The Measure of Time in the Appraisal of Social Reality

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To

PRABHATI

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PREFACE

Society *in being* and society *becoming* are two facets of society as entity that are necessary for our appraisal of social reality. These two facets always meet at a particular point in time. Society *in being* is considered contemporary (time at a particular moment), society *becoming* is considered as contemporaneous (time flowing towards a particular point). In both cases, the measure of time is indispensable for comprehending society: in the former case, from the past to the present; in the latter, from the past to the present and then to the foreseeable future.

I illustrate the case for the indispensability of time in our reckoning of social reality in this volume with reference to three *place* situations in *contemporary* times: 1) the land issue in a local setting, West Bengal, which is a component state of the Indian republic; 2) the caste issue in a national context, the nation-state of India; and 3) the gender issue in the global context. I examine the *contemporaneous* perspective in measuring time with reference to a) the analytic significance of time and b) the synoptic appreciation of time.

Among the divisions in Social Science it is History which is, most visibly, concerned with time; its entire knowledge corpus being organized around a temporal framework. I argue here that the measure of time is no less relevant for the other divisions within Social Science, if we are to comprehend social reality in all its richness.

The organization of this volume reflects not only our engagement with time but also with space, seen here as space-in-time. It glides from the local (regional) to the national and then to the global. From a particular situation (the land issue) in a specific place (West Bengal) today, it moves on to the general state of affairs driving Indian political and social change, namely the caste question in all its fullness and quirky manifestations. The volume ends with a global case for gender, which can, and does sometimes, cut across caste and class lines.

Ramkrishna Mukherjee, Kolkata, India, March 2009.

CHAPTER ONE

WEST BENGAL, INDIA, IN 2008: THE LAND ISSUE

Arboreal, Rural, Urban = Forestry-Agriculture-Industry

In 2006 a slogan was raised: *First Food Then Industry*, just when the government of West Bengal was planning for the industrialization of the State on a massive scale. This cry was similar to the outcry of the forest dwellers in the late 18th and early 19th centuries: *First Forest Then Civilization*, at a time when intensive village settlements based on an agrarian economy were in the process of formation in the early days of the British East India Company's rule in the *subah* (province) of Bengal. Maps of the large province (*subah*) of Bengal (at that time comprising the present states of West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in India and present Bangladesh) at the time of its acquisition by the East India Company show that large tracts of the districts of present West Bengal were arboreal regions. Villages in the map were scattered, towns were sparse, and cities were few and far between.

Yet the ruralisation of West Bengal did take place, feeding emergent towns and growing cities, despite the cry: *Save the Forest from the onslaught of Civilization*. This was the chief demand of many of the local revolts that occurred in the *subah* of Bengal in the early part of the 19th century: such as those of the *Santhals* and *Mundaris*. But according to Government statistics, "forests" claimed only 9.1 per cent of the total surveyed area of Bengal in 1939-40 (Mukherjee 1957: 36 n 2). Cultivated lands became the norm. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Bande Mataram*, which became the national anthem of pre-independent India, portrayed Bengal as dazzling in agricultural prosperity: *Sujalang Sufalang, Shasyashyamalang.*

Until the 1940s, villages in Bengal, and indeed in the whole of India, subsisted overwhelmingly on agriculture, and agriculture was engrossed in producing one crop a year. Inputs to agricultural production were from the locally available primary sources : water from nearby rivers, canals, tanks

and ponds; cow dung as fertilizer, black-soil from dried-up tanks and ponds, etc. to provide fertile soil input; implements like self- or locally-made wooden ploughs, harrows, levellers, huskers (*dhenki*), etc.; seeds—the stored grains from last year's production; and so on. In sum, rural West Bengal lived at an elementary stage of agriculture as the mode of production, characterized by the primeval state of the productive forces; and thus, entirely dependent upon the employment of kinetic energy of human and animal labour, namely, that of the peasants tilling the land and that of the draught cattle employed for the task.

Land, therefore, was the principal (and virtually the sole) means of production for agriculture – the backbone of the rural economy-culture-polity of West Bengal. Intrinsically, it was also the backbone of the whole of Bengal because an independent urban economy (i.e., by means of industry) was at a rudimentary state of development.

Consequently, *Land to Tillers* (*langal jar jami tar*) – a slogan raised in 1930s along with the publication of the journal *Langal* became an all-Bengal issue, although it was centered in the rural areas. It led, at the first stage, to the *Tebhaga Andolan* (the demand for a one third share of the crop to the landholder= the *jotdar* and two-thirds to the sharecropper = the *bargadar*) and, later, to the revolutionary phase of the Naxalbari (Maoist) movement, on the one side, and *Operation Barga* of the left oriented Government of West Bengal, on the other. By the 1970s, the land-hunger of the West Bengal peasants was satisfied to a significant extent; and the Naxalbari movement thrives until today elsewhere in India under various denominations (such as, in Bihar, in present-day Jharkhand, in Chattisgarh, in Orissa and in Andhra Pradesh) by transforming itself into predatory bands or variants of the Left Radicals.

Meanwhile from the 1950s and particularly since the 1970s, various inputs to agricultural production were increasingly available from the following: irrigation projects leading to abundant water supply to the peasants' land by means of electricity-driven mechanical motor pumps, fertilizer production – both organic and chemical, high-yielding seeds for diverse kinds of crops, portable husking machines reaching individual households, etc. over and above the previously accessible natural and local sources. Energy in mechanical and electrical forms had therefore reached farm lands and farmer's households, and was being harnessed for agricultural production beyond the manual labour of human and animals.

As a result, on the one hand, land-holdings began to yield 2-3 crops a year in place of only one in most cases; on the other, the input of large-scale irrigation works brought previously fallow land under cultivation. The aforementioned Government statistics had recorded that until 1940,

9.4 per cent of land in rural Bengal was categorized fallow ; from the onset of the 21st century hardly 1 per cent of land in rural West Bengal remains fallow, and that also in small pieces strewn sparsely over the state in most cases.

Pursuant to these incipient but discernible changes in the rural scenario, land in West Bengal has ceased to be the principal means of production. Presently it is rated third or even fourth in order of importance because of the attained changes in the mode of agricultural production. The trend now is cultivation by means of (a) an adequate supply of irrigated water, (b) an efficient drainage system, (c) the availability of suitable manure with respect to soil conditions, and (d) facilities for growing high-yielding 2-3 crops per year on the same piece of land by procuring appropriate seeds as well as technical advice from experts at affordable prices, and such other means and techniques of production. Contemporarily these are the peasants' pressing social demands.

The result is that the relative importance of the means of production is rated in accordance with the stage of transformation of conventional agriculture from the state of the only living-energy consuming traditional set-up. Inanimate forms of energy are in the course of being harnessed in or for agricultural production; albeit, the course of change is at an early stage. However, it has broken the shell of the rural-urban dichotomy since the second half of the 20th century (Mukherjee 1965: 15-102) and has clearly established a rural-urban continuum in present times. The course is not unique to West Bengal among world societies : it has been seen in Brittany (France) from the 1940s (Mukherjee 1949, 1950) ; in Scania in south Sweden as recorded in the studies of Professor Borje Hansen of Stockholm University ; in rural Japan after World War II as studied by Professor Tadashi Fukutake of Tokyo University ; and so on.

In sum, the rural and urban folk of West Bengal are becoming less and less identifiable as distinctive entities –culturally and politically, just like the obliteration of the earlier distinction between *gramya* (the rural folk) and *banya* (the forest dwellers). However, there is a difference: the rural people could extend land by *pushing* back the forest to the periphery of the state and, thereby, through this action, agriculture reduced forestry into a marginal activity and lifestyle; whereas now, presently, agriculture needs industry to survive and prosper and, therefore, the rural *pulls* the urban toward it. Simultaneously, the urban can survive and prosper only by evermore industrialization – from small to heavy industry without limits so long as the ecological balance is maintained. Therefore industry too needs to move endlessly into rural areas to expand.

But the dual course of the rural pulling the urban for industrialization of agriculture (and ancillary activities which are economic, cultural and political in nature) and the urban surviving and prospering by means of ever greater spatial industrialization, has an indispensable common ground: both courses require land – obviously agriculture is based on land no less obviously, industry is established on land. And, in West Bengal, land has become a scarce commodity either for agricultural or industrial growth; that is, for both rural and urban development.

Therefore, the 2006 slogan of *First Food then Industry* is now *passé*: it will only nurture political, economic and cultural decadence and thereby lead to societal decay in West Bengal — both rural and urban. On the other hand, the populist slogan of 2007: *Save Land for Agriculture* would acquire a fruitful meaning only in consonance with the slogan of *Save Land for Industry*. This creates a seemingly enigmatic situation which could have been resolved by activating the slogan: *Industry for Food and Prosperity*. But the slogan is quixotic in appearance because of the contemporary media sponsored political and cultural resistance of the people "*en masse*" against it. The move seems spontaneous but may be largely well engineered; anyhow, enforcing the slogan of *Industry for Food and Prosperity* in present-day economy of West Bengal would not be an easy task.

Even so, the situation is not unique to West Bengal with respect to the space-time dimension of world societies. For example:

1. During World War II food imports to Britain were heavily restricted while a substantial portion of the land was utilized for war industries. The *Grow More Food* campaign in Britain– initiated contemporaneously – was upheld after the war, leading to intensive farming along with sustaining the spurt in industrialization. This was clearly noticeable between the late 1940s and the early 1990s. Moreover, around 1946, scientists like J.B.S. Haldane exhorted the British government and people through the national press to exploit sea resources as food supplies.
2. When the concept of the European Union was mooted the French farmers – especially from Normandy – resented the move, fearing that the union would adversely affect their parochial interests. But eventually France joined the European Union, the functioning of which has not been detrimental to the prospect of her farmers. Instead, farming all over France has become more and more industrialized along with the growth of industry.

3. Professor Borje Hansen (mentioned earlier) gave up his professorship and started poultry-farming in mid-Sweden from the early 1970s. When I visited Borje in the late 1970s I found that his farm involved only a portion of his residential estate where in a 3-storied hermetically-sealed air conditioned building trained girls operated the farm. A vet visited the farm regularly. On enquiry Hansen stated that his income from farming was higher than that from his earlier professorship and by virtue of this increased income he could be engaged virtually whole time with his sociological research.
4. In the 1980s it was found that while north Italy was bustling with industry, the south had remained largely rural and agricultural. The latter was the region reflected in the writings of Antonio Gramsci, in the famous novel *Fontamara* by Ignazio Silone, and also for depicting the *Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (1958) by E.C. Banfield—a disciple of Max Weber. The region was so afflicted by poverty that pot bellied, malnourished children played in open drains; a region so steeped in obscurantism that, in its noteworthy town Cosenza, local women covered their faces for averting any spell which the "witch" might have cast when seeing a black-haired black-eyed Indian woman. Yet, this was also the region where the University of Calabria was located; the university alleged to have been the breeding ground of the Red Brigade, a group mostly operating in Italy's industrialized north. Perhaps this is a good example of decadence in a social organism nurturing moribund agriculture and adventurist radicalism at the same time.
5. Converse to the situation in the southern region of Italy, Japan has become more and more prosperous with rapid industrial growth and industrialized farming – both augmented very significantly in Japanese life by large-scale industrial exploitation of the sea for food supplies and various marine products such as pearls.
6. Over time it was noticed that despite diverse instances over space as cited above, in 1972 the Club of Rome painted a gloomy picture for the future of humankind, predicated by the *Limits to Growth* which would be reached in 100 years unless industrial and population growth were stopped by means of "great moral resources [yielding] a totally new form of human society in equilibrium" (Meadows *et al* 1972). Less pessimistically than the Club of Rome, a *Readers Digest* forum posed *Mankind at the Turning Point* because a world crisis was developing due to

"regional resource catastrophes [which] could spread world wide and paralyze future orderly developments [unless] organic growth coordinated global economic cooperation [with] five per cent investment aid in LDCs [and] a conservationist global ethic and harmony with nature" were programmed for averting the crisis (Messarovic and Pestel 1974).

7. A more optimistic forecast for world society was recorded in *The Bariloche Report* which posed that while "catastrophe is an everyday reality in LDCs, scarcity is not due to physical limits – population growth is not the major factor [because] technology grows faster than consumption [and] if LDCs had technology production would outstrip population"; but this required "new patterns of self-reliant socialist development world wide [through] fundamental socio-political reforms and an end to the ideology of growth" (Herrera *et. al* 1976). Traversing the spectrum from doom to a rosy prospect for humankind, Leontief and his colleagues made the forecast that as "dramatic developments bring new land into production and double or treble yields,…..tremendous growth in consumption [is] not a problem of absolute scarcity [but of] how to exploit more costly resources", so that technological growth is the call of the hour (Leontief *et al* 1977).

These vignettes of human society over space and time can be replicated for enforcing the point that industrialization of agriculture and industrial growth *per se* for the prosperity of society cannot but be the perspective of the future of humankind. Nonetheless, their implementation at a given point of place-time-people, such as in West Bengal at present, requires neither rabid economism nor internecine political confrontation, with culture backing this or that side. What is required, instead, is a symbiotic appreciation of culture, economy and polity of the people concerned.

Culture, defined as the valorisation of capital in human achievement and perception, has two sequential aspects of traditional inheritance and acquirement in life- time—both of which operate by selective rejection and acquisition of their traits for holding society *in being*, that is, as a social product at a point in time. Correspondingly, economy – defined as the relation among human beings with respect to material goods and services – displays the kinetic energy of humans to move society over time for *becoming*, that is, as the vehicle of social process for satisfactorily meeting evermore the cardinal issues of humankind: survival of the species, security in the life-span of individuals, material prosperity for

meeting the above two demands, as well as for leading a wholesome life, mental progress for ensuring the last three issues and, in pursuance thereof, meeting the role of evolution of life as its best manifestation so far. And, polity, as the embodiment of power *in situ,* holds the potential energy for facilitating, obstructing, or even turning the social process toward the *status quo ante*; namely, leading the contemporary social product to decadence.

Viewed in this manner, the question that commands immediate attention for West Bengal is: why is an appreciable segment of rural folk not spontaneously amenable to what is good for them in the short and long perspectives for the future, in case the contextual proposal of the government is appropriate? The question cannot be dismissed by passing a judgement on the concerned mass as being not "rational". Nor can the opposition claim, *pari passu,* to be the repository of "rationality". Any such stance from either side would subscribe to the distinction drawn by V. Pareto (1963: 1915-18) between the elite in society as being "rational" and the masses as being governed by "instincts, sentiments". That would confer an innate quality to the meaning "rationale" as embodying Rationality with the value for *maximising* the relation between the end and the means.

This standpoint, clearly stated by L. Robbins (1932: 4-6), has been diligently followed – if not making explicit the ideology and action – by neoliberal economists. Political scientists – even though disowning their adherence to *realpolitik* and being presently concerned with the flow of power between the rulers and the ruled – tend to subsume the innate characteristic of rationality, such as, for *Building States and Nations* (e.g. Eisenstadt and Rokkan [ed.] 1973). And the general run of sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists – who are followers of Weberianism, if not entirely subscribing to the viewpoint of Max Weber – does the same by supporting, for example, the role of the *Protestant Ethic* for ensuring *Capitalism* in the West by upholding its *Spirit* (Weber 1930) and, contrarily, irrationality, stagnation and the overpowering role of caste in India. Yet, the last is imputed to be a creation of "Brahminical theodicy – plainly the construction of rational ethical thought" (Weber 1958 : 131)

In sum, "neoliberalism" in any garb conceives rationality as a given constant and thus perseveres to mould reality by assuming the stance of unified social sciences from the second half of the 20th century. The venture has promoted programmes, one after another, but not very successfully: first, for lifting the "traditional" Third World toward the U.S.A., the pinnacle of "modernity", as per W.W. Rostow's *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (1962); next, for

"developing the undeveloped"—reformulated from "developing the underdeveloped" to "developing toward being developed"; and, finally, for "globalizing" world societies with its epicenter situated in the U.S.A. The successive programmes have stimulated anti systemic movements all over the world, which do not require any citation because they have become signposts of contemporary history.

Nevertheless it is noteworthy that, insidiously, the unacknowledged failure of these programmes points toward the debacle of the nomothetic version of rationality for maximizing the relation between the end and the means. Correspondingly, it beckons the consideration of rationality as a *variable* in place of being a constant manifestation of the mental process, and as being applicable to the elite and the masses alike. From this standpoint rationality for the appraisal of social reality becomes a proposition for *optimizing* (not maximizing) the relation between the end and the means, on the axis of socialization of the concerned individual or people at a point in place-time coordinates.

This conception of rationality being a variable cutting across the distinction of the elite and the masses involves the corollary of variability within the respective categories of the elite and the masses, that is, between their identifiable segments. So that, the probable congruence of the same rationality of a particular segment of the elite and of a specific segment of the masses – due to the immanent course of socialization in a given society – may attain a critical magnitude for generating a formidable social force by their amalgam. This, in the perspective of social development epitomizing the aforementioned cardinal valuations for humankind (viz. survival, security, material progress, and mental upliftment), may be categorized progressive, conservative, or regressive; nonetheless, it has to be reckoned with in the given context.

A relatively simple context may be cited, as noticed by me in the early 1950s in the British Protectorate of Uganda and the British colony of Kenya, being rather intimately aware of the social situation in colonial Bengal during 1941 to 1946. The three-tier social structure of Uganda and Kenya – namely, of the British "masters" (*bwana*) at the top, the Asians (mainly the sub continental Indian businessman in the middle), and the Africans (Ugandans and Kenyans) at the bottom – was familiar to all those living in the Protectorate and the Colony; overtly in the latter, covertly in the former. I had to live surreptitiously as a guest of an Irish family residing on the Kenya Highlands in the capital Nairobi, an area which was reserved for the whites. I found that on the plains of Nairobi the browns (mainly the sub continental Indians) occupied a better residential area than the blacks (mainly the Kenyans), as I also found in the coastal town of

Mombassa. Moreover, the "racial" segregation was so clearly manifest that the public urinals on the streets of Nairobi had three sub-blocs labelled accordingly for the use of Europeans, Asians, and the Africans.

Apparently, the three communities had optimized respectively their rationality in the given social situation. The British, except for a microscopic minority disliking the state of affairs, enjoyed the political power and behaved like colonial masters; a motivation underscored by Tagore (1961) for the British in India as "chhoto" (narrow minded) and at Home as "boro" (broad minded). The Indians, for benefits accruing from the colonial economy, had in bulk accepted their intermediacy between the British and the Africans and were making money from business enterprises even though as hotel-owners, for instance, they were not allowed to go into the premises beyond the office-rooms (with the residence reserved for Europeans). The Africans were employed as the serving staff. The Black Kenyans brewed their discontent against colonial rule except for the "native chiefs" and other African functionaries who enjoyed the colonial bounty.

Even so, academically white-washing this dismal social situation and giving colonialism an ideological boost, the famous functionalist-anthropologist B. Malinowski declared that "as a Pole born and bred, I may be allowed to say here that in my opinion the British colonial system is second to none in its capacity to learn from experience; its adaptability and tolerance, and above all, in its genuine interest in the welfare of the natives". He also announced that pre-colonial history was to be regarded as "history dead and buried"; and he prescribed the practice of providing extra incentives to the loyal native chiefs for upholding colonial rule in East Africa (Malinowski 1945: 152ff).

But, discarding this variant in the rendition of rationality, and disregarding the consequent praxis, Malinowski's erstwhile student Jomo Kenyatta noted, in his monograph *Facing Mount Kenya* (1962), a Kikuya saying: "Before the missionaries [as emissaries of imperial powers] came we had the land, they had the Bible, and now we have the Bible and they have the land". Kenyatta organized the "infamous" *mau mau* movement against the European settlers and later became the first President of the Republic of Kenya. The dominant rationality-differential of Black Kenyans in optimizing the relation between the end and the means thus overrode intra- mass distinctions and, while benefiting a little from the British and Indian intra-elite distinction, ushered in a better quality of life for Kenyans – the people of the soil.

Uganda in the 1950s encountered an apparently tranquil situation with the British, Indians, and Africans subtly segregated, not only in the town

of Kampala – the gateway to the Protectorate in those days – but also even in the remotest town of Gulu situated in Acholi Province at the border of the Congo and the Sudan. But this calm was deceptive. I resided for a while in Gulu with an English colleague in order to help him design and conduct a sample survey of the Acholi people. The Acholis had barely given up hunting over a generation and now were growing the main cash-crops which were cotton and some sweet peas. To the resident British administrators I was deemed non existent as compared with my English colleague, but to the Australian missionary posted in Gulu I was acknowledged enough to be told by him how arduous was his task to "civilize" natives who practiced polygyny and many other heathen customs. I was welcomed by the few Indians residing in the town as traders, and to the Acholis I was accepted but not with any enthusiasm. Nevertheless, I was accurately rated by the Acholis in their social *milieu* and they expressed this during the survey by explaining the driving reason behind their practice of polygyny.

One of them who had become rather friendly with me said that as both my English colleague (*bwana*) and I had no wives, wives could be procured for us at the bride price of 1000 shillings for my colleague and for 500 shillings for me. When asked about the price-difference he clarified that my colleague as *bwana* belonged to the ruling class while I, as an Indian, belonged to that of intermediaries such as traders. When further asked what would be the bride price for an Acholi, he blandly stated it as 100 shillings ; and on inquiry as to why an Acholi should pay so much he explained that a bride was not only a cultural asset but also (and the more so) an economic acquisition as a source of human labour. Cotton production in a previously arboreal region provided land in plenty but, as the process of production depended on hoe-cultivation, the relation of production was such that the more human power (in one of the forms as wives) employed to wield the hoe, the more would be the economic returns. The symbiosis of culture, economy, and polity was thus simply expounded, denoting optimization of the relation between the end and the means in the given social situation.

However, differential rationality was emerging under the tranquil surface of the Uganda Africans. A segment of the native elite – different from that of the contended chiefs and such other ancillaries of colonial rule – was in the process of growth (found also in Kenya); first within the well-developed ethnic community of Baganda, and also across the inter-ethnic distinctions of Banyoro, Banyankole, Batoro, etc., to the less and the least developed ethnic communities of Lango, Acholi, Karamajong, etc. A British Africanist had forecast: "If you teach them to read the Bible they

may also read the *Communist Manifesto*, eventually". Whether or not that proscribed pamphlet was read by the growing African elite in Uganda (as also in Kenya), a short-lived revolt against the Protectorate rule took place in 1949 – centering in Kampala but also spreading inside Uganda; which may or may not have been tacitly supported by tiny segments of the resident British and Indian intelligentsia (as it was in Kenya, too).

At this crisis in the British Protectorate, Elspeth Huxley – a disciple of Malinowski – described the Acholi as simple folk but warned, at the same time, that they could become "the Sorcerer's Apprentice" for destroying the well-knit social fabric. Therefore, she mentioned that "politics was banned" in the Youth Club at Gulu and that in the "last sitting" the topic for discussion was: "Where does the Rainbow come from?" (Huxley 1948). Yet, in real terms, the "rainbow" spread across inter-ethnic and inter-class distinctions of the Uganda Africans, and Uganda – a nomenclature *chosen* by the British rulers for a territory brought under their "protection" – became independent in due course (Mukherjee 1985).

Such variability in the display of rationality by the elite and the masses respectively, — as rudimentarily exposed within the category of the elite and incipiently within that of the masses in British East Africa in the 1950s – was far less simple for Bengal even in the 1930-40 decades. It was evident, from the onset of the 1930s, that a new category of landlords was emerging in the rural areas which were different from the statutory landlords, viz., the z*emindars*.

Established from 1793 under the laws of the Permanent Settlement of Land, the former landlords = the *Zemindars*, settled the rural folk as peasants (*ryot*) on their land in return for a share of crop-return which was lately measured in cash; in the early 1940s the share varied from 4 to 9 per cent in present-day Bangladesh and West Bengal (Mukherjee 1957: 48-49 n 1).

Meanwhile, from the 1920s, land transfer was accelerating from the impoverished to the prosperous peasants, but the *nouveau riche* who had turned into landlords did not settle the dispossessed peasantry as "new" peasants, as usually happened in earlier times. For agriculture was no more a mere source for subsistence: the market for crops was growing at a rapid rate, turning land into a commodity like crops. Therefore, the new landlords became landholders = *jotedars* (not *Zemindars*) – who employed the impoverished peasantry as sharecroppers (*bargadars*) on the usual condition of a half-half share of the crop grown on the land.

The rationale of the dispossessed peasantry prompted it to accept such terms because there was no other avenue for employment except going further down the "social ladder" – materially and mentally – and to

become agricultural wage-earners (*kisan*) for uncertain employment, in place of retaining the façade of a *ryot* as well as a somewhat ensured living. This is how the peasantry in Bengal in the early 1940s optimized its role in the rural set-up (*ibid.* 48-58).

The urban *milieu* of Bengal in those days, and especially among the elite, was characterized by the dominant trend to overlook the qualitative shift in the rural scenario. Culturally, economically, and politically, their refrain was to concentrate solely on the colonial exploitation aided by the *Zemindars* (e.g. Huque 1939). The academia rejected a contemporaneous study of the dynamics of the rural society as "politically motivated" despite the fact that The Land Revenue Commission of Bengal and the Indian Statistical Institute had recorded from previous documents and sample surveys that while 5 acres of land was at that time the minimum size of an economic holding under ideal conditions, the average size of cultivated acres per peasant was 3.1 in 1921 and 2.2 in 1931 ; and 74.6 per cent of rural households had holdings below 5 acres in 1938 – the figure rising to 88.5 per cent in 1945 (Mukherjee 1957: 47n1)

So a band of urbanites and ruralites – aware of the gloomy prospect for Bengal in case the situation was allowed to drift *sine die* – intervened for rousing the awareness of the masses in respect of the future. Also, the rural population *en masse* was now encountering and envisaging its bleak future as consequent to the inexorable process of de-peasantisation: by turning the *bargadars* into *kisan*, the marginal peasants into *bargadars*, and a sizeable segment of subsistent peasants (*ryot-stithiban*) into marginal peasants, the juggernaut was rolling on. Therefore, for its survival, security, and any prospect of prosperity, the rationale of the rural mass was ripe for change. This was also a need for the complementary urban *milieu*, as evident from the 1943 famine in Bengal – the ravages of which were not confined to the rural region (*vide*, Mahalanobis *et al* 1946).

But any dialectical intervention in the historical process was to be neither short in time nor a bed of roses. By means of sustained rural-urban interactions of the corresponding segments of the elite and the mass, attempts were afoot to demolish the myth of the *jotedar* as a mere variant of *Zemindar*. The latter had emerged through the subinfeudation system operating under the auspices of the Permanent Settlement of Land from 1793. It was declared, from another motivated perception, particularly in the context of north and east of undivided Bengal, that the overwhelming bulk of the *jotedars* was Hindu (like that of the *Zemindars*) while the bulk of the peasants were Muslims. Moreover, both these perceptions castigated the "dreaded" intervention as a sinister attempt of the "left extremists" to disturb the peace and destabilize society by disrupting social harmony.

These "national" and "communal" moves bewildered the rural mass to an extent but more relevant was its apprehension of how much more bleak would be its future in case the proposed *Tebhaga Andolan* failed because of the *jotedars'* machinations, those of the right-wingers and the manipulation of the communalists, as well as the state's action to smash any revolt against the rural *status quo*. Ultimately, however, the wheel of history turned in favour of the *Andolan* (movement); the 1946 Dinajpur Congress of the *Bangiya Pradeshik Krishak Sabha* was attended by at least 100, 000 *bargadars*, marginal peasants, and an appreciable number of subsistent peasants.

As noted, the *Tebhaga Andolan* – emerging from concerted action consequent to an amalgam of contextually rational appraisal of reality by a segment of the elite and the bulk of the masses – was the harbinger of the first Naxal movement as well as of *Operation Barga* (which redistributed land between 1978 to 1982) after a Left Front came to power in West Bengal; and presently, while the same Left Front is still in power in West Bengal, Bengal is at the crossroads of a leap forward or a step backward toward oblivion. But the social scenario is now different, calling for an appropriate assessment of the contemporarily relevant rationale to induce development and to resist regression.

This difference over time operates within the global scene of ever mounting and graded inequalities among income-recipients in the process of wealth-accumulation, and in the *modus operandi* for the acquisition of material resources. As a result, the previously flourishing *jotedars* – more in a low key since the *tebhaga andolan* and the first phase of the Naxalbari movement – have found new recruits into their charmed circle from those peasant-farmers who have prospered at the expense of abject immiseration of the lower echelons of the peasantry. It is worthy of note that even the newly assigned *pattadars* and *bargadars* during *Operation Barga* were not exempt from it. By the beginning of the 21st century, land was alienated from 13 per cent of these *pattadars* and 14 per cent of *bargadars* (Chakraborti 2003: 53, 57). The new recruits are operating as "middlemen" between the big landowners and small-middle peasantry. Accordingly, a segment of the rural elite has crystallized itself to back up the erstwhile *jotedars*. Correspondingly, the peasants *en masse* are segmented even though they are successively going down the social ladder, despite real and/or propagandized measures for uplifting their condition; and, at any rate, for resisting the onslaught of unipolar globalization.

The rural elite and the rural masses have thus undergone newer segmentation and newer alignments: a course of change which signifies a

qualitative transformation in conformity with the alterations in the rural-urban nexus and the social structural alignments of the elite and the masses within a more and more diffused distinction of the social space. As a result, the rural-urban distinction regarding both the elite and the masses is not only steadily but also being ruled out rapidly in the last 2-3 decades.

The process is spontaneously noticeable in the context of culture; namely, by a similar rejection of the traditional culture-traits and a similar acquisition of the "modern" ones in a person's life-time – just as it was seen between forest-dwellers and the villagers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Equally it is found that the ruralites are keeping more and more one foot on the rural soil and the other in urban settlements by way of livelihood activities related to trade in agricultural and other produce from rural to urban areas, and through the extension of urban amenities to rural areas, as also by way of various kinds of employment of the rural peoples in nearby rurban centres, towns and cities.

The immanent social process – enforced by the economy and upheld by culture – has thus assumed the stance of social transformation, affecting the polity profoundly by forging alliances of the respective segments of the urban and rural elite. Differences among political parties in West Bengal – as also their bloc-formations on policy, strategy, or tactical grounds – are now revealed on the social surface regarding the apposite mode of transition in West Bengal society; principally, by means of resolving the contradictions on the way to industrialization while sustaining the agrarian economy *or* stressing the role of agriculture primarily while acknowledging the need for industrialization formally.

Analogous to this course of social transformation, an alteration between forestry and agriculture took place in the southern fringe of West Bengal during the early 20th century. The District Gazetteers, studies sponsored by the Indian Statistical Institute and later undertaken by its Sociological Research Unit, etc., recorded the fact that the marginal peasants from the eastern part of Medinipur had ventured to move seasonally to their nearest portions of the mangrove forest known as the Sunderbans. They cleared areas under forest, and cultivated the fertile virgin land. There they set up families by procuring wives locally while retaining the traditional family in Medinipur. Over a generation or so, the family-strains separated with the respective residences of the localized offspring while, in due course, permanent villages were established in the previous forest lands as also rurban centers and towns. Furthermore, with the encroachment of the rural economy and culture on the previously arboreal regions, rural polity thrived here.

The District Gazetteers and other government publications recorded similar happenings in all regions of West Bengal, with the transformation of culture, economy and polity of the arboreal to those of the rural. However, an earlier account is available for the northern fringe of West Bengal from the writings of Francis Buchanan-Hamilton who was commissioned by the East India Company in the first decades of the 19th century for exploring possibilities of growing cash crops in the territory occupied by the company. Buchanan- Hamilton traveled from the Madras Presidency to Nepal *via* the *subah* of Bengal and Assam, and recommended the cultivation of tea in the sub-Himalayan region (1819, 1833, and 1917). Tea plantations developed in the Dooars region by clearing forestry. Until the 1940s, while traveling to Darjeeling from Calcutta and stepping on to the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway carriages at Siliguri, one passed through denuded forestry, flourishing tea-plantations, and sparse village settlements. In the second half of the twentieth century the village settlements were found to have become denser, and at the beginning of the 21st century, towns and cities have become prominent in the region, along with the situated villages, while plantations have been rather done away with – following the vanished forestry.

Some attention is paid in recent times to the cry of *Save Forestry for Survival*, along with the slogan of *Save Land for Agriculture* or *Save Land for Industry and Agriculture.* Notice is taken of restoring the ecological balance since the Kyoto Protocol; but the issue of enforcing a balance among the arboreal, rural, and urban sectors of West Bengal seems to have lacked a precise attention from a very vocal section of the *milieu* and the media. The calls for optimizing the share of land among forestry, agriculture, and industry is, in theory, accepted by all while, in practice, they sharply differ on how to meet this basic social need.

In this context, the slogan *First Food then Industry* is *passé* as mentioned, because it would promote both decadence and the eventual decay of West Bengal. Also, at the contemporary state of society, the slogan *Save Land for Agriculture* seems tantamount to an infantile tantrum "to have the cake and eat it too"; yet this slogan deserves a critical appraisal in the light of the oft-mentioned "land consciousness" attributed to the peasants *en masse*. The peasants are equated to the contemporary ruralites. This mental construct should be attended to because it has been imputedly immortalized in Leo Tolstoy's tragic story of a serf in Tsarist Russia who was asked to traverse a feudal lord's land from sunrise to sunset, having been assured that the traversed area would be owned by him, and who fell dead after having covered a substantial area.

But changes in society over time and space, due to the immanent mastery of process on product, can never be bypassed. The tragedy so pithily portrayed by Leo Tolstoy would have been pre-contextual (or out of context) to the time of the Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte in France when the peasantry was aptly characterized as a "sack of potatoes"; and it is post-contextual (and thus irrelevant) to the sharp structural alignments of the farmers in contemporary France or "free" Russia. So without replicating instances from other lands and of other people, some paramount questions may be posed in the context of present-day West Bengal: are the ruralites in the same stage contemporarily as they were at the time Lal Behari Dey wrote *Peasant Life in Bengal* (1892) or even when Dey's "village", viz. Kanchanpur, was revisited more than half a century later (Basu 1962)? Are not the peasants moulded by the *real* life situations they encounter? How much land does an average peasant own today, merely with reference to the production of children along the generational growth of a family, as compared to what his father did in his prime; how much land his father's father owned in his life-time; and so on back in history?

In reference to the above-mentioned questions and all issues important to the life of a peasant, the preamble to a scathing commentary of Rabindranath Tagore on the machinations of *Zemindars* (and not the later *jotedars* and contemporary "middlemen") in his poem *dui bigha jami* (Two Bighas of Land), written a century earlier, is instructive: only two *bighas* (approximately, 0.75 acre) of land was left to the hapless "peasant" because "all other lands were alienated in [the guise of] debt-repayment" – obviously underscoring his inability to subsist on land.

The point then is: land-consciousness may linger on as a wishful imagery but it is nothing but *false consciousness* ; the peasant cannot circumvent the real situation of successively less inheritance of owned land and the prospect of a moribund (if not deteriorating) economy and population growth unless society is rapidly industrialized. It follows that stoking fuel to the imagery of an idyllic but unreal consciousness – bereft of an impossibly practicable plan for ensuring a better future and to implement it – would be cruel and tantamount to a crime. And, that crime would be committed by the elitist-rendering of the Paratean definition of rationality under the motivated slogan of *Save Land for Agriculture* for the promotion of political mileage by a consortium of allegedly right and left radicals.

Correspondingly, sponsoring the slogan *Save Land for Industry and Agriculture* would be an ill-begotten rendering of the Paratean definition of the elite's rationality in case of economism, implemented by means of

mighty political power and thereby forced on the masses, involving the urban elite and the rural elite.

The miserable resultant of such a strategy has been witnessed in contemporary history; albeit, the locale was heavily contaminated by various virus promoting retrogressions in the name of freedom and prosperity. Also, the lesson is not lost of the consequences of forced economism and constipated politicisation – coupled with the recalcitrant role of capital – in the Howrah-Hugli belt of West Bengal as well as in the Dooars region of north Bengal. In the 1960s, the former was thriving on industrialization; the latter was thriving on industrial plantations. But, since the 1970s, deindustrialization and/or devitalization of respective regions have yielded unbearable loads of urban or rurban marginals on to the rurals – leading to a chronic crisis in the civil life in these two regions of West Bengal in particular. However, all over West Bengal as elsewhere, checks and balances are seen to be operated by the masses in terms of *their* rationality for comprehending reality. A few instances are noted below:

1. In 1980, while conducting an UNESCO-sponsored quality of life study in West Bengal, in a sampled village in the Belpahari region of Medinipur, a somewhat well-to-do peasant candidly outlined his plans for his family of three sons, his wife, and one daughter, the last of who would leave the family after marriage. Of the three sons, the senior most would be groomed to look after the family occupation of agriculture, the second would be trained to liaise with the "unseen" wood-cutters for augmenting the family income, and the third would become a "sympathizer" of the locally mightiest political party for ensuring family security and prosperity.

2. During the 1980s, while guiding a study of forest-dwellers and visiting some villages in Medinipur, West Bengal, it was found that in several villages the relatively better-off families abided by the government rule of receiving the commission due when trees were felled officially but the heads of several families also encouraged stealthy wood-cutting for sums substantial to them while being fully aware that the action was not "good". On

being asked the reason for this unlawful and "bad" activity, they brazenly stated that the family had to survive in lieu of any "legal" and better sources of livelihood available to them other than conventional agriculture in a region under forestry.

3. In the mid-1980s, when advising on a study of empowerment of rural women in the southern region of the district of South 24 Parganas, West Bengal, the study was geared to the definition of empowerment as exogenous generation and/or endogenous arousal of the awareness of deprivation in view of a better quality of life and transformation of awareness to achievement-orientation. From the surveys for this study, stratified by the location of the villages far to near an urban center and finally near Kolkata, West Bengal, India, it was immediately visible in the entire region that the bulk of the women were obliged by economic compulsion to discard Manu's dictum *grihini griham uchate* (woman as housewife equals home and hearth) and take to work in and around the dwelling village. They also worked by commuting to urban centers – Kolkata being the ultimate destination.

4. Furthermore it was found that : (a) at the far end of aforementioned spectrum were located those women to whom daily transport facilities for commuting to work in urban locations (such as, by the railways) were not available and they wanted such facilities as well as education of their children (including girls) ; (b) non-manual jobs for their children (including girls) and therefore, their education at home were the wishes of those daily commuting to urban centers for doing manual work in houses ; and (c) the women engaged in non-manual but low-grade jobs in urban areas wanted their children (including girls) to be so educated that they may ultimately obtain better non-manual jobs.

5. In 1990, in a village about ten kilometers away from the town of Bishnupur in Bankura District, West Bengal, a farmer – who grew 2-3 crops a year by using high-grade seeds and appropriate fertilizers, and irrigating his fields with water drawn by electricity-driven motor-pumps from the nearby canal (designated a river) – stated that he would educate his sons to at least the secondary school level and, if any or all of them did well, the son(s) would be sent to the Technical School in the town so that he (they) would have the choice to remain either as farmers or take to lucrative urban employment; while the daughters would be given in marriage after educating them up to the primary school level. But this farmer's wife was firm that the daughters should be educated as much as the sons according to their abilities, and should be given the option to work, if they so desired.

6. In another village away from the town of Bishnupur in a different direction, the peasants could not obtain the means of production available in and around the village noted under 5. There the bulk of the peasantry was impoverished, awaiting government-intervention for improving their agriculture and/or providing other means of livelihood.

Such instances in contemporary West Bengal – sporadic, no doubt – are neither exceptional nor universal. Instead, they indicate that rationality for optimizing the relation between the end and the means is not the monopoly of the elite; in point of fact, rationality within the elite is not a monolith, it varies from person to person and from group to group depending on the specific congruence of polity, economy and culture. Correspondingly, the rationality of the rural (and urban) masses would not present a monolithic display of polity, economy, and culture. Amidst these complementary and contradictory displays of rationality on the axis of the rural-urban continuum, a notably amalgamated sector has raised the slogan of *Save Land for Industry and Agriculture*, an analogous sector shouts the slogan of *Save Land for Agriculture,* and a possibly small minority sector

clings to the image of agriculture in itself, by itself, and for itself while chanting the consequent slogan of *First Food Then Industry*.

Thus "land" becomes the center of contention facing contemporary West Bengal: a formidable issue awaiting resolution, a rather vacuous symbol of "freedom", or the shibboleth of a dwindling coterie of "The Last of the Mohicans". Doubtless, history will resolve the quandary by means of the inexorable social process operating along with the cardinal valuations for humankind. But what will be the dialectic of human intervention into the contemporary state of West Bengal: continuation of these skirmishes within and between the elite and the masses – rural and urban – leading to the eventual demise of West Bengal *or* a realization of that unwelcome possibility and therefore a judicious intervention for ushering in a 'prosperous' West Bengal without a fringe of arboreal and rural marginals around the urban – created by a hastily programmed rapid industrialization?

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