Chapter 7:

LAND REFORMS IN WEST BENGAL
CHAPTER VII
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7.1 Introduction:
The West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act, 1953 and the West Bengal Land Reforms Act, 1955 provide the necessary legislative infrastructure for elimination of intermediary interests, imposition of ceiling on land holding and distribution of surplus land to the landless and the near landless. These legislative measures have been supplemented by a few schemes like providing institutional finance to the allottees of surplus land and the share-croppers so that they can profitably cultivate the land, generate some surplus and thereby contribute to the national economy.

7.2 Components of Land Reforms:
The main components of the Land Reforms package are the following:

(i) Distribution of vested land to the landless and the near landless;
(ii) Vesting of ceiling surplus land;
(iii) Implementing Institutional Finance to share croppers and allottees of vested land;
(iv) Recording of share-croppers i.e. Bargadars; and
(v) Implementing homestead land to certain categories of the rural poor.

1) Distribution of vested land to the landless and the near landless -

Allotment of ceiling surplus land to the landless and the near landless forms the most important component of the Land Reform Programmes. Priorities have been accorded to persons, who are landless and the members of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes. The ceiling up to which allotment of land may be made to a landless person is one acre. Persons who already hold less than one acre of land may, however, be given land to an extent which is equal to the difference between one acre and the land already held by them. In case of a share cropper, half of the land cultivated by him as a share-cropper is taken into account in computing this total land for the purpose of allotment.

No settlement of land is made with a person, who is employed in a business, trade undertakings, service or industrial occupation etc.
Allotment of land is made to eligible persons on the recommendation of the Block Level Reforms Advisory Committee. With a view to involve the Panchayati Raj institutions in this important aspect of Land Reforms Programme, the standing committee of the Panchayat samity dealing with development and Land Reforms has been declared as the Block Level Land Reforms Advisory Committee to advise the local Revenue Officials in the matter of allotment of land.

Government have taken all-out measures to see that the available agricultural lands are distributed to the eligible persons as far as possible.

(ii) Vesting of Ceiling Surplus Land:

The West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act, 1953 and the West Bengal Land Reforms Act, 1955 are in force in the state. The earlier Act provides for imposition of ceiling on individual basis and the latter on family basis. It has been the constant endeavour of the present government to mop up as much as ceiling surplus land as possible and to distribute the same to the deserving persons.

Revenue machinery came heavily on the intermediaries who clandestinely retained land above the ceiling by circumventing the provisions of the ceiling Acts. Assistance of the Panchayati-Raj institutions in identification of such persons has been fully mobilized by the administration. Field functionaries have been advised to make, all efforts to identify cases of clandestine retention on the basis of records and to undertake necessary enquiries for them.

III) Institutional Finance to Share-Croppers and allottees of vested land:

In the year 1979, the State Government undertook a scheme for providing institutions finance to the share-croppers and assignees of ceiling surplus land i.e. the patta-holders. The scheme was intended firstly to snap the unwholesome tie between the share-croppers and the patta-holders on the one hand and the big moneylenders as well as the landed gentry on the other, and secondly to provide them with financial backing so that they could cultivate their small holdings profitably.

In 1980 the special component plan and the Tribal Sub-plan were dovetailed with the main scheme for providing institutional finance. The main features of the schemes as they stand now are the following:

(a) The non-scheduled castes and the non-scheduled tribes beneficiaries get the entire amount of loan at zero rate of interest under the interest subsidy scheme.
(b) The Scheduled Castes beneficiaries are entitled to subsidy from Scheduled Castes and Tribal Welfare Department under special component plan in addition to bank loan.

(c) The Scheduled Tribes beneficiaries are entitled to subsidy from Scheduled Castes and Tribal Welfare Department under the Tribal Sub-plan in addition to bank loan. The scheme covers both the major cultivation seasons of the year, i.e. Rabi and Kharif. The minimum holding for the purpose of Kharif lending is ordinarily 30 cents and that for Rabi 10 cents. The modalities of the scheme are fixed by the Government in consultation with West Bengal state Level Bankers’ Committee. In the districts, action programme is finalised by the District Level Co-ordination Committee.

The Panchayati-Raj institutions have been called upon to play a vital role in the implementation of the scheme. They are required to identify the beneficiaries, render their assistance in the matter of filling in the loan applications and to submit applications to the concerned commercial Banks or the Co-operative Banks. They are also required to assist the banks and the local field functionaries in the matter of disbursements of the loan and subsidy to the beneficiaries.

iv) **Recording of Bargadars:**

Share-cropping i.e. cultivation of land by bargadars is a very old practice in this part of the country. Share-croppers also constitute a notable percentage of the rural population of West Bengal.

Bargadars are persons who cultivate land of other persons on condition of delivering a share of the produce. Their rights on the land are heritable and transferable. For centuries they have been the target of exploitation and deprivation by the land owners. There were sporadic convulsions in different parts of undivided Bengal for securing due share produced to the bargadars. These culminated in the famous Tebhaga Movement which was launched by the bargadars to assert their right to share the products.

Registration of the names of the bargadars in the settlement records has been a part and parcel of the survey and settlement operation since the enactment of the Bengal Tenancy Act 1885. But unfortunately, the coverage was very limited. Revisional settlement under the Land Reforms Act was taken up in the state with effect from 1972. An assessment in the year 1978 revealed that the number of bargadars already brought
into records was about 3.5 lakhs. The main reason behind this gap was the fear-psychosis from which the bargadars were suffering. In order that the names of the unrecorded bargadars could be brought into records, the state Government launched a programme styled ‘operation Barga’ in 1978. The essence of this programme was that the Revenue officers in charge of recording the names of the bargadars would go to the beneficiaries instead of the latter coming to them. The massive administrative effort was fully backed by spontaneous co-operation and assistance from the Panchayati-Raj institutions and peasant’s organisations. Because of its novel feature, the programme attracted the attention of administrators, social thinkers and research scholars not only in India but also abroad.

Total involvement of the administration on the one hand and that of the peoples representatives and the beneficiaries on the other, yielded spectacular results.

The State Government did not rest contented only with launching of the programme of ‘operation Barga’. The law was amended to give further rights to the bargadars and to make resumption of lands under barga cultivation by the owners was more stringent.

Recording the names of bargadars on the one hand, and addition to the stated book of provisions beneficial to them, on the other, have infused in their minds a sense of security. They have also become more conscious of their legal rights and responsibilities. The sense of security in respect to their right of cultivation has acted as a motive force behind their efforts to get more and better production from the land under their cultivation.

v) Providing homestead Land to certain categories of the rural poor:

The West Bengal Acquisition of Homestead Land for Agricultural Labourers, Artisans and Fishermen Act, 1975, provides for acquisition of land upto 0.033 hectares (five cottahs) in possession of persons of the above category on 26th June, 1975, and transferring the title of those lands to them. These beneficiaries become either raiyats or non-agricultural tenants depending on whether they are in possession of agricultural or non-agricultural land. They are not required to pay any selami, revenue or rent to the state, but they are liable to pay the usual cesses.

Prior to 1978, such persons were recorded in the settlement records as in permissive possession of such lands. With effect from 1978 the implementation of the Act
has been taken up by the Government in right earnest and the names of these persons are being registered in the records as full-fledged raiyats or non-agricultural tenants with full title over the lands. They are also being given document of title by the "collectors" under the Act.

Till 1978 the names of a large number of beneficiaries under this Act could not be brought into records. A massive drive was launched by the Government with the cooperation and help of the Panchayati-Raj institutions for identification of such persons, their names, thereafter, had been brought into records with delivery of documents of title to them.

One significant aspect of the Land Reform package undertaken in the state is that it is not being implemented in isolation from the other beneficial programmes aiming at total rural reconstruction. The beneficiaries of the schemes come from the poorest strata of the society without any asset base at all. The state Government have, therefore, taken particular care to see that the beneficiaries of the Land Reforms Programmes are brought within the umbrella of such Programmes as IRDP and NREP so that they may take to farm forestry, animal husbandry, village industries, wage labour, etc. as diversification of the household economy which is a sinequanon for increasing their income.

One novel features of the land reform programmes under taken in the state is the massive participation of the Panchayati-Raj institution in these Programmes. Assistance and co-operation from such institutions has to be sought, as it is not possible to sustain such vast beneficial activities only with administrative efforts. The Panchayti-Raj institutions have played a very useful role in different spheres, like identification beneficiaries under different schemes and assisting the administration in reaching the benefits to them. They have also been greatly instrumental in infusing in the minds of the beneficiaries a sense of awakening and in helping them in sustaining the benefits, which these programmes have sought to reach to their doors.

7.3 Main Features of The Programme of Land Reforms In West Bengal:
The main features of the programme of land reforms in West Bengal are

- Quick recording of the names of the Share-croppers (bargadars) through "operation Barga" and thereby securing to them the legal rights that they are entitled to.
Distribution of already available ceiling surplus vested lands among the landless and the land poor rural workers with the active co-operation of the Panchayati Raj institutions.

Drive to detect and vest on more ceiling surplus lands through quasi judicial investigative machinery with the help of rural workers' organisations and Panchayati-Raj institutions.

Giving institutional credit cover to the share-croppers and the assignees of vested land irreversibly snap the ties of bondage, that they have with the landlords and the money lenders.

Assigning permanent title for homestead purpose to all the landless agricultural workers (including share-croppers), artisans and fishermen upto 0.08 acres who are occupying lands of others as permissive possessors.

Providing tiny sources of irrigation to the assignees of vested lands through bamboo tube-wells where underground hydrological conditions permit such technology and bank financed dug-wells with heavy subsidy from the state in other suitable areas with a view to induce such assignees to go in for high value multiple cropping and improve their economic status.

Giving financial assistance in the form of subsidies to the assignees of vested land for development of their lands.

Abolition of the old revenue system which was a hangover from the Zamindari era and substituting it by a new measure under which revenue is assessed on land-holding above a certain valuation on progressive rate. Small and marginal farmers have been exempted from revenue burden.

Restoration of land alienated by poor and marginal farmers through distress sale provided the purchaser himself is not a poor peasant having land holding less than one 1 acre.

Designing Food for Work Programme for developing rural infrastructure which would primarily benefit the assignees of vested land and marginal farmers as well as to give them sustenance during periods of distress to tide over the crisis and to prevent retransfer of land to affluent farmers.
7.4 Present Rural Development Scenario of West Bengal:

The Panchayat and Rural development department is the nodal Agency for implementations of poverty alleviation programmes in the rural areas of the state of West Bengal that comprises eighteen rural districts. The department also organizes community action for rural planning and development through the elected panchayat bodies at different levels.

The major objectives of the Panchayats and rural development department is to eradicate poverty in the rural areas, the decline in the percentage of population below poverty line over the years becomes an important surrogate for the performance of the poverty alleviation programmes. In this respect a comparison of the percentage of the population below poverty line between 1973-74 and 1999-2000 shows that poverty in West Bengal which was 73.16% in 1973-74 rapidly declined to 31.85% in 1999-2000. All India figures during the corresponding period declined from 56.44% to 31.22%.

Another measurement of the growth of the West Bengal’s economy, although a macro-aggregate which is essentially limited in giving a true picture, could be the per capita income over the years. In 1993-94 per capita income in West Bengal was Rs. 6780/- which increased to Rs. 10012/- in 2000-2001. During the same period all India per capita income increased from higher base of Rs. 7698/- to 10654/- in computing the growth rating per capita income, West Bengal is placed at a higher position of 5.56% in comparison with all India growth rate of 4.64%.

The texture of the rural society in West Bengal at present has the following characteristics :-

a) Dominance of agriculture and allied sector in rural employment.

b) Absence of land rich section of people due to land reforms movement in the state and consequent empowerment of landless level labourers and marginal farmers with ceiling surplus land and recording of barga rights.

c) Diminishing class – caste tension.

d) Existence of Rural- Urban gap in the infrastructure sector.

e) Existence of a strong local government (Panchayats).

f) Existence of Substantial incidence of poverty.

g) Low per capita land available.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name of the District</th>
<th>Quantum of net area sharing for cultivation (X)</th>
<th>No. of Cultivators / 100 bha of Cultivated Land (X)</th>
<th>Yield Productivity in ton per hectare (X)</th>
<th>No. of Agriculture/100 bha of cultivated land (X)</th>
<th>Rural Literacy rate (X)</th>
<th>% of cultivators (X)</th>
<th>Density of Rural population (X)</th>
<th>% of Agricultural Labourer (X)</th>
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Source: Calculated from Census of India, 2001
Levels of Rural Development in West Bengal (by Composite Index), 1991

SOURCE: Prepared Based On Data From: Census Of India, 2001

Fig.: 7.1
Table No. 7.2 Percentage in Change of Workers in West Bengal (1991-2001)

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Sources: Census of India 2001.
The department of panchayats and Rural Developments aims at facilitating economic and social development in the rural areas of the state and organize community action in all development initiative in the rural sector by utilizing Central / State sector programmes. such as :-

a) Constitution of and support to the Three-tier panchayat institution.
b) Universalisation of primary education.
c) Employment Generation Programmes.
d) Rural Housing.
e) Public Health.
f) Social Security.
g) Infrastructure.
h) Decentralization.
i) Sustainable Development of natural resource.
j) Interface with civil society organizations.
k) Training.

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