
**The Land Problems and Land Reforms : A Case Study in Cooch
Behar District (1947 -1993 AD)**

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Abstract: *The present work attempts a detailed study of the Land Problems and Land reforms in Cooch Behar district. Land reform is a concept of independent India. Cooch Behar region belonged to Pragajyotishpur during ancient times. Later this Pragajyotishpur was changed to Lohito and Kamrupa. Cooch Behar district is located in the North Bengal corner of West Bengal. The Cooch Behar district of west Bengal has its own identity. Until the year 1949 Cooch Behar was an Indian Princely State ruled by the Maharaja of Cooch Behar, who had been a feudatory prince under the British Government. Cooch Behar was incorporated into the native of West Bengal in 1950(as per section 290 A of the Government of India Act of 1st January 1935). Later, on 1st January 1950, Cooch Behar become a district of Indian state of West Bengal. Since the partition of India, millions of the people (most of them in search of life, livelihood and shelter)came in Cooch Behar district. The Partition of 1947 led to the influx of Refugees from East Pakistan to different part of India, which was also the case in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal. North Bengal is the fresh Land of research work. Since a long time many indigenous group of people like - Koches, Rajbanshis, the Bodoes, Rabhas , Meches, Pans , Poliyas, Madashis were living in this area. Out of the total Rajbanshis of North Bengal, about 74% were living in Cooch Behar. Economically the Rajbanshis were more dependent on primary sector (agriculture). Zamindars, Jotedars and Bargadars were the main characters in Land reform of Bengal. In the decades since independence West Bengal, Land reform progress can be divided into three phases. Such as, Land reform in Post-independence West Bengal with the passage of the West Bengal Bargader Act (1950), followed by the West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act (1953) and the West Bengal Land Reforms Act (1955).*

Key Words: *Cooch Behar, North Bengal, Partition, Land Reform, Migration, Land Distribution etc.*

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Introduction

The geographical boundary of modern Cooch Behar the documented, history of this region provided us the fact that, this tract once formed part of the ancient and independent Rajya (Kingdom) named pragajyotishpur, which was formed composing of geography of Present day Assam and a part of early Bengal. Different regional tribal groups, such as - Danaba, Kirata and Asura were ruled entire or some parts of this region. With the passage of time Pragajyotish pur became as Kamrupa. At a later stage Ahom, Khen, Koch and such other tribal groups dominated the region at different points of time. It is know from the sources that, Kamrupa was under the domination of the Pala Kings for several years. Situated in the North Eastern Part of West Bengal and surrounded by Bhutan, Assam, Bangladesh and Jalpaiguri district of west Bengal. The name Cooch Behar is a compound of two words Cooch and Behar. The Cooch Behar Royal Gazetteer of 1896, first used the name cooch behar instead of Koch bihar. From a small Koch Kingdom to Princely state, from a Princely State to a feudatory state and from a feudatory state to a small district of town , under west Bengal after the merger of the state to the Indian union in 1950. After India independence, the Princely state merged to India and instrument of as accession was signed on 12th september 1949. On August 30, 1949, an agreement was signed between King Jagaddipendra Narayana Bhup Bahadur of Cooch Behar and Government of India. Later, on 1st January 1950, Cooch Behar became a district of Indian state of West Bengal.

The Partition of 1947, led to the influx of refugee were from East Pakistan to different part of India, which was also the case in Cooch Bear district of west Bengal. Around 10lakhs to 15 lakh Hindu refugees from East Pakistan were forced to Migrate to West Bengal, Assame and Tripura during this time. In all, about 50 to 70lakhs Hindu and Sikh refugees took shelter in India at that time. The census of 1961, however, had estimated a total of 3068750 immigrants from East Pakistan to West Bengal. The relief and rehabilitation committee had also estimated a figure of 52.83lakhs between 1946 and 1970. A massive exodus of about of 57lakhs took place at the time of war of independence of Bengladesh in 1971 subsequent years. According to statistics, the number of refugees in west Bengal is now more than 80lakhs.

A large part of the Hindu population of Cooch Behar district belonged to the Rajbanshi Community. In 1961, the total number of Rajbanshis in this district were 4,18,893, which were 41% of the total population of Cooch Behar and 54% of the total Hindu population(7,75,514). Apart from the people of the Rajbhanshi community same other scheduled Tribes lived in this district, among which the Namasudras, Bagdis or Daluis, Chamars, Jaliya Kaivarts and Jhalomalos or Malas. Compared to these, the number of Scheduled Tribes were 0.8% or 8,809 of the total population. In the North Bengal, large scale transfer of Land from the Rajbanshi to this non Rajbanshis, which had started, from the late Nineteenth Century was only accelerated further by these later development. Another important reason for Land transfer to the non Rajbabshi was the migration of a large number of outsiders to different districts of North Bengal. This influx of immigrants people created and extensive pressure and crisis in socio- economic structure in North Bengal. Agricultural Land was the chief source of income. Zamindars, jotedars and Bargadars were the main characters in the Land reform of Bengal.

In the decades since independence west Bengal Land reform progress can be divided into three phase. The 1st phase (1953-1966) saw the adoption of the basic legislation, little progress in re-distribution of above- ceiling Land and deterioration in the protection of Bargadars. Land reform in post independence, west Bengal began with the passage of the west Bengal Bargader Act (1950),

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followed by the west Bengal Estate Acquisition Act (1953) and the west Bengal Land Reforms Act (1955). These three Acts were enacted at the initiative of the Congress governments of the state. During this 1st phase of Land reform in west Bengal 3000,000 acres of above-ceiling Land was re-distributed a little less than percent of the cropped Land in the state. The main object of Bargadar act in 1950 was to give protection to poor share croppers by recording their names and also stipulating the ratio of share of produce. Some provisions were inserted against eviction. The main object of the west Bengal Estate acquisition act 1953 was to abolish the zamindari system and the abolition of intermediaries. So by a stroke of Legislation Zamindari system was abolished on 12th February 1954. By the west Bengal Land reforms act 1955 is said that, no Raiyat should hold Land in excess of the ceiling area. In 1955 west Bengal Land reforms act passed for the protection of Bargadars right. The west Bengal Land and Land reform Act of 1955 was based on three important principles, such as (1) To determine the ceiling of Land Holding, (2) To redistribute the Land, (3) To decrease the rent of a Raiyats.

In the 2nd phase (1967-1976) west Bengal made most of the overall achievements in above ceiling re-distribution, but made little progress in protecting the rights of Bargadars. In 1967, Left wing and centrist parties. Between 1967-1970 an additional 600,000 acres of such Land was redistributed. Much of this redistributed Land had been invaded by peasants during the 1960s. In 1975, introduced West Bengal Agricultural Labourers, Artisans and Fisherman Act. The Act aimed to enhance the position of Landless Agricultural Labourers by severing the power that Landowners could exercise over the allocation of ownership over. A home plot of up to 0.08 acre for poor and Land less Agricultural Labourers, Artisans and Fishermen. Till the first Congress Ministry (1953-67) only about 3.5 lakhs acres of Land were vested in the state. But during the United Front (1967-72) regime nearly 6 lakhs acres of Land were vested in the state.

In the 3rd phase (1977 onward) tremendous progress was made in recording and protecting the rights of Bargadars and the redistribution of above ceiling Land continued, but at a pace. The Left Front government led by the Communist Party of India- Marxist CPI(M), came to power in 1977 on the promise of extensive agrarian and political reform. CPI(M). Most notable success has been in recording and protecting Bargadar rights. Further more, in 1979 the state government amended the Land reform Act to narrow the definition of personal cultivation to better ensure that those that owned the Land were the actual cultivators. The Left Front's most notable Land reform achievement was in launching OPERATION BARGA. Under which government functionaries recorded the name of Bargadars in order to provide them with greater tenure security. By recording their status, Bargadars were finally able to avail themselves of the protection of Land reform Act without fear of eviction. Reform of Land 1st-2nd decades after the Left Front came to power in west Bengal in 1977. Operation Barga for registration of the names of Bargadars (sharecroppers) in the Land record.

Operation Barga involved registration of 14 million Bargadars, of which over 30% were dalits and over 12% were Adivasis. Through Operation Barga, about 1.1 million acres of Land was permanently brought under the control of Bargadars and their right to cultivate this Land was secured. One of the parts of the Land reform programmes was Operation Barga that was related to the Sharecroppers popularly known as Adhiars or Bargadars. It is found in the plannum of CPI(M) at the time of Parliament Election in 1979-80. 28,120 Bargadars were recorded by old method from 1974 to 1977 whereas 23,759 Bargadars were recorded from 1978 to 1982 of which 19,867 Bargadars were recorded by Operation Barga. Upto 30th September, 1993, 44,763.94 hectares Land were distributed among 1,18,180 Peasants of which 31,570 were general.

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From the above statistics it is found that major Land reforms works that was Land acquisition and distribution among the landless people was performed during the reign of United Front Government and Left Front Government. Operation Barga method 24343 Bargadars were recorded up to September 1993. P.K Bhowmik also proves from the statistical point of view that more Bargadars were recorded than the Operation Barga is more successful and practical than the per Operation Barga method, because before the period of pre- Operation Barga the Bargadars could not establish their right on Land in spite of recording their names in the record of right and most of the cases Bargadars were failure to have their share of the produces. At last stage the names of the relevant Bargadars would be recorded and certificates were issued to the Bargadars. By the implementation of Operation Barga, 6,75,000 Bargadars(share- croppers) were registered between October 1978 and Jun 1982. Operation Barga was a mate realization of the provisions of existing Laws. One of the major aspects of this operationalization was the registration of Bargadars. By the implementation of Operation Barga 30% people of the rural areas benefitted by this Land reform programme.

In North Bengal most of the peasants and Cultivators were Deshis, Polias, Namasudras and Muslims. After the abolition of Zamindar, Jotdar system and the passing of Land reforms Act of 1955. Land related Rajbanshis were in great Crisis. By this Act most of the Jotdars became Landless Cultivator. Because the Government fixed the ceiling of Land as 25 acre. Rajbanshi society which was depended on Land, became Landless day by day. North Bengal most of the Cultivated Lands were gradually transferred by the hand of the cultivators and dominated by the Land hungrys. Due to Land transfer issue an ethnic movement started throughout North Bengal. Bodo, Kamtapur all Koch Rajbanshi student Union (AKRSU), Kamtapur people party (KPP), Greater Cooch Behar Democratic Party (GCDP) were organized themselves. The Greater Kamta United forum works for their own identification and establishments in the Soil of North Bengal and the eastern part of North East India. From Tebhaga to Naxalbari (1946-67) and abolition of Zamindari Act to implementation of Operation Barga created lot of changes in the rural life of North Bengal. Tebhaga to Naxalbari these movement opened a new chapter of Land Settlements and Agricultural economic crisis of west Bengal as well as North Bengal. Socialist or Communist movement in the name of Naxalite movement mainly related with Land rights.

Conclusion

It can be undoubtedly said that since 1947 till date the problem of Migration (inflow and inter- flow) has become widespread in Cooch Behar and has disrupted the socio- economy of the district and created an existential Crisis in terms of Life, livelihood and shelter for the natives of the district. As a result, many of them are once again realizing the need to protect their Land, habitat, Livelihood and Culture (from outsiders). In Cooch Behar, Land transfers are increasing at a massive rate, complications, uncertainty and dysfunctional despair are increasing in public life. As a result, the arrival of a large number of immigrants to Cooch Behar, many of the Bhoomiputras of the district (whose birth, work and upbringing are all in this district) started to consider them as aliens in their own homes. In search of work and in pursuit of Livelihood, many of the sons of Bhumiputra gradually migrated, peoples anger and dissatisfaction began to accumulate, peace and stability were disturbed and the atmosphere of harmony was destroyed. In view of the under development across the district, the anti- government movement is sporadically organized in the desire to keep their art, culture and tradition intact, indestructible and bright, which creates great tension and unrest not only in this district but in the whole of North Bengal. Local History has a great role in understanding the history of a local area as well as a Country.

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Local History can build the strong base of National History. I have best intention to fine out the real picture of the Lands and Peasants since Land reforms had been initiated in Cooch Behar district as else where in West Bengal, from the above discussions, it may be said that Land reforms programme in west Bengle marked a new dimension in the agrarian field and th life of the peasants, particularly the small and marginal farmers in west Bengal.

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