Politics of the Left: Communists, Land Reforms, and the Left Front in West Bengal

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Introduction

This book investigates one of the most sustained experiments in democratic left governance in the postcolonial world: the rise, consolidation, and eventual eclipse of the Left Front in West Bengal. Spanning the period from independence in 1947 to the 2010s, it situates agrarian reform and peasant mobilization at the core of a broader political project that sought to transform the countryside while stabilizing representative institutions. Centered on land relations—who tills, who owns, and who decides—the story is at once local and global: it speaks to debates on redistribution and growth, rights and administration, and the possibilities and limits of electoral socialism.

The argument unfolds through a mixed-methods approach that integrates policy documents, electoral data, and evidence from grassroots movements. Government orders, budget statements, and legislative debates are read alongside village-level narratives, organizational records, and peasant testimonies. Electoral returns and turnout patterns illuminate how programmatic change interacted with party competition, while district and block-level comparisons help separate durable effects from conjunctural victories. The aim is neither hagiography nor indictment but explanation: to trace how left politics built institutions that could deliver, how those institutions evolved, and why they eventually faltered.

At the center of the analysis lie three interlocking arenas. First is agrarian reform: tenancy registration, enforcement of ceilings, and the redistribution of surplus land together altered bargaining power in rural society. Second is social provision: food security, health, and education policies raised expectations and reshaped citizen–state relations, creating a welfare architecture that was both moral claim and political strategy. Third is local governance: the institutionalization of elected panchayats recast participation, dispute resolution, and development planning, embedding party organization within everyday administration. The book evaluates successes and failures across these arenas with attention to variation—across districts, social groups, and time.

The narrative also follows the Left through moments of rupture and recalibration. It examines the ideological and organizational consequences of earlier splits within the communist movement, the aftershocks of Naxalbari, the consolidation of a “party–society” in the countryside, and the strains imposed by economic liberalization, fiscal tightening, and urbanization. Particular attention is paid to the politics of land acquisition in the 2000s, when the promise of industrialization collided with the legacies of agrarian empowerment, reshaping alliances and reconfiguring the moral economy of development. These conflicts, and the responses they provoked, clarified

both the achievements and the blind spots of long-duration rule.

Throughout, the book engages comparative questions that matter to political scientists and policy analysts: Under what conditions do land reforms endure? How do programmatic parties convert early mobilization into institutional durability? When do welfare gains translate into electoral hegemony, and when do they invite backlash? By setting West Bengal alongside other Indian states and international cases of left governance, the chapters offer analytical leverage beyond the region—on state capacity, intermediation through mass organizations, and the tension between movement energies and bureaucratic routines.

Finally, this study is attentive to voices at the grassroots. Archival traces and statistics reveal patterns, but they do not, by themselves, capture the textures of everyday politics: the negotiation of tenancy, the moral authority of local leaders, the role of women’s committees and youth fronts, or the craft of dispute settlement in the panchayat office. By bringing these worlds into conversation with policy and electoral analysis, the book reconstructs the political economy of reform as lived practice. In doing so, it seeks to explain not only how the Left governed for so long, but also why, in the end, a project rooted in the fields struggled to find consent for a new developmental turn.

CHAPTER ONE: Colonial Legacies and the Making of a Radical Countryside, 1850s–1947

The fertile plains and sprawling delta of Bengal, a region now bifurcated into West Bengal and Bangladesh, were once the jewel in the crown of British India. For centuries, its rich agricultural output sustained a vibrant economy and a complex social structure. However, the arrival of the East India Company and the subsequent imposition of colonial rule profoundly reshaped these ancient land relations, laying the groundwork for the radical agrarian politics that would later define West Bengal. The story of the Left Front cannot be fully understood without first grasping the deep fissures and simmering resentments born from over a century of colonial land policies.

Before the British, land ownership in Bengal was a nuanced affair, often involving intricate systems of communal rights, customary tenure, and varying obligations to regional rulers. There was no absolute private property in the modern sense. Mughal administration, while extracting revenue, largely respected these existing arrangements, relying on local intermediaries to collect taxes. These intermediaries, often hereditary zamindars, were essentially revenue farmers rather than absolute landlords, their power circumscribed by tradition and the strength of peasant communities. This equilibrium, however imperfect, was shattered by the British.

The pivotal moment arrived with the Permanent Settlement of 1793, a landmark policy introduced by Lord Cornwallis. Driven by a desire for administrative efficiency and a steady revenue stream, the British declared the zamindars to be the absolute proprietors of the land. In return for a fixed annual payment to the colonial state, these new landlords were given sweeping powers over their tenants, including the right to evict. The intention was to create a loyal class of landed gentry, a bulwark of stability for the British Raj, who would invest in improving agriculture. The reality, as often happens with grand colonial schemes, diverged sharply from the ideal.

Instead of fostering agricultural improvement, the Permanent Settlement unleashed a cascade of unintended consequences. The fixed revenue demand, initially set at an exorbitant rate, often forced zamindars into arrears, leading to the fragmentation and sale of their estates. A new class of absentee landlords emerged, more interested in collecting rent than in managing land or investing in its productivity. Beneath the zamindars, a multi-layered hierarchy of intermediate tenure holders—known as jotedars, patnidars, and other designations—proliferated, each extracting a share of the produce, further burdening the actual cultivators. This complex chain of intermediaries created a system ripe for exploitation and difficult to navigate for the peasants at the bottom.

The primary victims of this new land regime were the ryots, the cultivating peasants. Stripped of their customary rights and facing arbitrary rent hikes and evictions, they were pushed to the brink of destitution. Sharecroppers, or *bargadars*, fared even worse. Without any legal recognition, they tilled land owned by others, often paying half or more of their harvest as rent, with no security of tenure or rights to the land they worked so diligently. Their existence was precarious, subject to the whims of the jotedars and zamindars who held the real power in the villages. This widespread insecurity and economic vulnerability created a fertile ground for social unrest.

Famines, which became more frequent and devastating under colonial rule, exacerbated the plight of the peasantry. The Great Bengal Famine of 1770, occurring before the full effects of the Permanent Settlement were felt but indicative of the Company’s early mismanagement, wiped out an estimated one-third of the province's population. Later famines, such as those in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, further exposed the fragility of the agrarian economy and the colonial state's inadequate response. These catastrophes etched deep scars on the collective memory of the Bengali peasantry, fueling a deep-seated distrust of authority and a yearning for fundamental change.

The economic exploitation was not limited to land. British policies systematically undermined indigenous industries, particularly Bengal's renowned textile production, to create a market for British manufactured goods. This de-industrialization pushed even more people into an already overstretched agrarian sector, intensifying competition for land and driving down wages. The jute industry, while providing some employment, often operated under exploitative conditions, with cultivators compelled to grow jute for export at prices dictated by colonial trading houses, rather than food crops for local consumption.

In response to these systemic injustices, peasant resistance began to simmer and occasionally boil over. These early uprisings, though often localized and brutally suppressed, demonstrated the latent power of organized cultivators. The Indigo Revolt of 1859-60, for instance, saw Bengali peasants rise up against British indigo planters who forced them to cultivate indigo instead of food crops, often under coercive contracts. Though not explicitly a movement for land reform, it showcased the power of collective action against exploitative colonial economic structures. The Pabna Disturbances of the 1870s, another significant agrarian movement, involved ryots resisting arbitrary rent increases and demanding their customary rights. These movements, though ultimately failing to fundamentally alter the land system, served as crucial precursors to later, more organized, and ideologically driven struggles.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries also witnessed the emergence of a nascent nationalist movement. While initially dominated by urban elites and focused on constitutional reforms, the plight of the peasantry gradually began to attract attention.

Nationalist thinkers and nascent political organizations started to recognize that true independence would require addressing the agrarian question. Figures like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore, though from privileged backgrounds, wrote movingly about the suffering of the cultivators, helping to articulate a moral critique of colonial exploitation.

The rise of political consciousness among the peasantry was also aided by the gradual penetration of modern political ideas. Concepts of rights, equality, and justice, filtering down from urban centers and through limited educational opportunities, began to resonate with the lived experiences of oppression. Nationalist propaganda, disseminated through pamphlets, newspapers, and public meetings, often highlighted the economic drain of colonial rule and its devastating impact on the rural poor. This intellectual ferment, though slow and uneven, provided a framework for understanding and articulating grievances that went beyond immediate local concerns.

The early decades of the 20th century saw the gradual consolidation of peasant organizations, albeit still fragmented and operating under various banners. Religious and caste-based associations sometimes played a role in mobilizing specific groups of cultivators. However, it was the burgeoning communist movement, with its emphasis on class struggle and the revolutionary potential of the peasantry, that would eventually provide a more coherent ideological and organizational framework for agrarian mobilization in Bengal.

The Communist Party of India (CPI), founded in the 1920s, recognized the immense revolutionary potential within the exploited peasantry. Drawing inspiration from Marxist-Leninist theories, they began to organize agricultural laborers, sharecroppers, and poor peasants, advocating for radical land reforms, including the abolition of landlordism and the redistribution of land. Their activists, often educated urban youth, ventured into the villages, living among the cultivators, understanding their struggles firsthand, and translating complex political ideologies into relatable demands for justice.

The global economic depression of the 1930s further intensified agrarian distress in Bengal. Falling agricultural prices, coupled with existing high rents and indebtedness, pushed millions of peasants deeper into poverty. This economic crisis provided a crucial opportunity for communist organizers to expand their influence. They organized peasant committees, led protests against arbitrary evictions, and campaigned for debt relief. The Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha (BPKS), the peasant front of the CPI, rapidly grew in strength and became a formidable force in the countryside, articulating the demands of the rural poor with increasing clarity and assertiveness.

The Second World War also played a significant role in shaping the political landscape. The infamous Bengal Famine of 1943, a man-made catastrophe exacerbated by British

wartime policies, logistical failures, and hoarding, claimed millions of lives. This horrific event exposed the utter callousness of the colonial administration and solidified anti-British sentiment across all sections of society, but particularly among the rural populace who bore the brunt of the suffering. The famine became a powerful symbol of colonial misrule and fueled the demand for immediate independence. Communist cadres were often at the forefront of relief efforts, further cementing their position as champions of the oppressed.

As independence loomed in the mid-1940s, the agrarian question in Bengal was a powder keg. The colonial legacy of the Permanent Settlement had created an extremely unequal land distribution, with a small number of zamindars and jotedars controlling vast tracts of land, while the majority of the peasantry, particularly sharecroppers and landless laborers, lived in abject poverty. The repeated cycles of exploitation, famine, and localized resistance had fostered a deeply radicalized countryside. The BPKS, under communist leadership, had successfully channeled these grievances into organized movements, preparing the ground for the massive land struggles that would erupt in the immediate post-independence period. The stage was set for a dramatic confrontation over who would control the land, and for whose benefit.

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