Impact of Operation Barga on Sharecroppers' Standard-of-Living in West Bengal, 1977-1993

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To what extent did Operation Barga reduce the standard-of-living problems of sharecroppers living in the Indian state of West Bengal from 1977 to 1993?

Candidate: [redacted]

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Introduction

The plight of the bargadars, or sharecroppers, can be traced back to the late 1700s when the British began colonizing India, starting with the modern-day state of West Bengal. Enacting many laws to ensure their control of the subcontinent, the British inadvertently bound the bargadars to servitude on their zamindars' (landlords') land. Several problems originated from the bargadars' inferior status, hampering their ability to live a financially secure and happy life and attain upwards social mobility. Although several reform attempts were made, none were as successful in addressing the bargadars' standard-of-living problems as Operation Barga.

The major sources used in this investigation are two theses written by Bengali Ph.D. candidates, Notan B. Kar and Samir K. Mukhopadhyay. Their empirical investigations provide insight into the experiences of being a bargadar and the historical context surrounding this issue. Mukhopadhyay's argument appears Leftist-oriented but that allows one to research a bargadar's perspective. Kar seems more neutral, giving a balanced report on his findings of a field-study in two villages in rural West Bengal. The investigation also uses a series of articles appearing in the Indian academic journal, *Economic and Political Weekly*, whose authors both support and oppose Operation Barga. Lastly, two personal interviews with a former Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) official and an eyewitness give detailed accounts of the implementation of Operation Barga as well as related policy initiatives, rationale, and historical context. Overall, this investigation uses a mix of primary and secondary sources to argue that to a large extent, Operation Barga reduced the standard-of-living problems of sharecroppers in the Indian state of West Bengal from 1977 to 1993.

Investigation

An Abbreviated History of the Agricultural System in West Bengal

The roots of the agricultural system of West Bengal just before the implementation of Operation Barga can be traced back to colonial times. The British East India Company, through the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793, structured the rural villages under a new system designed for the, "...commercialisation of agriculture," which was a part of the British plan for the, "...subjugation of the entire Indian economy to British imperial interest" (Mukhopadhyay 6). Under this system, placing the British at the apex of the socioeconomic pyramid, a new class of people were created (zamindars) who were given, "proprietor[ship] of land in exchange for the payment of land revenue [to the British] fixed in perpetuity" (Kar 42). The zamindars, in turn, hired their own agents to collect land revenue from the sale of crops tilled by bargadars (sharecroppers), who were given rights to stay on and work the zamindar's land in return for giving them a large share of the harvested crops. However, the convoluted British tax-collection-scheme resulted in an, "...appreciable increase in rent (or tax)," the failure to pay which, resulted in, "...large-scale evictions, widespread unrest, and declining agricultural production" (Kar 42). Though it seems that Kar largely blames the system for these problems, Mukhopadhyay blames the personality of the zamindars. He argues that the zamindars desired to, "...perpetuate their class rule in Bengal village[s]," and therefore, used their "greed for money and lust for power" to increase the rent bargadars would pay to continue staying on their land (Mukhopadhyay 9). Regardless, the problems existed and they stemmed directly from the semi-feudal environment created by the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793.

Undoubtedly, the system's chief beneficiaries were the British because they could now finance their operations from the land revenue paid by the zamindars. Arguably the British

created this system to satisfy their increasing demand for cash as part of their, "...expanding military expenditure…[part of] the Investment Policy of the Company" (Bandyopadhyaya 2). The zamindars also received benefits from this system. Most importantly, the zamindars received, "...unbounded rights to extract rents from the hapless bargadars" who resided and worked on the large parcels of land received by the zamindars (Ganguly 5). This allowed the zamindars to further solidify their preexisting high-class position in society. For example, Mukhopadhyay writes that in addition to economic gains, the zamindars formed a close bond with, "...the police administration…[and] with their own martial forces" to control villages where their class was the minority (9). Essentially, capitalist forces introduced by the British "seized" India figuratively as they attempted to extract large sums of money to finance the operations of the East India Company. Zamindars acted as agents of the British to bolster their financial holdings and tighten their grip on the common people of India's villages so as to perpetuate their class rule over the majority.

Analysis of Bargadars' Problems

Just as the new rural power structure benefited the elite, the ordinary people—especially bargadars—suffered from it. The main problem of the bargadars was their exploitation by landlords, taking various forms, resulting in their inability to pursue upwards social mobility. The illiteracy of the bargadars may be the central antagonist. Creating written contracts and keeping written records of crop cultivation, land usage, and other data would allow a court to properly enforce them, thereby prohibiting the landlords from finding loopholes in oral agreements. It appears that this same problem plagued other leftist governments, who were more concerned than centrist or conservative governments about addressing the problems of the

bargadars due to their ideology of helping peasants. As Bose mentions, Lenin in the U.S.S.R. spoke of a similar problem in his speech about the Soviet New Economic Policy that, "...without universal literacy...without training...we shall not achieve our object," meaning that illiteracy is a serious problem that has to be dealt with in order for the betterment of the poor people like bargadars (2053). Equally troubling is the fact that many bargadars are from low castes, inherently discriminated against, leading society to accept that, "...the low castes are born to labour with their hands and high castes to enjoy the fruits of others' labour" (Mukhopadhyay 9). From these two roots, stem other problems.

For example, from illiteracy comes the lack of adequate written records/contracts. From that comes landlords' attempts to, "...downgrade the status of tenants...to prevent the realization of [their] rights" (Kar 50). This comes in two ways. One, the landlords attempt to extract more than their fair share of crops as stipulated by law. This results in the bargadars being left with less crops to sell, thus decreasing their income. Now, these diminishing returns on their labor and other investments in their crops cause a downwards cycle—lower income means decreased purchasing power—both for consumption and for production of crops. Therefore, in the next season, the bargadars will produce less crops—due to lower income to purchase inputs—and will make less money, *ceteris paribus*. Thus, landlords taking more than they are legally entitled to, in terms of crops, creates a standard-of-living problem for the bargadars.

Another way the landlords downgrade the bargadars' status is by evicting them from their lands. According to Banerjee et al., "...the landlord may use the threat of eviction when output is low to induce the tenant to work harder," but the threat of eviction may cause undue mental stress leading to future health problems (241). Furthermore, low output can be the result of a number of causes—excessive/lack of rainfall, temperature variations, illness of the bargadars,

etc. This serves to negate Banerjee et al.'s argument that forbidding eviction reduces efficiency because it shows that output can be reduced due to a number of factors (241). Moreover, if the bargadars are not threatened with eviction and incentivized to think that the land they cultivate is theirs, then they might make a larger investment in improving the land, thus "...enjoy[ing] the fruits of his investment" (Banerjee et al 241). Of course, it should be noted that if the bargadars themselves invest more in the land without assistance from the landlords, then they would be legally entitled to receive a larger share of the crops. However, as mentioned before, the landlords' attempt to extract more than their fair share disrupts the bargadars' crop share. Thus, the landlords' threats of eviction serve to undermine the bargadars' standard-of-living through the reduction of their crop share, and therefore, income.

This uncertainty of the bargadars' residency status makes it difficult for them to receive institutional loans, i.e. loans from banks and other established intermediaries, for growing their crop production. In fact, Chadha and Bhaumik argue that the chance of eviction for many bargadars is a fact that banks cannot overlook because if the bargadars are evicted, then they cannot grow and sell the crops to receive money to repay their loans (1094). Therefore, the bargadars are forced to obtain credit in other ways. Many take out personal loans from the banks to meet their consumption demands, but some of this money is also diverted to growing production, depending on the available household financial resources of the bargadars, and sometimes the reverse also happens—bargadars take out loans for agricultural cultivation but they use it for personal purposes (Williams 204). Additionally, if banks are unwilling to loan money to inherently precarious individuals like the bargadars, they obtain their money from local village moneylenders known as mahajans (Chadha and Bhaumik 1092). While some may argue that mahajans are a good source of credit for poorer people like the bargadars due to their

unrestrictive lending policies, reality shows a harsher picture. As Mukhopadhyay argues, "...in the long run...they [those who utilized the mahajans] were trapped by the inescapable bondage of loans" (12). Mukhopadhyay's argument can be explained by the following. Poor people who use mahajans do so out of desperation because banks and established institutions refuse to give them loans. Mahajans, with their unrestrictive policies, essentially ask them no questions about their use of the loan(s), but unfortunately, charge "exorbitant rate[s] of interest" due to the increased risk of lending to people with limited assets and also due to the desire to exploit their desperation for profit (Mukhopadhyay 25). Essentially, it can be argued that the bargadars' limited access to credit-markets contributes to the suppression of their standard-of-living as low-cost loans cannot be taken out for improving the productivity of the bargadars' lands.

Of course, one must admit that several factors are beyond one's control that contribute to the numerous standard-of-living problems of the bargadars. As Williams concisely writes, "...rain-fed farming [and]... price changes in agricultural inputs and products" are the main uncontrollable factors (201). Regardless, post-independence laws provide for the cost-sharing of agricultural inputs between the landlord and tenant so as to reduce the burden of uncertainties. However, a field study of twelve villages in West Bengal found, "...the incidence of cost-sharing by the landlords has been very low" leading to most of the bargadars paying for fertilizers, seeds, irrigation, etc. reducing their purchasing power as the cost of their farming increased (Chadha and Bhaumik 1090). Of course, a case-study's results of an opportunity-sample cannot be generalized to the whole state of West Bengal because the twelve villages in the sample are not necessarily representative of the state. The study does, however, offer an argument to be further explored. Perhaps a greater involvement by the landlords, either voluntarily or legally mandated, to help reduce the impact of uncontrollable factors on bargadars' cultivation will be beneficial.

Overall, a series of problems plague the bargadars with regards to their standard-of-living. Being exploited by the agricultural system established by the British when they began their colonial rule of India, the bargadars have limited access to upwards social mobility. The roots of their problems are their illiteracy and low-caste origin, from which comes their inability to fight contract violations by the landlords and lack of support, especially financial support, to improve the land under their cultivation to augment their income. Of course, certain problems have other sources—rainfed farming and price changes in agricultural inputs and products. Regardless, these problems need to be addressed so as to improve the standard-of-living of the bargadars.

Pre-Operation Barga Reforms

Soon after the implementation of the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793, there were calls for reform. Unfortunately, in the 66 years that elapsed between the institution of the zamindari system and the first sign of reform, the aforementioned problems resulted in, "...large-scale evictions, widespread unrest, and declining agricultural production" forcing the British to implement The Bengal Rent Act of 1859, whose aim was to limit landlords' power to increase rent and evict tenants (Kar 42). However, Kar explains that this Act increased security for so-called "fixed rent tenants" while the bargadars were left out due to their uncertain residency status. This is because the Act required that tenants cultivate their land for 12 consecutive years to enjoy the legal protections ("Emergence of Tenancy Laws"). Thus, the Rent Act had little positive effect on the bargadars because they could be evicted before the 12-year period elapsed, and exploitation would continue.

Seeing the failure of the Rent Act of 1859, the British government instituted the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885. According to the University of Delhi, the main feature of this Act was to, "...confer the right of occupancy on any tenants who have cultivated land in a village for 12 years which need not be necessary the same plot" (Emergence of Tenancy Laws). Essentially, this meant that as long as the bargadars worked in the same village for 12 years, they could gain occupancy rights. However, the major problem with this was that if the bargadars angered the landlords in the village, then they could hire people to intimidate the bargadars into leaving the village. Therefore, the Tenancy Act of 1885 also proved unsuccessful.

With India gaining independence on August 15, 1947, West Bengal saw the massive loss of agricultural land with the British partitioning the eastern half of Bengal into East Pakistan (modern-day Bangladesh) (Chattopadhyay). Historically, western Bengal was industrialized with some agriculture, while eastern Bengal was largely agricultural (Chattopadhyay). Additionally, Kar argues that the legacy of the Permanent Settlement Act developed a tangled mess of the feudal zamindari system and, "...created a class of parasitic, non-cultivating landlords" who exploited the "actual tillers" (44). Amidst this backdrop, two major acts were passed post-independence: the West Bengal Bargadars Act of 1950 and the West Bengal Land Reforms Act of 1955, passed by the Congress government. The major feature of the Bargadars Act of 1950 was the establishment of a crop-sharing ratio of, "60:40 if the sharecropper provided the inputs," thus addressing the problem of landlords taking more than their fair share; however, no provisions were made for tenant security (Kar 50). According to Ganguly, in the Land Reforms Act of 1955, the concept of a land-ceiling was first introduced, i.e. a limit on the amount of land an individual can own, so that excess land can be redistributed to the bargadars and smaller farmers (3). Unfortunately, the provisions of the Act were not strongly enforced, as can be seen

from the large-scale evictions and the continuing control, albeit indirect now, of landlords over their property through, "...evasive transfers to relatives, friends or fictitious persons (benami transactions)" (Kar 45). This is supported by Mukhopadhyay's argument that, "...mere legal prescription does not solve the problems arising out of the powerful grip of the semi-feudal forces dominating the rural scene in Bengal" (153). Of course, despite the lack of enforcement of both of the Act's provisions, they undoubtedly laid the foundation for Operation Barga later in 1977. Without having a precedent for land reform, it would have been more difficult to pass a reform bill because vested interests would have worked their influence over the government to block such efforts.

Deriving themselves from the Bargadars and Land Reforms Acts of 1950 and 1955, later approaches by the government during the 1960s were similarly unsuccessful in addressing the bargadars' problems, though they did enjoy success in land redistribution. According to Kar, approximately 900,000 acres of surplus land was redistributed to bargadars and small farmers from 1955 to 1970 (45-46). However, there remained a special clause in the Land Reforms Act that allowed landlords, "...to reclaim land from bargadars" if the landlords wanted to use it for "personal cultivation" but the Act allowed the landlords to use hired labor or servants to cultivate their reclaimed land (Kar 45). Therefore, landlords threatened bargadars with the personal-cultivation-clause whenever they tried to register their legal rights (Banerjee et al. 242). Essentially, this limited the reformatory power of the Land Reforms Act of 1955 because the redistribution of ceiling-surplus-lands remained incomplete because of the loophole. Additionally, the main problem of the bargadars—illiteracy and lack of legal protections leading to their exploitation—was not addressed. This is because, "...bargadar rights remained unrecorded," and therefore they had limited legal options to petition the court or government to

protect them (Kar 46). Furthermore, from this stemmed the continuation of evictions, issuance of high-interest loans, etc. However, amidst these problems, the "...landslide victory of the Left Front government" helped to set a backdrop for change (Ganguly 4).

Operation Barga

In order to properly examine Operation Barga, it is necessary to discuss the CPI(M) and its ideology. The CPI(M) led the Left Front (coalition of left-wing parties) to a landslide victory in the West Bengal State Assembly polls in 1977, winning 231 out of 294 seats (about 78.6%) according to the ECI[1] (11). Until 2000, Jyoti Basu led the Left Front-ruled West Bengal government as Chief Minister implementing, "...Marxism-Leninism [in] its appropriate application in the concrete Indian conditions" (CPI(M), "About Us"). Undoubtedly, Operation Barga had its roots thoroughly embedded in the Party Programme of the CPI(M), where it clearly states that the Party is committed to a program for socioeconomic change, including addressing, "...abolition of landlordism, end to feudal domination and elimination of caste oppression" (CPI(M), "Party Programme"). As such, Operation Barga and other policies addressed the core problems faced by bargadars.

Operation Barga's main objective was to record the names of the unrecorded bargadars residing in rural West Bengal (Kar 47). As Ganguly elaborates, Operation Barga entailed a massive deployment of state resources, both manpower and materials, to register the millions of unrecorded bargadars (2). This was in accordance with the CPI(M)'s slogan, "...land to the tillers" and Mukhopadhyay's argument that India at the time of Operation Barga was ruled by the bourgeoisie further serves to support the CPI(M)'s rationale for launching this policy (169). The CPI(M) carefully worded the policy so as to include, "...permanent and inheritable tenure on

[1] ECI - Election Commission of India

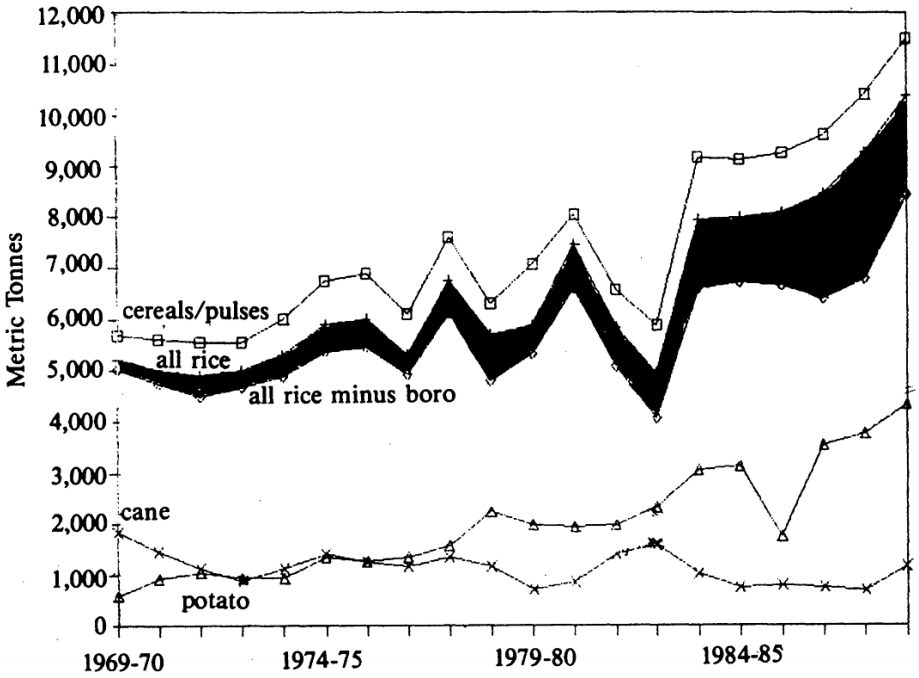
the land they [the bargadars] sharecropped" in return for giving their landlords at least 25% of the agricultural output (Banerjee, et al. 240). Finally on paper, the CPI(M) addressed the problems of eviction and lack of upwards social mobility.

To execute this ambitious plan, a village-to-village campaign was held to publicize the policy and show interested people how to register. Banerjee, et al. point out that the bargadars would register with the Department of Land Revenue so as to ensure the protection of their rights (240). However, the registration with the Department occurred at the landlords' residences, intimidating the bargadars (Mukherjee). Therefore, after complaints of many bargadars and party members, the CPI(M) established large registration camps in the villages for the bargadars (Mukherjee). Arguably, a significant contributor to Operation Barga's success is the utilization of CPI(M) and related Left Front party offices in villages to mobilize those volunteers and staff to, "...make sure that landlords did not intimidate tenants, that tenants who registered did not face reprisal, and that disputes were handled fairly in the courts" (Banerjee, et al. 242). Essentially, using the political machinery of the ruling party ensured that the influence landlords had over the local village administration and police was negated because it can be assumed that party volunteers and staff were motivated by their ideology to support Operation Barga, while the administration and police received bribes or other favors from the landlords to ensure their compliance. Therefore, the loyalty of the party's organization in implementing Operation Barga was greater relative to the village government officials, as they remained in their posts regardless of political changes.

Due to the great effort invested by the CPI(M), the willingness of the bargadars, the restraint exercised by the landlords, and other factors, Operation Barga can largely be deemed a success. From its inception, the embedded ideology of the CPI(M) resulted in the policy being

crafted as a gift to the bargadars and confidence was high that it would improve their standard-of-living. The much cited statistic[2] of this progress is that 65% of bargadars were registered by 1993 as compared with 15% pre-Operation Barga (Banerjee, et al. 255). This may seem marginal, but the increased registration led to the growing bargaining power of bargadars when establishing their contracts with their landlords. As such, the economic model of Banerjee, et al. predicts, "...an increase in the tenant's bargaining power…[ceteris paribus]...leads to an increase in his share and productivity," which undoubtedly will increase income because the bargadar can sell more. In fact, according to Lieten, agricultural production in West Bengal basically doubled (please refer to Graph 1: Agricultural Production in West Bengal below).

GRAPH 1: AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION IN WEST BENGAL



This graph is taken from *Depeasantisation Discontinued Land Reforms in West Bengal* by G. K. Lieten, found on page 2269.

[2] Many of the utilized sources had this statistic, but only one is cited here.

Though some may argue that this massive increase in crop supply will cause a drop in prices resulting in a negligible impact on bargadars' income, this is not the case because the paradigmatic assumptions in that argument are false. The argument holds true for a free-market economy, but India is a "...sovereign socialist secular democratic republic" where the Government of India and the Government of West Bengal have had crop purchasing programs to buy the surplus crops from farmers near or at the market rate (Constitution of India). Thus, the bargadars' income increased due to the cultivation of more crops, leading to greater prosperity for them in terms of consumption of goods previously considered "luxuries". Additionally, greater income allowed bargadars to send their children to school where they could receive an education and not have to work to supplement the household income. Thus, a core problem of the bargadars, illiteracy, was addressed indirectly through Operation Barga. However, the exploitation by landlords and issuance of high-interest loans by the mahajans required additional time. As Kar writes, "...immediately after launching of 'Operation Barga', reports were received about stopping of consumption credit by landowners and hiking of rates of interests as retaliation" (85). Though his argument lacks considerable weight due to his failure to mention the extent of the problem, Kar no doubt brings up Operation Barga's failure to address bargadars' access to credit. Of course, one may counter that that was beyond the scope of Operation Barga because its aim was only tenant registration to ensure proper crop-sharing and realization of bargadars' rights. Additionally, the problem of caste remained unchanged by Operation Barga, but again, it can be argued that that was beyond the scope of the policy, and gradual social changes would address it. Regardless, several problems remained to be addressed

which the CPI(M) did indeed do in various proportions during their uninterrupted governance of West Bengal from 1977-2011.

Conclusion

In retrospect, Operation Barga largely reduced the standard-of-living problems of the bargadars in West Bengal by ensuring proper crop-sharing and realization of bargadars' rights through tenant registration. This conclusion is thoroughly supported, though several limitations exist in the research.

Relying on secondary sources—theses written by Kar and Mukhopadhyay—allows thoroughly researched information to be used in this investigation though the authors' ideological stances impede in objective, shared-knowledge creation. This limitation is minimized by incorporating a range of perspectives from sources such as journal articles written by expert economists (and some historians) and personal interviews with former CPI(M) officials. Another limitation is the failure to include bargadars' eyewitness accounts because their perspective would greatly support or detract from the argument made by this paper. If a group of bargadars' standard-of-living did not improve after the conclusion of Operation Barga, then it would be deemed a failure. A third limitation of this research is that it fails to include significant economic research on the bargadars' standard-of-living after the conclusion of Operation Barga, though this is because this information could not be easily found from the Government of West Bengal, Government of India, or from third-party sources.

Nevertheless, this paper concludes that Operation Barga, to a large extent, reduced the problems of sharecroppers in the Indian state of West Bengal from 1977 to 1993, albeit indirectly. In the future, it remains to be seen whether similar policies can alleviate standard-of-living problems throughout India, and perhaps, the world.

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