

Chapter - 1

Introduction

Although West Bengal is endowed with rich natural resources such as large areas of good alluvial soil, abundant surface and ground water resources as well as climatic conditions favorable for agriculture, the agricultural economy of West Bengal has been marked by stagnation for a long period right from pre-independence era (Blyn, 1966). British land policy is said to be responsible for that. It is said that the agrarian structure in pre-Independent Bengal has been largely inequitable and growth retarding. Agrarian relations, mainly semi-feudal in nature, has been characterized by highly skewed land distribution, widespread share tenancy, rack renting, sub-infeudation, usury, interlinked market transactions, forced labour and so on (Malvia, 1954; Sen, 1962). Agrarian arrangement has also been unfavourable for adoption of improved methods of cultivation. Hence, it has been felt that there should be brought a thorough change in agrarian structure. And accordingly, various programmes have been initiated to change the agrarian structure. Of the various programmes, land reform measures have been considered essential for restructuring land and agrarian relations both in the interest of liberating rural peasantry from the stranglehold of the exploitative production relations and

fostering agricultural development. Accordingly, immediately after Independence, the government of West Bengal has been found to enact a series of laws on agrarian front in consonance with the spirit of national land policy whose sole objective has been to remove obstacles of the agrarian structure inherited from colonial rule and to ensure social justice in rural economy. The policy of undertaking land reforms is consistent with this theoretical view that a change in agrarian structure can be brought about by land reforms. And such reforms would change and restructure the legal and contractual arrangement of land whereby people in farming may gain access to productive opportunities on the farm.

Though a number of land reform laws have been enacted right from the early 1950s, their implementation remains inappropriate (Bhaumik, 1993). Many loopholes have been found in the enacted laws. In fact, satisfactory implementation of land reform measures in West Bengal gain prominence since the Left front government regime from 1977 onwards (*Ibid.*).

As a part of land reform measures, the surplus land available due to imposition of ceiling has been redistributed among landless and land-poor farmers and in the process, a large number of small and marginal farmers have emerged. It is to be noted that these farmers constitute the majority of rural population (as per the Agricultural Census estimates of 1990-91, the small and marginal size holdings constitute 91.4 per cent of the total holdings of the State).

As such, it seems natural to think that rural economy should not ignore this section of rural population. In fact, rural development would largely be dependent on their productive performance. But their productive performance in the production front, can largely be taken to be conditioned by the feasibility of their access, among other things, to new technology. And hence, agriculture is likely to respond to new situation created by land reforms; and it may be relevant, in this context, to examine the impact of land reforms on small and marginal farmers in adopting new technology in agriculture.

In recent years, a number of changes have appeared in the rural scenario of West Bengal which have virtually helped eliminating 'agricultural impasse' of the 1970s, pointed out by Boyce in his seminal article published in 1987. That the agricultural impasse had already passed away, was also observed by Sen and Sengupta in 1995 when they estimated the growth rates of net value added in agriculture at constant prices in West Bengal at 6.85 per cent in the 1980s as compared to 2.3 per cent in the 1970s. This breakdown of the agricultural stagnation in the post-1970s has aroused considerable debate among the scholars in identifying the factors responsible for the decadence of '*agricultural impasse*', because the period had witnessed on the one hand, the advent of certain technological changes, popularly known as 'Green Revolution' in West Bengal agriculture, and on the other, certain sincere state efforts towards

implementing land reform measures aimed primarily at changing the agrarian structure in West Bengal.

Some scholars like Bandhyopathyay(1986), Kohli(1987), Dreze and Sen(1989), Lieten (1990), Bhaumik (1993), sen and sengupta (1995), Ghatak(1995), Bhattacharyya(1996), Saha (1996),Banerjee and Ghatak(1996), Ramachandran(1997), Rawal (1997a, 1997b), Rawal and Swaminathan (1998), Sanyal, Biswas and Bardhan (1998) had opined that the agricultural production and productivity improved substantially during the 1980s and onwards because of institutional changes. Some others like Mallick (1992), Harriss(1992,1993) opined that the observed agricultural development in West Bengal was due to application of modern inputs rather than institutional changes.

John Harriss (1992,1993) argued that agricultural growth in West Bengal in the 1980s was mainly because of growth in production of Boro paddy, and was based on an expansion of irrigation by private shallow tube-wells. The remarkable growth in agricultural output was accomplished by some growth in 'suitable technology'. The development of irrigation was driven by the availability of suitable HYVs of seeds, of credit, and a favorable fertilizer-paddy price ratio. And all these had taken place in the absence of any reforms of the agrarian structure. Harriss also pointed out that the significance of the modest agrarian reforms which had been implemented in increasing the

confidence of rural poor, cannot be discounted but the State Government had been instrumental in achieving something of a break-through in agricultural production by means of a focus on the expansion of productive forces. He put evidences of no significant changes in the agrarian structure and concluded that the reforms had not been instrumental in increasing agricultural production.

Rawal and Swaminathan (1998) argued that the evidence clearly showed that the agricultural growth in West Bengal was not merely a result of area and yield growth in Boro paddy. They had shown that over 75 percent of the overall increase in rice production could be attributed to increase in productivity, and as Boro had always been an irrigated crop based on HYVs of seed, yield had always been relatively high and yield growth had not been a major contributor to growth of output. On the contrary, an increase in gross cropped area had contributed to the growth in Boro rice cultivation. They had further pointed out that some changes in cropping pattern were also responsible for the growth of agriculture. They argued that the acceleration in agricultural growth in West Bengal occurred during and after major changes in agrarian institutions and land relations.

Sanyal, Biswas and Bardhan (1998) argued that it was very difficult to agree with Harriss' attempt to play down the role of land reform measures in accelerating agricultural production in West Bengal in recent times. They

pointed that land reform measures intensified 'state intervention in defining property rights in a more meaningful manner, narrowing the gap between ownership and operation'. The measures also widened the access of the small cultivators to technology and other inputs. Mukherjee and Sanyal (1997) argued that since the small and marginal cultivators claimed the largest share of the total holdings, the accessibility referred to above was considered extremely significant from the point of view of growth in production and productivity in the post 1970s.

Lieten (1992) pointed out that the two main components of land reforms carried out in West Bengal under the Left Front Government were tenancy reforms and the redistribution of land. The government launched 'Operation Barga' (O. B.), a programme of tenancy reform, with the support of organisations of rural workers and peasants. The programme, through the registration of the names of the bargadars, ensured security of tenure, prevented the eviction of tenants by non-cultivating landlords and made tenurial contracts more transparent. Ramachandran (1997) argued that the registration of bargadars created new rights for tenants in respect of rent payments. For example, it enabled them to have access to institutional credit from the formal banking sector. Mallick(1992), however, refuted the success of O. B., saying that the Left Front

Government manipulated estimates of the total number of sharecroppers in order to inflate its own performance. Khasnabis(1981), had raised a serious question regarding the viability of innumerable small and marginal farmers created by land reforms and claimed that O.B. was an inappropriate step in the field of tenancy. Thus, the studies of Mallick, Harriss and others questioned about the effectiveness of land reforms in bringing about agricultural transformation. Sengupta (1995), Sen and Sengupta (1995), however, found after analysing trends in input use in West Bengal agriculture, that the growth rates in the intensity of fertilizer use and the extent of adoption of HYVs were lower in the 1980s as compared to the 1970s. Saha (1996) also pointed out that the speed of adoption of HYVs of rice between 1980 and 1989 was not significantly different from that in the period 1966 to 1980, but the yield elasticity with respect to both HYVs and fertilizers was higher in the 1980s than in the 1970s. It was thus evident, he argued that better use or management of HYV and fertilizer technology was more responsible for higher yields than that of increased use of HYVs, or in other words, improved complementarity between HYVs and fertilizer was likely to have led to higher production (Sen and Sengupta (1995). Ghatak (1995) found that O.B. had significant positive effect on the rate of expansion of boro cultivation and on investment in private irrigation. Banerjee and Ghatak (1996) observed that tenancy reforms had a 'significantly

positive effect on the productivity of all crops working mainly through yields'. Bhaumik (1993) studied the effects of O. B. on agricultural production and productivity in Midnapore district and pointed out some of the ways in which O.B. provided incentives to tenants to raise production. Frisvold's (1994) findings indicated that supervision by family members was required for raising the productivity of the higher labour, but because of fragmentation of land holdings the level of supervision was low in his study area, Aurepalle, a rice growing village in the Mahbubnagar district of Andhra Pradesh. Thus at a constant supervision intensity, an increase in the ratio between hired and family labour would to loss output. Now as this relation had been seen to be a rising function of the separation between ownership and operation, barga recordings and the distribution of vested land would reduce the output loss attributable to low levels of supervision intensity. Barga operation has raised the level of ownership holdings. Available evidence suggest that the sale of land holdings in parts by the land lords to the tenants with an option for barga holdings has gone up substantially after 1978. Rawal (1997c) found that agrarian movement had a profound impact on rural markets, and in particular, on land and credit markets are argued that redistributive implications of agrarian reforms went far beyond the achievements of direct public action.

However, without going into the controversy regarding the relative importance of land reform measures and the penetration of new technology in raising

agricultural productivity and hence removing agricultural impasse, it has to be pointed out at the very outset that agriculture is likely to respond to land reforms and new technology in the event when we recognise that redistributive land reforms have created a large number of small and marginal farmers, and any attempt towards increasing agricultural productivity would largely be dependent on the feasibility of their access to new technology.

That land reforms have been followed by a strong technological response on the cultivator-beneficiaries is borne out by the study of two villages, although such a conclusion would be reinforced in any study incorporating a larger number of villages. At the same time, it is also to be pointed out that at macro-level study it seems very difficult to identify the cultivator-beneficiaries cum adopters of new technology. And hence, we have carried out an in-depth study at the village level.

To carry out the study at village level, we have taken two villages from Dhupguri Block under the District, Jalpaiguri of West Bengal to delineate agricultural responses of land reforms and new technology on the economy of two villages. The villages have been selected purposely. Those two villages are such that where new technology has become widespread and at the same time where land reform measures have been preponderant.

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A detailed village investigation has been taken on a complete enumeration basis for the collection of data we have prepared a questionnaire with an eye to the research parameters selected for the study. The data, thus collected, have been processed and analysed both on simple numerical terms as well as by applying some simple statistical and mathematical techniques. For our macro-studies, we have depended largely on the secondary data as available from various reports and records available from government sources, articles as well as published books on the theme.

To delineate agricultural responses to land reforms and new technology we have organised our analyses into the following chapters. Chapter 2 describes agricultural situation in pre independent Bengal. Chapter 3 follows this where we have analysed land reform measures and their consequences on agrarian economy of West Bengal. The chapter has given a special attention to '*Operation Barga*' programme initiated by the Government of West Bengal since seventies of the previous century. Chapter 4 deals with an analysis of the agricultural responses to land reforms and new technology in agrarian West Bengal. Chapter 5 attempts to examine such agricultural responses at the village level in order to identify as far as practicable the beneficiaries of land reforms cum adopters of new technology. We have summarised our analysis in Chapter 6. In this chapter we have also tried to suggest certain ways and means for tackling some of the problems we have referred to in our discussion with some concluding remarks.