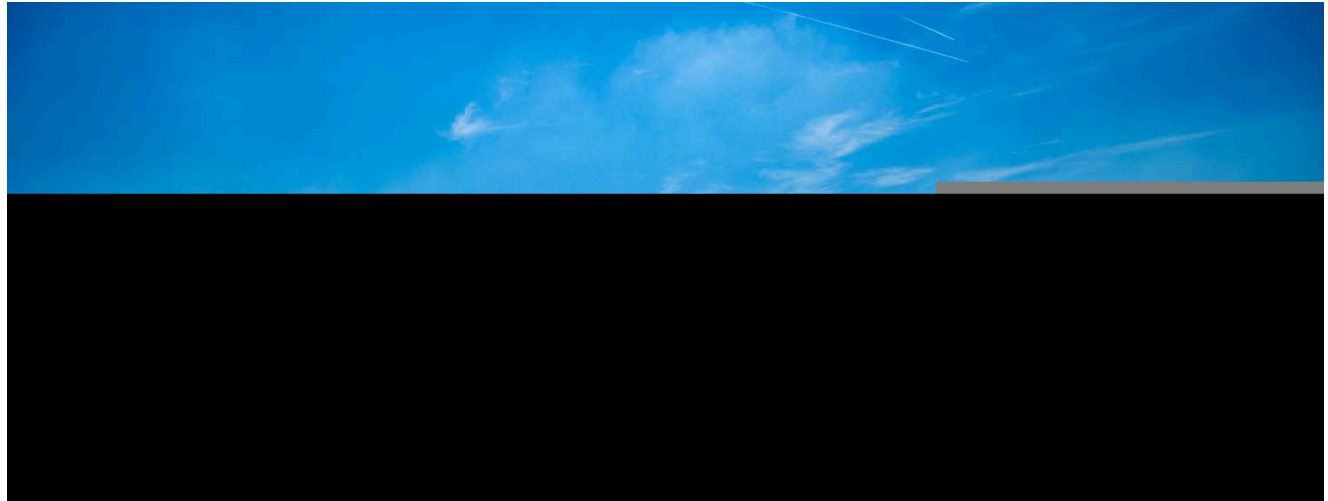


Land Reforms in India's West Bengal: Through the Lens of Policy Theories

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Abstract

The West Bengal Land Reforms Act of 1955 aimed to redistribute land to marginalized cultivators, disrupting colonial-era inequities. Through policy theories like Punctuated Equilibrium and Social Construction of Target Population, its impact and challenges are examined in this article. However, discrepancies between policy intent and implementation persist, necessitating refinements. Group Theory advocates for equitable stakeholder engagement and adjustments to safeguard small-scale cultivators' livelihoods. While the Act has reduced rural landlessness, operational shortcomings require attention for its transformative potential to be fully realized, ensuring equitable land access and economic security for West Bengal's marginalized communities.

Introduction

The West Bengal Land Reforms Act of 1955 is one of the most significant policies of independent India, since it characterised itself as the most large-scale land redistribution initiative across the country. It visualised this by ensuring the erstwhile landless tenant cultivators of Bengal, who were compelled to practise the Adhi or Barga system of agriculture, which denied them basic financial, socio-economic rights over their own labour, were now capable of owning the lands they would earlier simply work on. This was because according to the erstwhile zamindari system introduced during colonial times, the land areas were starkly concentrated amongst the rich, upper-caste elite, and the Bahujan masses who would work on the farmlands owned by the former, would get a measly wage rate in return

for their arduous labour.

This Act was legislated upon in the year 1955 but was also properly implemented during the later Communist Government's reign in period following the election of the United Front party to the state assembly of West Bengal in the year 1967. This policy will be critiqued through the lens of the Punctuated Equilibrium, the Social Construction of Target Population, as well as the Group Theory.

Understanding the Policy and The Theories Applied

It is more than necessary to study and understand this particular policy enacted by the Bengal government, because it gives us a good insight into understanding how effective redistributive policies can be in the country, and how such policies can be replicated in other states, especially when the landlessness of the marginalised caste groups is exceptionally high in our nation even after 75 years of independence, denying them basic financial security. Studying such a policy is important to eradicate relative poverty in the nation, which will even improve agricultural productivity, as the land reform act in West Bengal alone even resulted in the increase of agricultural yield by approximately 28% (Hanstad and Brown, 2001).

Therefore, the three important theories of public policy: Punctuated Equilibrium by Charles Darwin (as well as scholars Gould and Eldredge), Social Construction of Target Population theory by Schneider and Ingram; and the Group theory are essential lens to view this policy through.

Relating Punctuated Equilibrium Theory with Bengal's Land Reform Act

Following the philosophy of renowned biologist, Charles Darwin, the Punctuated Equilibrium theory has significantly shaped the way in which policymaking is observed and analysed. Having its roots in biology, this theory enables us to understand the starkly divergent and disruptive pathway that the institution of land rights took up during the timespan of the Indian Independence Movement.

As mentioned earlier, Punctuated Equilibrium theory emphasises on dynamism associated with any evolutionary process, whether that process is of a biological or policy-oriented nature (Gould and Eldredge, 1972). In context of policymaking, it implies that any policy is subject to very quick and dramatic change in an abrupt fashion, and that it may effectuate a destabilisation of preceding policy frameworks, despite the standard operating procedure exhibiting an adequate level of stability and uniformity.

As observable in this particular case study, the land and property rights institution imposed in Bengal (then Bengal Presidency) during the colonial rule was the Zamindari framework via the policy of Permanent Settlement Act of 1793, which continued even after the introduction

of the Charter Act of 1833, that only made minute adjustments to the administrative regulations, but broadly retained the land rights framework, in fact strengthening it further to ensure greater exploitation of the rural Bengali peasants.

However, this centuries-old stability was disrupted post-Independence, when the oppressive Zamindari system was outright discarded vis-à-vis the introduction of the West Bengal Land Reforms Act in 1955, which empowered the tenant cultivators of farm lands, known as *Bargadars*, to not only obtain a much higher remuneration for their labour services in the form of greater produce allotment and increased wages, but most importantly also ensured redistribution of land plots unethically usurped by the *zamindars* back to the peasant families. The structuring of land ceiling was an important mechanism that determined the extent of land that was eligible for redistribution (Hanstad and Brown, 2001), as it facilitated an upper-limit to the area of land that the landowners could possess, and ensuring a minimum, lower-limit of land area to be guaranteed to the impoverished, marginalised cultivators as their home plot, which they had complete ownership over.

This satisfies the theoretical principles of Punctuated Equilibrium as it portrays how a novel, equitable and democratic institution was put in place that was diametrically opposite to the erstwhile colonial arrangement of land wherein the upper-caste landlords held extensive tracts of property by evicting crop cultivators from their own homes and turning them into landless tenants subjected to exorbitantly high taxes, low wages, debt traps due to unavailability of assets to pay back high-interest loans, consistent poverty; which collectively caused heightened vulnerability to famine-related deaths, violence and even social dehumanisation since they would become all the more dependent on the whims of the landlords for basic survival.

This abrupt, dynamic change in the structure of West Bengal's property rights displays that change in levels of attention to the issue is not proportional to the change in the size of the problem, since the issue of agricultural distress and subjugation of peasants was a recurring problem since the beginning of the colonial rule, and was in fact more pronounced during that period of time, due to an even more oppressive legal regime, however as we note, there were non-existent avenues of grievance redressal for farmers during the colonial era, and their distress was not even considered as worthy of any attention. Whereas even though the situations became slightly better during the post-Independence period, the Congress and then the Left Front regime in Bengal took initiatives to address the farmers' exploitation.

Social Construction of Target Population View of Land Reforms in West Bengal

With respect to the land reforms act, we can observe how the policymakers of West Bengal also greatly adhered to the Social Construction of Target Population theory to mould the redistribution of surplus land amongst the marginalised, Dalit-Bahujan and Muslim cultivators and protect their rights to land ownership.

As the theory states, policymakers use their own discretion (and sometimes even vested interests) to demarcate the society into starkly defined four quadrants, based on whether they harbour any political power and based on whether they can be considered as worthy of deserving benefits from welfare-oriented policies (Schneider and Ingram, 1993). These views are derived from the socio-political status in society, wherein the dominant view of those particular communities generally tends to prevail.

Here we observe that the landless cultivators of Bengal, the Bargadars, were considered as the 'dependent' section, which means being considered socially deserving of basic financial and livelihood security, and experiencing an absence of strong, potent political representation to make their voices heard in the legislature. Since they were subjected to intense exploitation since centuries and were not seen to be part of the 'troublemaking' elements of society, since they lack the political expression to create mass mobilisations which might turn into a violent kind. Following the basic principles of the Indian Constitution, which promotes socialistic policy towards the disadvantaged sections, particularly even calling for equitable distribution of resources (Hanstad and Brown, 2001). The Communist government was relatively more sympathetic towards the issues facing the tenant cultivators and initiated mechanisms to resolve those issues, distributing around 6,00,000 acres of land within just three years, 1967-1970 (Ibid).

The erstwhile upper-caste zamindars were viewed as the 'contenders,' at least on the surface level, wherein they were deemed as those sections of the society that had excessive political power but were abusing it for strictly their own, egocentric interests and causing grave harm, disadvantage and socio-economic stagnancy, by instituting structures which allowed them to access disproportionately high levels of resources, leaving the larger majority with significantly more skewed assets.

However, upon observing the realities in a more detailed sense, we observe that although the state did portray their allegiance to the marginalised farmers by instituting the reform policy, in many cases the land was in fact transferred to the zamindari landlords' own relatives, acquaintances and fake identities through fraudulent transactions, wherein they were often supported by the local political administration, as well as the law enforcement agencies like the local police and judiciary. Hence, it was often observed, that although the policy on paper did aim to treat the bargadars as the deserving, but in reality, they were often meted the treatment given to 'deviants.'

Policy Recommendations: Essential Role of Group Theory

Although the policy has had multiple positive points, it can be observed that there were stark drawbacks to the policy which could be addressed if the lens of Group Theory was to be adopted as the set of principles through which equitable distribution of resources could be conducted.

Firstly, it was observed that during the first phase of the land redistribution, the process of structuring tenant cultivators' rights was next to negligible. For instance, the cultivators did not have unilateral rights over their land, which might curtail their financial independence, as it prevented the new landowners (the erstwhile bargadars) from leasing out their land for any purpose, from utilising the land for a purpose other than what it was initially intended for, and that they must perform the cultivating activities themselves, without any external factor service involved. This provision is not very beneficial to the tenants, as they lose their unilateral rights over the land, which the zamindari landlords earlier did possess, whether legally or illegally. This particular provision can be corrected through the incorporation of group theory, wherein all the stakeholders of the policy should be engaged in a mutual discussion, and the power dynamics of various groups struggling for political dominance should be well understood. According to Group Theory, it is understood that balancing the interests of the society is essential, and to ensure this the excessive power harboured by a small elite group has to be diminished and the rights of the masses have to be increased to restructure the balance. Therefore, in such a case, the rights of the tenant cultivators, now the landowners, should be boosted up to the appropriate level wherein they can exercise proper control over their newly obtained land, which the other dominant caste landlords are already doing with the help of their inherited wealth, that is still higher.

Secondly, it is to be recognised that the requirement of the “principal source of income” criterion now levied on the small farmers, cultivators is also very problematic since it means that the landowners should only obtain their principal sources of income from the produce of their land. However, this is detrimental to the marginal, small landowners who earn a majority of their income from the agricultural labour they perform, and that they can even lose their small plot of land to the state now that they are in violation of the land reform act provision.

Incorporating Dalit-Adivasi-Muslim farm labourers and small landowners should be made the primary stakeholders, and more members from their communities should be made representatives in the local law enforcement and administrative affairs, because bureaucratic hindrance to such important reforms can exacerbate the situation by manifold times.

Two other major policy recommendations should be considered. With respect to the first point of lack of unilateral rights of the landowners, it should be ensured that the Bargadars could have the opportunity to choose to acquire ownership of the entire plot of land, the barga, by giving the erstwhile landowner a remuneration of around 50% of the land's total market value (Hanstad and Brown, 2001). The second alternative could be that the tenant cultivator could own one-half of the land instead of the entire plot and let go of his bargadar rights over the other plot of land. This would not only ensure them some agency by getting a position on the negotiating table, but also potentially get an opportunity to get higher income.

The second major policy recommendation to consider is that the narrow definition of 'principal source of income' should appropriately modified to ensure that small landowners, who cannot earn any kind of adequate income by only the produce of their own agricultural land, but have to resort to agricultural labour on other lands to earn a decent livelihood, can also access such basic rights to their own land and to the right to earn the basic financial remuneration they are able to. If this policy provision is amended in this sense, then the small, vulnerable farmers would not be under the constant danger to lose their precious lands.

Conclusion

Therefore, it is to be noted that the West Bengal Land Reforms Act, 1955, is a very noble initiative to redistribute resources to the marginalised sections of Bengal's society, and it has been a successful initiative to some extent as it has been able to achieve very high levels of land transfers, which are the highest in the country amongst all states, and the rural landlessness of Dalit, Bahujan and Adivasi cultivators is thus one of the lowest in the country as compared to those states which did not enact any such reform (Sarkar, 2021). However, it is also to be noted that the policy has some very considerable drawbacks to it which must be amended as soon as possible for it to achieve its full potential that it visualises.

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Author's Bio

Divyanshi Sharda is a final-year undergraduate student of Public Policy who is passionate about working in the arenas of rural development, community-centric governance and social infrastructure building.

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