

Operation Barga

A Comment

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ASIM MUKHOPADHYAY has drawn a gloomy picture of the West Bengal government's Operation Barga (OB) or the programme of rapid recording of sharecroppers.¹ But what he has written is hardly convincing to those who have some knowledge about the barga-recording under the OB. Mukhopadhyay says that the OB had raised high hopes among the peasantry because, unlike earlier land reform measures, it seemed to be a better thought out and determined attack on agrarian problems and seemed to have the sincere support of the parties in the Left Front in the state. He further adds that during his first visit to different parts of the state at the beginning of the OB he had noted extraordinary jubilation among the peasantry but a second visit after a few months revealed a sharp fall in the people's morale. This statement seems to be an exaggeration.

It was during the regime of the second United Front (UF) government that an extraordinary jubilation among the peasantry was seen. At that time the movement for unearthing excess lands held by the landlords-jotedars over the ceiling raised high hopes amongst the peasantry. The regime of the first UF government also, to some extent, witnessed such jubilation. Whatever might have been the result of this extraordinary jubilation, the sharecroppers, poor peasants and agricultural labourers have been cautious in their movements since 1972. Even after the victory of the Left Front in the state assembly elections of 1977 and the recent panchayat elections, no such jubilation has been found amongst the toiling masses of West Bengal. But this does not mean that they have done away with class struggle. In fact class struggle is increasing day by day. But the people have already been trained, up to a great extent, to carry on their movement in a very calculated way, in which extraordinary jubilation does not find any place.

Operation Barga is not an exception. Rather it has to be made clear that there are many impediments to a rapid recording of sharecroppers. Through successive amendments the

West Bengal Land Reforms Act has become really beneficial to the bargadars. All sorts of safeguards for the bargadars have been provided in this Act. Recording of bargadars eliminates all possibilities of their being evicted from the lands which they cultivate.

In spite of this the recording in the last Settlement Operation was very poor. There is no correct estimate of the total number of bargadars in the state. It may be somewhere in the range 2.2 to 3.5 million. But only 0.4 million had been recorded before the initiation of the OB. There are mainly three reasons for this state of affairs: (1) lack of awareness among the bargadars about their rights, (2) fear of reprisal by the landowners, and (3) economic dependence on the landowners.² Very few bargadars know that recording of their names gives them protection against eviction. Fear of reprisal by the landowners is a serious impediment to barga-recording. The bargadars are exploited by the landowners in various ways. The common method of exploitation is that they are given a lower share of produce than they are entitled to. The landowners are apprehensive that if the names of the bargadars are recorded, they would not be able to continue the exploitation by giving a lower share of the produce as before. Therefore, they are determined to thwart all attempts to record the names of bargadars. In many cases, the landowners resort to economic pressures on the bargadars and to intimidating and threatening and even physical assaults on them or setting fire to their houses and starting criminal and civil cases against them. Economic dependence of the bargadars on the landowners is another impediment to barga-recording. The bargadars are mostly perpetually indebted to their landowners. If in times of need, the landowners refuse to give loans in cash or kind to the bargadars, they are left with no other source from which they can borrow. If an indebted bargadar comes forward to record his name, his relation with the landowner becomes strained and his source of borrowing dries up. Obviously an indebted bargadar will be

reluctant to have his name recorded.

In such circumstances, the traditional method of the Settlement Operation for barga-recording would have been quite ineffective in bringing about tangible results. Earlier experience of the Settlement Operation had convinced the top land reform officials in the state that all possible efforts would have to be made to educate the bargadars about their rights, before embarking on OB which was a serious political task set by the Left Front government. At the same time, the attitude of the government officials required thorough change. They should learn how the people for whom they work would react to them. An atmosphere would have to be created in which poor people could speak freely to them.

With a view to educating the bargadars and bringing about the desired changes in the attitudes of the land reform officials, reorientation camp had been organised in the districts with the participation, in each camp, of 30 to 40 poor villagers like bargadars, landless agricultural labourers, and small allottees of government vested lands, and about 15 officials at the field level like junior land reforms officers, kanungos and agricultural extension officers. For free exchange of views, all the participants in a camp stayed together for three days in the same premises without any distinction between an officer and a peasant. The non-officials were actively involved in the deliberations of the camps. They narrated their experiences with regard to their demands and rights, discussed their problems of cultivation, made appraisal of the existing method of barga-recording. In the first reorientation camp³ which was held at Halusa in Polba PS in the district of Hooghly from May 18 to 20, 1978 it was suggested that if a special drive for barga-recording was made by setting up camps in areas inhabited by sharecroppers and agricultural labourers belonging to backward classes, the bargadars who were afraid of recording their names might come forward now for registration. On the basis of this suggestion, follow-up action was immediately taken. A special camp was organised in mouza Patnabhairapur PS, Polba on June 8 and 9, 1978. Wide publicity for the camp was given by beating of drums, distribution of leaflets and personal contact. The participants of the Halusa reorientation camp helped very much in orga-

under the peasants. About 200 bargadars, mostly belonging to the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, came in groups and got their names recorded. The owners of the lands which these bargadars were cultivating were given time, during the camp, for filing objection to the recording, if any. About 35 objections were submitted by the landowners. After proper verification they were disposed of and the names of 181 bargadars were recorded in the Patnabhairabpur mouza.

The results of this special camp were very encouraging. Subsequently some operational decisions relating to streamlining the process of recording of bargadars were taken in the workshop on measures on land reforms held at the headquarters of the Directorate of Land Records and Surveys.⁴ It was decided to organise camps of 3 to 4 days' duration in carefully selected twenty pockets having heavy incidence of bargadars. Squads manned by kanungos, junior land reforms officers, amins and clerical staff under the leadership of an officer of the rank of Special Revenue Officer Grade II or Subdivisional Land Reforms Officer, would take up the work of bargadars recording in these pockets. A squad allocated to one pocket would take up staggered a group of mouzas at a time. Wide publicity would be given in the area by organising group meetings, by beating of drums, by personal-on-person contact with the bargadars and by using the services of the mobile units of the state government's Department of Information and Culture. The publicity would end with an evening meeting with the bargadars at a place near the habitats of the intended beneficiaries. In this meeting the merits of bargadars and the legal and economic benefits that the bargadars would derive would be clearly explained.

One year's experience of the OB has proved the efficacy of the above methodology. Evening meetings in the selected areas have resulted in boosting the morale and raising the level of consciousness of the bargadars. They have been more organised under the OB than before. But Mukhopadhyay gives a completely different picture: "Everywhere they seem to be in the grip of despair and confusion and are engaged in bitter quarrels among themselves over narrow personal gain". He claims that multiple recording is a very common phenomenon in the Bangar area in the South 24 Parganas and recording of fake sharecroppers has been done in Suri and Kheirasol regions of Birbhum district.

Did he really visit these areas before bringing such serious allegation against the OB? Perhaps he does not know that after holding the evening meeting of the bargadars in each area, applications are collected from them for recording their names, particulars of which are displayed in the locality for information of the interested parties to enable them to file objections, if any. Field enquiry is thereafter undertaken by the squad officers and the names of the applicants who are found to be genuine bargadars are recorded. Barga-certificates are then issued to them. The wide publicity which precedes barga-recording leaves very little scope for fake recording. Moreover, multiple recording is out of question. There is no provision in the Land Reforms Act for recording more than one name on a plot of barga-land. Mukhopadhyay's report of infighting among poor peasants over sharecropping rights in the irrigated zones where the landlords generally grow 'boro' crop beside the traditional 'aman' crop and employ different sharecroppers for the two crops, also seems to be baseless, because it is the usual practice to record the name of that person who works as a bargadar on a plot of barga-land in the 'aman' season. If a different person works on the same land in the 'boro' season, his name is not recorded.

Mukhopadhyay says that the infighting among poor peasants over narrow personal gain has been "a development that has very much pleased the forces of reaction". But he himself reports that as soon as the OB was launched, "disgruntled landowners sought the intervention of the Calcutta High Court against the recording operation" and that whenever "the new reform tried to make any headway, volleys of injunctions from the High Court obstructed its progress". What does this mean? The landowners' attempt to obstruct the progress of the OB through the intervention of the High Court is a clear indication that the OB has been quite helpful in intensifying class struggle in the rural Bengal. The jotedars have clearly realised that if they fail to thwart the progress of barga-recording, they would be no more in a position to bring the poor peasants to heel. Therefore they have not only sought the intervention of the High Court but also tried to thwart the progress of the OB in other ways. For instance, officers and other staff engaged in the OB have been man-handled by henchmen of landowners in at least 17 places. About 80 persons, most of them being CPI(M)

workers and supporters, have been murdered. The retaliatory actions taken by the landowners have no doubt hampered the progress of the OB but the overall performance in barga-recording under the OB has been quite encouraging. During the 11 months preceding August 1979, 7,32,955 bargadars were recorded in 30,795 mouzas in which the total number of bargadars recorded in the last Settlement Operation had been only 2,44,672. Thus there has been a nearly three-fold increase in recording under the OB compared to that under the Settlement Operation.

Top officials of the Land Reforms Department expect that by the time the OB is completed, the names of another 2 to 3 lakh bargadars will be recorded. They apprehend that even then about 50 per cent of the existing bargadars will remain unrecorded for various reasons. But these officials are of the firm opinion that the allegations against the OB are entirely false. Of course, violation of the regulations which are supposed to govern OB cannot be ruled out when lakhs of interested persons are involved. Such attempts were made in a very small number of cases but the minister in charge of the land reforms department immediately intervened and things were set right. The huge task involved in the OB also leaves ample scope for genuine mistakes. The incidence of such mistakes may have been quite considerable. But the OB proceedings are followed by four other stages of work, viz., Khanapuri-Bujharat, attestation, draft publication and final publication of the records. If there is a genuine mistake or a violation of regulations in the OB proceedings, it can be pointed out or challenged by the interested person at any subsequent stage of the work. In fact many genuine mistakes in the OB proceedings have been corrected as and when pointed out.

Mukhopadhyay also wants to confuse his readers about the objective of the OB when he obliquely points out that it has failed to bring about any definite change in the economic condition of the downtrodden. He conceals the fact that the OB was conceived as a crash programme for recording of bargadars within a specified time frame and not as a measure for bringing about any definite change in the economic condition of the bargadars. The Left Front government has attached utmost importance and urgency to the recording of bargadars for two reasons: (1) once a bargadar is recorded as a bargadar and given a certificate it becomes more difficult for the landowner

to evict him than an unrecorded bargadar; (2) the bargadar-certificate issued to him entitles him to financial assistance from institutional sources. Protection against eviction is of vital importance to a bargadar but it has very limited scope for promoting his economic interest. After recording, he would probably get his due share of the produce more easily if there be, behind him, the organised strength of the bargadars of the locality. The OB cannot bring about any other change in his economic condition. Financial assistance from institutional sources would not come to him directly through the OB.

With a view to promoting the economic interest of the bargadars and assignees of vested lands, the West Bengal government has already started a new programme. A pilot scheme for providing agricultural credit to some recorded sharecroppers and assignees of vested lands in 23 selected clusters was initiated with the help of five public sector banks and a co-operative bank during the 1978 kharif season. The result of the experiment was by and large encouraging. In the current year a greater number of sharecroppers and assignees have been covered by the scheme with the help of 11 banks. Under this scheme credit is made available to the sharecroppers from institutional sources on the basis of the bargadar-certificates issued to them by the Settlement Department. The rate of interest charged for this credit is either zero or very nominal. With the help of the Gram Panchayat all formalities for providing the credit are completed as quickly as possible and credit is supplied well ahead of the agricultural season. Instead of paying the entire loan in cash a portion is paid in seeds and fertilisers depending on the requirement of the borrowers, so that there is no misuse of the loan. This agricultural credit would help the bargadars in two ways: (1) their perpetual dependence on money-lenders would be reduced to some extent and (2) they would be encouraged to increase production on their bargadar-lands. But agricultural credit for a single crop season cannot bring about any definite improvement in the economic condition of the borrowers. Recycling of the credit for a couple of years is necessary if the sharecroppers and other poor peasants are to be freed from perpetual indebtedness to the money-lenders.

Successful implementation of the scheme is very difficult even if the con-

cerned government officials and panchayats work in right earnest. It may be pointed out that as per agreement with the banks involved in the scheme, a target was fixed to give loans to 79,837 sharecroppers and assignees of vested lands in selected areas, but due to certain reservations amongst a category of the banks' managerial staff about the viability of sharecroppers or even the desirability of financing of hitherto 'non-bankable entities' like sharecroppers, assignees of vested lands and marginal farmers,³ not more than 55,000 borrowers could be given loans. There might have been other constraints on successful implementation of the scheme. The target of borrowers that was fixed accounts for only about 5 per cent of the total recorded bargadars and assignees of vested lands in the entire state. The difficulties encountered in the implementation of the scheme were such that even this low target could not be reached. In such circumstances, it is very difficult to think of continuing the scheme from year to year, ultimately covering all the poor bargadars, and small allottees of vested lands in the entire state. Moreover, there is the problem of rolling or recycling of funds. If a large number of borrowers fail to make timely repayment of loans, the time-bound programme will get bogged down and it would be embarrassing for the state government to ask the bankers to continue the scheme in the subsequent crop seasons.

Notes

[The author is much indebted to Debabrata Bandyopadhyay, Land Reforms Commissioner, West Bengal, and Bikram Sarkar, Director of Land Records and Surveys, West Bengal, for valuable help.]

- 1 Asim Mukhopadhyay, "West Bengal: Operation Barga", *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 15, 1979, pp 1566-67.
- 2 "Notes on the Origin of the Bargadar System, the Evolution of the Rights of Bargadars, Impediments to recording of Bargadars, Remedial Measures", (mimeo) by N G Sarkar, Settlement Officer, Murshidabad-Birbhum.
- 3 Document on Reorientation Camp at Halusai, Polba, District Hugli, May 18 to 20, 1978, prepared at the Directorate of Land Records and Surveys.
- 4 "Workshop on Land Reforms, June 23-24, 1978: A Few Operational Decisions", Board of Revenue, West Bengal.
- 5 Government of West Bengal, "Bank Loan and West Bengal: A Statistical Report", West Bengal Government Press, Alipore, West Bengal, 1979.