Chapter V

Media and the Agricultural Policy of the Left Front:
The Curtain Raiser

5.1 Contextualising Mediation

The experiment with democratic politics and governance not only involves the traditional ‘insiders’ of politics but also increasingly engages the mass media as the important player and resource, legitimising or de-legitimising the ruling agenda. As has been argued in the first two chapters, the modern press is increasingly switching over to a more active role by accommodating agenda-building functions at its core, beyond routine journalism.¹ Priming and framing of news coverage represent the manipulative role of the modern press that engages press in a vibrant deliberation with the audience in building up the public agenda. Taking cue from Doris Graber’s (1989: 11) identification of four basic functions of the press as surveillance, interpretation, socialisation and manipulation, one can explore the increasing ascendancy of the vernacular media as a meta-political institution in the expanding space of democratic governance, with its active involvement in local political space.² As elaborated in the introductory chapter, mass media, like many other non-state actors, is progressively getting engaged in a symbiotic relationship with the political process. The proliferation of the vernacular mass media, especially in last two decades, at the very local level of Indian society has nurtured the dynamic traits of local/regional politics casting great impacts on processes of policy making and nature of democratic citizenship.

From this perspective the intervention of Bengali news media in constructing and mediating the images of the Left Front regime exhibits an interesting example of mediatised politics. Over the three and half decades of the Left Front rule in West Bengal mainstream Bengali news media gradually emerged as a vibrant space of policy debates beyond routine journalism, often coalescing with the civil and political actors in agenda-setting. The news industry, especially the Bengali press, grew as an important deliberative space lending voices to and articulating interests of political and civil society, significant both for the ruling Front regime and the oppositional politics. The
framing of news, with its modes and imageries, informative and persuasive interventions created a new narrative of reciprocity between the vernacular media and the state politics. Both the mainstream media and the Front regime got sustenance from this process, as well as the oppositional politics. The routine reporting interjected by the dominant framing and counter-framings in the editorial and opinion space, including the ‘Letters to the Editor’, in the mainstream Bengali news media provided an opportunity for the audience to be an ‘active’ part of the public opinion-driven politics. This is notwithstanding the assumption of media scholars like Entman that “in place of active citizen we have publics – ‘publics’ who are ‘herded’ and ‘steered’ by skilled media operators” (quoted in Louw, 2005: 32). It is also to be noted that the media texts, in spite of its persuasive influence, are produced in the specificity of the political-economic and cultural contexts of the society, which the framing itself takes note of. The interface of the Bengali mainstream media and the Left-led regime reflects this critical discursive and communicative process that is nurtured by the above-mentioned functions of the modern press visualised by Graber or Schudson in modern democracies.

5.2 Agenda-Setting Role: Broad Traits

For the first term of the newly instituted Left Front rule (i.e. 1977-1982), the vernacular media took a mixed position in reporting the policies and programmes of the Front government, which unfolded in a more assertive way in the following years. As has been noted in Chapter II, ABP as the leading Bengali newspaper in terms of influence and circulation contributed immensely in creating a new media discourse in West Bengal by expanding the local news universe and developing new genres of reporting politics. From the very first day, it sought to play a watchdog role but developed an emphatic positioning in assessing the Front’s policy-programmes and regime functioning, carved with its own ideological filtrations. The ideological predispositions of ABP endorsed occasional blurring of roles to cultivate strong adversarial mode and accordingly, it came out to be known as one of the leading critics of the Left-led regime in the state. From the beginning, ABP’s coverage reflected a continuity of its predilection for neo-liberal economic model with emphasis on limited state and expanding private capital investment. In subsequent years, the stance got reiterated (ABP, 14 May, 2001) in a more emphatic proclamation in favour of free market economy vis-à-vis state enterprise: “The role of the
state is to construct the stairs for a proper liberal economy abandoning the dream of an improper heaven of socialism.”

Accordingly, ABP’s coverage threw light on an engaging process of mediating the images of the Left-led regime in the state, carving tenors of news framing in a distinctive way. In the process, certain interesting twists and turns were evident in the coverage reflecting occasional convergence of agenda and rhetoric with the ruling Front and the party newspaper, amidst a dominant trait of non-conformity with the Left political-ideological positioning. ABP’s representations, from the very first day of the Front rule, went beyond predicative generalisations about its ‘opponent’ role vis-à-vis the Front’s ruling agenda.

Bartaman, founded in the mid 1980s, strengthened its opinion-making role since the later years of the second term of the Left Front government (i.e. 1982-87), predominantly favouring a strong adversarial role in reporting the Front regime. Barun Sengupta, the founder-editor of Bartaman, pioneered the tradition of critical reportage of the Left Front’s policy-programmes as a senior edit-page contributor of ABP, which he continued in a more jingoist way in his own newspaper.³ In tailoring critical deliberation about the Left governance, especially its delivery mechanisms, Bartaman drew heavily on the “everyday hijacking” of the rural development programmes by the corruption-inducing dalatrantra (party-regime) of the Front in the state. Barun Sengupta was widely read, at least among a section of Bengali readers, for his crusade against the Left leadership in the state, especially against the then Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu. Bartaman’s intense coverage of the ‘failures’ of the Front government, especially regarding the issue of corruption at the very grassroot level, brought in a unique encoding strategy, hitherto uninitiated in Bengali newspaper space.⁴ It favoured an oral/conversational style, banking on dense use of personalised, narrative mode. The hard news and editorial observations, from the beginning, indulged in highly charged coverage of failures of governance under the Left-led regime and endorsed for itself a watchdog and/or adversarial role in reporting the Front regime.

One can note that the critical-interpreter role of the two Bengali mainstream newspapers, ABP and Bartaman, had often substituted the periodic ‘lull’ in oppositional politics in
West Bengal with its dominantly anti-Front stance. Thus, from the beginning, the coverage of the agrarian reforms of the Front governments in these two newspapers fed the public domain not only with essential information about the regime but also with certain critical judgments and prognosis about the Left Front rule, helping thereby to accomplish the second-level agenda setting role for the regional politics. In this context, we can also take note of Schudson’s arguments about a growing trend in journalism to promote “a single political standpoint”, which is popularly known as advocacy journalism. Schudson describes (2008: 76) “advocacy journalism of this sort is not only an effort to inform but an exhortation or incitement to participate.”

The representations of the Left governance in Aajkal were also marked by certain changing intonations over time, unfolding gradually a professed association with the Front over the three decades of the Left Front regime. The coverage of the agrarian reforms paid greater attention to intra-Front debates and ideological implications of the policies in first few years, resting broadly on an assessment of land reform programmes on merit/demerit terms. However, the stance showed an evident shift from mid 1980s with a low key reporting of rural reforms and a drift to the coverage of the Front government’s industrial, educational and language policies. This posturing, combined with the framing styles, marked a subtle tilt in choosing its target readership which had been broadly urban and peri-urban and overwhelmingly middle class. As has been argued in Chapter II, Aajkal’s representations also marked a kind of take-off to Bengali exceptionalism since late 1980s and accordingly, the construction of the image of the Front regime evolved in light of its variant shades.

Ganashakti, as the party newspaper, played a crucial role in image-building of the Front regime prioritising and articulating the Front agenda and Left mobilisation in the state in general. The transmission of the political-ideological messages of the Left Front had been substantiated by the party mouthpiece in their political campaigns with the help of the imageries of the Front to ‘counter anti-Left propaganda’ as well as ‘to influence a cross section of the people.’ Accordingly, the coverage of the agrarian and rural reform programmes converged with the prioritisation of the Front government to implement radical land reforms and followed the periodic spell of peak and/or quietude of the Front’s agricultural policy mobilisation. In this context, framing emerged as an important
polemic for the party newspaper and displayed the nuances of mediation in constructing and contesting the ‘reality’ and sustaining the image of a Left regime. It is interesting to see how the encoding of the Front’s policy-strategies in *Ganashakti* over the years unfolded as a critical negotiating exercise between the ‘party line’ and ‘objective journalism’. The style refurbished official party discourse, signified in formal language structures. The tenor of coverage broadly relied on verbatim representations of the policy declarations, keeping less room for ‘alternative’ interpretations – for example, press briefs by the then Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu, or by the Minister of Land and Land Revenue, Binoy Chaudhuri, legislative or budget speeches by the concerned ministries, or the cabinet and departmental decisions. The accountability of a party newspaper to ‘project’ the ‘successes’ of the Front regime also procreated certain traits of the advertorial mode of journalism. The oft-quoted posturing of the party organ was the recovery of ‘truth’ in reporting vis-à-vis the “false”, “half-truth” and “perverted” news of the mainstream ‘bourgeois’ newspapers. To cite a relevant example, during 1980-81, *Ganashakti* editorials embarked on an aggressive crusade against ABP’s “unlimited audacity” (*Ganashakti*, 23 November, 1980), “detestable journalism” (*Ganashakti*, 17 December, 1980), “destructive opposition” (*Ganashakti*, 17 December, 1980) and “satanic role” (*Ganashakti*, 25 June, 1981). On several occasions, it quoted Jyoti Basu and Promode Dasgupta in the first page in describing big newspapers assuming an ‘opponent’ role against the Front government. The party newspaper vindicated (*Ganashakti*, 3 February, 1980) the stand by relegating ABP’s role to the “faithful nakib (an usher) of the vested interests and the reactionary groups in the state”. The Chief Reporter of *Ganashakti* termed ‘objectivity’ as “sonar pathorbati” (stone-cup made of gold, indicating ‘a myth’) in defining the positioning of a newspaper. The party mouthpiece had always been engaged in a war of words with other ‘bourgeois’ newspapers on the ‘evasive’ canonisation of objectivity in journalism. Thus, *Ganashakti* texts produced a distinct media language with inherent logos of party ideology and programmatic vision, which often appropriated the impersonal, documentary style of the party literature. However, the language accommodated a perceptible shift in the later years with the documentary style often replaced by more flexible feature-type mode anchored with emotive expressions like sarcasm, pathos, metaphors or figurative
expressions. A few instances of such shift, as reflected in the title, are – “The Prime Minister is in full praise of West Bengal” (Ganashakti, 13 January, 2005); “Agent of the Bastughughus (one who resides in the family permanently and bring it to a ruin)” (Ganashakti, 16 September, 2005); “Bad Intentions of the News Media” (Ganashakti, 20 February, 2006). In the backdrop of these changing textual modes and strategies, it is interesting to see how Ganashakti coverage posited certain counter-framing vis-à-vis the dominant modes of framing in mainstream ‘bourgeois’ newspapers like ABP, Bartaman and Aajkal to get a mileage in the image-making of the Left governance and in sourcing a pro-Front agenda.

However, the representations of the agricultural policies in the first decade of the Front regime did not follow any linearity and thus, produced varied streaks of mediation in the encoding process. The analysis of the temporal and structural evolution of the encoding traits of the Bengali media exemplifies media’s spin-doctoring of issues in the agenda-building processes, involving certain negotiations and contestations with multiple images of the Left-led governance in the state. As has been mentioned in Chapters I and II, the study finds certain instances of loud propaganda and certain zones of silence nurtured in the coverage of the Left Front from the very first decade of its rule. It has to be mentioned that the media did not generate these zones of hype or silence unilaterally; rather it reinforced the ‘indexing’ role by substantiating political agenda of the Front or the Opposition on several occasions. However, there is no denying the fact that vernacular newspapers played a crucial part in sustenance of a policy-agenda in public deliberation and framing its ‘relevance’ for the political and the civil society. The hype not only gave publicity to policy-agenda but also influenced primacy and salience of issues, defining certain agenda as ‘crucial’ and marginalising some other as ‘trivial’. Media scholars take increasing interest in this critical constructive role – how governance issues are negotiated in the space of interface between political power and media power. Keeping in mind the potentiality of ‘decoding’ by the reader/public, it can be argued that Bengali newspapers have emerged as important cultural-political source with all their volitions for ‘manufacturing consent’ in favour of certain preferred ideological-cultural order, as well lending a potential space for information generation, policy articulation and public deliberation.
5.3 Framing ‘Operation Barga’

The Left Front, after coming to power in 1977, took up a massive drive in agricultural reform and democratic decentralisation. The Front government prioritised land reform programmes, popularly known as the Operation Barga programme, to fulfill its political commitment and electoral promises towards redistributive justice and also to consolidate its support base in rural Bengal. The first term (1977-82) of the Left Front government in West Bengal was identified as the ‘peak phase’ of agrarian reforms in terms of policy prioritisation, marked by a vibrancy of organisational effort of the Front in implementing the Operation Barga programme. The hype around the land reform programmes was gradually substituted by a marked shift towards industrial sector reforms since mid 1980s. The oft-quoted ‘success’ of the Operation Barga in bringing about certain long-standing transformations in the rural power structure of Bengal generated certain myths and imageries about the Front regime, interjected by the rhetorical frames of the Front politics and counter-assertions by the Opposition. In this discursive space how the mainstream Bengali media emerged as a link between the ruling Front and the readers in interpreting ruling agenda, sustaining certain moral judgments about governance reforms and in evoking public interests on policy-agenda, presents an interesting example of everyday media framing and intervention in political life. The respective coverage of the Operation Barga in the party newspaper and in other mainstream Bengali newspapers showed how the vernacular press was substantially enmeshed with different teleology of governance, cultivating images, myths, symbols or schemes vis-à-vis its own frame of reference and seeking to promote social consensus around public issues. In the process Bengali media emerged as an important claimant to power in competition with parties and governments as agenda-builders.

As has been argued earlier, over the three and half decades of the Left Front rule, ABP emerged as one of the strong opponents of the Left ideological regime and a prolific advocate of neo-liberal philosophy, despite its professed ‘neutrality’ in media business. A brief overview of its reporting since the beginning of the Front rule showed that ABP had assessed the successive Front governments in terms of its own development agenda which in turn visualised ‘modernisation’ of the Bengali society with industrialisation programme and an urge for global reach at its core. In the first decade (1977-1987)
ABP did not enunciate in a radical critique of the Front policy principles in general; it was rather engaged in “impact evaluation of the Front programmes”.\textsuperscript{10} It experienced “a paradigmatic shift since mid 1990s when ABP started raising questions about the basic tenets of the Front’s ideological system”.\textsuperscript{11} Aajkal, launched in 1981, began with a coverage of the later phase of the first Left Front government (1977-1982) which had already stirred the state politics with the Operation Barga programme and democratic decentralisation through panchayat reforms. Accordingly, Aajkal’s coverage delved into the ‘uniqueness’ and ‘limitations’ of the Left-led experiments with governance in general and the euphoria over agrarian reforms in particular in its framing with occasional critical observations. While it praised the enhanced ‘security’ of the bargadars under the Left regime, the coverage dominantly resided on the loopholes in the implementation of a radical reform programme through the Operation Barga (Chattopadhyay, 1982: 4).

Ever since it came to power in 1977, the Left Front government considered the land reform programmes as one of the cornerstones of its rural developmental strategies. The Front leadership visualised the massive scope of political mobilisation of the small, marginal and landless farmers against the jotedars in the Operation Barga campaign. In the first few years of its rule, the Front expressed its intentions to translate the political commitment of securing the rights of the agricultural labourers by a massive drive to register the names of the sharecroppers. The recovery of benami and surplus land in the villages and redistribution of the recovered land were the major planks of the agrarian reform of the Front in this phase.\textsuperscript{12} Sustained political campaign about the land reform policies of the Front government was an integral part of the Operation Barga programme and the party organ was given with a crucial role in this effort.\textsuperscript{13} Ganashakti was also working in a new political context – of legitimating the Left in power. The hype around the Operation Barga programme was well captured in the party mouthpiece that devoted greater space to the agricultural policy coverage than the industrial one, toeing the government’s focus, during the initial years of the Front regime. A broad convergence of the government agenda and the party newspaper’s agenda was well manifested in sustaining certain zones of hype in the public sphere. For example, during the period January-December, 1978, the land reform policies and
programme were covered in ten editorials and featured in fifty-eight columns as the Lead news in the first page whereas only three editorials and eighteen columns were devoted to industrial policy in *Ganashakti*, despite the fact that the industrial policy was declared in January, 1978 and the Operation Barga was launched in late 1978.

On the occasion of one-year completion of the Left Front in power, *Ganashakti* devoted the first page and a special page on the achievements of the Left Front government in which agrarian reforms and restoration of democratic order were given pre-eminence over other issues, indicative of predominance of these issues in state politics and the Front agenda. As has been noted in Chapter II, news framing in *Ganashakti* broke the conventional boundaries of news reporting and political campaign and from the very first day of its coverage of the Front regime, stressed on party-government networking. Its framing went beyond ‘objective’ or ‘factual’ mode of reporting and nurtured ‘political awareness’ generation for the party, supposedly in favour of the working population. Accordingly, this genre of framing often reinforced an inter-textual correspondence between news and political speech. At the same time, in the age of media explosion, the party newspaper was engaged in a struggle for space in Bengal’s local news universe that demanded certain negotiations with the mainstream news networks like news agencies, readership, advertising or even marketing. Veteran Communist leader Somnath Lahiri wrote, in the early 1980s, about the need of expanding the readership base of a party newspaper to make it “acceptable to the masses”. He wrote (1984: 53):

> “Newspaper should reach broader sections of readers. It has to churn the public opinion going beyond party supporters. The indicator of success will be mass acceptability in real sense, not cheap popularity.”

*ABP*’s preoccupation with neo-liberal industrial policy overshadowed its representations from the very first day, and its coverage of the agrarian development was largely fallout of this concern about the industrial prospects of West Bengal. *ABP*’s coverage prioritised the *feeble* industrial situation of West Bengal, particularly in the context of political turmoil of the 1970s. The agricultural policies received attention mainly from late 1977 when violence erupted in many parts of West Bengal due to the movement of recovering surplus land from the big landowners by the Krishak Sabha.
The policy of the Front government to recover *benami* (over and above the ceiling, registered under false names) land and to make some necessary amendments to the existing Land Reforms Act hit the headlines and the coverage went beyond routine reporting to appropriate an evident agenda-building role. Gradually, rural West Bengal emerged as the centrestage of state politics as the Left Front government professed its strong political intention of introducing a radical agricultural programme.

In this period *Ganashakti*’s coverage of the various dimensions of the land policies appeared to be much more comprehensive than other mainstream newspapers, as it shared the responsibility of presenting ‘authentic version’ of the policy. The mission had led the party newspaper to publicise and appreciate the less propagated aspects of agrarian policies like identifying *khas* lands, acquisition of homestead land for *bargadars*, training camps for *bargadars* to make them aware of their rights or arrangement of loan schemes for *bargadars* from public sector banks. These aspects had been more or less marginalised in mainstream newspapers like *ABP* and *Aajkal*, which preferred to focus more on drafting the *zones of hype* with their coverage of recording of names of *bargadars* and land redistribution programmes. The editorials in *Ganashakti* were often literal extension of hard news and reiterated the merits or political significance of the policy of ‘protecting’ the interests of the poor peasants against the ‘vested interest’ of the *jotedars*. Thus, the party newspaper attempted to appeal to the emotions of the readers and/or supporters by assessing land reform programmes with phrases like “bold step”, “committed to the interests of the *bargadars*”, “praiseworthy steps” etc.

**5.3.1 The Role of Krishak Sabha**

One of the important agents in the Operation Barga programme was the peasant front of the Communist Party, which played a crucial role in the movement. From 1930s the Krishak Sabha was active in the mobilisation of the landless or small and marginal farmers in securing their tenancy rights against the exploitation of the *jotedars* or moneylenders in rural Bengal. The growing strength of the Left parties among the lower and lower-middle strata of peasantry resulted, to a great extent, from the role of the Krishak Sabha to spearhead the battle against the *jotedars’* domination, which culminated in the radical, violent upsurge in the Naxalite movement in the late 1960s.
The United Front ministry, with the Left as the major constituent, undertook certain administrative measures in favour of the landless farmers in the countryside during this period. The Krishak Sabha had always been the driving force behind this struggle of the dispossessed sharecroppers and contributed largely to set the political agenda of the Left Front government in 1977. It can be argued that the larger share of the success of the Operation Barga programme was attributed by the Left leaders to the sustained political effort of the peasant front of the CPI(M). It was their intervention that resulted in a new genre of populist democracy in rural Bengal in post-1977 period.

From the very beginning of the Left Front rule, ABP editorials and post-editorial essays emphasised the legal implications of transformatory politics, drawing on normative judgments about the role of the Krishak Sabha in the programme. It posited the issue in the context of a ‘deteriorating’ law and order situation in the countryside. Thus, the op-ed pages apprehended possible outbreak of violent conflicts around land ownership in rural society as a result of the policy and the aggressive tone of mobilisation of the peasant front in sustaining the policy. ABP’s much use of the term ‘land capture’ and reference of *benami* land in quotes hinted at proposing a counter-discourse to the party rhetoric of ‘land recovery’ from *jotedars*. *Ganashakti* alleged a predisposition of ‘class bias’ in reporting of the land reform movement by the mainstream ‘bourgeois’ media. ABP’s coverage raised concern about “dismantling production in the name of justice to peasants” and held (ABP, 13 November, 1978) the Krishak Sabha responsible for the disorder. *Ganashakti* joined the debate in favour of the mass front’s intervention in ‘recovery’ of land and visualised the role of the state government only as a *facilitator* in implementing the Front’s land reform programme. Its coverage strongly advocated the sustained effort of the peasant movement to this end. Accordingly, *Ganashakti* representations glorified and provided greater space to Krishak Sabha, especially during harvesting period when the role of the organisation was glaringly evident in ‘securing’ sharecroppers’ claims to land.

In its framing and narrative strategy, during the peak period of land movement, ABP popularised the term *bargi* to identify the aggressive party cadres, especially of the CPI(M) and the Krishak Sabha, in the common usage of its political reporting. The term was well accepted in the speeches of the opposition leaders as well. In 2007, ABP regenerated the usage with a new coinage, *harmad bahini*, keeping the same
connotation, which was extensively used as a popular political jargon, as a symbol of CPI(M)’s political militancy. Ganashakti later responded with its own coinage of bhairabbahini (a militant band of Lord Shiva in Hindu religion), to describe the Congress-supported jotedars and their groups. This term, with its rhetorical fervour, also found favour among the Left cadres, especially in the later years of the Front regime.

5.3.2 The Areas of Tussles

The land reform programme generated different tactical moves in the Front politics around these issues, which in turn marked a subtle difference in public posturing of the party and the government. ABP captured this party-government dynamics even in its routine reporting. The then State Secretary of the CPI(M) and the Chairman of the Front, Promode Dasgupta, defended the clashes around land in rural areas with the argument that the jotedars had captured land forcibly, which were leading to the conflict. He strongly criticised the ‘conspiracy’ and argued that the CPI(M) would take the side of the bargadars in any dispute between the owner and the bargadar (ABP, 15 August, 1978). On the same day, in the same front page, ABP reported (ABP, 15 August, 1978) the then Chief Minister’s statement that his government would not ‘tolerate’ any ‘forcible recovery’ of land, and that the principle of the Front government was to follow the ‘rule of law’.

Over the three and half decades of the Front rule, ABP’s mediation strategy went on inducing readers to a perceived conflict between the hardliners and pragmatics within the Left Front and the government. In the first decade of the Front regime, ABP built up its narrative of intra-party tension in the CPI(M) between the ‘orthodox’ followers of Marxian canons like Promode Dasgupta, the then State Secretary of the CPI(M) and the Front Chairman, and the ‘realist’ politicians like Jyoti Basu, the then head of the Front government. It surfaced in reporting land reform programmes and industrialisation efforts in the early years of the Left Front regime and led to a more emphatic coverage around industrialisation agenda in the later years of the Front rule. In the context of industrial policy, ABP editorial wrote (ABP, 16 May, 1985):

“Like a prudent administrator, he (Jyoti Basu) has said that the Left government is interested in cooperating with the private enterprise in the interest of development … this relative deviation
from the so-called conservative Leftism is mainly resulting from administrative experiences of eight years.” (brackets mine)

During the sixth and seventh Left Front regimes, ABP sometimes branded the intra-party dynamics as ‘hardliners’ versus ‘Bengal line’ only to entice the Bengali readers to a possible rallying against the hegemony of the central leadership of the CPI(M).20

The political agenda of redistributing the recovered land to the landless peasants and recording of the rights of the sharecroppers paved a number of important amendments in the Land Reform Acts and corresponding government directives. A comprehensive policy was developed in late 1978 to decide over the share of the produce and occupancy right, which may be termed as the first attempt of the Front government to translate its political goals into government’s policy-directives. As has been mentioned in Chapter III, the Operation Barga programme was well-known for launching a new methodology of state action whereby the villagers were encouraged to air their claims and grievances in the locally organised evening group meetings in the presence of the land revenue officers. As the party assessed the programme in later years it identified two major problems in operating the Operation Barga programme – first, to identify the real sharecropper; and second, to overcome the legal obstructions like injunctions. However, the then Chief Minister Jyoti Basu, on several occasions, had identified (1997: xii) this methodology as “a significant shift of the balance of class forces away from the landlords, the rich peasants to the poorer people”.

ABP welcomed the “intention” of the Operation Barga programme as “good” but took a sharply critical stance in evaluating the implementations of the programme. The ‘commitment’ of the Front government to the claims of the ‘real bargadars’ and against their eviction was placed in the Lead news (ABP, 10 November, 1978). However, it apprehended an implicit ‘invitation’ to the possibility of violence as repercussions of the government’s policy in upholding the right of the bargadars, especially the evicted bargadars (ABP, 13 November, 1978). Criticising the agricultural policy as a whole, it suggested that its objectives should be two-fold: i) peasants should get their due; and, ii) agricultural production should be sustained. It argued (ABP, 13 November, 1978) that the policy of establishing the share of the evicted bargadars and punishing the owner for depriving the bargadar by recruiting others in place of him, would bring in
conflict between two poor wage labourers in the village. On several occasions, ABP’s coverage confronted the land reform policy with scathing criticism, highlighting the segregation of the intention from practice. It raised (ABP, 2 June, 1979) questions about the rationality of the policy in terms of legal dimensions and tried to remind that the Operation Barga did not come under the statutory provision of the West Bengal Land Reforms Act, but was “a non-statutory reformatory planning”. Accordingly, it hailed (ABP, 2 June, 1979) the High Court verdict in June, 1979, which refused to accept the Front government’s explanation about the existing provisions of the Land Reforms Act in implementing the recording of the Barga. The Court directed the government to act in accordance with a legal procedure. The editorial chastised (ABP, 2 June, 1979) the government for following its “own preferred explanations” instead of “due process of law” and “facing consequences of its own action”. The op-ed pages covered the legal shortcomings of the Operation Barga on several occasions. A legal expert observed (Pal, 1978: 4) that the most “dangerous and anti-people provision” was that there was no scope of listening to the owners’ opinion whose land had come under Barga settlement and as a result, anybody claiming share would get the entitlement recorded. The observation vehemently rejected (Pal, 1978: 4) the policy-principle as untenable “in any civilized country”. Many small and marginal farmers, who took tractor on rent or bought a plough from others and cultivated land by paying cash to agricultural labourers, were also recording their names as bargadars, as it reported. The editorial pages had consistently gone beyond referential communication to indulge in connotative expressions in evaluating the agrarian policy. Thus, they harped on the ‘ politicisation’ of a well-intended “genuine” policy in the hands of some “imprudent”, “opportunist” politicians. The op-ed article concluded with (ABP, 2 June, 1979) a lament about the fate of the programme, using popular Bengali idioms like drowning in “swakhato salil” (self-dug water-body), thereby implying facing consequences of one’s own illegal actions. In subsequent years, ABP’s representations rested greatly on this premise of politics of clientalism in assessing the land reform programmes. The ‘political’ intention of the programme, on the other hand, was justified in Ganashakti in terms of the ‘interest of the bargadars’.
A veteran journalist and the former senior political commentator of ABP, Barun Sengupta, argued (1979a: 4) in his article that “sheer temptation” of expanding the party base was leading the politicians, especially the CPI(M) workers, to make false recording by forcing the Land Revenue Department officers. It was creating “a division between two poor labourers” (Sengupta, 1979a: 4), one supporting the party and the other a ‘non-supporter’. He pointed out (1979a: 4) that the big jotedars were making ‘secret arrangements’ in almost every district with the party babus (party’s higher leadership) to record falsely the barga settled land as self-cultivated land. The subsequent coverage also delved into the ‘dissent’ of the Front partners like Forward Bloc, or the opposition of the Janata party, on the eviction of ‘real’ bargadars from land and complained of the riot of the bargis in rural Bengal in the name of the Operation Barga. The then President of the West Bengal Provincial Committee of Janata party, Fazlur Rahman, alleged the harassment of the landowners in the CPI(M)-dominated villages. It is in this backdrop of ABP’s framing strategy of highlighting ‘breakdown of law and order’ in rural Bengal, the party organ solidly stood beside the government in restoring the ‘interests’ of the bargadars during harvesting of crops. Its coverage shared the concern of the Land Revenue ministry about the regular occurrence of violent conflicts during the harvesting time, fuelled by the “opposition of the jotedars”. It did so with a regular space provided to the ‘request’ of the Chief Minister, the Land Revenue minister and the Krishak Sabha to maintain peace and order, particularly during harvesting season. It joined the debate, rallying with the Front leadership on the ‘legal constraints’ in implementing an ‘alternative’ land reform programme in a federated state. At the same time, conforming to the militant and political spirit of the movement, the Ganashakti Lead went overboard with the warning of the Front Chairman in blaming the jotedars as “creators of trouble” and observed that the Opposition like the Congress and Janata Dal were taking side of the jotedars (Ganashakti, 12 August, 1978; Ganashakti, 15 August, 1978). In an anchored feature in the front page, the party newspaper criticised the role of these parties in the legislature in raising private motions against the Operation Barga. The reports were framed with a strong warning tone and reflected (Ganashakti, 10 December, 1978) a conscious
entrenching of vertical division along class lines – “Opposition to the Operation Barga would mean acting as broker or agents of the big landowners”.

5.3.2.1 Assessment of the Land Reform

On the occasion of two years of the Left Front government on 21 June, 1979, Barun Sengupta embarked on an assessment of the performance of the government in general in a post-editorial in ABP. The political commentary was a fine balancing exercise in identifying the ‘achievements’ and ‘failures’ of the Front government and reflected broadly ABP’s posturing on the agrarian reform of the Left Front. He observed (1979b: 4) that the Front, especially the CPI(M), had been able to expand its influence extensively in the rural area but its influence and support base in the urban area had been eroded.24 With his unique personalised style of anchoring, he appreciated (1979b: 4) the ‘positive’ dimension of the land reform programme as follows:

“The poorest of the rural population, that is, the daily wage labourers, the small bargadars and a section of the lower-middle class population – the chief support base of the CPI(M), have been benefited by the Left Front. The Left Front has done much for them...for the first time, large sections of the rural population are able to feed their families even when they have no work in the land.”

This argument substantiated the Front’s claim of betterment of economic condition of the poor in villages as a result of the Operation Barga. However, the article carried (Sengupta, 1979b: 4) the caustic remark as well that “the wheat distributed under the Food for Work programme without price is actually provided by the Centre; though the poor villagers are informed that they are getting wheat only by the favour of the CPI(M) regime”. At the same time, the author severely criticised (Sengupta, 1979b: 4) the Front regime for encouraging “politics of clientalism” in rural Bengal. Inspite of Sengupta’s disappointment about the slow progress of the Operation Barga, he observed (1979b: 4) that “lakhs of sharecroppers were hopeful that the CPI(M) would arrange a legal entitlement to agricultural land for them and they would be secured against whimsical eviction by the owners”. The post-editorial took note of the achievement of the Front government in increasing the wage of the agricultural labourers at least nominally and admitted (Sengupta, 1979b: 4) that it was “a direct result of the movement of the Leftists.” However critical, the assessment reflected on
the growing political and social trust of the rural lower-middle class on the Left Front, especially the CPI(M). It can be argued that a number of scholarly works on politics of West Bengal corroborated this view that the land redistribution programme strengthened the support base of the Left, especially the CPI(M), among the lower stratum in rural Bengal. Atul Kohli wrote (1991: 290):

“Families with small landholdings provide the CPI(M)’s main political base. Many of the party’s ideologically loyal cadres are from this social background. Additionally, the CPI(M) has sought to build its own version of “machine politics” to incorporate this social stratum. The revamped panchayats (local government), for example, provide one crucial component of this design.”

At the same time, ABP’s evaluation showed a strong concern about the dissent of the well-to-do population in rural society, prompting Ganashakti’s allegation of ‘class bias’ of the ‘bourgeois’ newspapers. According to ABP, the value of bargha land had steadily decreased and the cost of cultivation escalated due to the increased wage. Barun Sengupta argued (1979b: 4): “The middle class and the upper class people of the rural society in West Bengal are very much aggrieved with the CPI(M) for their financial loss, on the one hand, and for the loss of social authority and leadership in the village, on the other.” Aajkal also shared the concern, on a later occasion, though with a milder tenor, as it covered the dissent of the Front partners like Forward Bloc in the legislature about the lack of attention of the Front government to the interests of the middle peasants. However, reflecting a ‘friendly’ tone, Aajkal, while quoting the ‘warning’ of the Forward Bloc leader, Bhaktibhusan Mondal in the Assembly, also diluted the allegation by balancing the ‘dissent’ with the ‘assurances’ of the then Land and Land Reform Minister, Binoy Chaudhury “to protect the interests of the middle peasantry by the state government” (Aajkal, 19 September, 1982).

As noted previously, as early as in 1979, ABP popularised the familiar critique against the Front regime that the gradual increase in influence of the CPI(M) was basically “a product of the politics of patronage” (Sengupta, 1979b: 4) and warned of its dangerous political implications for the future of a party organisation. The argument received strong support in some of the academic exercises on West Bengal politics as well. In assessing the ten years of the Left Front rule in 1987, Partha Chatterjee reiterated (1997: 126) the same argument by pointing out that certain qualitative changes did
occur in “the attitudes and self-confidence of the majority of the poor, landless, low-caste peasants in West Bengal villages in their dealing with the wealthy and the landed” due to institutional reforms, but the continuation of the Left Front in power had also “fostered a much wider network of the politics of patronage (and hence also a certain degree of corruption and favouritism).” During the first phase of the Operation Barga, the Front government and the peasant fronts expressed their deep concern about the identification of real claimants to land, which, they believed, was a major cause inciting conflict in villages. At several meetings with the concerned departmental executives, the then Land Reform Minister, Binoy Krishna Chaudhuri, emphasised the policy of distributing khas land as pattas to the ‘real’ cultivators. Negating the well-circulated criticism in the mainstream ‘bourgeois’ media of emerging ‘politics of clientalism’ in rural Bengal, Ganashakti repeatedly projected (Ganashakti, 21 January, 1978; Ganashakti, 20 July, 1978) the peasant fronts’ ‘call for vigilance’ over the process, with editorials reiterating the Front’s prophecy of distributing patta to the real claimants “without considering the party identity of the bargadars.”

In the first two years (1977-78), that is, the peak period of formulating the Operation Barga, agricultural reform policies of the Front government hit the headlines in the front page of ABP for seventeen days and figured in thirty-five columns. Ganashakti devoted one hundred and twelve columns on agrarian policies as the Lead report during the period. ABP, inspite of its critique of several policies of the Front, did not blot out major governmental decisions on the whole. The routine reporting in the front page of ABP were normally limited to the occasional reference of cabinet deliberations or the press briefs by the then Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu and the Minister of Land and Land Reform, Binoy Krishna Choudhury. These reporting reflected only selectively on the legislative debates and enactments of certain important aspects of land reform, punctuated by editorial commentaries. On the other hand, Ganashakti carried forward the task of mobilising public support in favour of the government by consistently covering the deliberations over land reform legislation and thereby, reinforcing the ‘stand’ of the Front leadership in favour of the bargadars “inspite of the limited powers” of the government. At the same time, it upheld other ‘positive’ aspects of
agricultural reforms with wide coverage like the rural credit or food policy, particularly the land revenue policy.

5.4 Land Revenue

One crucial debate that stirred the public domain, during the early years of the Front rule, was the West Bengal Land (Farm Holding) Holding Revenue, 1979 legislation which replaced the old system of revenue by introducing the provision of ‘rated value’ in assessing the amount of land revenue. Ganashakti extensively covered (Ganashakti, 29 August, 1979) the “progressive component” of the new bill, especially in the Lead coverage, which, it assessed, aimed to “come out from the existing feudal revenue system” in the state.25 It argued that as early as in 1977 the Left Front government attempted a revision of the old feudal revenue system by lowering the rate in favour of the small and the medium farmers. But even the party mouthpiece acknowledged (Ganashakti, 29 August, 1979) that the amendment was not a “sufficient” intervention because it was made on the “existing structural arrangements”. The K. N. Raj Committee on Taxation of Agricultural Wealth and Income (1972) suggested restructuring of agricultural holding tax on progressive rate. The suggestions had not been accepted by most of the states. Ganashakti projected (Ganashakti, 29 August, 1979; Ganashakti, 1 September, 1979) that it was only the Front government, which took the initiative for “a radical change” in the land revenue system. This bill also arranged for a five-year period of tax fixation that could be extended up to ten years. The party newspaper hailed (Ganashakti, 29 August, 1979) the Act as a “progressive change” and an “exemplary one” (Ganashakti, 1 September, 1979) and emphasised that it was a fulfilment of the Front’s electoral promise to the small and marginal farmers.

The new land revenue policy was also welcomed (ABP, 4 September, 1979) in an ABP editorial as a “bold step” exemplifying the Front government’s “sympathy” to the poor farmers. Here, ABP’s editorial assessment interestingly converged with the party organ’s rhetoric that the law would bring “a radical change” in the land revenue system of the state and would exempt the poor peasant families from the revenue burden.26 Marking an evident contrast with its previous assessment, the pace of the Operation Barga and the involvement of the Panchayat in village development were also
acclaimed in the same editorial, moving away from its earlier critique of “slow pace of the Operation Barga” (Sengupta, 1979b: 4). As has been argued in the previous section, ABP’s coverage of the Operation Barga was primarily created out of the concern for the ‘rule of law’ and ‘agricultural production’. Accordingly, the editorial raised (ABP, 4 September, 1979) doubts about the effectiveness of the revenue reforms in terms of agricultural production, as it might lead to “fragmentation of land into small plots”. The concern raised by ABP about the possible repercussion of fragmentation of land on production received a certain degree of recognition among the advocates of modernisation of agriculture based on capital investment and technological breakthrough. The editorial also sought to intensify the debate about the aversion of the small peasantry to use modern cultivation methods and thus, reinforced the claims of the Opposition of a gradual decline in the agricultural production in the state. It perceived that the new land revenue system might encourage more and more fragmentation of ownership by transfer of names and would act as an ‘obstacle’ in augmenting production. This ‘reading’ led the reader to the dominant economic paradigm about the ubiquitous link between fragmentation and technology as one crucial variable in agrarian production.

5.5 Debating Rate of Production

There was an intense debate on the possible implications of land redistribution on the existing agrarian set up in different forums of peasant organisations of the Left Front and the Opposition also raised the issue of the ‘declining’ growth rate in agriculture in the state. The polemic was largely unattended in the front page reporting of the Bengali newspapers, even in the party newspaper. ABP pursued its critique of land redistribution policy even in the mid1980s and held it as one of the primary factors behind the ‘slow’ growth rate of agricultural production in the state. It criticised the Front leadership for being ‘reluctant’ in transferring agriculture in the hands of ‘rich’ peasantry like in Punjab and Haryana. The arguments went high-pitch in favour of the premise – ‘agriculture, in essence, is also an industry’, and called for “a minimal size of the farms to augment profitable production” and efforts to “encourage farmers to utilise modern technology” (ABP, 12 April, 1985). Over these years, ABP representations reflected a persistent continuity of its support in favour of an “enabling condition for
the growth of successful and smooth development of capitalism in agriculture” \((ABP, 12 April, 1985)\). It indulged into the agriculture-industry debate more aggressively with its own counter-rhetoric of ‘modernisation’ in agriculture during the later phase of the Front regime. The stand strongly vindicated \((ABP, 12 April, 1985)\) the “pragmatism” of economic growth vis-à-vis the “cheap sparks of romantic idealism” or “cultivation of theory” by the Left.

As an emphatic supporter of economic liberalisation \(ABP\) advocated intensive capital investment in agriculture to secure remunerative prices in agricultural production. During the period 1977-85, \(ABP\) was strongly criticising the lack of emphasis on the modernisation programmes in the Front’s agricultural policy, like increase of agricultural output, irrigation system, flood control measures, converting fallow lands into arable ones. The op-ed pages reflected repeated concern about the declining rate of agricultural production under the Left regime due to fragmentation of land and aversion to capital-intensive technology. The arguments about the declining rate of productivity were, however, strongly contested by the Front government and the party newspaper, often with data analysis. \(Ganashakti\)’s coverage of the issue of productivity in agrarian sector under the Front regime rested on, what Stuart Hall termed as, \textit{oppositional code} – negotiation of an alternative reading of the dominant economic argument about agricultural production in small holdings. The Front government claimed (Document#1: 9) that “the annual rate of growth in agricultural production (5.9 per cent) in West Bengal far outstripped the national rate (2.8 per cent)” during the period 1980-90. The Krishak Sabha leaders believed that a comprehensive package of incentives and subsidies like improved seeds, organic fertiliser and expansion of irrigation facilities could work towards increasing productivity in small plots. The argument was corroborated by a number of empirical surveys on agricultural productivity in West Bengal under the Left Front regime.\(^{27}\) The “leading performance” of the state in rice or potato production was widely publicised by the Front leadership as their “unique achievement” in agricultural sector and continued to draw sustenance as one of the electoral issues even in the later years.

The peasant leadership of the Front, however, debated intensively over the problems of productivity in small lands and accordingly, worked upon an extended definition of
land reform to include both improvement of productive forces and changes in production and power relations. For example, while the CPI(M) peasant leadership was not in favour of large-scale cooperative farming to augment production, the RSP leadership advocated consolidation of land to avail greater productivity. ABP’s coverage rarely addressed these debates and dissensions within the Front and largely closed off different views in this issue. It was not restored in Ganashakti coverage as well in order to blur the image of a divided Front. However, during the sixth and seventh Left Front regimes, when the agrarian reforms resurfaced in state politics with renewed vigour, ABP devoted greater space on intra-Front dissentions. The framing strategy rested on severe criticism of the ‘objections’ of the small partners of the Front in augmenting reforms, vindicating its own developmental logic of capital-intensive production. Since mid1980s, Bartaman also paid greater attention to the ‘dissent’ of the Front partners in its coverage, but from a different vantage point. Its framing strategy centred around the critique of the tendency of hegemonising the Front by the dominant partner, CPI(M). Thus, gatekeeping role of the respective newspapers indulged in a sort of competition to silence ‘other’ views and/or discourses vis-à-vis hegemonic or preferred ones.

5.6 ‘Class Bias’ as an Issue

As the land reform movement gained intensity with partisan and administrative enterprises, ABP was gradually manifesting a posturing in support of the landed gentry, though in a very subtle way, built on the opinion pages. Barun Sengupta strongly argued (1979c: 4) that “about ninety five per cent of the middle class population in the suburb area of West Bengal was against Operation Barga” and “they would voice their possible jihad28 against the government in Assembly elections”. ABP editorialials and post-editorialials, from the initial years of the Front regime, had paid serious attention to the sentiments and dissent of the big and middle proprietors of land in rural Bengal and also the urban middle class, evidencing a prejudiced disposition with the upper and middle class. With the rising fervour of the movement in favour of landless and marginal population in rural Bengal, ABP’s arguments reinforced (Sengupta, 1979c: 4) the disappointment of this well-to-do section fiercely critical of the Left Front and optimistic of the return of the Congress party in the next election. It went beyond the
threshold of ‘neutrality’ expressing the concern that the damage to the interests of a much larger section of population by the Operation Barga had been more than that of the abolition of the zamindari system. ABP believed that the bargadars and agricultural labourers possessed little influence in the society, while the big and middle land owners controlled the rural economy and social life. So, the latter would put a strong resistance to the electoral prospect of the Left Front. Barun Sengupta even predicted (1979c: 4) a strong setback of the Front, especially the CPI(M), in the local panchayat and Assembly elections. The apprehensions about the reactions of the upper class population of rural Bengal was also shared by Aajkal, though it was done with a much detached tone. This concern of Aajkal about the increasing polarisation of the rural society received a fairly consistent coverage in the early 1980s and got strengthened (Aajkal, 31 January, 1985; 1 February, 1985) in the backdrop of a rethinking process within the Front about the ‘actual reaction’ of the Operation Barga in the mid 1980s. Aajkal attended the ‘concern’ of the central committee of the CPI(M) about the reactions of the land reform in the state with much importance. As noted previously, ABP coverage also touched upon the politics of emerging vertical social divisions in rural areas under the Front regime and tried to prioritise the agenda of the well-to-do section of the rural society as its potential readers.

The divergence between media houses in articulating the interests of the upper section of the rural society had been captured in the party newspaper’s analysis as the ‘class bias’ of the mainstream ‘bourgeois’ press, especially of ABP, and was well placed in the Front’s rhetorical mobilisation around the “vilification” campaign of the media against the Front government. Interestingly, contrary to the dominant assumptions of a section of Bengali mainstream media, many scholars mentioned a steady growth of “workable relationship” (Kohli, 1991: 291) between the well-to-do landowners, urban businessmen and the CPI(M) in subsequent years of the Left Front regime. Atul Kohli argued (1991: 267) that “…the CPM has adopted a non-threatening approach toward property-owning groups, whose role in production and economic growth remains essential for the long-term welfare of the state.”
5.7 Tussle with the Centre: The Take-off Stage

The West Bengal Land Reform (Second Amendment) Bill\textsuperscript{31} was placed in the Assembly in April, 1981. The government amended the Land Reform Act to include all categories of land under the same ceiling limit to avail more vested land, both agricultural and non-agricultural, and to determine the \textit{benami} character of land with more precision. \textit{Aajkal} provided only a three-column space in front page to cover the bill by a verbatim representation of the press conference of the then Land Revenue Minister, Binoy Chaudhury. However, the report, projecting the ‘benefits’ as stated by the minister, also commented (\textit{Aajkal}, 17 April, 1981) that the bill had generated much debate and interest outside the legislature, referring to its description as a “Land Destruction bill” by the Opposition. The Land Reform bill could finally be introduced in the legislature in 1986 after much tussle with the Central government. The Front took up the issue in its political campaign, arguing that the ‘inordinate delay’ in accessing Presidential assent to this bill was “politically motivated” and had thwarted the pace of land reform in the state. It sought to rely on the popular rhetoric that the political limits of the Centre-state relations were contrived to frustrate the radical land reform legislations in the state. The Front mobilised the provincial electorate with its war cry of “step motherly attitude” of the Centre towards the state.

An important strand in framing emerges here, which represents the interface of media agenda and government and/or party agenda in determining the ‘primacy’ and ‘salience’ of issues. The dissent against delaying Presidential assent to the land bill occupied serious attention in party newspaper and also in the propaganda of the Front as a “political motive” and “dillydallying” (\textit{Ganashakti}, 13 July 1982; \textit{Ganashakti}, 17 September, 1982) of the Centre to thwart development in the state, but was highly marginalised in \textit{Aajkal} or \textit{ABP}’s front page coverage in those days. \textit{ABP} gave it only a one-column coverage in the first page (not as a Lead news) and reported the “reservations” of the Centre in granting assent to the bill apprehending court cases, floating the ‘other side’ of the story and appreciating the scrutiny of the bill as “justified” (\textit{ABP}, 14 July, 1982). Thus, contrary to the Front’s claims, the delay in the Presidential assent to the Land Reform bill was rather justified on ‘pragmatic’ grounds in the ‘bourgeois’ newspaper. Here, the framing reflected \textit{ABP}’s preoccupation with
industrialisation programme vis-à-vis the agrarian reforms, vindicated by its ‘focus’ in the representation of the issue. During the first term of the Front government, ABP pursued a strong critique of the ‘discriminatory attitude’ of the Centre in respect to industrial licensing, freight equalisation policies, echoing the arguments of the Front leadership and the party newspaper. Con contradicting its own positioning vis-à-vis the issue of Presidential assent to agrarian reform legislation, the ‘dillydallying’ of the Central government in facilitating industrial development of the state came under scanner by the newspaper as being the legacy of the Centre’s “perpetual discrimination” or “step-motherly attitude” to Bengal (ABP, 30 March, 1979; Roy, 1979: 4). Interestingly, this kind of framing reflecting issue-specific positioning was reflected in Aajkal’s coverage of industrialisation programme as well. Aajkal also showed its dissatisfaction, in the context of “rejuvenation of industry” in the state, about the discrimination of the Centre (Chakraborty, 1985: 4). The episodic convergence of agenda and rhetorical expressions in Ganashakti and ABP’s coverage, however, was indicative of ABP’s emphatic positioning in favour of a specific development agenda that rested on the logic of industrial capital and thus, prioritising speedy industrialisation programme. This positioning of ABP took an aggressive lead in the peak phase of agriculture-industry debate during the sixth and seventh Left Front regimes. The convergence also reflected gradual heightening of attention of the mainstream press to the industrialisation programme in the state since early 1980s.

5.8 Reviewing Operation Barga

Just after the Left Front came back to power in 1982 for the second term, the prioritisation of the Front politics were reviewed internally and also were contested in the representations of the Bengali mainstream media. Aajkal assessed the Operation Barga from a different conjectural position, which broadly reflected the concern of the Left about the future of the programme. In one post-editorial (Chattopadhyay, 1982: 4) it raised the issue of ‘utility’ of the barga system in general. The Operation Barga had secured the legal rights of the bargadars against the whimsical eviction by the owners and secured their share to the product. But, the author critiqued (Chattopadhyay, 1982: 4) that the Front government did not think of any “radical land reform” in terms of “abolishing” the barga system altogether or changing the “feudal” land system and
“exploitative intermediary-based agrarian economy”. He apprehended (Chattopadhyay, 1982: 4) that the reform programme would give rise to a “privileged class”, which would surely join the capitalist system in future. He regretted (Chattopadhyay, 1982: 4) that while many states were rethinking about barga system, a “Marxist-led government” was showing reluctance to bring in such radical reforms. Supporting the argument that different explanations of the Operation Barga by two different groups – landowners and bargadars – were leading to conflict between bargadars and jotedars or between bargadars and middle peasants in the rural Bengal, the post-ed article concluded (Chattopadhyay, 1982: 4) with a frustrating note that “the whole system was going to be ended in a political gimmick which would possibly not even touch the exploitative structure of the agrarian economy”. In a pre-poll survey series, Aajkal came to the conclusion that “the mediaeval darkness of feudalism” could not been removed by the “reformist orientation of the Marxian ideology” (Aajkal, 8 May, 1982). The critique actually reflected the skepticism of a section of population about the potential of the Operation Barga in effecting any radical change in the existing structure, especially raised by the Left-wing critics.32

In an editorial, Ganashakti highlighted the observations made in the ILO (International Labour Organisation) report on the assessment of the ‘removal of rural backwardness’ programmes in the third world countries (Ganashakti, 1 October, 1980). Inspite of a general distrust in the reports of the international development organisations, run and dominated by western ‘capitalist’ states, Ganashakti put to use the report’s positive note of the “meaningful” experiments in rural Bengal by the Front government and countered the critics that “it would not open the eye of the supporters of vested interests who were leading politically motivated propaganda against the Left Front government” (Ganashakti, 1 October, 1980). One can note a subtle war of coverage in the ‘selective’ highlighting of such global surveys on the Front regime by mainstream ‘bourgeois’ newspapers versus ‘intended’ silencing of the criticisms in these findings by the party newspaper, especially in the later years of the Front rule.

From the very first day, the party newspaper was engaged in the mediation with a counter-perspective or ‘alternative’ image of the Left Front in power against the bandwagoning effect of the other mainstream newspapers, invoking value-loaded terms
like “fundamental”, “timely”, “committed”, “historic”, “resolute” to assess the agrarian reform policies of the Front government, going beyond the codes of ‘objective’ news. It was envisaged to serve two purposes: presenting ‘authentic’ and positive image of the Front governance, on the one hand, and contesting negative or “vilification campaign” (Basu, 1997: 231) by opponents, especially mainstream ‘bourgeois’ media, against the government, on the other. The veteran peasant leaders like Binoy Chaudhury, Ramnarayan Goswami, Dinesh Roy and Jayanta Bhattacharyya campaigned for the ‘revolutionary’ agrarian reforms in the post-editorial pages of *Ganashakti*, on the eve of the Assembly and Lok Sabha elections in 1982 and 1984 respectively. On the other hand, the ‘success’ stories of the Operation Barga were reduced to the narrative of a “leaked paper-balloon” or a “scarecrow” (Ghosh, 1985: 4) in *ABP*’s post-editorial reportage. In the context of a ‘review’ of the agricultural policy in the Front in the mid-1980s, the reportage brought in the story of a legal battle of one Ahmed Ali of Murshidabad to establish his ‘claim’ over *barga*-recorded land against the ‘injunction’ achieved by the owners of land. The author concluded with the strong pejorative assumptions that the Operation Barga had remained merely “paper rights” and thus, secured only “theoretically” the entitlement over land. *Aajkal*’s ‘review’ report, however, encapsulated the political-ideological debates within the CPI(M) party and went for a more formal framing of the issue. Reflecting on the defeat of the Front in the Lok Sabha election in December, 1984, it stressed on the differences of opinion within the Central Committee of the CPI(M), quoting the CPI(M) leaders, over the ‘effects’ of the land reform policy and especially the Operation Barga on the rural population as evident from the electoral result (*Aajkal*, Lead, 31 January, 1985; *Aajkal*, 1 February, 1985; *Lahiri*, 1985: 1). The coverage hinted at the internal tussles and negotiations in the evolution of a much-hyped ‘success’ model like the Operation Barga. On occasions, however, as mentioned earlier, it also shared the same concern with *ABP* that the Operation Barga paved the way for a new kind of “exploitation of the peasantry by the non-agriculturist land owners with the help of their land ownership right” (*Lahiri*, 1985: 1).

Agrarian policy debates received limited mention in *ABP* in post-poll period. Its coverage primarily rested on the ‘contradictory’ demands and statistics on food
production emerged out of the debate, especially within the Front and negated the ‘success-claims’ of the Front government in tackling the crisis. From this period, *ABP* was also framing its serious reservations about the ‘mode’ of the Front’s governing strategies, which involved working through panchayats, to be entrenched in its later coverage. While the Front and *Ganashakti* rallied in favour of ‘active’ involvement of panchayats in agrarian policy implementations, particularly during drought situations, *ABP* smelt (*ABP*, 25 September, 1982) a strategy of “extending partisan influence” in utilising the panchayats as “agency” in all rural matters, thus hinting at the possible outgrowth of corruption. The issue was later reinforced in *Bartaman’s* coverage of corruption at the grassroot level and ‘politics of favouritism’ pursued through local governance institutions in the state.

5.9 ‘Marginal’ Zones

As has been noted in Chapter III, beyond the hype of the Operation Barga agrarian reforms under the first phase of the Front rule included certain other ancillary issues which attained comparatively less focus in the public agenda as well as media representations. These reforms were well acknowledged in government’s propaganda as spheres of “spectacular” success of the Front, but failed to gain wide attention in political battle. Here, one can identify a slight incongruence in projecting these zones of ‘successes’ even in the party mouthpiece. *Ganashakti* paid greater coverage to some of these underreported dimensions of the Left Front’s agrarian policy and programmes, which had almost been brought down to margins in the mainstream ‘bourgeois’ press. However, it was limited to routine reporting of the policy declarations in the party newspaper. One such example was the irrigation policy of the Front government, which was regarded as an essential component of land reform. The public advertising visuals released by the Information and Cultural Affairs Department highlighted the achievements of the Front government in breaking through the limited scope of existing irrigation system in the state and unleashing small irrigation network to cater to the growing needs of cultivation in the state. The irrigation policy, for the first time, could find editorial coverage (*Ganashakti*, 27 February, 1984; *Ganashakti*, 8 April, 1984) in the party mouthpiece as late as 1984, beyond some scanty references as ‘part’ of achievements in ‘rural development programme’. *ABP* also took note of the policy in
one editorial but that too as part of the intra-Front debate over administrative reforms (ABP, 8 September, 1982). The government’s ‘claim’ to far-reaching breakthroughs in the irrigation infrastructure and the ‘evidence’ of its overall impact on ‘improved’ agrarian production was largely marginalised with the hype around the land ‘entitlement’ agenda in the media texts and also, in the Front’s mobilisational politics.\(^{35}\) Beyond public informational campaigns, it was confined to the deliberations of the Krishak Sabha and to some extent, in academic works, and failed to occupy important space in media agenda as a whole.

From the beginning, Ganashakti representations intended to capture the “intention” of the Front government to work for the “interests” of the poor peasantry inspite of various “limitations” or “obstructions” (Ganashakti, 21 January, 1978; Ganashakti, 7 February, 1979). Reporting the less hyped policy aspects, thus, was more associated with emotive prefixes like “exemplary”, “strong” and “extensive” to draw public attention to the core of the reforms. Ganashakti stressed on the reorganisation of the land reform advisory committees at the block level with the ‘inclusion’ of stakeholders, like patta holders, to expedite the process of land recording and to make the bargadars and the poor farmers aware of their legal rights and organisational strength through village level awareness camps (Ganashakti, 5 July, 1978). The newly elected panchayat samitis were given the responsibility of acting as land reform advisory committee in villages. The government directive emphasised on the mitigation of land related disputes with the assistance of panchayat samities. The JLRO (Junior Land Revenue Officer) and the local police station were directed to assist the panchayats in implementing government policies smoothly. For Ganashakti, all this were indicative of the Front’s “intention” to integrate land reform programmes with the elected local government institutions at the village level. The state-level workshop to coordinate the involvement of different departments in land reform programmes was also covered by the party mouthpiece with much importance. The coverage on ‘mode of operation’ attempted to reinforce the Front government’s claims to decentralisation experiments in implementing agrarian programmes. These aspects of agrarian reforms were conspicuously absent in the representations of ‘bourgeois’ newspapers and accordingly, received limited attention in public deliberations.
5.9.1 Mode of Action

Over the first decade of the agrarian experiments the Front leadership emphasised the collective effort of the rural population in materialising land reform programmes. The party newspaper placed the issue at the core of its coverage as part of its mobilisational framing strategy. It provided a consistent coverage, in the front pages, of the repeated appeals made by the peasant organisations to the rural population in implementing the Front policies of land reform, which itself generated the hype around the programme. In the 1980s the rhetorical call for debureaucratisation through elected panchayats established the ground for people’s participation in rural development and the peasant front utilised the opportunity to steer the agrarian reforms with the help of its organisational strength and local panchayats. Ganashakti played an important role as a catalyst to the propagandist politics and strengthened the euphoria over land reform with “people’s participation” (Ganashakti, 9 September, 1977) in the Left Front’s political agenda.

One such supportive coverage engaged with the new mode of group action in the Operation Barga programme. The illustrated coverage of the evening group meetings in the villages with the bargadars, in the first pages of Ganashakti, attempted to build up a new visual narrative, for the reader, of a pro-poor governance vis-à-vis the mainstream framework of bureaucratic-technocratic development. The evening meetings constituted one of the major planks of deliberative exercise that gave the Operation Barga a new brand value in land reform history in post-independence India. Many of these meetings were even attended by the Land Revenue Minister himself, which promoted an intense mode of political mediation at the grassroot level of governance. The programme was visualised by the Front government to “overcome the fear psychosis (of the sharecroppers) (bracket mine) by creating a mutual support system” (Basu, 1997: 45). As the Front leadership later evaluated (Basu, 1997: 45) it:

“This methodology which depends heavily on the group action of the sharecroppers, is qualitatively different from the traditional revenue court approach where the poor are at a disadvantage against the rich…”

This mode of group action was never captured in the representations of the mainstream ‘bourgeois’ press, either in textual or in visual form. The ‘novelty’ of the group action
approach in the Operation Barga with the involvement of the beneficiaries, peasant organisations and local panchayats, highlighted in party newspaper, found mention in many scholarly works as well (Bandyopadhyay, 2000; Chatterjee, 1997). The political tenor of these administrative exercises was part of the visual representations and ‘committed framing’ by the party media and of the party programmes. However, it failed to attain much importance in the representations of other newspapers as an ‘essential’ agenda of land reform movement. The components of agrarian reform were sidetracked in the public debates and covered as ‘ancillary’ agenda in media, with only occasional mention in the mainstream news. This reduced the land reform programme of the Front only to the Operation Barga and particularly to the ‘entitlement’ issue. While representations in the party newspaper relied on official facts and figures supplied by the government as ‘authentic’ source, ABP and Aajkal’s framing embodied the traits of feature mode or emotion-laden anchor in editorials and post-editorials to build up their own schematas of the reform.

Herein emerges one of the crucial aspects of framing – the ‘active selection’ of issues by the party newspaper to reinforce the governance agenda of the Front, counterbalancing the ‘selective’ marginalisation of some of the Front’s ‘unique’ achievements in ‘bourgeois’ newspapers. Over these years, the coverage of the party newspaper and the informational campaigns of the Government of West Bengal often revealed an interesting cross-referencing of texts in terms of content, language and tenor. Ganashakti recovered some of the ‘unique’ achievements of the Front government in agrarian sector far from the silenced and underreported zones of coverage in ‘bourgeois’ newspapers, and integrated it in its own campaign war for the Front, especially during the electoral phase. One such less-reported ‘achievement’ was the special grant and incentives to the weaker section of the bargadars and patta owners, like the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The grain loan for the bargadars from the public sector banks arranged by the Front government was specially covered in three columns with a box Lead in the first page (Ganashakti, 24 August, 1979) and in the editorial as “first of its kind” (Ganashakti, 24 August, 1979) in India, which got only a single column mention in ABP as hard news. In the same vein, the decision to provide old-age pension to the poor farmers over sixty years of age
with little means of adequate subsistence was only mentioned in Ganashakti reporting as a “unique” and “historic decision” (Ganashakti, 13 September, 1980), and found no mention in other mainstream newspapers. Ganashakti headline incorporated political conviction implicit in the policy in reporting the government programme on this occasion in the following way — “Introduction of farmers’ pension in West Bengal: not a charity, but a legitimate right: Jyoti Basu” (Ganashakti, 12 September, 1980). The propagandist spirit inherent in the report accordingly received seven column-coverage as the Lead news. Ganashakti reporters covered the re-orientation camps for the bargadars, pattadars (patta owners) and small farmers held in different districts, where the minister himself and the peasant front leaders explained different aspects of rural development programmes and land reform to the farmers. The encoding of these programmes in the party newspaper built up the political fulcrum in which the governance agenda of a ‘Left’ government and mobilisational spirit of the mass front could be incorporated.

**5.10 Centre-state Debate: Reaching the Climax**

As noted earlier, in the first phase of the Operation Barga, the Left Front and the party newspaper not only placed the ‘success’ of the agrarian reform at the core of political agenda, but also gradually heightened the campaign against the Centre for obstructing the reform. It was the beginning of an ascending rhetoric against the Centre, ruled by the Congress party, which culminated into a long-term political battle, occasionally interjecting the Left governance agenda with nuanced Bengali chauvinism. The tortuous political trafficking around the Centre-state relation during the Front regime rested on an articulation of the ‘Bengali subnationalism’/‘regional nationalism’, which found a powerful lineage in Bengal’s political history. Scholars have argued that the Left Front government reinforced this “anti-center political rhetorical and political strategy” (Sinha, 2005: 196) in its programme to expand its electoral base.\(^{38}\) The vernacular media embraced the essence of this ‘confrontational politics’, at the earliest instance, by exploiting its inherent potential as a dominant political issue and media agenda. The encoding of the Centre-state tension, with the ‘newsworthiness’ of the issue, served both political-ideological and commercial purposes for the mainstream media. Thus, the issue began with the Front’s rhetorical articulation of the
“constitutional limitations” of the state government in proposing ‘alternative’ and autonomous land policies ignoring the Centre and took a more assertive form in the context of industrialisation in the state in the 1980s. Bengali media appropriated and identified themselves with the implicit rationality of the rhetoric, the ‘commonplace’, in their respective ways to facilitate its active mediation in regional politics. As Roger Silverstone has noted (1999: 35):

“At the heart of persuasion, and at the root of rhetoric, are the commonplaces, the topoi, without which there can be no connection, without which there can be no creation: neither memory nor invention. The commonplaces are those ideas and values, frames of meaning, which are shared and shareable by speakers and listeners.”

It is in this backdrop, one can identify the evolution of the aforementioned Centre-state debate in the representations of the Bengali media in respect to agrarian reforms. The Left Front leadership, on several occasions, had shown their strong dissatisfaction about the ‘inordinate delay’ in giving assent to the proposed Land Revenue bill (1977) by the President of India and used it in a vibrant political campaign against the “step motherly attitude” of the Centre towards the state. The party mouthpiece initially covered (Ganashakti, 7 February, 1978) the agitation only in one column of the front page and in one editorial after the President provided consent, with a mild tone of criticism against the Centre for “dillydallying”. The conflict reached its peak with the refusal of the Centre to consider the Front government’s appeal to include the amended Land Reform Act into the Ninth Schedule (by amending the Constitution) so as to keep the law beyond the scope of judicial intervention. The Centre had repeatedly rejected the appeal and both the Front and Ganashakti strongly demanded a “reconsideration of the decision” (Ganashakti, 20 September, 1978; Ganashakti, 30 November, 1978). This issue did not surface in ABP’s reporting at all, though the Front leadership showed their repeated concern about the court ‘injunctions’ in thwarting the pace of land reform programme. However, as mentioned previously, from the early 1980s ABP joined the debate by showing its strong discontent against the Centre’s “obstructive” policies in industrialisation of the state and did not hesitate to borrow phrases/jargons from the Leftists, like “step motherly attitude of the Centre”. Aajkal rallied with the arguments of ‘discrimination’ by the Centre, but with a milder tone. The post-editorial (Chakraborty,
1985: 4) observed that “the state government has little influence over the policies of the national government” or “the Central government does not want renovation of industries in West Bengal as long as the Left Front government exists”.

As the electoral campaigns reached its peak in 1982, the media coverage devoted more space to overall assessment of the Front regime, indicating a gradual decline in the hype around land reform programmes. The party newspaper attempted to mobilise public opinion by blending emotive expressions and suggestive generalisations in representations, borrowing from the Front’s political campaign. It rested on the rhetorical articulation like “in the interests of the peasantry”, “stable government”, “increased agricultural production”, “communal harmony” or “improved law and order” in the state. Specific focus on agrarian programmes was limited only to ten columns even in Ganashakti during the five months period (January to May) prior to the Assembly election in 1982. Aajkal published a series of anchor features on land reform programme and industrialisation in the state in five years of the Front rule. ABP embarked on assessing the ‘intentions’ of the Left Front government in restoring the state from poor industrial situation, relegating reports on agrarian sector to a secondary position in terms of primacy in coverage. The hype around the land reform policy was, however, sustained in the Front’s political campaign in its agony over the delay in the Centre’s assent to the West Bengal Land Reforms (Second Amendment) 1981 bill. The period witnessed the gradual rise of the grand rhetoric of “step motherly attitude of the Centre” to the state by the Front leadership on the issue of the refusal of the Centre to allow important amendments to the land reform bills mooted by the Front. It reached its highest pitch in reference to the Centre’s ‘reluctance’ to support industrialisation programme of the state.

The anguish of the Front partners was articulated in Ganashakti’s representations with editorials strongly commenting on the “class character of the Central government” in favour of vested interests (Ganashakti, 17 September, 1982). This political stand corroborated the arguments of the Krishak Sabha leaders that the Opposition was always apprehensive about the possible repercussions of the bill on the Right to Property (Goswami, 1981: 2). The “dillydallying” was immediately taken up by Ganashakti as the Centre’s policy of “intervention” in the ‘autonomy’ of the state ignoring federal distribution of power, as “agriculture, peasants and land reform were under the State...
Consequently, along with the Front leadership, it raised a strong demand of reorganisation of the Centre-state relations.

During the Assembly elections of 1982 and 1987, the specific assessment of agrarian reforms surfaced in the Front’s electoral agenda and in the media space, but they were largely overshadowed by the emotive rallying around the rhetoric of the Centre’s ‘discrimination’. The debate culminated in 1983 when the state was rocked by series of protests of the Left parties demanding reorganisation of the Centre-state relations. The anti-Centre jingoistic hype relegated coverage of all other governmental reforms, especially agrarian reforms to a secondary status. The party newspaper was also no exception. For example, while the Centre-state debate surfaced in twelve editorials, six post-editorials and thirteen days as Lead news, agricultural policies managed to occupy only one post-editorial, one editorial and four days as Lead news in Ganashakti in 1983.\(^40\)

The coverage of land reform programmes also showed a gradual declining trend with the relative rise of industrialisation issue from 1982, reflected in the framing of a predisposition towards industrial development of the state, both in government agenda and in media agenda.

It was also the period when the Left Front government’s performance in other social sectors was coming under the public scrutiny. The mainstream media followed it up with the newly emerging agenda around the Front’s educational policy, language policy or the state of closed and sick industries and labour situation. While the ABP coverage was getting preoccupied with the prospect of industrial development of West Bengal, Aajkal was more concerned about the cultural-educational reforms. As has been argued earlier, Bartaman was covering the ‘corruption’ cases at the grassroot level of rural governance from its origin, and hinting at an entrenched “dalatantra” (partocracy)\(^41\) in the state under the Front regime. Its representations popularised the counter-rhetoric of ‘rigged election’ to be readily appropriated by the Oppositional politics from this period. Inspite of its strong adversarial coverage of the Left Front regime, Bartaman could hardly ignore the rising trend of Bengali antagonism against the Congress rule at the Centre, whipped up by the Left Front, and supported “Bengal’s rebellion” in the election against the “injustice, deprivation, deception” caused by the Centre (Ghosh, 1987: 4).
From the beginning of the Centre-state tussle over the Presidential assent to the land reform enactments, the party newspaper upheld (*Ganashakti*, 11 November, 1978) the argument that enacting a law was not enough for bringing in radical reform, but what was needed was implementing that law properly with a “political will”. This observation attempted to hint at the nuances of policy execution in the federal set up in which the provincial government had to operate within the *constraints* and *limitations* of a state government. Jyoti Basu observed (1997: xii) that the success of the agricultural policies of the Left government was to be assessed in terms of “achieving a breakthrough in the sphere of agriculture and allied sector” which helped in augmenting “a significant shift in the balance of class-forces away from the landlords, rich peasants to the poorer people”. Referring to the ‘constitutional limitations’, Anil Biswas wrote (1997: xxii):

“We realized that within the present framework of the Constitution and the limited power of a State government, complete elimination of feudal and semi-feudal forms of exploitation was not feasible. The Left Front accordingly resolved to adopt measures to provide minimum relief to the agricultural workers, *bargadars* and small peasants who together constitute over 75 per cent of the rural population.”

In an editorial, evaluating the progress of the land reform in West Bengal compared to the other states of India, this political-ideological conviction of the Left leadership was corroborated by the comment that “political will could bring in some changes in favour of the peasants even in the present state structure of India” (*Ganashakti*, 7 February, 1979). This conviction prompted *Ganashakti* to praise the Front government for arresting the ‘stalemate’ and ‘depreciation’ of agricultural production by introducing “redistributive policy packages” in the state within the ambit of “existing federal structure” (*Ganashakti*, 28 February, 1979). However, *Aajkal*, on occasions, contested (Chattopadhyay, 1982: 4; Lahiri, 1985:1) this claim about the “political will” of the Left Front in sustaining a backward, feudal agrarian economy with the help of the Operation Barga programme. Toeing the stand it refused to acknowledge the government’s claim that the Operation Barga could bring in “revolutionary changes” in land reform legislation (Chattopadhyay, 1982: 4).
5.11 The Emerging ‘Concerns’

Since the beginning of the second Left Front government, the hype of barga recording was gradually receding to divert attention to the ‘realities’ of agricultural production in the state, which was well acknowledged in the government’s policy prioritisation and reflected in media representations. While ABP was gearing up its critique of the performance of the government in other sectors like industry, power or general financial crisis of the state, Ganashakti coverage followed the drift by shifting its focus on the infrastructural investments in the rural areas under the Front regime. A series of reporting and post-editorials embarked on highlighting the “success” of “comprehensive” reform packages in the agrarian sector like intensive farming, “improved” irrigation and drainage, use of “balanced” fertilisers and high-yielding seeds, local application of agricultural technology etc. It rested on the conviction that the land reform programme would expand the scope of rural employment and a steady market for the advancement of the industry. It argued in favour of bringing “fundamental changes” in the method and priority of investment in development than on spending more money. The inter-textual borrowing, on occasions, took an evident shape in the party newspaper’s framing with verbatim reproduction of the state government’s information booklet on the rural development in front page coverage, showing a strong convergence of party and governmental mediation in the agenda-building process. In this context, the party newspaper was engaged in a discursive battle with the ‘opponents’, especially with “some Leftist intellectuals” around the ‘nature’ of agrarian reform in the state. As mentioned (Ganashakti, 29 December, 1981) in an editorial:

“The Left Front government has never promised that it will change the land system radically or fundamentally after coming to power. It is not possible to bring in any fundamental change in this present bourgeois-landlord economic system…In this regard, the state government is facing three obstacles: i) loopholes in existing land reform laws and zamindari acquisition act; ii) injunctions imposed by the courts; and, iii) the dominance of the bureaucrats in the land reform departments…The critics blame only for the purpose of sheer criticism.”

In a post-editorial, the then Land Reform Minister, Binoy Chaudhury, reiterated (1981:2):

“The aim of radical change in the land reform cannot be achieved without the success of a mass-democratic revolution…it is not possible to achieve this success working within the present
constitutional structure and limited powers of the state government…the immediate aim of the programmes taken by the Left Front government is to facilitate the struggle for radical reform by encouraging and mobilizing the peasantry in their immediate and partial demands.”

The early and mid 1980s witnessed tumultuous farmers’ movements in Karnataka, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Western UP led by farmers’ organisations like the Bharatiya Kisan Union or Shetkari Sangathan on remunerative prices of agricultural product. The movements initially saw a massive involvement of the rich farmers, which was later joined by the Left-democratic forces to mobilise peasants of all sections. Binoy Chaudhury argued that the demand for remunerative prices of agricultural products could gain momentum throughout the country with the involvement of the agricultural labourers, poor farmers and the workers. Ganashakti covered the concern of the then Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu, about an agricultural policy, which would ensure remunerative prices for the peasants and opened up the space for the debate around increased production and remunerative prices in the state. Quoting Jyoti Basu, it argued that the rhetoric ‘produce or perish’ got defeated when the peasants increased production (like jute production) and suffered from low prices of their product in the market. So, it was a necessity to ensure that the peasantry got “real prices” for their produce (Ganashakti, 14 February 1982). Ganashakti utilised the context to publicise the Front government’s initiatives to procure rice from the real cultivators in the supportive price.

The declining rate of agricultural production throughout the country captured the Front leaders’ concern in the 1980s. Ganashakti coverage tried to address the anxiety of the critics about the rate of agrarian production in the state resorting to facts and figures, often borrowing from the Central government’s statistics. In this debate, it was engaged in war of words with ‘bourgeois’ newspapers like ABP and Bartaman. The party newspaper highlighted the “integrated” aspect of the rural development approach of the government involving the panchayats and insisted on the urgency of a decentralised governance to implement ‘alternative’ agricultural reform. In the process, it relied on the verbatim coverage of legislative speeches of the Front leaders to project the ‘success areas’ conforming to the ‘official’ version. It is noteworthy that the projection of the ‘success’ of the Front government in initiating a ‘breakthrough’ in the moribund rural economy with the help of a comprehensive rural development programme with land
reform at its core, continued to feature powerfully in the official information campaign (for example, in the booklets, hoardings designed by the Information and Cultural Ministry, Government of West Bengal) throughout 1980s. But, it was failing to get proportionate space, compared to the late 1970s, even in the party newspaper, beyond ‘routine’ attention, not to mention the overt and complete marginalisation of these aspects in the ‘bourgeois’ media since mid1980s. The comparatively low attention in the media coverage of the agrarian policies in the mid 1980s showed an evident decline of the issue in favour of the other rhetorical upswing around the Centre-state debate or industrial roadmap for the state. Thus, while the party newspaper rallied with the claim of “outstanding” progress or “dramatic success” of the agrarian policy in generating employment, infrastructure or demand of the rural economy by the Front government, it could think of whipping support only in terms of land recovery from the jotadars and redistribution to the bargadars, as those programmes contained potential sources of subversion and negation. The agrarian reform programme was as well reduced to an ‘ownership’ issue in other mainstream newspapers. It is also interesting to note that infrastructural development and rural employment generation did attract attention of the ‘bourgeois’ newspapers like ABP and Bartaman since mid 1980s, only to be eventually associated with the prospect of capital investment in rural economy or agro-based industrialisation in the state. The ‘dissent’ of the Front partners about the ‘pattern’ of rural investment remained, comparatively speaking, a zone of silence in the Bengali media’s dominant coverage in the first phase of agrarian policy making. However, it received special attention in the later phase, in a section of the ‘bourgeois’ media, to uncover the ideological differences within the Front on agrarian reforms.

5.12 Concluding Observations

As discussed in the previous sections, Bengali media got actively engaged in articulation of policy-programmes, with its agenda setting and spin-doctoring potential, since the beginning of the Left Front regime. The interface prompted competitive coverage of the Bengali language press generating a lot of contending narratives of the Front governance, thus projecting certain ‘images’ of Left experiments with governance from the very first days. One can note that the critical-interpreter role of a section of the Bengali mainstream press, beyond its informational and watchdog roles, had provided sufficient stimulus for
the oppositional politics as well in the debate on agrarian reforms. The mainstream media, on occasions, also delved into the tension-zones in the party-government or the intra-Front relationship, reflecting the nuances in the Front’s governance reforms. Bengali newspapers played active role in legitimising or negating, as the case may be, policy output on selective terms implying the gradual unfolding of media intervention in the state politics. As noted in the current chapter, the Operation Barga programme received focal attention in agricultural coverage of these dailies, whereas policies like agricultural credit to the farmers, irrigation projects, marketing and storage facilities, food processing found only occasional references. On the other hand, various other aspects of agricultural reform packages like farmers’ insurance, agricultural research and training, crop diversifications were almost marginalised in the mainstream media coverage, even occasionally in the party organ. The hype or silencing of issues reflected active engagement of the Bengali newspapers in the political-ideological articulation of agricultural policy-strategies with media’s own schematas and a corresponding shift in mediation strategies as well, which reached its heightened phase in the last decade of the Left Front rule. The subsequent chapter tries to capture the ‘shift’ both in the Front government’s agenda of agrarian reforms, as found in the oft-mentioned agriculture vs. industry frame, and in the role of Bengali press in encoding the debate during the sixth and seventh Left Front regimes.

Notes

1. Media scholars like Doris Graber prefer to describe the opinion making function as agenda-building instead of the more common usage of agenda-setting role, indicative of a more engaging process of mediation.

2. Michael Schudson identifies (2008:12) seven functions of journalism in democracies exemplifying different combinations, cross-purposes and emphases. These are – information, investigation, analysis, social empathy, public forum, mobilisation and publicising representative democracy.

3. In an advertisement, prior to the publication, Bartaman publishers claimed to run the newspaper in the “interest of common people”, not “to satisfy interests of any political master, any businessman or abiding any authority as a preceptor” (tr.) (Advertisement published in ABP, 31 October, 1984, p.7).

4. Well-known media analyst, Sumanta Banerjee attended this aspect as “a paradoxical situation in the Bengali media scene”. He argued, “On the one hand, we find papers like Anandabazar and Bartaman following a blatantly pro-capitalist line and blacking out
positive achievements of the Left Front government, but on the other hand it is these papers which regularly expose the cases of corruption and criminalization of politics that are happening in West Bengal under Left Front patronage and affecting the common citizens – incidents which are blacked out by *Ganashakti*! ...the basic issue of a bourgeois ‘free press’ operating in a democracy – selective in its choice of news, and yet at times capable of influencing public mind by exposing (selectively again) crime and corruption indulged in by the ruling powers – which is again necessary for strengthening civil society and its democratic voice”. The observation was made in an email-based interview of Sumanta Banerjee by the researcher, on 21 August, 2009.

5. Till 1998, the major opposition to the Left Front was the Congress (I), which lost almost all the electoral battles in the state to the Front since 1977. The Congress (I) could only win the parliamentary election in 1984, held in the critical political situation followed to the assassination of the then Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi. The West Bengal Provincial Congress was torn with internal dissensions, suffered from leadership crisis and organisational weaknesses and could produce only a fractured opposition to the ‘united’ Left Front. The rise of the TMC, a breakaway group of the Congress (I), in 1998, could progressively stir the oppositional politics with active mobilisation of its undisputed leader, Mamata Banerjee, and put a strong resistance to the Front regime. It was successful in wresting power in 2011, ending the three and half decades of rule by the Left Front in West Bengal.

6. The merger of editorial languages with advertisement discourse of open persuasion gives birth to the new genre of *advertorial* news reporting.


8. Instances can be found in framing the headlines of news or editorials in formal statements – “Agricultural Sector should be built on a Right Framework: Agriculture Minister” ( *Ganashakti*, Lead, 14 September, 1977, p.1); “Important Steps in preserving the Interests of the *Bargadars* by the State Government” ( *Ganashakti*, Lead, 21 May, 1979, p.1); “In the Interests of the Farmers” ( *Ganashakti*, Editorial, 22 March, 1978, p.1); “Attention has to be paid on Agriculture” ( *Ganashakti*, Editorial, 2 October, 2004, p.4).

9. W. Lance Bennett refers to (1990: 103-125) ‘indexing’ function of the press to describe how media ‘index’ the voices and viewpoints in news and editorials according to the “range of views expressed in mainstream government debate about a given topic”.

10. Argued by Anirban Chattopadhyay, the Editor, Editorial pages, *ABP*, in an interview with the researcher taken on 29.10.2009.

11. ibid

12. Operation Barga resided greatly on the aggressive spirit of mobilisational politics of the Krishak Sabha against the ‘vested interests’ of the rural society.

13. *Ganashakti*’s role has been identified to the party not just as ‘party newspaper’, but also as a ‘political-organiser’.
14. *Ganashakti* catchline is read as ‘*mehonoti manusher mukhopotro’* (mouthpiece of the toiling/working population). It declares its *bias* openly in favour of the working class people.

15. Two editorials and four special features covered industrial policy of the Left Front in contrast to one editorial and two special features on agricultural policy, in the first six months of the Left Front rule.

16. The CPI(M) could increase its voter turnout from 21 percent to 39 percent between 1967 to 1971 (Ruud, 2003: 22).

17. Notwithstanding the success of the mass peasant front, the overwhelming presence of the Krishak Sabha in the land reform programme, however, evoked great debates among scholars. While Partha Chatterjee argued (1997: 67) that the “impressive” performance in land reform “was due not so much to administrative vigilance as to the direct intervention of organized political movements in the countryside”, scholars like Ashok Rudra criticised (1981: A61-68) the Operation Barga as “a party-based struggle” where “tenants belonging to one party (are) being evicted to give place tenants belonging to another party”.

18. The popular slogan of the Left cadres envisaged the Left Front government as *the weapon of struggle*.

19. Here one can recall the speech by Harekrishna Konar, cited in the Chapter III, where he expressed his helplessness “as a minister” in land grab movement of the United Front regime, and called the peasantry to rise as they “are not ministers” and “have no compulsion”.

20. In the last decade of the Front rule, *ABP* spearheaded its campaign against the ‘conservative’ faction of the Central Committee and the Politbureau, led by Prakash Karat as the Secretary of the CPI(M), vis-à-vis the ‘liberal/pragmatic’ postures of Buddhadev Bhattacharjee-Nirupam Sen of the Bengal CPI(M). It assessed (*ABP*, 14 April, 2006) the ‘conservative’ faction as “devoted to pre-historic Leftism” with “stone-age jargons like struggle against class enemy, Dictatorship of the Proletariat”. It praised (*ABP*, 6 November, 2005) Buddhadev Bhattacharjee with the observation that “though trained in conservative tradition of Promode Dasgupta, he has not made a mistake to follow the pragmatic path of Jyoti Basu”.

21. The Maratha cavalry famous for their plunder is known as *bargi* in Indian history.

22. Promode Dasgupta, the then Secretary of the CPI(M) State Committee, responding to this allegation, aggressively forwarded the argument that the remnants of the previous ruling party, the Congress, and a section of the Janata Dal, were standing in favour of the landed gentry (*Ganashakti*, 15 August, 1978).

23. During the harvesting season (July to December) of 1978, three editorials and twenty-four columns in the front page Lead were devoted to the ‘call’ by the leadership. It continued to occupy importance throughout 1980s.

24. Mainstream Bengali media, especially *ABP*, had more or less silenced the Front partners, other than the CPI(M), in their coverage, during the initial years, and accordingly, attributed the Front’s achievements or failures to the big partner, CPI(M) only.
25. Just after the introduction of the bill in legislature on 28 August, 1979, *Ganashakti* devoted fourteen columns as front page Lead and one editorial on this bill.

26. The new revenue policy figured in two columns in the first page of *ABP*, though not as a Lead and in one editorial, as a whole.

27. Quite contrary to *ABP*’s assumptions, it was, found by many researchers (Banerjee et al. 2002; Rawal and Swaminathan, 1998; Lieten, 1996) that the foodgrain production in the decade of 1980s increased by about 6.5 percent on an average, making it the ‘fastest growing state’ in India in agricultural production during that period. The decade also saw “a switch to high-yielding varieties, a shift towards cash crops like oilseeds and vegetables and a substantial expansion of multiple cropping” (Banerjee, et al. 2002).

28. The literal meaning of *jihad* is the holy religious war of the Muslims. In colloquial linguistic expression it implies crusade against/strong opposition to something ‘unacceptable’ socially and politically.

29. The Front, however, increased its electoral margin by 238 seats in 1982 Assembly election from 231 in 1977.

30. Saroj Mukhopadhyay, the then State Secretary of the CPI(M), slammed(1985: 4) the role of the “monopoly house-owned newspapers” for supporting “the interests of the big capital-big land owners”.


33. During the post-poll days, that is, the second half of 1982, agrarian policy surfaced in three editorials, one post-editorial and three days of front page Lead in *ABP* altogether. Drought became an issue of concern for its negative impact on agrarian production.

34. The Left Front government ‘claimed’ to extend the irrigation facilities to the state to a great extent by involving the panchayat institutions. According to the statistics of the Government of West Bengal, the ratio of net irrigated land to total agricultural land in the state was increased to 68.3 per cent in 2005-06 from 32 per cent in 1977-78, while the national average is around 48 per cent (Document# 2: 39).

35. Land recovery and redistribution of land to the *bargadars*, distribution of *pattas* etc. received primacy in the media coverage throughout 1980s.

36. As has been noted in Chapter III, these meetings were organised to encourage the *bargadars* to express their grievances and make them aware of the potential benefits of the Operation Barga programme. Tentative claimant lists were prepared from these meetings and were put to public verification. The landowners were given the opportunity to file any objection about those claims and thereafter, the final lists were prepared.

37. In 1980 the state government decided to merge the special component plan and the tribal sub-plan to extend the benefits of the institutional finance, like government subsidies or bank loans, to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The State
government arranged for a sub-planning in agriculture in underprivileged tribal areas to implement incentives like supply of indigenous agricultural implements and *minikit*, application of soil-purifier or exhibitions of variety of crops etc.

38. The tensions in the Centre-state relations intensified since the mid 1980s around industrialisation programme in the state.

39. An emphatic shift was evident in *Aajkal*’s position since 1990s, which showed a manifest articulation of Bengal’s chauvinism against the Centre. It would be discussed in subsequent chapters.

40. The debate was primarily built around licensing in industrialisation programme, especially Haldia Petrochemicals, and also covered the delay in Presidential assent to the Land Reform (Amendment) bill, 1981.

41. *Partocracy* or *Particracy* refers to the domination of one or few political parties in the structures and processes of the political system. It has often been used to describe the First Republic (1946-92) in Italy or the USSR in the post-revolution period (1918-1990), marked by the omnipresence of the Christian Democratic Party and the Communist Party respectively.

42. Popularly known as the new farmers’ movement, these kinds of agrarian mobilisation showed a different path in terms of agenda, leadership and forms of mobilisation as compared to the conventional class-based agricultural movements of the 1950s and 1960s. Important works on the movements are: M. V. Nadkarni, (1987). *Farmers’ Movements in India*, New Delhi: Allied Publishers; P. Brass (ed.) (1995). *New Farmers’ Movements in India*, Essex: Frank Crass and Company Ltd.

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