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**POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF  
INTRA-VILLAGE INEQUALITIES IN  
RURAL TRANSFORMATION – A STUDY  
OF TWO VILLAGES IN WEST BENGAL**

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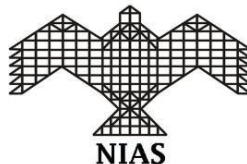
A THESIS TO BE SUBMITTED TO  
**THE UNIVERSITY OF TRANS-DISCIPLINARY HEALTH  
SCIENCES AND TECHNOLOGY**



FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
BY

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UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF  
**PROF. NARENDAR PANI**



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**THE UNIVERSITY OF TRANS-DISCIPLINARY HEALTH  
SCIENCES AND TECHNOLOGY**

**Private University Established in Karnataka by ACT 35 of 2013  
Bengaluru - 560064**

**DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE**

I declare that this thesis entitled “**Political Consequences of Intra-Village Inequalities in Rural Transformation – A Study of Two Villages in West Bengal**” submitted for the award of Doctor of Philosophy to THE UNIVERSITY OF TRANS-DISCIPLINARY HEALTH SCIENCES AND TECHNOLOGY, Bengaluru, is my original work, conducted under the supervision of my guide, **Prof. Narendar Pani**. I also wish to inform that no part of the research has been submitted for a degree or examination at any university. References, help and material obtained from other sources have been duly acknowledged.

I hereby confirm the originality of the work and that there is no plagiarism in any part of the dissertation.

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**THE UNIVERSITY OF TRANS-DISCIPLINARY HEALTH SCIENCES  
AND TECHNOLOGY**

**Private University Established in Karnataka by ACT 35 of 2013**

**Bengaluru – 560064**

**CERTIFICATE**

This is to certify that the work incorporated in this thesis “**Political Consequences of Intra-Village Inequalities in Rural Transformation – A Study of Two Villages in West Bengal**” submitted by Mr. Shilajit Sengupta, was carried out under my supervision. No part of this thesis has been submitted for a degree or examination at any university. References, help and material obtained from other sources have been duly acknowledged. I hereby confirm the originality of the work and that there is no plagiarism in any part of the dissertation.

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## **List of Acronyms**

<b>AL</b>	Agricultural Labour
<b>CL</b>	Cultivator
<b>CPI(M)</b>	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
<b>CPI ML</b>	Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist)
	Liberation
<b>DVC</b>	Damodar Valley Corporation
<b>GDP</b>	Gross Domestic Product
<b>GNP</b>	Gross National Product
<b>GP</b>	Gram Panchayat
<b>HYV</b>	High Yielding Variety Seeds
<b>INC</b>	Indian National Congress
<b>LF</b>	Left Front
<b>MGNREGA</b>	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
<b>MNC</b>	Multinational Corporation
<b>MSP</b>	Minimum Support Price
<b>NABARD</b>	National Bank of Agriculture and rural Development
<b>NIAS</b>	National Institute of Advanced Studies
<b>NREGA</b>	National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
<b>PDS</b>	Public Distribution System
<b>PMAY</b>	Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojna
<b>PRI</b>	Panchayati Raj Institute
<b>TMC</b>	Trinomool Congress
<b>USA</b>	United States of America
<b>SC</b>	Schedule Caste
<b>ST</b>	Schedule Tribe
<b>OBC</b>	Other Backward Class

## Synopsis

Rural transformation in India over the last few decades has been marked by considerable change. In the social sphere, a growing body of literature captures the changing nature of castes and their influence. The economic sphere has been transformed by the changes in the agrarian economy, ranging from the decline in the share of agriculture in GDP to large-scale shifts in the occupational pattern. This transformation could increase the extent of inequality in various ways, including the difference between those benefiting from the change and those left behind. Such a transformation is reflected in the ideological and other political changes that have taken place over this period, including the simultaneous emergence of regionalism and the Backward Caste movements. These political trends have been studied at a macro level of individual states going up to larger regions and the country. Yet, at the core of this change is the transformation taking place at the village level, which impacts local politics.

This thesis has tried to explore this local relationship by asking: What is the effect of rural transformation at the village level on inequality and on local politics? More specifically, the objectives of this can be divided into the following sub-themes:

- What are the inequalities generated by the changing occupational structure in a village?
- What are the political processes that arise from this change in the village?
- What is the impact of these political processes on inequalities in the village?

This thesis has attempted to explore these questions through a household survey and qualitative village study conducted in two villages, Amloki and Haritaki, in districts of Purulia and Bankura, respectively, in West Bengal. It attempted to understand the political consequences of the inequalities in the rural transformations of these two villages through a 'process approach' where politics has been understood through the activities of attaining a general arrangement where people have come by chance or

choice, a definition of politics given by Michael Oakeshott, which provides a broader approach to capture the nature and dynamics of the transformation process. While existing inequalities in rural change have multidimensional consequences in rural arrangements, economic and social transformation at the local village level changes people's activities and associations, resulting change in the arrangements. In addition, occupational changes and changes in socio-cultural arrangements have generated inequalities in two villages in West Bengal.

From the study, it has been found that the multidimensional process of changes in the socio-economic arrangements of villages are an aggregated result of various factors such as the struggle to keep the status quo of a certain group of people, emergence of a new set of activities around non-farm works, former agricultural workers joining the non-farm occupational opportunities inside the village, inaccessibility to migrate out increased the competitions amongst the villagers avail the locally available non-farm jobs and patronages from the economically dominant sections. The study was conducted in the villages of West Bengal, which went through some essential economic and political transitions in the last two decades. The learnings from the fieldwork, which is also aligned with the existing literature and the local narratives, show that the external investments in the villages, occupational shifts, an increase of land fragmentation and a decline of the per head land size and leaving agricultural works have given birth to a new group of villagers whose former associations and arrangements have changed along with the transformation of their activities around farm-based occupations. As the agricultural works were abandoned, the older dependency among the landowners, sharecroppers, cold storage owners, and agricultural labourers changed. The establishment of the river dams in both the villages, the acquisition of the land and the influx of different non-farm opportunities have created new sets of demands for compensation and access to livelihood. Land acquisition, distribution, and utilization in West Bengal have already played an essential role in political history.

It is learned through this thesis that even the consequences of land acquisition are also different based on the local arrangements of the villages. Amloki, which is situated in the Purulia, has experienced a recent phase of the land acquisition process where upper caste people had given the majority of their lands for the development of the river dam

under the central government development plan. There was an expectation that the compensation would be assured and sufficient. However, when they understood that adequate compensation was not provided, protests against the authority was launched along with the scheduled caste groups. During this period, West Bengal was also going through a protest movement on land acquisition, but in Amloki, the protestors did not receive any support. This made their movement context-specific and can be understood through the specific activities in which people were involved. The main political opposition of the state launched a movement before the acquired land could be utilised. In Amloki, the river dam was established, and the discontent among the people developed after a few years when they understood that the compensation was inadequate. In the meantime, the local arrangements and livelihood changed to mostly non-farm activities. People also invested their compensation in chit-funds, which eventually failed because of their fraudulent activities. Although the upper castes in the village had also gone through the same economic distress, but they were relatively better off than any other caste groups in the village.

The newly created non-farm activities were coordinated by these upper-caste groups, who were also the former landowners and the employers of the agricultural workers in the village. In the new occupational arrangements where the increased flow of non-farm workers in the village seek work, these upper caste groups become the main controllers and providers. Their control over the Panchayat also demands a mention. The Pradhan of the Panchayat comes from the scheduled caste group as the seat is reserved, but the actual control of the resources remains in the hands of the village's upper castes. The dependency of the lower caste groups (SCs and OBCs) in the village are visible where they are also left with no choice of finding work in the farm sector in the village. In addition to this process, the emergence of businesses and labour contractors is also observable. Former landowners and sharecroppers have also transferred or leased out some of their land to establish brick kilns, where further demands for non-farm work have been generated.

In Haritaki, this transformation pattern is also influenced by external investments and development plan of the government. Like Amloki, occupational transformation can be observed in Haritaki as well. However, contrary to Amloki, no resistance came from

the people whose land was taken to develop a river dam. Moreover, when the land was taken and developed, the local villagers, especially those who gave their land, got jobs in the development project. However, such distribution of non-farm jobs was unequal and accessed more by a particular dominant trading community, the Sahoos. Through the field study it was explored that an entire generation of the Sahoos had received government jobs in those locally created opportunities because of the establishment of the dam. Such benefits changed the economic profile of the Sahoos in the village and made them one of the most dominant groups. Their control over the decision makings at the panchayat level, socio-cultural programmes and providing non-farm job opportunities to the other lower caste groups are visible.

Along with these developments, several government schemes were introduced, controlling of the distribution process of those resources have also become the source of mobilization and created an arrangement inside the village. Development schemes targeted to the rural poor come through the Panchayat. As these economically dominant groups emerged as the main authority who controlled the Panchayat, it was observed that the resources released through these Panchayats had become the material of patronage. Research has also revealed that alongside upper castes, economically dominant groups have actively participated in controlling the processes through which new non-farm opportunities could be manoeuvred. In the case of the accessibility of the newly created non-farm opportunities, they were able to mobilize the benefits more effectively.

The local arrangements of the people were also affected by changes in occupation and related activities. The previous mobilisation methods, the older patron-client relationship and the allegiance to the authority started changing as new sets of demands were created at the bottom. The independent character of such demand generated at the grassroots level has challenged the command polity, which functions at the state level. Transformations in the villages have given birth to unequal wealth development, mainly among those who had the opportunities to access the benefits of the non-farm work opportunities. The socio-political history of the state supports similar groups that had earlier emerged as the major financial support system for the ruling elites. The local narratives aligned with the existing literature about how rural elites had participated in

and coordinated the activities to attain specific arrangements in the villages in different regimes.

The study of the two villages revealed that rural transformation has benefitted some people who are leaving agricultural work and able to access alternative opportunities and some are left behind. In the villages, the impact of such transformation has changed the dynamics of the arrangement that was hitherto existing around agricultural works. The emergence of the new elites in the villages has to cater to the changing nature of the demands for which controlling access to non-farm occupation and various poverty alleviation schemes are the primary means to retain dominance. Such development of transaction politics has found its method of insuring the structure of dominance. The inter group competitive patronage has led to violence or the threat of it. It functions more as an element that protects sovereignty of each group. The clashes are based on the attempts to establish supremacy over the channels of resource allocations like, the hiring of wage labourers for rural employment guarantee programmes, allocation of houses and toilets, pensions for the widows etc.

It has been observed that the change in the political sphere of West Bengal in the last two decades is not only the change at the top but a result of an aggregation of new demands at the bottom. The need for direct cash transfer programmes, different social security schemes and government jobs have become the precious resources which are now used to keep the traditional elements of polarization but through the promise or provisions of accessing those. The change in the local socioeconomic activities had created a transformation in the needs of the citizens, leading to a change in the old pattern of control and hegemony through a disciplined party structure. The new association of rural elites in West Bengal are now more sovereign in their activities and in creating an identity, based on their ability to form an arrangement and associations which is beyond any particular political ideology.

### **List of Publications**

Sengupta, S. (2023). Individualization of Distress: Farmers' Suicide in India. In *The Routledge Handbook of Poverty in the Global South* (pp. 654-672). Routledge India.

Bayen, N., & Sengupta, S. (2024). Reparation or Negotiation: Rural Women's Struggle for Selfhood and Livelihood in West Bengal. In *Gender, Environment and Sustainable Development* (pp. 105-120). Routledge India.

## **Chapter: I**

### **Introduction**

*“India is a political and economic paradox, a rich poor nation with a weak strong state” (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1987)*

#### **1.1. Politics amidst Rural Change**

India's agriculture-based rural political economy is in transition (Bardhan, 2009; Roy, 2014; Majumdar, 2020; Choitani, 2021; Bajar, 2022). There has been a decline in farm-based occupation and an increase in non-farm work in the last two decades, with a low GDP contribution in the agricultural sector (around 18%) (Bardhan, 2009). While 50% of population growth happened in urban India, with a significantly lower rate of urbanisation (2%), much of the country's people (68.8%) and 72.4% of the workforce still live in rural areas (Chad et al., 2017).

Rural-to-urban migration steers occupational change from farm to non-farm, which has become the country's dominant trend of informal economic processes. However, this multidimensional transformation process creates ethically unacceptable differences (Pani, 2021). The differences that emerge from such changes have also created a process of transformation, which is captured by scholars of rural transformation, writings on agrarian changes, rural political economy, and studies on inequality.

While the traditional works have separately tried to describe the phenomenon and to understand the socio-economic conditions and spatial dynamics of the 'rural' (Beteille, 1972; Srinivas, 1978; Patnaik, 1986) where social stratification, changing nature of caste relationships and landholding patterns have been captured, political scientists (Kothari, 1970; Arora, 1972) during the post-colonial period and after the economic liberalisation (Pandey, 2015; Das, 2019) attempted to understand the rural politics through the lens of participation in the local democratic institutions such as Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI), with particular reference to rural development programmes and schemes implemented by the government and voters behaviour in different levels of elections.

Ideological shifts from socialism to a liberal economy to aspirational capitalistic growth

could dominate the popular media and election studies. Still, much of India's political economy is about the inequalities that are generated in the process of rural change. Protests against the license raj, caste-based reservations or demand for inclusion of certain castes under reservation and recent farmers' protests all have roots in the rural arrangements and their present conditions. When much of the country's working population lives and works in villages and is directly or indirectly connected to agricultural occupations yet yields a declining amount of turnover leading to an increase in the informal urban non-farm economic sector, an enquiry needs to be made to understand what the implication of this are in the politics of the country.

The relationship between economic changes and political consequences can be explained through different methods of analysis. Economic policies are often shaped by the ideology of a political regime. India remained under British colonial rule for more than 200 years and her economic exploitations happened according to the direction of the imperialist rulers of England. With the end of the colonial period, independence had established two essential things: one is the democratic political value, and the other is welfare economic planning. Most of the post-colonial nations in the global south had followed these two fundamental political and economic modules barring apart a few like China. India adopted her constitution and emerged as one of the largest democracies by the early 50s, but her economic policy remained primarily dominated by socialistic patterns where the state had major control over the resources and their allocation. In the 90s structural adjustments and economic liberalization changed such arrangements and the whole idea of 'postponement theories' (Rudolph & Rudolph, 1987) where the 'sacrifice for the present is for a better future' has finally been replaced by the short-term goal-driven development policy which could address the question of achieving basic human needs a lot faster than bringing in long-term growth of GNP.

## **1.2. Command and Demand Polity:**

Political economists such as Stuart Corbridge have also explained the condition through the lens of dominant state control. He has shown that the planned economy, which had been the predominant structure of the country, had faced failure and success (Corbridge et al., 2018). While it had brought growth through the establishment of heavy industrial manufacturing units' modernisation of agriculture was yet to be realised. A top-down

command economy served the nation well through the flow of labour from the backward disguised unemployment-ridden rural to the capitalist modern urban economy and was welcomed as long as it did not threaten food production in the countryside (ibid).

However, such economic practice cannot function in a controlled environment. Socio-political and natural environmental factors often function as dependable variables, and a sudden change in established conditions could affect the existing economic order. For example, on the one hand, the failure of monsoons in 1965 and 1966 created a severe food shortage (Bihar faced a near famine condition); on the other hand, country's over-dependence on foreign aid led her to be manipulated by superpowers like the USA (Vietnam War) bringing Nehru-Mahalanobis plan to the brink of failure. Such conditions also set the stage for developing a powerful opposition force against the unchallenged position of the Nehruvian political-economic model.

Francine R. Frankel (2005) captured this paradigmatic shift in the political-economic arrangement, pointing out a dualism while analysing the evolution of the Indian political economy from 1977 to 2004.

- a) It is marked by the vast rural hinterland with very few big farmers to utilise and a burgeoning number of landless agricultural labourers, giving birth to high levels of inequality in rural India.
- b) A limited modern industrial sector is conspicuously inadequate to accommodate such a huge number of labourers released from declining rural livelihoods.

By using Gunnar Myrdal's Asian Drama (1968) as an example, she has also opined that the Western model of economic and political analysis has distorted the attempt to explain the contradiction within the subcontinental arrangement.

Frankel's argument on the precondition for the development of postcolonial countries like India is based on addressing the social and cultural backwardness that could function as a major barrier to development. Thus, she points out this by calling the country a 'soft state' where its economy can be centrally controlled, but the socio-cultural arrangements have a surprising level of autonomy. Therefore, the macro-level arrangements are based on the top-down approach, but the micro-level actors have a considerable amount of autonomy.

Her approach to this argument has also pointed out the accommodating nature of such duality in the Neheruvian economic model. The nation's first prime minister, the leader of the non-alignment movement, took the 'third way' by not joining either of the ideological blocs. However, eventually, this gave birth to a 'few powerful rich' with a considerable rise in inequalities in the country. Thus, India is an economically and socially stratified and heterogeneous country where no single ideology or economic policy has ever been able to monopolize the political helm.

### **1.3. Planned Economy and State against an Autonomous Society and People:**

This condition has been succinctly captured by the model of command and demand polity (Rudolph & Rudolph, 1987) that brings out the perpetual tension between two autonomous entities, the state and the people. Contemporary writings so far have tried to indicate the dual nature of the state command economic forces trying to control the people through the system, but Rudolph's model shows that rather than seeing the state and her people as separate actors, it is more explanatory if we see these two as a competitive entity.

According to their model, the state is the command polity that functions as the allocator of the resources, and her preference is manifested by the elected members and the officials who are to implement policies. Their biases, commands, and favours to different social groups or elites make the state an oligopolistic or monopolistic producer who tries to control the demand of the 'consumer' voters.

The voters or citizens are the demand polity, which aggregates their demand through political parties, formation of interest and pressure groups, and finally, through the electoral process, competes with the command polity in the succession of the power to govern others.

State sovereignty, the command polity, functioned as the centralised commanding force acting as the primary decision-making agency since independence. It has been observed over time that the leadership of a single party under the leadership of a single personality is overwhelming in the governance and polity running process. It is notable that as and when the local demands start rising to the surface, they challenge the upper-tier political force irrespective of the regime or ideological prowess.

After the initial years of the Congress regime's ascendancy, there was a significant change from command to demand-based polity when the state started to fail in the internal economy and foreign relations. Amidst these transformations, changes in the rural sector covertly shifted the country's socio-economic arrangements.

#### **1.4. Change of Command Polity:**

The Indian political system can be seen as an evolving structure functioning through multiple stages of political-economic transformations (Vaishnav, 2019; Yadav, 2004; Palshikar, 2009). It is a country with strong centralized union control and an equal distribution of powers to the states. The executive, legislative, and judiciary function in each state and union territory under the control of the centre. However, the economic conditions and possibilities are not as equal as the political structure of the country.

As a union of states, India started functioning as a centralised developing economy in the post-independence era, fundamentally led by the first prime minister and leader of the Indian National Congress (INC), Jawaharlal Nehru. In the political sphere too, the leadership had been taken up by the INC as it came out as the single largest majority in the parliament and other state legislative assemblies. The industrial development phase, which started during the Nehru era of planning and establishment of heavy industries along with developments of river dam projects was fundamentally state-driven capital based on a controlled and centralized economic process and relegated private capital and organized workforce to the political margin (Rudolph & Rudolph, 1987). Thus, the government intervened in the economy through the taxation system in an increasing manner along with both the personal and corporate incomes being heavily taxed (Chatterjee, 2010). This period had a high level of state-led welfare policies in education, health and transport, harbingering Soviet-style socialism in the Indian political and economic arena (Rudolph, 1987; Chatterjee, 2010).

On the other hand, in agriculture, India was still not self-reliant. Soon after Indira Gandhi took charge, India was befallen by an acute food shortage as agriculture was not modernised and the public distribution system was far from efficient. Nonetheless, this phase has an ideological centrality that pre-supposed the premises of a socialist

command economy. As Rudolph and Rudolph have argued, the marginality of private capital and the unorganised sector, as mentioned earlier, never allowed them to have a chance to crystallise their demand. There is a political centrality involved in the process as well.

Since independence, INC had functioned as the catch-all centrist party where no other regional party or interest group could aggregate their demand in an organized manner which could outlaw the hegemonic and all-pervasive positional superiority of INC. This phase was, therefore, termed “the congress system” by political scientist Rajni Kothari (1970). However, the decline started with the severe economic crisis, which took place in 1966, soon after Indira Gandhi assumed the position of prime minister and had to devalue the rupee. In the 1967 election, the popularity of Congress declined drastically, losing its power not only at the centre but also in different states.

### **1.5. The Contested “Centrality” of Social Demands:**

It is important to note here that this decline of the first phase was not only a result of the economic failure of the country and the failed leadership of INC. The social demands of the nation were also increasing in the face of the economic crisis. The old, centralized command system was experiencing a new challenge of a strong mobilization by the leftist parties which started organizing the peasant and the workers’ class against the big landlords and oligarchic capitalists patronized by the state. Rajni Kothari’s argument on the ‘dynamic core’<sup>1</sup> is the one in which INC has a unique relation with the state and the districts functioning within an organized structure. But, at the local level, the socio-economic changes and the character of the demands were changing. The process of consensus-making and the room for dissent from the periphery functioned like a safety valve<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See Rajni Kothari Politics in India 1970

<sup>2</sup> Rajni Kothari’s argument regarding the dynamic core of the Congress system suggests that until Indira Gandhi’s ascendancy to power congress had a dynamic top-down approach of the command which used to give a space of mitigating demand from the bottom through the maintenance of a hierarchical leadership from the local village to the central level.

### **1.6. The contest and complimentary relationship between Indian capitalist and upper caste rural elite:**

From the works of K.N Raj (1973), as argued by Partha Chatterjee (2010), it is evident that despite being a liberal democracy, Indian capitalists had to share the power with the rural elites, mainly the landed class hailing from the upper caste. The change in the 70s and 80s thus brought a jolt to these arrangements of the socio-political associations. On the one hand, the economic failure questioned the irreplaceable position of the INC. On the other hand, the mobilised landless farmers and workers, led by the left, started violent opposition against the command-based politics of the government. Although the Indira Gandhi Congress came into power with an overwhelming majority, the food crisis and economic decline had to be addressed. To address such a crisis, the ‘dynamic core’ of the congress system was transformed into a highly centralised party, incapacitating the local leadership with a price to be paid for ‘non-performance’. The Green Revolution modernised the agricultural sector to tackle the food crisis. These two measures practically accelerated the process of local transformation.

The centralised political force was getting cut off from the demand that needed to be mitigated locally, and the Green Revolution affected the farmers unequally. During the post-second plan era, in the late 1960s, systematic attempts were made to modernise agriculture by introducing the HYV (high-yielding variety) seeds with the help and collaboration of a US-sponsored technological package (Mohanty, 2012). The water-seed-chemical fertilizer-based package fundamentally changed agricultural production in the first phase. Then, it concentrated on non-food crops such as cotton in the second phase.

The Implementation process of the Green Revolution was undoubtedly based on the vast-scale usage of scientific technology and machinery in regular agriculture to enhance yield. This process certainly brought the existing agrarian system to a phase of developmental change, but the effect was highly diversified. Inequalities were inherent in the result of such an effect.

While the large farmers could access and invest in the new technology-based farming, the small farmers struggled to afford it and were eventually left out of the process

(Dhanagare, 1987). The predominant unequal land ownership pattern and social inequalities, such as caste and geopolitical diversity, played crucial roles in this matter. Satya Deva, by studying the situation in Haryana, had shown that as the large farm owner has the capacity to grow a substantial number of seeds and can invest lump-sum at the beginning, thus, it was for the land-owning big farms which benefitted from advanced agriculture.

Apart from this, the Green Revolution led to new technology requiring a good amount of irrigation facilities (Deva, 1984). V. Athreya's (1990) study in Tiruchi, Tamil-Nadu, looked into the inequalities among the rural households and between wet and dry areas and shows stark inequalities in the wage distribution based on the irrigation facilities available in the farmland. According to that, in the wet areas, the households in wet areas were getting better income compared to the dry regions.

### **1.7. The birth of a new class, “the agricultural capitalist”:**

This inequality in the rural areas gave birth to a new class of agricultural capitalists or what was termed the ‘bullock capitalists’, who benefitted from this agricultural reform (Rudolph & Rudolph, 1987). Hence, in the North Indian region, these rich farmers became a big manipulative force mobilising rural support for their demands. On active grounds like West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, and Kerala, left parties have already made a firm base amongst the peasants and the workers.

Against such a backdrop, the 1975-77 Emergency period created a heavy backlash to Congress's power (Vaishnav, 2019). Though it somewhat managed its position at the centre in the 80s until Rajiv Gandhi's era across India, the process of fragmentation at the grassroots level of politics drastically eroded the hegemonic existence of Congress leadership as the new caste and regional identity-based political parties were developing with their distinct needs and leaderships.

### **1.8. A silent revolution in the countryside:**

Christopher Jeffrelot's (2003) argument on the rise of the lower caste leaders from the dominant rural backward caste in Uttar Pradesh is what he termed the ‘silent

revolution'<sup>3</sup>. After the '80s, what made a total shift in the political trend idea was the *mandal*, *masjid* and market-based politics, which also marked the era of coalition arrangements in the parliamentary elections. This drastic change in the political scenario brought an era of a constellation of multipolarity where the relevance of the Congress as the unipolar force faced redundancy (Vaishnav, 2019). What is essential in the political process, if compounded since independence until 2014, when Bhartiya Janta Party emerged as the single largest party in the general assembly election, can be divided into three phases.

Milan Vaishnav calls it three systems; in the same essay, he argues that since 2014, there has been an emergence of a fourth system in the Indian Political system where BJP has started settling the foci of National politics by retaining its unchallenged position only to be compared with the Congress era of the post-independence era. However, before coming to the recent development of the empirical electoral situation, it is also necessary to understand the backdrop of such political change, which involves a large-scale socio-economic change in the country.

### **The “three systems”**

1. Perpetuation of old inequalities: Along with the Green Revolution, land reform was another important step in intervening in the existing inequalities in the land-holding pattern. Studies undertaken by Daniel Thorner (1962) and P.C. Joshi (1975) have focused on this issue, showing that it has also failed to reach the desired result due to internal loopholes and ambiguities in the legislative procedures (Mohanty, 2012).
2. Reorientation of old elites in the new “congress system”: The lag was not only at the bureaucratic level; the predominant influence of the landholders who used the backdoor method and the docility and absence of resistance of the downtrodden caused large-scale inequalities in land reforms.
3. Challenge to old order by left movements: In states like Kerala and West Bengal, the land reform was to some extent successful, having a long and extended

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<sup>3</sup> 2003 a book by Christophe Jaffrelot where is summarized the caste politics in Uttar Pradesh and process of political change in the Northern India

peasant struggle at the village level and performed well in terms of ceiling surplus land, tenancy reforms and protection of land rights of the SCs whereas, it is not the same in case of all the states of the country given their pro-rich bias (Mohanty, 2001).

### **1.9. Rise of a Demand Polity:**

#### Impact on the Economic Sphere: Change in the Occupation Structure

The economic impact of the change is more comprehensible by understanding the shift in the process that started taking place in the occupational structure of the rural population. With the coming up of small towns as part of the urbanization process and improved communication between the rural and urban through the building of roads and improved transport facilities, there is a greater tendency to opt for non-farm activities by the erstwhile agriculture labourers.

#### Rural non-farm employment: Decline in farm income

The rise of rural non-farm employment, as reported in the Rural Development Report 2012-13, shows that the increase of income by households, which is primarily dependent upon nonfarm employment, has increased from 32 per cent in 1993-94 to 42 per cent in 2009-10 (NSSO 2011). The reasons for the decline in agricultural farm activities are the shrinking farm size, increased cost of cultivation and declining returns. The declining share of agriculture in GDP is remarkable, with a sharp chronological descent from 1954 to 2012-13 (from 55% to 14%, Source: NABARD).

Despite these economic changes and the perceived process of expected urbanization in the country, as mentioned earlier, most of the population still lives in the villages. A major occupational shift is also taking place while these sections of people are moving away from agricultural work and staying in the villages. On the other hand, there is a fundamental change in the ratio of cultivators' land to agricultural labourers, along with people leaving agriculture and rural residences altogether and becoming marginal labourers.

#### Rising complexity of rural employment patterns: Question of "Migration."

As farm incomes are no longer sufficient to provide the needs of rural people, the spurring of multiple livelihoods inside rural areas is also visible, making the rural economy more complex (Shah, Harriss-White, 2011).

1. Migration of “marginal footloose labour.”

People who access jobs outside the rural set-up are mostly in the informal sectors such as construction, manufacturing or sometimes large-scale capitalist farms of other regions (ibid). However, there is an increasing vulnerability amidst occupational shifts. The migrating labourers from the villages are mostly the poorest, those who are not only migrating but becoming marginal footloose (Breman, 1996) labourers having no fixed work at all, including the absence of any job security or social protection. This section is more vulnerable than those who at least have small land holdings and can afford to stay back in the rural set-up and access the urban jobs.

2. Semi-urban labour: marginal landholding and seasonal migration

Apart from this, the change in the farming and land holding pattern has also increased sharecropping, leading towards uneven changes between the old semi-feudal relationship between the landlord and serfs (Harriss-white et al., 2011). Breman’s study in Gujarat suggests that the old employer-employee relationship between the Patidar and Halpati castes, as the upper land-owning caste and lower bonded labour caste, has changed as the external labourers come from elsewhere. As mentioned earlier, these labourers are far more mobile and less dependent on their employees than 30 years ago.

#### Changes in the Social Structure:

1. Impact on “caste hierarchy”:

In the social sphere, the caste hierarchy is breaking down with changes in land ownership and the declining power of the upper castes. The predominance of certain castes/groups is now challenged by the improvement in the financial condition of the downtrodden. This has also led to a fundamental change in the caste hierarchy in the villages.

2. Impact on the “exploitative nature” of rural employment pattern:

The proliferation of jobs outside the traditional village-based farm activities has lessened the exploitative power of the previous land-owning castes in the village. The

study in Haryana (Jodhka, 2012) shows that while the upper dominant caste and upper layer of the other backward castes used to control the agrarian economy the declining attachment of the labour class has changed the relationship as now these labourers are much mobile and mostly hired from outside of the village.

Dalits have rejected farm-based jobs as they get better opportunities in urban areas, government sectors, or even casual labour (RDP 2012-13).

### 3. Acceptance of “social change” among “Dalits.”:

There has also been a substantial change in the acceptance level of the lower caste and Dalits in the village; inter-caste dining and casual relations between the upper and lower caste households are now certainly not as hostile as they were during the 1990s (Kapur et al., 2010). Examples from different states would strengthen the argument.

In Gujarat, primarily taken from the work of Jan Breman’s study<sup>4</sup> of the transition from the traditional feudal mode of production dominated by the upper caste landowners to the state-intervened capitalist cane farming has resulted in changing the class relations in the villages.

Breman’s works are certainly connected to the subject of migration. The loss of earlier relationships between agricultural workers and landowners has given birth to a new form of exploitation, generating conflict between groups. Gunnar Myrdal’s argument, as Breman stated, on the radical distribution of agrarian resources might reduce inequality has been one of the influencing factors that led Indian policymakers to take a progressive path of land reform and then the Green Revolution (Breman, 1989). This undoubtedly helped the erstwhile small farmers become ‘peasant entrepreneurs.’

### 4. Impact of new labour relations: small and medium peasant capitalist.:

However, the impact of these new agrarian policies could have been more balanced. First, peasants from the Patidar<sup>5</sup> caste emerged as the new agrarian class in the region by connecting with the urban resources and basing themselves in the rural. Their changing lifestyle pattern was captured in Breman’s fieldwork. On the contrary, the

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<sup>4</sup> see Jan Breman, (1989) Agrarian Change and Class Conflict in Gujarat, India,

<sup>5</sup>The traditional landowning caste in South Gujarat

Halpati, whose right to own land was denied long ago, started losing connection with their earlier Patidar masters. Earlier, the traditional landowners used to take care of the bonded labourers, i.e., the Halpatis. The entire responsibility of the labour and his family was borne by the ‘master’. But with the emergence of ‘peasant capitalism’, this traditional relationship was broken as the migrant labourers seemed to be a more attractive choice for the new technology-driven commercial farming; in the case of south Gujarat, it is sugar cane cropping.

Now, landowners are more interested in assigning farm work to contract-based labourers as it is cheap and requires little responsibility. In addition, there is a huge influx of migrant labourers from the arid regions who have put the Halpatis’ employment opportunities at stake. In such a situation, though, agricultural growth might have occurred, but with that caste based polarization also increased.

#### 5. New “class conflict” between old rural labour and new rural labour.:

This made the situation bitter as the socio-economically hierarchical group used all the means to curb the rights and silence the voice of the rural landless people whose jobs were further jacked by the migrant outsiders, leading towards a perpetual conflict. Hence, Breman’s work clearly shows that state-induced agricultural development policy undoubtedly brought an important transition in the primordially existing rural economy. However, the development is lopsided, leading towards a class conflict.

#### 6. Changes in the “dominant castes”

From Jens Lerche’s fieldwork<sup>6</sup> in two areas of Uttar Pradesh, it can be observed that the sustainability of a group (in this case, a caste group) depends on a certain degree of conflict. His study conceptualises the current relationship between bonded labour and landowners. The transition in agriculture has also affected here as well. The earlier powerful caste group ‘Thakurs’ lost its position due to the land reform. Their political power has also been curbed as they lost the Panchayat to the Yadav caste, who have also benefited hugely from land distribution.

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<sup>6</sup>Lerche, Jens (2008) Is Bonded Labour a Bound Category? -Re-conceptualizing agrarian conflict in India

The *Chamar*<sup>7</sup> communities are the main farm worker who earlier used to be the bonded labourers working under the Thakurs. However, in the post-independent era that bondage no longer works as it used to be earlier; hence now the Chamars are mainly migrant workers. The Chamar-Thakur conflict as Lerche pointed out in his studies, first started when they were denied working as the *Tatwars* in the early 70s.

The *Tatwar-Chamars* were the labourers working in the *Thakurs'* courtyard to look after the cattle. The first strike by the Chamars for the claim of the abolition of these *tatwari* jobs no doubt was violently confronted by the Thakurs, led to the killing of the *chamar* leader. As a result, the Chamar stopped all the work, and finally, the Thakur communities had to come to a negotiation with the agitating *chamars*. Since then, the right of the *chamars*, especially the wage and dignity, have come to the forefront, and the community itself has become aware of their class position.

#### 7. An interesting case of “weapons of the weak.”

The situation is surprisingly different from that in other parts of India, where the unfree labourers also show the capability of collective action (Lerche, 2008). Although *chamar's* got a stronghold in this case but Lerche's study in the Jat-dominated Western UP shows a different situation. In the case of the Jat-dominated regions, Chamars went on strike, but they were treated by a total boycott by the Jats. As a result, Chamars had to give in (*ibid.*). These two different results have individual reasons. In the previous case, because of the land reform, Thakurs had already started losing their previous stronghold. In contrast, the rise of the middle peasant-based *Bhartiya-Kranti Dal*, which also has a very strong Jat base, did not leave any chance for the Chamars to fulfil their claim by launching strikes and other means. In both examples, what is preeminent is a fundamental shift in the dynamics of caste dominance.

### **1.11. Political Impact- Need for Macro to Local**

Preoccupations with understanding Political consequences often remain around macro-level political issues relating to electoral changes and influences of multi-party activities. Yet change is primarily taking place at the village level, where socioeconomic

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<sup>7</sup>Landless backward caste, *Niji* was the actual bonded labour of the Thakur Caste Houses

arrangements are dramatically transforming. In this part of the discussion, such micro-level changes will be explored.

The peasant mobilization during pre- and post-independence politics could help understand the unequal arrangement in the mobilization process itself (Ommen, 2012). While the British were the main element against whom the mobilization majorly took place before independence, in post-independent India the mobilization of the agrarian class was majorly taken over by different political parties. However, few farmers' organisations developed over time.

Now, if we look at the predominant inequalities in the arrangement, the matter will become clearer. A particular political party mobilises specific agrarian categories to attain a particular set of arrangements for collective actions, not always simply based on its ideological orientations but also the political payoffs it receives or expects from such activities.

1. Mobilisation of middle peasantry as a “vested interest” in the changed rural scenario

Therefore, mobilisation of selective groups by the regional political parties is the most usual which has given birth to inequalities in terms of power. For example, the development of Charan Singh-led Bhartiya Kranti Dal was primarily based on the mobilisation of the middle peasantry (Brass, 1993), though he was supportive of the backward caste as most of the jobs in the bureaucracy were taken up by the Brahmins, but the party support was primarily to the middle peasantry. However, he supported the 15 per cent reservation of backward caste as, according to him, this helped the backward caste to be better represented. The rise of the other backward caste in the political sphere was undoubtedly because of the development of the middle peasants in the agrarian economy, such as Jats and the Thakurs in UP and Bihar regions. Jaffrelot's study has shown that the rise of the Jat power as the other backward caste in electoral politics has certainly changed the power dynamics of the previous upper caste-led congress politics.

2. Rise of Hindutva as the “later form of Nehruvian” total agrarian mobilisation

Thus, the newly emerging political situation has inherent tendencies of aggregating the demand from the changed social and economic needs, which differed from Nehruvian nationalist politics. It was mainly inclined towards holding up to a nationalist ideology

of socialist, secular and equal development opportunities. In the late 80s, the *Janata* Experiment failed but showed the transformation of the ideological politics of the country, and the development of *Hindutva* nationalism coupled with the open market economy clearly showed the new dawn of politics in India. Another important factor in this process is the inequalities that have generated socially and economically. Rudolphs succinctly identified that due to the Green Revolution and land reforms, different classes emerged in the rural side replacing the old *Zamindari* System. In the later stage, the rapid decline of agriculture started changing the available occupations.

### 3. Diversification of occupations and fractured mobilisation in the voting pattern

Large-scale occupational diversifications started taking place in the '90s onwards from farm to nonfarm jobs. This further generated inequality in the countryside based on who could be able to access such nonfarm job opportunities in the urban areas/non-farm sector and at what level. What is essential in this process of change is the analysis of the voting pattern. Yogendra Yadav and Suhas Palshikar have rightly pointed out that voting in Indian politics can be divided into two sections, i.e., 1. Principal voting, which is the state assembly elections and 2. Derivative voting is the cumulated reflection of the regional choices in the centre.

Therefore, it turns out to be clear that the socio-political changes and ideological shifts from the socialist economy to an open market economy or from a centralised command polity to a more dispersed demand polity were happening at the macro level as the culmination of the local rural level changes, which were determining an eventual or terminal shift at the micro level. The change in the local rural arrangement is the component of a larger body of transformation and needs to be studied as the element causing the political consequence at the state or the central level. In this context the thesis seeks to ask three sets of questions:

1. What are the inequalities that result from local rural transformations?
2. How do those inequalities affect local politics?
3. How does local politics coordinate or interact with national politics?

Before discussing the actual fieldwork area and the reason for its selection, it is necessary to explain the transformation of two spatial and occupational categories,

namely, the village and agriculture. The macro picture of these two can be found at the micro level of the villages chosen for study.

### **1.12. Changing Village Arrangements:**

Indian villages are constantly changing (Roy, 2017; Jha et al., 2016; Jodhka, 2023). The occupational changes are especially visible after the proactive initiatives were set up by the early post-independence congress leaders and policymakers. There is a two-fold argument in the whole process of such transformation. The first one is particularly based on the concept of the increasing population and decrease of the per capita land size. This is a general argument true about decreasing the man-land ratio (Krishnaji 1990, Bardhan et.al 2014) while making the transition from farm to non-farm occupations is valid across India.

The transition in macro-level politics induced by the rise of regional parties and demands for the rights of small and landless agriculturalists occurred in the 1970s when agriculture was quite a viable option, and the government centrally decided the policies for developing agricultural productivity in the country. As mentioned earlier, the Green Revolution and the land reform no doubt brought growth in productivity and changes in the socio-economic situation amongst landless farmers, yet the impact was unequal. In the 1980s and 90s, India became a food-sufficient nation, but agricultural land started shrinking drastically, especially among farmers, especially in West Bengal, where land reform was implemented with the utmost sincerity and strictness. The famous tenancy reform, which gave the tenants security, later also turned out to be quite less land possessed by individual landowners because of the division of land.

However, across India, the effect was not evenly distributed. Punjab, Haryana, and parts of Uttar Pradesh hugely benefitted from the Green Revolution, and the HYV seed, fertilizer, and high irrigation-based cultivation was out of reach for the poor farmers in the eastern part of the country.

Thus, it is important to note that after the 1990s this entire process started experiencing a backlash from the farm and cultivation-based communities. In the meantime, the market entered a liberal regime by implementing liberalization, privatization, and globalization policies taken by the then prime minister Manmohan Singh. As a result,

steady growth was observed in the manufacturing and construction sectors while agriculture started declining. The economic impact is more comprehensible when understanding the shift in the process that started taking place in the occupational structure of the rural population. Such changes in the occupational structure in the village have a structural impact on the earlier arrangements that existed in the villages.

### **1.13. The dynamics of the rural agrarian system:**

The agrarian system works through a network of demands of tools and ingredients and the smooth supply of the same. These are again set up through a large chain of suppliers who provide such support.

It is not necessary that every resident or household in a village be directly attached to the agrarian works, but several are connected in the process through which the farms function.

#### **1. Supplier of tools:**

Starting from sowing the seeds to harvesting the crops and finally taking the same to the local wholesale markets or storing it in the cold storages, different people work as a support system. For example, the works of Dayabati Roy (2013), in the context of the arrangements in the villages of West Bengal, have given extensive accounts of the owners of the shallow pumps owners who are indispensable parts of the agricultural works and how the locally based resourceful rural elites control the access of such tools makes the small farmers dependent on them. Through her anthropological works, she has also observed that once renting the shallow pumps became an indispensable part of the agricultural work for making the HYV seeds effective in crop yielding, the rent of such pumps skyrocketed, turning it into a scarce resource.

#### **2. Rural credit finance system:**

In addition, there are forms of debt-based relationships between the supplier and the buyers of the tools and ingredients for farming. During the sowing season, farmers often buy seeds and fertilizers on credit to pay back only after a successive harvest of the crops. This often leads to taking more credit from the money lenders, and the harvest gets adversely affected because of the crop failure.

### 3. Rural dynamics and “caste”:

Such existing rural relationships in India are often based on the castes resulting in the creation of power dynamics in the village. In West Bengal villages, it has been observed that after the implementation of the HYV seeds, the need for irrigation rose, and the shallow pump owners became quite powerful in terms of controlling the most essential resources, such as the supply of water. The cold storage owners are also some of the most economically dominant sections. With the declining agriculture in the village’s farm, farm-based workers started opting out of the agrarian works, leading to estrangements from the old agrarian relationships. While elsewhere in the country agrarian changes were affecting the caste relationship as well.

### 4. State policy impacting agrarian “arrangements”:

Policies such as Minimum Support Price (MSP) had been useful for the paddy and wheat cultivators, but such policies had also led numerous farmers to shift to paddy cultivation only. As a result, paddy cultivation-related dependency increased but alongside declining agriculture and increasing non-farm activities and related out-migration from the villages resulted in a new form of arrangements where the labour who would be providing the former agriculturists jobs in the former work sectors in the urban areas started taking the most important positions in the villages.

## **1.14. Changing Agriculture:**

This was also the time when in the entire nation command, based economic and social policies were no longer enjoying the erstwhile validity or control they had earlier and were rapidly moving towards a more dispersed kind of occupational pattern where a large part of farmers or the former agriculturalists started moving out of their traditional occupational arrangements and entering into informal non-farm jobs in the towns and cities that started developing as the part of the transformation process. Studies show that three major patterns of occupational diversification are taking place (Bajar, 2019).

1. First is the change in the ratio of Cultivators and Agriculturalists (henceforth CL&AL), where the number of CL is decreasing in specific parts of the countries and the number of Agricultural labourers is increasing. As farm-based

cultivation works started becoming non-profitable, more and more cultivators are turning into daily wage labourers, keeping the options open to switch between farm and non-farm work.

2. The second fundamental change is that a large number of rural workers are migrating or becoming seasonal migrants to the cities in search of non-farm jobs, majorly in the construction sector, who are now often termed circular migrants (Deshinkar & Bird, 2005). Amongst these sections, some are leaving agriculture and rural areas of residence, and others are leaving agricultural work but staying in the rural areas.
3. In addition to this pattern of change, a sizable number of these workers are also becoming marginal labourers. If the national-level data is analysed, this pattern of changes is taking place in the eastern parts of the country, affecting mostly four states: Uttar Pradesh (Part), Bihar, Jharkhand, the southwestern part of West Bengal, and parts of Orissa.

In this context, the social part of the change also needs some mention. When such occupational diversification is taking place, it is essential to understand that the old forms of social arrangements based on caste hierarchies and land ownership are no longer able to function in their old version. Therefore, in the rural peripheries also, there is a substantial change taking place where the command of the few is disintegrating and new forms of occupation-based arrangements are emerging based on the availability of non-farm jobs in the towns or the cities. The socio-economic arrangements are also shifting towards more demand-based and dispersed patterns.

However, it would be wrong to claim here that the influence of the land-owning communities or the old land-owning families (especially from the upper castes) decreased but their area of influence changed too. The latter part of the thesis will be discussed in detail to show the new form of unequal arrangements in the process of change.

### **1.15. Field of Study: Two Villages in West Bengal**

The context of the socio-economic transformation in the country and the shift from centralized command to demand-based politics happened through the rise of local

demands and changes in the country's states. West Bengal had set the stage at the state level. While in the country, such transformation is taking place against the background of the declining centrist parties like Congress and its allies in West Bengal, violent disruption started taking place against the state machinery, setting unprecedented changes. Though ideological and need-based political tussles with a strong left-oriented political culture had always been present, politics in West Bengal since independence had experienced both ideological and region-based associational arrangements based on community needs.

The political economy till Independence was primarily based on agriculture, even though Calcutta was the largest city in the eastern zone and the former capital of British India. As an important business and educational hub, it attracted several people across the country making it an eclectic of different political, social and cultural milieu. However, during the post-independence period, Congress championed political power and Prafulla C. Ghosh was elected as the first chief minister, but his principled positions soon made him unpopular amongst the other congress leaders and was later replaced by the leadership of Bidhan C. Roy. During his regime, two distinct political and socio-economic changes were taking place. On the social front, a crisis was rising with the huge influx of refugees coming from East Pakistan in the aftermath of the partition. On the other hand, in the economic sphere, unemployment and settlement issues were making the situation grimmer for the urban poor.

Yet, agriculture being the major economy of the state, big landowners were the main support base of the Congress government. In the meantime, leadership factions were developing and expressing regional interests inside the Congress. Besides these internal conflicts, the tribal and the people of the hills were dissatisfied with Congress's upper-class elite urban leadership.

The rise of the left at this juncture was a turning point In West Bengal politics, as the middle-class left intellectuals of Kolkata took up and addressed the plight of distressed landless farmers and the urban poor (mainly the refugees who came from East Pakistan, now Bangladesh).

This was an era of strong ideological political forces in the state political front where factions in Congress and the Left (front) could be conspicuously visible. For a short period, both came under an understanding by forming the United Front government under the leadership of Ajay Mukherjee in 1967. Congress ideologues like Atulya Ghosh, and Prafulla Roy were more concerned about maintaining the ideological leadership of Congress toeing the political line of central leadership of Congress. Left ideologues like Pramod Dasgupta were keener to bring in Marxist ideological politics. Still, radicalism was proliferating in the countryside through the Maoist line of violent irradiation of the 'class enemies' like big landowners, industrialists, and storage owners. Later, this line of "Maoist" action was banned, and the CPI (M) made its position clear, distanced itself from this radicalism, and joined the parliamentary form of electoral politics. In the 1977 state assembly election, Congress lost its position, paving the way for the new left regime, which would rule for more than three decades uninterrupted.

However, this uninterrupted political regime was also continuously challenged by local factionalism since the beginning of post-independence politics. But it also marked the beginning of two very important eras of political culture in West Bengal. First, it skillfully kept all other factional politics at bay by maintaining a thorough relationship with the villagers (especially after the land reform of Operation Barga movement) and second, this overarching political force ended ideological political battles between the parties based on regional and community-driven interests through the introduction of local-level political leadership, which became a key factor in forming local village-level associational political arrangements involving teachers, petty businessmen, small farmers, sharecroppers etc.

Though Economic development issues were addressed while keeping the strict party ideology of pro-poor and anti-industrialists the space for the ideological debates was increasingly narrowed as the retention at the helm was based on the activities of forming these local associations contributing to the party voters' strength at the rural areas. However, against the backdrop of such political culture, significant change took place in economies.

Two major economic crises during this regime were (a) agrarian decline and (b)

industrial stagnation in the state.

(a) Agrarian Decline: the problem of rising rice production and declining agrarian income:

Returning to the state's Agrarian Situation, it is important to understand the agrarian impasse amidst the context of the 'highest producer of rice' (Central Statistical Office 2018). The growth rate in agriculture faced a huge decline during the New Economic Policy era of the 1990s and then decreased since 2000. The total yield has been declining since the 1980s. Between the 1980s and 1991, the yield growth rate declined from 5.08 to 1.98 per cent (Bhattachaya & Bhattacharya, 2007). The crash of the agricultural growth rate was no doubt connected to the dramatic decline in crop prices at the national level, but the problem of using HYV seed because of the lack of infrastructure was one reason (ibid).

Though West Bengal is the highest rice producer in the country (Central Statistical Office 2018) there is a clear site of decline in farm activities and an increase in non-farm employment opportunities (World Bank Report 2018). Between 1994 and 2012, the share of farm employment had decreased dramatically from 51% to 39%, while there was a sharp increase in non-farm employment from 49% to 61%. However, the understanding of keeping agriculture as the primary economic activity remained somewhat intact as it can be reflected in the anti-industrialization movement during the setting up process of the TATA's NANO car industry in Singur. The point needs to be made here that though the entire movement was led by more or less a single issue of illegal disposition of the farmers from their farmland and taking away 1000 acres of land of which 400 acre land was taken forcefully, to the entire business community of the nation received a strong message of the critical situation of industrial environment and lack of efficient policy of government in case of managing land.

The World Bank report clearly shows" that since 2005 in West Bengal a huge number of employments have been created but mostly in the informal sector and the non-farm employment share is increasing to accommodate such new job seekers WBs' new economic policy under the leadership of the then industrial minister Nirupam Sen was quite a pro-industrialization. But the problem was much more political than economic.

### **1.15.1 Command politics of CPI(M) and decline in agrarian income and employment:**

The command-based politics that was the fundamental structure of the congress in the state had been replaced by the newly elected state government under the leadership of Jyoti Basu but eventually, it succumbed to a new form of command-based cadre politics. The Communist Party of India is known for its strong organizational structure that functions through a system of top-down approach. But it had also appropriated the command style of politics through the strong central leadership at the party core. Nonetheless, the emergence of communist political power was primarily based on the agrarian movements and defending the rights of the workers in the industrial sectors of the state. However, the result of such a process later changed the economic situation of the state. West Bengal was not an exception in the context of the agricultural decline which was the sui generis of the country's present socio-economic situation.

The command-based cadre politics in West Bengal was steady at the top, but economically, it was dilapidating as the largest employment sector. Agriculture was becoming a non-viable option for small land-holding farmers, and industrial growth was faltering because of the state's apathetic policy. In this context, a brief narration on the development of a 34-year-long regime could provide the base of the state's politics.

### **1.15.2 Role of Agrarian Movement – Central force of Left Front Populism; party and people**

Understanding the constraints on a steady transformation from an agro-based economy to an industry and service-based one was difficult because the state's political-economic set-up has a long history of agricultural movements, based on which the communist government practically came into power in the late 1970s.

During the 1940s and 50s, the state experienced a very strong peasant movement called *Tebhaga Andolon* (Basu, 2001). The crux of such movement was directed to as famously sloganeered 'Land to the Tillers' and fair share of the crops. Within the 1960s, the movement got a good amount of momentum in the rural parts of the state, and the

landless or semi-landless population started getting a stronghold in demanding fair wages and a voice against the oppressive landlords (ibid 2001).

The pathway of the rise of the proletariat in the so-called bourgeois democratic system was becoming bright as the Naxalite movement gained power and support from the newly formed party for the marginalised. However, in 1977 the communist party assumed power in a contradictory context. In the meantime, through the process of political negotiation, CPI(M) made its distinct position in the electoral democratic process, abandoning and condoning the militant orientation of the other faction called CPI(ML). During this process, the land grabbed from the landlords by the Naxals was held illegally and the old landowners took away their lost land.

### **1.15.3. Brief introduction to “Operation Barga”**

It should be noted here that CPI(M) came into power with the promise of ending inequality in land share and establishing a peaceful socio-political environment. Thus, it legally implemented ‘Operation Barga,’ which is nothing but the entitlement of the tenants or the sharecroppers to cultivate the land, but the actual ownership of the land is retained with the landlords only.

Apart from this, as Dipankar Basu argued in his paper, the retaining of the middle-level landowners at the influential position or the hegemony of the elites remained as usual because the so-called *Bargadars* were quite less in numbers and there were a huge number of agricultural labourers and farmers existing. While the agricultural labourers did not get any better opportunities because there was no wage revision or increase the farmers were more or less using their family labour or hired labour from outside. Operation Barga was in no way helpful in sharing the cultivation cost between the landlords and the tenant and in addition to that close to 50% of the Bargadars failed to register their names. In the meantime, the actual beneficiaries were the rich and medium farmers in rural West Bengal. When the Left Front Government tried to strengthen the Panchayati Raj, the erstwhile elites started influencing the contestants in the election. Nonetheless, the Left Front Government managed to maintain its image as a pro-poor and pro-labour party by another means i.e. supporting and fueling trade unionism.

#### **1.15.4. Industrial Stagnation:**

Partition caused a huge loss to the land holdings of Bengalis, and as they had never been interested in commerce hence, the field was occupied by the Marwari communities, which in the long run stoked up an anti-foreign and anti-non-Bengali sentiment.

This led to the construction of a strong support base for the communist leadership, whose primary activities were radical labour union and peasant empowerment through land distributions.

However, as Bengal was completely dependent on non-Bengali entrepreneurship the capability to shape their destiny on industrial establishment was lacking naturally. After assuming power the situation was kind of awkward for the communists as they soon realized that a party socialist in orientation has to work in a capitalist economy.

#### **1.15.5. Trade unionism of CPI(M) and the new reality of MNCs:**

The situation became more problematic because the party strongly denounced foreign MNCs' interference in the commerce arena and the role of Indian monopoly houses, which have great control over the large-scale private sector. However, the party workers and the trade union cell were always interested in creating employment, which could only be provided by big private business houses.

In other words, the Communist government was most interested in attracting private investments and setting up businesses to improve states' employment and financial conditions.

In such a situation, it is important to understand the abstraction process of the national situation in the state context. While industrial stagnation and the agrarian impasse were challenging the economy, the need for employment found a new way to survive the crisis.

A large number of former agriculturalists started migrating out from the villages, abandoning their traditional occupation in the agricultural field. Hence, many erstwhile voters of the party who supported the cause of agrarian development and land reform-based supportive politics started shifting their allegiance from the individual party

leaders. This change was happening at the local village level. In particular, the change of occupational arrangements took place in the villages quite silently as long as it did not clash with any further and immediate requirements.

Between 1994 and 2012, the share of farm employment decreased dramatically from 51% to 39%, while non-farm employment sharply increased from 49% to 61%. However, the understanding of keeping agriculture as the primary economic activity remained somewhat intact, as reflected in the anti-industrialization movement during the setting up process of the TATA Nano car industry in Singur.

Although the Left government tried to bring about the changes by setting up small and medium-scale industries, the magnitude of the demand was perhaps unfathomable for the incumbent. Singur-based<sup>8</sup> movement erupted against the forceful land acquisition, which may be seen as a spark of a descent that the earlier government had doused through its central command.

#### **1.15.6 Command politics and Cadre-based political structure**

The major learning from the situation was the shift from command-based politics to the crisis of cadre-based command politics, where the party and the government lost control over the rural cadres, failing to mitigate their economic demand and disrupting the structural balance. Hence, West Bengal poses two important reasons to be studied to understand the political consequences of the rural transformation. Firstly, it is the state showing one of the highest numbers of migrating labourers leaving agricultural jobs and becoming marginal labourers between the period of 2001 and 2011 and secondly, this is the period when the state has gone through a major political shift, from the longest uninterrupted serving government to a new government challenging the strongest rural base of the left regime.

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<sup>8</sup> Singur came to prominence in 2006 when the Left Front-led government acquired land and collaborated with the TATA group to set up a car manufacturing unit. The opposition political party, along with other social activists, brought allegations about an illegal and forceful means of acquiring such lands from the farmers and launched an impactful protest movement against the government.

### **1.15.7 Brief synopsis of “Chapterisation”:**

In the next 6 chapters, the thesis attempts to answer the three research questions. Chapter II explains the theoretical explanation of the enquiry, taking a broader defining characteristic of a political process in two villages. “The activity of attending to the general arrangements of a set of people whom chance or choice have brought together” – (Oakeshott, 1962, pp. 112-113) is the working definition for the explanation of the rural political processes which captures the broader transformative political economy of the villages in West Bengal.

Chapter III engages directly with the arrangements in the village, where the interplay between different actors creates the conditions for people to make certain socio-economic choices, leading to certain changed activities. This chapter also shows the external and internal arrangements of the two study villages, which shows the inter-group inequalities. As the thesis proceeds, it seeks to explain the consequences of external investments in the villages, which either came as development policies or as an indirect effect of larger state development plans, such as the budding of dams and implementation of the rural employment guarantee programmes along with a panchayat-controlled public goods distribution system.

Chapter IV of the thesis shows the consequences of the external investment in the two villages. The next chapter is engaged in understanding the politics that stem from such inequalities generated from all the processes in the villages. It also includes the evolution and consequences of the rural policies in the state that generated a distinct type of politics. The objective of this chapter is to show the two counter-influencing factors where particular activities have generated inequalities and vice versa.

Chapter V examines the core of the political trend and the genesis of a state arrangement that can be characterized as a resilient system with changing political regimes. It seeks to explain the rise of actors whose activities are changing to keep the arrangement intact. The concluding Chapter VI justifies the model of command of demand polity as the base of the political process amidst changing unequal rural arrangements where the interplay of two sovereign actors, the state, and the citizens, forms the competitive existential binary. It explains the ‘political consequence’ of changing demand polity as

a response to the inequalities in the rural transformation.

### **1.16. Methodology**

For selecting the 2 villages, the contemporary literature on the agricultural transition was first consulted. The study shows that there was a steady decline in employment in the agricultural sector between 2001 and 2011, making a sharp transition in the rural job sector (Bajar, 2019). Along with such national-level trends, some specific pockets in the country where such change is severe make a sizable number of population marginal labourers.

From census data between 2001 to 2011, it has been found that there is a steady growth of marginal labourers between the years 2001 and 2011, and the main affected area is the Eastern part of the country. This is also important to note that this part of the country is also industrially low-performing and ranks high in the poverty index. The study involves intensive qualitative fieldwork and an understanding of the sensitive problems of a rural community; hence, proficiency in the local language is an absolute necessity. Being a native Bengali speaker, West Bengal was chosen over other Eastern states in the first place. Also, it falls under the category of aforesaid transitions as well.

After setting the language priority for keeping the authenticity of the field, understanding the census data had been consulted where it shows clearly that it is also, with other states where a vast number of people have left agricultural activities after finding the former option not economically viable. But before proceeding to the selection of the village calculation of the rate of urbanisation amongst all the 21 districts of the state was done to confirm that the transition of occupation is not affected by other factors such as urbanisation.

#### **1. Village in Puruliya District**

After the census data review, it was revealed that Puruliya has a lower urbanization rate (15.5%) than the state average (32%). It is also the district that has observed the highest number of people who left agriculture and became marginal labourers in the previous decade.

Along with such significance, West Bengal has experienced an important political transformation in the last two decades. Between 2001 and 2019, two political parties sharply rose after ousting the CPI(M)-led government, which had remained in the ruling position for more than three decades. Hence, the objective was set to find out if there is any significant relationship between this economic change and changing political regimes.

As mentioned in the introduction section the dispute over the land acquisition policy taken by the erstwhile communist party led govt. has played an important role in strengthening the opposition movements, which truly paid huge dividends during the 2011 assembly election. The main opposition party, Trinamool Congress, ousted CPI(M) from the incumbency, promising to secure and redistribute the acquired land from the dissenting farmers. However, this process of acquiring land for public purposes was not new even during the CPI(M) regime.

The village which has been selected to study was also a prime site for such a phenomenon. In the study, village land was acquired for the setting up of a power plant by Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC), which is one of the biggest public sector companies in the country that produces electricity through hydropower plant projects. As a result, hundreds of farmers of several villages had to give away land at a rate fixed by the Government. This entire acquiring process took place from 2008 to 2010, and by the time the main opposition leader (at present the chief minister of the state), Mamata Banerjee, took the cause of land grabbing by the government, the farmers had already lost their farmlands to the DVC authority.

The village is already situated in a semi-arid part of the state where none of the lands have any irrigation facilities and are completely dependent on rainwater. But the land they used to possess served them two important purposes: it provided them subsistent level occupational opportunities along with food security without being dependent on the public distribution of food grains, and it was also regarded as a backup asset that could be used (sold, if required) during individual financial emergencies. The loss of land practically left no choice regarding the occupations but to leave agricultural work and find non-agricultural daily wage-paying jobs around or outside their village.



**Fig: 1.1. Map of Puruliya District**

Source: Wikimedia Commons

## 2. Village in Bankura District

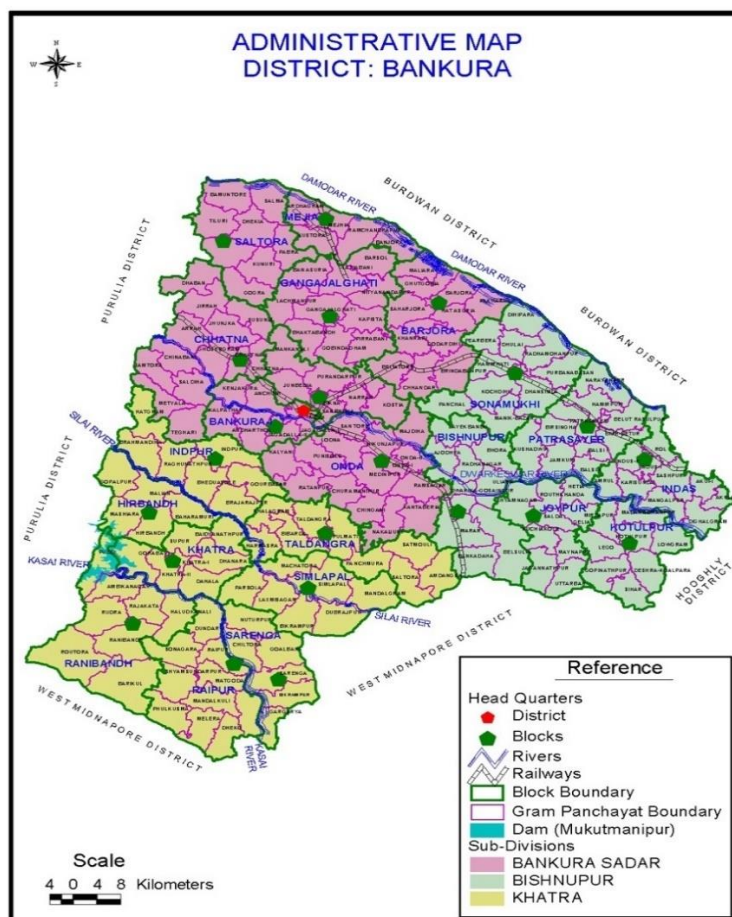
The other village, Haritaki, is situated in Bankura, a neighbouring district of the Puruliya district. Bankura is socio-culturally rich yet economically one of the most backward districts. It is home to a large number of tribal populations and farming communities like Mahatos.

While Purulia's urbanisation rate is 15%, Bankura's is 8%, compared to 32% in West Bengal. Being a landlocked district sharing a border with Murshidabad and Purulia, this district has experienced the lowest urbanisation rate. Agriculturally, it is backward, and with almost no industrialisation, the district has become economically distressed to the extent that a large number of former agricultural labourers are leaving agriculture and the village.

Therefore, this village experienced a similar pattern of change but with some differences in the pattern and arrangement of transformation. The quantitative survey was done using the systematic random sampling method, where a random number was generated using the Microsoft Excel application. Then, every second households were surveyed, majorly collecting the household and other socio-economic conditions.

The qualitative study has been done mainly through an In-depth interviewing method by selecting the Key Informants (Key Informant Interviews of KII) through an unstructured interview schedule. It is important to mention that a major part of such a qualitative method was based on a transect walk where the participant or the respondent himself had taken the research through the field and provided information regarding the internal space of the socio-cultural fabric.

The local Panchayat leaders, labour contractors, former large landowning family-turned-business family, small vendors and non-farm workers inside villages, tea shop owners, school teachers, ITI students, seed sellers, cold storage owners, party members, gram sabha coordinators, Panchayat Pradhan, tribal liquor sellers, former Panchayat members, brick kiln owners, supplier of labourers to the Fly Ash collecting jobs, local small hotel/restaurant owners and several daily wage workers were informally interviewed through which rich qualitative narration of the change of the 'activities to attaining an arrangement' in villages has been mapped. Table 1.1 below provides the numerical reality of occupational diversification.



**Fig: 1.2. Map of Bankura District**

Source: District Census Map 2011

**Table: 1.1 Change of the proportion of total agricultural workers in Amloki and Haritaki**

<i>Village Name</i>	<i>Proportion of Total Agricultural Workers 2001</i>	<i>Proportion of Total Agricultural Workers 2011</i>	<i>Difference between 2001 &amp; 2011</i>
<i>Amloki (Puruliya)</i>	<i>74</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>66</i>
<i>Haritaki (Bankura)</i>	<i>126</i>	<i>68</i>	<i>58</i>

Source: Census 2001-2011

The above data is based on the total number of households in Amloki, 403, and Haritaki, 247, according to the 2011 census.

The names of the villages and the respondents have been pseudonymised to protect their identities. Please note that the names of the villages Amloki and Haritaki are fictional.

### **1.17. Sampling method:**

A sequential random sampling method was used to select the sample size, where every second household was interviewed. In the Amloki village, 185 out of 407 households were surveyed, and in the Haritaki village, 133 out of 247 households were surveyed. Additionally, 20 qualitative interviews were conducted in each village as part of the qualitative data collection. An inclusion criterion for selecting the respondents was that they were residents of that village and had valid voter cards or other government ID proof stating the same.

Most of the respondents were male; however, there were female-headed household members as well. One limitation of this thesis is the absence of equal gender representation. The background of the field study area and the overall context will be further explored in the following chapter.

## Chapter: II

### Politics as Activities of Arrangements

‘A set of beliefs or principles, especially on which a political system, party or organisation is based’ - (Meaning of ideology by Cambridge Dictionary)

‘An action-oriented system of beliefs’ – (Daniel Bell, 1960) - *on Ideology*

“The activity of attending to the general arrangements of a set of people whom chance or choice have brought together” - (Oakeshott, 1962, pp. 112-113) (Defining politics)

Is it ideology or the association of a set of people concerned for collective benefits, coming to a common arrangement, and creating a unique balance of power? This question could be pertinent to understand the shift from the command polity to demand politics devoid of any singular, unanimous, or majoritarian ideological force in contemporary West Bengal politics.

Given the excuse that in recent decades it has shown one of the largest contributing states to the rise of the farm-to-non-farm shifts in occupation and high growth of marginal labourers, it has also experienced a massive change in the political culture of conservative left to a much open pro-capitalist and to some extent cultural identity clinging politics of Trinamool Congress<sup>9</sup> by successfully removing the Communist Party of India (Marxist) from power.

Understanding such shifts and their political consequences has a twofold problem. The first is with the phenomenological aspect of the studying process, which certainly should be concerned about the means, but the end is pulled by the second fold of the problem, i.e., seeing politics as the competition to achieve power, ‘who gets what when and how,’ as famously put across by Harold Lasswell (1963)<sup>10</sup>. Unfortunately, it leaves

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<sup>9</sup>Trinamool Congress Party or in abbreviation called TMCP is currently the ruling party in the state of West Bengal which emerged as the separate party breaking away from the Indian National Congress (INC) in the year 1998 under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee who started her political career as the member of *Chatra Parishad* the student wing of INC and later rose to a prominent opposition leader in West Bengal State politics

<sup>10</sup> Book by political scientist Harold Lasswell published in 1963 where he famously argued and defined politics as ‘Who gets What When and How’ is widely used as the primary definition of Politics. This also made the study of politics is the study of power.

little room for understanding the means rather than paves the way for focusing on the end, viz., power. Therefore, peripheral elements of activities must face a collateral consequence of being underplayed by the dominant forces of the core.

In West Bengal, this dominant core developed primarily during the period of cultural modernisation and social development-based movements to remove the regressive superstition and orthodox upper caste ritualistic and exploitative society and replace it with the enlightened field of Western Scientism and rationalism, rethinking the concepts of religious gospels and defying the conservative ritualistic dominance of ‘society’.

## **2.1 Colonial Background: Bengal and Calcutta as the “laboratory of the empire” and the Permanent Settlement**

In such context, it needs to be noted that the period of British East India Company taking over Kolkata as their colonial capital city and administrative power shifting in the hands of British Raj. An obvious result was the implementation of colonial economic terms with the local *Zamindars* and the businessmen.

Lord Cornwallis implemented the draconian Permanent Settlement Act<sup>11</sup>, which could have been the formal beginning of the British Raj's total control over the Local *Zamindars* and *Rajas*.

It would be unjust not to mention here that since the Mughal conquest, there were plenty of Hindu Rajas who were governing their *estates* not in a so-called oppressive manner as Baden-Powell wrote almost more than a century ago. His description is rather an economic hotchpotch showing the origin of the development of the *Zamindari* systems in the native provinces of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, which were under the control of the Mughal empire, namely the great Akbar and the other predecessors but were not directly ruled or exacted by their administrative machinery. As Powell’s description follows, in the latter stage of the weak Mughal administrative systems, the earlier ‘appointed farmers’ increased their land holdings by simply acquiring more uncultivated lands available in abundance and living off by paying old revenues, which

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<sup>11</sup> Permanent Settlement Act was introduced by Lord Cornwallis in 1792 where he primarily set the taxation norms between the Landowners of Bengal and British Administration, also the formal indicator of the *Zamindari System* in British ruled Bengal.

made them rich.

It is true that they never directly controlled the ownership of the land, but the levy was mostly extracted in kind from the local cultivator, through which the Zamindar was supposed to take responsibility for the territory or keep the villages under his control. Powell's justification for the permanent settlement is important to understand how the structure of the arrangements changed at the ground level without waging any so-called bloody battles.

The declining Mughal empire finally went into the hands of British East India Company rule and then the Raj which were preparing to control with modern concepts of sovereign power of rule of law. The situation in the Bengal farming land was complicated and unclear as the Mughals lost administrative control due to a lack of organized effort of supervision.

Many more settlements were made between the local Zamindars and Mughal administrators, but that practically gave the Zamindars unadulterated power; therefore, for efficient control and revenue earning, 'permanent settlement' was necessary (Powell, 1896). Whatever the justifications, after such settlement, the old feudal hey days were on the path of decline. It was also right before the *Sipoy Mutiny*, which was about to take place as a culminated retaliation by the dissatisfied provincial Kings, puppet Mughal emperors, and a few faithful foot soldiers against the growing supremacy of the East India Company's influence in the land.

### **2.1.1. Ideological Legacy**

Now, this preface is required not only to understand the genesis of the early feudal elements in Bengal but also to comprehend their connection and relation with the British. The caste character of such *Zamindaris* is not to be missed here too; Brahmins and the Kaysthas were the primary upper-caste feudal lords (Ghosh, 2017). The caste character is important here because these feudal heads were also some of the first few groups of people who were directly involved in the urbanization process of the region, namely Kolkata and Dhaka, and eventually the first recipients of the 'modern English education'.

### **2.1.2 The birth of the “comprador middle class”: the upper caste Bengali**

#### ***Bhadralok***

After the total appropriation of the administration by the British Government important changes took place in social, economic, and political spheres. In the social sphere, English education, and the existence of a modern form of universities started changing the occupational character which had a direct impact on the development of a new middle class based in major cities like Kolkata, Dhaka, Madras and Bombay, probably the first group of native class of lawyers, engineers, doctors and most importantly bureaucrats apart from simple divisions of the landowners and cultivators or sharecroppers.

The agricultural arrangements hitherto experienced formal employment, though under the British Government and companies or hospitals. Still, they were different from the former agricultural arrangements in rural societies. This change was certainly happening amongst a few upper-caste prosperous groups who had already encountered British administration while administering their feudal interests.

### **2.1.3 Political “empowerment” of the *Bhadralok*, organic intellectuals and fledgling “nationalism**

On the political front, the changes were primarily two-fold. The first group inherited the ancient classical education of the land and advocated against Western education and jurisprudence, so they eventually took the revivalist path. The other was the denouncer of such regressive religiosity, tampering with the modern rational mind and embracing Western Liberal Thoughts on the state.

This also formed a unified sentiment for a common land, as it may be conferred by early nationalist leaders such as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay<sup>12</sup>. At the end of this section, two essential observations could be made first the changes of the owners of the means

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<sup>12</sup> One of the most famous early enlightenment Bengali writers in Colonial Bengal and a primary advocate of the social and cultural reforms. *Anandamath* was the most famous novel which also coined the *Bandemataram* slogan for the pan Indian nationalist movement against British Raj.

of production as it was historically happening since the changes of the rulers at the throne of Delhi did not impact the social and economic arrangements of the native people or their *Zamindars*, but this was perhaps the first time a paradigm shift struck the idyllic agrarian structure of the land where the idea of a nation, nationality and most importantly the concept of the right to the country was born.

Till this period, changes at the top did not matter much as it certainly kept itself distant from the local socio-political and economic arrangements, but the presence of the British Administration did not leave a single stone unturned when it came to ruling the country. In the absence of any unifying force of resistance and doctrine, the ‘colonial subjects’ no doubt submitted the power of self-rule but quickly picked up the Western thought of nationhood and its model of implications.

This was the beginning of the rise of the first few ‘organic intellectuals’ as Gramsci termed it but there is no denying the fact that strength of ideology could be the biggest unifying force that would be coming in different phases of the politics of the land.

#### **2.1.4. Ideology as Opposing Force: Local customs and “traditional intellectuals”**

The growth of ideology as it could be followed during the social and political history of Bengal first started with the movements against religious dogmatism, especially against oppressive Brahminical supremacy. *Chaitanya*<sup>13</sup> spreading the Vaishnav spiritualities and open socio-religiosity by the *Bauls*<sup>14</sup> and the *Sannyasis* were some of the earliest ideology-based movements in Bengal. How much they would have affected the idea of humanitarianism and individual freedom was debatable and required separate enquiry, but these were not ‘political’ opposing forces, neither against the exploitative feudal system nor the newly introduced British Raj.

But it already proved its worth against the majoritarian Brahmin-dominated oppressive Hindu society as uniting forces in rural Bengal. Interestingly, as it may be seen, the

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13 Chaitanya Mahaprabhu as he was called by his followers was the advocate of Vaishnavism in Bengal during the 15th century

14 Mystic musicians in Bengal, believer, and followers of esoteric life of austerity.

British-implemented education first brought the unifying political consciousness to the few upper-class gentries of the reminiscent feudal lords, who took the opportunity to move toward a new direction of Western liberal education.

It would be half-truth to give full credit to the English education, the birth of the nationalist leaders was also heavily banking on the revivalist politics of bringing back the past glories of the indigenous, primarily old Hindu holy scriptures of Vedas and Puranas along with the famous modernist leaders like Raja Rammohun Roy, Vidyasagar, Durozio and Dwarkanath Tagore. The latter names are attached to the famous movements of social reformism based on some important legal restructuring of the repressive social norms and practices such as banning the Sati and widow marriage. This was also the time when frontier leaders first advocated for women's education and established educational institutions exclusively for women.

**Bengal Renaissance:** The whole process of drastic changes was seen as the Renaissance of Bengal, as it is often compared with the Italian Enlightenment period and the French Revolution in Europe. Nevertheless, this was the beginning of a structured, formal beginning of ideological opposition against the old authoritative, anti-science-based Hindu society but not exactly against the British political regime. These early social reformers and ideologues were highly influenced by the British progressive legal systems and used them to implement the rule of law in the 'primitive' native society.

Apart from befriending the British legislators a great number of middle-class former land-owning class of Bengalis also emerged as the '*Bhadrolok*'<sup>15</sup> section of society, particularly the servants working under the British Government. However, this section soon changed and joined the nationalist political leadership with the formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885. This could be marked as the first ideological opposition against the British Government, which would become the chief force for launching anti-British movements across the country in the next century.

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<sup>15</sup> The upper caste and class western educated Bengalis emerging in the nineteenth century colonial Bengal. They were mostly taking the administrative and other white-collar jobs such as medicine and legal practice also ardent advocate of Western English education. The term is chiefly associated to *Bhadrota* which in Bengali means being gentle. Therefore, they were the section of the gentlemen who did not associate themselves with the 'native' non anglicized colonial subjects.

## **2.2. Top or the Bottom? The contest for “public space” between the “organic” and the “traditional” intellectuals**

Without delving much into the historical past, what is more, important in this context is to excavate the origin and the gradual growth of the ideological opposition in Bengal with the help of a particular class and caste group. Although the leadership was primarily in the hands of the few socially influential groups, it had a wide range of mass appeal. During the Anti-British freedom movement, the path shown by the famous novelists Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, and Michael Madhusudhan Dutta became the source of spirit amongst the youth of Bengal.

In the post-independence era, Congress emerged as the natural and legitimate successor of the British Raj, and Bengal was no exception. Although this entire phase was glorious, as it may be seen from the top, the ground level, the situation was quite grim. As mentioned earlier, the feudal elements were transformed into a new form of ideological opposition, first against the old regressive society and then British imperialism. The successors in the congress leadership were not free from such status quo-based leadership.

All top leadership outfits hailed from upper-caste and upper-class families and hardly had ties to rural agricultural origins. However, these peculiar characteristics of upper-caste and class-based urban leadership started changing to a leadership that was primarily rural-born (Weiner, 1959). Study shows that the changes at the political ‘top’ is also a change process that starts reflecting at the bottom. Hence, the role of Congress in this particular area of discussion also builds up the whole ideological opposition right from the beginning of the freedom movement to the empowering rural class, especially the agricultural people of Bengal. Renaissance in Bengal, whether it was in the purest sense of holistic enlightenment or not is debatable. It is often argued that it was an upper-class-based social reformist movement with little connection to the ground-level sociopolitical and economic reality. It is also criticised because of the absence of the expected capitalist development, which theoretically must be followed if it is to be similar to its European counterpart. Despite such a critical point of view, it is prerogative

here to dwell on the cultural changes among the middle-class Bengalis.

It successfully implemented the consciousness of ideas and reasoning with the concepts of democracy, sovereignty, and progressive democratic efficacies in the Bengali intelligentsia (Chatterjee, 1998). Such ideological criticality also brought a peculiar form of a contradictory yet effective process of building an identity that established indigenous authenticity with cosmopolitanism (ibid).

Such creative, nuanced, and genuine identity of a particular class of Bengalis also set standards of culture, politics, and the focus of intellectual development of society, which was certainly not based on the place of birth, caste, or religion but on education and practised apathy towards earning easy wealth (ibid). Such a process of alienation was evident as the total abolition of the Zamindari system added to an increasingly disenchanting class of urban residents with little or no ties with their agricultural origin.

Hence, when such groups of the middle class tied up with the radical political forces of communism, they entered mostly through the state machinery or party organization outside of the causes of agrarian struggle, not exactly as the spontaneous organic leaders stemming from the field. Thus, we find that with the process of “decolonisation” under way and the absence of a “national” other making “freedom struggle” party like Congress highly irrelevant, the social base of political mobilisation and leadership changed immensely and began to chart the contours of existing “traditional” rural arrangements.

### **2.3. Ideological Top: “Colonial”, “Nationalistic”, or “Organic”?**

To understand the presence of ideologies and not only the social identities (often argued that in West Bengal, the former shapes the latter, though such a concept would also be analysed through the historical evidence of social hierarchies) as it is observed in other parts of the country this above analysis was necessary to show that the genesis of the middle-class intelligentsia group no doubt hailed from distinctively upper caste background. But no sooner did they get, to some extent, neutralised in the sense that they left their caste of class identity with the new educated urbanised consciousness expressed rapidly among them with the changes in the economic and the educational structure of Bengal.

At this juncture, this group understood and internalized the cause of the agrarian depression in the binaries of the exploiters and the exploited groups, who must be brought under the fold of a new consciousness of equality and freedom. Development of communism through stalwarts like M.N Roy and the building of the Kisan Sabhas during the 1930s was already taking place in the rural peripheries of Bengal but in the post-independence period, the development of such activities advanced with the new group of intellectuals who were more inclined to base themselves in the villages.

However, such developments and the passion and originality with which people understood the socio-economic situation were no doubt based on a particular class or section of the masses, as mentioned earlier. The support was derived based on the simple and common Indian political norms of promises made to people if it wins the election. But before coming to that section, it must be made clear in this section only that the ideology of the better public distribution of resources, land, and other facilities was also an important factor as Congress was faltering throughout the process.

Therefore, ideological motivation was crucial at the top, mobilising the middle-rank leadership and, most importantly, the toiling sections of the students, as could be seen in the Naxalbari Movement in the 1960s, but at the ground level, it was primarily the pledges the party was making. In such a scenario, the misinterpretation of the facts and mistakes in policy was something not unexpected, which became evident in their ground-level actions. For example, as Chatterjee has mentioned, the first phase of the formation of the United Front Government was based on the understanding that a vast number of the sharecropper tribal in the north Bengal areas of tea plantation would be given ownership right by the dispossession of the Landowners or the *jotdars*.

As a result, many of such landowners forcefully started evicting the sharecroppers from the land which sparked the local-level furore and violent reactionary politics from the radical left-wing parties. This important juncture could be seen as part of the argument of how ideology develops as the counter or opposing power, but what is important to watch is the consequence of such a rise at the local village level. At the political centre,

the United Front was sharing power with the Bangla Congress under the leadership of Ajoy Mukherjee, but at the ground level, the other faction of the left was waging a battle against the ‘class enemy’.

The aftermath was quite horrific as the United Front lost soon, and Congress assumed power under the leadership of Indira Gandhi. Most of such sporadic ideologically radical left leadership was termed as terrorists and put behind bars or encountered by the police.

This example of contradiction within an ideologically driven political party was not happening at the top level of leadership, which was more concerned about the formation of the government, but at the village level, where the actions mattered the most. This brought factions inside the party functionaries at the field level, over which the top leadership had little control. The ideological rift had somehow backfired the whole communist project at one point in time when the rebel faction, arguably who believed in the violent path of the elimination of ‘class enemy’ was ousted from the mainstream movement led by the other alliance of coalition front of left. Nonetheless, the fact of the matter is that the development of ideology as an opposition force has been a well-established case in the scenarios of West Bengal, but what is much more important now is to see what it does to the people.

#### **2.4. Consequence at the Bottom: *Bhadralok* leadership and the “subaltern” people:**

In 1977, when the Communist Party assumed office, two major electoral promises that were bound to be kept were land reform and the effective implementation of the Panchayati Raj Institution in the remote village of West Bengal, which was otherwise quite out of the reach of the politics. In the post-independence era of congress dominated national politics, there was an increasing amount of centralized political tendency, which was countered by the communist party in West Bengal quite successfully.

However, the sole credit cannot be given to the party alone, but it was a successful and effective reintroduction of the 1973 Panchayat Act by the central government (Webster, 1992). It was quite effective in the sense that in the earlier structure, the gram

Panchayats were the mere rural body of no political significance or without a regular space for electoral competition. After taking up power in the state, it opened Panchayats for electoral competition, which further paved the way for the strong party hold at the grassroots level. The arrangements of such a situation were crucial for making the party machinery at the local rural level strong. In the earlier, the selection of the candidate was based on the local influence of the person. Especially during the Congress era, the locally powerful land-owning class used to get benefits for maintaining the patronage power over the sharecroppers and was the usual winner of the post.

As the space became more competitive and open to the multiparty presence, CPI(M) had the opportunity to fulfil its promises of land distribution and a fair policy of conferring tenancy rights to local sharecroppers (ibid). This was one of the earliest party strategies to build a powerful local support base in rural West Bengal.

This also shifted the characteristics of the village-level political processes in the sense that the people of the villages were now more expectation-oriented from the government or the party than showing only ideological or patron client-based allegiance to the ruling party.

As recently surmised from the writing of Neil Webster, the idea of development got more politicised, meaning the villagers started looking at the development policies from the perspective of the party strategy involving all the local actors in the activities of the election. Along with this, the flagship project that the party took over was the land reform. In the previous chapter, this has been described briefly and will be further described in the following chapter in different contexts.

In this situation, citing the example of land reform, which was mostly tenancy reform, where the sharecroppers got tenancy rights through the legal procedure, further strengthened the local-level support base. The former landowners lost their unchallenged property-owning social capital in rural West Bengal, which changed the socio-economic dynamics of village politics.

Party membership and the patronage of the *Kisan Samiti* and other village committees

of the party became the centre of power over the individual “elites”. Hence it is a very much visible fact that the ideological politics with which the party came into existence undertook some specific strategies to retain power and strengthen the organisational structure through the establishment of different arrangements at the regional community level. While this part of the process is quite an effective strategy to keep the party's hold strong at the rural base, it was doing poorly at the industrial level. In brief, the declining state of the state's industrial sector can be described.

## **2.5. The Industrial front: *Bhadralok* revolutionaries and the proletariat**

After independence, the Indian National Congress ruled from 1948 to 1962 through one Bengali leader, Bidhan Chandra Roy, who had close relations with top national Congress leaders after 1967. This was challenged by a group of communist parties in the state. However, it is noteworthy that during this period, the economy of West Bengal fell behind those of the faster-growing regions of India.

As Congress started losing its hegemonic power in national politics, the emergence of communist forces in West Bengal became very prominent. Within a couple of years, the state's governability deteriorated drastically, which was restored only after the CPM's electoral victory in 1977.

In an earlier section, I mentioned that partition had severe effects on the political and economic development of West Bengal. The chief reasons for that are, firstly, after the region was abandoned by the British, Marwaris moved into the jute industry. They were not industrialists but mainly traders and speculators. In addition to this, inefficient and inadequate management resulted in the decline of regional industry. Another thing was the tendency of Marwaris to move investments out of the state as a result of political trouble.

The next section will analyse the steady decline of the state's infrastructure and development, which was accompanied by the gradual emergence of political mismanagement. This mismanagement paved the way for the absence of capital-generating trade and commerce, leading to the obvious migration of educated people to

other states for suitable employment.

As noted before, perennial disinterest in commerce among Bengalis (irrespective of class) made them a class of white-collar employees more interested in intellectual practice, art, and literature. Political development involved this '*Bhadroloke*' class in left politics, whose inception was through the sentiment of deprivation of refugees by the central government.

Ross Mallik has pointed out: "The dominant influence of the Communist Party had been in East Bengal and its ideological influence was carried over by refugees into West Bengal. Most of the communist members and their strongest bases were in East Bengal. The CPI(M) noted that the main base and influence of our united party before partition lay in East Bengal. Apart from the peasant movement, the majority of party members were from this region. The growth of communism in West Bengal was dovetailed with the influx of refugees and loss of their land resulting in the elimination of a large class of *Zamindars* and land owners who would otherwise have proved a serious impediment to land reform and growth of communist influence among the middle class."

***Centre, as Stepmother? An enduring "narrative."***

Indeed, communists, after forming a government in West Bengal, were never favoured by the central because of the political rift due to ideological differences. Especially after voting out Congress from the state, the situation was bitterer and stepmotherly from the side of Delhi. In a scholarly explanation, it has been elaborated as:

"Since the central government was controlled by the Congress Party which was also the main rival of the communists in Bengal, the state Congress Party was at a disadvantage in taking up grievances against the central government as these complaints reflected on themselves as well." (Mallik 1993)

It is quite evident that Congress politicians have always been interested in attracting investment to their states, and naturally, the opposition government was in a disadvantageous position. However, the statistical data does not reflect any systemic discrimination in the case of issuing the licence for setting up a business. On top of it,

investment in West Bengal was greater under the first five years of Left rule than in the previous five years of Congress rule (Rupees 2176 million in 1977-82 as against 1174.6 in 1971-76). During this period 141 letters of intent were converted into industrial licences for a 1927.7 million investment during 1977-82 compared with 124 licences involving 1109 million Rupees in 1971-76.

From this data, Left Front's allegation of discrimination by the central government would, therefore, appear to be flawed.

More data show that industrial expansion is deceptive. In 1970-71, the state's net domestic product in the manufacturing sector was at about the same level as in 1984-85, which was almost the same as when the Left Front came to power. During this period, West Bengal fell from second to fifth place among Indian states, while other states kept on expanding their manufacturing. Bengal's position remained roughly the same.

Since then, the decline of the state economy started, which sometimes managed to develop at a certain pace but never been capable of making any significant change.

The interesting fact about the state's economic development strategy is that while land reforms and other related pro-agricultural policies were implemented, the business sector was neglected.

As some prominent writers argued, *"With respect to comparisons of growth rates in food grains production and farm productivity across the rest of India, the state transformed its status from a laggard in the 1970s to star performer in the 1980s"* (Banerjee et al.).

Though rural poverty declined relative to other states, in fact quite fast, it was substantially lagging in crucial sectors such as industries, higher education, and fiscal stability, where the situation was deteriorating even faster.

Lockouts were an added hindrance which was inevitable as the trade unions were quite actively opposing the often criticised autonomy of the owner of the industries. Experiencing growing depression in industrial growth the then Chief Minister endorsed and was keen to have business houses like Goenka and Philips in the state. However, Pranab Bardhan, Dilip Mookherji and a group of scholars' research works (2009,2015) give a different account which tells a completely different story and especially if we consult West Bengal Development reports and other survey documents the scenario is

not as satisfactory as it has been claimed.

According to the report of the Planning Commission, the state of West Bengal received less number of licences because of the perennial rift with the central government. Though the state government tried its best to boost the economy by giving tax rebates and reviving the sick industries, the Planning Commission's report mentions that West Bengal as a state received relatively fewer amounts of licences during the Central Regulation period in business.

As a result rate of business expansion also slowed down over time. Left Front took up policies of boosting up the sick industries and generation of employment through large-scale and small-scale industries, albeit the employment rate and the industrial development of the state were surprisingly disappointing according to the Development Report of West Bengal 2004.

It was true that from being the top industrialised state in 1960, it lost most of its glories due to several political unrests. Public investments in the state were also falling drastically, and the relative share of the factories was from 14 per cent in 1972 to 4 per cent in 2002.

## **2.6. Education and other welfare sectors: *Bhadralok* not learning from experience?**

Besides the decline of industrial arrangements, the education sector was also affected due to the 'politicization of space'. Bengali's rich legacy of education and practice of culture and art is renowned nationally; thus, basic education or achieving the minimum literacy rate has never been at a poor level.

But after coming to power in 1977, communists allegedly failed to improve the level of higher education, and 'political recruitment' replaced merit and excellence. Rather than improving the condition communists tried to strengthen their influence within it.

Before coming to power, they already had a good base through teachers, associations and student unions, so, after inheriting the system, they consolidated their position

successfully. Political interference in education is a tradition in Bengal and communists continued the practice of their Congress predecessors (Mallik, 1993). No wonder the same practice is still there after the so-called 'change' in the government. 'During the congress regime, the Vice Chancellor of Calcutta University was traditionally the nominee of the ruling Congress party and prone to implement their directives'; maintaining this tradition, the communist-appointed Vice-Chancellor were more subservient to the ruling party.

The situation was such that no initiatives were to be taken without the party directives, it was a saying that unless the order was issued or the recruitment was recommended from 'Alimuddin', CPI(M)'s main office in Calcutta, nothing would move. Getting a secondary teaching post to secure a seat in college admission was a matter of good connection at the party level and string-pulling with the communists. According to communists, this practice was legitimate as they claimed to strike a balance against the previous discriminations during the Congress regime. It can be noted that the current ruling party is also following the same footsteps, which proves that a vicious tradition has already been set by the ruling elites enough to abolish all sorts of transparency in education.

As a result, the academic standard started deteriorating massively, and low-quality teaching faculties stuffed by party members made the education sector a place of political largesse. The most controversial issue took place when the professors of Presidency College, the premier college of Calcutta University were transferred to district colleges. In the name of making the best education available to the poor district-level students what happened was a 'blatant stuffing' of party-affiliated teachers in Presidency College. Moreover, 'the controversy died down with the leaders of CPI(M)-controlled teachers' union receiving prize posting to Presidency College, where they would be in a position to consolidate their own and party position'.

Another blunder was abolishing English up to class V; the claim was to ease the study load for the primary level and assist the lower classes. But there is no denying the fact that in today's world, fluency in English is the basic requirement for getting any job, and weak language skills become the biggest hindrance for these students. Making something

easy or accessible does not mean diminishing the quality of it, and by abolishing English, the erstwhile government did exactly that.

However, the result was adverse to the overall educational development. The proliferation of privately owned English medium schools took place in the state, especially in Calcutta, where the tuition fees were very high, Middle-class people had no option but to send their children to these schools to access education in English. As a consequence of it, a great division was created between the students from English medium backgrounds and the vernacular medium in the job market. It was quite natural that vernacular medium students were rejected for poor language skills. Moreover, the trend in Calcutta was more severe, as the standards of college education fell drastically as students coming from posh English medium schools were losing interest in studying in the poorly structured higher education system, which was full of unnecessary political influences. Especially when cities like Delhi, Bangalore, Pune, and Hyderabad are offering hassle-free higher education equipped with the latest technologies and amenities at moderate fee structures it was natural for an ambitious student to look for better options outside the state.

Such a decline in the industrial sector and education created a huge employment crisis, and thereafter, job diversification started. A detailed analysis has already been provided in the earlier section, but what is notable in this consequential situation is that politics also impacts the people in the parliamentary democratic set-up.

Hence, it would be quite a misjudgement to see politics from the point of view of capturing power, as indicated in the widely understood defining factor of the discipline; rather, the process is more based on arrangements and the retention of such arrangements to protect the ruling right of the party at the helm.

The result of such arrangements, which was successfully set up by the Left Front during its heyday of the 80s and 90s, started giving a severe backlash, as has been portrayed in the above description. To save its position party and government went for pragmatic solutions. As the power shifted from the leadership of Jyoti Basu to Buddhadeb Bhattacharyya the requirement of industrial capital was felt more urgent. Two incidences in this period stirred the power conglomerate of the state in a way where the party was

not only seen as a disenchanted communist party losing its ideological primacy but also in a desperate need to change the local economic arrangements through exceptional decisions.

Singur and Nandigram were two villages that were selected for a large corporate capital investment that would develop as the industrial hub of the state. The opposition leadership did not waste such an opportunity to hit it with the hardest strike, which was the right of the farmers to the land, which once was the chief concerning factor of the growing party strength of CPI(M).

Therefore, the opposition leadership, namely the Trinamool Congress, under Mamata Banerjee, took control of the same arrangements and the activities associated with maintaining such political rights.

## **2.7. Defining the Politics**

At this juncture, what is, therefore, necessary is to explain how such changes or the techniques of establishing such an effective rural political base which was intricately tied up with the functioning of an ideologically rigid party led by the upper class and caste-based educated urban middle class yet influencing and controlling the periphery as their fundamental electoral support. Also, the question arises then, what is the 'change' that ousted such an organizationally strong party to an extent where, in the present situation, they hardly have any more effective influence left amongst the rural masses? It is essential to understand how the modern democratic tradition has been inculcated against the background of universal rationalism to understand the limits of both processes.

Modernity brought about an era of enlightenment ridden with various possibilities where power alone cannot explain a political phenomenon. It is rather open to different variants of social and economic arrangements that start influencing the activities in the process of democratisation of the political space. Rationalism, in this context, is a major point of existence in terms of setting the chances or the choices of the people rather than a singular, dependent factor of gain or loss; hence, setting up any universal factor would hinder the understanding in totality.

### **2.7.1 Activities of Arrangements: Philosophical analyses; epistemological underpinnings**

The above point takes us to the area of understanding phenomenon through the sense of singular morality, which is called normative morality. Such normative singularity of explaining any condition or process can be critiqued through Aristotle's idea of *Phronesis*, which is different from absolute scientific determinism and emphasises ethos comprising cultural and historical norms operating in a society refusing it to be explained through the model of universality (Mouffe, 1993).

Hence, specific cultures and their historical background build a certain contextual tradition. Here comes the importance of understanding politics as a mixed-bag phenomenon where not only a singular form of rationalism functions, but the activity becomes more important to understand the influence of external factors such as the tradition of a particular society.

Thus, the multiplicity of the subject positions is crucial to locating their several possibilities to be part of different traditions that share an inherent antagonism and, therefore, can be politicized (ibid).

Power may be an important component in politics but the process of validation or "legitimation" is an inherent part of the activities where particular forms of arrangements are made to mobilize a group of people. Here come the definitions set by Michael Oakeshott who indeed claims that politics is an activity of attaining general arrangements where people adhere or are subjected to this multiplicity of choice or chances influenced by hegemonic traditions. Therefore, to understand the politics in the eclectic of democracy is not the set of tricks, rituals or an abstract idea that is important to be learned but the coherent form of a practice of living in all its intricateness (Archar, 1979).

Certainly, this throws up the causality of certain results observed in the everyday politics of a village where loyalty to a particular political party is often mobilized through setting up or a pre-existing set of arrangements. Here the individual's subjective position and her chances or choices become more prominent along with collective actions.

Allegiance to the power elites is not necessarily a consequence of rational behaviour; it could be an obvious result of an individual's precarious position and her economic, social, and cultural conditions, which have continuously influenced the subject to associate or take part in certain activities to attain general arrangements to form a single community.

These activities could, therefore, be regarded as the seed of politics, which often leads to the formation of a common choice of that single community bounded by a particular set of arrangements. In the case of village-level local politics, these particular arrangements become the determining factor for political mobilisation, where the electoral choice eventually happens as the expression of that single community.

Returning to the factors of determinant in politics, the precursory position of the individual's socio-historic location in the whole process is, therefore, something that needs to be understood to assess the possibilities of him or her participating or being forced to participate in a particular type of arrangements which could be an external force of conditions like consequences of a foreign rule, ideological development in a social system or a massive change in the economic sphere such as occupational diversification. From such an argument, what derives that the 'demand politics' as defined by Rudolph in explaining the nature of the political process in the country shows that at the top, it may be a concentrated version of a command tendency of politics for controlling the periphery but it is no denying fact that the arrangements made at the local level often generate the demand of its own which in the process of change culminates to different sets of activities influencing the top irrespective of the ideological or administrative command. An empirical analysis of the fieldwork in a West Bengal Village could help explain such an assertive claim.

## **Chapter: III**

### **Processes in the Village: Internal and External Arrangements**

The external and internal arrangements of the two villages are important to explain as they show how different activities have taken place over time to attain a specific set of arrangements inside the villages. The external arrangements such as geographical locations, public investments, acquisition of land, and emergence of private capital are narrated through the caste dynamics and emergence of the class due to the differential effects of access to resources, which are elaborated as the internal arrangements.

It is observed that the previous land-owning caste accessed better economic opportunities through the established network around the activities they had been traditionally engaged in. On the one hand, the upper castes have greater mobility and better connectivity with the local resources, along with the manipulative power to utilise external investments internally; they have control over the internal resources.

Therefore, activities such as all the non-farm jobs inside the villages also require externally allocated material for the development and creation of opportunities organised by the top cliques of the villages. This chapter will also concentrate on the village's location as it would reflect the geographical condition of the studied area. It would also explain the distances from the main economic centres of the village and the characteristics of different caste settlements from which the external resources and arrangements of it would be unfolded.

#### **3.1. Land Reform and the Effects in the Village**

Amloki and Haritaki have been subjected to the land reform programme, where it is evident that the land has been transformed for non-agricultural purposes, creating a diverse effect. While the erstwhile large land-owning groups had experienced a high level of fragmentation (family and, therefore, land ownership), resulting in a decrease in the per-head amount of land ownership, the small landowners left farming their land altogether and turned into landless agricultural labourers. Later, such large landowners transformed their lands into brick kilns, as can be mostly experienced in both the villages in Purulia and Bankura, and started employing the former agrarian labourers in these brick kilns.

### **3.1.1. Land Reform Domination and the genesis of inequalities in the two study villages:**

Land reform has always played a central role in the political economy of the state and is implemented on a large scale (Sengupta, 1981). Land is one of the primary assets in the rural livelihood that determines the economic conditions of the people (Bardhan et.al. 2014)

Land Reform is one of the most celebrated yet critiqued policies by the erstwhile Left Front Government. During the 1940s and 50s, the state experienced a strong peasant movement called *Tebhaga Andolon* (Basu, 2001). The crux of such movement was directed to the famous sloganer 'Land to the Tillers' and its fair share of the crops. Within the 1960s, the movement got a good amount of momentum in the rural parts of the state, and the landless or semi-landless population started getting a stronghold in demanding fair wages and a voice against the oppressive landlords (ibid 2001). The land reform programme occurred in the state, where the average land ownership was 3.01 acres compared to the national average of 6.25 acres (Sengupta, 1981). During the pre-land reform era, the agricultural scene of the state of West Bengal, therefore, can be marked by a few important characteristics such as high pressure on the land, poor farms, and high numbers of sharecroppers with agricultural labourers (ibid 1981).

However, if we consider the amount of land per head as an asset in the village Amloki in Purulia, then it does not exceed more than 1.2 acres per head on average (Agricultural Census, 2011). Now, it is essential here to understand the dynamics of the village's socio-economic process that finally forms the present situation; nevertheless, that process is also deeply embedded in the historical evolution of the political geography of the village. As mentioned earlier, the village has three major caste groups. Historically speaking, the Bengal gazetteer (O'Mally, 1908) also mentioned that the villages of the Manbhum area had three major castes: a. Brahmin, b. General, and c. Backward Castes. (SC and ST).

It is important to mention here that although the average land size does not exceed more than 2 acres, the Brahmins and the other general castes are still retaining more land than the Scheduled castes, amongst which Bauris are the majority. In addition to this, both

the Brahmin and General caste houses are bigger, with larger living spaces that can be noticed conspicuously. In addition to that other asset-based inequalities can be noticed in comparison to the other backward caste people in the village of Amloki (Detailed asset-based inequalities will be discussed in the following chapters). However, a clear distinction of the structural differences of the houses that we could see in the village is quite conspicuous. The Upper Castes and Brahmins mostly have *pucca* houses made of bricks and cement while the lower caste Bauris and Santhal have mud huts with thatched roofs. Under the schemes of Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojna, all the villages were entitled to get a two-bedroom *pucca* house and works were under progress in various areas. However, the allocation of the money that each of the village residents was supposed to receive was detailed and listed based on their political allegiance. This makes up the context of the village's political location and functional arrangements.

### **3.2. External Arrangements:**

Amloki, a semi-arid village situated in the Western Part of West Bengal comes under the Nildi Panchayat. Reaching the village from the city centre is itself a journey to be observed and understood. The processes of changing landscape and accessibility of communications could often be described as remote and outdated. While embarking on the journey to study the village, there was little to no idea of how to reach the destination, so first, the block office was reached out. Raghunathpur is the main urban centre, having two blocks, namely Raghunathpur I and II. The ignorance about the block area under which the village comes took me to the first block of Raghunathpur. Eventually, it was learned that the two villages have the same name of which the study village is the smaller one and comes under Raghunathpur Block II. It was noteworthy to realise how the census data distinguishes between two different villages bearing same name with completely different demographic details. The technology, i.e., Google Maps, on which we generally depend so much, is practically inaccurate.

The smaller Amloki does not exist on the map was followed. A documentation clerk based in the Raghunathpur Block quickly understood the problem and showed me the census data, which both villages were showing and contained different data. During my census data analysis, the smaller Amloki was the selected study village, which was eventually found under Raghunathpur Block II. When the entry point of the road leading

to Raghunathpur Block II was reached, it was learned that the block office is not so popular in the aforementioned official name. Rather, people know it by the name of the Cheliyama block office. The name suggests the place it exists in. To reach Amloki, there are several autos ferrying people to Cheliyama block. From Cheliyama, the road leads towards Amloki Village. Approximately a 5-kilometre journey through fields and scattered woods with rocky dunes, evidence of the extended part of the Chotonagpur Plateau. An auto was taken from Raghunathpur town, and Nildi Panchayat was soon reached. As the Panchayat office approached, different political party flags and wall graffiti started coming up on the village huts. Three major political parties from such an exhibition can be traced: Forward Block, Bhartiya Janta Party, and Trinamool Congress. It was conspicuously visible that the liberal existence of the thesis political party and its supportive cadres are at least visually existent in and around the area.

The other village, Haritaki, is in the district of Bankura and is approximately 45 Kilometers east of the Village of Amloki. This is comparatively nearer to an urban centre and more developed with better road transport connectivity.

### **3.3. Comparative differences in arrangements of connectivity and the hamlets of different caste groups:**

Two reasons could be important for such developed connectivity. First, it is approximately 7 kilometres from the nearest town, Khatra, a main crosspoint functioning as a Bus station and joiner for the other important locations. The second is historical: a large barrage on the river Kangsabati is located in the Mukutmanipur area, just a few kilometres away from the village of Haritaki. The barrage construction process made the place locationally well connected with the other parts of the district and Kolkata the capital city of West Bengal. On the other hand, because of the mega construction and the presence of the river, Mukutmanipur has turned into a well-known holiday destination, and it is also a popular picnic spot for the locals. The village is situated amidst such a setup, which links it with various surface transport facilities such as buses, rented cars, auto rickshaws, and toto. This village is also situated on the extension of the Plateau and is full of hillocks and dunes. The soil is semi-fertile and requires adequate irrigation to make it agriculturally viable. However, the

administrative town of Bankura is around 30 kilometres away from the village and connected through private and government-run bus services. Both the villages have residents of different castes and religions.

However, Amloki does not have a single Muslim resident living in the village, but there are sharecroppers and agricultural labourers belonging to that religious group who seasonally come and stay in the village during the sowing and harvesting time. In the Amloki village, Brahmins, Bauris, Santhals and other general caste people live in different quarters or settlements. The quarters are named after the caste and called *para* or locality as it means in the Bangla language. Therefore, Mishras, Ojhas, and Rajhamsas are Brahmins and live in Mishra *Para* and Ojha *Para*, respectively. The name of the locality is based on and named after the majority of the caste living in that area.

The Santhals live in distinct and demarcated colonies in different parts of the village. Their areas of living stand out amongst the other settlements. Painted mud huts, neatly tamed courtyards, and colourful designs on the walls of the houses are quintessentially part of their aesthetic practices.

The Brahmin locality is evident from their affluence. Their houses are mostly brick-made and often have bare walls. Those in the middle-class strata have brick-made houses; nevertheless, they can hardly be mud-built.

Bauris, on the other hand, are the most deprived in terms of houses and other assets (detailed asset inequalities and other deprivations will be discussed in the following chapters). Most of their houses are thatched or tiled, but lack of maintenance and support has often led to broken bamboo pillars and the construction of tarpaulin sheds instead of stable materials.

### **3.4. This pattern could be replicated in the Haritaki village as well.**

The dominant caste here is Sahoo. Sahoos are primarily business communities with land assets. If agricultural labourers are unavailable, they often work on their farms. Those who are neither on the farm nor in the business sector are engaged in formal jobs such as teaching at the local primary and secondary school or practising medicine in the local clinics and hospitals.

The other sections of the villagers are from different castes, like Sordar, Nabik, Napit, Bauris, and Teli, who were brought in by the Sahoos for their work support. In the late 50s, when the building process of the river dam started in the Mukutmanipur area, Sahoos were the first to benefit from getting formal and informal employment in the Project.

Gopal Babu, an octogenarian retired schoolteacher, commented, *“Sahoos were just like the other farming communities in the Haritaki village, but they had always been keen to find employment as quickly as possible. If not formal employment, then entrepreneurial engagements always played the essential part for them to earn and get rich.”*

It is quite observable in the Amloki village that the comparatively well-off Sahoo *paras* (locality) are full of neatly painted two or three-storied concrete-brick-made houses, often erected walls around the compound. However, many of the families have not been able to secure employment or a regular source of income and presently living on their ancestral property but are not financially sound enough.

On the other hand, the spatial and physical differences in the Sardar *Para* and other lower caste settlements are distinct compared to the upper caste areas. Houses are mostly built with mud or, if made of bricks, left uncared for decades and substantially smaller in size. The roads through the localities are mostly muddy or partially brick/concrete-made and bereft of adequate streetlights. The unavailability of water and sanitation facilities is more acute in the other parts of the village, while most of Sahoo localities have roadside tap water facilities.

However, the water crisis is a serious issue in the area. Gopal Sahoo states, “*We are ashamed of offering marriage proposals to the brides living in other villages as they would have to fetch water for the house once they settle in their in-laws’ house.*” Overall, both villages are suffering from huge unemployment, poor education and health facilities, and declining agricultural jobs.

### **3.5. Does caste explain unequal internal arrangements of power and dominance in the village?**

In Indian politics, caste defines land ownership and agricultural domination (Bakshi, 2008; Chatterjee, 2018; Rawal, 2001). Traditionally, upper-caste households owning large tracts of land is a usual characteristic in the rural areas of the country (Borooah et al., 2013). In this context, it is important to mention that such a trend is significant in understanding poverty, inequality, and accessibility to other social and cultural capital. Studies (Arora & Sanditov, 2015) have shown that caste has always played a major role in determining spatial dominance (Srinivas, 1978).

Therefore, inequalities and poverty in the countryside are intrinsically connected to the caste, which can also be called a social group. This would be an important discussion to bring here to understand the omnipotent horizontal inequalities (Fraser, 2020) in the country. Horizontal inequalities are significant regarding the caste-based exclusivity of access to benefits and land ownership. This form of inequality is primarily concerned with groups. As the upper caste groups are wealthier, they wield power economically and socially in a particular community. However, such a trend often absents in West Bengal. It is not to pose exceptionalism in the Indian land ownership situation but an attempt to understand inequality and poverty through a different lens of social history.

Like the other states of the country, West Bengal was also dominated by the upper-caste land-owning community. As elaborated in the earlier chapters, the zamindari system in Bengal (Baden-Powell 1896 and Hunter Commission’s Report) dominated and controlled land ownership. This structure came to its formal ending soon after independence. In 1955, West Bengal’s Chief Minister B.C. Roy declared the disbandment of the century-old law. Under the new system, tenants had to pay the tax

directly to the government. This no doubt changed the scenario of land ownership in Bengal.

However, the real change occurred in three phases after the land reform was implemented in the state.

1. The first phase from 1953-66 did not bring much change, though, apart from making basic legislation and above-ceiling redistribution and protecting the Bargadar rights (Hanstad & Brown, 2001).
2. In the next round of phases, changes were drastic. With a pragmatic change in the political fortune West Bengal's newly elected communist party-led government embarked on an effective land reform movement (ibid). This not only changed the traditional land ownership pattern that was prevalent in other parts of the country but also shifted the caste-based social dominance. However, this argument is highly debatable as West Bengal is a state that has not had a single lower caste chief minister in her 70 years of political history. Also, most of the social, economic, and political movements are consolidated, planned, and led by the upper castes in the state. As a result, it is difficult to deny the factual possibilities of group-based inequalities of access to opportunities which is the crux of horizontal inequalities. Nonetheless, the point to be made here is not particularly about whether caste matters in Bengal or not but how it lost its prevalent dominant position in terms of controlling the ownership of land. Coming back to the land reform discussion, 'Operation Barga' was probably the most important step taken towards making equitable land distribution and tenancy security measures. While such land policy was being implemented in the state political situation was also going through a historical change.
3. Bangladesh Liberation War (1971) was an epoch-making event for the then-undivided Bengal. The exodus of the 7 to 8 million Bengali Hindus from former East Pakistan played an important role in shaping and developing a new class of residents of Bengal, the refugees. Three groups of migrants moved from east to west (Chatterjee, 2020). These three groups are based on their occupational and

economic class of which the middle class played a crucial role in developing a greater caste-less egalitarian common identity-based groups of people who happened to be leaving their homes and turn into refugees almost overnight.

### **3.6. The different hues of “comrades” and their impact on rural society:**

Middle class section of the migrants was mainly the educated middle class who got settled in the colonies in the city suburbs, lands and spaces provided by the government of West Bengal. However, such migration inflow to the western part of Bengal, which is presently known as the state of West Bengal, was not happening for the first time. The partition of 1947 also resulted in a huge number of refugees who settled in the hundreds of squatter colonies in the fringes of the city, stretching 60-70 kilometers north from the heart of the city (Chatterjee, 2020). The land and property owners did not accept such settlements. The demand for the eviction of the refugees became an important issue right after the settlement flourished with the labour put in by the refugees to develop the land for a living. This was the first phase of the land rights movements led by the ‘new citizens’ of the state. The cry for the abolition of land lordship together came from the dwellers of the colonies who understood the need to mount up resistance against the landowners. The formation of the United Central Refugee Council was an evident result of the time, and it got support and sympathy from the learned intellectual sections of civil society.

As mentioned before, land lordship came to an end during the regime of the first phase of post-independence state government, and upper caste land-based control started diminishing. Instead of land, employment and education started becoming more important in terms of determining the class position that started wielding over the traditional caste-based hierarchical structure of society. As Chatterjee argued in his recent work (Chatterjee, 2020) the substantial change of the socio-cultural mould in which most of the other Indian social practices and realities are shaped took place in Bengal in this phase particularly. Besides this, the upper caste landlords were losing the survival battle of keeping their class position; on the other hand, a section of new political leadership started developing based on the temporal demand for their resettlement through the socio-legal rationale. In this particular junction, the dilution of the hegemonic caste-based power group started changing its class character.

As Chatterjee argued, a certain remaining class now started growing up in the urban or peri-urban spaces of settlements where they had to experience the upper caste master and lower caste worker or what he called the *Manib* (Master) and *Praja* (Slave) binary of class relation. The caste hierarchy, therefore got diluted in the everyday practices and struggle of this new refugee class who had to establish and secure their place in the new city not by any social position but through the genesis of a section of people whose source of influence and honour come from their educational and employment background in the Calcutta, the capital city of West Bengal.

The communist movement was primarily led and organised by this section of educated middle-class Bengalis who had a deep connection with the historical background of partition and migration from East Pakistan.

The leadership however also comprised of upper caste anglophone sophisticated '*Bhadrolok*' who had set the style and characteristics of the Indo-Bengali Marxist politics in the state. The reason for using these hybrid terms here is two. First is the obsession with a Western liberal education that resulted in a breakaway from orthodox Hindu ideals of life and gave fresh air to a stagnant civilization during the nineteenth century.

Such connection and legacy were carried forward after the independence, many of the communist leaders were educated in former convent institutions and elite colleges of the city of Calcutta but they were culturally deep-rooted to the country and the region. For example, the chief concerns and political bases of the communists were labour, land, and the agricultural society, which was quintessentially Indian and covered issues that encompassed the whole nation.

### **3.7. Expansion of the social base of communist leadership:**

The expansion of the social base has several reasons first, during the pick of the communist movements in the 1970s, the ideological and political fraternity ran through the country. Such political struggle made the leaders rise above the regional demand for

identity and caste group priorities. Yet, they remained embedded in the realm of the West's political and social theories, making them a typical hybrid class.

The second reason relates to some extent to the first, but mostly the rise of the communist party in Bengal politics. As the party's cadre base, at least during the initial stage of its ascend in the post-independence period, was the refugees and poor agricultural workers of the countryside, it had organically risen above the caste interest and was concerned with the exploitation of the working class, purely in the Marxist sense of the term. Besides this, the party leadership always maintained a strong secular ideology of the activities and associations of the party workers, dissociating politics from the sociocultural and religious identity-based interests prevalent in the nation.

These contributed to the hybridity of a political party, and therefore, the construction of a new identity connecting to the ideologies of the 'party' started becoming even more inevitable after they assumed the seat of the ruling party in 1977. We will come back to the process of the party functions and its operational procedure in the following chapters with more details and references of recent scholarships, but in the present chapter, the argument is more about the social engineering through caste and class started getting entangled in an overwhelming political culture of the state where unlike other states of India caste cannot be regarded as the primary indicator of social dominance.

The previous explanation of the socio-political context of the state of West Bengal was essential to understand and capture the reason for which political exceptionalism could be explained. Both villages are spatially divided by caste. As described in the previous chapters and sections of this chapter, the spatial segregation by caste in the village settlement is quite visible, as are the asset and access-based divisions. Political exceptionalism, where caste-based political and social dominance does not function in the village, is valid in such a context because caste did not function as the mobilisation tool for a group. Rather, the emergence of the groups in village politics is more based on the associations and historically benefitted sections of a particular section through their activities performed. Therefore, the horizontal inequality in the villages is based on caste groups of whom certain individuals have created or amassed intergenerational wealth. This proves that caste plays a significant role and is a source of inequality. However, within the caste group, inequalities exist as well. Certain castes have

undoubtedly made a strong group-based position in the village, but that is more connected to their family or relative base rather than caste or religion.

Caste cannot be held as a dominant factor in the village because the local self-governance unit of the village, i.e., the Panchayat office, does not exclude the presence and representatives of lower castes. Also, in strong group dynamics, caste-based identity has never played an important role; rather, the way their resources and contacts can be accessed is the path for getting into the ‘club’.

This also brings us to the argument of making public goods quasi-public goods (Loury, 1987) or club goods, as mentioned by Fraser in her ‘Horizontal Inequality’ argument (Fraser, 2020). But, before coming to the distribution of the recourses, the access and control of it by the groups in the villages needs to be explored through the qualitative accounts of their activities in the village.

### **3.8. Dominance as the activities of the families in the village: Stories of Mishras and Sahoos**

When the fieldwork began in Purulia in November 2019 the first place that was approached was the Panchayat Office of the village. On the first day of my visit to the Panchayat office in the Amloki village, it was understood that the Panchayat Pradhan is a woman, and she is usually accompanied by her husband and male aide.

Being oblivious to the caste and religious factions in the village and as it was getting late in the afternoon and there was only one vehicle available that ferries villagers from the nearby town to Raghunathpur once a day it would not have been a wise decision to spend too much time at the Panchayat office. However, making initial contact with the Panchayat was essential to start work immediately.

The Panchayat office is a modest two-storied building, low in maintenance and difficult to be called technologically advanced. The secretaries and two other officials were working on laptops, but they complained about the internet connection. As *Pradhan* was absent, after the introduction to the secretary and was told that if any contact needed to be made right now, then Rupankar Banerjee would be the main contact person who is almost 2<sup>nd</sup> in command when the ‘boss’ is not around. Later, it was understood that,

like him, there was indeed a group of second in command who were the village's strong men and took the decision on behalf of the Pradhan.

However, after speaking to Mr. Banerjee and explaining the cause of coming to the village he told that a meeting could be held the next morning. Besides this, he was pretty much interested in sharing some of his stories regarding the past political turmoil in the village as it was also the time when the state assembly election was nearing and a competitive environment between the ruling party Trinamool Congress (TMC) and rising Bhartiya Janata Dal (BJP) had ensued with several clashes and rivalries between the two parties.

What was understood from Banerjee's account is that *“the previous land acquisition in the village to build a power plant has not fetched them any benefit and on top of that the recent loss in the chit fund investment allegedly incubated by the present government are reasons enough for which people think this fraud government should go”*. He was an erstwhile leader of the Communist Party of India (CPI(M)) and changed his affiliation when TMC started harassing him for being in the opposition.

Changing parties and especially joining the BJP was a shield for him to save his family from the goons of TMC in everyday village life. Eventually, we went back that day only to return the next day to meet the Pradhan. The Panchayat Pradhan is a lady from the Bauri caste group, one of the scheduled caste communities in the village. It was found that the table of the Pradhan surrounded by men, and she was not speaking a single word but only signing the bills and letters silently as and when directed by Rupankar *Babu* (as called by others). Her husband was helping her assemble the papers, stamps and other materials, sitting quietly beside her.

After a while, Rupankar *Babu* introduced me to her; after providing a detailed explanation about my work in the village, soon the permission to work was obtained. But as commuting deep inside the village was difficult it was necessary to find a place to stay inside the village. When walking out from the Panchayat office and looking for someone to approach a man hopped off from the bike. As noticed earlier, this person was there in the block office, which was visited earlier, to submit my papers to get permission to work in the village. He introduced himself as Prakash, a Panchayat

member. After knowing the situation, he soon contacted a couple of people on his cell phone and arranged a place for me to stay. The plan was to collect data both qualitatively and quantitatively. Prakash agreed to help identify some of the key people with whom conversations had to be prioritised to understand the village history and arrangements.

It seemed that even though he was part of the Panchayat while helping in the engagement, he had no party or ideological biases. Later, he explained the reason for this apolitical behaviour. From the initial days of visits, it was figured out that political rivalries are basically amongst the groups of different kinds of beneficiaries and stay hibernated during most of the year.

In terms of sharing certain common goods, such as ponds for bathing, is so unavoidable that it turns out to be difficult for one to keep their exclusivity in the village even if teaming up with other groups of political supporters. As some villagers explained *“You will never see us fighting amongst ourselves, it is the party and the babus (leaders) who play the dirty political game. They provide benefits and pick up young boys as and when they require pouring ‘jealousy’ and hatred amongst us. Throughout the year we bathe in this pond, chat and sometimes make fun of each other but you will see a different scene during the election. Do not expect such light behaviour during that time”*.

The work in the village started with walking through different localities named after the castes. After a couple of days of walking through the village, it was observable that the largest house in the vicinity was built by someone named Jiban Mishra. He was an earlier landlord in this area and, after land reform, still retains quite a huge number of land in the name of other family members. Recently, during the land acquisition for building the power plant, he lost most of his possessed land but received a lump sum amount as compensation.

Three cars were parked outside his bungalow-style house in the heart of the village, and a huge iron gate was closed from inside. Mr Mishra is in the city for a medical check-up; he is 75 now. His nephews, however, were not at all happy with their uncle and his influential position in the village. Sumanta and Jayanta are brothers quite close to Prakash and often told me that they are distant relatives to his family.

When we first started discussing the land ownership pattern in the village, it became clear that most of the villagers had lost land to the power plant industry and presently had no more than a couple of bighas. The data collected from the household survey below also proves it.

**Table 3.1. Caste-wise average land ownership in Amloki**

<i>Caste code</i>	<i>Average (in acres)</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
<i>Brahmin</i>	<i>0.47</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>1.19</i>
<i>General</i>	<i>0.36</i>	<i>36</i>	<i>1.07</i>
<i>SC</i>	<i>0.38</i>	<i>43</i>	<i>0.54</i>
<i>ST</i>	<i>1.24</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>1.06</i>
<i>OBC</i>	<i>0.30</i>	<i>42</i>	<i>0.42</i>
<i>Total</i>	<i>0.45</i>	<i>185</i>	<i>0.91</i>

*Source: Household survey by author*

### **3.9. Employment and Youth:**

Regarding the employment scenario, the village youth are mostly unemployed, of whom some have gone out to work in the non-farm sectors, mostly in the nearby towns and cities. The important arrangement amid such a crisis-ridden situation is that the power plant's fly ash pond is currently a big non-farm employment sector where hundreds of youths in the village are working.

The work is simple but painstaking. The ash or silt from the power plant gets deposited in the adjacent pond made by the plant authority, and the water post-use at the plant gets deposited with diluted silt. After a while, the silt floats up on the water like a thin layer of cream, which is collected and bagged into the sacks.

It is an important material to use in making paint colours, bricks and other industrial stuff, thus quite a high demand in the cities. Jiban Mishra's nephew and some other men like Bullet Singh are the chief coordinators of such activities. They look after the recruitment of the workers and loading of the fly ash before delivering it to the buyer.

### **3.10. Haritaki Village:**

In Haritaki the situation is a bit different. It is not solely a family but a particular trading caste named Sahoos who are in the dominant position. Haritaki is also a conglomeration of several groups of castes where the Sahoos are the earliest settlers. They belong to the *Teli* caste which was historically engaged in edible oil production and trade. It could be noted that the former Rajas of the Zamindar family of the village (still fondly called the royal family of the village) brought people of all the other castes during their reign to provide various services such as cobblers, sailors and barbers.

The river Kangsabati or Kansai flows right beside the village, making it an important source of water in the arid region of this village situated in the dry southwestern part of Bengal. Early in the 1960s, the government of India took over the dam project, and the Sahoos gave most of their lands to the dam-building authority. In return, they got temporary posts in the government offices set up to develop and supervise the dam region.

This also contributed to the rise of Sahoos as the most dominant economic group in the village. During the fieldwork, it was observed that in the annual sports event, the chief organisers are Sahoos. As they are also the main businessmen in the locale, the majority of the investments also come from them during any such event. They are also in the top positions in the governing bodies of the local schools.

To understand the dynamics in more detail, Mr. Kaviraj, an assistant teacher at Haritaki High School, has done extensive research work on the village's history. However, he was not willing to give any recorded version of testimonials. He had explained that the Sahoos are at present with BJP after TMC ripped off most of the benefits from the village while developing the dam area as a local tourist spot.

For the last five years, the government has acquired many places in and around the dam area for beautification and development. Some local boys got stalls through the government allotment programme, but Sahoos got nothing as such. However, they previously benefited from government jobs and currently invest much of their wealth in buying or leasing large uncultivated lands and have started brick kilns. Thousands of

local people, mainly from the backward Sardar caste, are getting jobs there.

### **3.11. Arrangements of internal investments: Private capital of the dominant families**

While in the first village, a large amount of land was acquired for constructing a thermal power unit, in the second village, land was taken for dam construction. In the first case, some agitations cropped up during the time of land acquisition but were soon crushed by the state government; in the latter case, the state government itself employed thousands of local villagers as temporary government employees working for the construction of the dam. This process nonetheless gives birth to unequal social arrangements and inequalities in the village. The thermal power plant did not employ the local villagers in the unit, but the subsidiary sector, which is the collection of fly ash, eventually went under the control of a few in the first village.

This control is exclusive, as the collected fly ash from the thermal power plant's ponds is controlled by a group of former agitators against the establishment of the power plant. Along with the other farmers in the village, this group of few is also facing severe loss in agriculture as the per-head land size has shrunk over the years while the shareholders of land increased.

Although these groups were the former big landowners in the village before the land reform, now they are the exclusive controller of the '*fly ash pond*' or '*chhai bandh*'. They are also the employer of the local village youths and women who are seeking work outside of agriculture. On the other hand, in the second village, the government took the project of developing a dam on the river that flows along the border of the village back in the 1960s. This required a huge number of temporary staff who would work to support the engineers and local administrators. In this process of employment, a particular caste group called Sahoos got the benefits and, at present, the most powerful group in the village. They have amassed a sizeable amount of wealth to invest in the non-farm sectors such as brick kilns that are growing in and around the vast infertile lands of the village. They are the employer of the other villagers too, who are in search of non-farm jobs. It is interesting to observe that the local governance body, the

Panchayat, is also controlled by these beneficiary groups. As a result of which the allocation processes of the rural employment schemes and other development programmes are hegemonized by such groups.

The houses and assets of the members of these groups are distinctly different from the other residents of the village unfolding inequalities among individuals. This is also distinctly different from the patterns of the other parts of the country and their rural politics where inter-caste inequality is more evident. While the groups in the first village belong to the Brahmin caste, perhaps conforming to the popular discourse of upper caste rural dominance, from the data, it is evident that all the Brahmins are not particularly well off or securing powerful positions in the village. The defiance of the caste-based rural dominance is further strong in the second village, where Sahoos is the most powerful section being under the other backward class group (declared by the Indian Government). The rise of such sections in the village is specifically connected to political affiliation as well. The reason for which decentralisation of government took place through the establishment of the local government body, namely Panchayat, was to further strengthen the democratic institutions at the margins of the society.



**Figure: 3.1. A house of a Sahoo family (Picture taken by author)**



**Figure: 3.2. A locality of Sardar Castes (Picture taken by author)**

But in practice, it could be observed that emerging powerful groups due to different economic transitional processes, in which some benefitted, and some were left behind, are the actual spearheads of the villages whose affiliation would ultimately matter in determining the political orientation of the village.

As previously mentioned, often in rural politics of West Bengal not caste, but first the control of the resources and then the political allegiance would determine the identity. In closed settlements like Indian villages identity not only matters for social security but also their survival. In the figures 3.1. and 3.2. a distinct difference of the economic position of the Sahoos who the business community in the Haritaki village are living in a concrete 2 storied building and the scheduled caste Sardars' locality who lives mostly in the mud house and thatched roof.

As both groups are dissatisfied with the agricultural policy taken by the government of West Bengal and the lack of rural employment the newly emerging Bhartiya Janta Party turned out to be the saviour in such context. In the last general assembly election these groups in both villages had changed their political choice and so had the whole village. Therefore, what is important in the whole situation is that the banality of democratic functioning lies in the core of the electoral spectacle that is overhyped by the popular media and visual culture, but the actual transition takes place when the activities of a particular social and economic set-up change. Such changes affect the arrangements most certainly shifting the balance of power at the bottommost level like the socio-

economy of two villages in India. The emergence of the new actors and their patronage ultimately mobilizes and determines the choice of the voters.

## **Chapter: IV**

### **Consequences of External Investments in the Village**

Rural changes are happening in India through an internal transformation of the occupational arrangements in the village and external investments through public or private capital (Dev, 2004; Levien, 2011; Adukia et al., 2020). In the post-independence era, villages in India have been going through a socio-economic transition that is part and parcel of two phenomena. The acquisition of land, primarily undertaken by the government, and capital investment in the form of development programmes has impacted the intra-village social fabrics (Nielsen, 2010; Narain, 2017; Chakravarty, 2016; Kodir, 2018; Singh, 2018).

#### **4.1. Changes in the traditional land holding pattern:**

The land has always been pivotal in framing social status and economic power in history (Kumar, 1965; Mosse, 1997; Mosse, 2006; Singh, 2008; Agarwal, 1994; Sampath, 2013). Barring other nations in South Asia, particularly in the subcontinent, the history of the caste-based social hierarchy was primarily based on land ownership and the system of employing landless labourers. Lands were also rewarded as a token of appreciation for the nobilities of the ruling elites. The Rayatwari, Zamindari and Jotdari systems were tied through the same thread and are often still influential in several parts of the nation. As ruled under the British regime, Bengal had several prominent landholding castes belonging to Brahmans and Kayastha, along with a few Vaishyas, who were the Zamindars of different areas of the region. Chapter I of this thesis deals with the details of the Zamindari system, and the following chapters explain the evolution of the change in the landholding system in more detail. However, understanding the change in the traditional land holding in these two villages is crucial to integrating the cumulative consequences of the external investments instead of transforming land ownership in the villages.

As the Chapter III has tried to show glimpses of the rising political influence of the erstwhile landowning community that did serve the purpose of the early accumulation of wealth, it also allowed tapping the benefit as and when different economic actors had

invested the external private or government capital. It is, therefore, crucial to unfold the processes through which the economic arrangements started changing in the two villages.

## **4.2. Village in Purulia**

The Mishras are the most economically prosperous community in the village of Amloki. The fieldwork experience showed that the community had always held a sizable amount of land in the village. One single caste group, the Mishra, had the largest. Interestingly, the caste group is also divided into several interrelated families that often refer to each other as relatives. During fieldwork, this interesting pattern was observed, especially when a household was surveyed.

In Amloki, field guide and companion Prakash hails from the Mishras. However, he was from the impoverished part of the clan. From his elaboration, it becomes clear that this family, the single largest economically dominant land-owning class, had politically and socially reigned the village for the last few decades. Until the land reform, this family owned a substantial cultivable land portion in the village. In the post-land reform period, the upper ceiling of the total land ownership decreased. However, the economic assets owned by the family had already transformed into forming social and cultural capital (Trueba 2002, Wacqant 1998, Woolcock 1998). For example, some of the first few people migrated out of the village for higher studies in the nearby towns or to Kolkata, the capital city of West Bengal from this family. In contrast, the average rate of literacy in the village is distinctively lower than the state average (Purulia is also one of the most backward districts in the state of West Bengal). Though land reform had decreased per headland owned by individuals or families, as mentioned, the social capital raised out of the pre-utilized capital generated from the land possession hitherto existing.

### **4.2.1. The *Mishra* Clan: Access to External Investment**

During my first visit to the village, the dominant narrative came from most of the senior villagers was that Jiban Mishra, the most economically influential person in the village, owns the most land, and most of his family members are now involved in different entrepreneurial ventures such as brick kilns and transport businesses. His eldest son works in a Kolkata-based private firm, and his daughters have been married to families based in

nearby towns. The rest of the family lives in a large mansion in the village. In front of his three-storied bungalow-style house, which is probably the largest house in the village, there is a huge iron caste gate, and three cars are parked outside with two tractors. They had been running a transport business for the last ten years and the tractors are there to put them on rent. However, none of those cars is now in service as most of their earning members have shifted to the city.

Jayanta Mishra is related to this family. As Prakash's friend, a chance to spend a substantial amount of time with him was given. Our fondness developed specifically during my first visit, which primarily involved surveying the village to understand the villagers' socio-economic profile and political activities. During this period, Jayanta and his brother Hemanta offered me their company when they had some free time from their 'business activities'.

This was also when the opportunity to become almost one of their group members was considered. They started sharing their everyday activities, problems at work, and how political affiliations work as an essential identifier for an individual during the tense time of Panchayat and state-level elections. At first, it was complicated for me to decipher the equations between Prakash, his elder brother Bidesh, Hemanta and Jayanta. All of them have the same title, 'Mishra'. This regular interaction revealed that, as in other villages, caste groups have clustered living arrangements; therefore, they could have had the same caste identity but belonged to different families.

However, from Prakash's explanation of the connection to the larger Mishra Family, it became much clearer. Purulia was earlier part of Bihar and has a deep connection with the *Jharkhandi* language. It later got mixed with the regional dialect and was spoken with the touch of the regional dialect of Bengali. Therefore, when Prakash told me that the other Mishra brothers belong to his *baradari* (clan) it was clear they are interrelated and once lived as a joint family. It could be many years back, which even Prakash's father cannot trace back when the family got separated, land ownership got divided, and families got fragmented.

Another word that Prakash frequently used was *ghorbakhol*, which also means the close

family net. Probably the closest English word for this typical Local Bengali word could be a clan. Nevertheless, Prakash and his family separated from the larger clan of Mishras and mainly got involved in the priesthood. His grandfather, father, and now Prakash are all into this occupation, and the little lands they had were not cultivable. When Prakash's father was asked about farming activities, he explicitly expressed his limited knowledge about any farming activities as he had never been involved in this activity in his lifetime. This was a reiteration of an earlier discussion with Prakash.

At first, being oblivious about Prakash's background, I had asked him about the village's agrarian situation and how the agriculture activity is framed in the village. After probing for a few minutes Prakash gave up and came up with a straightforward answer "*Dada, ami sob byaper e khub akta bhalo kichu apnake bolte parbo na, amra kono din chash bash kori ni amader dadu thakurda rao sobai jajmani kaj ei chilo, amader chash abad niye tamon bhalo kichu jana nei. Panar proshner uttor dite parbe jara tatader kache niye jabo*", dada (in Bengali dada is a way of addressing any stranger assumed to be older than the answerer) – means, I do not have a fair knowledge of agricultural work; our ancestors had never worked in the field and were chiefly engaged in the priest work; we do not know about agriculture; let me take you to the people who know about this better and can answer your questions.

It is also true in the case of the other upper caste households, very few of whom are not Mishras, do have or had large land ownership but always used sharecroppers or agricultural labourers for cultivation. Shrinking per-head land size resulted in their decreased involvement in agrarian work, while the change of occupation from farm to non-farm work became inevitable for regular farm workers. As land becomes 'useless' or in the local parlance, the increase of the '*Dangajomi*' (where agricultural work is not possible) led to a proliferation of non-farm land utilisation. The previous large-size landowners used innovative processes to use the land, and the geographic spatiality of the place played a pivotal role.

#### **4.2.2. The Emergence of Brick Kilns:**

During an interview with the local brick kiln owners, it revealed that a couple of quarries are nearby, from which labourers are often hired to dig up the alluvial parts of the land to

make it even. This is quite a long-tenured job because several stretches of upheavals are often required to make even and turn it into cultivable ‘usable land’. From such activities, a large amount of soil is gathered and mixed with soil collected from Ajoy and Damodar, two major rain-fed rivers in the area. While entering the village, one can notice that both sides of the road approaching the village were full of small brick kilns with blast furnaces.

The brick kiln owners are traditionally large landowners and do not belong to the studies village. However, they have mostly taken the unused lands to set up their businesses and employed former agricultural labourers in the brick manufacturing units. Such units require multiple jobs, from gathering soil to transporting the prepared bricks to the customers. Labourers are required at every step of the work. Along with that, the recent rural development schemes have given a new avenue for the non-farm activities inside the village, some of which are under NREGA through which works such as digging up ponds, building new roads etc. are done by the residents of the villages.

In the previous chapter, the insertion of the Damodar Valley Corporation and related land acquisition processes were discussed. A majority of the [landless] agricultural labourers have joined across caste and gender. Such large hydropower projects create several allied activities related to trade and commerce.

The main engagement is at the fly ash pond. A huge water reservoir was made to hold the existing water from the power plant. The water contains the residual ashes burnt out of coal and eventually got deposited in the pond. The silt is then collected manually through a piece of cloth from the top of the stagnated water. Since 2015, when the process of filling up the pond started, former agricultural labourers are now informally recruited by multiple groups of suppliers who control the trade of the ‘fly ash’ market in the village. The dominant Mishra family and their extended relatives have established substantial control over the local business supply.

#### **4.2.3. Coordinating Local Trades:**

Hemanta and Jayanta Mishra, along with their cousin brothers, are one of the main groups now in charge of recruiting labourers to collect the fly ash, stockpile it, and later load it

in the trucks of the suppliers. Such a supply chain is often coordinated from Kolkata, the capital city of West Bengal, and most importantly, it is not regulated or legally approved. Therefore, to keep trading activities free from legal complications, bribes are offered at most checkpoints and police stations on the way to Bajbaj, where the warehouse is located.

The little opportunity to interview the supplier gave me a story of a ‘political society’ (Bhattacharyya, 2021 & Chatterjee, 1998) functioning on behalf of the systematic transportation of the product. The main coordinator of the supply chain rarely visits the Mishra brothers, so the chance to meet him was taken. Around 9.30 at, the information came that he had agreed to meet, but the interviewer must not carry any recording device or camera. We had a 15-minute conversation on the topic, and he explained how fair all the business activities are; assuming that the interviewer could be a journalist, he repeatedly asked whether the interviewer is from any news media.

He mentioned how the local police stations must be paid to avoid other hassles the traffic department would try to impose on their trade. However, after further probing the issue of bribes and irregularities in case of having a valid license to deliver such products, he got uncomfortable and sceptical about the real intention behind this interview. He ordered others to stop the interview immediately.

### **4.3. External Investments in Haritaki**

#### The emergence of the Sahoos:

The situation in Haritaki demands a different elaboration. Because of its colourful historical background, the mosaic of the [caste-wise] settlement is truly diverse.

Unlike Amloki, Haritaki is more of a developed village intertwined with the town, which is rather a village in transformation, dominated by Sahoos. This caste is traditionally involved in business, therefore, falls under the Vaishya caste. They are also called *Teli*, i.e. a community historically associated with and engaged in edible oil extraction from Mustard seeds. After visiting some households it was understood that there are several sahoo families who are still involved in these traditional occupations. It is essential to

understand the genesis of the villages before discussing their arrangements in terms of occupations, trade, and socio-political activities.

The Haritaki village is between Mukutmanipur and Ambika Nagar. The nearest town is Khatra. Ambika Nagar is the oldest settlement with a glorious historical past. It is part of the kingdom of Dhalbhum and used to be administered from 'Ghatshila', the old imperial and British capital of the 'Singbhum' area.

**Antecedents:** The history of Ambika Nagar can be traced back as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century when the '*Parmars*' of Rajasthan came to the place and established the Temple of Amika Devi. They are devotees of Shiva, Radha and Krishna and the temple became the most famous Holy place for the local people. From the oral history and the narration of the old priest who is still offering puja and performing associated religious and cultural functions for the temple - this village was established and built in the name of Ambika Devi, and most of the inhabitants were brought by the Raja from outside the territory.

The history of the Sahoo settlements can be well relatable to this narration. Sahoos are Vaishya caste, and so is this imperial family. According to the explanation of Sushant Sahoo, a local primary schoolmaster, their origin in a place that was historically inhabited by Santhals and other agrarian castes like Mahatos, how an established business caste came and become dominant in the place should be enquired by keeping the settlement history of the place.

He said that all the Sahoos were brought by Raja Dhaval Dev, who was amongst the earliest Kings of the royal family. As the royal family's caste was Vaishya, their primary occupation was also based on business. This region's soil had always been perfect for cultivating mustard, one of the most popular crops in the Bengal region, producing edible mustard oil, a must-to-add ingredient in any Bengali cuisine.

When Sahoos were brought in their primary occupation was to cultivate mustard and extract edible oil from the plant's seeds. Such oil-extracting farms are called *Ghani*. Once these *Ghani*[s] were quite normal and popular in the districts of Bengal, mechanized large factories came to replace such old cattle-run oil extraction machines. Sahoos became the

main settlers involved in this occupation and became the main trading community in this area. Along with Sahoos came the Sardars and Nabiks. They are traditionally artisan and service-providing communities with some land to cultivate for their consumption.

The Nabiks were originally the seaman or transporters who used to carry the produce and sail through the various riverine routes across the state. Nabiks and Sardars are under the scheduled caste category, and so are the Mahatos, the region's main cultivator caste. Sahoos, being the trading community, had always been closely connected to the Royal family; later, when Zamindari and the imperial system became obsolete, especially during the post-independence era, they became close to the local authorities. During the early decades after independence, Sahoos were the first to take up formal learning and study in the local schools. Being economically dominant in the region, they took the opportunity to become the first to become literate, and when the opportunity came in the way, it was easier for them to tap it according to their ability and availability.

#### **4.3.1. Investment in the Kangsabati Reservoir Project:**

The Kangsabati Reservoir project was the first state intervention in the region as part of the Neheruvian model of economic development. The government of India commenced the development of the barrage, which was built between 1956 and 59 and became operational in 1962. The most important demographic change started as soon as the reservoir-making process started taking off.

A government project of this magnitude requires a large number of labourers. The Kangsabati Reservoir Project is India's second-largest river dam project. Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to say that a completely new township was on the way to being set up. Quarters for the engineers, supervisors, contractors, and their families were built up. The Reservoir Building Authority started establishing schools and colleges. In this process, all the job opportunities that came in the way were semi-permanent or permanent government jobs.

*“The hiring process was not as formal and competitive as it is in the present time”, – said one of the elderly schoolmasters who started working as a primary school teacher at the local government-run school that was then only built for the children of the engineers who came to build up the project.*

As Sahoos were the dominant and one of the progressive castes in the area, they accessed such informally available jobs. They already used to possess the land that had to be acquired to develop projects and related town development works. Some male family heads were offered office-based clerical jobs in return for their land and a lump sum amount.

It has to be kept in mind that such jobs were then low-paying but fetched high social prestige, unlike the land-owning agricultural background, which was so far popular and dominant. Getting a government job, and that too under the central government, changed the status of the Sahoos completely. The impact is relatively long-term and completely transformative, where Sahoos become ‘the community’ in the Haritaki Village. For example, from any small grocery store to a rice mill, from School governing board members to local construction business owners, they become omnipresent. The development of this community was also highly dependent on economic stability and improvement. As they started securing govt. jobs, their apparent lifestyle, and financial assets started growing exponentially.

During the fieldwork, it was noticed that the Sahoos' locality is distinct from any other caste's locality. They have at least one two-story building that is unusually large and well-maintained compared to any other house in the village. From interviews with such house owners, it was learned that none of those houses was built recently but was at least 60 years old.

*“Now it is unthinkable to build such large houses, my father and uncle both used to work as an accountant in the Reservoir project for 30 years and build this house for the family, now it is even difficult for us to maintain this” - Ananta Sahoo, a middle-aged teacher at a vocational school, stated.*

Unfortunately, with the completion of the project in the 1990s, most of the early recruits got benefitted from their govt. jobs, but at present, those jobs have vanished from the scene. Now it is primarily contractual positions in the local schools and government offices where the next generations of Sahoos are working. Some of them have expanded

their earlier business, which they were traditionally involved in, edible mustard oil extraction through mechanized factories and supplying it to the local wholesale markets. The capital they had generated during their earlier generations' government jobs was transferred into the creation of assets and investments in the construction business. Like the village in Purulia, Haritaki has also received government housing schemes; therefore, internally and in nearby villages, requirements for brick are high. On the other hand, the village is situated right on the banks of the Kangshabati River, making brick material available. Some of the Sahoo families own such brick kilns.

As can be inferred from this elaboration, even though Sahoos are generally the economic elites of the village, like Mishras in Amloki village of Purulia, not all the Sahoos are rich. It was interesting to notice that the families where multiple members from the older generation used to work in the reservoir project became economically quite prosperous and later invested capital into the business.

Traditional Brahmin castes and some of the Mahatos [during the fieldwork, I was hosted by a Mahato family; the head of the family, Mr Surendranath Mahato, is a school-teacher at the vocation training institute] told me their dislike towards the powerful Sahoos.

'Suren Babu' as I used to call him said that "*the Sahoos are only interested in making money. They are very cunning businessmen, do not care about studying much and usually join their family business at an early age*". The example of his comment became visible when I expressed my interest in visiting the richest Sahoo family in the village. There are two of them who are abysmally rich in comparison to all other Sahoos in the village.

I got the opportunity to interview one of them and learned that he now owns multiple business ventures in and around the village. He owns multiple brick kilns, warehouses, rice mills and tractors to put on rent. Sahoos become politically dominant by giving lump sum donations to the local Panchayat and clubs that regularly arrange social and cultural programmes.

It is interesting to observe that the annual sports event is coordinated and sponsored by the Sahoos, and even the major titles in separate events are also won by the Sahoos. I

noticed that the entire competitive event was organized and participated in mainly by the people belonging to the Sahoo caste. Although Gorai as a caste is prominent, they are primarily into agriculture, and external investments in government intervention or other forms did not make much difference to the group.

Gopal Sahoo belongs to the Teli community and is still involved in his traditional caste-based livelihood. His father got a job in the Kangsabati River barrage project and worked as a government employee, which has indirectly helped the family business to flourish. Now, their family is also one of the largest land-owning households in the village as well. Regarding his dependency on the government schemes Sheetal says “ *amra kono rokomeri subidha sorkarer theke pai ni. Amar baba kaj peychilo Kangsabati barrage er, tai amader dhar dena ba jomi bech te hoy ni. Akhon amader ja jomi ache tate sorshe chash ar tel utpadan er kaji lage. Eta amader paribarik byabsa*”

- *“We have not been supported by any government schemes. My father got work in the Kangshabati River Barrage Project; therefore, we did not sell our land, nor did we have to borrow money. The cultivation of mustard seeds is our traditional occupation, and we produce oil from it.”*

The above case and the verbatim explanation of the external investments in the form of the river barrage project benefitted the Sahoo family in a way where the next generation also gained economically and retained their economic dominance in the village.

On the other hand at the Sardar colony Shibu Sardar explains that “*haan aksho diner kaj pai amra kintu botsor e oi 8-10 er moto. Amader barir lok Kansabatir bandh e kaj peychilo kintu oi kuligiri korar.tate kono subidha hoy ni. Akhon amadr rajnoitik meeting dakle jete hoy, oi kaj paoar e asha e. se aksho diner kaj er takao 6 mas ki ak bochor pore dhoke*”

-*“Yes, we get work under the 100-day work scheme, but we only get 8-10 days of work opportunity. Our household members worked in the Kansabati River Barrage Project as daily wage labourers, and we got no benefit thereafter. Now we are bound to attend political rallies in expectation of getting work. Our 8-9 days wage also comes after 6 months or after a year.”*

It is quite evident that the Sardar, who are the ‘Bhumij’ the scheduled tribes have been historically excluded from the benefits of the external investment in the village since the river barrage project implementation. In the case of the current situation as well, they are

bereft of accessing any facilities as far as external investments are concerned in the village.

#### **4.4. Investments in tourism:**

In 2011, there was a major shift in the state's politics. The dominant Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its allied parties, the Left Front, lost the election, and the chief opposition party, the Trinamool Congress Party (TMCP henceforth), came into power. From the beginning, the TMCP promised an inclusive development strategy, which they would use to develop the small villages nearer to the tourist spots.

Haritaki is situated in a relatively famous tourist place, or what is in the language of commercial tourism called the 'weekend gateway,' called Mukutmanipur. The hilly and lush-green forests around the Kanshabati River make it a perfect spot for picnics and weekend retreats for town-based tourists. A large number of tourists based in Kolkata also visit Mukutmanipur as there are a few more tourist attractions within commutable distances.

Since 2017, the promise by the new government has been percolating into policy implementation. The entire area of the water reservoir and the adjacent forests and the hills were brought under the Tourism Development Authority of West Bengal along with other clusters. As a result of which several shopping complexes with small provisional stores started coming up. With the intervention of the Panchayat authority, such empty stalls were allocated amongst the unemployed youth based in the village. Now as the Sahoos partially control the Panchayat, they become the main allocators of such stalls and wielded more dominance amongst the local populous. It can be discerned that while tourism was on the rise in and around Mukutmanipur, several other investments came into the place. Most importantly the lodging or Hotel business. Sahoos are also the local land-owning elites; therefore, once the place started emerging as a major tourist spot, all the uncultivated and abandoned lands, particularly nearer to the Kangsbati Reservoir, were converted into guesthouses or given out on lease.

This is one of the most important points to problematise regarding how land capital changed in the transformative situation and benefited from external investments. To

understand it through the lens of the emerging political arrangements of the country's micro level of the analytical unit, the village has to be unfolded through a historical and contextual overview.

#### **4.5. Conceptualizing the Political Consequence of External Investment in the Villages:**

Understanding political consequences in a particular socio-economic context requires multiple sources of analysis (Drezé & Sen, 1996; Gazdar & Sengupta, 1996; Roy, 2014). Starting from Plato's Republic to Machiavelli's Prince, we can observe that Political Science is substantially engaged with ethics and then delving into the question of what could be the just way of governing the 'subjects'.

No doubt, the dominant normative questions have been ridden with a high level of monarchical rule, where retaining absolute power was the central problem. With the emergence of democracy, that technique of retention of power followed by the erstwhile monarchs had to be changed as the 'subjects' had changed into 'citizens'.

In the meantime, the economy had also evolved, and slave-owning society entered a new regime of capitalism and a new form of accumulation—not by enslaving people but through the accumulation of their fundamental economic base, land.

#### **4.6. The Asian version of primitive accumulation took place mainly in the post-colonial era.**

Primitive accumulation in its theoretical structure did not exist in the Indian context. One of the fundamental reasons could be the magnitude of the industrialisation that had taken place in nineteenth-century England and Western Europe, which set the stage for the accumulation process was absent in India. Also, unlike India in the Western context of agrarian transformation, the dispossessed farmers were turning into industrial labourers as the industries were capable of absorbing them (Chatterjee, 2017). However, a more or less similar version of the accumulation process took place during British colonialism, when vast amounts of land were acquired for mining, tea plantations, and other trade activities.

With the new industrial policies in place during the early post-independence decades, large companies, along with the government, started acquiring land, which made many rural people who were primarily dependent on agricultural work had to abandon their traditional occupations. A steady decline in agriculture from 54% share of GDP in 1950-51 to 16% in 2011 can be observed in India, which has also increased the flow of labourers in the non-agricultural work sector (D'Costa & Chakrabarty, 2017). From the existing literature (Byres, 1993; Sanyal, 2007) it is also an established discourse that the classical transition to capitalist agriculture has not taken place in India; rather, through the heavy state intervention and 'planning' the country did a two-way structural change where the old landholding system was reformed through the introduction of the land reform (extensively implemented in West Bengal) (Bandyopadhyay, 2008) by which the sharecroppers got the tenancy right to cultivate the land and take away the share of the harvest.

It also provided a fair amount of surplus land distribution after setting the ceiling of land ownership for the big farmers and former zamindars. This chapter intends to embed the question of land ownership into the historical evolution of governance because, across the world, land ownership has defined the position of the ruler. But before proceeding further, a brief discussion is required to understand the current discourse in the agrarian transition debate in India and how it influenced the country's political stage.

#### **4.7. The current debate on Agrarian Transition**

The agrarian transition in India can be understood mainly from two perspectives. The Marxist argument of Mode of Production and the other is based on the Market Economy. The market economy-based analysis brings the role of the Green Revolution in changing the old agrarian production system in the country along with the launching of land reform. In the late 1960s systematic attempt was made to modernize agriculture by introducing the HYV (high-yielding variety) seeds with the help and collaboration of a US-sponsored technological package (Mohanty, 2012). The water-seed-chemical fertilizer-based package brought a fundamental change in agricultural production in the first phase. Then it concentrated on non-food crops such as cotton in the second phase. This process no doubt brought the existing agrarian system to a phase of transition, but the effect was

highly diversified. However, this triggered the most important debate, the mode of production debate in the agrarian transition in India. It has tried to identify the changing class structure – Landlord-tenant to Capitalist-Agricultural labour, but how far this helps locate the heterogeneous character of the Indian Agrarian Society is a matter of doubt (Ommen, 2012). Under the Marxist framework and terminology, the debate mainly focused on the nature and extent of the growth of capitalism in Indian agriculture (ibid).

The Indian modes of production debate focused primarily on two aspects: the development process of capitalism in the countryside, and related class struggle and the relevant existence of Left politics. The role of agriculture in industrialization was also an important issue in India in the 1960s and 1970s, but it took a back seat in the modes-of-production debate. However, an analysis of capitalism in the countryside, as well as the political agrarian question, both need to be contextualized in an understanding of capitalist development that includes industrialization. However, there are multiple strands centred around the debate; while Ashok Rudra and others argue that the capitalist relation has not yet been realized in the Indian agrarian Economy, Utsa Patnaik and others opined that the capitalist tendency already exists. Hence, there is no agreement on the base from which the change can be observed (Ommen, 2012). The nature of the mode of production is itself highly varied in terms of its existence across the country and the attributes of ‘feudalism’ or ‘capitalism’ varied. Apart from this the Marxist argument of change in the ‘mode of production’ leading to classical agrarian change has not taken place in India (Shah & Harriss white, 2011).

Amidst rural transformation the complex livelihood of rural India no longer remains within agricultural works or wage labourers. Rather, they are in the process of accessing both forms of work, farm and non-farm, or sometimes staying in the village but tapping jobs in the nearby urban areas. Along with this, the circular migration of labourers has increased the complexities of the situation. Moreover, a complete replacement from semi-feudal or pre-capitalist to a new mode of capitalism or any other is not the situation in India. Rather, it is a diverse heterogeneous process generating a different kind of transition across the country. The current study in the scenario shows three distinct types of transitions. There is a clear pattern of change in the proportion of cultivators and agricultural labourers between 2001 and 2010. A large number of cultivators have shifted

to agricultural labour. Along with this, some people prefer to stay in the rural area but access jobs in the nearby city, villagers stay in rural setups but engage in non-farm activities, and marginal workers leave the farm activities along with their rural settlements (Bajar, 2017). Although the dimension of such transformation processes has gone through a socio-economic change, it is important to note that the connection between conflict during change and agrarian transition, basically the political mobilization of the agrarian class, started in India in the early twentieth century, and it continues to vary across regions (Ommen, 2012).

#### **4.8. Land Acquisitions and Politics: Old Arrangements, New Dominance**

In the context of the state of West Bengal, any conversion of the land usage category falls under the Land Reform Act of 1955. On the other hand, to acquire any land, there was the Land Acquisition Act of 1894, a colonial-era act that was mainly focused on acquiring land for public goods, often without explaining to the landowner and prior compensation. It is important to note that this Land Acquisition Act has been used to acquire several pieces of land so far by the government of India and all its state governments in various parts of the country. Acquiring land on the ground of ‘eminent domain’ (Gogoi, 2018) has been bereft of any rehabilitation and relocation clause, often leading to the displacement of people living in the particular land. Implementing such an authoritative act aimed to develop infrastructure for ‘public purposes’. Besides this, in the context of West Bengal, there is the Land Reform Act of 1955 and further amended Acts of 1981 and ’86, which focused on confiscating land above the limits of the ceiling and distributing it among the landless people (Guha 2023). In addition to this, the conversion of any farmland that is not in use for any non-farm activities can be converted through individual initiatives under the Land Reform Act 1955 only.

However, the Land Acquisition Act of 1894 is more important in the context of this thesis because of the implementation of the same colonial and even post-colonial period, as the Government has the authority to acquire farmland for ‘public purpose’. This Act has been replaced by the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 (LARR), where emphasis has been given to the social impact of land acquisition and adequate compensation for land losers. In the case of Amloki village in Purulia, the Left Front lead government had acquired the land

by implementing the 1894 Land Acquisition Act, as it was before the LARR replaced the former. While the objective of the colonial Land Acquisition Act 1894 was to prioritise only infrastructural development, the 2013 act was more mindful of the social impact of applying such an Act amongst the farmland owners. In the context of the study village, it is observed that the compensation for the land acquisition was given to the respective landowners. Though the adequacy is debatable, the social impact was certainly not gauged. The land is an essential asset for any rural family, and once it is acquired, even though compensated monetarily, it incurs huge losses. During the fieldwork, the survey participants mentioned that their lost land has been compensated poorly. They feel that the same piece of land is now priced quite high compared to the compensation given to them.

The relationship to the land determines the social status of the people, and India is no exception. Traditionally, the upper castes held most of the lands in rural India, which changed to some extent but not fully after the reform programme.

Nonetheless, the state played a crucial role in governing and distributing land ownership in contemporary times. As mentioned before, the country's government played a crucial role in distributing and governing land ownership in the post-independence period. It also turned lands into commodities that could be bought and sold for non-agricultural purposes (D'costa & Chakrabarty, 2017).

As the development agendas started growing, an important narrative from the state's side became stronger, proclaiming it for 'public purpose' or benefit. Yes, it is, of course, essential for a country to develop its energy sector by building dams which in a way should have helped the irrigation as well or set up heavy industries for the growth of manufacturing units and create employment outside the agricultural sector but the question that has been raised regarding many such land acquisition programme for the sake of economic development is, 'at what cost'?

Resistance against such actions by the affected people cannot be discussed as it forms a new political economy of change in the power arrangements. As described so far, the primary focus of this chapter is on the state of West Bengal, which is situated in the eastern part of India and is essentially an agricultural state. In 2007 a violent resistance

against such land acquisition by the government became the key factor in ending a three-decade-long Communist Party-led rule in West Bengal. It needs to be mentioned in this context that the Communist Party (Communist Party of India Marxist, CPI(M)) led Government of West Bengal was the architect and one of the most celebrated state Govt. in the country who bagged the credit for implementing the land reforms successfully after ending the Congress rule.

The party leadership understood the weakening condition of the industrial sector and related joblessness across the state it wanted to bring an all-out change in its economic policy which was to date farmers and pro-land ownership of the disadvantaged group. As they invited and facilitated motor industry giant TATA to set up a car industry in a place named Singur by acquiring 997 acres of land from the farmers, the whole pro-industrial stand backfired. Dayabati Roy, in her ethnographic fieldwork, had shown that the farmers who once supported CPI(M) smelled the betrayal from their leaders and outrightly discarded the whole initiative.

The farmers were completely against such action taken by the state as they had invested in multi-cropping land for generations to make it fertile, along with other important investments such as shallow pumps for irrigation (Roy, 2014).

The opposition soon took a chance on such a disputable situation faced by the ruling party and secured support not only from the farmers who had lost their land for nominal compensation but also from the urban intelligentsia, which was an important base for the ruling elite of the CPI(M).

The purpose of citing this example is to show that before the start of a power struggle, as we normally argue in the political science discipline, the changing character of the arrangements of the people is very important to note. This chapter is primarily an empirical study of a change in a village's primary economic and social arrangements, which in applied electoral democracy reflects through a change in the government body or the local power structure. In this case, too, land played a crucial role. The upper caste Brahmins and Vaishyas have practically retained their economic dominance by using their land assets in all possible ways.

While in Puruliya, the dominant castes mainly utilized the lump-sum compensation received after the government acquired land and later used social capital to wield power in the Panchayat, in Bankura, they acquired mainly government jobs.

In both cases, the traditional caste-based and land ownership-based arrangements percolated to the accessibility of external investments either through getting jobs in the government sector or controlling the resources of the village for the newly emerging non-farm trading opportunities. This is most evident if we analyse the process of the implementation of the external investments in the villages and the consequences of the implementation of the central government development schemes such as MGNREGA and PMAY. The government schemes that are targeted to alleviate the precarious livelihood and living conditions of the people in the villages are the long-term plans set for achieving a sustainable outcome, which is one of the essential features of the Command Polity, as Rudolph has explained in their theoretical explanations. In such a scenario, though the state can function as a sovereign decision-making authority, the implementation of the schemes can only be possible through the local Panchayats and their elected members. In this situation, the Panchayat and the party that controls this start making the distribution of the benefits of the scheme as a content of patronage through which they start maintaining the clientele among their support base. The demand polity, therefore, gets manipulated by generating the local demand for the schematic benefits, availability or non-availability of the facilities, and often by controlling the resources coming through the command polity. Here, the local implementing authority functions as the chief agents of the sovereign people who could generate the local demands.

## Chapter: V

### Inequality and Politics

Prevailing inequalities in the state and the village society of West Bengal affect the village's economic and political processes (Davis, 1983; Biswas, 2016; Bakshi, 2008). Unequal arrangements that have benefitted or excluded people have often been impacted by the processes through which political representations and dependencies on local political bodies are taking place.

As has been observed in the previous chapters, the prevailing intergroup inequalities between different caste and occupational groups in the villages have historically functioned as the chief component of social stratification (Basu, 1991). Later, especially in the post-independence era, the prevailing inequalities contributed to unequal economic development in the villages.

#### **5.1. Role of Land**

Land has played an important element along with the caste to set up the 'arrangements of activities' (Oakeshott, 1962; Mouffe, 2005) that have created a situation of occupational dependency on the landowning groups of the village. It has been observed through the field survey that in both the villages, upper castes (not particularly Brahmins, though) own a large portion of the land that has always benefitted them even when the land-based farm activities are getting replaced by the non-farm production processes.

The bonding and collaborative relationship among the landowning upper caste groups are strong enough to utilise and transform land usage from farm to non-farm work. Such accessibility and capability of replacement have also aided them in sustaining their economic dominance over the landless and other caste groups who received the ceiling surplus land or the rights to cultivate the land under the programme. It is essential to note that the distribution of the ceiling surplus land had a positive impact on the alleviation of the precarious rural landless farm workers, but it is debatable how far such measures or policy choices have helped to bring down the economic disparity prevailing

in the state.

The geographically disparate and demographically diverse state of West Bengal has a drought-prone region, contrasting with heavy rainfed Gangetic basin areas, which receive a high level of rainfall during the monsoon and often get flooded.

Historically speaking, the agricultural yield has always been critical as it tends to the vagaries of monsoon or severity of the same (Gadgil, Kumar 2006; Mohanty, 2005; Lal et al., 1999). In addition, irrigation has been a major concern for small land-holding cultivators (Ramdas Kumar and Sing 2019, Shah, Singh, Mukherjee 2006). The first inquiry made through this chapter is the most celebrated land reform in the state, whether it was a success or should be understood critically as land-based inequality was not eradicated effectively.

Land being the primary indicator and unit of the rural economic condition, it can be observed that the class of landowners had not been withered away, nor did they yield benefits from their primary economic unit. There is no denying the fact that land reform, in comparison to other states of the country has been much more effective in West Bengal, though the abolition of the Zamindari Act, and Land Reform Act of 1954 and especially after the cumulative effort put by the coalition government led by Communist Party of India (Marxist). However, with the receding turnovers from agrarian activities, unrealistically small per-head land size and non-existence of a modernised agricultural production system, small landholders sold off their land or abandoned farming. On the other hand, the erstwhile large land-owning castes, even after their ceiling surplus land was confiscated (Bandopadhaya, 1981), still retained a sizable amount of farming plots, including land-based properties through extended families, which they later converted into or started utilizing for other economic activities. In the present study village, it is noted that a large number of Teli castes, the economically dominant landed caste in the village Haritaki, have done the same, while Amloki Mishras have been engaged in similar kinds of activities through other means<sup>16</sup>.

Therefore, the second objective of this chapter is to understand the processes of

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<sup>16</sup> Other means are various in nature. The Sahoos are business communities and had been engaged in different trade related activities like cold storages, large whole sale traders of food grains, rice mill owners and investors in the local business activities such as tourism

converting land into ‘other’ economic activities and how their economic dominance was retained even when agriculture or land-based dominance and class influence were supposed to be equalized through the government's emancipatory economic policies [CPI(M)].

The third objective of this chapter would be to problematize the connection between such retention of the ‘power elites’ in the rural agrarian eco-system and how the arrangement of the activities revolved around such ‘Dynamics of the Differences’<sup>17</sup>.

Therefore, the chapter would also attempt to underpin historically situated inequalities in the state getting accepted and the external investment in the forms of various welfare schemes (examples) making the normative inequalities embedded in the process of justification of distributive justice<sup>18</sup>.

## **5.2. Inequalities and the Land Reforms**

Land Reforms in West Bengal are one of the most celebrated and substantially evaluated policies taken as a pledge to be implemented if came into power during the political struggle of the Communist Party of India and later introduced once they assumed the helm of the affairs in 1977.

In the previous chapters, it has been explained the consequences of land reform in the state and the country (Chapter II) and especially the consequences of agrarian policies like the Green Revolution in general. We have seen the unequal and regional disparities in the case of implementation and accessing the fruits of the agrarian reforms but the much-discussed land reform policies in the state of West Bengal have been a subject of critical review.

Land Reform Act 1956 had two main premises to focus on, first, it was aimed at the distribution of the ceiling surplus land, allocation of homestead lands and most

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<sup>17</sup> See Narendar Pani ed. Dynamics of Difference - Inequality and Transformation in Rural India (2022)

<sup>18</sup> According to the Stanford Encyclopaedia, distributive Justice is strict and radical equality through the distribution of public goods.

importantly cultivation rights to the bargadars (sharecroppers) or the tenancy reform (Bakshi, 2008).

Operation Barga, as it is popularly known was the basic premise of the communist party movements where the right of cultivation was made contractually permanent and legal contract papers were conferred to the farmer. Now it is imperative here that the processes of distribution of land were not even and varied from region to region (ibid). The distribution of land, as Bakshi (2008) has described aptly in her studies in seven villages, did not observe an even level of spread. The uneven effect could be of multiple reasons which have not been further dealt with in her research but the fact that the villages in West Bengal have experienced a reversed trend where the small landholders bought lands and the erstwhile big landowners sold off their lands and moved out of the village settled in the city and engaged in city-based jobs. The argument regarding this trend could be two-fold: firstly, such a trend in rural West Bengal could have a positive impact in alleviating the condition of poverty along with providing greater dignity to the tribal and scheduled caste communities by distributing the ceiling surplus land on the other hand what Pranab Bardhan et.al argued that it could have created another form of inequality affecting the agrarian production adversely.

In the study of villages in Purulia and Bankura what has been understood from the quantitative and qualitative data (data on inequalities in land ownership has been shown in Chapter III of this thesis) is that the upper caste groups in Purulia and the dominant caste group in Bankura had retained their land-based economic superiority in the village. Along with retaining some of their vast uncultivable lands, they have also managed to secure city-based employment in the nearby town or the capital city of Kolkata. Purulia and Bankura are the districts which have regularly ranked lowest in the Human Development Index and have a lesser amount of cultivable land.

Also, from a historical point of view, both states have contributed to the earliest incidents of forced migration by the British colonisers (Mahato, 2020). later in the post-independence era, Poverty-stricken regions like these lacked resources such as networks or contacts to migrate to other states or cities, even in search of non-farm informal jobs. During the qualitative interview round, it was recorded that some of the former

agriculturalists had tried to work outside the village, but they refrained from migrating too far as their remittances were not enough to make their families sustainable back home. On the other hand, the former landowners have no doubt sold off some of their lands after the government confiscated the ceiling surplus land, but their social and economic resources built up through generations have helped them to shift from farm jobs to non-farm jobs successfully.

Land reform and inequalities in land holding persisted or subverted Harekrishna Konar's explanation:

The land reform process was primarily focused on fixing the upper ceiling of the operational land holding owned by each family. It can be noted that before land reform and during the process as well, the pattern of families was majorly joint. Therefore, the rule in the 1955 Land Reform Act was set so that the definition of a family was not defined on a priority basis. This adversely affected the fair land ceiling fixation process and delegitimised the 'per family' upper limit of land ownership.

One of the most senior and prominent CPI(M) leaders, Mr Harekrishna Konar, had expressed his concerns in his writings (collected Essays by Harekrishna Konar 2015, published by National Book Agency) that there are several follies in the land reform act which need to be revised to achieve the expected and aimed impact of the land reform. He did admit that because of certain legal discrepancies and gaps, the primary aim and the expected objectives have become critical to achieve. In addition to that, "In the rural areas of West Bengal, the condition of the small farmers is deteriorating fast, and there is a great amount of dissatisfaction growing amongst them..." Konar opined (ibid). However, the dissatisfaction and eventual political unrest caused by the unachievable objectives of land reform and acquisition of ceiling surplus land will be elaborated on later in this chapter. Before coming to that, Konar's critique of the policies taken and Shyamal Chakrabarty's apprehensions about the possible occupational transition with which this thesis mainly engages will have to be unfolded systematically.

Konar's observation and recommendations on the possible rectification of Land Reform policy:

Since independence as Konar points out the conditions of the farmers were distressful because of the agrarian policies that the congress-led government had taken. Particularly, as he clarifies in 1973's publication (from Konar's collected essays) the government had taken a regionally non-viable and unequal means of agrarian policy where the Green Revolution was aimed to benefit the big land-owning farmers of Punjab and the whole process was based depending on the high-cost irrigation facilities and modified seeds which were also expensive to afford. On the other hand, the inequality in the availability of land remained intact which provided large farmers with more yields.

In his cautionary explanation, he pointed out the objectives of the party [CPI(M)] and elaborated on the reason why the ceiling surplus land must be acquired by the government and should be distributed among the landless villagers primarily engaged in the agrarian works. The instances of disbanding the sharecroppers, putting them under perpetual financial bondage and often taking away their land in the name of repayment or mortgage were common and observed across India.

To improve such a situation, acquiring the ceiling surplus land and providing stability of rights to cultivate sharecroppers was the 'revolutionary decision' by the aspiring Communist Party of India (Marxist).

However, the Land Reform Act was taken in 1955 when across the nation, including the West Bengal Indian National Congress (INC), operating as the ruling party, was criticised for favouring the land-owning class, and the so-called land reform was not implemented as was promised. Since the formation of the united front with the faction of Congress called Bangla Congress and CPI(M), along with the coalition partners such as SUCI, Forward Block, etc., took it as their primary political agenda to implement the Land Reform with utmost priority.

In the election of 1969, with the leadership of Jyoti Basu for the first time, the INC-led government was dislodged from power. Before such politics, even the

Naxalite movement had already started following the most crucial event of mobilisation of the agrarian class called the *tebhaga* movement,<sup>19</sup> where the tenancy right, the share of the yielded crop, unlawful eviction of the sharecroppers by the landowners and oppression by the landlords (jotdars<sup>20</sup>) were addressed through violent revolutionary means<sup>21</sup>. As pledged in 1977 with the landslide victory of the Communist party-led Left Front, soon after the formation of the government in West Bengal, the government implemented the Land Reform, intending to reduce land inequality and provide tenancy rights to the sharecroppers.

Although it was a novel political and economic policy decision, does it reduce the disparities in land ownership? As the thesis tries to understand the 'political consequence of the inequalities in rural transformation' it becomes imperative to see the catalysts that led to firstly, the transformation in the 'rural' which had always taken agrarian for granted (Bhattacharyya, 2019), secondly the changing arrangements in the villages, in terms of social cleavages and also economic, in this context particularly occupational and thirdly the culmination of the political events surmounted during the three decades of a regime that came with the support base of sharecroppers and labourers. The thesis must admit the limitation in gathering vast data about the distributed lands and the present numbers of the tenants who got the cultivation rights. Therefore, it had to rely on some of the recent field-based research done by established political economists like Pranab Bardhan (2014), Abhirup Sarkar (2007), Dilip Mukherjee (2006, 2014, 2010) and Nripen Bandyopadhyaya(1975). In addition, it connects with the studied village (the qualitative and the quantitative data) where the aforesaid scholars' arguments are held.

Bardhan et al. (2014) gave an important account of the evolution of land reform in the

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<sup>19</sup> One of the most famous agrarian movements started in the undivided Bengal for the rightful demand of the equal and justiciable share of the net yield of the cultivated produces. *Tebhaga* means the teen bhag i.e. the crops will be shared into three portions of which the sharecropper must get one third of the net yield.

<sup>20</sup> Jotdar are the landowners, the nomenclature came from the era of British raj where the land was distributed and the ownership was legalised as the jot jami or the cultivable land to the owners who were called the jotdars.

<sup>21</sup> *Tebhaga* movements was primarily led through the violent revolutionary movements such as revolting against the large oppressive landowners and their British Patronage

state of West Bengal from 1967 to 2004. It is a robust village study that covers almost 89 villages across the state. Whether the land reform reduced the inequalities in land ownership and achieved the expected outcome has been answered critically. As it correctly mentioned, land has still been functioning as the central indicator for determining the asset in the rural areas of LDC countries such as India. Distribution of it may not always fetch the result of the eradication of landlessness or land inequalities. For instance, large landowners had split their households to become the beneficiaries of the land distribution programme. They sold off their land to their family members to show lower land holding size. The small landowners, in particular, had divided up their land to become beneficiaries as well.

On the other hand, tenancy reform could have had an indirect impact on the rate of the return which could be declining because of the leasing and tend to sell much of their cultivable land. This phenomenon has also been captured in Aparajita Bakshi's (2008) study of seven villages across seven villages spread across six districts, where she has pointed out that, unlike the North Indian states like Punjab, large landowners have sold their cultivable land.

In addition to these points, various other demographic transitions have been made that could be affecting the objectives of the reform. Some of those impacts are the falling mortality rate and increased household size. Elsewhere in this thesis, it has been argued that in the villages of West Bengal, there is a sharp decrease in the per-head land size, which has decreased the per-household agrarian return.

Previously this chapter has tried to raise the point of enquiry about how many households have benefitted and what the actual amount of land that was distributed is. This study, done by Bardhan et al., shows that around 20% of rural households received benefits covering around 11% of the land. This is not an evaluative explanation but certainly shows the limitations of the actual number of beneficiaries and the amount of land distributed. The model they produced from their analysis shows that the net effect of the land distribution programme could be different from the tenancy reform.

Two major points of criticality that they raised were that the distribution of land could

not always mean an increase in productivity as poor-quality land was often given to the landless labourers; on the other hand, the large landowners have usually subdivided their land in a way where they could be able to queue up as beneficiaries of the land distribution programme. Moreover, Bardhan and Mukherjee (2011) have found no significant rise in the wage rate of farm labourers during the tenancy reform processes. Another prominent economist, Kaushik Basu (2007), has also pointed out that the tenancy reform had to co-exist with the quality of soil and the market viability in the case of West Bengal. Especially in this thesis, villages have experienced this sort of anomaly that has made the impact of land reform ineffective and sustained the land inequalities in the village. Purulia and Bankura are both dry regions and get relatively less yearly rainfall. Also, it is an alluvial extension of the Chotanagpur Plateau that has made most of the land mass single cropping pattern of farmland.

The small amount of land that the SC communities got and the upper caste land owners who had to give away or sell some of their lands are uncultivable. The actual condition inside the village vis-à-vis the land ownership pattern, farming condition and occupational transformation has been pointed out in Chapter III of this thesis; however, the later part of this chapter would problematise how such arrangements were positioned as a result of the land reform, starting from the genesis of the Left Front government rule in 1977 to its departure from the ruling position in 2011. Land reform and its cumulative impact are among the main reasons for the process through which the present activities of arrangements have come into prominence.

One of the finest accounts of land reform and its impact is given by the Rural Development Institute (RDI) in their report: Land Reform Law and Implementation in West Bengal (Hanstad & Brown, 2001). This report has concluded with numerous potential problems, amongst which joint titling is an important aspect where the bargadar status should have been given jointly in the name of the husband and wife. During the current thesis-related fieldwork, it has been observed that many households have lost the papers about their baradari status once the male household member has passed away. The distributed land has also been restricted to be sold, which limits the use-value of the land as an asset. This also means that this policy did not keep the inevitability of the change in the rural economic sphere where the non-viability of

agriculture would turn into reality mainly under the pretext of growing urbanisation.

As Keneth Bo Nielson argued in the book *Land Dispossession and Everyday Politics in Rural Eastern India* (2016), with rapid urbanisation, land has again taken centre stage of the development discourse and, more importantly, for the nation's political class. But before getting into the transformative arrangements of land and rural political and economic processes around it, the historical background of 'land justice', as this thesis would like to term it, needs to be concluded with some of the earliest discussions.

Nripen Bandyopadhyay (1981), right after the land reform took place in the state, pointed out the economic objectives, productive efficiency and distributive justice. Defining land as a major source of wealth is highly dependent on the usage of labour, which this thesis would argue is intertwined with the inequalities in occupational arrangements. Such unequal arrangements are further connected with sociocultural cleavages such as caste and gender. In addition, the whole discourse on land possession is subjected to the colonial judio-social discourse on the law regarding private property. The alien ruler's conception and imposition of the law regarding private property was also a vehicle of the hegemonistic and biased present in legal provisions on land ownership. Nripen Bandyopadhyay's (1981) explanation of distributive justice is further related to allocating the resources in a just and ethically equal way. Nevertheless, before coming to that point, it is essential to note the efficacies on which the personal possession of land or 'private property' makes an individual entrepreneur through utilising the land.

Such utilisation is deeply related to the arrangements of the supply of labour, market and growing need for raw materials and food to create a viable environment where land utilisation could be remunerative. The history of the land-based economy in colonies like India experienced draconian permanent settlement acts where revenue was collected through the inhuman method of force (Bandyopadhyay, 1981; Bose, 1993) and unequal arrangements of the actual land ownership. The three classifications of the relation with land, as Bandyopadhyay argued, the Landowner, the sharecropper and the state were the major actors where the state functioned as the arbitrator for maintaining the steady and fair business terms between the two former actors.

Such arrangements are often fraught with the danger of giving birth to a precarious condition when the relationship between the landlord and the sharecroppers/tenants is biased towards state patronage. A simple economic arrangement deeply connects with its social and cultural precursor. Caste is the primary component in creating the social hierarchies in a village. Few families often control most of the resources, such as land and water, in a village, and the mass of the villagers pay allegiance to those top cliques (Bandhyopadhyay & Eschen, 1991).

This patron-client relationship is connected and operates under the state's patronage. The top families in the village can defend their rights and sustain themselves in a powerful position. Poverty and intra-village inequalities lead to the desperate need for favour from those families, which percolates to every aspect of everyday life in rural socio-economic arrangements (ibid). While the objective of the land reform was aimed at the eradication of the middlemen and bringing the actual cultivators into direct relationship with the state (Bandhyopadhyay, 1981 & 1995), it had underestimated the dominance of the existing unequal preconditions of socio-economic arrangements that are operating in the villages. Therefore, the implementation of the land reform and the expected outcome are often distorted by the unlawful means taken by the landowning class through their legal and political power, as sighted in the previous discussions referred from Bardhan's study.

### **5.3. Retention of economic dominance**

Purulia and Bankura, two districts' villages, were studied in this thesis where, according to the agricultural census data, both observed a rise in the number of small land holdings (2-3 and 3-4 hectares.), marginal land holdings (in case of Purulia) (below 0.5-1.0 hectares.) and semi-medium (4-10 hectares.) land holdings between the years 2000 to 2011. Such transformation can also be seen in the case of the pattern of land use, where the amount of the fallow land, i.e., the land that could be used for cultivation but has not been in use for years, has increased over time. During the fieldwork, this land was noted as the *dangajomi* in the local parlance. It can be noted that between 2001 and 2011, the land size below 0.5 hectares increased from 1358 hectares to 1550 hectares. in the Raghunathpur II block, where the study village is located.

This also proves the field testimonials and data gathered during the fieldwork, where the respondents spoke about their reasons for abandoning the small plots, which can only be used as 'kitchen gardens' but are not viable for regular crop cultivation. Similar trends can be observed in the case of semi-medium and medium-sized cultivable land that has turned into fallow land. However, such medium-sized fallow lands are mostly owned by the dominant families in the village, who are now using these fallow lands for 'other' non-farm purposes. The chapter will discuss that shortly after illustrating similar trends in the Bankura district.

From the Agricultural Census between 2001 and 2011, it is derivable that between 2001 and 2011, the net amount of the sown land has increased. There is also an increase in the total marginal sown land. There was rise in the small and semi-medium landholding increased as the large landholders either sold out their land or the small landholders got ceiling surplus lands from their erstwhile landownership, which got broken down into small plots and distributed.

Thus, from both districts, it is visible that there is an increase in marginal land holding (which is also the pattern of all-India agricultural land ownership). However, as the previous studies argued and Harekrishna Konar pointed out the illegal means of retaining the ceiling surplus land was done through breaking up the joint families and studies by the Rural Development Institute (2001) show that a large number of families could not sell out the ceiling surplus land that they received from the government, being small plots and often uncultivable, they abandoned cultivation. They became marginal agricultural labourers under semi-medium land owners.

In addition, four distinct phenomena were visible in the studied villages. Firstly, a large number of informal labourers worked as non-farm workers in the village and often migrated to other agrarian villages located in Bardhaman or Dinajpur as agricultural labourers or to other states in search of non-farm informal jobs. Secondly, all these labourers have too small plots of cultivation, which will not allow them to earn a living. Thirdly, a few powerful families, usually from the same caste background, hold the cultivable and uncultivable land separately. However, their family bonding is quite

close, and they usually collaborate in setting up non-farm business ventures. Fourthly, this condition has also made them quite influential in politics, such as in the Panchayat, and in the economic sphere, such as accessing the supervising jobs of MGNREGA or allocations of Houses under the housing allocation schemes implemented by state and central government. In both the blocks in Purulia and Bankura, the cropping pattern is sometimes irregular because of the irregularities in the irrigation facilities. There are dominant families such as Sahoos and Mishras in Purulia and Bankura, respectively, who claim the position of medium-sized landownership.

In the village of Purulia, I had the opportunity to interview the patriarch of the Mishra family. He delved into the agrarian history of the region, quite similar to that of Nirmal Kumar Mahato's (2010, 2020) description that the agrarian labourers were hired from the scheduled tribes and the scheduled caste backgrounds who had slowly started abstaining from engaging in the job as through land reform they got their plots of land started cultivating by themselves.

In addition to that, the large land ownership had also broken down as a result of the land reform and those families only survived who could have afforded labourers outside of the villages.

In this narration, farming knowledge was one of the most important factors. As had also interviewed the present generation male household members of the Mishra families, they mentioned the limitations of the knowledge of farming. They also mentioned the risk involved in the farm works and in the investments where if somebody is not acquainted with the traditional knowledge of agriculture, it is difficult to maintain the farm work as the primary source of income. However, the transformation of the land into other uses became prominent in the later period, which could be possible through joint ownership of the business and social cohesion amongst the caste groups. The intervention of the public distribution and control of this sphere's social and economic elites is a notable feature.

#### **5.4. House for the poor schemes and the development of the brick kilns**

Housing for the rural poor, or the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojna, was launched on the 25th of June 2015 with a target of providing two crore houses for the rural poor; this

also covers the poor slum dwellers and informal housing-based population in the urban areas.

However, the implementation in rural Bengal has a multi-varied impact. On the one hand, it no doubt brought a huge number of rural poor under the scheme of allotting all-weather houses or pakka houses to the villagers, but the allotment processes have observed patterns of competitive patronage.

Besides the arrangements around the allotments of the houses, the supply of raw materials such as cement, sand and bricks became an essential source of business venture for the aspiring dominant families in the village. As explained so far, the diversification of the occupation became a social reality in the hitherto existing agrarian village. Many of the dominant families, which earlier owned the major portion of the lands in the village, came up to set up brick kilns in the growing fallow lands. Such fallow lands are seldom cultivated and are left without cultivation for years. Setting up brick kilns with temporary or make-shift structures does not require converting the land into a plot for industrial production.

During the fieldwork, many such kilns were noted, built with bricks and mud. These kilns make the main furnace and produce bricks on a mass scale. The housing scheme is a fairly large project implemented in villages across the nation. In the block, there are several villages where the bricks could be supplied.

The arrangement of the political position, business, and supply chain is such that the dominant families have substantial influences on the Panchayat and the processes of the allotment of the houses, and they could only decide which families would get the houses first. While controlling such processes, they have family members or acquaintances who have set up the local brick kilns, which supply the required bricks to the sanctioned houses under construction.

In addition, kilns are an important source of non-farm rural jobs. Because of the comparatively low risk of migrating far from the villages and in the absence of rural agricultural jobs, the former agricultural labourers are now working in these kilns, and

they are often coordinated and employed by the extended family members of the dominant families of the village. Apart from this, the rice mills and subsidiary jobs relating to agriculture are mostly owned by the same powerful families in the village, and they often use vast areas of land for stockpiling crops and earning rent out of that.

### **5.5. Control of the government's public distribution system and employment guarantee schemes**

During the primary data collection and while living in the village, one notable observation could be made on how the same economically dominant group has extended influence in every other sphere of the village's economic and social life. Also, even if the Panchayat Pradhan's position is reserved for the women and the scheduled caste groups, the actual control is retained by the upper/dominant caste in the village.

Like in the village in Bankura, it was the Sahoos who could be omnipotent in almost all spheres of the socioeconomic and political lives of the village. The village in Purulia, the Mishras, has actual control over the Panchayat.

On my very first day, I had an experience in the Panchayat office when I was interrogated not by any of the village's Panchayat members but by the family members of the Mishras. They questioned my reason for coming, how long I wished to stay, and where my living could be arranged. Later, they arranged everything.

A similar situation was experienced in Bankura, where the Sahoos are involved in most of the village's functions. The annual sports event that I coincidentally attended was organised and participated in mainly by the family members of Sahoo castes. Also, in both villages, these dominant families control all the employment guarantee schemes related to job allotments.

During an interview, I noted the process through which the terms are set to get the jobs under the scheme. The worker would have to give a percentage of the remuneration to the contractor or the supervisor to get the job in advance, and the supervisor would also control the master roll in which the enrolment would be made.

Therefore, the supervisor plays an important key role in getting the job and ensuring their payment of a minimum of 100 days of work. If the conditions are set, there will be an assurance of getting the job and being remunerated properly.

These family members supervise and control the ration shops, which enjoy selecting the ration card allotment process and could influence enrolling or cancelling out anyone in the village. Such practices inside the village are deeply rooted in unequal economic and social arrangements, where the understanding of the inequalities is spread across the groups vertically and horizontally. This has not only allowed certain groups to retain the dominant position but also shaped a group's identity.

Following Kwame Anthony Appiah's (2010) definition of the group that brings such a multifaceted idea of identity into focus, it could be said that the individual must believe that she is part of a particular identity; others should believe that she is part of the identity. There should be a discourse around that identity group. The dominant families who formerly held the landowner's position in the village have formed such groups, which are historically dominant in the village.

The reason for the extensive explanation of the processes and impact of the land reform in this chapter is that, since land being held as one of the most important components that created the economic binaries of the rich and poor in the countryside was justifiably taken into consideration by the CPI(M) led Left Front government as a measure for providing the tenancy rights and distribution of the ceiling surplus land as being important steps towards eradicating such inequalities. However, these policies did overlook the group cohesion of the economic and social elites of the village.

From the field experience against the backdrop of the Singur and Nandigram movements<sup>22</sup> Marc Hatzfeld (2019) has noted that sharecroppers did not make the legal enrolments and required judio-legal arrangements for securing the rights of cropping.

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<sup>22</sup> Singur and Nandigram movements are two major events during the political transformation in West Bengal based on the unlawful land acquisition of lands by the government against which the opposition party along with various independent land rights based platforms started protesting leading to an eventual defeat of the CPI(M) led government that ruled West Bengal for 34 years since 1977.

This was due to their social arrangements with the landowners. Marc explained in his ethnographic work that people always had different relationships with the land and methods of using the land for their economic purposes.

Like in the Singur areas which come under the highly fertile lands regions of the state the sharecroppers had a century-long relationship with the small and medium-sized landowners and they never felt the desire to sign any legal papers of a contract to establish their rights to cultivate the field thinking that this would strain their trusted relationship with the landowner who practically 'looked after' them as their family members and cared for them during the crisis.

Therefore, turning it into a contractual legal relationship could strain such informally arranged personal relationship that the landowner sharecropper and the land had in an agrarian set-up. This is not only special for West Bengal but could be seen across the country therefore when the power was equally distributed among all social groups and sometimes special positions were even reserved for the backward castes and classes what sometimes remains unaddressed is the inequality that often accepted and normalised by a set of people as an inevitable 'habitus'.

## **5.6. Normative and descriptive inequalities and processes of replacing arrangements**

The analysis presented above could be further divided conceptually into normative and descriptive inequality (Pani, 2017), derived from normative and descriptive morality. In West Bengal, inequalities have been understood and studied from different socioeconomic perspectives.

One set of analyses has been based on the caste and class inequalities that are historically ingrained in the village society of West Bengal, where occupation and unequal remunerations dovetailed with the discriminatory attitudes of the socially stratified rural communities that have been accepted for ages., it is conspicuous that at the state level politics certain differences such as land owners and the land less were not accepted. Reform was implemented as the most rational choice for improving the

situation, but at the local village level, these differences mattered when the government intervened in the matter to acquire land and reform the existing relationship.

There is no denying that the reform implemented at the state level was with the utmost good intention, but the village arrangements differed in the public distribution of the resources and land. An impact of this, rather than land-based self-sufficiency, was the ethically unaccepted differences: the inability to access some of the government-funded resources and control, which created the new arrangements of allegiance. In fact, the erstwhile left-front-led government had this interesting dichotomy in the last few years of rule.

While their position got lost in the process of acquiring the land for setting up the industries, the challenges with the land distribution and reforming the tenancy system were soon forgotten the moment the distribution of the benefits was to be directed not towards the village-based rural population but skilled urban industrial folks.

Such a shift in the arrangement became a key factor in gaining support to sustain at the helm, whereas over the decades, not land but public goods had turned out to be the focus of the benefits aspired to be controlled by a new group with new arrangements.

## Chapter: VI

### **Resilient Arrangements and Transforming Political Dominance**

Inequalities in the Rural transformation of West Bengal have so far been explained through the arrangements of the activities in the village that have often given rise to groups of dominant caste groups turning into a class and controller of resources. But the replacement of the caste-economy-class-based arrangements into ‘party society’ (Bhattacharyya, 2016) gave rise to a new form of patrol-clientele-based rural arrangement which in the juncture of dissolution of ideology-based party organization, reverted to the group and individualistic dominant actor-oriented settings.

It has highlighted that the economic relationship between different caste groups transformed into a hierarchically structured relationship called a transactional relationship (turning into patron-client). The interlinkages between each group and their actions bring out such a structural arrangement, which serves as a resilient arrangement maintained through political dominance. In the case of West Bengal’s politics, it has been observed that such dominant political arrangements often change the shape, components and actors residing in the system while the activities and the arrangements remain the same.

In the present scenario, the absence of a party system gave rise to ‘autonomous’ groups under individual elites, and violence became the means of maintaining the hierarchy. The fear of violence works as the insurance for keeping transactional politics secured, a vehicle for mobilization and eventually translating into politics.

#### **6.1. A new set of “arrangements”**

The socio-political arrangements that have grown in the villages in West Bengal have their roots in the economic system primarily based on agriculture (Gajdar & Sengupta, 1997; Thapa, 2015).

The popular claim of caste absolving into class identities has been eventually

discarded by some fresh arguments (Mondal, 2021; Bandyopadhyay, 2012; Sinha Roy, 2014 Nath, 2023), which can be further embedded in the process of group formation through the ownership of land (Mukherjee, 1986).

Three major caste groups, the Mishras, the Sahoos, and the Mahatos, emerged as the most dominant land-owning class in the Study Villages in West Bengal. Gajdar and Sengupta (1997) observed that in the absence of industrial development and commercial agriculture, the state remained overwhelmingly rural and dependent on subsistence farming.

Landlessness and fragmentation of land have further made agriculture non-viable and there is a concerning economic stagnation in which radical political changes have taken place. The communist movement that swept the entire state in the late '70s emphatically created a class-based political ideology but the eventual growth of 'party society' has led the arrangements towards a patronage-based political process.

After the fall of ideology-based party dominance or rather the detachment of a resilient 'party society' from its ideological obligations, the dominant class was only left to be turned into dominant groups that became autonomous in owning, hoarding, and distributing the resources. This has been particularly done through the establishment of inter-linkages between the dominant and the dependent groups.

In the next section, this argument will be unpacked by explaining the processes of creating the groups, their estrangements from the ideological political organ, and a resilient 'party society' (Bhattacharyya, 2016) that eventually survives on these hierarchically structured autonomous groups.

## **6.2. Inter-Linkages of Actions Between Each Group**

In the study village Purulia, a rural state in West Bengal, the economically dominant and upper-caste Mishra families have established a web of connections and contacts due to their socio-cultural position in the village. The Mishra family encompasses multiple actors engaged in various activities within the village. Particularly, major business initiatives that have flourished since the post-land reform era are primarily coordinated and led by family agents or close allies of the Mishra family. In the

previous chapters, their positional supremacy and the process of maintaining dominance have been discussed. In this conclusive chapter, the focus will be mainly on the individuals, creating the web of such arrangements and following the same. What is most important in this chapter segment is the creation and circulation of the power elites in the village and violence as a response to the establishment of the hegemony of such arrangements.

### **6.3. *Mishras* and Development of an Arrangement**

Before the land reform era, strong joint families of the Mishra community monopolised occupational opportunities as landlords, further reinforcing their socio-economic position. However, post-land reform, there was a significant shift from agriculture-based jobs to non-farm jobs, leading to a rise in landless agricultural labourers. Interestingly, the same Mishra families coordinated informal non-farm jobs in the village, such as brick kilns, fly ash collections from power plant project reservoirs, and local building construction works for the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) houses.

In Purulia, although the Mahatos are the large land-owning farming caste group forming a sizable number of elite but not from the Brahmin caste, the more we go towards the western part of the district Brahmins become dominant like Mishras who are originally from the Jharkhand and Bihar. They are priests in the village but own land. Also, the Bengali Upper caste groups, the Banerjees and the Mukherjee, own land, which mostly they converted into brick kilns and rice mills. The Mishras, as explained earlier, had never been the zamindars of the village but functioned as the dominant group of middlemen between the tribal and the lower caste agricultural workers and the Zamindar being the upper caste priests. Over the years it gave them a natural right to dominate the village socially and later economically. Such a position also helped them to yield the politically powerful position where they became the chief deciding agents. In the case of the cultural arena by the virtue of being priests they are the main coordinators of the local religious festivals including the investors in the socio-cultural functions while on the other hand, they take up the lead position about who would contest in the election and later how would the welfare scheme and other policies would be coordinated amongst the villagers.

#### **6.4. Identifying the individuals (Mishra and Banerjees) who create the change**

Individual case studies of influential family heads or members reveal that socio-economically dominant Mishra family members hold prominent positions in every significant contact point in the city.

As the economy transitioned to non-farm work opportunities post-land reform, these formal feudal gentry assumed the role of new employers. Consequently, the gentrification of work opportunities perpetuated a continuous cycle of inequality.

Prakash Mishra, the person who functioned as the key guide for the field work hails from the *Mishra* clan but does not belong to the wealthy section of the economically dominant group. When he was interviewed about this, he elaborated on how individuals grew to predominance in the village. These individuals are not connected from the beginning of their development to economic prominence also, neither did their economic prominence fetch political dominance. However, with the establishment of the power plant and as a consequence, land acquisition became one of the key elements stoking up the resistance against unscrupulous methods of compensation.

Two relatives of the Jiban Mishras family, including Prakash, started mobilizing the agitating families who claimed that their compensations were grossly underpaid and an intentional process of ‘duping’ helpless villagers. While the then opposition party started such agitation movements, BJP quickly took these mobilizers under their fold to politically manoeuvre the situation to gain popularity amongst the villagers who gave away their land to establish the power plant.

This, on the one hand, brought the Mishra families into prominence in the village community; on the other hand, the power plant authorities came to a term of negotiation with the prominent leaders hailing from the Mishras. Amidst such a situation, the power plant also started functioning and producing large amounts of fly ash surrounding an entire business (discussed extensively in the previous chapters).

This business was mainly headed by this family, along with a few more associates. As it is quite a value-yielding business, the associates also have the greatest opportunities to make profits and become economically influential individuals. Along with the Mishras, Radhanath Mukherjee, whose family was also a traditional landowner got a government job and used the single crop cultivable land into brick kilns or sold it. While he invested a major part in the transport business, his involvement in the daily Panchayat work was conspicuous.

After a long interview, Radhanath Banerjee revealed the fact that he and his family had been involved in politics before but never in the manner in which he at present functions. During the Panchayat election of 2018, he was such a key figure in the electoral mobilization that he was threatened by the Trinamool Congress party members and was moved to the neighbouring Jharkhand district, only to return 3 months after the end of the election.

The spheres of violence will be discussed in the next part of this chapter but here it is more important to note that all the upper castes in the village were not politically dominant even when they were economically solvent while their social dominance is quite prominent.

On the other hand, some of these upper-caste families grew to political prominence who were not economically dominant. Like the families of Jiban Mishra, they were moderately economically solvent, but it was only after the political involvement of the present generation brought them to an overwhelmingly dominant group in the village.

### **6.5. High Dependence on the Patronage**

#### Arrangements between the Mishras, Bauris, Santhals and other lower Castes:

While the Mishras are particularly the main actors in the farm and the non-farm workers in the village, they are also the controllers of the same. These arrangements are more transactional leading to dependency and dominance.

Mishras and the Banerjees are the chief land-owning groups in the village who, in

the absence of the farm work have invested heavily in the brick kiln factories. On the other hand, the possible non-farm opportunities are majorly tapped by them as well. As a result, the other castes, mostly the Scheduled castes and the tribes have resorted to seeking non-farm jobs and share-cropping opportunities from them. Such a situation has helped the upper castes emerge as the main employers as contractors and contacts for accessing the available National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme job owners. It is possible to derive from the fieldwork that the Santhals, often self-sufficient in their own liquor business and farm works seek the non-farm jobs as well and receive such opportunities from the Mishras.

In return, the upper castes often take the benefits of consuming liquors in credits. These activities happen at a very informal level where dependency and the former groups' political advantage for being close to the Panchayat officials work as leverage. On the other hand, Bauris and Sardar castes in the village are primarily engaged in non-farm jobs which are controlled by the Mishras.

As the Panchayat seat is reserved for the Scheduled Caste women candidates these upper castes support the individual candidate externally, but such support becomes preeminent for capturing the position at Panchayat level.

#### **6.6. Comparison between the Sahoos and Mahatos**

In Bankura, a similar process took place with the help of the Sahoo, a business community originally. The dispersed existence of the elites can be observed here as well, like, Sahoos had never been the zamindars of the village, it was the Dewans who came from Rajasthan and set their position by having local contracts with other Zamindars. This village, on the bank of Kansabati, was not inhabited then and was turned into cultivable land by these new landowners. The Sahoos came along with the new landlords whose business ventures started functioning as partners and major trading communities in the village. They also gave large amounts of land for cultivation or to supervise the same. The Sahoos and the local landlords also brought Nabiks, Napits, and Kaibartyas, the sea men, barbers, and fishermen castes, to satisfy the daily needs of the village. After the abolition of the Zamindari, the local landlords lost their economic position and moved to the city or were reduced to a single-earning head family residing in the village.

During the fieldwork, their palace was visited, and it was in a completely dilapidated condition. Nevertheless, their present generation has no economic, political, or social dominance or even significance in the village. The Sahoos rose to prominence during the post-Zamindari era when the river Kansabati came under the large dam development project named Damodar Valley Corporations. The Sahoos, by being the dominant in the area, secured the jobs at the DVC project.

These jobs created a completely new section of people in the village. A completely agriculturally immersed village had observed a newly emerging group of people who are mainly into formal government jobs. Such diversification of agricultural work to non-agrarian fields was a paradigmatic shift. The entire caste group took the position of the government job holding, fixed salaried and regular savings-based section who started to educate their children in formal educational institutions creating a *rurban* middle-class section in a vastly low-income and less educated section of rural mass.

During the fieldwork period, it was noticed that most of the Sahoo families are well-settled means, having a *pakka* house and personal two-wheelers (or in some cases four wheelers) has made it a quite different class or group in the primordial arrangements of that area. In the later part of the development phase, it was the main middle class of the village that secured more government jobs or regular non-farm-based livelihood opportunities thus growing up as the economically most dominant group of people. Thus, the elite section of both villages is diversified.

On the other hand, among these Mishras and the Sahoo groups, it is often seen that not all the members belonging to these communities are wealthy or economically dominant. Following Dube's (1968, pp. 58-81) argument, it can be said that few families of these caste groups have emerged as economically and politically dominant while accumulating wealth and connections over the years.

### **6.7. Arrangements of the Sahoos and other Lower Castes**

Similar kinds of trends can be observed in the case of the village situated in Bankura.

As explained earlier in this chapter the Sahoos are one of the most influential and dominant. It would be insufficient to bundle up the entire caste group under one single homogeneous socio-economic category. Rather, some specific individuals rose to prominence through the diversification of their occupations and had invested their generationally saved capital (which mostly was earned by their previous generation through government jobs given in the (Kangsabati River Dam Project).

The non-farm ventures are majorly centred around the agribusiness and diverse land uses. The Sahoos are the 'Teli' caste, traditionally involved in the edible mustard oil business. Some of the households are still engaged and have old networks of trading activities that are still intact and in the process of growth.

Mohit Sahoo, during the long interview, explained the current situation and the methods that are still in use for running a smooth business of mustard oil. He has about 10 acres of land, which is owned jointly by him and his brother and they cultivate mustard through using the agricultural labourers who belong mainly to the Sardar castes. Another prominent Sahoo family head of the household volunteered to be the respondent in the interview. He was specifically chosen because of his political influence on the local community and his presence in most of the village-level meetings regarding the grievances put forth by the Panchayat members or people who are associated with the Panchayat works. His house is distinguishably different from most of the other villagers, and so is the structure of the Mohits. a two stories mansion spread over 4 Kattha(i.e. 1.65 Decimal) area, the adjacent large complex contains a kitchen garden and a garage, the latter is quite unusual compared to the other households with better economic. Mohit's father and uncle both got the job in the DVC while the river dam was under construction.

Apart from that they had a business since their great grandfather came and settled in this village. The house in which we were having the discussion was built partly by his grandfather and then expanded by his father and uncle. However, the same economic solvency did not remain after the DVC project.

There were no other opportunities that could keep a steady earning as it were during

the era of government jobs. Mohit could not acquire the required qualifications for continuing the stable income and resorted to a basic vocational teacher's training which fetched him a nominal paying teaching job at the government-sponsored school in the village. But the business kept a regular earning. As a result of this he and his extended family still possess a respectable position in the village in terms of the decision-making platforms.

Sukanto Sahoo another clan member of the Sahoos, made a big gain during the shift of the occupation. He has successfully transformed his oil business into brick kilns. He has the largest house in the village with high walls and air condition machines installed in the house which is unusual amidst the overall condition of the village. He did not reveal his actual business activities, but it was understood that he has three main areas of business interests. Transportation, go downs and brick kilns.

He is also one of the largest recruiters of the Sardar communities who are historically backward and comprise the daily wage-earning labourer communities. Apart from these three families, two Mahato families also have big grocery stores and some cultivable lands and a couple of upper-caste families such as Dasgupta and Sengupta, who belong to the Bengali Baidya communities and practice medicine as their caste-based occupation.

They are also investors in the local religious and cultural programmes, yet they refrained from getting involved in any political activities. The government intervened in setting up the stalls near the Kangsabati River Dam, which has grown into a major tourist spot over the years. The Sahoos managed to reap most of the benefits of the new business ventures.

Though the stalls had been on sale and under an equal distribution scheme by the state government, the Sahoos took over most of the stalls through their influential contacts in the Panchayat. In the interview, it was also revealed that as they belong to the business community, their proactive and present approach to setting up businesses has also helped them secure the facilities.

As mentioned earlier, the village is also situated in a prominent tourist spot, and the land prices in the nearby areas have also increased. Some of the owners thus transformed those lands into hotels and restaurants, which has, in turn, made them a new rich class in the village.

Therefore, the most observable situation is that the transforming village is also experiencing unequal changes to different communities, and the emergence of the village elite class is more diverse and individualistic, though it has often exploited the traditional economic position facilities and political advantages.

### **6.8. Rise of the Rural Elites as Resilient Force**

Elite power arrangements in the village are one of the major understandings required to analyse the individuals who are functioning in specific capacities. To have a background of the same the genesis of the elite in West Bengal villages need to be discussed. Also, whether they could be called elite or not is important to unfold. By taking reference from the traditional viewpoints of the elite theory, it has always been observed that rural wealth and power have always been concentrated in the hands of the few influential sections of the population in the villages but what is necessary for this chapter is to elaborate the reason and the processes that are responsible for such concentration.

Srinivas's (1959) arguments on the dominant caste have a two-pronged conceptualization of such concentration of power and wealth. A small number of upper castes, mostly the Brahmins, with a large number of land holdings also wielded social and political power and assumed the decision-making position.

However, the argument has been justifiably countered by the dispersed processes of the emergence of elites who are rather fragmented. The first counterargument could be referred to as caste groups, which may not be solely responsible for the development of the dominant lobby; it is the individual family that grows strong with economic and later political prowess in a village community (Dube, 1968). The village situated in Purulia is a suitable situation to satisfy this argument.

But before delving further and elaborating on the process, the other point of view needs to be incorporated too. Kothari (1970) came up with the most heterogenetic concept of the dominant elite classes of rural India. With that the idea of an entrenched caste group where he reinterprets Srinivas's (1959) idea of a dominant caste who may not be prominent or numerically superior to the other groups but an ascent caste who are not interested in remaining in the traditional occupations like farming in this thesis.

This reference is complimentary here as the emerging political-economic group in this village is abandoning the traditional occupation that is farming and getting more involved in non-farm activities. In the village situated in Purulia, it has to be noted that the existing dominant group belonging to a single caste group is Mishra, who also belongs to the economically wealthy section of the population. However, it is essential to mention that they are not the local zamindars of the village. In this respect, it is necessary to visit back the origin of the zamindars in Bengal.

In the previous chapters, the background and development of the zamindars have been explained in detail (referring to Chapter II of this thesis), but what is dealt with here with specificities is the everyday relationship of the zamindars in the agrarian village.

## **6.9. Rural Elites Creating Resilient Arrangements**

This is the relationship of the zamindars with the local farming communities, who could be the agrarian labourers and daily farm labourers (who are not directly involved in the agricultural work but are more involved in the tertiary works relating to the farm's yields).

In the works of Binoy Bhushan Chowdhury (1970), there is reference to the relationship between the Zamindars, the middlemen of the agrarian rural Bengal, and the Jotdars (Beteille 1970, has described any large land owner as the *jotdar*, where the jot means the large cultivable land). In his historical overview of the work, he described that the interests and the relation of the Zamindars and the farmers were not so close. Zamindars had a mere idea about the condition of the farmland

and the farming processes, rather after the Permanent Settlement Act in Bengal, Zamindars became more pressurized to deposit the tax (*khajna*) to the British Government for which the chief responsibility was given to the middlemen who emerged as the real power holders of the village. In many cases when the landowners ceased to exist these middlemen used to buy out their land and become large landowners.

Before the permanent settlement the British East Indian Company used to own the land as they got the right from the Mughal Rulers and later from the Nawabs of the Bengal after the act, there was a written contract that was signed between the Zamindars and the British under which the zamindars had gained more power over the land.

However, according to Chowdhury (1970), there was an emerging class of sharecroppers who started taking the responsibilities of maintaining the farmland and enjoying the actual power. It is essential to note that the zamindars had never enjoyed real power amongst the village communities. This study or the reference is also relevant in the case of the villages of Purulia and Bankura where, during the field works as well, the respondents explained that the Mishras, presently the most economically prosperous group, had never been the Zamindar of the village.

Upon visiting the old Zamindar's place, it was visible that the abolition of the Zamindari system during the post-independence era had been the major milestone in the deceleration of this class's economic power. As they enjoyed a very limited connection to the actual farming communities after the abolition period of the Zamindari system and then land reforms in West Bengal, they had lost their position in the villages.

A majority of their family has been completely lost and has no trace in the later period. Like the study village in Purulia, the old Zamindar family is out of the village and is not visible in any walks of village life. Historically speaking, many of them have left the village and are at present living in the city, cutting all connections from the village. A large number of Zamindars also had landownership which was so

scattered in nature that in the absence them the local middlemen who used to collect the tax as an ad hoc supervisor captured a large portion of those.

Therefore, it is observable that the section of the villagers who later started building the elite section of the place had not been from a particular group of the caste but was dispersed in nature. Undoubtedly, they belonged to the upper caste group but not a single caste section.

### **6.10. Breaking Down of the ‘Party System’**

The elites of the West Bengal Village have functioned in the network of arrangements which has produced a patron-client relationship in the rural socio-economic life (Ruud, 1995; Chattopadhyay, 2001). The relationship is still existing in its old format, the landlord and sharecropper relation and later into the sharecropper and daily wage labourers.

The fragmentation of land and deterioration of the profitability of agriculture, change in the rules and landowning tenure have been well explained in the ‘Agrarian Class Formation in Bengal’ (Mukherji, 1986). The notable point in this is that before the genesis of the communist intervention in rural West Bengal, the ground was operating through a particular form of arrangements which, with the establishment of the ‘Party’, had co-opted and grew as a structured organization.

The patronage earlier provided by the individuals now turned into a party actor and with a strong pro-farm and labour-based ideological unity cemented the base of such arrangement. Amidst the degrowth of industrial opportunities and farm yields in 2011, the ‘Party’ had to leave power after a long three-decade control, and Trinamool Congress came as a ruling authority that did have a particular ideological inclination but firm support of the rural elites. Their movement against the authoritative land acquisition by the former left-front government also obtained the most important support of the urban middle class and the ‘*Bhadrolok*’ (mostly upper caste urban middle class, the most important support for the communist intelligentsia and party ideologues).

However, the former ‘party’ had appropriated the well-established socio-economic arrangements of rural West Bengal, and patronage was coordinated through the ‘party society’ (Bhattyachayya, 2016). However, with the complete obliteration of the ‘party’, the ‘society’ remained and turned back into the older form of groups and individual elites-based patron-client relationship.

Therefore, with the changes in leadership, the arrangement becomes more resilient. Change of leadership has also given birth to a new group of beneficiaries and controllers of the resources which resulted in violence. The culture of political violence has given the rationale to the primary actors or agents of such changes. While the culture of violence entered Bengal’s politics through the revolutionary activities in each epoch of political regime change and the need for resistance later the logic of violence remained as the controlling component of maintaining the hierarchy in a group.

In the next section, we will unpack the historical root and then come to the current logic of violence, which is the logic of maintaining hierarchy in the absence of an organized ‘party society.’

### **6.11. Resilient Arrangements Amidst Changing Leadership**

Villages in rural West Bengal operate through kin and clan-based networks. As locally dominant groups, like the Mishra families, control economic opportunities and resources, villagers become dependent on them for access to jobs, healthcare, and other essential services. In return for this support, villagers are expected to display loyalty during elections and provide political benefits.

Failure to comply with these expectations can result in the threat of violence, as these influential groups wield considerable power within the community. The emergence of a sphere of violence during the process of changing leadership could be traced historically to the West Bengal villages.

To understand the development of such a trend, it is essential to comment that Bengal was a fairly peaceful agrarian society during the late sixteenth and early

seventeenth centuries when regular everyday violence did not develop until the land started getting ravaged by periodical famines in the late eighteenth century.

Ranabir Samaddar (2018) referred from the works of W.W. Hunter's account, 'The Annals of Bengal'(1770) where right after the observation of Shah Suja the son of Shah Jahan the governor of the Mughal Ruled Bengal was a peaceful state had turned into a most crisis-ridden place where violence becomes the only way to for the survival. Since then, there are multiple famines and communal riots have taken place in the state as a result of British rule and colonial exploitation.

1905 marked one of the worst violence when Bengal was divided into two parts which gave birth to the "*Bongo Bhongo Rodh*" andolon. As a result, people from all walks of life, including poet Rabindranath Tagore, took part in the protest against an arbitrary decision of the British Raj.

Nevertheless, religious violence has also reaped apart the state over time, in 1947 and 1971 the official partition and '*Mukti-juddho*' or the fight for the liberation of Bangladesh, respectively resulted in the highest numbers of killings and riots in the country that can only be compared with its counterpart of breaking up the Punjab province. The great Calcutta killing of 1946 was also the severe most communal riot that erupted in the wake of the independence movement. But in the post-independence era, social, religious, and cultural violence came under the folds of political violence. The same article published by Samaddar (2018) explains the shift from social violence to political violence. But before coming to that the political factionalism needs to be unfolded first.

## **6.12. Political Party as Network of Arrangements**

Political violence unleashed in the state of post-independent West Bengal was primarily based on party-based rivalry. The genesis can be traced back to the ideological factionalism between the Indian National Congress and the CPI(M) which took up the plights of the refugees and the landless labourers. The famous Naxal Bari movement was spread across the revolutionary front, from Shiliguri to Srikakulam, where guerrilla warfare was taken as the method to retaliate against the landowners and the business-owning community whom the revolutionaries had

termed as the 'class enemy'. From the accounts of the violence that took place during that time, it is clear that their targets were *the jotdars* or the middlemen of the village (who became the economic elite of the villages, as discussed earlier in this chapter).

Therefore, the conflict and the mobilization of the armed forces to eliminate such class enemies were made normalised through the usage of the revolutionary ideologies especially the Maoist path of communist movements. The ideologues who were involved in this movement had encouraged such killings and justified it as the process of bringing a new age of ruling which would be led by the proletariat or the working-class government.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) held a different view. The lawlessness and anti-democratic terrorist style of ruling would not be the path for withering away the bourgeois patronizing- government as they believed that the country has already well transited to the Parliamentary Democracy.

Therefore, contesting the election, and mobilization of the voters would be the right process to establish a communist government. Now the process of the mobilization itself turned into a violent rivalry inside the villages. From the accounts of Dwaipayana Bhattacharyya (2012), the party started making its position in the villages of West Bengal in two ways. On the one hand, it started expanding its activities as the agent of new revolutionary ideologies to bring changes, namely the Maoist agrarian revolutionaries in the leadership on the other hand it started negotiating with the mainstream political parties to create its legitimacy as an electorally viable option for gaining a legal position in the electoral democracy in the country.

The violent faction of the communist party recruited heavily to carry out the cleansing of the class enemy which gave an authoritative legitimacy to the violence in West Bengal Villages. But it is also necessary to understand that this phase of violence was functioning based on an ideological perspective but the culture of violence and justifying ideological battle through means of violence no doubt got

established through this method of political activities.

After the defeat of Congress, two major reforms took place (a) land reform and the (b) introduction of the elected representatives at the Panchayat level for strengthening the grassroots level governance. In the previous chapters, it has been discussed in detail that even when the land reform was made possible the consolidation of land became rampant by the former landowners by fragmenting their joint families.

As a result, the elite families in the village held the majority amount of land but under different names of the same family. Therefore, even when the economic transitions were made possible through the acts of land reform the consequence was not something that irradicated the land ownership-based supremacy in the village. In addition to this, the Panchayati Raj Institution became the most important political unit at the bottom level of the village administration, which was important to mobilize and influence the huge number of voters in the rural bases.

Contemporary commentators (Bhattacharyya, 2012; Bardhan, 2009; Banerjee, 2011) analyze political control and the style of governance in two ways. On the one hand, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (hereafter CPI(M)) tried to consolidate their position by strengthening its base amongst the *Bargadars* who had put a violent resistance against the *Jotdars* and the other village elites, on the other hand, their well-administered party rule gave a promise of good governance to the ‘unruly’ state of West Bengal that was difficult to be governed (As Atul Kohli had also pointed out that West Bengal under the regime of CPI(M) is the best-governed state). But the violence that started getting normalised in the name of elimination of the landed and propertied class in the villages of West Bengal gave birth to the culture of bloodshed.

Shekhar Bandyopadhyay and Sucharita Sen’s (2023) latest argument about the myth of the casteless Bengal is well juxtaposed by Bhattacharyya’s argument that the leadership has always remained in the hands of the upper caste, while the lower party cadre has been the lower castes and the tribals who in a way further

strengthened the legitimacy of the upper caste leadership and depoliticised the caste-based dominance in the villages. Such efforts transformed social violence into political violence, which excluded the existence of other stratification in the villages and created economic inequalities.

As Banerjee (2011) pointed out and explained in Ghosh and Sahoo's paper (2022), the murder of Hemanta Basu on 17th February 1970 marked the beginning of the *gun culture* in the state's politics. However, as explained elsewhere, political violence had never been new in Bengal, as the most violent revolutionary groups launching urban guerrilla-style warfare were formed in the state itself. From the same works by Ghosh and Sahoo the definition of political violence could be cited as a reference point, 'violence that is perpetrated for the personal and eventually political gain.' Some of the most notorious political violence started taking place mainly based on controlling the Panchayats. Such tendencies developed mainly as a process to keep the 'patron-client' relationship in the rural socio-economic arrangements.

### **6.13. Violence guarantees the insurance of the transaction**

Economic inequalities in rural West Bengal have evolved into class-based groups, leading to inter-group rivalries to preserve their respective positions. These group-based identities are often founded on the control of resources and government welfare benefits.

Across India dole-giving politics has become an obvious phenomenon with the development programme spreading amongst the rural areas. The planning is particularly focused towards subsidising the services and the regular consumable products. The Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI hereafter) is made strong, and the Public Distribution System (PDS) has been launched. However, such arrangements have been facilitated through the rurally based PRIs where the candidates are elected candidates, especially in the case of West Bengal.

As a result, the arrangements became particularly dependent on the political affiliation of the rural voters. The argument in the literature (Banerjee, 2011) that

the accessibility to the facilities turned into the process through which political loyalty turned out to be the key factor. The benefits or the doles were scarce and limited than the demand, poverty was high, and the people entitled to receive such benefits were vast. Therefore, the distribution becomes exclusive to the party cadres and voters who show unquestionable loyalty to the party. As the public distribution system (PDS) became the base for political sustainability and the method to suppress the opposition in the villages others started resorting to the opposition political parties who could help them out in survival.

MGNREGS, PMAY and PDS are national schemes aimed at alleviating poverty and supporting the large number of poor living in precarious situations. These schemes are formed, and the budgets are allocated and coordinated through the central government, but the implementation is done through the Gram Panchayats (GPs). The eligibility criteria are based on the economic status of the household, the location of the household and the individual in a GP and enlisting of the name in the job-seeking list. Government schemes aimed at alleviating poverty are inclusive but require the individuals to be connected to the respective GP for certain identification of the candidature.

In different regimes, the GP is the most important contact point where individual job seekers can complete their enrolment. There are several reports (Singh 2024, Biswas 2023) mention that the allocation and enrolment of individual job seekers under the MGNREGA scheme or the assistance for building houses under Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojna (PMAY) depends on the political affiliation of the person. As mentioned earlier, the implementation of such pro-poor government-run schemes are implemented through the respective GPs; *Gram Sabha* plays a crucial role in the decisions regarding the nature and number of jobs that need to be done in a particular village. In such meetings, Panchayat members and supporters with political connections would be prioritised in case of accessing the benefits of the schemes. Due to such practices, it has been revealed in studies (Das 2013) that the number of workdays allocated for households that support the ruling party is significantly higher than the households which are the voters of the opposition party. During the period of Left Front rule, such trends can be observed where the distribution

enrolment for job cards and allocation of the total workdays of NREGA jobs prioritised the ruling party supporters, giving rise to political clientelism through the control of such schemes (ibid).

In the study villages, these practices were also recorded during the fieldwork. The local panchayat member, as one of the key informants during the qualitative interview, has explained how the master roster includes the name of the supporters of the ruling party often twice and thrice in the same year while according to the rule, each should be getting a chance at least once in a year-long work cycle. Apart from this, several methods are used to maintain the clientele among the villagers. Most importantly, misinformation due to the absence of the Gram Sabha, which all the villagers do not attend. Thus, decisions are often taken by the ruling party members only. Additionally, such decisions and information are not shared with all the villagers; rather, the allocation of schemes is used as patronage against the party's allegiance. Unequal benefits have been rendered through such a setup. For example, several GP members who already possess a concrete and brick-made pakka house are securing housing assistance because of the close connection with the panchayat and the ruling party. According to the inclusion criteria, the benefit of 1 lakh 20 thousand rupees has to be allocated to the people who do not have a pakka house. During fieldwork, several GP members were spotted to have housing assistance under the PMAY scheme when they have already been living in a pakka house for decades. In recent days, against such allocation, party and panchayat members have also been accused of extorting money when the schemes are to benefit all the villagers free of cost.

Such arrangements deeply divided rural Bengal and highly politicized the villagers' everyday lives. Violent clashes started erupting after the first few years of the Left Front's rule, turning it into a politically competitive ground for the opposition. From the 1980s to the late 1990s, there was an apparent peaceful situation because of the effective consolidation of the part in the state.

The foundation of the Trinamool Congress in 1998 brought back the fierce rivalry of the 60s. It is interesting to observe that the obliteration of the opposition had been

possible through a successful establishment of the cadre-based political base, which led to a hegemonic power of the party in the state, giving birth to an unchallenged position of the party. This had, too, adapted and become the political culture of the state. Wining in the uncontested seats become the trend in rural Panchayat-based politics. Statistically speaking, in 1988, there were 4200 uncontested seats in which LF won, and in the following years, that number decreased, but again, in 2003, there were 6300 seats that were won by LF uncontested.

Such a trend did not change after the historic loss of the LF rule in the state in 2011. According to the media reports in the 2018 Panchayat election, 34% of the Panchayat seats (summing up Zilla parishad and Panchayat samiti seats) were won uncontested by the Trinamool Congress (TMC henceforth) while in 2023 12% of seats were won contested by TMCP. Uncontested winning of the Panchayat seats had become a trend mainly the hyper-consolidation of the political camps in the rural areas of West Bengal.

#### **6.14. A Resilient ‘Party Society’**

The method of mobilisation is the ‘fear of violence’:

The process has been termed in different ways by different scholars, but the most prominent amongst them is the ‘Party Society’ by Dwipayana Bhattacharyya. Taking references from the idea of Political Society by Partha Chatterjee (2004) as a conceptual tool, the organism of the party society is an apt explainer for the rural political arrangements in West Bengal. In the post-colonial democratic system, the lopsided development started creating deep-rooted economic inequalities with sustained social inequalities where the communist party entered with a violent approach to change through arms resistance. In this context, Charu Majumder the communist ideologue and one of the key organisers of the Naxalite movement made the perpetration of the violence more intimate than ever to the agrarian class when he propagated that there shall be no guns in launching attacks against the landed labour class but the tools that are used to plough the field (Nigam, 2018 The WIRE). Such deliberation of ideological position and intensification of violence had set the tone of the political rationale of the state when it had to solidify a political regime against a strong opposition. Bhattacharyya’s argument on how the movement of

the entire political legitimacy had been strengthened reveals that before coming to the conflict between the oppositional political factions, it is much more important to understand how the political mediation started taking place through the everyday, apparently mundane incidents. The populism of the party took its place in the domestic affairs of the rural households through successful incubation by the locally influential against. This could be a joiner to the earlier argument of Samaddar's (2018 *The Wire*) argument on transformation from social to political.

### **6.15. The ideology of violence is the fear of the 'party'**

Caste-based inequalities have transformed into class-based inequalities, further normalizing violent and antagonistic positions within society.

Caste is often thought to have been obliterated by the introduction of the class-based communist political ideologues in West Bengal. While the discussion on caste and caste-based politics in the context of West Bengal has received a mixed review weightage is still given to the fact that even when the caste-based cultural inhibitions and exclusionary practices are still violence exclusively based on 'Caste' is not making it quite an exceptional case amidst the socio-political situation of other Indian States. The recent scholarships (Ghosh, 2001; Roy, 2011; Bandyopadhyay, 2012; Guha, 2021) have brought back the issue in the intellectual discourse on the state's political and sociological studies and all have made a deep engagement with the historical background of the situation of caste in the state. Drawing from such arguments this chapter will attempt to understand two essential parts of the rationale behind the political violence in the state. The objective is to unfold the transformative process of the commonly observed upper castes' abhorrence towards the lower castes into class antagonism and the response towards normative inequality through descriptive morality-based violence.

Caste-based inequalities in West Bengal are as common as it has been in any other parts of the country, both socio-culturally and politically. In the case of marriage, everyday relationships and economic position caste is a major determinant. In the empirical accounts of Dwipayana's work (Bhattacharyya 2012) as well it has come up that the upper caste landlords have always treated the lower caste agricultural labourers as untouchables. Such practices are still quite visible in rural Bengal.

During the fieldwork, it was noted that the upper caste Mishras usually never entered a tribal or a Bauri house, putting off their shoes or slippers, which they would never do in their own houses. Micro-level behavioural characteristics are even more distinct. In a lower caste's house, an upper caste person will never drink water directly from their glasses (which means their lips will never touch the glass, and this is specifically noted as this is not the practice in the other upper caste households), they would never accept the rice (*bhat*) instead they will rather eat *muri* or the puffed rice.

In the case of marriage, this practice is even more rigid, and the hierarchical social relationship is observed through collective adherence to clan-based rituals. However, unlike other states in West Bengal, 'pure violence' based on caste is not observed, but two major incidents have proven that 'caste', no matter what, still functions in West Bengal as an important political category. Incidents like *Marich Jhanpi* massacre, which is seen as the most notorious state-sponsored brutality against the Dalit refugees in the camp where they took shelter, and another one is much discussed reconceptualization of a caste group consolidation under a large organization called *Matua Songhati*. In order to keep the casteless Bengal's political exceptionalism, the government pro-actively tried to obliterate a Dalit refugee camp, suspecting a powerful, resistant, self-reliant and increasingly moving towards legitimised identity-based 'class'. The movement was more of a selective amnesia than the existence of a real threat against state machinery, while the latter is an obvious response towards continuous denial of the so-called 'casteless Bengal's' exceptionalism (Singha Roy, 2012).

The Matua group came under the 'Namashudra' caste or the lower castes of the state's caste list and came under the leadership of the Harichand Thakur, who, along with the followers, also came as a refugee from Bangladesh. Their strong association was later openly supported by the TMCP government. While the first incident was a forceful denial and a violent consequence, the latter is an obvious recognition of the existence of the caste-based political identity in the state. There is no doubt that the Left Fronts' PRI policies were targeted towards the poor irrespective of their caste and religion, but like the national trend, there is no denying

the fact that the inequalities in the rural areas of West Bengal can be easily stratified based on caste.

The study villages in Purulia and Bankura have both shown that the poorest households, with no provision for water supply or *pakka* structure, belong to the lowest caste groups of the villages, such as *Bauris* and *Sardars*.

Whereas, the contractors, the Panchayat persons who coordinate the 100-day employment roaster and the mediators between the villagers and the government officials of BDO offices, all belong to the upper caste groups. They are still the largest number of landholders in the villages and wield sufficient influence in most of the social arrangements of rural life.

#### **6.16. Violence Translating Setting into Transactional Politics**

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the caste-to-class transformative process can be well observed in everyday politics and is now totally dependent on the political classes of party identity. The leadership as can be seen in both the study villages in the hands of the upper caste rich individuals the clash over the competitive 'dole politics' what is popular Bengali termed as the '*paiye deoar rajniti*' (politics of dole giving or patronage) (Banerjee, 2011) has been morally sanctioned since the genesis of the pro-poor politics of CPI(M) in the state, socially in the context of Liberation war of Bangladesh and the wave of refugees in the West Bengal from former East Pakistan.

The upper caste educated intelligentsia soon took up the cause and genuinely started associating with the Left Front's ideological war against poverty. But soon after assuming power, the upper caste-based leadership turned out to be a widely discussed class of 'Bhadrolok' whose political manoeuvring led the party cadres to develop a strong resistance group against any kind of political opposition in the state.

#### **6.17. Granting the legitimacy of violence**

There is no denying the fact that such upper-caste leadership had genuinely left their

economic benefits and careers and worked for the cause of the upliftment of the poor but the political culture in a particular arrangement was targeted towards establishing three decades-long hegemony of party society will not be able to survive only based on the welfare schemes and convincing voters by honest development narratives.

Therefore, the usage of violence which had its root in the cause of the elimination of the landed gentry and *jotdars*, withered away the middlemen in rural political life and came back in a new form which is often termed in the popular Bengali Media *Harmad* or the groups of plunderers or mercenaries (They are often termed as *bike bahini* or the violent militias in bikes).

Their major profession becomes limited to creating a life-threatening condition for the voters of the opposition party and keeping any kind of oppositional force at bay through violence. These groups have been made sustainable as paid hooligans and thus received moral justification from the local upper caste leaders.

The caste identity however got merged with the class identity after the implementation of several welfare policies and reservation schemes many lower caste individuals also rose to the level of higher leadership, but the number is nowhere comparable with the upper caste leadership.

The system had been crafted in a way where the legitimacy of perpetrating violence by the lower caste paid hooligans in a way justified the upper caste's leadership position. In fact, in present-day West Bengal politics, the majority of the ministers and the higher officials in the government belong to the upper caste only. The lower caste, or later turning into the category of the lower class, has strengthened the base of the party cadres and received permission to do the violence for the cause of protecting the party from the oppositional force.

### **6.18. From descriptive inequalities to descriptive violence**

This thesis will try to theories such practices as introducing descriptive violence. The inequalities that have grown more between these two sections are mainly

because of the lack of capital growth in the state and the age-old tendency or the political culture of resistance through violence. The position of the lower class's response towards any kind of political demand, change or expression of choice has now become more of descriptive violence that is collectively normalized and neutralized as well. Such conceptualization is first brought from the idea of normative and descriptive morality and then the inequalities it is important here to reiterate their specific means and why the conceptualization of descriptive violence is a justified one in the case of political violence in West Bengal as a consequence of inequalities in the rural transformations.

So far in the thesis, it has been shown that the inequalities generated in the processes of rural transformation or the rural transformation that has created the inequalities are majorly normative ones, which include the question of what ought or should be. The ethical judgement is, therefore, more of a normative relativity, but the above description of the development of violent culture is also rooted in the denial of such normative inequalities when most of the leadership had been wielded by the upper caste leadership.

Therefore, the so-called transformative process from caste to class is something from normative to descriptive relativity. In this process, people accepted the upper caste leadership as the upper class, and violence became limited between the lower class' accessibility to the upper-class leadership and benefits. The moral fight against the upper caste landed gentry finally turned into a descriptive inequality, losing its moral or ethical unacceptability. This change percolated in the culture of political violence as well. The normative violence was ethically permitted because the inequality itself was ethically not right during the first few years of the Left Front's idealism and political development, but in the later part of the political development, the ethically unacceptable inequality (Pani, 2017) got blurred under the narrative of the survival of a pro-poor political party where remaining poor become a part of descriptive morality; therefore, the inequalities between the class turned into more of a descriptive one.

The legitimacy of such upper-class and caste leadership finally made the ideological

political battle into survival-based political violence based on descriptive inequality, turning the ethically unacceptable normative violence into descriptive violence in the state.

## **Chapter: VII**

### **Conclusion**

*“The play of contesting sovereignties, the state versus the people, in the tension between command and demand polities, helps us to explain India's political economy by tracing the interaction since independence between rising levels of political mobilization and the changing capabilities of the "state." The use of competing sovereignties in the form of command and demand policies avoids conventional but increasingly unproductive arguments about whether "capitalism" or "socialism" is better for prosperity, freedom, or equality. For example, both models allow, inter alia, for planned or corporatist capitalism or market socialism under conditions of more or less equality and freedom.”*

*-Rudolph and Rudolph (In Pursuit of Lakshmi 1987)*

#### **7.1. Changing rural India**

Transforming socioeconomic arrangements, farm-to-non-farm occupational shifts, out-migration (locational changes) and unsustainable agriculture created fundamental changes in the local rural fabrics. It primarily shifted the earlier command-based polity that provided unchallenged sovereignty to the ‘State’ or the ‘Government’ and posed a demand-based polity that steered the activities of the arrangement of the people according to the immediate needs of the people.

Indian villages are changing socio-economically and culturally, and their millennial old arrangements are transforming due to the occupational shift from farm to non-farm jobs. Such transformation is primarily induced by the development of communications and information technologies along with rapidly developing transportation and connectivity. Scholars would like to add that such changes are often induced by agrarian distress, viz., the declining return in both capital and labour in the agrarian sector.

It has been observed that across the countries various factors are responsible for such decline. In smaller states, fragmentation of land or decreasing amount of per capita land size; in drier states, vagaries of rain; and in poorer states, lack of

irrigation facilities; and in the coastal states or regions of states, erosion of land and increase of the salinity have been the major causes for the agrarian distress in the country. Such distress immediately affects the occupational shift leading to large-scale migration from rural to urban regions in search of non-farm work, mainly in the informal sectors of the cities and towns.

Against this backdrop, socio-cultural and economic transformations have been taking place, often as a direct effect of changes in occupational arrangements or as an indirect result of changing activities at the village level. So far, this thesis has tried to explain such changes in the activities through which people attain an arrangement.

## **7.2. Inequalities in the transformation**

However, these changes, as hinted in the previous paragraph, are dispersed. Most importantly, the transformation of the occupation is demand-led, but the availability of the labourers and demand for the non-farm work in the rural transformation itself is unequal. Where the jobs are created, and regions, where the rural agricultural labourers are released, are locationally mismatched. While this is one of the important push factors, such inequalities in the rural transformation have created a diverse pattern of arrangement. The relationship between the farm workers and the owners of the farm, the borrowers and the money lender or the sharecroppers and the daily wage workers working at the farm changed based on the availability of or scarcity of farm-related jobs. On the other hand, it is crucial to note that with the decreased opportunities in rural job opportunities, a proliferation of non-farm jobs at the urban centre is quite conspicuous.

The development of the real estate economy and the infrastructural requirements for urban growth have created numerous non-farm jobs in the urban and peripheral towns, now often termed *urban*. Such a situation has functioned as one of the key push factors for the flight of labourers from villages to cities and creating a remittance-based sustenance for the families left in the villages. But this process is not as simple or unilinear as it can be comprehended, and neither

is it homogenous across the nation. In several instances, it can be observed that even if there is a dearth of opportunities in the villages, people are not being able to move out. Similarly, people have lost the occupational benefits of working on the farm. However, they still retained their farmland as an asset and later used it to get support for their preparation for migration. It has also been seen that old migration networks based on religion, castes and often contacts have benefitted a particular section of people to migrate safely. Such networks have helped them to secure not only work at the destination but also to sustain a new urban space.

Amidst such heterogeneous rural transformation as described above, the demands that have so far been the major political cry of the state have also started transforming to an aspect of a paradigmatic shift, from rights-based demands to patronage-based welfarist policy of each political party. While at the regional level, the parties are fostering the grassroots level demands, at the central, the ruling political actors are also keen on addressing the problems of daily sustenance of the people in distress. The common subjects for both have remained similar, providing welfare schemes to the masses. However, the newer form of inequalities emerging in such conditions has created obvious conditions of competitive patron-client relationships.

### **7.3. Demands are changing at the bottom**

Such changes are captured at the micro-level in rural West Bengal, where in two villages, people have left agriculture but stayed in the village, and the other people have left agriculture and joined non-farm work. The criteria for selecting these two villages were primarily based on the census data, where two significant transformations were observed.

Amloki, in the district Purulia, which has a long history of social and political upheaval, from the struggle for getting annexed to West Bengal to Bihar, based on language secondly it is also one of the most backward and underdeveloped districts in the state with a large number of areas covered in hills and forests, alluvial dry lands and inhabited by tribals. It was observed through the census data of 2011 that a village under the Raghunathpur Block II had experienced a

significant decrease in agricultural work as the primary occupation; however, the average increase of the population remained the same and increased in the decade between 2001 and 2011.

Haritaki is based in the Bankura district which has observed a high level of decrease in the average growth of the population along with a steady decline in agriculture as the primary occupation. In the case of the second village, it could be assumed that by leaving the agricultural work they are also leaving the village as well. It is imperative to mention here that while choosing the village it was kept in the methodological point that both should be far from the urban proximity so that the attraction to rural to urban movement will not be based on easy accessibility.

To understand such changes detailed fieldwork was carried out using a mixed method process and primarily it was targeted to two inquiries:

- a) The inequalities in the rural transformation.
- b) The political consequences of such a process.

In both villages, existing inequalities and inequalities in rural transformation processes are quite visible. Although caste has never become a polarising or mobilizing factor in the politics of West Bengal, the asset-based inequalities between the upper and lower castes were conspicuous enough.

The political myth of 'caste exceptionalism' (Guha, 2022) in Bengal has come out as a misnomer, as it is evident in the fieldwork that the upper caste groups are still the major landowners, distributors of the government schemes/benefits and coordinates the non-farm jobs. The field visit showed that the Mishra, Banerjees and Ojha are three major upper-caste groups owning sizable land in the village. By owning a huge amount of land, they used to control the hiring processes and the employment opportunities in the village. As these three castes owned a large amount of land, the daily agrarian labourers were dependent on their employers' pattern of agricultural work. This trend is quite observable in the village of Bankura as well. But before going into the observations made in

the Bankura village, the arrangements of the Purulia need to be fleshed out with more details. Mishras' ownership of land is family-based, which is also the same in the case of most families across the caste groups. The process of hiring agricultural labourers from the village is also based on the long-term relationships that have been maintained by the labourers and the farmers. Such a relationship has a complicated and layered influence on these families who mainly belonged to the lower castes, *Bauris*.

However, the *Bauris* are a prominent caste in the village and their numerical dominance is significantly higher than any other caste groups in the village. The underdeveloped irrigation facilities and rising infertility were turning agricultural work already an expensive affair from which the upper caste land-owning groups were already distressed and started investing their land into non-agricultural works such as brick-and-coming factories and rice mills.

As the respondents said, a vast portion of land has also been left unused for years. The reason was primarily the vagaries of the rain, no irrigation facilities, or irrigation becoming expensive to afford. In such a situation, as non-farm opportunities were becoming one of the major sources of utilizing the land, the local farm-based wage labourers also started looking for similar kinds of opportunities in or outside the village.

Two important things that need to be observed here are that the earlier arrangements between the employer and the workers started changing, through which other agriculture-related relationships started changing. First, because of leaving agricultural work for decades, there were generations born without any knowledge of agricultural work and neither interested in resuming that old family-based agricultural work nor did they have the financial capability to invest well in farming and make a living out of it. The second observable point is that because of the flourishing and preferable non-farm work opportunities among the former agricultural labourers, the contact points where the new non-farm job opportunities can be accessed have also changed.

Against this background, external factors such as establishing a power plant hub in the adjacent area of the village had brought about some drastic changes in the village's existing land ownership patterns. The major land-owning caste, the Mishras and other upper caste groups sold off their land to the government authority expecting good compensation, which eventually did not satisfy them. The *Santhals* of the village were not involved in this process as the law of tribal land protection safeguarded their land. In the meantime, the money the families received from selling the land to the government had been mostly invested in the local non-farm business work and the chit funds.

Lack of employment opportunities or any other financial gains through commercial works chit fund had emerged as one of the major sources of increasing the amount people received through selling off the land. The time when the villagers invested in the chit funds was also the time in West Bengal when various companies related to chit fund works had been operating, and later, the scam they were involved in came to the surface. The qualitative interviews and survey data revealed that the village in Purulia had been mapped by two major chit-fund companies whose primary investors were the scheduled castes and the other backward caste groups.

The primary data shows that the general and Brahmin caste groups (for the specific caste hierarchy-based effects, general and Brahmin castes have been segregated) still own the largest amounts of land while investing comparatively lesser amounts of money in the chit funds.

**Table 7.1. Caste-wise total land ownership and average chit fund investments in the Amloki**

<i>Caste</i>	<i>Sum of Land Owns Now (in acres)</i>	<i>Average of Chit Fund Investments (In Rupees)</i>
<i>Brahmin</i>	<i>22.65</i>	<i>46000</i>
<i>ST</i>	<i>19.9</i>	<i>11000</i>
<i>SC</i>	<i>16.38</i>	<i>90000</i>
<i>OBC</i>	<i>12.82</i>	<i>36000</i>
<i>General</i>	<i>13.11</i>	<i>90000</i>
<i>Grand Total</i>	<i>84.86</i>	<i>273000</i>

*Source: Survey data collected from fieldwork by author*

Although this data has been analysed in the specific chapter on the fieldwork and analysis (Chapter III) however, it is important to reiterate the fact that the Brahmins of the village still own the largest amount of the land and interestingly invested the lowest amount in the chit-fund schemes.

One of the concluding factors from such observation could be that the compensation the Brahmin families received after giving their land to the power plant authorities had been utilised in other non-farm sectors and invested in various commercial purposes. These families are also large in the sense that the typical joint family arrangement has changed but the heads of the separated households are in touch for their work and business ventures. While engaged in interviews with these households such arrangements made complete sense given against the backdrop of declining agriculture and non-farm works emerging as the only alternative. Earlier when the relationship was mainly based on the landowners giving their land for cultivation to the sharecroppers, and then the share was taken according to the deal between both parties later, sometimes the processing units are itself based at the house of the landowners, therefore, the sharecropper used to utilise the facility for a percentage of discounted price etc. now such relational arrangements based on the agrarian works become redundant. A fair number of respondents also mentioned that the daily wage labourers who used to work in the sharecropper's field have also abandoned their jobs;

therefore, now they are hiring harvesters from other villages. This part is also essential to unfold as far as the changing arrangements and the agrarian relationships are concerned. Earlier *Bauris* and the other backward caste community people used to work as daily wage labourers in the village who were employment-wise dependent on the upper caste sharecroppers or the farmland owners.

However, as the locally available workers in the village have left engaging in such work, workers are brought in from other villages who have no ties to the farmland owners. Such changes in the hiring and work patterns of the people have specifically affected the older dependency-based relation that existed inside the village. To substantiate this point, it is imperative to add that these sharecroppers or small landowners also became the major party members during the period of the CPI(M) government.

Some of the family members also got government jobs and emerged as important cadre mobilisers inside the village units. The data elaborated below shows that the most landlessness can be observed amongst the other backward castes and the scheduled caste communities.

One major reason is that the per-head land size among these two caste groups is the lowest, while the Brahmins, being the smallest groups in terms of population, owned the largest per-head land mass and, therefore, retained comparatively more land. It needs to be noted here that we are trying to understand the ownership of land as an asset base because all the caste groups have almost abandoned farming.

**Table 7.2. Caste based land ownership before and after land acquisition in Amloki**

<i>Caste</i>	<i>Land Before Plant (in acre)</i>	<i>Land Owns Now (in acre)</i>
<i>Brahmin</i>	<i>76.09</i>	<i>12.82</i>
<i>General</i>	<i>48.96</i>	<i>22.65</i>
<i>ST</i>	<i>40.88</i>	<i>16.38</i>
<i>SC</i>	<i>26.62</i>	<i>13.11</i>
<i>OBC</i>	<i>22.30</i>	<i>19.9</i>
<i>Grand Total</i>	<i>214.85</i>	<i>84.86</i>

*Source: Survey data collected from fieldwork by the author*

Changes in farm opportunities brought newer forms of no-farm work opportunities in the villages. The fly ash reservoir was the first such opening for the farm workers. It is interesting to connect the older social arrangements with the newer economic arrangements. As mentioned before the Brahmin sharecroppers and landowners were also the former CPI(M) party mobilisers and retained a substantial amount of influence over the other villagers. When farm work becomes redundant, and new work opportunities open up in the village, the workers' recruitment and coordination remain in the hands of these upper caste groups only.

#### **7.4. Generation of the demands**

Against the land acquisition and unsatisfactory compensation, the villages had made complaints against the existing policies of the government during the state-wide wave against the land acquisition movement (the Singur and Nandigram movements during 2007-2009). In 2011, when the new government under the leadership of the Trinamool Congress Party took over, they intensified their movement, expecting that as the new government came through the struggle for saving the farmlands against the former regime, it would do something in favour of them. Ironically it was seen that the new leadership did not pay heed to their demands. As a result, the immediate impact was to seek help from the actively

functioning opposition in the area, the Bhartiya Janta Party, which promised to extend help to the elder leaders of the movement.

Such a situation first created a descent-based anti-incumbent group inside this village which was primarily led by the BJP. An arrangement like this required a vast level of mobilization through the distribution of public welfare schemes and other benefits as the new age political mobilization in the state primarily focused on two major areas, development through the local commercial hubs and a robust public welfare scheme which would be unbiased and targeted directly to the poor. In the village of Bankura, transformation in rural life, especially in farm work, is quite visible. The upper caste Sahoos hail from the business communities and settled during the pre-British era. According to their oral history, all other castes apart from the Adivasis (the tribals) were brought by them to facilitate other regular activities, such as the barbers, fishermen, and farm workers.

Sahoos got most of the land in the village from the imperial ruler and started employing people from other castes as farm workers. In the post-independence period, these arrangements underwent a drastic change. The Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC) planned to set up a river barrage on the Kangsabati River. This was one of the biggest in the region and required a large amount of manpower. With a pre-dominant social position, Sahoos got clerical jobs in the river barrage project.

As a government project, it provided some social security and regular payment to these people, which helped them emerge as the largest section of the village engaged in non-farm activities. As agricultural activities started declining drastically, several of the Sahoos' family members quickly shifted or sold off their lands for non-farm usage.

Through the fieldwork, it was understood that one of the family members, Sahoos, either worked as a clerk or labour contractor at the barrage project. This has also estranged them from the agricultural works loosening the former ties with the other backward caste/class people who used to work in their farms. Such

changes, however, did not work as a homogeneous process. It would be unfair to describe all the Sahoos as well off; many of them have left agriculture for a generation and, therefore, have no idea how to utilise their farm even if they have it. These groups are almost like the town-based middle class in a village set up who have now moved out of farm work and, at present, more into non-farm works such as small business or labour contractors etc.

Their inadequacy regarding agrarian work has also made them leave other engagements allied to agriculture. Sahoos, being one of the most powerful sections of the village, are now less involved in agrarian works and have deeper implications.

First of all, the earlier demand and line of mobilisation have drastically changed because leaving agriculture has not changed their influence over the others in the village. Therefore, the new non-farm opportunities are either accessed individually or with the help of the Sahoos, who are now spearheading such new job opportunities.

Secondly, the demand for non-farm work has also brought out the futility of the former line of social and economic arrangements based on which both CPI(M) and TMCP can into power. Against the backdrop of declining agrarian relations, different government benefits and welfare schemes provided newer opportunities to sustain. This is also the village where with leaving agriculture people have also left the village as well.

### **7.5. Change of demands**

With the rapid change in agricultural work, the flight of labour from the farm to no farm job become inevitable. Elsewhere in this thesis (Chapters IV and V), it has been described that West Bengal is primarily a rural state political movement and demands at the ground level had always been regarding fair division of crops, right of cultivation or *patta* in local parlance and vocal about the unionizing these informal daily wage workers at both industrial and farm sectors. The rise of CPI(M) in West Bengal during the post-independence period was particularly

based on these issues.

It was also the time when the post-partition socio-economic crisis was engulfing West Bengal's everyday rural and urban life. Lakhs of refugees sought a place to keep themselves safe in a new country. Left-oriented organisations and political parties were promised to cater to this primary demand. If we look at history, the arrangements and relational exchanges between the people coming from the East Bengal (now Bangladesh) side were in dire need of the support of the administration in this country.

Congress being at the helm, was severely criticised by the powerful oppositions, mainly consisting of the Marxist parties. One of the major accusations to the incumbent by the left-led opposition of the state was favouring the upper class and caste people to flourish in their business and employment. At the same time, the workers from the bottom-most rank of the economic pyramid are getting exploited and so are the landless farm labourers. The sharecroppers also needed the right to cultivate the landowner's property based on a legal right. The Left Front (LF) catered these demands after coming to power in 1977 but such demands had started changing its characters slowly.

A series of works (Bardhan et al. 2005, 2009, 2014) on the political-economic change in West Bengal in the last two decades has tried to gauge these changing characteristics of village demands. The study done by Pranab Bardhan and others has shown several factors, of which patronage has turned out to be one of the major appealing factors for the voters. But what is essential here is to enquire what concluded the demands for these patronages. In addition to this, another factor that this thesis has also attempted to enquire into with the changes of the demands is how the arrangements also change at the local village level. Bardhan (2009) argues that a comparative study showed no change in welfare benefits received by the gram-Panchayats (GPs) under the control of CPI(M) between 2003 and 2009. Meanwhile, GPs that TMCP controlled had an increased number of beneficiaries of government-distributed welfare schemes.

Thus, he opined that CPI(M) did not properly understand the increased need for welfare benefits at the village level. However, the distribution of welfare benefits has always been used as one of the processes of building patron-client relationships in India. In the absence of employment opportunities, declining agriculture and inadequate health and educational infrastructure, almost all state governments, including the central, provide a large number of welfare benefits, which, on the one hand, alleviates poverty but also works as one of the essential patronages for the voters to make them trust.

The above elaboration of the overall arrangements of two villages in West Bengal brings out one of the major patterns i.e., the role of caste and their sustained relationship to landownership and socio-economic influence in the village life. While several scholars have recently raised the issue of the “invisibilization” of caste influence in Bengal, their major focus has justifiably remained on the recent revival of the Namashudra Matua caste mobilization, which is quite new to the way political mobilization has taken place in the state so far.

This thesis would rather try to delve deeper into the historical connection between caste, land ownership and the control of the upper caste over the other castes in Bengal villages. Mario Prayer’s (2009) description and historical account succinctly capture the social context and economic arrangements in a village through the lens of caste groups. The presence of the upper castes and their dominance in land ownership in rural Bengal have been explained with a critical view against the later agreements regarding caste exceptionalism, often claimed as an outlier in the pan-Indian political trend. The role of the *untouchables* and the other backward castes and classes with the dominant upper-caste Brahmins and Baidyas has shaped the everyday rural arrangement of pre-colonial Bengal.

## **7.6. Evolution of the Rural Social Arrangements**

However, the development of caste-based associations, the way it has been developed in other parts of the country, did not flourish in this part. The Zamindar (*Jomidar in Bangla*) village headman (the *moral*), the moneylender (*Mahajan*),

the sharecropper (*bhagchashi*), daily wage-based farm workers etc. are the key actors in shaping the rural socio-economic dynamics.

In such an arrangement, Prayers' observation is pertinent to show how, historically, the caste-based alliance had never played a pivotal role as it had worked in other parts of the nation. He argues that this was one of the primary reasons for Bengal not coming under the influence during the peak of the Gandhian movements across the country. Typically, the village headman and the Zamindars used to come from the higher castes, most likely from Brahmins and Kayasths. The mobility was observed among the other castes, such as the *Sadgops*, and the milkman communities. Their economic growth had often helped them to advance their positions at the level of Kayasths. On the other hand, the upwardly mobile castes, such as the Sadgops and often the Bagdis, also gained economic mobility in the village by buying land. During the colonial period, Bengal's caste dynamic was therefore more based on economic dominance rather than social practices and customs.

The influence of Western Modernity has been quickly absorbed and adapted by the upper castes creating an interesting category on which several scholarly discussions have been made, the '*Bhadrolok*' class. It means the well-educated Bengali gentlemen but if we see it using the caste lens, this class comprised of the three upper castes such as Brahmins, Kayasths and the Baidyas. It is also essential to mention here that the landownership of the Brahmins had also dominated rural Bengal since the pre-colonial rule. Later, during colonialism and in the post-colonial period, western modern education created an upper-caste-based ruling class where certain upward mobility was observed based on individuals' economic and educational position. From the references of Gauranga Chattyopadhaya (1964), Prayer went on, the development of the *Borolok*, the rich and the *chotolok*, the lower class, therefore well consolidated in the post-colonial Bengal based on an interesting duality.

There, the class was built based on the caste line where the urban upper class, hailing from the upper castes, assumed the leadership positions, and in the rural,

the upper castes remained as the headman or the most influential with politico-economic dominance. The *Sad-gops* and the *Bagdis* have also taken and supported the upper caste side and came to an alliance based on land ownership. This practice can be observed in both the study villages. For example, in the village in Bankura, Chattopadhyay's (1964) classification of social hierarchy is visible.

According to his classification, at the top, there were the Brahmins. Then there were seven (*sat* in Bangla) sub-castes of Sudras therefore called *Sat Sudras*- The oil pressers (*Telis*), barbers (*Napit*), farmers (*Sad-gops*), weavers (*Tanti*) and *Cow Breeders* (*Ahir-goalas*). However, the presence of the Brahmins significantly declined for two reasons one was the land reforms through which a large part of the land had been distributed amongst the sharecroppers who were mainly the *sad-gops* and the *telis*.

As a result of the presence form, it can be observed that *Sahoos*, who are not the Brahmins but originally fall under the Sudra castes, have emerged as the most dominant landowners and business-owning communities in the region. With a substantial level of economic dominance, they are now close and sometimes way more influential than the local Brahmins and allies with the Baidya and Kayasthas. Their ascendancy to such a position has also to do with a 'forced diversification of their traditional occupation' where a large scale of *Sahoos* left agriculture and took up government jobs during the time of the Kansabati River Barrage project (Under Damodar Valley Corporation-DVC Work).

Such changes in occupational opportunities and landownership have shown caste mobility and the emergence of a dominant class. This descriptive analysis would remain incomplete without mentioning their further assertion of caste position being a dominant class. As described before *Sahoos* are the Sudras and traditionally fall under the lower caste groups.

In the post-Mandal Commission recommendation, all the *Sahoos* registered as the OBC category showed a significant trend of caste-to-class mobility and the

ascendency of power in the rural arrangement. Economic dominance spreads out to other social and cultural dominances as well. Here the polarization process of the *chotolok* and the *borolok* class is even more relevant.

Since the 1950s, the consolidated caste groups have acquired economic dominance and emerged as key actors in every rural arrangement. The much-debated and discussed land reform during the Congress regime was implemented in the mid-1950s, and it had political consequences. In the same discussion, Prayer coined the term the *Gosh-Machine*, indicating arrangements between the urban and rural elites who worked together to keep their hegemony intact during the phases of land reforms.

The land ownership ceiling was limited to 25 acres, and because of this, a large number of rural landowners were about to lose their land. This would also mean that losing such economic assets, they were also going to lose out on the social and political power gained in the villages. On the other hand, being the rich man of the villages their pre-independence position as village headmen or members of traditional Panchayat or village council had changed. They had already assumed the position of a prominent Congressmen which was external to the other rural actors. In such a situation the arrangement was made in such a way in return for the maintenance of their social prestige and status quo the local rich men took the responsibility of ensuring that Congress would secure a vote with its major and minor allies (Prayer 2009).

This description and the history of the emergence of such locally powerful political mobilizers could perhaps be the genesis of the rise of the local rural leaders in Bengal's rural political scene. They become the chief mobilizers of each area where all the economically and socially dependent poor (*chotolok*) will follow. Such arrangements also gave birth to a system which had practically become the main structural characteristic of the rural political trends in 21<sup>st</sup>-century West Bengal as well. Some of the infamous political violence and hooliganism in the state had happened, keeping this structure unchanged. It is also important to note here that often, this central figure of a rural locality or a particular village hail from backwards castes or even from the minority religion.

Perhaps the exceptionalism that West Bengal presents through the unbiased yet land-based economic elitism in the countryside. Hence it is more important to track the local *borolok* in a village who would be the chief mobilizer for the entire population.

### **7.7. Creating a Structure: The Congress System in Bengal**

This Congress system, or what Prayer (2009) calls the Ghosh-Machine, under the leadership of Chief Minister Atulya Ghosh, came to a halt in the regime of Bidhan Chandra Roy. Political practice and, most importantly, the arrangements at the socio-economic level in both urban and rural started changing drastically. The dominance of Congress at the central and state levels created a classic condition of hegemonistic political practice in the state where anti-incumbency was inevitable. While at the central level in terms of agricultural policy, HYV seeds were brought in, and an overhaul of the entire agrarian production was planned, popularised as Green Revolution in Bengal village, the demands were different. There were multiple changes on the political and economic levels.

Firstly, the implementation of the land reform was flawed and did not meet the requirements for which it was implemented. The major need was to provide the right of cultivation to the sharecroppers who were farming in the land of the landowning class without having any security to their occupation, in the local parlance called *patta* given.

Secondly, for the Green Revolution and usage of HYV seeds, it was important to have vast undivided fields and a developed standard of irrigation facilities. The availability of such things was only possible for some rich farmers and specific parts of the state, increasing the inequalities within the rural arrangements. In many parts of the villages, it was reported that the HYV seed crops had been destroyed by the locals erupting large-scale protest movements in the rural areas. The village-based *jotdars*, who were often functioning as the key Congress leaders or the ones who would be securing the electoral support of the Congress, were understood as the ‘class enemy’. This formal introduction of class-based politics is no doubt a result of the long-term struggles and creation of a powerful

village-based organisational structure by the communists in the state.

Thirdly, there was an unprecedented political event that unfolded: the war with Pakistan in 1971 and India's direct involvement in the process of liberation of East Pakistan and the creation of 'Bangladesh'. This caused some serious demographic changes in West Bengal. An overwhelming number of refugees started flooding into the rural and urban areas of the state. Such a situation could be given as a classic example of how the command of central government policy of accepting the 'Hindu refugees' in the countryside and the cities of West Bengal created a completely different kind of demands which had never been fathomed before this period. Communist Party of India (CPI(M)), with its various factions and allies, had already been working on the unchallenged Congress System in the state, and strengthening their organization at the local rural level intensified their demands during this demographic paradigm shift. These changes in the demand at the bottom level of society were changing the established social and economic orders of rural Bengal.

As mentioned before, a large number of lower caste groups, too, had educational and formal jobs outside the village or farm work, which gave them prominence in the village as an educated '*Bhadrolok*' class whose command should be hard. A large number of such people took part in the communist movements in the rural parts of Bengal where perhaps not the theoretical communism, but the pressing demand of the village was becoming the line of mobilization. The repressive Emergency rule at the central level, implemented by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi worked as one of the push factors and an effective catalyst where the cry for political freedom became stronger than the economic arrangements-based strategy based on which the Congress System worked so far.

### **7.8. Fall of the command to new demands**

After the 1977 election, substantial changes were brought in the political processes and economic structure. The promises with which the left-front government rose in power and got the mandate in the election had to be met. The hereditary tenancy right had been given to the sharecroppers, and trade union-

based left allies created a right-based approach for the nonfarm wage labourer.

What is important here is to mention that these changes had some benefits in the countryside, where the sharecroppers got their due and the land-based dominance of the upper castes diminished. Still, the inequalities were not vanquished as expected. The rural arrangements, primarily based on the class division of the rich and poor, created new forms of power inequalities. It is also not true that the upper caste's dominance had also withered away.

As explained in Chapter V, although the land reform policy was implemented with utmost sincerity at the local rural level, the existing arrangements exactly functioned as they did during the early fifties Congress regime. Because of the rigorous implementation of the Land Reform Act, several land-owning families first split up to show lower land ownership per head, which they later consolidated further and retained thereafter. Apart from such practices, the land reform had also created an unequal distribution of land. Those who did not have any land were given homestead land, meaning they would at least possess the land on which their home existed, along with families with a very number of per headland, of which sometimes non-cultivable lands were there as well.

Such a huge level of land fragmentation made any large-scale agrarian enterprise uneconomic. As the number of family members increased, the per-head land size became so small that several sharecroppers left cultivating their land and migrated or preferred to work in others' large cultivable lands. This trend was observed in both study villages. Sharecroppers or even those who possess some amount of land have realised that cultivation will not yield any benefit and have left agricultural work. In addition, overall pan-Indian agrarian distress has already hit after the era of structural adjustment programmes.

While non-farm work opportunities were given greater importance throughout the country, West Bengal truly lagged in setting up labour-intensive industries. Pabitra Giri's (1998) argument about the industrial stagnation and the huge growth of the population in the post-Bangladesh war, there was a growth of

urbanisation in the state as villages became bereft of agricultural opportunities. Several scholars have critically evaluated The Left government on this ground, but the political machinery was crafted based on an unequal arrangement. The system the Congress era had given birth to was co-opted by the left from the government. Keeping the upper caste and class as the key actors in the village all other aspiring castes were made the political cadre and mobilizers in the villages. The use of government schoolteachers in the village to micromanage the party vote bank has been captured well by Dwipayana Bhattacharyya's (2016) work. He has justly explained the factor of 'party-society' where all the arrangements in the rural areas were based on a dependency-based relationship; therefore, party people emerged as the only actors to keep everyday life economically and socially legit. Kohli (1990) has explained the rise of the hooligans or the local goondas to keep the dominance. Single or handful of rich people in a rural locality on which a large number of people would be dependent in terms of getting social security benefits or the welfare schemes by the government have become the model. In the later stage, this socio-economic inequality has given rise to a change of demands. Rural stagnation in West Bengal peaked and made a concern to the left-front rulers as well. But by the time they resolved to bring change in the economic arrangements in rural areas, the elements of the demand had changed. In the absence of non-farm job opportunities and agrarian decline, a large section of the workers left cultivation and migrated out of the state for other job opportunities. In 2008, the decision to set up a car manufacturing unit in Singur spurred up an unprecedented new demand-based protest.

The opposition leader, who would become the present chief minister took up the issue of forceful land acquisition by the government for the car industry. Amidst the existing economic crisis, the government at the helm did not have much to offer but promised non-farm jobs instead of the farmlands. But the demand was something very different than this; also, the requirements were more immediate than ever. What the Left Front led the government to think about bringing a structural change in the economic condition was not enough to meet the pressing need of the toiling mass mobilised by the opposition.

The direct transfer of the benefit was something the opposition has promised which is still the existing governments' main electoral promise, both at the state and the central level. It must be kept in mind that even when welfarist politics became the major cry of the opposition the rural arrangements of the dependency were already established. Using welfare benefits as the saviour for the poverty-stricken rural unemployed mass had been the major element that started catering for the immediate demand. From our study village itself, the new demand-based change in the arrangement would show how the existing inequalities functioned for setting up a new arrangement for the newly elected government that made providing direct benefits to the rural people one of the major agendas.

It can be discernible from the household survey that a substantial degree of economic inequality exists in both villages. Few upper castes own most of the land, and different kinds of businesses and trade-related enterprises. In the absence of agrarian work, they are also the contractor of the non-farm daily wage labourers and have set up large business ventures using the economically backward sections as the daily wage workers. The Panchayats in the village generally distribute the government benefits. Being an economically dominant section, few of these rich people have a good influence in the Panchayat. As a result, whatever welfare schemes are supposed to be implemented are finally supervised and managed by them.

### **7.9. Understanding the Trend of Transformation**

Such local village-level social and economic arrangements can be observed in a macro pan-Indian context with some variances depending upon the demographic contexts. For example, the entire analysis from the secondary literature and the fieldwork data obtained from the present study on West Bengal has been also seen in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Anthony Carter's 1970 thesis (Cambridge University Press 1974) titled *Elite Politics in Rural India* explains a similar kind of phenomenon in Maharashtra. Anthony's (1970) anthropological work shows that the upper caste *Marathas* and the *Patils* are the most powerful landowners in the rural parts of Maharashtra state, and they have total control over the local resources and the labour forces in the villages. In

various institutions and organisations, their extended kins have occupied influential positions quite strategically, providing them immense control over the Panchayat and the local development works.

According to Anthony (1970), a small section of people controlling a large number of dependents in rural India can be compared with the idea of power elites (Mill, 1959). Therefore, in the changing socio-political scenario in West Bengal, it can be the circulation of elites and the arrangement change rather than actual structural change.

### **7.10. Transformation from command to demand polity**

To come to this new arrangement, the changing trajectories of the political process need to be understood against the backdrop of the overall functioning of the centre and states' objectives and development policies. Short-term and long-term goals of development policies are at the core of setting a system in post-colonial developing countries, and in the case of India, there was no exception. The above explanation of the changing nature of the rural arrangement is the signifier of two things.

First, the power elite groups in rural areas have tried to maintain socio-economic inequalities by creating a dependency-based system in which the patron-client relationship helps them maintain their status quo.

Second, social stratification due to economic transformation has changed the dynamics of dependency. Such a situation has been well explained by a succinct theorisation by Rudolph and Rudolph (1987) in their explanation of command and demand polity. According to them, command polity mostly functions in exchange for the compromise of immediate needs in return for long-term advances.

In this condition, the people in the leadership position, i.e., the government or the context of this thesis, the power elites, assuming the positions of governance, have so far been able to mobilise their masses based on keeping the existing

structure intact in return for keeping a larger promise such as providing employment, distribution of land and giving basic supports to agricultural developments in the rural areas. Land reforms, minimum support price, distributing seeds and fertilisers for free or subsidised rate, etc., were all part of yielding long-term benefits. The policies were formulated at the legislative and executive levels.

The implementation process was dependent on the local institutional arrangements in the villages, where the power elite groups had absolute control over distributing such public goods. However, this structure started changing rapidly as the capital and labour relationship transformed. Agrarian change has been primarily captured in areas where agricultural work did not remain the centre of the rural population's economic activities; rather, industrial and service-based trade and commerce have changed the allocations of resources at the spatial and intersectoral level (Roy, 2009). The institutional structure embedded in the rural system started rearranging its everyday choices and actions based on such transformation. The growth of capitalism in the rural areas of India has immensely affected the earlier version of the labour relationship and, later, the pattern of patronage that could effectively keep the patronage under control. In this context, one of the examples could be the employment guarantee programme.

Faced with the severe decline in the availability of farm-based jobs, the Congress-led UPA coalition government introduced the National Employment Guarantee Act (2005). However, such schemes are implemented through the Panchayats, which have often been biased towards the supporters of the ruling party members in the villages.

Another practice observed in the study village is, in several cases, where the job has been given not only to specific supporters of the ruling party but also in return for fees (in local parlance, *Chanda*, a form of extortion). While such practices are rampant in the village, another group of elites have been converting or investing a large part of their farmland into non-farm enterprises. One of the most important is the brick kiln, which has particularly flourished in the study villages

as the demands for bricks increased after the launch of the *Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojna Scheme*, under which the rural residents would get *pakka* house with monetary support from the central government. In addition, the nation's economic transformation has also widened the economic inequalities between the rural and urban.

In terms of development, rural is severely lagging where the long-term goal-oriented rural job guarantee schemes or supports in agriculture are no longer the primary demand of the people. They are finding better-paying non-farm work in the urban centre, triggering large rural-to-urban seasonal migration or inside rural areas, and farm-to-non-farm diversification of occupation has become the only viable option. In such a situation, the complete sovereignty of the ruling or power elites is infringed by the need for short-term benefits that would help the beneficiaries immediately in their everyday lives.

Several developmental economists have supported direct benefits such as free rations and cash transfers. In the 2021 state assembly election in West Bengal, Nobel laureate Prof. Abhijit Banerjee opined and supported direct cash transfer in the post-pandemic situation (Economic Times 25<sup>th</sup> May 2020, The Hindu 9<sup>th</sup> March 2023), which serves the immediate crisis that has hit the employment, saving and the daily wage of the millions of the people, already living in rural distress.

This direct transfer of benefits has also turned out to be the most successful policy, through which many voters have been mobilised in the countryside, eventually leading to a dependency on such benefits. Such an emergence of a demand polity has an interesting paradigm shift from the earlier activities of the sovereign leadership to the sovereignty of the supporters, voters, or citizens. The transformed condition has had several impacts on the strategies of making promises to the voters and eventually led to a demand polity where rural transformation generates demands at the village level.

Rural transformation, from farm to non-farm occupational shift, changed the

‘demands’ in the arrangements. Now, the local rural elites are more in creating the arrangements to control these direct benefits aimed towards people rather than committing to something that would generate benefits in the future, the earlier command-based process. Therefore, such changes in demand first affect the local actors where the dynamics of the rural elites changed (who are the primary channel to deliver the demand to the command centre), eventually affecting the command-level actors.

Competitive patronage has, therefore, been turned into the central theme of the present electoral process where the dialectics between the command and demand polity is functioning through changing the activities of attaining the arrangements which could against be able to keep the institutional arrangements of the rural elites unhindered by accommodating the demand polity.

This thesis attempted to study and understand the political consequences of inequalities in rural transformation. It has emerged that inequalities are often part of local rural arrangements based on age-old relationships among different caste groups and their relation to occupations. Several government policies, affirmative actions, and democratic methods of decision-making processes have been implemented in the country over the decades. Still, local rural-level studies indicate that decentralisation of power and poverty alleviation schemes do not change the arrangements of the ‘elite’ dominated sub-continental politics.

Most importantly, the control of the resources has remained indirectly in the hands of the locally powerful, economically dominant castes and groups. Creating an arrangement where such practices can be kept unhindered has thus become more competitive. The violent characteristics of an idyllic rural set-up in West Bengal are more of that competition of mobilising people to bring under a dominant group that would secure their everyday needs and counter-violence from the ‘other group’.

In recent scholarships, such arrangements have been termed in various ways. In an attempt to see it through a process approach, it shows what inequality does to

the political processes in rural West Bengal. In the post-Congress era, the left-front government's attempt to emphasise class-based political rhetoric kept the caste-based economic dominance alive. From both the village study, it has come out that not every upper caste in the village is economically dominant, but all economically dominant groups comprise upper caste families. In the case of West Bengal, these rural economic elites have become closer allies of the ruling elite, while the latter's emergence was not from the former class in the last few decades.

The regime of CPI(M) has successfully created a strong base of command polity in the state, which enjoyed its sovereign presence in case of stating their demand and rights and creating an exceptional form of anti-socio-cultural identity politics, unlike many other states of India. However, as Dwipayana Bhattacharyya (2016) pointed out, it created a party society with a conscious effort to replace socio-economic identity with a party-based identity. This arrangement experienced a paradigmatic shift when the primary support base of the CPI(M) had to undergo an eventual occupation transformation. Such change transformed the local arrangements of resource ownership and control and gave rise to a non-elite political leadership in the urban sphere. The political intelligentsia, which so far held the farmer and industrial or factory labourers as the force of mobilisation, had to lose their ground as they failed to cater to the new demands of the changed arrangements.

To understand it in a wider background, it can be concluded that the existing inequalities have created or altered the arrangements of the villages, giving birth to group-based rural elites, who are the main drivers of the sovereign demand polity. Therefore, the 'party society' has been rather fragmented into smaller groups, which has created their independent arrangements based on the local economic conditions, demand, and practices. Inequalities in the rural transformation is thus a regenerative process that has created a new class of people whose identity is more aligned to their capacity of aggregating the latest demands in the changed activities and creating their status quo in the arrangements stemming out of such activities.

In conclusion, defining the characteristics of the political process in West Bengal is essential. The connection between the traditional conservative politics of INC and, later, the radical democracy through the rise of communism-based ideological politics in the state has given birth to a combination of both. On the one hand, the state experienced social and cultural enlightenment during the late eighteenth century on the other hand, the dominance of the upper caste remained and retained its 'elite' position by capturing the post-colonial state power. When such a structure was challenged by a communist ideologically radical political force, the previous economic structure was challenged but practically replaced by the new political elites, who may not be economic elites but wield power through a hegemonic existence of the party structure. The ideological party base has often functioned as the common point of sympathy. Chantal Mauffe's work on Oakeshott (*Radical Democracy – Modern or Postmodern* 1989) explains this as the 'tradition of behaviour'.

Furthermore, Mauffe (Mauffe, 1989) explains that Oakeshott's definition of '...politics is the activity of attending to the general arrangements of a collection of people who, in respect of their common recognition of the manner of attending to this arrangement, compose a single community...' fits well in the context of changing political culture in West Bengal. The 'political society' performed as the 'party society' in everyday attaining that arrangement during the left front's regime. The fall of their rule broke that 'party society' and the control of the party was lost in its rural bastions, but as the interviews during the fieldwork suggest, the same party members and cadres had formed the base of the Trinamool Congress based on the 'tradition of the behaviour'. As Mauffe decodes Oakeshott's argument, this tradition of behaviour is actually an integration of the customs, institutions, laws and diplomatic decisions, forming a common sympathy point explored through a single community. This act of formation of such communities is the 'politics' we can observe in West Bengal. The tradition of the erstwhile CPIM-led government had been created that commonly adhered to sympathy or the tradition of behaviour, which further made the new arrangements of the individual political elite-based TMCP.

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