

**THE LAND QUESTION IN THE POLITICS OF WEST BENGAL: AN
ANALYSIS OF DISCOURSES AND RHETORIC (1977-2021)**

**SYNOPSIS OF THE THESIS
THESIS SUBMITTED TO JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY
FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ARTS**

2024

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SYNOPSIS

The Land Question in the Politics of West Bengal: An Analysis of Discourses and Rhetoric (1977-2021)

Context of the Study

Any account of politics in West Bengal remains incomplete without a reference to the land question. Land has remained a sensitive issue determining the contours of politics in West Bengal. Scholars trace this to the enactment of the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793. A new class of settlers called Zamindars were given permanent rights of occupation on land similar to the system which prevailed in Great Britain at that point in time. The Zamindar was responsible for the collection of revenue from land. However, a large section of the population was dependent on land and the issue of relations among those dependent on land was not dealt with in the colonial era. The Bengal Tenancy Act, 1885 recognised the rights of the under-tenants in agriculture but the issue of the rights of the *bargadars* was not adequately addressed by the Act. In the years leading to Independence, the Floud Commission raised the issue of rights of tenants on land and recommended that the *bargadars* be given legally stipulated rights as to their claim on the share of the crop cultivated by them. The Tebhaga struggle led by the Communists demanded that the *bargadars* receive two-thirds of the crop cultivated by them from the landowners.

After Independence, the priority was accorded to increasing the productivity from land and also addressing the question of social justice as land was concentrated in the hands of a few people. M K Gandhi's slogan of 'land to the tiller' belonged to the latter priority. In the context of West Bengal, the abolition of intermediaries with payment of compensation and the issue of legal protection to *bargadars* on land were considered as essential both from the point of view of social justice as well as productivity. The Zamindari Abolition Act was passed in 1950 by the Central Government.

In West Bengal, the West Bengal Bargadars Act was framed in 1950 to fix the share of the crop which the *bargadar* would receive from the landowner. The West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act, 1953 was framed to take over the ceiling surplus land of the *Jotedars* and to address the question of compensation. However, the evictions of the *bargadars* continued and to tackle the issue the West Bengal Land Reforms Act, 1955 was passed which was a more comprehensive piece of legislation.

The thesis has made a humble attempt to argue that the politics surrounding the process of land reform was created using certain phrases and metaphors like rights of the *bargadars*, personal cultivation, land ceiling limits, compensation, vested land, redistribution, etc. The bureaucracy was the instrument through which the process of land reform was sought to be implemented. However, land reform was a priority among other priorities like increasing productivity through adoption of better farming techniques by farmers.

With the formation of the United Front Government in 1967, the emphasis was more on the struggle through which the *bargadar* could acquire his rights. In this process, a singular peasant identity emerged. The binary of a weak *bargadar* being placed against a strong *Jotedar* was the symbolism that was used to carry out the struggle. Other sections of the population dependent on agriculture in the villages like the *khetmajur* were to join the *bargadars* in their struggle against the 'bourgeois-landlord' State. Under Land Reforms Minister Harekrishna Koner, the land seizure movement in villages put primary emphasis on the seizure of ceiling surplus land of the *Jotedars* even before completion of legal formalities. The Naxalite Movement went a step ahead to realise the promise of 'land to the tiller' by focussing on annihilation of the class enemy and encircling the cities. However, the movement was contained with police force both by the United Front Government and the Congress Government that was formed in 1972.

After the Left Front Government came to power in 1977, the emphasis was on redistributive justice. A state wide programme (Operation Barga) to record the *bargadars* and also redistribution of ceiling surplus land was carried out. OB was carried out with the objectives of recording of rights of the *bargadars* and also redistribution of land to the landless. The emphasis was on redistributive justice in the decades of the 1970s and 1980s with the involvement of the local population through the Krishak Sabha and the Panchayati Raj Institutions. Agricultural productivity would increase after the issue of redistributive justice was addressed. Several studies have shown that OB managed to change the power structure of the rural areas to an extent as the erstwhile *Jotedars* were left bereft of their political and economic clout. However, the implementation of a programme of land redistribution within a democratic framework had its limitations and complexities in social relations in rural areas were not captured by the binary between the strong *Jotedar* and a weak *bargadar*. For example, the landless segments of the village society were largely left out of OB and landlessness increased. A broad consensus existed among the various political formations regarding the economic efficiency of redistribution of land.

After the liberalisation of the economy in 1991, the priority shifted to attract investment for industrialisation. I have studied certain select documents like the Policy of Industrial Statement that was tabled in the Vidhan Sabha in 1994, the critique of the GATT Treaty, speeches of Chief Minister Jyoti Basu, a document called Destination West Bengal and the implementation of a Township project at Rajarhat to understand the change. Land reform is shown to be a successful project in the above documents. The peasant is not sought to be empowered through a process of struggle but rather becomes an appendage to the process of industrialisation. So, OB had increased the purchasing power of the rural population and this was one reason why West Bengal could attract investment.

After Buddhadeb Bhattacharya became the Chief Minister in 2000, the emphasis shifted from land reform to that of land acquisition and the process was set in motion after 2006 with greater momentum. Newer arguments were put forward to create a consensus in favour of the changes. The arguments that emerged in this time were that agriculture was becoming less profitable, land holdings were fragmented and marginal and that people in the villages themselves wanted to come out of agriculture. The agenda of redistributive justice associated with OB does not come up as a priority in this period. Land reforms is projected as a successful activity of the past. The future lay in industrialisation and it was in their own interests that the people should support this new priority. A binary between agriculture and industry came to dominate public discourse in this time period.

However, it was with the aggressive pushing forward of this process of industrialisation that popular resentment arose against the LFG in places like Singur, Nandigram and Haripur among others. Land was required to be acquired for industry and the LFG carried out the process without consulting the local *Krishak Sabhas*. In this process, spontaneous movements arose against the LFG that were later joined by political parties belonging to the Opposition camp. The economic logic behind the newly discovered need for industrialisation could not be balanced with the political motives of maintaining a support base among the peasantry in the rural areas. In the face of complexities of rural society, the process of acquisition of land encountered widespread resistance and these incidents are widely believed to have contributed to the electoral setbacks suffered by the Left Front Government in the 2011 elections to the Vidhan Sabha where it lost to the Trinamool Congress. The LFG was left with no option but to respond to the opposition using a mix of force as well as attempt to gather consent from the general public.

The Trinamool Congress came to power in 2011 on the slogan of Ma-Mati-Manush which was developed in the heyday of the popular movements in Singur and Nandigram. The slogan was coined to protect farmlands. Over the years, the emphasis has shifted to increasing the productivity from land but without abandoning the security of the tenants and also without changing the laws related to land reforms. The TMC did not use the category of class to analyse society. Thus efforts to increase productivity from agriculture can be said to follow the logic of the trickle down effect. The TMC Government tried to bring in an element of participation and inclusivity in matters related to land acquisition and the rehabilitation packages were planned in ways that were suited to a particular context.

Discourse and Rhetoric

The thesis has attempted to answer whether discourse surrounding land in West Bengal and the rhetoric used have been able to capture the rural complexities. The impact of this process on industrialisation has also been studied. Based on the above exposition, questions were articulated and the answers have been teased out through a detailed study in the chapters of this dissertation.

Rhetoric and formation of dominant discourse is an imperative feature of the politics of any period. Political communication and rhetoric is the lifeline of political processes in organising, managing and constituting authority in States and for establishing a two-way interactional relation between the government and the citizens in a functional democracy. Various issues connected with land have dominated the politics of West Bengal since Independence. These issues were related with economic justice. Two major approaches were followed, namely increasing the productivity of land and that of redistributive justice. Some of the main points followed regarding the latter were those of security of tenure to the peasant and equitable distribution of land resources. Over the years, the focus has been on increase of productivity from land and bringing people left out from the process within the purview of welfare schemes.

The present research work is an attempt to understand, analyse and evaluate the uses and functions of rhetoric and of discourse formation in political communication through speech act by active participants in the democratic political processes in play in West Bengal on the question and issues centred on land-- reforms, acquisition and uses.

Objectives of the Study

The present research work on the topic *The Land Question in the Politics of West Bengal: An Analysis of Discourses and Rhetoric (1977-2021)* has been carried out with the following major objectives:

- 1) To understand, situate and analyse the significance of rhetoric and discourses in politics;
- 2) To present a comprehensive understanding and analysis of the land question involving land ownership, land reform legislations and land acquisition policies of successive governments in West Bengal over the last about 5 decades
- 3) To analyse and interpret the speech act of government and political leadership of West Bengal in and outside the Legislative Assembly constituting rhetoric and discourses on land from the standpoint of politics and political mobilisation and
- 4) To examine and evaluate the significant changes in the stance and orientation of various political actors over time and through various government formations.

Statement of the Problem and Research Agenda

The present study aims to deal with the significance of discourses and rhetoric in understanding the politics of West Bengal with a focus on the question of land and its impact on society and politics. This is sought to be done by discussing the history of discourse and rhetoric and then applying these concepts to political movements based on land in West Bengal. The attitude of the governments both at the Centre and in West Bengal are discussed through the proceedings of the Vidhan Sabha, various Acts passed by the Parliament and the West Bengal Legislative Assembly and socio-political movements. The distinctive policies followed regarding land redistribution by the Left Front Government after 1977 are discussed along with their drawbacks. We try to identify certain speech acts which signal a deviation from the initial policies. Attempt has been made to discuss the various protest movements mobilised against the LFG policy priority on industrialisation which culminated in its losing power in 2011. After the fall of the LFG in 2011, the Trinamool Congress attempted to carve out a distinct break from the existing policies on land acquisition. The aim to project a radical departure from the policies of the LFG on land acquisition however has also meant non-availability of land for big industries and in many cases even for small business and commercial activities. The TMC government has stressed on the element of consent of all

landowners in any government clearance involving purchase of land. The Government has also continued the policy of increasing productivity from land and bringing those dependent on land within the net of welfare schemes.

The thesis work builds on the legislative acts related to land and how successive governments of Jyoti Basu from 1977 to 2000, Buddhadeb Bhattacharya from 2001 to 2011 and the present Mamata Banerjee Government from 2011 to 2021 have attempted to build up their own narrative of success in redistributive justice and welfare in this sphere for the rural populace of land tillers, share croppers and landless labourers. The research work aims to understand and analyse the rhetoric and discourses employed by the successive regimes to communicate their policies and priorities for the intended beneficiaries of the government's engagement with the central issues of land, land-relations, land reform, and imperative of land acquisition and finally the centrality of consent of land owners in any project involving land acquisition.

Scope of the Research

The thesis is an attempt to uncover the co-relation between discourses and rhetoric on the one hand and the entirety of issues related to land in West Bengal from the perspective of legislative measures, political currents and political mobilisation. The time frame chosen for the research work is from 1977 to 2021. The period covers the 34 years of Left Front Government's rule—1977 to 2011 but this long period had three phases. The first phase was focused on *Operation Barga* and the next phase was on debates and dilemmas presented in the wake of liberalisation and imperative of industrialisation in the 1990s. The third phase saw a resolution of the debate in favour of industrialisation under Buddhadeb Bhattacharya's stewardship of the Government from 2000 to 2011. This phase also unveiled multiple levels of contradiction in the policy and stance of the Government and helped build opposition to the LFG. The inauguration of the TMC Government in the state in 2011 and its two terms in the Government, up to 2021 constitutes the end point of the scope of the research. The analytical framework of the universe of rhetoric and discourses have been analysed in the first Chapter of the thesis and though not extensively, post-Independent India and West Bengal's journey in the formative years and up to the mid-1970s has been described for the sake of chronology and continuity in the second Chapter.

An extensive review of literature has been undertaken in the thesis and gaps identified in the existing body of knowledge has been taken into account for necessary improvement.

As we can note from the previous account, the studies on land based politics in West Bengal are quite extensive and the literature on discourses and rhetoric is also vast. Although some of the studies on West Bengal refer to the use of rhetoric by the ruling Party in power but as of now there is no serious study on a theory of rhetoric to analyse the significance of the concept in creating the space of politics. Thus, the role of rhetoric in creating discourses on land has remained relatively unexplored. Moreover, the relation between discourses and rhetoric on land also remains unexplored in the context of West Bengal. The present study is a humble effort to fill in these gaps by capturing the use and deployment of discourses and rhetoric to address and exemplify the issues related to land and its interconnectedness with politics and political mobilisation through the last about five decades involving 9 governments under three Chief Ministers and two political formations in West Bengal.

Research Questions

The present research work deals entirely with the discourses and rhetoric centred on issues and question related to land in West Bengal. It is necessary to delve deep into the sources and input for political mobilisation centred on land and how successive governments have attempted to use and deploy rhetoric for the purpose. The objectives of the present research work have been systematically examined in 5 substantive chapters by an attempt to answer the below research questions:

- 1) What are the significance of discourses and rhetoric in understanding politics in general and West Bengal in particular?
- 2) What and how laws and policies related to question of land ownership, distribution and land use in West Bengal have evolved?
- 3) What were the distinctive aspects and policies of the Left Front Government on issues related to land over the decades?
- 4) What were the reasons for the opposition against the Left Front Government on land issues and how political narratives were shaped by the LFG and the Opposition?
- 5) What are the distinctive aspects of the laws and the policy decisions taken by the Trinamool Congress Government on issues related to land?

Research Methodology

In answering the above questions, emphasis has been placed on usage of both quantitative as well as qualitative methods. References mined and used for the preparation of this research work are mostly based on primary sources. The governments at the centre as well as in the

various states have invariably legislated on almost every aspect of the questions and issues related to land since Independence. The various legislations and their repeated amendments over the decades therefore constitute the basic framework shaping the work on this thesis. Since the legislation is the end-point of public discussion and discourse on a certain question, in this case issues related to land, political pronouncements of government and Opposition leaders and their speeches and intervention both outside and within the Legislative Assembly has been studied thoroughly and the various chapter contents enriched. Also, extensive use of primary source material from the Speeches and Memoirs of significant political actors, as well as official documents and reports of political parties and noteworthy public figures is another distinct feature of the present thesis. Moreover, the thesis has equally focussed on the materials in the form of government orders as well pamphlets and petitions of myriad organisations and association involved in questions and issues related to land, whether in support or in opposition to government moves and approaches in this regard.

The historical method has been used to analyse the Proceedings of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly and the policy decisions that were adopted over time. The case study method has been used while studying and analysing certain select socio-political movements. Usage of statistics by Government Departments and scholars has been used to corroborate the speeches made by various leaders in various forums during the period under study. Discourse analysis has been used to identify the key phrases, metaphors that recur in the speeches and to understand how decisions taken centrally, percolated down to the grassroots level during various movements.

An Overview of the Chapters

The Thesis consists of an Introduction, five main Chapters and a Conclusion.

The first Chapter is titled *Understanding Discourses and Rhetoric in Politics*. In this chapter, the views of various scholars on rhetoric and how the views developed over time have been studied. The first part of the Chapter describes the various perspectives on rhetoric in the Ancient, Medieval and Modern Periods. In the Ancient period, discussions on the ideas of Aristotle, Plato, Cicero and Quintillian have been attempted. In the Medieval Period the formalism attached to the practises of kingship has been emphasised. In the modern period, the ideas of Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and Marx have been discussed in details. The ideas of John Rawls, Habermas and Hannah Arendt are also discussed. The second part of the Chapter studies how the concept of rhetoric is linked to the idea of discourse. After a

brief description of the post-structuralism turn in political science, the ideas of Foucault on the creation of a discourse have been discussed. The idea of how economic ideas of justice also constitute a discourse has been discussed, thus paving the way for treating land reforms as an economic exercise. In the concluding part of the chapter, the salient features of both the terms, namely ‘rhetoric’ and ‘discourse’ have been identified.

The second Chapter is titled *The Land Issue in Post-Independent West Bengal (1947-1977)*, In this Chapter, a brief description of the evolution of the land policy in the post -independent period in the country and more particularly in West Bengal through the enactment of various laws and the speeches of prominent leaders has been attempted. The first part of the Chapter focuses on the period of Congress rule where the chief method of addressing the problem of land was through the enactment and implementation of laws. The second part of the Chapter deals with the approach of the United Front Government and the Naxalites towards the issue of land. The chief difference with earlier eras is that of the centrality accorded to the building up of mass movements to carry out the implementation of the land reform laws. The Chapter goes on to offer a brief description of the land based movements that played a role in producing politics and also the shaping of laws.

The third Chapter is titled *Discourse on Land Issues: The Left Front Government in West Bengal (1977-2001)*. This Chapter deals with the issue of implementation of land reforms under the Left Front Government. The drive to record sharecroppers was undertaken through *Operation Barga* which started in 1978. The Chapter describes the implementation of OB through the formulation of a policy taking into consultation various stakeholders in the process and the involvement of the bureaucracy and the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The views of the important leaders belonging to the LFG and the Opposition have been studied through the Proceedings of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly. Certain key phrases and metaphors are identified that were used to create politics of land reform in our case. The second part of the Chapter deals with the changes in the overall policy orientation of the LFG after the adoption of the New Economic Policy in 1991 and the impact of this on the question of land. The shift in policy has been discerned through a study of select representative documents like the Policy Statement on Industrialisation that was tabled in the Vidhan Sabha by Chief Minister Jyoti Basu in 1994, a document titled ‘Destination West Bengal’ published in 1999 that was intended to attract businesses and the building of a township in Rajarhat where land was acquired through the application of the Land Acquisition Act, 1894 instead of

direct purchase, as the presence of *bargadars* was considered a problem. The views of the members of the LFG in the Vidhan Sabha on the issues regarding General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade have been described to show that rather than on the grounds of redistributive justice, it was an outlook closer to the neoliberal one on the basis of which GATT was criticised. The prices of inputs in agriculture would increase and agriculture would become less profitable. Ideological issues are raised when the LFG members connected the issue of sovereignty and security of India with the signing of the GATT. In these documents the gains from land reforms are used to justify the changing priorities. Changes in land use pattern are sought to be studied on the basis of the above discussion. In the concluding part of the Chapter, arguments have been raised that while the implementation of OB constituted a discourse there were attempts to come out of the discourse in the later part of the 1990s. But the anti-incumbency wave could not amplify perhaps because the drives towards industrialisation did not gather much steam.

The fourth Chapter is *Land Acquisition, Politics and Opposition to Left Front Rule (2001-2011)*. This Chapter deals with the policies of the LFG after 2000 when Buddhadeb Bhattacharya came to power and more particularly after the 2001 Assembly election in 2001. The first part of the Chapter offers a brief description of the change in the policies of the LFG towards industrialisation and urbanisation and how this impacted the issue of land. Speeches of political functionaries who were instrumental in bringing about the proposed change have been discussed. The legislative changes like Amendments to the West Bengal Land Reform Acts and administrative changes like a new manual on land acquisition that were brought about to implement these policies have also been discussed. Certain key phrases and metaphors that were used repeatedly in an attempt to facilitate this transition have been sought to be identified. The second part of the Chapter deals with the resistance and opposition faced by the Government in the implementation of these policies. The methods used by the affected persons to resist the process of land acquisition for industry and the involvement of political parties belonging to the Opposition have been discussed. The voices of dissent even within the LFG have been analysed to buttress the point that the LFG did move away from the discourse of the earlier periods. It is argued that the new discourse was only confined to a rhetorical management of the situation which developed in the aftermath of the land acquisition initiatives, the brunt of which was borne by sections of rural society that were hitherto loyal to the LFG. In the concluding part of the Chapter an attempt is made to theorise the rhetoric of the LFG.

The fifth Chapter is titled *Approach of the TMC Government towards Land Issues: Policies and Practices (2011-2021)*. This Chapter deals with the rhetorical stance adopted by the Trinamool Congress in dealing with the issue of land. In the first part of the Chapter, the Singur Land Rehabilitation Bill that was introduced in the Vidhan Sabha to give land back to the ‘unwilling farmers’ at Singur has been discussed. In the next section, the amendments to the West Bengal Land Reforms Act is also discussed along with case studies of instances of land acquisition in Birbhum to show the attitude of the Government towards security of tenure and compensation. The efforts to increase productivity from land resources with the increasing commercialisation of agriculture have also been described briefly. In the last section, an attempt has been made to describe how the TMC Government visualised the interests of the people dependent on land and how efforts were made to protect these individuals through the safety net of welfare schemes. Thus, the land policy is contextualised in the overall scheme of the TMC’s economic policy.

The analysis in the above five main Chapters is followed by a Conclusion to the thesis and a section on select Bibliography.

Research Outcome:

The research questions mentioned above have been analysed in detail in the five chapters of my thesis. The findings from my research are summarised below.

Research Question 1: What are the significance of discourses and rhetoric in understanding politics in general and West Bengal in particular?

The purpose of rhetoric is to persuade a target audience to the speaker’s point of view. Even if the listener is not persuaded by the speaker’s point of view, rhetoric still remains important as a method of communication. As discussed, the notion of truth has been used as a yardstick through which rhetoric is evaluated and truth was considered as an external benchmark. Rhetoric involves another external component in so far as it involves an audience who are involved in the particular speech act. This conception of rhetoric was carried forward from the ancient to the medieval ages and till the beginnings of the modern era when the truth was fixed with certain concepts. Truth was to be found in the application of categories like sovereignty, liberty, freedom or class or society.

However, when truth is fixed then the problem arises as to the nature of truth that is contained in these categories. It is here that the role of discourse comes in. Truth is believed to be

something that is produced through social interactions rather than something which is an objective category. The study of discourse involves a study of the nature of social interactions and the patterns of power. Discourse in contrast to rhetoric has an internal component as it does not need to be justified to an audience but is internalised through usage of certain symbols and signs, among which language is primary. The application of discourse that involves the circulation of power is to be studied at the local level.

The thesis at hand deals with land and since the issues related to land and more specifically the process of land reform is taken as rooted in the principles of economics, it can be treated as a discourse that has been brought alive by the symbolism of a strong *Jotedar* against the weak *bargadar*, the amount of vested land, compensation paid and the amount of land redistributed. Laws that are enacted carry forward this purpose of circulation of a discourse as a law implicitly implies consent of the governed population.

However, when a Government is unable to create a discourse, the role of rhetoric assumes crucial importance in lending legitimacy to the ruling dispensation.

Research Question 2: What and how laws and policies related to question of land ownership, distribution and land use in India have evolved?

The issue of land comes up very early in the policy agenda of the law makers both at the Central Government and also in West Bengal. Several pieces of legislation were framed in the years after Independence mainly to tackle the issue of unequal land ownership.

Adopting the basic Gandhian slogan of ‘Land to the tiller’, the Central Government enacted the Zamindari Abolition Act with the purpose of abolishing the intermediary rights of ownership but the issue got entangled in Courts when the former landowners filed cases as Right to Property was a Fundamental Right under Article 31 of the Indian Constitution.

In West Bengal, legislations passed in this period included the Bargadar Act, 1950, the Estates Acquisition Act, 1953 and the West Bengal Land Reforms Act, 1955. The emphasis on land was a product of the knowledge built up during colonial rule and also land based movements like the Tebhaga movement in the aftermath of independence. In these Acts, the focus was on abolishing the intermediary rights of ownership of land and recording the rights of the dependents on land, in this case the sharecroppers or the *bargadars*. A ceiling was set on the amount of land that an individual could own and land held in excess of the ceiling limit was to be distributed among the land poor segment of the population. The related

question which came up was that of the compensation to be paid to those landowners whose land was confiscated. This was the accepted position among all the political formations in West Bengal including the Congress, the Communist Party of India and later on even the Communist Party of India (Marxist). The emphasis was on laws to bring about the desired social change.

However, with the end of Congress rule in West Bengal and the formation of the first United Front Government in 1967, the attitude towards land underwent a change under Harekrishna Koner of the CPI (M) with emphasis being laid on grabbing land rather than the completion of legal formalities. It was alleged that legal formalities were being used to protect the landlords who formed the support base of the Congress in rural areas. The peasants were drawn into a struggle against the machinations of the 'bourgeois- landlord' state. Importance was given on developing a movement to mobilise the peasants using Communist ideology. Otherwise laws had no significance. The Krishak Sabha was to play a leading role in organising peasant struggles in the rural areas to capture ceiling surplus land of the *Jotedars*.

The trend continued in the Naxalite struggle when the land of *Jotedars* was seized and the cities were sought to be surrounded. There were differences among the Naxalites regarding the methods to be followed in the struggle. For example, there was a debate over the question of annihilation of the class enemy and whether the Naxalites should concentrate their work in urban areas or in the villages. The question of whether an educational institution should be attacked was also contested within the Naxalites.

Meanwhile in office, Koner had realised that the revolutionary zeal had to be curtailed and this resulted in a parting of ways with the Naxalite leaders. The police were sent to deal with the situation.

Despite the differences the movements brought in, a conception of the peasantry emerges as a unified and a singular entity imbued with an autonomous interest. An analysis of the writings of Harekrishna Koner shows that the UFG was aware of the tensions that existed among various sections of the peasantry and wanted to involve the landless in the struggle. But the aim was to form peasant unity. Even the Central Government Reports refer to the necessity of political will in carrying out the process of land reforms. Under Siddhartha Shankar Ray's Congress Ministry in 1972, the Land Reform Acts were made more stringent towards securing the rights of the sharecroppers and in keeping with the Green Revolution, efforts were made to introduce measures that could augment agricultural growth.

Thus throughout this period the debate between the major political formations was not on the economic efficiency of land reform but rather the method of implementation. Phrases like 'land to the tiller', 'rights of sharecropper', 'ceiling limit' and 'compensation' recur in the Acts, Assembly Proceedings and in political speeches and writings linked with 'land reforms'.

Research Question 3: *What were the distinctive aspects and policies of the Left Front Government on issues related to land over the decades?*

The Left Front Government was voted into power in 1977. The stress laid on carrying out the process of land reform gathered impetus during the initial years of the Left Front regime. The 'peasant' is situated in the context of land. One of the most significant changes that were brought to the Land Reform Laws was that the onus of proving whether a person was a *bargadar* or not was shifted to the landowner and non-payment of receipt to the *bargadar* on collecting the crop was made a criminal offence. The definition of *bargadar* and personal cultivation was also amended. The *bargadar* had to reside in a locality to get the benefits of OB. The most distinctive step towards the implementation of land reforms was encapsulated through 'Operation Barga'. The methodology of Operation Barga was decided through consultations at the local village level and the feedback of the local people was incorporated as seen in the issuance of several orders of the Board of Revenue seeking to implement the same. Much of the work of recording *bargadars* was completed in the first five years of the LFG.

The Land Reform laws were amended in 1977, 1978, 1980 and 1986 to plug the loopholes which could frustrate the aim of recording the rights of the sharecropper and the redistribution of land to the land poor sections of society.

The LFG was shown to be furthering the interests of the peasants. The rallying cry was that the peasants would be empowered through OB and thereafter in the future a revolution would be built up against the 'bourgeois-landlord alliance' ruling the Indian State. The peasants would join the Trade Unions, women, youth and other Party Fronts in the struggle. In addition to this process of 'othering' the political opponent who were depicted as powerful and morally deficient, OB entailed a legal process which used certain phrases like recording of rights, vested land, rights of sharecroppers and evasion of ceiling limits continuously through both political and administrative jargon. Through these measures, the subject of the

peasant would be protected from repression by the *Jotedars* acting in tandem with opposition political parties.

It is through the usage of certain terms mentioned above that the notion of truth emerges. The weak *bargadar* was involved in the process of getting his own self recorded at the local camps. The LFG won three elections to the Vidhan Sabha till 1991 mainly dwelling on the successes of OB.

However, as has been shown the discourse that was built up in the 1970s and 1980s began to peter out by the decade of the 1990s. OB had its limitations and after the adoption of a New Economic Policy, we find a distinct shift in the attitude towards the peasant and land. As has been discussed, documents like the Industrial Policy Statement, the Discussion opposing GATT in the Assembly, Destination West Bengal show the willingness of the Government to bring in industry mark a distinctive shift in the discourse. The notion of the empowered peasant disappears and is replaced by a stress on an increasing rural market. West Bengal could attract investment by virtue of the large and expanding rural market. The GATT Treaty was critiqued in the Vidhan Sabha on grounds that it would raise the cost of inputs. During the process of land acquisition in Rajarhat, the presence of recorded *bargas* was seen as a hindrance to the process of creation of the new township. Over time a party society was created in rural areas to mediate between the local population and the Party. Sections of the unified peasantry like the landless agricultural labourers eventually moved out of the umbrella of the CPI (M). However, I argue that notwithstanding these fissures that can be interpreted as signs of emerging cracks in the discourse, no large scale political change was in the offing as the new initiatives towards industrialisation were not carried out aggressively.

Research Question 4: *What were the reasons for the opposition against the Left Front Government on land issues and how political narratives were shaped by the LFG and the Opposition?*

The shift in the discourse that had started in the 1990s did not draw much resentment because the State did not identify itself with the process of industrialisation and not much of an effort was made for implementing the same. After Buddhadeb Bhattacharya was made the Chief Minister and more so in his second term after 2006, a distinct effort was made towards furthering industrialisation in West Bengal. The leaders of the CPI(M) close to Bhattacharya like Nirupam Sen, Gautam Deb, Anil Biswas and others repeated certain arguments to support an aggressive push towards industrialisation like the decreasing profitability from

agriculture, the marginalisation of landholdings and the desire of the people to welcome industrialisation. An attempt was made to create a new discourse that would amalgamate the practises of the earlier efforts with the new found priorities. So OB was shown as a successful venture of the past that had improved the standard of life in the rural areas thus creating a new market. Due to a rise in the cost of inputs after the New Economic Policy, farming had been made unprofitable and landholdings were marginalised in rural areas. Industrialisation was shown to be a process connected with the future and the involvement of peasantry in the process towards industrialisation is shown to be as a process that was internalised. The process of othering of the capitalist classes that had been a part of the LFG stance was absent. Rather than redistributive policies in agriculture, the move was towards increasing productivity in agriculture. The future lay in industrialisation.

Ultimately the moves generated widespread resentment against the LFG that saw it getting voted out of power in the Assembly elections of 2011. That such activities were linked with the processes of land acquisition is evident from the fact that the LFG suffered electoral losses in the 2008 Panchayat elections and the 2009 Lok Sabha elections as well. We see the efforts as a strategic management of these situations by the LFG and thus it is rhetoric. The local wings of the Krishak Sabha were not consulted at any stage of taking the decision to acquire land and the LFG did not side with the peasants who constituted its primary support base in rural areas.

However, as the chapter describes, when land acquisition actually began they were marked by widespread protests. All the movements described started primarily through mobilisations of the local people dependent on land. The movements are a testimony to the fact that the intended discourse could not produce truth. It was at a later stage that the political parties involved themselves in these protests that had already built up a popular support base. With the involvement of a 'rainbow coalition' outside those immediately affected, the movements were characterised by a two-way political communication between the urban areas and rural areas and also with other political formations outside the state which created a 'industry-agriculture' binary.

The government responded through police action in tandem with local party cadres and simultaneously handed over cheques to the willing farmers in an effort to convince people of the benefits of industrialisation. It was not the capitalists but the Opposition parties led by the TMC that was othered as law breaking persons who were opposed to development. We read

such speeches and political activities as an attempt at strategic management of the changed situation in the aftermath of popular movements against the LFG. As my thesis shows such speech acts are identified as rhetoric as they were not internalised but had an external component in so far as they attempted to manipulate the target audience.

The rhetoric here tries to project application of Marxist principles as an economic rather than a historical doctrine. The attempts at creation of a disciplinary society tried to tilt the self-reflexive process of dialogue in favour of one side of the self through the rhetoric described above. The rhetoric followed is based on the discourse of the earlier eras as it tries to build a bridge between the old and the new keeping in mind the fact that the LFG had to defend the policies followed since 1977. The other side did exist but it was suppressed through the use of force. In this context an effort has been made to show that the process of discourse formation did not reach its conclusion. It is out of the denigration of the unstable discourse that the use of rhetoric emerges. In the absence of a well-entrenched discourse, the LFG resorted to rhetoric to justify its moves.

Research Question 5: What were the distinctive aspects of the laws and the policy decisions taken by the Trinamool Congress Government on issues related to land?

The TMC Government was voted to power with the electoral slogan of ‘Ma-Mati-Manush’ that was a direct fallout of the involvement in the struggle against the process of forced acquisition of land. After coming to power the attempt at giving the land back to the unwilling peasants at Singur through legislation was a symbolic attempt to show that the Government was true to its electoral promise.

Although the TMC Government did not bring about changes in the Land Reform Acts, it did exempt entities from the ceiling limit. No new policy was framed for land acquisition. Where land acquisition did take place, it was through a process of consultation with the local population on a scale much higher than had happened under the previous LFG. Novel packages of compensation were announced. The commitment of the Government towards ensuring security of tenure is seen in the fact that the Government did not amend the provisions of the Land Reform Acts dealing with transfer of land belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. At the same time, steps were taken to increase agricultural productivity and it was believed that such steps would have a trickle-down effect on those dependent on land.

Though the concept of class has been abandoned, yet the state has not openly taken the side of the capitalists in the process of acquisition of land. The overall economic policy of the TMC in carrying out implementation of schemes like *Lakshmir Bhandar* that move away from conventional economic policy by identifying benefits with select social groups have been described as populist in the sense that they do not adhere to any particular ideology. The land policy of the TMC is described in my thesis as part of the broader economic policy that it is not strictly identified with the tenets of any particular ideology or the creation of a new discourse is attempted to be created through use of phrases or metaphors that would be universal in their application at the local level. Rather as new situations arise, new methods are devised to deal with the changed circumstances. Rhetoric is not confined merely to the ornamental use of language. In this context the role of rhetoric is of utmost significance in carrying out the task of socialisation and thus the mobilisations for popular action are justified through the use of rhetoric. Thus, the socially situated character of land gives rise to a distinctive form of rhetoric under the TMC Government.

Limitation and Future Research Agenda

The study of rhetoric focusses on the role of the speaker and the audience. In my thesis, an attempt has been made to study rhetoric from the point of view of the speaker. The reception of the speeches by the audience has not been dealt with in my thesis unless the speaker was challenged. The time period followed in my thesis is quite expansive and this makes an ethnographic study difficult. The use of newspapers in my research has been limited. This is a limitation as forms of speeches might differ in spaces of organised politics like the Legislative Assemblies and unorganised spaces like on the streets. However, the emerging forms of rhetoric in response to the land issues is a topic that will attract future researchers to deep delve into the intricacies, nuances and multidimensional interaction of the formulation of discourses and uses of rhetoric on the one hand and politics, its narration and its practice in a democracy on the other.