

Development Policies and Democratic Disruptions: Predicaments of the Marxist Left

This paper argues that development policies operate in Indian democracy at the interstices of two largely different yet interconnected worlds – of technical formulation and political formations. The Indian Left found dramatic success in its land reform policies as it travelled between the two by combining its programmatic goals with pragmatic governance, and – by contrast – failed miserably to overcome popular protest against acquiring farmland when it was driven by a top-down bid for industrialisation. Populist disruptions, strategically negotiated with, play a far more productive role in India's democracy than ordinarily acknowledged in effecting a political scrutiny of state policies for economic development – however sound and desirable.

[Key words: land reforms, land acquisition, Special Economic Zone, primitive accumulation, populism, peasant protest, political society, party society, Communist Party of India (Marxist), Trinamul Congress, industrialisation, Singur, Nandigram, West Bengal, postcolonial capital]

Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya¹

When do developmental policies succeed? When do they fail? In this essay I will look into two major policy thrusts of a state government in West Bengal, an eastern Indian state bordering Bangladesh to the east and Nepal to the north. Here, led by a parliamentary left coalition, the

¹ Dr Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya of the Centre for Political Studies at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi (India) can be contacted at dwai22@gmail.com. The author, not the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore, is liable for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

government remained in power for thirty-four years – a record duration in ever-changing Indian politics. Many suggest that such an exceptionally long tenure was mainly on the account of – among other factors – a slew of land reform policies that the left-wing government adopted in the first few years of coming into power. These reforms helped distribute land to the landless and give security of tenure to the sharecroppers, and build a large constituency of electoral support for the government in the state's rural areas where a vast majority of the population lived. Several commentators are also of the opinion that the dramatic collapse of the regime in 2011 resulted largely from its faulty land acquisition policies for setting up industrial infrastructure and Special Economic Zones. While both of these policies were meant for the state's 'development', the question is: what actually made the first set work in favour of the government – offering rich electoral dividends – while the second set turned out to be so blatantly mistaken – unseating the left from power? In exploring these queries, the paper aims to address some critical issues of democratic politics and the Marxist left's rhetorical ambivalence on economic development in postcolonial India.

Let me highlight the basic argument of this paper. It goes on to show that governmental policies always operate at the interstices of two largely different, if interconnected, worlds – of technical formulations and political formations. The first realm (of technical formulations) involves debates and discussions as well as convergences and differences on competing policy options (including discussions in the media, academic interventions, party resolutions etc). Such activities reflect distinct sectional interests comprising the dominant segments of the state power as they draw upon a variety of intellectual, ideational, legal and technical resources to give the body of a policy its definitive contour. The process is indifferent to various approaches in political science literature that perceive the workings of the state as an institutional field of competing forces. So it matters little whether the state represents the 'dominant proprietary classes' or gets wrapped in the stalemate of a 'passive revolution of capital' or appears as 'locked in place' along a course of path dependency. Technical quality of a policy does matter. On the other end of the spectrum, there happens to be the field of political formations. The efficacy of even technically sound policies depend a good deal on how they are received by various political constituencies, which follow the logic of 'populism' as they oscillate like a pendulum between an idealized world of complete consent and an anarchic danger of absolute dissent. In short, the discursive elements of a policy, however well-defined and desirable, find their rightful place only if they stand the test of disruptive elements in a democratic polity.

Some policies indeed appear as sudden (such as the decision to liberalise the Indian economy in the early 1990s), but they are the results of cumulative pressures built over decades through discursive deliberations, pressures that find a point of exit at a particular moment of crisis ('tectonic displacement'). The suddenness of such shifts may give the appearance of their origin solely in the discursive fields of deliberation, as though popular politics stands complicit in its acceptance of such policies without a murmur, without a voice of dissent. The reality, however, is different. The fact that the opening of the market and the so-called withdrawal of the state in India were accompanied by the state's renewed attempt to engage with the social sector – expansion of the rural employment guarantee schemes is a good example – is a vindication of the balance that is sought to be struck between discursive imperatives and dissenting potentials in the implementation of public policies in this country. It is only such a fine balance of programmatic goals and pragmatic concerns that can make a policy tick.

Before we take up two specific policies in West Bengal – of land reforms in the late 1970s and land acquisition in the late 2000s – let me contextualize the larger political landscape in the country on which the policy dynamics were located. As is widely known, the peculiarity of India's development strategies is that the institutions of modernity and its associated processes (such as, industrialization, bureaucratization, commercialization, secularization, urbanization, individuation etc.) did not precede the establishment of democratic channels for popular representation as it happened in major Western European economies. The state in the West could exercise early industrial policies over a largely non-enfranchised population by means of what Marx graphically described as "the bloody legislation against the expropriated" (*Capital*, Volume 1, Chapter 28). By contrast, in India, industrial developmental goals had to be wedded through negotiations to a very different democratic reality. Moreover, the reality itself was not static, but was changing ceaselessly since the middle of the last century, from the beginning of the republic. Success of several policies geared to 'nation-building' in the early Nehru years was primarily due to the acceptance of such policies (including the industrial policy of the Second Five Year Plan that caused a severe food crisis) among a large segment of an expectant population, whose resolute faith in the abilities of the national leadership was as yet intact. The hegemonic moment elapsed by the late 1960s, and from late 1970s more segmented perspectives of development – reflecting particularistic angles of caste, region or religion – undermined the idea of a homogenous nationhood. Simultaneously, as a second major change, the collapse of the 'Congress System' made way for the rise of regional parties and power blocs, upsetting a unitary centre of command by a nationalistic leadership. This twin blows, of

heterogeneous developmental interests and pluralistic popular representation, further complicated any dialogue between what we call the technical and the political in Indian democracy.

Take the case of land reforms first. Demands for land reforms and land to the tiller to break the domination of the rural exploiters and to increase productivity were part of the nationalist discourse against colonialism. A resolution of the Indian National Congress in 1935 pointed out that ‘a system of peasant proprietorship under which the tiller of the soil is himself the owner of it and pays revenues direct to the government without the intervention of any zamindar or taluqdar’ was a ‘fundamental method of improving village life’. After independence, these concerns were duly carried through the First Five Year Plan (1951-56), and in some states steps were taken to eliminate big tax-farming zamindars. However, instead of delivering land and other resources to the land poor or landless, such policies ended up empowering the class next in line on the rural hierarchy: intermediary landlords and the rich peasants. As John Harriss (2012) has recently pointed out, the demand for ‘land to the tiller’ figured in Congress party’s agenda only until the mid-1950s, and since the late 1950s, the Congress buried the agenda under the leadership of Charan Singh, a north Indian leader of the rich farmers. It was only a matter of years, not even a decade, that the Congress launched a policy alternative to land reforms known as the ‘Green Revolution’ to fight food shortage in the country. This required capital intensive interventions without any serious change of property relations through the intervention of the state.

So the discursive evolution of land reforms continued until the 1960s, and was seen as consistent with some key goals of ‘nation-building’ (such as distributive justice and a socialistic pattern of development). Since the middle of the 1960s, land reform was dropped as a national policy option. In several states, a section of farmer entrepreneurs – the ‘bullock capitalists’ – now extended their influence over the public/political arena, feeding into the staggering ‘Congress System’. With their interests well-entrenched in the rural localities, attempts were now made to suppress the mobilization of the poor peasants for land, for better wages or for secured tenancy contracts. By contrast, West Bengal’s political scenario in the late 1960s and early 1970s (which we shall see shortly) was radically different; here an agile popular struggle was underway led by the left peasant unions. The Congress government, which came into power in the state in 1972, could not but respond to such agrarian dissents and had to formally initiate a number of legislative measures through its Land Reform Acts. However, in tune with

the overall Congress politics of the time, the laws were kept pending and never executed. It was only in the late 1970s, when a newly elected Left Front came into power, the laws were brought back to the table and the government decided to implement them with a new gusto.

What compelled the Left Front to pay extra attention to land reforms and what made an effective implementation possible? Two successive peasant movements in the state, since the mid-twentieth century, in demand of radical land and tenancy reforms made it obligatory for the left government to act. The first wave was the 'Tebhaga' movement and the second was the 'Naxalite' upsurge. Tebhaga, which meant a third as share, was the rallying call of the sharecroppers, whom the local landlords (or jotedars) compelled to transfer at least half of their produce even when the latter did not make any investment at all. In 1946-47, the CPI and the Krishak Sabha mobilized the sharecroppers, demanding a revision of the crop-sharing arrangement and a two-thirds share of the produce for them. Within months, the campaign spread like a wild fire in nineteen districts of the undivided Bengal, making the systemic injustice of extant agrarian relations apparent to the poor peasants. Another bout of peasant stridency made way in mid-1967, when the 'Siliguri Group' of the CPI (M) orchestrated an armed uprising against the landlords. The rebellion took place when the party was a partner in the ruling United Front coalition, which put the government in a fix on whether to support the movement – which would have offered New Delhi an excuse to topple the government on a platter – or to quell the rising peasants. After the failure of its initial attempts to pacify the movement and bring the dissenting factions under control, the CPI (M) decided to send police to suppress the movement.

Though the unruly peasants were put down, their demands – which had a longer lineage in West Bengal politics – continued to linger. In 1973, the Central Committee of the CPI(M) agreed in a resolution that breaking 'the monopoly of the land enjoyed by the landlord class... is in the common interest of the entire peasantry' (CPI(M) 1973, 6). The party demanded 'fundamental land reforms by abolishing landlordism without any compensation (CPI(M) 1973, 3). It characterised the Congress-initiated land reform laws of 1972 as 'hollow' and 'pitiful'. By contrast, it pledged to implement 'more authentic' land policies if it ever came to power. So, the 1977 victory of the Left Front did not only make possible a series of agrarian laws protecting the rural poor, such laws were in fact mandated by West Bengal's recent political history. However well-intended these laws might have been, they would have

remained politically unviable, and therefore ineffective, without the political pressure brought in by the peasant struggles that preceded legislation.

Also, a discursive milieu or political climate was capable of generating such a big policy-impact because West Bengal's economy demanded a speedy formulation of protective laws for its suffering peasants. The state had chronic food shortages (which prompted Left-led 'food movements' twice since independence) and a massive influx of refugees from the east when Bengal got divided in 1947, and once more after India's war with Pakistan in 1971. The level of rural poverty was stark. In 1982, more than 80 per cent of rural households in the state owned less than 5 acres. The degree of destitution and polarization becomes visible if one takes note of the fact that the number of households holding less than .01 acres shoot up by 76 per cent in the 1970s, while the concentration of holding rose dramatically (67.6 per cent) among the 'large' landholders (5-10 acres) and 'middle' peasants (2.5-5 acres, by 62.3 per cent) (Bhaumik, 1989, 156; Lieten, 1990, 2265). West Bengal also had an unusually low land-man ratio: about 40 million people depending on barely 13.6 million acres, or less than .34 acres per capita (GoWB, 1989). There was an additional sociological factor in post-partition Bengal that helped towards a smooth passage and implementation of the land reform laws. The upper echelons of West Bengal's bureaucracy – as many top officials were migrants from eastern Bengal leaving behind whatever family property they possessed – had little attachment to agricultural land that was far less than elsewhere, minimizing the scope of subversions of reforms laws. It was, therefore, a mix of such discursive formulations, dissenting formations and socio-economic conditions, as we can see, that produced the requisite 'will' to enact and execute land-ceiling and tenancy laws in the state to the benefit of sharecroppers, agricultural workers and poor peasants.

The extent to which these laws succeeded can be gauged from the following figures: Up to 1977, when the Left took charge, only 59.8 per cent of land, already vested in the government, was distributed. By 1990, this proportion rose to 71.92 per cent, 1.94 million got 0.46 acres each. With only 3.4 per cent of the country's total cultivable area, West Bengal's share of land distributed was as high as 18.7 per cent. With only 5 per cent of the country's intended beneficiaries, West Bengal's share of actual beneficiaries was 48 per cent. A survey conducted in several Indian states revealed that West Bengal had the largest share of recorded bargadars (82.8 per cent) in 1990 (all figures from Bhattacharyya 2016, Chapter 2). In the 1980s, the first decade following the initial reforms, the state recorded an estimated annual growth in food

grains production by 6.5 per cent, the highest among the country's seventeen major states. This, however, followed a decade of impasse in the 1990s, when the growth dipped to 2 per cent. Yet, West Bengal in the early 2000s ranked third in agricultural intensity among all Indian states (Guruswamy, Sharma and Mohanty 2005: 2152, Table 2). There can be little doubt that apart from the political dividends in the form of periodic electoral approvals for a record duration, the Left's land policy also succeeded in offering productive implications for West Bengal's agrarian political economy.

To conclude this part of our story, let us go back to the beginning. When do development policies succeed? The fate of the land reform policy, as shaped and implemented by the Left, shows that they succeed when there is a clear politico-legal thrust in favour of such policies and when the execution of such policies receives appropriate and effective support from the grassroots. In a democracy, it is important for the discursive thrust from the top to maintain an organic tie with the popular moods at the grassroots level, either to overcome resistance or to shore up support. At times, such an exercise manages to bypass popular dissent by 'selling' a policy as inevitability in the face of a crisis (India's pro-market reforms of the early 1990s, for instance). Most often, however, it follows the logic of populism, of carving an 'internal frontier' to form an 'equivalential chain' so that the discrete 'democratic demands' get an extended horizon to transform into robust 'populist demands' for policy change (Laclau, 2005, 83-93). We have seen above how some major agrarian movements in the post-independent West Bengal helped precisely to create such a moral case for land distribution and tenure security. I have argued elsewhere that this, in turn, required a government to activate its programmatic principles from the top, simultaneously in tune with its pragmatic manoeuvring from below so that what one may call the 'elevated' institutions of the state (such as the legislature and top bureaucracy) could work in tandem with the 'embedded' organs of power (peasant organizations, local government bodies and the lower bureaucracy). Such coordinated initiatives make possible a reciprocal interaction between the quotidian, everyday life-world of the population at large, and the far-reaching, long-term goals of developmental policies. This act of connecting the discursive with the potentially dissenting realms in the state-society dynamics, either by a disciplined party, a charismatic leader or a dynamic civil society, delivers workable policies from a politically effective administration. We called such arrangements 'government as practice' - a category distinct from 'governmentalism' (in which all attention is paid to the technicality of laws with little appreciation of popular movements) as well as

‘good governance’ (where the focus is on efficiency, minimizing profligacy and corruption, in a top-down mechanism of delivering public goods).

Before going into a contrasting case of the Left’s *failed* industrial policy, here is a short note on West Bengal’s unique political culture. Since the Left Front was elected in 1977, political parties assumed growing importance in the state. The Left made maximum use of its partisan strength for implementing land laws and pioneering administrative decentralisation (that is, the setting up of the panchayats). Its ideological orientation of class politics and emphasis on a strong and disciplined organisation paved the way for the emergence of ‘the party’ as the central mediatory idiom, especially in the countryside. While in other states individual leaders and/or identity based associations played a much larger role in defining the public sphere, in West Bengal the collective hold of ‘the party’ superseded all other entities. While the party commonly followed the norms of legal-formal transactions and tutored the people in the art of government, if needed it also indulged in violating laws to protect what it reckoned as the interests of the poor. The site of such transactions has powerfully been identified as ‘political society’ in Partha Chatterjee’s work, a sphere distinct both from both the state and civil society of the (rights bearing) citizens. Taking a cue from Chatterjee, I have shown elsewhere that a distinct form of political society – which I called ‘party society’ – had evolved in rural West Bengal, sharing some key characteristics of its more generic form but also differing importantly from the latter.

Over the long Left Front decades (1977-2011), the character of the party-society transformed. In the early years of its pro-poor initiatives (which included the successful land policies), the left could install a hegemonic power that enjoyed a good deal of popular consent. This, however, did not last longer than a decade, roughly. Eventually, as the Left’s reformist spirits ran out of steam, coercive techniques and enforced loyalty began to rule in an increasingly bureaucratic, insensitive and unresponsive environment. The character and composition of the Left’s local leadership also changed in the process. Earlier, in the days of idealist reformism, the schoolteachers typified the grassroots leadership of the party society. In the later years, the teachers were replaced by the petty entrepreneurs of the local economy: the contractors, agents of illegal micro-credit companies, the ration-dealers, the builders and the like. Working in high-risk informal economies, these people were driven chiefly by their narrow instrumental interests, which made it mandatory for them to be on the right side of political power. As the defeat of the Left became imminent, a sizeable section of these local leaders – veering around

what in current parlance is called ‘the Syndicate’ – switched sides and turned almost overnight into leaders of the Trinamul Congress. The Trinamul, in turn, inherited the local leaders and their clientele, but not the organisational structure of the Left parties and thus, – under the towering leadership of an autocratic leader – is currently governing the state as a ‘deficient party’ in party-society. That, however, is another story.

While the record card for agriculture during the three decades of Left rule in West Bengal was not too bad, in the field of industrial production – for reasons we are not getting into here – the state experienced a steady fall. Between the mid-1980s and 2001, investment of industrial capital went up by more than seven fold in the country, whereas in West Bengal it grew by only four fold. Over the same period, the country witnessed a rapid rise in the number of industries, while in West Bengal the number of people employed in industries actually dropped by almost half. Worse still, the state’s share of ‘sick’ industries continued to be larger than the national average. Also, in the first decade of economic reform (1993-94 to 2001-02), the country witnessed an expansion of the share of manufacturing, but in West Bengal it actually shrunk. Between 1971 and 2002, West Bengal’s share in the country’s total number of factories dipped (from 9.87 to 4.74 per cent), as did its share of total employment (from 16.19 to 6.99) and net industrial value addition (from 14.38 to 4.16). In 2004, the industrial investment in West Bengal was 4.9 per cent of the total investment in the country, falling behind Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Uttar Pradesh (Guruswamy, Sharma and Mohanty 2005: 2153-4; Government of India 2010: 64).

Such contrasts between agriculture and industry produced a curious situation in West Bengal. Although agricultural surplus was produced, it lacked an adequate market. People had spendable cash, but lacked avenues for making sustainable investments. Younger generations from peasant families with some years of schooling developed higher aspirations, but lacked opportunities to move outside the rural regions. As a result, West Bengal, especially rural West Bengal, eventually turned into a home for a low-skilled workforce willing to break free of unprofitable agriculture but incapable of doing so. A tiny section of this adventurous lot migrated to other states for jobs in manufacturing, construction or handicraft industries. The bulk which stayed behind had to get embedded in the small-change service sector of the vast countryside, indulging in petty trade or manufacturing. The bottom line was: agriculture’s share in the state’s population in 2005 was 65 per cent, while its share in the economy was a measly 26 per cent. Rural West Bengal spawned a highly politicised ambience with a large number of

under- or unemployed workers ideally fit to be ‘useful’ foot-soldiers for different political parties.

From the mid-1990s, and more emphatically from the early 2000s, the CPI (M) realised that the contradiction between a post-land reform agrarian sector and an underperforming industrial sector cannot coexist and that there had to be a push for rapid industrialisation. The party had long blamed the central government for its allegedly discriminatory attitude to West Bengal - particularly its freight equalisation policies, which deprived the state of its location advantages. With the liberalisation of the Indian economy and a diminishing role of the state in determining destinations for capital, West Bengal saw new opportunities in the prevailing competitive atmosphere. The state’s unique political stability, social peace, skilled workforce, cheap labour, low rate of attrition and a well spread out market, it was reckoned, should be attractive for investors. The state government became highly proactive to portray itself as industry-friendly and laid out several concessions for potential investors. The government’s somewhat frantic attempt to achieve a fast-track industrialization not only overshadowed the Left’s traditional criticisms of economic ‘liberalisation’, but it also betrayed a distinct lack of appreciation of the potential of popular dissent in the Indian democracy.

In August 2005, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, the chief minister of the Left Front government, left for Jakarta with a twenty-two member trade team to sign a memorandum of understanding with Indonesia’s biggest industrial house, the Salim Group of Companies, to set up a township in South 24 Parganas and a Special Economic Zone in Nandigram in East Medinipur. The project was named ‘New Kolkata Development’ (NKID), involving almost 39,000 acres of farmland in the two districts with a proposed investment of 40,000 crore rupees. The following year, in 2006, after a massive electoral triumph, the chief minister declared the setting up of a car factory by the Tata Group in Singur - a paddy and potato producing town in the Hooghly district. The project, located some 45 kilometres north-west of Kolkata, was to acquire some 1000 acres of agricultural land over six *maujas*. Both the proposals triggered off an unprecedented bout of popular protest in West Bengal against the acquisition of farmland. For the first time, the Left government appeared as inimical to the interests of the peasant classes. Mamata Banerjee and her Trinamool Congress reaped maximum benefits from these protests and eventually galvanised a formidable strength that ousted the Left from state power after thirty-four years of uninterrupted rule. I have detailed elsewhere the events that led to the protest and the state repression that followed. Here, let me summarise a key debate within the

Left to highlight its inadequate understanding of the dynamics of popular democracy in contemporary India.

Of a surfeit of polemical exchanges on the peasant protest and state reaction in Singur and Nandigram, I select here the one between economist Amit Bhaduri and chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee. Bhaduri's was a radical left criticism of the government's industrialisation policies. By contrast, Bhattacharjee, a politburo member of the CPI (M), defended his government's action in his bid to explain the urgent need to invite private investments in West Bengal. I would argue that both of these positions, apparently bipolar as they were, suffered from a common fallacy: both undermined the potentials of populist protest in Indian democracy that render any unilateralism, on the part of the state or the market, impossible. Both focused on the technical (discursive, logical, rational) aspects of land acquisition policies, while paying little attention to the limits of both the state and the market to enact policy-goals when the disruptive potentials of what we called political formations remain more or less unaddressed.

Bhaduri wrote two essays criticising the model of development adopted by the Indian state in the post-liberalisation period on which both the Right and the parliamentary Left, he alleged, had converged. (Bhaduri 2007a, 2007b). The model assumed that a high rate of economic growth would eventually produce a trickle-down effect bringing economic benefits for the country's entire population: the rich and the poor, the urban and the rural. By assigning the leading role to private corporations, the new scheme expected the state to facilitate acquisition of large tracts of land on which capital-intensive industries and SEZs could be set up and to coerce any popular resistance against these projects into submission. The model, he claimed, was fully on display in Nandigram and Singur. Although it was claimed to be 'good' for the country, the policy was to transfer "more and more resources to the so-called high productivity sector producing for the rich in the name of comparative sectoral advantage". The poor, at the other end, were denied resources "because they have no purchasing power". For this 'internal colonialism', the real aim was to dispossess the majority poor for catering to the insatiable greed of a minority rich.

Bhaduri anticipates two possible political outcomes from this model of development. It could either generate a crisis of parliamentary legitimacy – no regime that propagated an urban centric development in contemporary India was returned by the electorate either in the states or at the

centre (Bhaduri 2007a: 553). Or it could create possible crisis for parliamentary democracy itself as illustrated by the Maoist insurgence in the tribal areas where the government had habitually treated dispossession as simply a case of ‘collateral damage’ in the country’s historic progress. Calling the new economic policy ‘terroristic’, Bhaduri offered three concrete suggestions for the Left’s consideration. They should adopt a selective approach to globalisation with a focus on the internal market, demand full employment “by making agriculture and the rural economy the centre of economic dynamism” and fight to scrap the Fiscal Responsibility and the Budget Management Act (2003) which – as desired by the IMF, the World Bank and the multinational corporations – reduced public expenditure on health, education and other welfare needs of the poor.

On the other end, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee presented the ‘conventional’ Left perspective at a gathering of the CPI (M) unit leaders on February 9, 2007. (Bhattacharjee 2007). He declared that there was no ‘model’ of development for his government to adopt, as it was on an ‘untraveled path’ in an economic system not amenable to his party’s ideology. West Bengal maintained a steady agricultural growth of 4 per cent per annum against the country’s 2 per cent, though many sceptics had doubts about the viability of small-holding cultivation post-land reform. In addition, the state ranked first in the country in the production of fish and vegetables and attained self-reliance for the first time in the production of paddy. This brought a good amount of disposable cash for rural West Bengal, turning it into a huge market for consumer goods. “Our kisans”, Bhattacharjee asserted, “possess the highest purchasing power of industrial goods in the whole of the country today in the retail sector, be it cement, radio, cycle, motorcycle, or apparel”.

Arguing that “the transition from agriculture to industry is an *inevitable* phenomenon both in capitalism and in socialism” and “we cannot agree with the postulate that agriculture is the last and final stage of development”, the chief minister highlighted the crisis that West Bengal would face if the government failed in its responsibility to modernise agriculture and create opportunities for those waiting to move out. With the rising demographic pressure, agricultural land was getting fragmented. Moreover, the rising input costs made agriculture less remunerative. With little investment in infrastructure – in areas such as refrigerated shades, transport, and food processing – a large amount of perishable produce was routinely getting wasted. Some critics of his government, he claimed, wanted him to “not proceed any further

and stay in place... and enjoy the success we have achieved” - a sure recipe to “stagnate and drift backwards”.

Industrialisation, from the standpoint of the government, was not a matter of choice. Two main challenges had to be overcome: the paucity of capital and of land. While there was nothing unusual in the state’s demand for capital, West Bengal, with a high density of population, had a serious problem with land availability. The state had only 1 per cent of its land as fallow (against 17 per cent in the country), 13 per cent under forest cover, 23 per cent under urban and industrial settlement and a vast 63 per cent under intense cultivation. To set up industry, Bhattacharjee pointed out, acquisition of agricultural land was unavoidable.

Land acquisition, however, had already become a contentious issue across the country. “Under capitalism, in India, the expropriation of the land of the peasantry is taking place in a brutal manner” the chief minister observed. “In our drive for industrialisation in West Bengal”, he assured, “we will not proceed this way”. Recounting Left-led peasant struggles in the 1960s and 1970s, which brought 83 per cent of the state’s agricultural land under the possession of poor and marginal peasants, he said West Bengal was different from other states in which “the zamindars own the land and the lathi-wielding *pehelwans* run the Panchayat”. Barely five weeks before his police would open fire on the protesting peasants in Nandigram, the chief minister promised: “We are committed to protect the interest of the farmers. If land needs to be taken, it will be done by providing those owning and dependent on land a fair deal, without coercion”.

Now let us look at what was living and what was sterile in both these positions. Bhaduri was right when he said that the present model of growth as development was not going to accommodate the displaced labour in modern industries and it was an illusion that enough jobs would be created. He was also right that the model had to have a strong bipolar effect on the society creating a wedge between the rich and the poor. He was, however, unrealistic to assume that a *rupture* was inevitable, leading either to a legitimacy crisis for the system or the government. Such systemic ruptures – in the form of war or revolution – were indeed the nodal points in the history of European capitalism, but the Indian case – with a functional democracy in vogue – was clearly different. Conditions of universal suffrage, a liberal constitutional regime and the need to conform to a global standard of human rights made it not just necessary, but also possible, to politically manage such ruptures in the interest of capital’s reproduction. Moreover, a legitimacy crisis of the government, prompting a defeat for the ruling regime in

the elections, was a possible, but by no means inevitable, outcome. To overcome such possibilities, all it required was a greater appreciation of popular politics and a better handling of protests by the government, which doubtless were seriously lacking. Bhaduri was blatantly unrealistic to expect that the Left governmental, by no means wielding ‘the state power’, was in any position to neutralise the ‘predatory instincts’ of corporate capital.

On his part, Bhattacharjee seemed right in arguing that his government could not transcend capitalism. He was also right that West Bengal’s industrialisation had to rely on private capital, as there was no alternative source of financing within the present economic arrangements. He was, however, wrong in assuming that industry was to radically displace agriculture as the ‘future’.² Development of capitalism in postcolonial India, unlike in most of Europe, followed rather than preceded conditions of popular democracy thereby annulling expropriation of the peasantry or of the informal workforce that constituted the country’s overwhelming majority as a politically permissible project. Instead of considering himself as a facilitator for West Bengal’s ‘fortuitous’ though rather late, industrial transition, a Left chief minister’s firm emphasis should have been on representing the multitude outside the circle of corporate capital to maximise its benefits. That the Left completely failed to understand this political responsibility was revealed even when the chief minister admitted that “there was a mistake (in Nandigram) on the part of the local authority, for it initiated steps without informing the local people”. If in its governmental mentality the Left was genuinely inclined to stand by ‘the local people’, the lapse could not have been perceived simply as one of information alone, but more critically of its failure to put in place a mode of consultation, dialogue or conversation at the lowest level. In short, driven by the high spirit of its rational-technical righteousness, what was critically missing from the Left’s policy agenda was an appreciation of the demands of its (what we call) ‘political formation’.

Curiously, their differences apart, both Bhaduri and Bhattacharjee shared a common ground. While one opposed capitalism as a radical left critic, the other facilitated capitalism as a modernising chief minister, but both held a universal conception of capital essentially derived from its European history. In this understanding, capital is inexorably capable of subsuming all

² “We are facing a transitional period of development; from agriculture to industry...I am very clear about what we are trying to do... Another point being raised is that industrialisation means capitalist development... If you want industry you have to ask all industrial houses including big business to invest...” ‘It is high time we move from agriculture to industry’: Interview with Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, *The Hindu*, February 27, 2007, quoted in Das 2013: 247.

pre-capitalist economic forms, for better (Bhattacharjee) or for worse (Bhaduri). Consequently, the history of capitalism in India is viewed as more or less an action replay – albeit at a different pace and scale – in which capital will inevitably triumph over all pre-capitalist production forms as happened in more advanced global economies. In recent times, however, some reframed Marxist readings of India's political economy have offered a very different understanding. They rather stressed on a different trajectory of capitalist industrialisation in this country, a difference borne by the fact that here capital has little choice but to negotiate under conditions of popular democracy with pre-modern, pre-capitalist, grossly political and even extra-market agents and processes. The message is clear: it is impossible to understand the process of economic transformation in India without bringing the uncharted potentials of democracy back in, without acknowledging the capacity of popular politics to disrupt every existing script derived from other histories and other places. Consequently, the pre-capitalist production processes – the antecedents of capital – do find a democratic space for an afterlife in India's capitalism.

How can democracy disrupt the policies of capitalist industrialization? A crop of historical and sociological writings has sought answers to this as they studied Indian democracy through this prism of difference. Many of them placed it within a larger interrogation of postcolonial democracies, their distinctive institutions and practices. They point out that among the votaries of industrial modernisation (which include different shades of the Left), the idea of India's 'historical lag' persists. This 'lag' is expected to be mitigated by a 'catching up' (or transition), an idea that Sudipta Kaviraj has shown is premised on the assumption that all the processes and institutions of modernity are functionally coeval, that is, they are 'symmetric' in their development. Calling this a typical example of 'diffusionist teleology', Kaviraj proposes an alternative way of reading modernity sequentially, in which the relationship between industrial capitalism and democracy emerges as all but functionally correlated. Instead "of emerging and evolving symmetrically, and being related functionally, capitalism and democracy have a contradictory, at least oppositional, relation for a long period in the early history of modernity" (Kaviraj 2005, 512). The wider theoretical implications of this revisionist reading include that there can be no given precondition for capitalist industrialisation, nor can there be an inevitability of equating industrialisation with 'development' or 'modernity'. In other words, popular politics in India is capable and entitled to give shape to its own modernity, and the narrative of industrialisation, as part of that modernity, cannot be expected to follow any prescribed script.

Arguing somewhat on a comparable line, Dipesh Chakrabarty talks about two histories of capital, History 1 and History 2. While History 1 follows the known story of primitive accumulation whereby capital subsumes all pre-capitalist forms for its expanded production, History 2 consists of antecedents of capital that do not make capital's life-process, but causes disruptions to capital's self-reproduction. "Marx", says Chakrabarty, "does not himself think through this problem, although his method, if my analysis is right, allows us to acknowledge it" (Chakrabarty 2000:67). While History 1 unleashes industry and efficiency, profit and property, rationality and modernity, History 2 imbibes customs and rites, spatial practices and lethargy, commons and affect. It is in the play between the two, between capital's adventure for expansion and people's struggle for retaining their habitat, that the politics of industrialisation, and policies for 'development', need be configured. One must only be blind to assume that democracy by default facilitates industry as internal to a universal modernity.

Two other sets of argument that follow a similar strand are those of Kalyan Sanyal and of Partha Chatterjee. Sanyal rather radically rejects the idea of 'development' in postcolonial conditions, which presupposes a transition from non-capitalist to capitalist economy. Historically, capitalist industrialisation in the advanced economies was possible when primary workers were delinked from their means of production through a painful transition. Such coercive incorporation of workers from artisan and agricultural occupations is no more possible in an economy where growth is grossly 'jobless', in a polity based on universal suffrage, in a legal system premised upon a global discourse of rights, and in a world order that imposes ultimate restrictions on the migration of labour. So, postcolonial democracy requires that a sphere of non-capital is left unabsorbed by industrial or urban expansion. More importantly, it also requires that the process of primitive accumulation be *reversed* by various welfare policies in the need economies of peasant and artisan production (Sanyal 2007:59).

Sanyal's reading of (capitalist) development in postcolonial conditions leave some nagging questions unanswered. Once capital takes charge, can there be a sphere independent of capital? Can a segment of population really engage in the production of 'non-capital'? Can, in short, primitive accumulation, once set in motion, be actually 'reversed'? Partha Chatterjee disagrees. While accepting Sanyal's contention that India's economic transformation is not heralding a 'transition' whereby urban and industrial modernity can sweep aside peasant and artisan forms of production in the vast informal and rural economies, he rejects that the latter are preserved by policies of 'reversal'. Instead, Chatterjee makes a distinction between corporate and non-

corporate capital. While the first aspires for symmetric modernity for civil society, the latter stands as a real check on that modernity in the form of what he calls political society. On the governmental plane, policies seek to strike a balance between the two by reversing the *effects* of corporate capital's accumulation frequently through accommodation of the pressures of the popular society as a matter of exception to norms (Chatterjee 2008, Chatterjee 2011). Economic transformation in India can never be immune to such democratic transactions.

If we now return to the debate between Bhaduri and Bhattacharjee, we find something critically missing in both their arguments. They both undervalue the strength of democracy. Contrary to what Bhaduri suggested, the protests in Singur and Nandigram did not signify a possible crisis for parliamentary democracy, nor were they – if the government had a larger appreciation of political formations along with the technical formulations of its policies – bound to create a crisis of legitimacy for the government. More accurately they illustrated an instance of pushing institutional democracy to its limits for a populist cause. On the other hand, Bhattacharjee was simply not right in claiming that “the transition from agriculture to industry is an inevitable phenomenon both in capitalism and in socialism”. Above, we have recounted a number of sceptical positions, critically Marxist, clearly refuting such a dogged sense of historical inevitability. The end of history is not written yet, and the battle for democracy is still on, a top-down dictum of historical certainty can scarcely alter the unpredictable course of popular resistance. A failure to value this indomitable democratic content of India's economic transformation has unseated many regimes in the past. The democratic left in West Bengal – despite three decades and half of repeated renewals – was no exception to this iron law of Indian politics.

To wrap up, we begin from the beginning. Why did the policy of land reform succeed and that of land acquisition fail? In the first case the discursive formulation of the policy at the top evolved in tandem with the political formation of popular demands from below, refining the policy and making its execution possible at the ground level despite many roadblocks and subversions. In the second case a reciprocal relationship between the elevated calculations of state institutions with the embedded everyday problems of the peasant cultivators was simply not allowed to evolve. As a result, the programmatic elements of the land acquisition policy overshadowed its pragmatic possibilities, making the policy appear as a top down imposition with no intent to enlarge a democratic consent. So the moment the Opposition mobilized a protest against the policy, it ended up filling a large void left unattended by the government. It

was a matter of time, and of a brutal exposure of the government's illegitimacy, that the policy met with a complete failure, eventually unseating the Left Front from power.

.

References

- Bhaduri, Amit. 'Development or Development Terrorism?', in *Economic and Political Weekly* 42 (7) (17 February 2007a): 552-553.
- Bhaduri, Amit. 'Alternatives to Industrialisation', in *Economic and Political Weekly* 42 (18) (5 May 2007b): 1597-1601.
- Bhattacharjee, Buddhadeb. 'On industrialisation in West Bengal', *The Marxist* 23(1) (January - March, 2007).
- Bhattacharyya, Dwaipayan. *Government as Practice: Democratic Left in a Transforming India*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- Bhaumik, Sankar Kumar. 'System of Land Tenure, Allocative Efficiency and Agrarian Development: A Study of Agriculture in West Bengal'. Ph.D dissertation, Centre for Regional Development, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 1989.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Chatterjee, Partha. "Democracy and Economic Transformation in India" *Economic and Political Weekly* 43(16), (19 April 2008): 53-62.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *Lineages of Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.
- CPI(M). *Central Committee Resolution on Certain Agrarian Issues and an Explanatory Note by P. Sundarayya*. Calcutta, 1973.
- Das, Ritanjan. 'History, Ideology and Negotiation: The politics of policy transition in West Bengal, India'. Doctoral dissertation, London School of Economics and Political Science, January, 2013.
- Government of India. *West Bengal Development Report*, Planning Commission, New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2010.
- Government of West Bengal. *Economic Review, Year 1989-90*. Statistical Appendix. Calcutta: State Planning Board, 1989.
- Guruswamy, Mohan, Kamal Sharma and Jeevan Prakash Mohanty. 'Economic growth and development in West Bengal: reality versus perception', *Economic and Political Weekly* 40(21) (21 May 2005): 2151-2157.
- Harriss, John. 'Reflections on Agrarian Change in India Since Independence: Does "Landlordism" Still Matter?'. Draft paper presented at Yale Conference on new questions concerning land in modern India, Yale University, 27-29 April, 2012.
- Kaviraj, Sudipta. 'An Outline of a Revisionist Theory of Modernity', *Archives européennes de sociologie* 46(3) (2005): 497-526.
- Laclau, Ernesto. *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso, 2007.
- Lieten, G. K. 'Depeasantisation Discontinued: Land Reforms in West Bengal'. *Economic and Political Weekly*. 25(40) (1990):2265-2271.
- Sanyal, Kalyan. *Rethinking Capitalist Development: Primitive accumulation, governmentality, and post-colonial capitalism*, London and New Delhi: Routledge, 2007.