Chapter III

Debate Setting I: Agricultural Policy

3.1 Introduction

It needs to be clarified at the outset that Chapters III and IV with ‘Debate Setting’ as the common (first part) of their headings have intense and near-exclusive focus on agriculture and industry respectively – as part of positioning and articulating the main theme of the dissertation. To be more precise, the policy dimensions of these two key domains constitute the very foundation of the mediated politics that the Chapters V to VIII subsequently analyse.

Any analysis of agricultural policy in India needs to be situated in the broad trajectory of economic development, marked by a ‘journey’ from a traditional-subistence one to one based on market economy striving for a global reach. The colonial rulers had brought about drastic changes in the agrarian sector by introducing commercialisation and capital investment and changing the age-old social relationship structures in agriculture. Since 1950s the post-colonial state has embarked on a spate of reforms in the sector that encompass the issues of land relationship structures, technological interventions, food security and numerous other socio-economic infrastructural arrangements. West Bengal, representing one of the most fertile zones of eastern India, was severely hit by agricultural stagnation during the colonial regime and experienced acute food crisis followed by hunger and famine in the pre-war days. The colonial policies and the perpetuating effects of the Partition cast a lasting impact on Bengal’s predominantly agrarian economy even after independence (Bose, 1993). Against this historical backdrop, policy initiatives and reforms in the agricultural sector by the successive state governments, embedded in specific ideological stances, receive serious attention of the scholars. In the post-independence era, agricultural performance of the state under the three and half decades of the Left Front rule deserves special mention as the state had a highly ambitious focus in agriculture during this regime. The agrarian reforms of the Front government have attracted not only scholarly references in the critical discursive accounts but also evoke numerous responses and negotiations in the mass-mediated
public sphere of West Bengal. The Front politics also rested greatly on the agrarian achievements in its programmatic and rhetorical terms.

3.2 Pre-Left Front Era

The Left Front government came to power with a strong legacy of peasant mobilisation under the leadership of the All India Krishak Sabha (AIKS) in rural Bengal. After independence, the Congress government at the centre enacted the broad framework of institutional reforms in the agrarian sector with the abolition of Zamindari and Intermediary Act, land ceiling legislation, etc. Since agriculture was put under the State List in the Constitution, it was left to the responses of provincial governments to implement the reforms in the agricultural sector. Land reform along with various rural development programmes emerged as a cardinal issue for addressing the problems of the feudal agrarian relations with its exploitative tenancy structure or revenue system. During the British rule, Bengal became one of the hotbeds of peasant mobilisation. Throughout 1930s and 1940s, different parts of the Bengal province like Midnapore district, Jalpaiguri and Kakdwip were rocked by the agitations of the sharecroppers against the landlords over the distribution of produce. This assertion of rights culminated in the famous Tebhaga movement, which occupied a historic salience in India's peasant movements demanding the right share of produce from the landlords.¹ The peasant front of the Communist Party of India, Krishak Sabha, played an instrumental role in the movement and spread the spirit of protest to other parts of India also.²

After independence, the Congress government came to state power in West Bengal and it introduced a series of land reform legislations. The first piece of land reform legislation, The West Bengal Bargadars Act, 1950³, addressed the issue of tenancy rights. The Act tried to define the share of output among the bargadar (sharecropper) and the landowner and also proposed formation of 'conciliation board' to intervene in the land disputes. In 1953, the West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act⁴ was passed to implement the abolition of intermediaries and securing rights of the tenants by bringing them under the state protection. Thus, ryot-intermediary relationship was replaced by the state-ryot (a tenant of a piece of agricultural land) relationship and all rents were made money rents. However, it allowed the intermediaries to retain land in their khas (under direct
ownership) possession with a ceiling of 25 acres per person. The West Bengal Land Reforms Act was enacted in 1955, which again amended the rights, obligations of the bargadars and the landowners to some extent and arranged land assessment to check concentration of ownership in land. The Act underwent several amendments between 1955 and 1969 to secure the bargadars’ rights and fix the ceiling laws. Inspite of the progressive tone of these land reform legislations, the Acts could not minimise the role of the vested interests in rural Bengal and check eviction of bargadars from land, due to lack of political will of the Congress government in bringing a radical change in the agrarian relations. The landowners could even maintain ceiling surplus land utilising various exemptions provided under the law. The Congress party primarily banked on the support of the rural landlords and national bourgeoisie to consolidate their regime in different states in post-independence years.

The establishment of the United Front governments in the late 1960s fuelled the spirit of agitation of the bargadars against eviction or landowners’ exploitation. The two United Front ministries, that resulted from a strong anti-Congress wave and spirited mass struggle in the mid 1960s, were formed on the basis of some common minimum programmes to be implemented by a broad front of a number of non-Congress parties. Both of these governments were short-lived followed by a year-long Presidential rule in the state. The decade of 1967-77 experienced radical Left movement and counter reactions of the rulers leading to political instability and “a severe governability crisis” (Kohli, 1991: 277) in the state. Amidst these turbulent days, the United Front governments came to power with a promise of pro-poor governance recovering people’s power. One of the important agenda of the CPI(M), the major constituent of the United Front governments, was extending the support base among the lower classes of rural and urban society utilising the state power and neutralising its oppressive base. Land reform along with restoration of democratic order was conceived as the immediate task of the United Front governments, and it stressed on recovering benami (false names) and ceiling-surplus land and distributing it to the poor bargadars. The West Bengal Land Reforms (Second Amendment) Act, 1969 was introduced under the second United Front ministry to secure the right share of the bargadars over the produce. The portfolio of Land Reform belonged to Harekrishna Konar, the firebrand peasant leader of the CPI(M),
who played instrumental role in mobilising *bargadars* to materialise land reform programmes. The politically inspired land reform programmes of the United Front governments sparked off violent resistance of a section of landowners and led to forcible seizure of land from the *jotedars* (landowners) by the *bargadars* in different parts of Bengal leading to law and order trouble. The revolutionary speeches of Harekrishna Konar against the oppression of the *jotedars* induced the party cadres to initiate a militant land grab movement. Following political unrest and inner-Front differences the United Front ministries did not survive long. But, it could cast a lasting impact on land reform movements in the state at a later stage, especially under the Left Front regime.

The Congress party regained power in the state in 1971 and reigned till 1977. During this period, the earlier legislations were supplemented by another important piece of amendment to the Land Reform Act in 1972, which made *bargadars’* right to cultivation hereditary and increased his share if he supplied all the inputs. The West Bengal Land Reforms (Amendment) Act, 1975 arranged for certain rights and obligations of the *ryots* regarding transferability of holding, mortgage or partition of land holdings. Thus, under these numerous land reform legislations the security of tenancy rights were addressed, limits of land holdings were determined to abolish the concentration of ownership in land and redistribution of vested lands to the poorer section were thought of. Notwithstanding the radical tone of the enactments, the implementation of the Acts exposed the shortcomings of the laws and the reluctance of the Congress government to restructure the land tenure relations fundamentally.

### 3.3 Coming of the Left Front Government

The Left Front government came to power on 21 June, 1977, with a massive electoral mandate. It was established in a critical juncture of Indian democracy that marked the victory of popular electoral mandate in different states against the atrocities of Emergency imposed by the central government led by Indira Gandhi. Amidst an anti-authoritarian wave, the Left Front leadership “sought to address the more fundamental issue of socio-economic transformation and guaranteeing justice and equity for the disadvantaged sections of society” (Biswa, 1997: xxii) within the limitations of the “restrictive powers of federal units in India” (Biswa, 1997: xxii). On the question of
participating in a state government run under a ‘bourgeois’ constitutional structure, Jyoti Basu wrote (Document # 1: i-ii):

“The aim of our programme is to alleviate the sufferings of the rural and urban people and to improve their conditions to a certain extent. We do not claim anything more, as we are aware that without structural changes in the socioeconomic order it is hardly possible to bring about any basic change in the conditions of the people.”

The Left Front projected a tactical shift by replacing militant class confrontation with a policy of redistributive justice and democratic decentralisation. The Front leadership reflected on the goal of the government as “to adopt measures to provide minimum relief” (Biswas, 1997: xxii) to different sections of the society like the agricultural workers, bargadars, small peasants, industrial workers, middle class and backward communities.

In this backdrop, land reforms and decentralised local self-government emerged as the fundamental policy agenda of the Left Front. The Front government visualised their implementation with the active support of the grassroots organisations – the political mobilisation of the Krishak Sabha coalesced with the administrative support of the panchayats. This blending of political programme with administrative enterprise fed the debate on the much-discussed role of ‘politically’ or ‘red’ panchayats in West Bengal.

The popular electoral slogan raised by the CPI(M) in the first panchayat election in 1978, “destroy the centers of vested interests”, intended a ‘radical restructuring of power’ in rural Bengal ‘in favour of poor people’. The newly elected leadership in panchayats represented varied section of the population, from the bargadars, middle peasantry to school-teachers. The revamped three-tier panchayats were empowered to implement grassroots development schemes in agriculture, irrigation, cottage industries and other anti-poverty programmes. The rural development programmes, implemented under the revitalised institutions of panchayats and complemented by the land reform programmes, were expected to bring a decisive change in the rural profile of West Bengal.

The ruling strategy of the Front government was primarily built on the ideological scaffolding and organisational vibrancy of the leading partner, the CPI(M), which had already established a strong support base among the middle and lower strata of the rural population since late 1960s (Kohli, 1992: 287). Accordingly, the ideological or strategic shifts in the CPI(M)”s
party programmes over these three decades had attested the Front government’s development agenda, occasionally creating subtle crevasses in the coalition relationship. In light of this argument, it can be said that the Left Front government’s policy responses to the agrarian questions unfolded with interesting twists and turns over the three decades, sanctioning an overtly political-strategic shift since late 1990s.

Thus, the first decade of the Left Front rule in West Bengal can be broadly identified as the ‘peak phase’ of agrarian reforms in terms of policy prioritisation and the period since late 1990s as the ‘great leap forward’ to industrialisation. While the first phase marked championing of the land reform agenda, the second phase reflected the traits of a journey from agriculture to industry. Both of these phases witnessed distinctive framing of reformative policies and rhetorical mobilisation in agrarian sector with identifiable thrust, notwithstanding the underlying continuities.

3.4. Operation Barga: The Key

The oft-mentioned success of the Left Front, to a considerable degree, lies in its promise of ensuring redistributive justice to the rural poor and “dismantling the vested interests” (Basu, 1997: 65) in rural Bengal with the help of the Operation Barga programme, launched in 1978. The programme was built on a broader understanding of agrarian reform as part of a ‘people’s democratic revolution’ formulated mainly in different Party Congresses of the Communist parties of India (Document # 2; Document # 3; Document # 4). It visualised land reform as part of agrarian struggle to liquidate the semi-feudal and feudal remnants and developing a broader unity of the peasantry with a core focus on the poor and marginal peasants. The programme was supposed to serve two purposes: first, extending and consolidating the political-electoral support base of the Front among the majority population of the rural society; second, establishing a more democratic relationship among the government and the people. Both of these were framed on a long-term consideration. The Operation Barga programme marked an important policy shift from ‘growth with distribution’ to ‘redistribution before growth’ (Chatterjee, 1985: 19). The Left Front government addressed the lower rung of the peasantry, which constituted its main support base, in the land reform programmes. But, it also tried to build up friendly relations with rural propertied sections by proclaiming certain incentives for
them. However, the main components of the land reform programme were tied to the unfinished agenda of the United Front governments in tenancy reform – securing entitlement to the *bargadars*, recovering *benami* and ceiling-surplus land and redistribution of land to the landless. In the opinion of the leadership, the land reform programme of the state would address the “deficiencies of the traditional administrative approach” (Basu, 1997: 44) that stopped at merely legislating on distribution of land and failed to control the domination of the vested interests in the rural society, with the “active assistance of rural workers’ organisations and rural self-governing institutions” (Basu, 1997: 45). D. Bandyopadhyay, the land reform commissioner of the first Left Front government, argued (2000: 1797) that the new methodology of Operation Barga “was qualitatively different from the traditional revenue court approach”. Learning from the experiences of the United Front regimes, the Left Front government embarked on a tactical shift in proclaiming a “strong support mechanism by establishing functional linkages with the bureaucracy, elected rural self-governing institutions and rural workers’ organizations” (Basu, 1997: 44). The leadership believed that strict enforcement of existing laws with a *pressure from below* could achieve significant breakthrough in the land reform programmes (Bandyopadhyay, 2000: 1796). The renewed vision about land reform was substantiated by a change in the name of the department from the Land and Land Revenue to the Land and Land Reform Department. The Directorate of Land Record and Surveys was reorganised to deliver the fruits of land reform schemes to the marginalised farmers. One of the important preconditions of the success of the land reform programmes was the preparation of up-to-date records of entitlement. Maintenance of data was necessary to secure the sharecroppers’ lawful rights over land and the Directorate served as the chief custodian of all such records.

The Operation Barga programme attempted to rectify the shortcomings of the earlier land reform legislations and implementation of the Congress era and sought to address the reform more as a political programme rather than a bureaucratic one. For example, inspite of the ceiling on land, a large quantity of land had been retained by the landowners and the intermediaries using the loopholes of land legislation. The Congress governments did little exercise to recover excess land and converting them to *khas* land under state possession. The process of distribution of vested land to the landless also had
failed to gain momentum due to apathetic administration. The bureaucratic method of recording names of the sharecroppers in the official records of entitlement failed to bring success as the poor *bargadars* hesitated to come forward fearing retaliation from the landowners. On the other hand, the Operation Barga programme evolved a new method that emphasised the *group action* of the sharecroppers with the help of the peasant organisations to enable them overcome this fear and marked a new genre in land reform programme. The two important stages in vesting ceiling-surplus land were the identification of families possessing excess land and *benami* land and verification of claims and counter-claims. During the United Front regime, Harekrishna Konar had involved the mass organisation to gather information and evidence about the clandestinely-held plots in the village. D. Bandyopadhyay, the then Director of Land Records and Surveys, wrote (2000: 1796):

“What started off as a trickle induced from outside soon turned into a voluntary deluge (sic) of evidence coming from organized and often not-so-organised peasants and peasant groups…It broke the economic power and social dominance of the landed aristocracy of West Bengal.”

The then Land Reform Minister in the Left Front government, Binoy Chaudhury, who has been largely credited with the success of the Operation Barga programme, took personal initiative in organising sharecroppers’ camps in the presence of the revenue officials to make them aware of the Operation Barga programme. Bandyopadhyay, who afterwards became the Land Reform Commissioner\textsuperscript{14}, recollected that in one such camp at Halushai in the Hooghly district, one local peasant leader, Sambhu Tudu, enriched the programme with the critical observation that the method of recording was biased against sharecroppers, since sharecropping was a verifiable fact and not a question of law. Thus, it required active verification of the claim by the revenue officials in the presence of the contesting parties (Bandyopadhyay, 2000: 1797). The group meetings and the camps organised at the localities with the sharecroppers, especially in the evening, enabled poor sharecroppers to articulate their grievances against landowners to the officials. The revenue officials of the Land Reform department attended those gatherings to prepare tentative lists of the beneficiaries. This was followed by public verification of such claims in the field in presence of the landowners and the sharecroppers and preparation of a provisional list, which was hung up in all important public places in the village. After hearing both the parties in case of any dispute, the final registration of names was done.
This new method replaced the traditional revenue court approach with a qualitatively different and decentralised approach that helped the administration to reach the grassroots and provided a support mechanism to the poor bargadars lacking resources to approach courts to settle disputes or claim rights. In absence of such supportive mechanism in the earlier regimes, the sharecroppers were exploited by some oral contracts with the landowners that did not have any validity in terms of legal protection. The Operation Barga programme granted the sharecroppers the legal right with documentary evidence and secured the position of the landless peasantry with the help of administrative machinery and a motivated political organisation of the peasants. Even the departments like Board of Revenue were mobilised to convene annual workshops on ‘group action’ approach. According to an estimate (Basu, 1997: 56), in the first decade of land reform programme, i.e. till 1988-89, the number of recorded bargdars was about 14 lakhs.15 According to the Government data, more than 30 lakh peasants received 11.27 lakh acres of land free of cost and the social composition of the patta (document of leasehold/purchase of land) holders reflected more than half of representation of the scheduled castes, tribes and Muslim population (Document # 6: 19). The Left Front government claimed to have achieved significant success in empowering more than 1.61 lakh women with patta in rural Bengal along with 14 lakh joint pattas till 2006 (Document # 6: 19).

However, the Leftwing critics of the Operation Barga programme raised questions about the political will of the CPI(M) to desired realisation of redistributive reforms as it vowed to work within the institutional structure conditioned and constrained by the impediments of a class society. Ratan Khasnobis apprehended (1981) that the land reform programme with revolutionary potential could be reduced to an ordinary reformist one. Asok Rudra, substantiating the argument, assessed (1981) the programme as a “party-based struggle”, rather than a class struggle. Atul Kohli argued (1987: 99) that the redistributive programmes were more attuned with the reformist orientation as it diverted attention from the focus on class confrontation. Though the overall assessment of the Operation Barga programme raised mixed responses of the scholars, the consolidation of tenancy reforms had been widely acknowledged as a landmark of the Front government.

Another critical dimension of the Operation Barga programme was identification of
bargadars in land. The Left Front government amended the existing land reform Act (that is, West Bengal Land Reform Act, 1972) to include the name of the bargadar cultivating the land hereditarily and provide protection against eviction (West Bengal Land Reform Act, 1977). This amendment relieved the poor bargadars from the whims of the landowners in proving their status as bargadars in the land. Under the new amendment, the landowner was required to justify any refutation to this claim. This important piece of amendment conferred the bargadars with legal protection against eviction (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2003).

Yet another important dimension of the Operation Barga was that the state government brought all categories of land under the same ceiling limit by an amendment to the West Bengal Land Reform (Second Amendment) Act, 1981. The amendment also sought for stricter processes to identify benami holdings. The Revenue officials were empowered with greater power to locate ceiling-surplus land. Thus, in the first few years, the government could make large quantity of land available for redistribution with the help of this legislation and the proactive support of the peasants in detecting illegal holdings. This amendment was followed by another important piece of legislation, the West Bengal Land Reform (Third Amendment), Act, 1986. The implementation of both of these amendments, however, were kept waiting for long due to the delay in the Presidential assent to the bills. The “dilly-daily” attitude of the Centre, as alleged by the Front, in securing assent to the bill rocked the state politics in the decade of 1980s and the Front heightened its political campaign against the unequal Centre-state relations or “step-motherly” attitude of the Centre as serious obstacles to federal governance.

The land reform programme of the Front government was built on a comprehensive approach of rural development that marked it different from the earlier attempts. The legislations not only sought to address the issue of security of cultivation to the tillers but also stressed on the creation of alternative employment facilities for the poor and marginal farmers. The Front leadership argued that land reform would work as the basis of employment-generating agricultural production. The Left leadership proclaimed that the efforts of the Front government in land reform were not sufficient to strike the ‘final blow’ to the feudal social relationships in rural society (Datta, 1988: 34). Thus, they propagated for a ‘consistent struggle’ to change the socio-political equilibrium in favour
of the marginalised by utilising the institutional support of the local self-governing institutions like panchayats. The Front government proposed to revamp the cooperative institutions and rural credit organisations to “extend institutional credit cover to the land reform beneficiaries” (Basu, 1997: 69). However, critics argued that these institutional reforms failed to mature with desired results. Pranab Bardhan and Dilip Mukherjee found (2003a) “some evidence of local elite capture” of the rural credit and agricultural kits distributed by the government. The issue has been dealt with in subsequent sections.

The Front leadership argued that the implementation of these programmes was not easy for the state government. Resistance from the landowners, embedded bureaucratic control in rural development, innumerable litigation on claims over land rights and political compulsions to stay in power were some of the important constraints or ‘obstacles’ to fulfill the ‘aims’ of the Front government.

3.5 Other Focal Areas in Agricultural Policy

Land reform programmes constituted the very foundation of the Left Front’s agrarian reforms and political mobilisation from the beginning and accordingly, received wide public and media attention. However, there were some other aspects of agricultural policy strategies that, on occasions, initiated public debate, though with a comparatively low key coverage.

3.5.1. Agricultural Productivity

The startling success of the Operation Barga programme can be as such located in the economic breakthrough achieved in the moribund agricultural economy of the state. The agricultural policy in the first decade of the Front government included certain other components that contributed in the changing profile of the rural Bengal, which got less public attention, even in the Left discourse and rhetoric. These zones of silence in policy and propaganda-coverage, however, were recovered in the second phase of agrarian reforms with greater attention.

Agriculture in West Bengal experienced severe pressure in the post-independence period due to the massive influx of population from the East Pakistan as a result of Partition and in-migration and shortage of arable land compared to the high density of population. The
state was recognised as a food-deficit state in the first two decades of post-independence period.\(^{18}\) Despite this steady increase of population, West Bengal experienced one of the highest growth rates of agricultural production in the first ten years of the Left Front rule. The agricultural policy of the first two Front governments stressed on intensive farming and rotational cropping system to increase the productivity to a substantial level. In 1979-80 the State Plan played a major role in incorporating several important policy inputs to address the problem of productivity. It worked on basis of a comprehensive survey (Document#5: 3) that helped the government to prepare an integrated policy package to deliver long-term changes in agricultural production. Thus, while the Plan set a target of production on basis of available infrastructure, it highlighted some areas of immediate attention like local application of technology, improved irrigation, supply of high-yielding seeds, hybrid crops and mixed farming, to bring breakthrough in production by achieving self-sufficiency. These policy principles were supplemented by changes in agricultural and rural credit policies, agricultural marketing, training of farmers, facilities for agricultural researches, use of biotechnology and crop preservation through improved storage facilities to meet the deficits in food production (Document# 6: 31). The agricultural policies of the Left Front governments in the early years of the eighties projected technological intervention coupled with substantial transfer of Plan funds to consolidate rural investment.

A number of empirical surveys indicated that Operation Barga stimulated productivity of land under cultivation in the first two decades of the Front regime. The state achieved leading position in foodgrains like rice, pulses, and cash crops like potato and jute production over these decades and continued to enjoy it even in the peak periods of industrialisation drives.\(^{19}\) The state could also break the stagnation in rice production with intensive cropping and expansion of small and medium irrigation.\(^{20}\) Though there is debate on the methodology of the government’s data\(^{21}\), empirical surveys have, however, identified the optimal utilisation of land tenure reforms in raising agricultural productivity in the state. Abhijit Vinayak Banerjee, P J Gertler and Maitreeesh Ghatak identified (2002) 17-18 per cent increase in productivity in the fields of the sharecroppers during their surveys in mid1990s. In terms of intensive farming, that is, cultivation of more than one crop in a land, the state commanded a leading position along
with Punjab for a long time. Experts reiterate that one of the crucial factors behind the success story of the Front government in accelerating growth in agricultural production lies in the kind of tenure reform in the state. D. Bandyopadhyay wrote (2003: 880-883):

“Redistributive land reform, which allows poor and landless households to access land results in small family-holding agriculture which is generally more productive than large-scale farming through hired labour…The ascendant middle peasantry, always eager to increase production, took to modern cultivation on a large scale which was initiated rather hesitantly by the rural rump of the old landed aristocracy. Change in the social order coupled with the new technology brought about this amazing surge in the hitherto moribund agriculture sector.”

The party leadership argued that this incremental *bargaining capacity* of the peasantry opened a greater space for improved earning and disposable income in the hands of the rural communities in the state, which necessitated a leap forward to industrialisation.

Thus, the ‘impressive’ agricultural growth rate during the Left Front regime is posited on the critical observation by a leading scholar (Bose et al. 1999: 19) that “this growth occurred during a period of modest but significant agrarian reform” and it suggested, “greater equity is compatible with efficiency and growth”.

**3.5.2. Agricultural Inputs and Biodiversity Conservation**

One of the focal areas of the agricultural policy under the Left Front government was maximisation of the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides to increase productivity. The state occupied a higher rank in the country in respect of the use of fertiliser per hectare, gross fertiliser consumption or its quality use. The Front government’s agricultural policy also stressed on ensuring subsidised seed to the farmers, procurement of seeds at fair prices and enabling further researches to improve quality of seeds. However, the indiscriminate use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides drew criticism of a section of the agricultural scientists who apprehend great damage of soil, water and crop health and an imbalance in the biodiversity in the state. We shall mention subsequently that the Front government’s agricultural policy in later years sought to address these criticisms by endorsing an ‘organic’ orientation.

The Front government, in its state plan of 1979-80, visualised the importance of agricultural researches in augmenting long-term changes in agriculture. The Left Front government established a new agricultural university – *Uttar Banga Krishi*
Viswavidyalaya (North Bengal Agricultural University) in 2000. The sixth Left Front government also reiterated the need to “activate Agriculture Extension Service including training and visit system to intensify linkage between research and extension workers” as well as “utilising farmers’ wisdom” (Website#1) in these areas. The Front government stressed on the policy of biodiversity conservation in agriculture with the help of the State Biodiversity Board (formed only in 2004). The board formed Biodiversity Management Committees (BMC) at the panchayat and municipality levels to document local biological diversity in consultation with the local people. However, the fact remains that West Bengal could make little progress in initiating this project compared to the success of the southern states like Kerala and Karnataka, inspite of its decentralised participatory approach to governance.

3.5.3 Irrigation

Over the three decades, the Left Front government pursued a dual focus on increasing agricultural production and productivity and crop intensity by extending mechanised farm activities and bringing more areas under irrigation and High Yielding Variety (HYV) crops. The expansion and consolidation of the irrigation system as a basic component of agricultural restructuring was given utmost priority in all the Front governments’ agenda of agricultural development, along with the tenancy reform. The irrigation policy was envisaged as part of an integrated rural development programme where along with the increase of agricultural productivity and crop intensity, the potentials of rural employment were also to be explored. During the early years of the Front rule, in the three-tiered panchayat system, the Panchayat Samity at the block level and the Zilla Parishad at the district level were given with the responsibility of framing and adopting broad schemes on development of irrigation. The Gram (village) Panchayats at the grassroot level was entrusted with the implementation of the schemes with the informal help of the peasant organisations.

Development of the irrigation system was monitored by integrated efforts of the two departments – the Irrigation and Water Transport department and the Water Investigation and Development department. The Front government’s policy in the development of the state’s irrigation system highlighted expansion of the irrigation potentials of the existing
large projects. The Front’s irrigation policy stood on the basic postulate that minor irrigation system constituted the immediate and effective solution of irrigation problem and rural employment generation. About seventy per cent of the existing irrigation potential in the state was covered under the minor irrigation system. The minor irrigation potential of the state increased steadily over these three decades.

It is important to note that in the second phase of agrarian reforms in the state, the strategic shift in agricultural policy of the Front government was made evident by the approval of foreign funding in extending irrigation potential in rural Bengal. Accordingly, the World Bank and the Government of Japan were approached to invest in different projects of irrigation in the state.

3.5.4. Agricultural Marketing

Increased agricultural production and productivity opened up greater possibilities of agricultural marketing in the state to support farmers with remunerative prices of their product. It meant greater investment in infrastructural facilities like market complex, cold storage, shops, cattle sheds and transportation. Agricultural marketing provided the much-needed linkage between the rural economy and the markets and thus, it emerged as important policy ‘item’ for the transition of economy from ‘Agriculture to Industry’. The principal infrastructural component of agricultural marketing was the construction of regulated market committees, constituted under the West Bengal Agricultural Produce (Marketing and Regulation) Act, 1972. These committees were run by the funds collected as market fees. They took up various construction projects like market complex, rural huts, storage and godowns.

Another important linkage, stressed by the Front government, in the agriculture-industry continuum was development of improved storage facilities, especially cold storages for the perishable goods. In this respect, the Left Front government had faced occasional crises due to the increased productivity of rice and potato and shortage of modern storage facilities, leading to huge loss in cultivation of rice and potato. In the first decade of its rule, the Front governments encouraged establishment of state-owned storage facilities and storage run by cooperative societies. But the existing infrastructure of storage failed to meet the increasing demand of the agricultural growers and private investors started
investing in the sector. The sixth and the seventh Left Front governments decided to encourage construction of multi-purpose and multi-chambered cold storages by the private entrepreneurs and involve the marketing department in training in storage technology, quality control of agricultural products, packaging and processing. The new agricultural policy of the Left Front government called for more private investment in rural infrastructural facilities to facilitate the transition from agriculture to industry. This, as we shall see in the subsequent discussion in this chapter and in later chapters, became a controversial venture.

3.6 1990s: Entry of the Market Economy

In 1991, the then Congress government at the Centre, under the Prime Ministership of Narashima Rao, officially adopted the Liberalisation policy, marking a crucial shift to the economic governance in India. This resulted in important changes in the Centre-state relationship as well. In accordance with the emerging exigencies, the 1990s witnessed a slow but steady shift in the Left Front’s agenda of governance and development. The thrust of the first two Front governments on land reform and agricultural growth gradually made way for an increasing advocacy of the ‘necessity of industrialisation’. The shift was not simply strategic; it indicated certain fundamental policy turns inciting dissent and schism within and outside the Front. The intent of the shift was captured in the updated party programme of the CPI(M) in 2000 and in the document of the 20th State Party Conference of the CPI(M) in 2002. Instead of the modest programmatic pledge of “giving immediate relief to the people”, the updated programme proclaimed to “project and implement alternative policies within the existing limitations”, in achieving “something more substantial” (Document# 7: point 26). In this urge to project ‘alternative policies’ in the post-liberalisation phase, the new Front leadership, led by its dominant partner – the CPI(M), embarked on a redesigning of the agricultural policy in the light of two critical factors – the achieved success and the exigencies of neo-liberal economic reforms in India. The CPI(M) charted out new agenda of development of the state with a “thrust on industrialisation and the need to increase investment in industries in order to generate employment” (Document# 7: point 32).

The oft-quoted slogan of the Seventh Left Front government exemplified this rhetorical
shift aptly – *Agriculture is our foundation, Industry is the future*. The Party document explained (Document# 7: point 33) this stance in the following way:

“Since there is constant fragmentation and division of land holdings and a high proportion of rural population dependent on agriculture along with a high proportion of landlessness, it is essential that this population dependent on agriculture finds avenues for employment which will be mainly provided by industrial development.”

The policy shift pondered over certain pragmatic review of the performance of the state in the agricultural sector, especially since 1990s. It reviewed the massive impact of liberalisation and privatisation in the national economy leading to opening of domestic market to the free play of global actors, especially the rural agrarian economy. The national policy in agriculture projected a technologically advanced ‘evergreen revolution’ in the new millennium with accelerated growth and capital investment. Declining public expenditure and marketisation of public services in agriculture increasingly marked the reform phase in Indian agricultural economy. The state gradually withdrew from the role of ‘protector’ in the agrarian sector. At the same time, it intervened actively in promoting agribusiness and capital accumulation in the form of contract farming and export-oriented production. An intense political-ideological debate on the role of the Left Front government in this changing context engaged the Left parties in the Front, the peasant organisations and the broader public sphere in Bengal since late 1990s. The policy shift gave birth to a vibrant debate, which was encapsulated in numerous party documents, addresses and manifestos of the Front partners. The broad traits of the debate have been referred in Chapter VI along with the role of mainstream media in framing the deliberations.

The CPI(M) party ideologue and the then Minister of Health and Family Welfare, Suryakanta Misra, (formerly in charge of the Panchayat and Rural Development department) summed up (2007: 14) the party position in the debate on relative importance of industry vis-à-vis agriculture in the following way:

“The issue is not of industry versus agriculture, as the Opposition - who are the known enemies of the peasantry – would have us believe. The issue now is that of industrialization for the sake of the peasantry and agriculture itself. All that the State and the people have achieved on the agrarian front will be at peril if balanced growth of secondary and tertiary sector fails to take off.”
In an address, the then Industry Minister, Nirupam Sen, substantiated the aforementioned position, arguing that the changing situations had forced a considerable number of agriculturists to employ themselves in non-agricultural sector. Number of people depending on agriculture was also reducing due to the advent of technology. “So, we have to fall back on industrialization”, he argued (Sen, 2007).

In what has become a sort of anecdote, a firebrand champion of land reform, Harekrishna Konar, pleaded for a viable industrialisation policy to feed the agrarian development based on radical land reform as early as in 1970, in the CPI(M) State Conference in Garulia. He put forth the thesis with his long-term vision of the ‘aftermath of land reform movement’ in the state. The argument, however, was greeted with less enthusiasm both in the deliberations of peasant organisations and in the professed visions of the Left Front. It was, however, revived with a new thrust in the changing scenario of the 1990s. The party, at the first instance, accommodated the thesis in formulating the agriculture-industry equation. Thus, a die-hard peasant leader, Binoy Konar, came forward to vindicate the Front’s industrialisation policy, citing the historic experiences of the New Economic Policy (NEP) of Soviet Union under Lenin’s leadership. In this changing context, the sixth Left Front government prepared the draft on agriculture in 2002, which projected the direction of policy and programmes of the Left Front government in meeting the challenges.

The spectacular rate of growth of foodgrains in the state in the first decade of the Front rule slowed down in the decade of 1990s, and it stood at an average of 3 per cent since 2008. However, the state retained high-performing status compared to other states in India during this period. One group of scholars associated the decline with technological saturation and acute fragmentation of land in small holdings in the state. Massive land reform programme succeeded to expand the social base of production leading to increased productivity. But after a decade it perhaps necessitated a reversal in the tenure structure in terms of consolidation of holding to avail potential benefit of modern agricultural technology. The issue raised certain serious questions about the merit of consolidation of holding and the use of high-yielding capital-intensive technology in augmenting production in state’s labour-surplus agricultural economy.
In an exclusive interview, on the occasion of one-year completion of the sixth Left Front government in 2002, the then Chief Minister, Buddhadev Bhattacharjee, reflected on the changing visions of his government, which indicated certain zones of hype of policy framing in terms of agricultural and industrial reforms in formulating the road to development. He identified one of the primary tasks of the sixth Left Front government as consolidating the success of agriculture and achieving value addition in agrarian sector. According to him, the second step forward necessitated development of agriculture-based industries to rejuvenate rural economy (ABP, 12 May, 2002). The proposed agricultural reforms in the following years were charted out on certain radical restructuring of the Front’s traditional agrarian politics by advocating commercialisation of agriculture and massive agro-industrialisation.

3.6.1 The Critical Debate

The agrarian reform proposals, mainly framed by the major partner of the Left Front, the CPI(M), stimulated much political-ideological debate in the public domain with the Front partners voicing their dissent against the apostasy of a Left-led government in favour of big business. The Department of Agriculture belonged to the Forward Bloc, which raised strong opposition to some core areas of reform along with other small partners like the CPI, the RSP. The opposition came as well from a section of the CPI(M) itself. The civil society of West Bengal also got divided in this discursive exercise into ‘champions’ and ‘marauders’ of reforms. The vernacular media, print and electronic, emerged as a powerful catalyst in the process by framing news, facilitating and mediating debate and annotating its own schemas of development. It is interesting to note that some of the components of the new agricultural policy had appeared in the early years of the Front governments’ agricultural packages\(^{37}\), but gained neither prominence nor salience in policy pronouncements and rhetoric. The agenda of land reform overshadowed the technological investments and opening of agrarian market to private entrepreneurs in different forms from the early 1980s. Accordingly, these dimensions did not come to the surface in the policy projections of the rulers or critique of the opposition. Nor did they find a space in Bengali media’s framing of news.

After assuming power, the sixth Left Front government appointed the US-based
consultancy firm, McKinsey, to review the economic status of West Bengal and suggest comprehensive policy measures. The decision to appoint a foreign, that too an American, consultancy firm by a Left-led government negotiating with the market economy generated a forceful public debate in the state. Working on the suggestions of McKinsey, the government prepared a Policy Paper on Agriculture (Sarkar, 2014), which was tabled in August, 2002 – only after much discussion within the Front. The two most hyped and debated components in the Policy Paper were crop diversification for the purpose of \textit{value addition} and contract farming. Both these policy inputs exhibited a marked departure from the Left Front’s traditional tirade against market reforms and advocacy of a ‘pro-poor policy’ insulating small and marginal farmers from the whims of the big farmers and corporate entities. The land reform programme had addressed this catchment of marginal peasantry and the agricultural reforms of the Left Front so far catered to the interests of this section. But the new Policy Paper embarked on an investment-centred policy prescription consonant with the idea of a green revolution and accelerated growth. The peasant organisations of the Front, especially the Krishak Sabha, the mass front of the CPI(M), deliberated extensively on the policy shift in their numerous council meetings, apprehending dilution of the Front’s commitments to the lower section of the peasantry. Veteran peasant leader, Binoy Konar, reflected on (2002b: 4) this critical posturing, during the intense debate on agricultural reforms:

“The growth rate of agricultural production in West Bengal succeeded to surpass the national average on the foundation of small holding under the Left Front regime, thus defeating the so-called wise argument - \textit{small holding is not suitable for increasing production}. Keeping this tradition in tact, it is required to enable agriculture in competition by increasing productivity…avoiding the opportunistic path(of lowering wage), the peasants should be mobilized to face the situation by increasing productivity, applying the modern scientific thoughts and improved technology.” (Italics mine)

Reiterating the position in 2007, Suryakanta Misra participated in the debate with the critical issue of ‘alternative policy’ available for the Left Front in a globalised economy. He criticised the example of state governments allowing huge release of agricultural land for captive cultivation to the corporations operating in agribusiness and explained the Front’s \textit{alternative} position on reforms. Misra wrote (2007: 13):

“With respect to agriculture, we certainly cannot embark on a policy of corporate farming in the way some other States have. These states have doled out vast stretches of agricultural land (on the
pretext that they are wastelands) to agribusiness companies for captive farming…we can upgrade small farms technologically. We can do so by mobilizing public and private investment, and utilizing contract farming arrangements in a way relevant and appropriate to our situation.”

Thus, the Left Front, accepting the compulsions of neo-liberal reforms, posited itself on an ‘alternative angle’ of policy framing in a federated state.

3.6.1.1 Ways of Reorientation

McKinsey suggested opening of the agrarian market to the MNCs and national-level big business firms for commercial production in select agricultural products on basis of contract farming.\textsuperscript{38} The report stressed on the market potential of agricultural trade in rural economic growth. It also pushed for a transition from ‘agriculture to agri-business’ by exploring the prospect of food-processing and other agriculture-related industries and, in fact, popularised the term \textit{agri-business} in the lexicon of (rural) development in the state. Following these suggestions, the government proposed the release of significant quantity of cropped land under rice cultivation for diverse crop production, especially the non-food crops and cash crops, like oilseeds, pulses, vegetables and horticulture. It also propagated multiple cropping or intensive farming, depending on the character of land and bringing more area under HYV, hybrid and improved varieties of crops. Improved seed, especially produced through biotechnology researches in the state were supposed to increase productivity. Advocates of this policy shift have cited China’s success in rice production by introducing improved varieties of seeds developed by private multinationals in collaboration with the Chinese government. The following excerpt (Banerjee, et. al. 2002) is revealing:

“A more circumspect strategy, based on the Chinese model, would be for the state government to strike a deal with some multinationals in the area to develop crop suited to the particular local environment of West Bengal.”

The issue of genetically modified (GM) seeds earned severe criticism by a large section of agricultural scientists, civil and political activists in India.\textsuperscript{39} The Left-led peasant organisations also expressed their deep concern against the GM seeds and strong reluctance to allow entry to the private capital and the MNCs like Cargil, Monsanto or Delta Payne in the local seed business. Rather, they urged the Front government to activate the state agricultural farms, agricultural universities and now-moribund CADC (Comprehensive Area Development Corporation) institutions to generate new seeds applying the farmers’ wisdom and agricultural research.\textsuperscript{40}
Thus focus on crop diversification got a critical edge in the new package and indicated an important shift in the pattern of production from traditional foodgrain cultivation to export-oriented commercial crops that associated the small farmers to the global market. The Front government reiterated its policy focus as achieving self-sufficiency in food as well as diverting crop production to generate rural income. It is highly interesting that while the civil activists pointed out the vulnerability and powerlessness of the small farmers vis-à-vis the big corporations in the global market, the advocates of economic reforms commended (Chattopadhyay, 2002: 4) the propensity “to think in a big way” going beyond the “traditionally myopic perspective” of the Left.

Maintenance of soil health, more use of bio-fertilisers, efficient application of fertilisers, exploitation of surface water potential and encouraging farmers for mechanisation were some of the important components of the new policy package. The Front government projected intensive use of technology in agriculture but a section of scholars, activists and peasant leader, expressed concern about the viability of mechanisation in small holding. The ‘reversal’ in the Front’s policy thus became a theme of intense debate and the media, as we shall see in Chapter VI, played a major role in it. The Left Front rejected the idea of consolidation of holdings in the early years of land reform as it apprehended its appropriation by big farmers and jotedars. Thus, peasants were not encouraged to adopt cooperative farming or collective farming in the line of socialist economy. A few examples of collective enterprise were found in some parts of the state, which had spontaneously grown on basis of sharing of mechanised implements like tractors, deep tube wells. In the context of increasing helplessness of the small and marginal farmers to meet the cost of production, the peasant leadership took note of this unexplored strategy and urged state intervention in establishing peasant-service cooperatives to avail credit in easier terms. The small and marginal farmers, in the absence of a robust rural credit support, were struggling to produce at a remunerative price. Many scholars located the crisis in the failure of the Left Front government in consolidating a strong cooperative credit supply system over these years undermining its early commitment. The rural market was, therefore, increasingly invaded by private vendors of agricultural appliances and inputs or newly emerging unlicensed moneylenders who commanded the rural credit system with an exorbitant rate of interest. In this context, the sixth Left Front government
proposed to reframe its agricultural credit policy to generate credit on easier terms for the marginal farmers and agriculture-related industries like horticulture, food processing with the active role of the state cooperatives, cooperative credit societies and cooperative banks.\textsuperscript{41} One of the important schemes of the Front government was the \textit{Bhabisyanidhi programme} for the landless farmers to provide financial assistance to the old and incapable agricultural workers (cultivating upto 6 \textit{bighas} of land), small and marginal farmers of minimum sixty years of age and poor farmers incapable to work due to accident or illness. The programme, however, received less publicity both in media and government advertisements.

In the mid 1990s the state cabinet was expanded to create new portfolio like Food Processing and Horticulture with a view to exploit the potentials of agri-business in the state. The fifth Left Front government appointed a task force to consider six potential areas of industrialisation in the state, following the industrial policy declared in 1994. The sixth Left Front government, in its policy documents, stressed on agro-industrialisation as potential source of rural income and competitive export-based economy and approached private entrepreneurs to set up food processing enterprises and commercial horticulture in the state, e.g. in vegetables like potato. The incentive policy in food processing was framed during the seventh Front government to cater to the development of the comparatively backward areas of West Bengal and to encourage self-help groups in this industry.\textsuperscript{42} Two separate legislations on horticulture industries\textsuperscript{43} were introduced to take advantage of the proliferating agri-business in the state. The new thrust on agri-business found expression in West Bengal Food Processing Industrial Policy, 2011. Following the McKinsey proposals, the government identified six crop-specific Agro Export Zones.\textsuperscript{44}

Thus, agri-processing industry emerged as the important linkage in the agriculture-industry relationship in the last decade of Front regime and served as the illustration of the well-known slogan – \textit{Agriculture is our foundation, Industry is the future}. The strengthening of the agriculture-industry linkage found support in the advocacy of local agro-processing industries in the line of the sugar cooperatives in Maharashtra (Banerjee, et al. 2002). However, critics apprehended a possible negative effect of this policy stance on food security of the state due to the transformation of mode of cultivation to export-
oriented profitable products that would feed the industry at the cost of agriculture. They looked at the revised explanations in the draft on agriculture with its jargons like ‘impact of world trade policy’ only as a leeway to allow the agricultural resources be exploited by the big, private corporations.

3.6.1.2. Contract farming

One of the most intensely debated components of agricultural policy document of the sixth Left Front government was the proposal to introduce contract farming. The issue raised great controversy among civil activists, peasant organisations and political parties, including the Front’s smaller partners. McKinsey suggested identification of select commercial crops to be produced under contract farming to meet the challenges of the global market. Under contract farming, the farmers would directly enter into contracts with the big Indian or multinational agri-enterprises to produce a select crop for a year, which would exclusively be bought by the firm. After much hesitation, the Front government proposed contract farming in the state, but with restricted scope. It was proposed to be implemented in select crop production without dismantling the farmers’ entitlement to land. It was limited to select areas and land holdings. Thus, the government discouraged setting of large farms endowed with better technology and based on long-term lease of land through contract farming arrangements. The peasant organisations and the Front partners like the CPI, Forward Bloc and RSP raised their strong objections to contract farming as they apprehended the dispossession of farmers from land if the farmer failed to abide by the terms of the contract. The land was the only collateral asset of small farmers for contract. Besides, the absence of a support mechanism to protect the small and marginal farmers under contract farming from the uncertainties of global market mechanisms and from the whims of the multinational firms having better edge in policy space, would throw the farmers into a severe crisis of livelihood. It was argued that the socio-economic vulnerability of the farmers would deter his power to negotiate with the global firms. Many civil activists argued that the farmers would be forced to adopt alien technology and crop production, which, in the long run, might destroy the traditional biodiversity base of the country. In the context of these deliberations, a group of economists argued (Banerjee, et. al. 2007: 4215) in favour of contract farming:

“The discussion of contract farming has brought up the spectre of the Neelkuthis re-born in some quarters. It is worth recalling that the Neelkuthis became what they became with the active
connivance of the colonial state. If the present, avowedly pro-people, government is confident that it has the will and the power to protect its people if and when necessary, why it would need to close the door on very real opportunities?”

The crusaders against contract farming, on the other hand, countered the argument with the possible ‘backtracking’ of the state government from its pro-poor commitments in the present situation of intense competition for investment and increasing hegemony of the transnational firms in the national economy. They argued (Bandyopadhyay, 2003: 884): “The plight of ‘campesinos’ and the peculiar operations of these entities in the ‘banana republics’ do not evoke confidence on their standards of fair play and ethics.”

Reviewing the situation with a critical introspection, the Land and Land Reform Department, under the ministership of the prominent peasant leader, Abdur Rezzak Mollah, came out with the suggestion of a separate contract for crop production keeping the ownership of farmers undisturbed and strongly pleaded for a third party presence to ensure remunerative prices for the farmers. Accordingly, the department accommodated certain conditionalities in contract farming in the final draft.45

In the end, the aggrieved section of the Front relied on the strength of the organised peasant movement and the ‘pro-poor’ panchayat institutions in the state in the bargaining exercise with the MNCs, along with the overall vigilance of the government ‘committed to the cause of the poor farmers’. However, the advocacy of agri-business by the Front government and the initiative to contract farming resulted in some sort of churning in the public domain. It also led to a changing polemic of the sixth and seventh Left Front governments.

3.7 Concluding Note

The role of the media in agenda-setting and everyday framing of the agrarian policies and the debates by the twin acts of inclusion and exclusion, and its mediation with its own schema of development exposed the space of deliberations. As we shall reveal later, the vernacular media gained much prominence by adopting and contextualising the evolution of agrarian reforms, particularly the agriculture-industry debate in West Bengal, during the Front regime. The next chapter deals with the industrial policies of the Left Front governments in two phases – the first two Front governments and the sixth and seventh Front governments, especially the intense debates around the policy strategies.
Notes

1. The Tebhaga movement of the 1940s was a movement of the sharecroppers in undivided Bengal demanding two-third share of the total produce. The movement sparked off in Dinajpur district and spread to other parts of Bengal during 1946-47.


4. The West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act, 1953, Government of West Bengal.


7. A typical instance is the following excerpt: “Harekrishna Konar, gave a call to the peasants: ‘Landlords are getting injunctions from courts, they are vulgarizing justice. As minister I am helpless, as I have taken an oath to abide by the Constitution. But you are not ministers, you have no compulsion. Please rise. The injunction order has been written by pen, you vacate it with your plough and uphold justice!’” (quoted in Konar, 2002a).


11. The Front leaders focussed on (Basu 1997:67) the changing character of new rural leadership.


13. G. K. Lieten wrote (1990: 2270): “In comparison (to the United Front experiments), the approach of the LFG has been a more cautious one, thereby attracting from its left flank opponents the criticism that it has sacrificed radicalism for reformism.” (Bracket mine)

14. The post of Land Reform Commissioner was created under the Left Front government in April, 1978, to supervise the land reform programmes in the state (De, 1994: 25).
15. The government data (estimated till March 2006) claimed that about 15.07 lakh families were benefited from the recording of sharecroppers’ names. 29 lakh 82 thousand acres of ceiling-surplus land had been recovered and 28.49 lakh individuals had received patta (leasehold of land) during this period. Of the total area of land redistributed in the whole country under land reform programmes, 22 per cent belonged to West Bengal. 55 per cent of the total numbers of sharecroppers who have received patta in the country belonged to West Bengal. The national average showed that 60 per cent of land was owned by only 15 per cent of the population, whereas small and marginal farmers (95 per cent of the rural population) held 78 per cent of ownership in West Bengal (Document # 5: 19).

16. According to this important amendment, the sum total of all types of lands (agricultural and non-agricultural) belonging to a family would come under the ceiling limit and accordingly, excess land would be declared as vested. The government aimed to recover a large number of clandestinely-possessed lands by the landowners utilising the loopholes of the earlier Estate Acquisition Act.


18. The overall demographic pattern in West Bengal over the years showed that the density of population per sq. km indicated a steady increase with 296 in 1951, 394 in 1961 reaching as high as 615 in 1981 and 904 in 2001 (Maharatna, 2007: 1385).

19. Growth rate of food production in West Bengal showed a sharp increase of 5.81 per cent in the first decade of the Front government, that is 1980-90, from the 0.96 per cent of the previous one (1970-80). It declined to 2.13 per cent during 1990-95 (Rawal and Swaminathan, 1998).

20. Rice production in West Bengal increased with a growth rate (compound) of 6.41 and 5.03 per cent in the periods of 1980-90 and 1990-95 respectively from the growth rate (compound) of 1.22 per cent of the 1970-80 decade (Rawal and Swaminathan, 1998).


22. For example, during 1976-77, the average rate of fertiliser use per hectare was 19.1 kg., which rose to 60.4 kg. in the period 1986-87 (Document # 5: 7). The total use of chemical fertiliser also showed an increase from 1,48,180 metric tones in 1976-77 to 13, 61,000 metric tones in 2005-06 (Document # 6: 34).

23. The state government utilised the resources of the West Bengal State Seed Corporation Ltd., established under the aegis of the National Seed Corporation Limited, in production, processing and marketing of seeds and seed-related researches. Later, plan documents by NABARD Consultancy Services in 2009 highlighted the areas of imbalances in fertiliser application and its impact on soil health and agricultural productivity.

24. The BMC was required to develop extensive data bank on landscape (i.e. land use pattern, water body use, etc.) and an overview of peoplescape along with the bio-resource information and impart awareness about natural resource conservation. Thus, the preparation of the People’s Biodiversity Register can be regarded as a participatory process to frame a sustainable agricultural policy and ensure people’s access over local natural resources.

25. During the years 1977-78, the ratio of net irrigated land to total agricultural land in the
state was 32 per cent, which was increased to 68.3 per cent in 2005-06 while the national average was around 48 per cent at that time (Document# 6: 39).

26. The Irrigation and Water Transport department looked after the large and medium irrigation projects, protection against flood, embankment schemes, river erosion, internal navigation channels, etc. and the Water Investigation and Development took the responsibility of small irrigation along with water resource conservation. The minor irrigation system worked as a branch of the Agriculture department and the Agricultural Engineering Directorate till 1995 when the new department of Water Investigation and Development was created.

27. The Front government stressed on the expansion of the Kansavati, Mayurakhkhi (completed in 1985), Midnapore Canal and the DVC and establishment and exploration of new projects like Teesta Barage, Mahananda Barage and Subarnarekha. The Teesta Barage was identified as one of the major schemes of irrigation and hydro-electricity power in the northern parts of Bengal. The Subarnarekha Barage was introduced in 1994 to cater the irrigation potential of the two Midnapore districts and neighbouring areas.


29. The Left Front witnessed a change in guard in 2002 with Budhdhadev Bhattacharjee replacing Jyoti Basu as Chief Minister and CPI(M) leader Biman Bose taking charge as the Front Chairman after the death of Sailen Dasgupta.

30. The National Commission on Farmers, headed by Prof. M.S. Swaminathan submitted a series of report, during 2004-2006, on goals and strategies in Indian agriculture to address the issues of agricultural production and farmers’ distress. Prof. Swaminathan’s book, From Green to Evergreen Revolution – Indian Agriculture: Performance and Emerging Challenges (New Delhi: Paul and Company Pub Consortium, 2010), is a major work on the sustainable agriculture referred as the ‘Evergreen revolution’.

31. The Department of Development and Planning, West Bengal, organised an international conference to deliberate on agrarian crisis in less developed countries from a Left perspective from 3-6 January, 2002, the inputs (Ramchandran and Swaminathan, 2002) of which was well acknowledged in considering over the shift in agricultural policy.

32. As told by one of the state committee members of the CPI(M) during an interview taken by the researcher.

33. During the heydays of debate, Binoy Konar took on (2006) a critique of the radical Leftists’ opposition to the Front’s industrialisation policy by evoking the arguments Lenin had raised during the NEP experiments in Russia, in an article in the People’s Democracy.

34. For example, the state witnessed a decline in the annual growth rate of rice production from 6.28 per cent in the 1980s to 2.19 per cent in the 1990s (Bandyopadhyay, 2003: 883).


37. In the first few years of its rule, the Front leadership, on occasions, stressed on the ‘integral development of agriculture and industry’. The then agriculture minister, Kamal Guha, in his budget speech in the Assembly, outlined (Ganashakti, 13 March, 1979, p.1) the relationship of rural industry and agriculture, especially the food processing industry. Some of the focal areas of the agricultural policy were: improved technology, extensive use of chemical fertiliser and quality improvement technology in agriculture (Ganashakti, 9 July, 1981, p.4).

38. They selected six agro-products – rice, fruits and vegetables, flower, milk and milk-based products, fish and poultry products, for setting up Agro-Export Zones in different districts within five years.

39. Vandana Shiva is one of the well-known activists opposing introduction of GM seeds in India. The anti-GM seed farmers’ organisations like ASHA are also building networking to fight against, what they term as ‘GM Genocide’.

40. It can be noted from the targeted share of different seed producing agencies under the Eleventh Plan that about 30 per cent of the share went to the private agencies and the remnant share was distributed to state farms, agriculture universities, seed villages, self-help groups and other government agencies. In consolidating the agriculture-industry linkage, the Seventh Left Front government established Department of Biotechnology in 2006 as a potential area of investment. West Bengal Biotech Development Corporation Ltd. was created to look after the common “seed activity facility” of biotechnology in the state.

41. State Crop Insurance Scheme was introduced from 2000-01 financial year with India government, West Bengal government and General Insurance Enterprise as partners to protect farmers from loss of income due to natural disasters, insect and diseases or other crop failures.

42. Over the last two terms of the Front government, state horticultural farms and food processing centers were provided with incentives to increase production and technical support to the farmers and investors.

43. one in 2001 and another in 2007.

44. These zones were proposed in Malda, Siliguri, Hoogli, Nadia, North 24 Parganas and Darjeeling in mango, pineapple, litchi, potato, vegetables and tea production in public-private partnership mode along with a number of Food Parks and Cold Chain facilities.

45. Some of the important revisions were - i) a separate contract was to be made for the crop production keeping the entitlement of the farmers to land intact; ii) the farmer needed to be provided with some cash credit along with the technological and other consultancy support; iii) the private investors would be required to bear the responsibilities of post-harvest operations, like thrashing, storage, packaging etc.; iv) there should be specific arrangements for crop insurance to protect the farmers from crop failure; v) the government should reserve its space in the contract to mediate between the farmers and the contracting farms.
References

Ganashakti, “Works are going on to involve Panchayats in the Interests of the Farmers” (tr.), Lead, 13 March, 1979, p.1.