizational centres' which dotted most parts of north India in the pre-colonial era. At least, West Bengal did not have 'civilizational centres', of either religious, political or commercial variety, which in their status, were comparable to their north Indian counter-parts. Bernard Cohn argues that most 'civilizational centres' did not make a distinct specialization in religious, political and commercial functions, and that there used to be considerable scope for overlap between these functions even within a single 'civilizational centre'.² But there was a multiplicity of 'centres' at many levels of greater and lesser scope, and at each level, these 'centres' were not only formed and functioned in relation to networks of social interaction, but also sustained and promoted these networks.³

The 'civilizational centres', at various levels, stood 'as models for the conduct of those who were at lower levels',⁴ and for particular castes, they stood as the level of greater differentiation and refinement of caste functions.⁵ These centres, it may be argued, then, were important for reinforcing common rules of functioning
within particular levels of the caste hierarchy and in differentiating these rules between different levels. The media through which these functions were performed were networks of interaction between the multiplicity of 'civilizational centres'. These networks, which were of trade, politics as well as marriage and religion, depended for their effectiveness on the status of the civilizational centre to which they were related. From this, it may be deduced that the most pure norms of caste behaviour were available to those who were either residents of the highest 'civilizational centres', or were in close contact with them through networks of interaction. This means that the 'civilizational centres', especially at the highest levels, contributed a great deal to the 'crystallisation' of caste norms and the enforcement of these norms through the relatively stable networks of interaction, which they constructed and through which they operated.

West Bengal (or erstwhile Bengal) had neither a 'civilizational centre' comparable in status to north Indian 'civilizational centres' like Benares, nor networks of stable interaction with civilizational centres like Gaya or Prayag. Historians of Bengal point out that this had a tremendous influence on the pattern of social organization in West Bengal. The one difficulty they repeatedly refer to in constructing a history of the social organization of Bengal in the pre-colonial period, is the absence of clear rules of hierarchy in the society.
which is intelligible in terms of the norms of caste. A part of this difficulty is explained by the unreliability of the sources, but the sources which are taken to be more or less reliable by them, point to certain attributes of the organization of society in terms of caste. One of these attributes is that Brahmins in Bengal lacked a proper knowledge of the Vedas, and another was the absence of a clear hierarchy of ranks even among Brahmins in Bengal. Besides, in the hierarchies they have drawn up on the basis of various sources, which are broadly similar, there is a clear absence of middle castes like Kshatriyas and Vaishyas. In fact, there is no caste between Brahmins, who were internally heterogeneous but who stood at the apex of the social hierarchy, and the Sundras, although there were uttama (high) Sankaras, madhyama (intermediate) sankaras, and adhama (low) sankaras or antyajas, among them.

One curious thing about the organization of society in terms of caste in Bengal were the Kuljis or the genealogical literature. Renowned historians like R.C. Majumdar, and more notably, Niharranjan Ray, do not consider them as authentic sources for the understanding the social organization in Bengal, although the common attribute of these Kuljis is their claim to ancient origin. What is remarkable about these Kuljis is that there was a sudden proliferation of this literature since about the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and these
became the bone of contention between different lineages of the upper caste people, to such an extent that, beginning from the nineteenth century, many historians used them as sources for their 'histories' the primary motive of these 'histories' was the glorification of the upper caste people in Bengal.\textsuperscript{11} Niharranjan Ray even goes to the extent of arguing that the Kaulinya (superiority) of certain lineages among the upper castes in Bengal rests entirely on these Kuljis.\textsuperscript{12}

The absence of a clear hierarchy of ritual and social ranks, and the urge for superiority among the upper castes through a reinterpretation of their past in West Bengal seem to have had two consequences. One was the consolidation of the immediate kinship group, and the other was an obsessive concern for the purity of the process through which a kinship group is formed and sustained, namely, marriage. Tapan Roychadhury observes that in the latter part of the eighteenth century, there was a transformation in the family structure of the upper caste people in Bengal, from largely nuclear to joint families.\textsuperscript{13} The excessive concern for purity in marriage seems to be the historical reason for the cultural significance of 'bad blood' in West Bengal, which Lina Fruzzetti and Akos ostor have studied, for the account they have given of marriage norms in West Bengal are invariably of the upper castes.\textsuperscript{14} These factors seem to have contributed to the 'discreteness' of castes,
especially among the upper castes/lineages in West Bengal, much on the line of the conception of caste put forward by Dipankar Gupta. 15

Colonialism and the Construction of the Bhadralok

The nature of the colonial state in West Bengal underwent transformation in three phases - the land revenue settlement in 1793, the establishment of modern educational institutions from the early decades of the 19th century, and the establishment of quasi-legislative bodies in the second half of the nineteenth century. The contention here is that these measures on behalf of the colonial state, interacted with the attributes of the pre-existing social organization in West Bengal, namely, the absence of a clear hierarchy of ranks in society, the 'discreteness' of upper castes/lineages, the absence of middle castes, and the upper castes' urge for acquiring Kaulinya through a reinterpretation of their past, to construct what, since about the middle of the nineteenth century, came to be known as the category of the bhadralok.

In the initial phase of colonial rule, the colonial state existed only at the margins of the society in Bengal, inspite of the fact that Calcutta, in Bengal, was the capital of the colonial state. In this phase, the colonial state did what Ravinder Kumar has called the 'imperialist rendering of the Indian past' through a
massive 'anthropological exercise' which Sudipta Kaviraj has called the 'enumeration' of the 'fuzzy' communities in India. Inspite of this accusation of 'imperialism', in this phase, the colonial state was based on the extant Whig philosophy of an uninterfering state, that is, a state which does not interfere in society except through institutions such as police and courts. The assumption was that the state's interference in society should be kept at the minimum level so that it does not harm interests in society.

It was from this point of view that the Permanent Settlement was enacted in 1793. The perspective in the settlement of land revenue 'in perpetuity' was that it would relieve the big 'land owners' of the incessant interference of the state. This would encourage the land owners in their productive 'enterprise', because they know their interests better and, in this, the absence of mediating institutions of the state, rather than their presence, would be the guiding force.

The Permanent Settlement, however, produced a totally unanticipated result. In coping with the higher revenue settlement, the zamindars of Bengal, after an initial jolt, preferred to lease out land to others, rather than take upon themselves the 'enterprise' of agricultural production. This set in motion what some writers have called the 'subinfeudation' of tenures in which there would be a long sequence of lessees who at the same time would be lessors to other lessees, with all of
them having a title to the same plot of land, from which they would derive income.\textsuperscript{20} Ratnalekha Roy has argued that even the initial jolt was not quite threatening for the nature of land holding. What changed hands in the wake of higher revenue settlement in the beginning was not land, but title, change in zamindari titles, led primarily to a change in the people who had access to land revenues rather than to an actual circulation of land. Consequently, those who lived on income from land circulated and there was a tremendous growth in their number, but the structure of village level control over land did not alter significantly.\textsuperscript{21} The argument here is that the decline of large zamindaris and the relative broad-basing of the distribution of income from land, which took place mostly among the three upper castes of Brahmins, Baidyas and Kayasthas was a generative condition for the rise of the category of \textit{bhadralok} in nineteenth century Bengal.

What finally satisfied the appetite of the upper castes for superior status in society, which, for quite some time, they were looking for in the Kuljis, was the widening scope for Western education in Calcutta from the early decades of the nineteenth century. For, Western education through the English language not only gave them superior status in society, it was also a gateway to the membership of the modern professions emerging in Calcutta and the district headquarters and employment under the
Raj. As a bonus to their present status in society, in the second half of the nineteenth century, quasi-legislative institutions were opened to them by the colonial state to establish its own centrality in society. This gave a clearer purpose to these educated people, who have already learned the Western principles of rationality and liberalism: they learned to be nationalists.

What is to be noted in the process of this transformation is that when these educated people, who originated overwhelmingly from the three upper castes of Brahmins, Baidyas and Kayasthas, having income from land for which they did not have to spend their labour power, gradually filled the schools and colleges as students and teachers, the courts as judges and lawyers, hospitals as doctors, factories as engineers, government and mercantile offices as clerks and head clerks (bara babus) and the quasi-legislative bodies as members, at the end of the nineteenth century, their transformation from upper caste people, to the bhadralok status, was complete. On the basis of these distinctions, and in the absence of middle castes, it was quite easy to distinguish themselves from the chhotolok, 'the people of low quality', constituted of the lower castes. But interestingly, education, aided by income from land, as the gateway to all conceivable success in life, and above all nationalism, which was only the fountain-head of education, was able, to a large extent, to erase the marks of upper caste from the category of the bhadralok, so that even if a bhadralok
called a person, from a lower caste, *chhotolok*, in the social ambience of the time, what would be counted, would not be the distinction of caste, as much as of culture, based on Western education. It is interesting to note that even after this transformation, people who staked a claim to bhadralok status in their public life, continued to be concerned about the 'purity' of kinship group formation and sustenance through marriage, and about the consolidation of their immediate kinship group. But these contradictory pulls between their public postures and private concerns, had the one significant effect that, foregrounded as the institution of the bhadralok was on the absence of a clear ritual hierarchy among the upper castes, a 'public sphere', perhaps narrow, perhaps a caricature of its European counterpart, was created, as a 'common' sphere where these people could interact in a variety of institutions that sprung up, as equal 'individuals'. The sphere of these equal 'individuals' was extremely limited, confined almost zealously to the three upper castes of Brahmins, Baidyas and Kayasthas, and the sphere of their interaction was also in the 'public', not in 'private' domains such as marriage, but within its limits, it took on the appearance of a 'civil society'. It was as leaders of the bhadralok category, that nationalist leaders proclaimed themselves as representatives of the whole society in their mediation with the colonial state.
The Bhadralok as the Mediator

The question arising here is how is the bhadralok as a mediator in his society, including the lower orders of it, and with the colonial state, to be interpreted. If the artists who produced great works of art, the scholars and literary figures who earned their fame as 'writers', the nationalist leaders who spoke of the nation and stood for it, are taken into account, it would be tempting to borrow Michel Foucault’s term in a modified context to call them 'universal intellectuals'. Sumit Sarkar in his famous work on the swadeshi movement in Bengal, took the idea from Antonio Gramsci to call them 'traditional' intellectuals. Perhaps, he thought it proper to use the term 'traditional' intellectuals rather than the 'organic' intellectuals, because these mediators did not come “into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production”. Instead, they were, according to Gramsci, a ‘stratum’ of administrators, scholars and scientists, theorists, non-ecclesiastical philosophers’, who thought of themselves as ‘independent, autonomous, endowed with a character of their own etc’. It seems that in talking about the bhadralok mediators at least till about the 1870s, it is inadequate to interpret them as mediators who were only ‘independent, autonomous, endowed with a character of their own etc’. In this respect, some of the attributes of the 'classical literati' discussed by Benedict Anderson
appear to be worthy of attention. Anderson says that the Classical literati were 'tiny literate reefs on top of vast illiterate oceans'. They were the only ones who had access to 'a single, privileged system of representation' in a 'truth-language' and as 'the bilingual intelligentsia' they mediated between this language and the vernarlar. Finally, this literati were secured in their 'unselfconscious coherence' till the advent of nationalism in Europe which waned this coherence. The only major difference between these attributes of the Classical literati and the bhadralok mediators of nineteenth century Bengal is that in Bengal's case, 'the tiny literate reefs on top of vast illiterate oceans' had a 'privileged re-presentation' in a 'truth language', which was not a Classical language like Latin or Sanskrit or Arabic, but English, which was the vernacular of the English people. But otherwise, till at least the 1870s, the English language had all the attributes of a 'classical language' in colonial Bengal because, in a more rigorous sense than Sanskrit, it was consigned to a 'pure' world of 'signs' by the common people, the chhotolok in society. Because, all the major newspapers in Calcutta were in the English language, the meetings of the Indian Association and the Congress Party were conducted in English, and great care used to be taken in them to make a 'perfect' case for institutional reforms of the colonial government. The compliance of the
'masses' was taken for granted, because the nationalists in this period thought of themselves as the 'natural' leaders of the people. Surendranath Bannerjee, for example, thought that national unity means primarily the unity of the English educated.35

Surendranath Bannerjee's 'unity of the English educated', in the image of the 'unselfconscious coherence' of the classical literati discussed by Benedict Anderson broke faster than he expected, because of two reasons. First, not every aspirant from the upper castes could have access to Western education which alone could give them the opportunity to enter into the charmed circle of the bhadralok in Calcutta. Besides, of those who received Western education, most remained far from the pinnacle of success, which alone could establish them in the various respectable professions in Calcutta. But since through whatever Western education they received, they could perceive the heights that some others reached, while they had to languish in ill-paid clerical or some similar jobs, Western education to them appeared like a shattered dream.

**The Signs of Split**

These were the first signs of a split in the bhadralok category. Interestingly, this split can be located in the 1870s itself, when the most reputed of the nationalists in Calcutta were in the process of achieving a greater 'unity' amongst themselves in the Indian Association which they formed and in the Indian National
Congress they were going to establish in a few years from then. Added to the indignity in society and the inferior status in office for the less educated upper-caste people, there was another reason for their distaste of the new dispensation. They could not bear with the new cultural environment which affected their place of work and even family life. In a study of this period, Sumit Sarkar observes,

Calcutta in the late 19th century ... was the headquarters of British Indian bureaucracy, mercantile enterprise, and education. Regular hours of work throughout the year in offices must have contrasted sharply with the seasonal variation in labour—tempo normal in village life. Mughal bureaucracy had its clerks, of course, but jobs in British controlled offices under bosses seeking to impose Victorian standards of punctuality and discipline must have still meant a considerable departure. Time-bound office work, again, had to be performed in the unfamiliar enclosed space of the modern city building. In school and office alike, there was the additional problem of an often imperfectly understood foreign language of command.

Chakri thus became a 'chronotype' of alienated time and space, late 19th century Kaliyuga's heart of darkness, the principal format through which awareness of subjection spread among colonial middle-class males. Unable as yet to resist foreign bosses effectively, the clerk—or the writer emphasizing with him—often passed on the blame in part to women. Awakening political consciousness thus became inter-twined with a strengthening of patriarchal prejudices. Thus, he quotes from Harischandra Bandopadhyay's Kaler Bau, which was published in 1880: "slaves to government officials, we [clerks] have to spend our time in home as slaves to the wives". 
It is apparent that the everyday woes of the upper caste bhadrolok who were only half-inducted into the modernity, based on an alien education and life-style, could not fall in line with the nationalist aspirations of the upper crust of the bhadralok, who were 'perfecting' the art of constitutional agitation of the Indian Association and the Indian National Congress. Initially, of course, this split in the bhadralok perception of colonial rule, did not take a political form. In the last decades of the 19th century, this split could be seen in the alternative cultural articulation of the underdog bhadrolok the solace they looked for in the preachings of Sri Ramakrishna:

Ramakrishna spent 35 years of his life in a suburb of Calcutta, but it was only during the last 10 years or so that he suddenly gained acceptance and renown among the Calcutta bhadralok. The timing concided, significantly, with a kind of 'hiatus' in bhadralok history.

The split or the 'hiatus' in 'bhadralok history' acquired a political form since the time of the wadeshi movement in the first decade of the twentieth century and this split was decisive since revolutionary terrorism struck roots in Bengal politics. Inspite of this split, however, what is to be noted is that politics was still very much an internal bhadralok affair. Partha Chatterjee explains that as far as revolutionary terrorism was concerned, there were two reasons for its remaining a internal bhadralok affair:

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One reason for this was organizational, prompted by the requirements of secret conspiratorial work. But ideologically, too, there was considerable scepticism, even contempt, about the political maturity of the masses and about the feasibility of effective political action on the basis of organized mass agitation... The levels of education, culture and articulate political thinking required for this purpose almost inevitably restricted the membership of these terrorist organizations to the higher caste bhadralok.

It may be argued that this 'scepticism, even contempt, about the political maturity' of the lower castes, who constituted the overwhelming majority of the population, and the absence of middle castes who could mediate between the bhadralok category and the lower castes, explains the relative lack of success of the Gandhian political agitations in the rural areas of West Bengal. In fact, in those areas in which Gandhian peasant movements were successful in West Bengal, 'there existed a fairly broad stratum of small holders preferably more or less homogeneous in caste composition, such as 'mahishyas of Tamluk and Contai'. Mahishyas are among the few organized land-owning castes in West Bengal, who are to be found in large areas of Midnapur district, but they are particularly concentrated in Contai and Tamluk. But 'mahisyas as a caste were not restricted only to peasants with large holding but included very large numbers of small peasants and share-croppers'. The conditions for the success of the Gandhian peasant movements in Midnapur existed from earlier because,
The social and political authority of many local Congress leaders in Contai and Tamluk derived in large measure from their caste, the Mahisyas, in fact, and a remarkable experience of caste mobilization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, led by their caste associations, on various educational, religious and other programmes of social upliftment. It was for the absence of such organization among the lower castes in West Bengal and the lack of will for their mobilization in politics against the interests of big land owners by the bhadralok political leaders in the Congress party, which enabled the Communists to seize the opportunity opened by the Damodar Canal movement in Bengal. But it was not through mobilization of peasants that Communists made their debut in radical politics. Its initial breakthrough was on the industrial labour front.

The Peasantry: At the Intersection of Market and Politics

In the last decades of colonial rule, the peasantry in West Bengal found itself in a curious intersection. The organization of production was still largely on a small-peasant basis, but the produce of the land was no longer meant exclusively for household consumption: it was meant for an extensive market network. The initial product specificity of this 'commercialization' was indigo and jute. But after the failure of the indigo experiment in the 1860s, the main 'commercial' crop in Bengal was jute, which could be cultivated on small peasant plots, mainly with family
labour. Production for the world market had its implications for the producer. He had to be aware of the demand fluctuations and take the risk of falling price of the produce in the world market. The trade in jute was controlled by the British-owned manufacturing houses in Calcutta, but whether the world prices of jute rose or fell, it was inevitably the small cultivator in far-flung areas, who was hit the hardest. But cultivation of jute was not very widespread. It used to be cultivated mainly in the eastern and northern districts of Bengal.47

The other product that affected the peasantry and that was up for sell was land itself. On this, the rather long standing position of scholars was that 'the imposition of a relatively inflexible revenue demand in cash led to a greater involvement in the market economy and a permanent cycle of indebtedness resulted in a process of proletarianisation of the peasantry through rapid land alienation'.48 Of late, there has been a debate about the exact (legal) nature of the land transfers.49 More important than 'the circulation of the revenue-collecting rights, as Sugata Bose points out, is 'the market in the right to occupancy and use of land'.50 Data on this show that the market steadily developed during the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Between 1885 and 1928 in particular, there was 'a brisk market in the occupancy raiyati right'.51 The 1928 and 1938 amendments to the Tenancy Act of 1885, gave a boost
to the land market. It is, however, not certain whether the
dramatic accbration in the velocity of the land
market in 1938-39 had more to do with legislative
enactment or with the onset of the trade and price boom.52
The second world war and the Bengal famine of 1943 caused
land alienation on an alarming scale, mainly because of
wartime subsistence crisis.53

In this booming land market, the principal from of
transfer of land was that raiyati occupancy rights passed
from small peasants to big money-lenders and rich
peasants. Until the late 1920s, the small peasants, often
using hired labour to supplement family labour, remained a
more or less viable proposition.54 The depression in the
1930s hit the small peasants hard. They had to grapple
with slumped crop prices, relatively high rental demands
and cost of labour and the stoppage of money credit
supply. Finally, the spiralling grain prices on the eve
of the famine, spelled disaster for the mass of small
peasants who were net buyers of rice.55 At the end of the
war, the Khas Khamar of the big land owner and rich farmer
increased in size. Consequently, a large portion of the
erstwhile small-peasants joined the ranks of landless
labourers. Those who remained on their lands, become ever
more subservient to money - lenders and big land owners.56

Inspite of this, except for the adhiai movements
in Dinajpur, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri and South 24 Parganas
districts,57 which were somewhat sporadic in nature,
peasant protest on a large scale could not be organized.
In fact, when the sharecroppers in the fringe regions began to assert themselves in the late 1940s, the dependant small peasant in West Bengal felt the backlash. Even the Tebhaga movement between 1948-50, which was exemplary in certain respects, and which along with the Telengana movement in the Andhra region in the same period, was the constant source of inspiration to Communists and other Leftists for a long time, suffered badly because of differences between the most important leaders of the movement, in which the rank and file were passive followers who not only failed to sustain the movement, but also failed to give it a relatively stable organizational form.

It is apparently intriguing that inspite of the rapid impoverishment and alienation of the peasantry from land, which swelled the ranks of landless labourers, and the further weakening of the position of those who remained as share croppers in the 1940s, it was neither possible for the peasantry to organise large-scale protest movements, nor could they sustain the ones which broke out in some of the fringe areas in the wake of the depression and the 1943 famine.

It may be argued that there is a category confusion in the evaluation of such failures by certain scholars. Daniel and Alice Thorner in their celebrated work, have sought to locate a 'proletarianisation of the peasantry' in the long process of their impoverishment and
dispossession in colonial Bengal. Even in a recent work, Sugata Bose, gave this title to the chapter which dealt with these issues: 'Peasants into proletarians? The market in land and the question of change in the social organization of production'. This is why failures of peasant movements like the ones mentioned above, are assessed in terms of 'strategies and tactics' of the movement. The question is not asked whether the minimum social base, the necessary cognitive map of the people, is prepared for such 'strategies and tactics'.

In an article which has become a classic in the area on the language of 'class' in early nineteenth century England, asa Briggs observes,

"There was no dearth of social conflicts in pre-industrial society, but they were not conceived of at the time in straight class terms. The change in nomenclature in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries [in England] reflected a basic change not only in men's ways of viewing society but in society itself."

In his study of the English working class history, Gareth Stedman Jones observes that England for certain reasons was seen by different theorists as the 'universal model', but from 'the vantage point of the late twentieth century' the salient points of English political development is not of England as an 'ideal typical example', but its own 'particularity'. On the concept of class, he observes that,

"... from the early nineteenth century, in a society in which languages of class grew earliest most extensively, England became the privileged testing ground for novel theories of class conflict and class consciousness. In particular,"
as the progenitor of the first generally acknowledged working-class movement, the English working class provided the initial empirical basis for the formulation of the most portentous theoretical construction in this area - the Marxian theory of modern industry and proletarian revolution. Elements of specifically English development between the 1770s and the 1840s were captured in an exceptionally compelling theoretical work and transformed into a universal theory of stages of proletarian class consciousness...

It is contended that in the 1940s, although the peasantry in Bengal were brought into the vortex of the market, through ‘commercialization’ of land and its produce, it was still not organized into a ‘proletariat’. It is for this reason that the peasantry at this stage was not able to organize itself into the Communist Party, which operates at the level of the every-day life of the working class.

The problem of organization of the peasantry in West Bengal was particularly acute traditionally because it did not have alternative norms in the idea of caste, which could organize it on a large-scale basis. This is certainly not to say that there was no caste basis in the organization of the peasantry in West Bengal. But equally certainly, the caste organization of the peasantry, overwhelmingly consisting of lower castes, were not as wide-spread and internally as well organized as the ease of Chamars in north India, which has been discussed elaborately by Bernard Cohn.68 Besides, in West Bengal, there are no ‘middle castes’ like the Rajput Thakurs in Cohn’s study,69 which could give a larger basis to the
organization of the different lower castes by mediating between them as the common Thakur (ruler) of all the lower castes. 70

**Independence and the decline of the bhadralok**

Independence of the country may be seen as a high water-mark in the decline of a large section of the bhadralok category. Till about the 1920s, even the lower orders of the bhadralok, however inadequate their Western education, whatever distaste of discipline in their place of work they have had, did not have much difficulty in getting at least clerical jobs in Calcutta, while some income from their intermediate interests in land continued to trickle in. But through depression in the 1930s and famine in 1943, as the Khas Khamar of a few of them increased considerably in size in the rural areas at the cost of share-croppers and small peasants, the intermediate interests of the legendary hierarchy of the bhadralok caved in, while the rate of unemployment increased alarmingly in Calcutta. On top of it, independence for them effectively meant the partition of their social horizon of existence and the influx of their compatriots from the eastern part of the province, who staked a more desperate claim to their dwindling resources. 71

These lower orders of the bhadralok, who by that time were the overwhelming majority of the bhadralok, were badly affected by these changes, because they did not
anticipate these changes. Inspite of whatever difficulty that came their way, so far they managed to fend for themselves. They did not often get proper education although they were from higher castes and craved for education. They were not happy to work under bosses at office who insisted on discipline, but they managed to get jobs in office and took some pride in it. At home, they preferred to live in a joint family and were frightened by the occasional assertion of independence by their women, but in the society outside, took pleasure to talk about the equality of men and women. In negotiating for alliances in marriage, they were particularly careful about maintaining the 'purity' of 'blood', but in other spheres of social activity, they showed little inhibitions in mixing with people. With a more or less secured economic position, derived from income from land and services, they could get away with an ambivalent position on 'modernity'. What was peculiar about this ambivalence West Bengal was its 'social' character, reinforced by plays, novels, newspapers and personal interactions of people.

The Bhadralok and the Left

It may be argued that inspite of the Tebhaga movement, particularly in Kakdwip, which could organize peasants on a large scale at least for a temporary period, at independence, it was the swelling ranks of the lower order bhadralok in West Bengal and more significantly, the
Hindu bhadralok of East Bengal, who migrated to Calcutta and its suburbs after partition, who constituted the social basis of the Communist Party of India and the other leftist political parties. It was their frustration and anger born of the calamitous fall in their status as the bhadralok in society, which made them receive 'the wrong signals from Telengana', and adopt the 'Calcutta Line, of B.T. Ranadive. What is noteworthy in Communist politics in this period is the remarkable continuity not only in the political background of many of the Communists as ex-revolutionary terrorists, but also in the style of functioning of the Communist Party which very much resembled the functioning of the terrorist revolutionary organizations like the Anceshilan and Jugantar Samities. The only difference was that the revolutionary terrorists were Hindu revivalists, whereas the Communists did not believe in religion. This difference, however, did not deter them in their faith in the abilities of the Communist Party and of its leaders. What further affirmed their faith in the Communist Party's ability to give them a new future was the dispossession of the overwhelming majority of them from any interest in land. In West Bengal, the intermediate interests of the non-cultivating, absentee bhadralok were wiped in the waves of depression and the famine, and for those who migrated from east Bengal, the lands were lost due to partition of the provience. In fixing the party's revolutionary agenda,
therefore, the Communist Party did not have any inhibitions about rural reform. It was in the perspective of this 'disillusionment' that the CPI perceived the independence of the country. In early 1948, the CPI observed that,

... the process of disillusionment has been quickened since August 15, and the upsurge is asserting itself more and more.".

It observed further,

The Communist Party, by exposing the national bourgeois leadership will accelerate the process of disillusionment of thousands, enabling the democratic front to grow and develop sufficient strength to defeat the bourgeois policies and create the preconditions for the establishment of a democratic state, which will really be an instrument for implementing the full programme of the democratic movement and for simultaneously passing on to socialist construction, without the intermediary stage of capitalism.

It is only in an understanding of them as lower orders of the bhadralok that the personal background data of the sample of Communists in West Bengal in the early 1960s, collected by Myron Weiner, are intelligible. According to this sample, Communist political leaders in West Bengal were more likely to be Brahmins than were Congress men, but in education, only 47 per cent of them as against 74 per cent of those in the Congress party, were college educated. But one curious thing about the Communists party was that although leaders at lower levels were less educated than Congress leaders, at the highest level, it had a few who were educated in England. As far as information on the occupation of the political leaders in this sample is concerned, the data are inadequate. But
from what Myron Weiner gives, it appears that more Congress men were landholders and businessmen than Comunists.  

With the exit of B.T. Ranadive from the post of the General Secretary of the Communist party and the assumption of leadership by C. Rajeshwar Rao in June 1950, the party line was shifted from 'frontal attack' to 'guerilla action', but in a year's time, this was also changed to what came to be known as the 1951 Tactical Line. The most important outcome of this time, which had a far-reaching influence on the Communist movement in West Bengal, was that the party resolved to prepare itself for the forthcoming first general elections for the Parliament. These changes in the 'party line' notwithstanding, through the 1950s and the early 1960s, the influence of the Communist Party and other leftist parties was largely confined to the refugees in Calcutta and its suburbs, and in the trade unions. In Myron Weiner's study, conducted in the early 1960s, it is instructive that though the 'interest affiliation' of the CPI and other leftist parties was more with peasant associations, the Congress was able to counter it effectively through 'association in local government, local civic activities and various caste, religious and tribal bodies'. This is why, on the basis of the study of the voting pattern in the 1952, 1957, and 1962 general elections, Anjali Ghosh observes that although the
Communists and other liftists could make inroads in some pockets, the Congress was able to retain its position as the dominant party in rural West Bengal. 87

Politicization of the Peasantry

For the peasantry, mostly small peasants and agricultural labourers, the independence of the country meant two things: the establishment of the Indian state as an 'welfare state', so that certain actions directed to them, were initiated through the Five Year Plans of the state, and the commencement of elections, in which the whole adult population, including the poorest peasant and the agricultural worker, would participate. For poor peasants, these two meanings of independence, were, in fact, packed in one. That is, they had to vote for the political party/leader, who, on behalf of the state, looked after their 'welfare'. Now, the Congress party was effectively the only political party that existed everywhere. At the local levels, the owner of the land that the poor peasant cultivated as a bhag chasi (bargadar), who gave him loans in cash and grain, during the lean season (welfare), was in most cases also the leader of the Congress party, or if the owner of the land was not a Congress party leader himself, somebody, to whom even the owner paid respect, was the leader. This, along with the legends of what the Congress party and its leaders had done to the country, which the local Congress
leaders used to their advantage, worked for the election of Congress party leaders to the State Assembly and the Parliament from the rural areas.

This dependence of the bhag-chasi on the malik (the land owner) was more deep-rooted than perhaps now can be estimated. In fact, it may be said that it was difficult to make a clear distinction between the relation between the malik and the bhag-chasi and that between the malik and the agricultural labourer who worked on the owner's land. Sometimes, the two sets of relation were combined, in that the bhag-chasi sometimes would come over to work in the Khas Khamar of the land owner and would get some return in cash or kind, which may not be specific to any work he had done. Besides, in the decades since the 1930s, when the small peasant or the bhag-chasi was dispossessed of his land by the land owner, for incurring debt, the small peasant or the bhag-chasi might continue to cultivate that land as an agricultural labourer, in which some subsistence support was not unusual. In a few cases, beside the other grounds for dependence, the owner of the land belonged to the same caste as the cultivator, as in the case of Mahisyas in Midnapur district, which created a sense of belonging together on both sides. Besides, although in West Bengal, the landowners could not perform the functions of mediation between the lower castes in as defined and organized a manner as the Rajput Thakurs in Bernard Cohn's study, but as big
landowners/money-lenders and in most cases, as members of a caste higher than the one to which the bhag chasi/ the agricultural labourer belonged, the landowner commanded respect from the bhag chasi/agricultural labourer. It is, perhaps, for this reason that Myron Weiner observes in his study that Congress men were more active in religious, caste and tribal associations than Communists and other leftists. It seems that such ties of dependence of the small peasant, bhag chasi and the agricultural labourers, on the landowner, explain why Myron Weiner even at the beginning of the 1960s (the book was published in 1963) thought that the Congress party was solidly based in rural West Bengal.

Despite these ties of dependence of the bhag chasi on his landowner, the West Bengal Land Reforms Act, passed in 1955, which offered certain measures for the tenurial security of the bhag chasi (bargadar), were blocked by the very leaders of the Congress party who were respected by them. This piece of legislation itself would not have disturbed the long existing ties between the land-owner and the bhag chasi. In fact, the peasants would not have come to know of this legislation in earlier times. What, however, made the difference was the elections. Elections, which started on the basis of the principle of universal adult suffrage after independence, in 1952, were made the basis of selecting persons for legislative bodies and, indirectly, for selecting Ministers who would head different administrative organizations of the
government. The very idea of these elections, which the Indian state initiated, is such that certain issues, which are thought to be of a general importance to the society by different political parties, are brought up for campaigning, propaganda, by these political parties, so that sections of the people who are interested in some of these issues, may vote in favour of the political parties, which promise to uphold these issues, if they are elected to power. Since many and mutually contending issues are brought out by different political parties, the function of elections is the mobilization of opinions in a society, which are of a general character. The issue of land reform was one such opinion in the two elections that were conducted after the legislative enactment for it was made in 1955.

Moreover, elections, which were in the nature of sporadic, spectacular events in the beginning, because of the long interval between them, began to have a more regular effect through the routinization of the issues in the activities of political parties, which, on the basis of these issues, began to operate in the everyday life of the whole population. These issues, in other words, which were campaigned for most vigourously only in times of elections, continued to operate on the minds of people and both served as the basis for and worked on the basis of organization of people in the political parties at various levels, beginning with the national, through the state and ultimately, down to the mostly intimately local level.
This set off a process of identification between the opinions of people in their family, lineage, neighbourhood lives and those which were expressed as issues by political parties. Obviously, many opinions, which were felt and expressed in the immediate surroundings of people, could not be identified with the issues raised by political parties, but some of the most deeply felt, if not expressed, opinions of people, were seen by them to be identifiable with the issues propagated by political parties. The opinions in the minds of people, which were identified with those held by political parties, acquired a greater power in their minds in shaping their intentions.

Land reform was an issue with which the majority of the poor peasants, bhag chasis and agricultural labourers identified their own personally felt opinions. But this identification of opinions, which was long overdue, if the impoverishment of the peasantry is the consideration, could be traced in the ballot boxes only at the end of four successive elections over a period of fifteen long years, at the end of which it could perhaps be said that opinions of people privately held for so long were transformed into socially explicable and politically determined intentions. But it was an underdetermined politicization of the peasantry. It took another ten long years between 1967 and 1977, during which the Communist political parties of which three had emerged at that time,
not only campaigned for and propagated the issue of land reform in the conventional electoral way, but pursued it through land seizure movements throughout the state by the mobilization of those sections of the peasantry who were promised direct benefits from these seizures. These mobilizations, moreover, were interspersed between long spells of crisis of governance in the State, particularly between 1967 and 1972, industrial unrest, severe food shortages throughout the State and what is called the politics of gherao in Calcutta. There were, of course, differences between the three Communists parties as to the extent of mobilization of people for land seizures to be undertaken in the rural areas - in disregard for law. On the extreme left, the Communist Party of India (Marxist - Leninist) wanted to go the whole hog in not only mobilization of peasants but also in arming them in preparation for the forceful overthrow of the state. In the middle, the Communists Party of India (Marxist), wanted to strike a middle path, in that they were willing to participate in government, but they wanted to utilize this for the more important purpose of rural reform and they were even ready to circumvent the law for this purpose. The Communists Party of India, on the right, stood for land reform and the rights of peasants, but they were not ready to circumvent the law for achieving this. It would appear that the CPI(M)’s middle path, its readiness to remain in government, while being committed to the cause of rural reform, if necessary through
circumvention of existing laws and the enactment of new laws, was crucial in determining the regime of governance that was established in the State in 1977.

The Communists, Peasantry and the Indian State as a 'Regime of Truth'

In a rather enlivening article, recently Javeed Alam argued for 'the thesis that the Indian Communist movement looked at the build-up of the revolutionary potential in Indian society only by, or at least primarily through, working around the state, its institutions and processes and dynamics'.94 'Such an orientation to politics', according to him, 'led to a withdrawal of attention and activities from the society as such - its institutions and values and particular modes of articulation - as direct targets of revolutionary focus'.95 He diagnosed this as an 'error' and argued that its consequence was that 'the people who come under Communist rule or influence for long spells may not acquire a socialist consciousness and may, as they get out of this influence, revert back to earlier modes of thinking and political behaviour'.96

There are many questions involved in this contention, but the most important of these is the accusation that it was an 'error' for the Indian Communist movement to target their strategies against the state as the main enemy. Without going into the question of the Indian Communist movement as a whole, because that is not
the present concern, it will do here to argue that as far as the Communist movement in West Bengal is concerned, there was every reason for taking the 'state, its institutions, processes and dynamics' as the worst enemy of the Communist movement. In support of this position, the first thing to be remembered is the time of birth of the Communist movement - 1920s, and the founders of the movement - ex-revolutionary terrorists. The argument here is that the Communist movement in West Bengal (erstwhile Bengal) was born in the social context of a split in the bhadralok ranks, the first signs of which can be discerned in the longing for village life, hatred of discipline in office and the worship of Ramakrishna in the 1870s and 1880s, discussed by Sumit Sankar, which gradually took the political form of opposition to the colonial rule in the wake of the partition of Bengal in 1905, and it would perhaps be fair to see a continuity in the exasperation and the desperate dimensions which the movement acquired in the subsequent phases of revolutionary terrorism and Communist politics. Otherwise, it becomes difficult to explain how some persons who were Hindu revivalists of the revolutionary terrorist type, overnight switched over to Communism, which does not believe in religion. Such transformations are revolutionary indeed, but it seems that one reason for which this transformation was at all possible, was that both their belief in Hindu revivalism and Communism were shallow. What, in fact, they fought
for was the assertion of their rights as mediators in a society which under colonialism had fallen to a 'regime of truth', 97 which, in different measures, was 'different' from their own, and one in which the people, generally from the upper castes, who were accustomed to being recognised as the mediators in their own society, were denied of their positions in society, by the 'strategies' deployed by the 'different regime'. 98

It may be seen that the ranks of those who were left behind in the scramble for the opportunities, opened by colonial rule, continued to increase through the 1930s and 1940s, in the context of the typical 'colonial' nature of the opportunities that were offered. But it was the partition of the Bengal province in 1947, and its attendant economic, social and, above all, psychological effects on a large section of the bhadralok from the eastern part of the province, as refugees to West Bengal in general, and to Calcutta's suburbs in particular, which brought the feeling of being let down by the Congress party and the Central Government, to the fore. It can be seen that the blaming of the Congress party/the Central Government, for the partition of the province by a large section of people, particularly in Calcutta, was the basis on which they viewed the Congress party/the Central government as the real inheritors of the colonial government that preceded it. The consequence was that for these people, the importance of the independence of the country was eclipsed, and for the Communist Party, which
represented them, the first reaction to the independence of the country was that it was jhuta (sham). The important reason for which the constellation of diverse forms of dissatisfaction could be organized into a central opposition to the colonial rule and the Congress party/Central Government, was the relative homogenization of a large section of the bhadralok category, through the absence of a clear hierarchy of ranks among them, which was further smoothened through the Western education which they detested. What, further, contributed to this homogenization was that despite the absence of a clear hierarchy within the bhadralok category, they had a collective urge for superiority, which can be traced to the times when some of their ancestors took to cooking Kuliis and writing histories on that basis, which for many of them, was betrayed by the colonial 'regime' and the one that replaced it. It was this homogenization of a large section of the bhadralok in West Bengal which constructed the working 'class' for the Communist parties in West Bengal.

In that sense, it may be argued that Marxism was appropriated by the Communist movement in West Bengal in the sense in which Michel Foucault talks about 'the social appropriation of discourses'. This is why, as Javeed Alam rightly accuses, the Communist movement in West Bengal always tried to 'get at the bourgeois state' and bring it 'under siege of the exploited and allied
classes', and attached secondary importance to the 'institutions and values and particular modes of articulations' in society and thought that the 'class-based mobilization directed against the state is enough to transform the outlook of toiling people into revolutionary consciousness'. Especially to whose who think of Marxism as being of Western origin, it is also a pointer to the fact that Marxism as an internal critique of Western society is liable to extension so much that it can be turned into the most vehement critique of the West as a 'different regime of truth' by a society which was colonized by the West.

Moreover, it seems that 'discourse' had its own turn for the 'appropriation' of the society. It is perhaps for this reason that the 'Chinese line', which reinterpreted Marxism to give the primary importance to peasants, rather than the proletariat, became particularly popular among the larger section of Communists in West Bengal in the early 1960s, by which time, the prospects of politicization of the poor peasantry seemed to be in sight to at least a crucial section of their leaders. And of all issues, the issue of 'land to the tiller' assumed supreme importance to all the Communist parties, although they went to different lengths of fighting for it, because to the Communist leaders, this was the issue which gave them a substantive basis for their opposition to the state and the Congress party. As for the poor peasants, it was a recourse to which they were pushed
economically since the 1930s and for which they were politically preparing themselves since the early 1950s.

It was, thus, only in the middle of the 1960s, when the poorer sections of the peasantry in rural West Bengal were passing through an acute shortage of food, that the first signs of the 'proletarianization' of the peasantry can be located. In the case of the peasantry, the attainment of this 'class' character was possible because of the absence of wide-spread 'networks' of particular castes, as is the case in most other parts of the country. Caste 'networks' were of course not altogether absent, but these were relatively small so that on an issue like 'land to the tiller', it was possible for the Communist leaders to kind of submerge these caste identities and 'networks' in the larger organization of the Communist parties. The Communist Party which did this most successfully was the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

A Shift in the Domain of Politics

The ten - year long urban and rural firment came to an end with the election of the Left Front, dominated by the CPI(M), to power in the State in 1977. True to its promise, the Left Front Government initiated measures for rural reform soon after coming to power. There were two basic components of the rural reform programme - the measures for land reform and the establishment of
panchayats, to be directly elected by the people, at three levels - the village *panchayat*, which more or less conformed to The *mouza*, the *panchayat samitis*, at the block level, and the *zilla parishad*, at the district level. The measures for land reform had two principal aspects - certain safeguards for holdings cultivated by *bargadars* (*bhag = chasis*) and the distribution of lands, found in excess of the ceiling on land-holdings, which were vested in the state, to the landless. The safeguards for bargadars consisted mainly of ensuring a specific share of the produce, the recording of the names of *bargadars* in the record-of-rights of *raiyats*, certain restrictions on the sale of lands under cultivation by *bargadars* and the restoration of lands for cultivation by bargadars. The measures for the distribution of land included the identification and taking into possession of lands found in excess of the ceiling by the government and the distribution of these lands among the landless.102

What is noteworthy in the provisions of the West Bengal Land Reforms Act, and the Rules made under it, is that in almost everyone of the measures as laid down in the law, it was the officers of the State Government at various levels, who were vested with the necessary powers under the Act, whether it was the recording of names of bargadars, the restrictions on sale of lands under cultivation by a bargadar or the distribution of lands among the landless. Except for some functions in bodies such as the Land Reforms Advisory Committees, constituted
at the block level, the panchayats had no direct role in the measures for land reform - whether in respect of ensuring the security of tenure of bargadars or the distribution of surplus land among the landless. Even the recommendation of such bodies as Land Reforms Advisory Committees might be turned down by the higher officials of the State Government at the district level, such as the Collector, the Additional District Magistrate or the Sub-Divisional Officer. 103 The functions of panchayats, on the other hand, were more in the nature of social service, local development work, the imposition, assessment and collection of taxes and the management of its funds, apart from the performance of such other functions which might be directed by the State government, 104 although there were some differences as to the emphasis on specific areas between the three tiers of panchayats. While village panchayats were more concerned with elementary social services, 105 the panchayat samitis leaned more towards economic developmental functions, 106 and zilla parishads emphasized on a combination of more expensive projects for economic development and the supervision of village panchayats and panchayat samitis. 107

A clear separation between the measures for land reform and the functions of panchayats had several consequences. First, this separation recognized the relatively short-term nature of the measures for land-reform, while the panchayats were perceived to be more
stable institutions which existed independently of the measures for land reform and their economic and social fallouts. Second, the separation perceived that the measure for land reform could be pursued more vigourously and speedily if the bureaucracy, rather than local political forces, are involved, because these measures are more in the nature of finishing a task, rather than introducing an issue, which has so far been the case. Third, the speedy implementation of measures for land reform through administrative measures can prepare the ground, can lay the minimum basis for the creation of a 'society', in which the bargadar no longer has to live in a dependent relation to the owner of land, so that institutions such as the village panchayat, which functions on the basis of a certain equality between individuals, can acquire a certain centrality in the local networks of power. Forth, the separation between the measures for land reform and the functions of panchayats also meant that land reform, the demand for land to the tiller, which for so long was the rallying point of the aspirations of the poor peasantry and the slogans of the Communist parties, but which was a relatively short-term measure, was expected to give way to panchayats whose functioning would give a long term basis to the interests of the peasantry. Fifth, in giving a separate and a more long term basis to the functions of panchayats, the emphasis was on the 'welfare' functions of panchayats, which would make panchayats kind of the local planning
bodies, to which the functions for the 'welfare' of the people would be delegated by the more directly bureaucratically organized planning bodies at the higher levels of the State Government.

It would appear that it was in the process of the transition from land reform as a short-term measure, to the functioning of panchayats in the long-term net-works of power in rural society, that Javeed Alam's accusation of the Communist movement as being unduely concerned with the state, in disregard of the values and institutions of society, expresses the dilemmas of the Communist movement in West Bengal today. 108 Inspite of this dilemma, however, the Communist movement has to be credited with being able to manage this transition remarkably well so far. It was not a small achievement for the movement, which originated in a fierce opposition to the state and the Congress party, as a cementing factor between the bhadralok Communists of upper-caste urban background, who wanted to take on the state in an effort to reassert their position and the poor dispossessed peasantry who received in their politicization an organized capability for opposition to the state as a 'different regime of truth', to be taken over by the bureaucracy of the state for the implementation of the measures for land reform. And it was a feat of sorts for the new Left Front Government that came to power in the State that the bureaucratic take over of the measures for land reform worked remarkably well
till about 1981. But, perhaps, at least a partial explanation of the bureaucracy's success has to be found in the manner in which the land reform bureaucracy functioned at that time: it was much in the nature of waging a war of land reform themselves. It was an "experiment with the 'feasibility frontier', of "how far", as Ashok Mitra, then Finance Minister of the State, explained in 1979, "we can push without invoking some intervention".109 In the short term, in which the major part of the measures for land reform were performed, it was an example of what John Hall calls the typically European idea of the 'organic' state,110 rather than the 'custodial' state, which he ascribes to India.111

The reason for the success of these measures during this period was that it was not only the land reform department of the State Government which moved on a war-path, but almost the entire apparatus of the state, at the lower levels of district administration, including the police, was brought into the implementation of the measures, which worked in direct collaboration with Leftist peasant organizations and the Leftist parties, which were in power in the State. The impression given to the poor peasants/bargadars/agricultural labourers, who were mobilised on an unprecedented scale on these occasions, was that the entire state apparatus, the peasant organizations and the political parties, which worked together for the implementation of the measures for land reform, stood solidly behind them. To the peasants
who were accustomed to looking at the state as their worst enemy, this was clearly an upside down view of the state.

It seems that this upside down view of the state, which was remarkably successful in implementing the measures for land reform in the short term, posed a serious problem to the establishment of the panchayats which were perceived to function in the long run primarily as institutions for the service and economic development of the whole society, apart from the other organs of the state which had also to assert their positions as the neutral 'third party', rather than ones which could continue to remain partisan to any cause.

One reason for which panchayats and other organs of the state at the lower levels of the district suffered from the inability to assert their neutral 'third party' status, was that even the measures for land reform, which were taken as tasks to be performed, rather than issues to be introduced, could not be completed in a short span of time, although a major success was achieved in the period between 1977 and 1981. In fact, in many areas, the measures for land reform introduced issues, rather than performed a task. The most important reason for this was the simple fact that in these areas, there were more people in the queue for land, than the lands that were available to the state for distribution among the landless. Besides, a considerable portion of the lands
that were targeted for vesting in the state and for redistribution among the landless, were locked in court cases, in the face of which the political parties in power and the State administration were quite helpless.

This created a condition in which a further redistribution of lands which were already redistributed had to be undertaken, so that relatively smaller plots of land could be distributed among a relatively larger section of the landless. By those who had already received land, the reduction in the size of their holdings was not taken in a quite 'socialist' spirit. This set off quarrels and gradually conflicts between the beneficiaries of the land reform measures themselves. Besides, each political party had to face up to a long queue of aspirants for possession of land, one political party which was dominant in an area sought to move into the areas dominated by other political parties, so that the vested lands in these areas can be given to the landless who supported them. Conflicts between and rivalries within political parties were inevitable in such a situation.

This required the intervention of the institutions of the state, such as the land reform department and the police, to pose as neutral 'third parties' between the disputants. Besides the question of the possession of land, the other institution to which poor peasants, bargadars and landless labourers could turn for economic
assistance, were panchayats, whose main function was the 'welfare' of the society. But the economic resources necessary for their 'welfare' was in short supply. The panchayats, therefore, sought to distribute benefits among as many people as possible. But even after that, a large number of people remained who had not received benefits. Thus, the panchayats had to start a process of selection of people for the purpose of distribution of benefits like bank loans, and since they had to look after their electoral support base in doing this, selected people who owed political allegiance to the elected leaders of panchayats.

Politics in West Bengal at present seem to have three issues. First, West Bengal is not yet a society of individuals as individuals. The relative absence of the organization of the society on the basis of caste identities, perhaps helped in the construction of the society more or less based on individuals at least among a large section of the mediators. But it is not very clear how far it really helped. For, the absence of a large scale caste-based organization of society, of course, helped in the avoidance of a head-on collision with a society organized of individuals, but it is not certain that caste identities, which do exist in society, do not break the idea of a society of individuals on a small-scale, in a querilla fashion. The fears of small-scale disruption are mitigated by the rather long tradition of Western education among the mediators in the society and
by a politics, which, in opposing the colonial and then
the independent state as a 'different regime of truth',
also shared in this 'truth' partially in not accepting
caste as the basis for the organization of society.

Secondly, in a situation in which the society has
not acquired a certain uniformity of norms which makes the
organization of individuals possible, the institutions of
the state, have to function on a rather uneven social
horizon, particularly in rural areas, where norms which
are not uniform, are sometimes posited against each other
in the functioning of these institutions. Consequently,
these institutions are denied of the autonomy, the neutral
'third party' status, which alone can enable them to
function uniformly with respect to every individual in
society.

Thirdly, the absence of a certain uniformity of
norms across the social horizon, not only operates on the
functioning of institutions of the state from the outside.
Such uniformity of norms, which is the hall-mark of an
organization, and which above all are encoded in the law
and the procedures that the institutions of the state are
supposed to follow, is absent in the functioning of the
institutions of the state in West Bengal.

As long as these three issues cannot be dealt with
effectively, the construction of a 'civil society' in the
senses in which writers like Jurgen Habermas\textsuperscript{113} and John
Keane\textsuperscript{114} have defined it, not as the thin crust of a
society constituted of a category like the *bhadralok*, but the whole society, which encompasses every section of people and every sector of the society, will remain a distant dream.
Notes and References


2 ibid., p. 149.

3 ibid., p. 150.


6 Swasti Mitter, op. cit., p. 593.


8 ibid., p. 634.

9 ibid., p. 622.

10 Kamal Chowdhuri, op. cit., p. 11.

11 ibid., p. 12.

12 idem.

13 ibid., p. 56.

14 ibid., pp. 56-58.

15 ibid., p. 58.


17 Interview, Dated August 18, 1991.


19 ibid., p. 622.

20 ibid., p. 623.

21 ibid., p. 622.

63
22 ibid., pp. 624-45.
23 ibid., p. 626.
28 idem.
29 Krishnakanta Sarkar, op. cit., pp. 618-60.