Chapter 3

The South 24 Parganas District: Society, Politics and Different Kinds of Differences

The crucial point to the argument in this chapter is that in spite of the shift in the domain of politics from the erstwhile urban bhadralok ambience, which was initiated in the middle of the 1960s and which, through many spectacular events till 1977, was given a stable political form in the rural areas in the measures for land reform and the functioning of panchayats, has not yet had the uniform effort in all sectors of the society in West Bengal, in which it can be said that politics in West Bengal functions, even at a rudimentary level, on the basis of the common codes of the co-existence of individuals as individuals in society. The South 24 Parganas is the interesting example of a district, whose headquarters are at the heart of Calcutta, some of whose northern areas are in fact parts of Calcutta in certain respects, and yet, not very far from these areas, it is not only that the society is rural, but that the very normative basis of politics is different. Moreover, it does not suffice to say that there is a difference between politics in the urban areas and politics in the rural areas. It may be seen that even between two rural areas, politics not only functions differently, it has an altogether different normative basis in the society in which it functions. It will, thus, be seen that in spite
of what has been interpreted as the politicization of the peasantry in the rural areas since the 1960s, perhaps a part of the reason for which this politicization has so far remained somewhat uneven in different sectors of society, among different sections of people across small localities, lies in the manner and the normative basis on which this politicization was undertaken and perhaps a part of the reason for which the politicization of the rural society was undertaken in the manner and the normative basis on which it was, is to be found in the absence of a society based on the common codes of the coexistence of individuals as individuals.

For the study of these different kinds of differences on the effects of the politicization of the society in the South 24 Parganas district as well as the broad uniformities which have emerged in the last two decades or so, it was thought to be necessary to exclude those northern areas of the district, which were urbanized along with Calcutta, the metropolis, rather than as part of the district. After excluding these areas from analysis, it is found that in some other areas of the district, changes in the society, economy and politics took place to some extent in an autonomous manner. Moreover, it is not clear that these changes did take place in certain areas. On the basis of these considerations, three areas of the district were chosen
for a more intensive study of the nature of functioning of politics and its relation to the normative codes in society, Kultali, Kakdwip and Baruipur areas.

**Society in the South 24 Parganas District**

On the basis of the available sources, it appears that the organization of society in the South 24 Parganas district is somewhat different from other districts in certain respects. One important attribute of the social organization of the district is the almost complete absence of upper caste settlements in most areas of the southern part of the district. There is a tragic paucity of literature on the history of this district. But from what was available, it seems to be possible to explain the absence of upper caste, particularly Brahmin settlements in most of the southern parts of the district. According to sources in this literature, large parts of the district in the south were a depopulated territory in the eighteenth century.\(^1\) These areas were not covered under the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793. Plans for commencing cultivation of land in these areas were under the consideration of the East India Company since the late eighteenth century, but the first survey of these areas was made between the years 1811 and 1814.\(^2\) Between the years 1931 and 1865, lands were leased out to what were called *loddars*, who worked as contractors for clearing the lands for cultivation.\(^3\) This required labourers who
were ready to move to these areas from their own places of dwelling, work hard and risk their lives in the face of wild animals and diseases. Despite the general poverty of the people, such labourers were difficult to find in those parts of the state which had a settled population. Consequently, those who actually moved to these areas of the South 24 Parganas district, were overwhelmingly from the lowest rungs of the society - lower caste Hindus and poor Muslims. Besides, these lower caste people did not have the chance to have access to modern, or at any rate, any education, which could bring them into contact with the Bhadralok in Calcutta, because the lotdars, whose land they cultivated, and many of whom were from the upper castes, were absentee landowners. They 'gathered the harvest', but did nothing to establish schools and hospitals and in most cases, let out their tenancy to sub-tenants and lived in Calcutta. This means that they did nothing to function as mediators between the bhadralok category living in Calcutta and the people who lived in these areas. Nor did the Government take the slightest responsibility in this regard, because it thought it had shifted these responsibilities to the 'private individuals' to whom it had leased out these areas.

These attributes of the organization of society in large parts of the district had certain consequences. The settlement of the people, in the manner in which it took place, did not conform to the rules of the organization of
society in the caste hierarchy. Even in small localities, the settlement pattern of the people belonging to the same rank in the hierarchy was not contiguous. This created problems in the establishment of networks of interaction within the same caste rank and prevented a clear differentiation from other caste ranks. Apart from this, the absence of Brahmins, in these areas had the effect that a crystallization of caste functions within the same rank in the caste hierarchy and the differentiation of caste functions between different ranks, which it was the Brahmins' responsibility to maintain in society, could not take place in a situation in which it would not have been easy for the Brahmin to perform his task. But there was no principle of social organization apart from caste which could serve as an alternative to it. In consequence, people had to depend on principles of caste for their social organization, but the lack of refinement of these principles meant that society had to be organized on the basis of principles of caste which were rather diffuse. This diffusion of the principles of caste again meant that the ritual ranks in the hierarchy had to be reworked considerably to enable the organization of society on a relatively large scale, so that at least some networks of interaction necessary for marriage, pilgrimage etc. could be developed.

As distinguished from these attributes which set limits to the organization of the peasantry on the basis of castes, at the same time as they did not offer
alternative principles of social organization to the peasantry, another attribute which acquired increasing importance after independence, particularly in the 1960s, was a concentration of land holdings in these areas. In Sornarpur, for example, in 1967, as one study indicates, the number of households was approximately 2,300, and the total population was about 15,000. The total cultivable land was nearly 11,000 acres. Of this, 8000 acres was shared by eight families. There were further six families who possessed between one hundred and two hundred acres each, these accounting for nearly another thousand acres of land, whereas 20 per cent of the remaining households held between four and ten acres. The Chakraborty family of Frazergunge near Kakdwip, the Ghosh family of Haripur near Kakdwip, the Pal and the Roy families in Kultali, Sarkar family in Bhangore and Canning, controlled most of the lands in these areas. Such high concentration of land - holdings explains why this district was among the earliest areas since the 1940s, where the somewhat fragile organization of society on the basis of the principles of caste, gave way to peasant movements in Mathurapur, Sagar, Sandeshkhali, Gosaba and Kakdwip. What is noteworthy is that it was only in Kakdwip, which according to Krishnakanta Sarkar, was selected by Communists for the purpose of an 'insurrection' of peasants, that the movement could gather sufficient momentum to attract wide attention.
Certain other areas of South 24 Parganas district, however, point to some other attributes of the organization of society. In Rajpur, Harinavi, Subhas gram, Langalbere, as Kamal Chowdhury observes, there was a long tradition of learning Sanskrit. It was the reputation in learning Sanskrit by some scholars which earned the name of Dakshin (Southern) Nabadwip for these areas, after Nabadwip's reputation as a centre for higher learning in Sanskrit in Bengal.\textsuperscript{10} It was from the background of Sanskrit scholarship in these areas, that some of the most reputed scholars in Sanskrit in the nineteenth century went to teach Sanskrit at Sanskrit College at Calcutta.\textsuperscript{11}

But it was in Baruipur that people turned to English education quite early because of the patronage provided by the local zamindars and the large number of Englishmen engaged in indigo plantation.\textsuperscript{12} The zamindars of Baruipur migrated from Rajpur, the centre of Sanskrit learning. After they settled in Baruipur, they gifted land to many people who had a tradition of learning and who were from the upper echelons of society. Baruipur, which was largely covered by forests when the zamindar family moved in to settle there, soon became a rather thickly populated area in the early decades of the nineteenth century. In consequence, some offices of the East India Company were opened here in the first and second decade of the nineteenth century. In 1820, an
Englishman established a missionary school in Baruipur. Gradually, Baruipur turned into a centre of missionary activities and a church was established. The Roychoudhury family, the zamindars of Baruipur, were the chief patrons of the local religious festivals of both Hindus and Muslims in the beginning, but towards the end of the nineteenth century, this patronage shifted decisively in favour of festivals of Hindus. In the 1870s, the then zamindar of Baruipur, Rajindra Kumar Roychoudhury, with the help of some other educated people in Baruipur organized 'Hindu Mela' (that is, a religious congregation of Hindus), on three occasions in a span of four years, which was attended by people from neighbouring areas. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhay, the novelist, in his capacity as a Deputy Magistrate, was posted at Baruipur, between 1864 and 1870.

It can, thus, be seen that although Baruipur did not have a settled population before the zamindars of the area moved in to settle there, the local peasantry had access to mediation by a whole layer of upper caste people, who had a tradition of scholarship in Sanskrit, which shifted to English education from the early decades of the 19th century itself. Besides, these mediators, who claimed the proud membership of the bhadralok category, which definitely emerged in Calcutta in the middle of the nineteenth century, had also a stable network of interaction with the bhadralok in Calcutta.
networks were further strengthened in course of time because, situated at a distance of only about 25 Kilometers to the south of Calcutta, Baruipur was connected quite early by rail as well as road transport to Calcutta. Interestingly, though Baruipur is quite outside the Calcutta metropolitan area, Calcutta Telephones almost overstretched itself to include Baruipur within its jurisdiction. Today, the Baruipur township has an well-equipped hospital, several nursing homes, schools and a college. There are youth sports and cultural organizations in almost every locality in the urban areas of Baruipur. Besides, the traditional upper caste culture in urban Baruipur is immediately noticeable in the pomp and glory of public religious festivals like the Durga Puja.

As distinguished from Baruipur, Kakdwip conforms more closely to the pattern of social organization of those areas which do not have a significant higher caste settlement. The notable attributes of the organization of society in Kakdwip is the presence of a relatively large Muslim population and a significant section of people belonging to Mahisya caste, who have originally migrated to these areas from Midnapur district across the Hoogly river. From interviews with sections of people in the area, it appears that Mahisyas have not altogether severed their relations with people from their own caste origin in the Midnapur district. The function in which Mahisyas specialise traditionally is cultivation of land. It was
observed in the previous chapter that Mahisyas in West Bengal are among the few castes who are relatively more homogenously organized and who have retained these caste ties to a considerable extent through a stable network of mutual interaction. As far as Muslims in the Kakdwip area are concerned, it is significant that they have not been subjected to doctrinaire Islamization of the kind which Ernest Gellner discusses in a recent work.\(^{16}\) For this, there are not many differences between the lower caste Hindus and Muslims as to most of the social practices and habits. Perhaps for this reason, many Muslims in this area have retained their erstwhile Hindu surnames for many generations. One reason, it appeared, for this lack of a more clear differentiation between lower caste Hindus and Muslims, most of whom were converted from lower caste Hindus by Muslim Pirs, Gazis and Fakirs, who emphasized on the common grounds of various faiths rather than by formal religious preachers of High Islam, was the absence of people from the upper castes, particularly Brahmins, who would have sought to enforce the distinctions of Hindus against Muslims.

Kakdwip has another distinction which sets it apart from other areas of the district which do not have significant upper caste settlements. Since the 1950s, Kakdwip gradually evolved into the most important business centre in those areas which are beyond Diamond Harbour to the south of Calcuta. It caters to the needs
of people from about Kulpi in the north to Namkhana and Frazerghunge in the south and the Sagar islands in the west. More importantly, Kakdwip grew into a centre of business in fish. It was reported that after the partition of Bengal in 1947, a large number of people migrated from Chittagong (now in Bangladesh) to settle down in Kakdwip. Fishing was their profession in Chittagong which they sought to reestablish in Kakdwip. In the beginning, their business in fish was small but gradually it grew to such an extent that some of these business men are said to have invested crores of rupees in the business. As an area of business, fishing promises almost unlimited prospects of growth because Kakdwip is close to the Bay of Bengal and so far there is no indication that fish will be in short supply in the Bay or that the demand for fish has saturated in West Bengal and large parts of the other States in eastern and north-eastern India where people have a long tradition of consumption of fish as almost a staple food. The question before the fish merchants in Kakdwip is, therefore, not the demand and supply of fish, but the availability of the necessary technology and manpower for fishing in deeper seas.

Although fish is the main commodity around which business in Kakdwip grew, today business activity at Kakdwip has expanded considerably to include almost every commodity which the people in the areas served by it require for their consumption. Besides, perhaps at the
initiative of the cultivating Mahisya community, a few years ago, an experiment started in the area to grow crops which would be suitable to the salinity of the soil and water in the area. Hrishikesh Maity, who has remained a Member of the State Legislative Assembly, from the area for a long time now, in an interview, informed that the effort to grow some commercial crops suitable for the salinity of soil and water in the area, met with some success in recent years. 17

What is significant about Kakdwip is that inspite of the growth of business in the area, particularly in the last two decades or so, which was instrumental in the creation of a rather big market in Kakdwip, and the construction of a few high-rise buildings in the vicinity of the market, a full-fledged township of the kind that can be seen in Baruipur, has not developed in Kakdwip. As interviews with some local people revealed, many of the richest businessmen who invest huge amounts of money in the business, particularly, in fish in Kakdwip, have ceased to remain permanent residents of the area. They have shifted to Calcutta both for the purpose of residence and coordination of business activities. Kakdwip to them has remained as a kind of outstation site for business operations, but not quite the centre for decision making. Moreover, these businessmen are not from the traditional upper castes. The kind of interest that the upper caste settlement in Baruipur showed in the promotion of Western
education and culture in the area, including the cultivation of religious identities, as early as in the nineteenth century, did not perhaps, appear to have any great worth even to those businessmen in Kakdwip who have not shifted their residence and decision making business functions to Calcutta. Even municipal and medical services have not attracted much of their attention. Of course, those of these people who earn rather considerable amounts of money, send their children to schools and colleges in Calcutta about 80 kilometers from Kakdwip. In consequence, Kakdwip has just one college which caters to the needs of a large area and only a few high schools. The medical facilities are undeveloped. And Kakdwip does not have an urban municipal body.

Kultali is the typical example of those areas of the South 24 Parganas district, or perhaps the extreme example of an area, which does not have upper caste settlements. This area also did not experience the kind of changes which Kakdwip did primarily through the growth of business in fish. Besides, this area is in the extreme south eastern part of the district which has most of West Bengal's part of the Sundarbans, which is very thinly populated. Of the three areas of Baruipur, Kakdwip and Kultali, this is also the farthest from Calcutta. The main route of communication from Calcutta is through Jaynagar, upto where train services are available. From Jaynagar to Jamtala in Kultali, which is a distance of about 25 kilometers, communication by road is available.
But public transport facility between Jaynagar and Jamtala in Kultali is extremely limited, with very infrequent bus services. Jamtala, however, is in fact, only the approach to the vast areas of Kultali which are accessible only by mechanised boat through the numerous rivers which have criss-crossed the whole area. Even these mechanised boat services are very infrequent. The water and soil in this area are saline. This means that only a limited variety of crops can be grown and only one crop in a year can be grown. The people in Kultali do not have anything else to fall back on, not even the cultivation of fish in enclosed water which is done on a wide scale in the neighbouring areas of Gosaba, Canning and Basanti. The facilities for medical treatment and education, which are generally provided by the Government, are also in a very poor state.

Kultali, thus, seems to provide for the example of an area where the resettled population, originally brought there for clearing and cultivation of lands from other places, reworked their caste boundaries to a considerable extent to facilitate the creation and maintenance of networks of interaction through activities like marriage and economic production, in the absence of upper caste mediators, who were traditionally assigned these functions in most other parts of West Bengal, which had a more or less settled population. This means that in the absence of the upper castes like Brahmins, although some
networks of interaction were developed, these remained, at least to some extent, reworkable. But the principles of this reworking of caste boundaries had to be imperfectly bound by caste, because alternative principles of social organization of people through modern Western education were not available to these people.

It was, perhaps, because of the marginal existence of the people of this area in relation to the people in the mainlands of West Bengal and the problem of inaccessibility of this area to outsiders, that there is a long tradition of powerful dacoits and dacoit settlements in certain localities in Kultali. In the absence of refined principles of social organization and mediators from the upper caste who would have been in charge of this refinement, the use of force gained acceptability as an alternative mode of organizing people. It seems that where clear principles for the organizations of society were not otherwise available, the use of physical force worked as an alternative. What is significant is that dacoits in this area are not invisible people who strike only in the darkness of night, but cannot be spotted in society. At the time of the fieldwork, the names of many dacoits were heard who were prominent members of the society not only in Kultali, where they appeared to be numerous, but also in some areas in Canning like Sarengabad, and in Basanti. But the one thing which appeared to be rather curious is that the contemporary dacoits are not as much regarded as the
legendary ones used to be. While people talk enthusiastically about great dacoits in the past who possessed supernatural powers, many dacoits who have continued in their vocation, are beaten to death by villagers, and are condemned to unlawful confinement by the police, at which no one comes to their rescue. Others who have remained in the vocation, at least to some extent insured their position through a tactical alliance with political parties. This seems to indicate that the absence of clear principles of social organization in these marginal areas, which traditionally opened a social space for the exercise of physical force by dacoits, and supported their position in society, has been at least partially eroded by the emergence of norms of politics which have been able to function as powerful principles of an alternative organization of society in which dacoits are marginalised in society. In fact, police officials at all the police stations openly confessed that the legal obligation for the production of an accused before a magistrate within 24 hours of his/her arrest, is quite frequently not observed when one or more persons are caught on charges of dacoity.

The Agenda for Political Action

There seems to be a pattern in the peasant movements led by Communists and others Leftists in the district. It is possible to see these movements as
progressively diminishing opposition to the law and the state over time. Moreover, this opposition to the law and the state seems to have been more virulent in those areas where there was not the kind of upper-caste bhadralok mediators like the ones who are numerous in Baruipur. Besides, the response of the state in terms of repressive measures against these movements also seems to have decreased in stringency over time. Finally, it seems to be worthy of some attention that although the floated agenda of all these movements have veered around the question of 'land to the tiller,' the actual opposition to the law and the state expressed through the movement encompassed much more than the question of 'land to the tiller'.

Of all these movements, the earliest one which Communists led was what Krishnakanta Sarkar calls, the 'Kakdwip Peasant Insurrection'. Krishnakanta Sarkar argues forcefully that this movement was led completely from the outside, in accordance with the resolution of the Communists Party of India adopted in its Second Congress held at Calcutta. He observes that 'the tebhaga movement was more or less confined within the legal framework' in the beginning, but that its character changed subsequently when the objectives of the Communists Party changed. In the latter phase, the movement had two apparently contradictory characteristics. On the one hand, the movement showed the undisputed sway of the leaders of the movement, like Kangsari Halder and...
Ashok Bose, who replaced the peaceful methods of the tebhaga movement, like holding public meetings, whose purpose was to draw peasants to the movement, by the militant Sangram committees in which notorious dacoits like Haridas were inducted, and on the other hand, how the faction led by Ashok Bose, who gradually showed a greater preference for armed struggle, developed a difference of opinion with Kangsari Halder, who did not favour such extreme measures, and strayed on the path to armed struggle until the end. In fact, the position of the leaders was so unassailable in relation to the mobilised peasants, that when some of the leaders spread rumours that 'the rifles of the police were made of wood and could not be used for shooting', and that the 'police were on stricke, they stood by the peasants', the peasants believed them.

The argument here is that the Kakdwip peasant movement was the most violent of the peasant movements in the South 24 Parganas district for two reason. The one is that till around the late 1940s and early 1950s, the social organization in Kakdwip showed many of the attributes that are found now in Kultali: a marginal society in which there was a lack of refined principles of social organization, the almost complete absence of upper caste English educated mediators, who have traditionally contributed to the refinement of the principles of social organization in terms of caste and some of whom, with the
advent of English education, would have also contributed to the spread of certain principles of social organization which were different from those of caste, and the social space that this opened to the exercise of physical force as an accepted method for the enforcement of social control. It was the temporary fusion of these attributes of the organization of society in Kakdwip with the objectives of the Communists leaders which sparked the movement. But as against the opinion of Krishnakanta Sarkar, this movement could not have been 'more or less confined within the legal framework' for a relatively long period of time, nor could the movement sustain the violent form it took in its later part, because of one reason—the absence of principles of organization of people on a relatively large scale, either in the principles of caste organization of society, such as could be seen among the Mahisyas in Midnapur district in the 1920s, or the organization of the peasantry as a 'class', which was not achieved in the late 1940s, even with the teachings of the Communist leaders. It was because of the temporary nature of the fusion of the attributes of the social organization in Kakdwip and the objectives of Communists leaders, rather than a relatively stable organizational base for it, which contributed to the gradual slide of the movement from 'the legal framework', in which it was initiated by Communists, to the hands of those leaders whose exercise of physical force already had a social space for acceptance. As far as the reaction of the state
in terms of repressive measures against these movements are concerned, it may be observed that even the newly independent state, after a long period of struggle for freedom, took desperate measures for supressing the movement. In terms of the severity of the measures, it appears that only the movement of Naxalites in the early 1970s, was equally, if not more severely, repressed. But in South 24 Parganas district, it seems that the Kakdwip peasant movement was repressed desparately by the state, not because the Congress Party wanted to remain in power, which was one reason for the repression of Naxalites, but because, the movement seemed to have unforeseen consequences in its store. This unforeseen character of the movement was much like that of the peasant and tribal movements in the colonial period, but what further heightened the unforeseen character of the movement to the state was the presence of Communist leaders at its helm.

Unlike the Kakdwip peasant movement in 1948-50, which was somewhat transient in nature, peasant movements in various parts of the district from about the middle of the 1960s, which were led by Communists and other Leftists, have been able acquire a relatively stable 'base' among peasants in those areas. It is argued that this was possible because of an elementary politicization of the peasantry, primarily through their induction into the political process through elections. This induction into the political process gave peasants the vision of a
society larger than the one in which they lived and of which they constituted a part. On the basis of this elementary politicization, Communist and Leftist leaders told them that they constituted not only a part of a larger society, but also a strategic part, from where they could demand something from the society for themselves. The study of the peasant movement in Sonarpur in 1972-73, by Swasti Mitter seems to confirm this.\textsuperscript{27} Jayanta Bhattacharya, who was the foremost leader of the movement, was not only a Brahmin, but also a post-graduate from Calcutta University. His method of politics was to 'teach' the peasants of their rights, of how not to be ashamed of forcibly possessing lands from the large landowners, which 'really' belonged to them.\textsuperscript{28} In this phase, peasant movements were not the all out 'insurrections' against the law and the state which the Kakdwip peasant movement, according to Krishnakanta Sarkar,\textsuperscript{29} was. These movements were oriented to only one agenda for political action of peasants - the demand for 'land to the tiller'. This is not to say that these movements were entirely peaceful and strictly in conformity with law. But these movements were based on a certain relation to law, which was vindicated by the West Bengal Land Reforms Act of 1955. The political task of the leaders was to convince the peasants that they have to fight for what was due to them in law. This fight for the rights of peasants within the framework of law reduced for both the peasants and the state the need to take extreme...
measures because the uncertainty of the intentions of either side was considerably reduced by the possibilities of a legal explanation of the demands of peasants.

It was on the basis of this narrowing of the focus of the peasant movements in large parts of the South 24 Parganas district and the explainability of the demands of peasants in law, that leaders of the Communist and other Leftist parties were able to establish what they usually call their 'bases' in certain areas of the district. In operative terms, what these 'bases' meant was that the leaders could organise peasants on the basis of the slogan for 'land to the tiller', and it was on the basis of this organization of peasants for their 'rights', which could be translated into votes of large sections of the peasantry, in favour of these leaders in the elections to the State Assembly in 1977.

What seemed to be rather strange in the course of the field-work in the district in 1991-92 was that the Communists and other Leftist parties were able to retain their 'bases' in different parts of the district, which they created between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s, for so long. For example, the CPI(M) has its bases in Kakdwip and Bhangore, the Revolutionary Socialist Party has its bases in Basanti and Gosaba, the Socialist Unity Centre has its bases in Jaynagar and Kultali. The one factor that facilitated the retention of bases by some Communist and other Leftist parties in the district is
that most of these parties are constituents of the Left Front which is in power in the State. It is interesting to see that although these Leftist parties are quite often at loggerheads with each other at the local level, so far many of these disputes have been smothered up by leaders of contending political parties at the higher levels, in the interest of their remaining in the State government together. At the initial stages of the field-work, it seemed as if the division of territories among the constituent political parties of the Left Front, has taken on the character of another Permanent Settlement, in which each political party would respect others’ territories, which they call their ‘bases’.

Left Front Government and the Institutions of Mediation

It seems that one important reason for which it was possible for the constituents of the Left Front to retain their ‘bases’ of political support in certain areas of the district for a long time, was the measures for land reform and the establishment of panchayats by the Left Front Government after it came to power in the State in 1977. The narrowing down of the agenda for political action by the peasantry to the question of the right to possession of land by the poorer parts of the peasantry, constituted of the poor peasants, sharecroppers and the landless labourers, was achieved in considerable measure by the proposals for land reform that the government sought to implement after 1977. To be sure, these
proposals were contained in the law and the procedures established by the law (The West Bengal Land Reforms Act, 1955 and the Rules made thereunder) required the bureaucracy, namely, the Land Reforms Department, to implement the measures which would benefit the poor peasantry. This meant that the bureaucracy of the state took over from the peasants what the peasants so far were fighting for. But the limits of law had to be accepted. The proposals for land reform in law had two basic components: tenurical security to share croppers who cultivated lands belonging to others, not possession of these lands by them, and the distribution lands above the ceiling limits, among landless labourers, the sizes of which at the initial stage itself, raised some doubts about their economic viability.

In certain areas of the South 24 Parganas district, however, this gradual narrowing down and the ultimate take over of the agenda for political action of the peasantry, was resisted in many forms. Some of this resistance can be seen in the large-scale mobilization of the peasantry on the occasions when the bureaucracy took measures for the acquisition of lands. Interestingly, these mobilizations were most often led by the local organs of the dominant political party in an area. The purpose of these mobilizations was both to facilitate the possession of these lands by the bureaucracy and at the same time to put pressure on the bureaucracy to act in
deference to the demands of the mobilized peasants with respect to both the possession of the lands and their distribution. It was largely because of these pressures by peasants mobilized by the local organs of political parties that some of the large lands in the district like Paler Chowk in Kultali, Pealir Char in Baruipur and Hajir Chowk in Canning, have remained contentious and the bureaucracy was able to neither acquire the lands, nor redistribute them. Beside, in this district, the presence of a large number of fisheries has complicated the issue of land reforms. Lands used for fisheries were not covered by the Land Reforms Act of 1955. It was only through an amendment to the Land Reform Act passed in the Legislative Assembly in 1981, that lands used for purposes other than agriculture such as fisheries, were brought under the purview of the Land Reforms Act. Acquisition of fisheries by the Government, particularly in Bhangore and Canning areas, provided a new impetus to the mobilization of peasants for the assertion of their rights. On the occasions when larger fisheries like Janata and Khagra fisheries in the Bhangore - Canning areas were acquired by the Government, in the face of stiff opposition from the armed gangs of people who worked for the owners of these fisheries, according to estimates by a police officer who led these operations at the time, on the side of the police, more than ten thousand people were mobilized by the leaders of the dominant peasant organization in the local areas on each occasion. It was
largely on the basis of his abilities for the mobilization of peasants on these occasions, and the follow-up operations through which he put pressures on the administration, for the distribution of these lands among the people chosen by him, that a leader of the peasant organization in these areas, shot to instant fame in the Canning area, and became kind of a rival to another leader in the Bhangore area within the same political party.

The panchayats can be seen as institutions which could deal with the ever-narrowing down of the focus of peasant action, and in the end, the take over of these actions by the bureaucracy. From the perspective of the Left Front Government, peasants could find in the panchayats the scope for broad-basing their political functions, from the narrow agenda of land rights with which they were initiated into political functioning. In the functioning of peasants were to be transformed from the spectacular forms of political functions to which they were accustomed in the movements for land rights, to more routinized, everyday forms of political functioning. As far as issues in politics are concerned, panchayats, to be elected by the peasants themselves, would have much more to offer to peasants in terms of financial assistance, self-employment schemes, assistance in securing bank loans etc., which would far exceed what the movements for land rights had to offer. The most important thing about
Panchayats was its location in peasant society. Panchayats were not to be confined to membership of particular castes, these were to be elected by the whole society, irrespective of the affiliations of people to various castes. In the context of the movements of peasants, which had a long tradition of opposition to the law and the state, the panchayats were perceived to secure a site in society, which was in contact with the state, because it was from the state that panchayats would bring benefits to the peasantry, but at the same time panchayats, particularly village panchayats, had to work in the tangible world of the peasants, and were expected to work with peasants. In the context of the narrowing focus of the peasant movements in the district, the panchayats provided for a flexibility of approach to politics for peasants which was no longer available in direct peasant mobilizations in politics.

The perceived shift in the site of peasant politics from movements to the measures for land reform to be implemented by the bureaucracy and the creation of panchayats as the institutions which would give a broader basis to peasant politics in different parts of South 24 Parganas district, seems to depend on two principal factors: the presence or absence of bhadralok mediators in the local society and the extent to which the local society had to depend on the measures for land reform and the services provided by panchayats. In fact, it may even be said that the number of reasons is one, because the
areas in which there is a sizable number of bhadralok mediators, it is found that the general dependence of the local society on the measures for land reform and the functioning of panchayats is much less, because with a greater access to the mediators, the society in these areas have already become more accustomed to forms of economic and political activity, which the measures of the Government have introduced only recently. Moreover, the immediate concerns of people in those areas where their is a substantial section of mediators, are more economic than political, because the political agenda of land reform and the introduction of panchayats to them promised no more than what they were already doing in their economic lives. It is not that people in areas which have mediators, do not respond to politics in any case, but that the measures for land reform did not hold out anything for them which could be the basis for their political organization.

It is, perhaps, for this reason that Baruipur was not the 'base' of any Communist or other Leftist political party. The study of electoral prospects of political parties since about the mid-1960s would show that fortunes were more or less evenly divided between the Congress party and the CPI(M), which are the two dominant parties in the area. Although there was a powerful peasant movement in neighbouring backward Sonarpour area, there is no report of any such powerful peasant movement in Baruipur even during the late 1960s, and early 1970s,
when many parts of the State had seen such movements. There is no Leftist leader in the Baruipur area, or any section of leftist leaders, who are credited with doing something for the people of Baruipur, or its peasantry, whereas in Sonarpur area, in which the concentration of land was very high and there are not the kind of mediators that Baruipur has, Jayanta Bhattacharya is almost a cult figure who cannot be challenged. Moreover, the urban part of Baruipur has a municipality, an urban body, not a panchayat, although there are panchayats in the neighbouring areas which constitute the Baruipur Assembly constituency and the jurisdiction of the Baruipur police station. There are, of course, fringe areas in the jurisdiction of the Baruipur police station, such as Belegachhi and Domdoma, where the functions of politics are somewhat different from what they are in urban Baruipur, but it seems that to some extent even these fringe areas are in the shadow of urban Baruipur. At the same time, it also seemed at the time of the field-work in 1991-92, that the nature of problems that the measures for land reform had entered in Belegachhi, and the kind of problems that the functioning of the panchayat had to face in Domdoma, were more akin to the functions of politics in Bhangore, Canning and Kultali, than what could be expected of it in Baruipur, or even in Kakdwip. In urban Baruipur, however, there is not only not any question of effects of
the measures for land reform, but the functioning of the municipality also takes a back seat to other issues in politics.

Kakdwip, on the other hand, is as yet a 'base' of the CPI(M). Much of the credit for creating this base goes to the leader of the party, Hrishikesh Maity, who has been elected to the State Legislative Assembly from this constituency, in every election since the late 1960s, except for the one held in 1972, in which the Congress Party won. In local politics, he is the supreme figure, and he, along with another person, Santosh Seal, who was described by a leader of the Congress party as the second man in command in the local CPI(M), are perceived to be the foremost peasant leaders who ushered in a new era for the peasantry and secured their right to the possession of land. The important point is that he is perceived to be as such even by the leaders of the Congress party in the area who are opposed to him in politics. On a visit to his residence, it appeared to be possible to understand at least partially the reason for his continuing suzerainty in the area. He lived in a rented accommodation near Kakdwip Bazar which resembled the home of a peasant who had somehow managed to live in a semi urban locality with some difficulty. The house seemed to be ill-maintained, and almost in a dilapidated condition, although the locality was not the poor peasant's, going by Kakdwip's standards. In that house, he lived in the corner of the
first floor, which was not very easy to find out, because of the other tenants, who lived in other parts of the building. This man, of advanced years, once in sight, resembled more of an old peasant than a politician. And he talked about peasants, of their distress, of their poverty, the problems of irrigation in the area, because of the salinity of the soil and water, and of how he and the panchayats in the area were trying to ameliorate the condition of the peasantry.

What seemed to be likely from talks with him and a cross section of others, is that the real base of Hrishikesh Maity, and of the CPI(M) as his political party, was among the peasantry, rather than in the market place at the heart of Kakdwip. Both Hrishikesh Maity and Santosh Seal, talked at length about the measures the panchayats and the Government took in the area, to reduce the salinity of water meant for irrigation, how to protect the prices of agricultural products, and the measures for developing the particular varieties of seeds and crops, which are suitable for the salinity of the soil and water in the area. In these measures, it seemed that the Mahisyas, who are present in significant numbers, among the upcoming sections of the peasantry in the area, were the real people, whom the CPI(M) largely represents in the area. It is this caste - basis which seems to have contributed to many of the CPI(M)’s concern for the innovative methods of agricultural development in the
area. And it was the innovative methods of agricultural development in the area, which have enabled the panchayats in the area to largely remain in CPI(M) hands for so long. The growth of Kakdwip Bazar appeared to have facilitated in the CPI(M)'s retention of its 'base' in the area, because, the growth of non-agricultural activities, was able to absorb many of those who might have fallen outside the process of agricultural production, thus sparing the diversion of funds from the panchayats for their 'welfare'.

Inspite of all this, it seems that the Congress party was gradually gaining in strength in the area. Of course, the party did not have any leader, who could even remotely match the stature that Hrishikesh Maity of the CPI(M), has been able to build over the years in the area, and it is likely that as long as Hrishikesh Maity guards the CPI(M) fortress in Kakdwip, it will be extremely difficult for the Congress party to build anything resembling a 'base' in the area. But what seems to enable the Congress Party to gain a foothold in the area are the possibly two allegations against the CPI(M): first, that party has made the panchayats like their party organs and second, that both in the questions related to land and in the functioning of panchayats, the party uses force to silence opposition.

An examination of both these allegations seems to suggest that the explanation lies in the nature of the politicization of the peasantry in Kakdwip. It was a
politicization on the basis of the organization of the peasantry on two grounds, the agenda for political action of the peasants for their right to the possession of land, and perhaps partially also a mobilization of the peasantry on the basis of the organization of the most powerful peasant caste in the area, who were able to come into alliances with some other castes. It was possibly an overlap of the two forms of organization of the peasantry which worked for its politicization. But the one factor which worked out this politicization was the leaders of the Communists party. In the absence of a dominant caste leadership of the Mahisyas in the area, and the absence of the kind of bhadralok mediators who are numerous in Baruipur, it was only the leaders of the Communist party who constituted the literati in the local society. Most of these leaders have had a school education, and were either teachers in local primary or secondary schools or were whole-time functionaries of the party. Being the only literate sections in the society and the Communist party, they took charge of the panchayats when these were constituted, because only they had the minimal knowledge of the law and the procedures, which the panchayats were to respect, to be able to function at all. But as they were the only literati in society and the party, they could not be questioned, either by his peasant non-literate comrades in the party or people in the larger society, on the manner of their functioning in the
panchayats, because the normative basis for such questioning was available only to them. Consequently, they developed a vested interest in denying, what Jurgen Habermas would call, the 'publicness' of the panchayats. This vested interest struck deeper roots as their revolutionary euphoria gradually gave way to the pragmatism of functioning in panchayats.

Besides, the society in Kakdwip, traditionally had a marginal existence in the absence of upper caste people who would have refined the principles of the organization of society on the basis of caste. The rather diffuse organization of society in consequence, which could not satisfy all the needs of principles of organization of the society in terms of caste, had to rely on the exercise of physical force as the solution to the problems of organization of society. In a society devoid of mediators from the upper castes who could mediate between different sections of the lower castes and with outside society, it had the consequence that the society was poorly organized for the purpose of economic production. Combined with this poor economic organization of society was the concentration of land holding in the hands of the few big landlords.

The marginality of the society in Kakdwip, the diffuse, unrefined character of its social organization in terms of caste, its poor organization for the purpose of economic production and the high concentration of land holding, was, however, highly conducive to the
organization of peasant movements, once the minimal politicization of the society took place after independence, mainly through the process of elections. The organization of the movements of peasants was made possible through working out an alliance between different sections of people on the basis of the common agenda for the peasantry: the peasant's right to the possession of land. This organization of the peasantry came through rather easily because there was hardly any contending organization of society on the basis of refined principles of caste, which would have clearly divided the peasantry.

In spite of this rather remarkable feat in the organization of the peasantry for movement, to which surely the Communist leadership contributed in a large measure, in Kakdwip, it seems that at least to some extent, the alliances between different sections of the peasantry, was worked out around the section of the peasantry which was already relatively more organized on the basis of its caste identity - Mahisyas. As the focus of the movement was gradually narrowed down to the questions of the right to the possession of land by peasants, the task of which was taken over by the bureaucracy after 1977, and the peasantry was given a more elaborate political role in the panchayats, a new set of problems set in. The reason for these problems was that before their politicization, the peasantry learned to live in poverty, but in the wake of their politicization when
the Communist leaders taught them not to tolerate their poverty and to fight for their rights, the peasantry was awakened to their poverty and fought for their rights. But beyond a point, they were asked to give up fighting because institutions were created to which they would elect their leaders, which would look after their rights. The fights of the peasantry for their rights were thus transformed into what their leaders could do in institutions whose manners of functioning and their capacities for economic welfare were not known to them. Certainly, panchayats had their limitations, both for reasons of the vested interests of the leaders who had a monopoly of knowledge of these organizations, which they effectively used for the monopoly of their power, and the dominant sections of the people in society, who supported these leaders and whose interest also in turn was protected by the leaders. In Kakdwip, it seems that the up-coming Mahisyas who constitute the dominant section of the peasantry, are the main ‘base’ of the Communist leaders, and the innovative methods for agricultural development conceived by the leaders, subserve mainly this section of the peasantry. When the interests of this dominant section of the peasantry was at stake, the old method of physical force was used to resolve the problem. But in Kakdwip, because of the clearly identifiable dominant section of the society, who are both more cohesively organized socially, and are also economically
powerful, the need for the use of force arises not yet very frequently.

In Kultali, on the other hand, the need for the use of physical force arises more frequently, because there is no clearly identifiable dominant section of the society. It was perhaps for this reason that the Socialist Unity Centre of India, which since the middle of the 1960s, organized peasants more or less on a similar basis as the CPI(M) in Kakdwip, has already lost some ground to the CPI(M), since the panchayat elections in 1988. Besides, in Kultali, there is not an ameliorating business centre as in Kakdwip. This is what substantially contributes to the constant realignment of different sections of the people on every issue, whether it is related to the right to the possession of land or any developmental scheme of the panchayats. This is all the more so because the people have little else to turn to.

In fact in Kultali, it is largely possible to say that all the three political parties, namely, the SUCI, the CPI(M) and the Congress Party, are no more than temporary alignments of particular sections of the people. Since the late 1960s, it was the SUCI which ate into the Congress Party base in the area, and now it is the CPI(M), which is eating into the SUCI base. For this, the people's affiliations to particular political parties, are rather transient, although, surprisingly, affiliation to a political party, seems to be an absolute must for most people. The manner in which political parties work out
specific alliances between different sections of the people is through the distribution of either the right to possession of land or some benefits from the panchayats. But usually, the greatest beneficiaries of the distribution of these benefits are the important/numerous sections of people, who constitute the main base of a political party. The less important and the less numerous sections get less than this, for which in most cases, it is they who defect from a political party. It is also not uncommon for differences to arise within the important/numerous sections which support a political party, perhaps in the form of differences between two important leaders. In such cases, political parties stand to lose more because, either of the leaders who chooses to defect to another political party, would take a relatively large number of people with him. In Kultali, it appears that most sections of the people have their own leaders, who are instrumental in working out their alliances with other sections, which constitute and/or sustain a political party. But some large sections of people have, more than one line of leaders, that is, rival leaders, which complicates the process of the alliances of these sections with others.

It seems that the leaders of different sections of the people, who constitute the factions in the political parties, are integrated with the higher levels of these political parties through a mechanism. From the point of
view of the higher-level leaders, these factional leaders maintain the support-base of the political party in an area and ensure votes for the party at the time of elections, whereas from the point of view of the factional leaders, they appropriate the political party and its higher-up leaders to extract benefits for their own sections of the people and for themselves. This complicity between the factional leaders at the local levels and the higher leadership of the parties, has the one consequence that factional competition and rivalry at the lower levels are reflected in the differences of opinion between factions at the higher levels of the party hierarchy. Another consequence of this complicity is that while the higher-level leaders have a personal stake in defending the factions at the lower levels of the hierarchy, because the support-base they constitute and maintain, are crucial to their survival as effective leaders, the lower-level factions seek the protection of the higher level leaders in their functioning, which may more or less conform to the party-line.

It thus appears that the differences in the organization of society at the local level, has considerable effects on the construction of the domain of politics in the local society. It does not suffice simply to say that a society is primarily organized on the basis of caste or something like the organization of the peasantry, as a class, the rural proletariat, as some writers have argued. If one has to look into the manner
in which a society is based on caste, the most important factor that is to be taken into account, is whether and how far a certain degree of crystallization of caste functions has taken place in a society and whether these caste functions are more or less diffuse. If one has to look into the manner in which a society is based on conceptions of class, the one factor that has to be taken into account is the nature of the mediator in that society, whether it is based on caste functions of mediators or they have have assumed the role of mediators on the basis of Western education which promises, among other things, the organization of a society on the basis of class. More than this caste-class distinction in the organization of society, it is important to see how the two conceptions of the organization of society have specific overlaps in particular social contexts, which have important consequences on the nature of the politicization of the peasantry. And in its turn, the nature of politicization of the peasantry has important consequences on the newly-created institutions of panchayats, as the new site of the political functions of the rural society. In the functioning of panchayats again, it is important to see if they occupy a central position in the mediation between the state and the rural society, or exist at the margins of other institutions, which occupy more important positions in the mediation between the state and society. Finally, it seems that the
nature of politicization of a local society considerably determines the manner in which institutions of the state function in society on the basis of the laws with which they seek to explain acts in society.
Notes and References


2 ibid., p. 149.

3 ibid., p. 150.


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


8 ibid., p. 634.

9 ibid., p. 622.

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

11 ibid., p. 12.

12 idem.

13 ibid., p. 56.

14 ibid., pp. 56-58.

15 ibid., p. 58.


17 Interview, Dated August 18, 1991.


19 ibid., p. 622.

20 ibid., p. 623.

21 ibid., p. 622.

106
22 ibid., pp. 624-45.

23 ibid., p. 626.


28 idem.

29 Krishnakanta Sarkar, op. cit., pp. 618-60.
