

# NOTES

## *Operation Barga*

THE West Bengal government's Operation Barga completed one year in September 1979. It is a crash programme undertaken by the Left Front government for recording of *bargadars*<sup>1</sup> within a specified time frame. Recording of *bargadars* was also a part of the programme of the last Settlement Operation. Then what induced the government to undertake this crash programme? The answer requires a discussion in some detail.

There are three major constraints to *barga* recording. Firstly very few *bargadars* are aware that the recording of their names gives them protection against illegal eviction. But they know that any attempt made by a *bargadar* to get his name recorded will antagonize the landowner. Secondly, the *bargadars* are exploited by the landowners in a variety of ways. The common method of exploitation is that they are given a smaller share of the produce than they are entitled to. As provided in the West Bengal Land Reforms Act, the produce of a *barga* land is divisible between the *bargadar* and the landowner in the proportion of 50:50 where plough, cattle, manure and seeds are supplied by the landowner and in the proportion of 75:25 in other cases. *Bargadars* hardly get their share of the produce from the landowners on the basis of this principle. If the *bargadars* remained unrecorded, the landowners would be in a position to continue their exploitation. On the other hand, recording would strengthen the position of *bargadars* and the landowners could be compelled to give them their due share. Therefore the landowners create all sorts of impediments to *barga* recording. In many cases *bargadars* are subjected to economic pressure, intimidation and threats. Quite often *bargadars* are physically assaulted and their houses are set on fire. Institution of court cases—criminal and civil—is quite common. Under such conditions it becomes difficult for the *bargadars* of those areas where the peasant movement is not strong, to come forward and get their

names recorded. Thirdly, *bargadars* are mostly indebted to the landowners who very often are also moneylenders. If in time 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 get his name recorded, his relations with his landowner immediately get strained and his source of borrowing dries up. Obviously he shows reluctance to have his name recorded.

The government officials involved in the earlier recording operations displayed an attitude of indifference to these constraints as they felt it was not part of their programme to educate the *bargadars* and make them conscious of their rights. Moreover the officials used to set up the recording camps in the houses of the rich people of the villages. The entry of the *bargadars* to these camps was very much restricted by the vigilance of the landowners and their henchmen. Under the circumstances it was hardly possible to bring about tangible results in the recording operations.

With the installation of the Left Front government in 1977, a wind of change began to blow. The new government was, of necessity, seized of the problem of hastening the recording operation for which a reorientation of the attitude of the recording officials towards the poor villagers was essential. It was felt that the officials should now play an important role in persuading the *bargadars* to come forward on a large scale to have their names recorded. This could be done effectively only when the *bargadars* were properly educated about their rights and an atmosphere was created in which the poor people who had so long been mentally shaken could speak to the officials freely.

### *Reorientation Camps*

For this the land reforms department began to organize reorientation camps in the districts. Each camp was held with the participation of 30 to 40 poor villagers like *bargadars*, landless agricultural labourers and small allottees of government vested lands and about 15 officials like junior land reforms officers, *kanungos* (*mouza* revenue inspectors), agricultural extension officers, who stayed together for three days in the same premises without any distinction between an official and a peasant. The atmosphere in the camp was congenial for a free exchange of views. The villagers actively participated in the deliberations. They narrated their past experience, discussed the problems of cultivation and made an appraisal of the *barga* recording system.

At the first reorientation camp<sup>a</sup> a suggestion was put

forward by the non-official participants that if the government was really serious about *barga* recording, special camps should be organized in areas inhabited by sharecroppers and agricultural labourers belonging to the backward classes so that the *bargadars* who have all along been scared of the landlords came forward for recording their names. This suggestion was accepted by the government and follow-up action taken up immediately. A special camp was organized in *mouza*<sup>3</sup> Patnabhairabpur within the jurisdiction of the Polba police station in Hooghly district, on June 8 and 9, 1978. Wide publicity for the camp was given with the help of the non-official participants in the first (Halusai) reorientation camp, and by the beat of drums, distribution of leaflets and by personal contact. 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 also given time to record their objections, if any. The officials at the camp received 35 objections which were disposed of after proper verification. Finally, the names of 191 *bargadars* were recorded in the Patnabhairabpur *mouza*.

### *Methodology of Operation*

The outcome of this special camp was very encouraging. Subsequently, a workshop on land reforms measures was held at the headquarters of the directorate of land records and survey, where some operational decisions to hasten the process of *barga* recording were taken up.<sup>4</sup> It was decided to organize camps of three to four days' duration in the carefully selected priority pockets having a heavy concentration of *bargadars*. Squads consisting of *kanungos*, junior land reforms officers, *amins* (village surveyors) and clerical staff, under the leadership of a Special Revenue Officer, Grade II, or a Subdivisional Land Reforms Officer, would take up the work of *barga* recording in these pockets. A squad tagged to one pocket would start its work in a group of *mouzas* with wide publicity by organizing group meetings, by the beat of drums, by personal 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 a meeting of the intended beneficiaries in the evening at a place most convenient to them. In this meeting the rights of *bargadars*, the legal and economic benefits that they would derive would be clearly explained.

One year's experience of Operation Barga has proved the efficacy of the above methodology. 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 was only 2,41,672.<sup>5</sup> Thus there has been nearly a three-fold increase in recording under Operation Barga compared with the Settlement Operation. Top officials of the land reforms department expect that when Operation Barga is completed, another two to three lakh *bargadars* will have their names recorded. Even then, it is apprehended that about 50 percent of the existing *bargadars* will remain unrecorded because the *jotedars* and landlords are resisting *barga* recording tooth and nail. They have sought the intervention of the Calcutta High Court and a spate of injunctions has obstructed its progress. But the intervention of the High Court alone is not enough for them; there has been a sharp fall in their morale due to the intensification of the class struggle of the rural poor through Operation Barga. In despair they have resorted to retaliatory actions against the recorded *bargadars* and the officials engaged in the recording operations. It is reported that at least in 17 places the officials have been manhandled by the henchmen of the landowners. Besides, *bargadars* who came forward to record their names are subjected to social harassment in the form of financial sanction and implicating them in false criminal cases. More than 80 persons have been murdered, and most of the victims are workers and supporters of the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

### *Allegations against Operation Barga*

Let us now examine some of the allegations currently being made against Operation Barga. It is alleged that a plot already under cultivation by a genuine record-holder is often registered in the name of some other person.<sup>6</sup> This allegation is not confirmed by the experience of those who have intimate knowledge of the recording operations. The West Bengal Land Reforms (Amendment) Act, 1977, says that "a person lawfully cultivating any land belonging to another person shall be presumed to be a bargadar in respect of such land if such person is not a member of the family of the other person whose land he cultivates" and the "burden of proving that the person is not a bargadar shall lie on the person who alleges that the person cultivating the land is not a bargadar in respect of such land." Prior to the amendment of the Act in 1977, it was the responsibility of the *bargadar* to prove that he was a *bargadar* under the owner. Now the onus is on the person who raises an objection.

Operation Barga strictly adheres to this principle. After holding the evening meeting of the *bargadars* in each area, applica-

tions are collected from them for recording their names, particulars of which are displayed in the locality for the information of the interested parties to enable them to file objections, if any. Field enquiry is thereafter undertaken by the squad officials 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 little scope for recording the name of a person who is not a genuine *bargadar*. Recording of more than one person for the same plot of land is also out of the question as there is no provision in the Land Reforms Act for multiple recording.

There is another serious allegation.<sup>7</sup> Landlords in the irrigated zones generally grow *boro* (second) crop besides the traditional *aman* crop, and employ different sharecroppers for the two crops. Now both the sharecroppers have the legitimate claim for the registration of their names as *bargadars*. But many of them, as the allegation goes, have been deprived of the sharecropping right on the lands where they had worked as sharecroppers the previous year either in the *aman* season or in the *boro* season. As a result in-fights have started among them over the sharecropping right. The in-fights have already led to a number of clashes which have often taken a political colour. If there have been really some clashes it is hardly believable that they have taken place over the issue of sharecropping rights. Since more than one sharecropper cannot be recorded for the same plot of land, it has been the usual practice to record the name of that person who works as a sharecropper in the *aman* season. If another person works on the same land in the *boro* season his name is not recorded. This practice brings about a uniformity in recording and there is nothing wrong in it. If a person working as a sharecropper on a plot of land in the *boro* season challenges the right of the sharecropper working on the same plot of land in the *aman* season, he certainly does this under the instigation of vested interests.

Top officials of the land reforms department are of the firm opinion that the allegations heard against Operation Barga are false. Of course, violation of the regulations which govern Operation Barga cannot be ruled out when lakhs of interested persons are involved. As the information goes, such attempts were made in a small number of cases but the minister in charge of the land reforms department immediately intervened and set the things right. The huge task involved in Operation Barga also leaves ample scope for genuine mistakes. But Operation Barga proceedings are followed by four other stages of work: *Khanapuri-Bujharat* (physical

verification), attestation, draft publication and final publication of the records. If there is a genuine mistake or violation of regulations in Operation Barga proceedings, it can be pointed out or challenged by the interested person at any subsequent stage of work. In fact many genuine mistakes in the proceedings have been corrected as and when pointed out.

### *Promotion of Economic Interests*

Some people deliberately make an attempt to create confusion about the objective of Operation Barga by pointing out that it has failed to bring about any definite change in the economic condition of the downtrodden.<sup>8</sup> They conceal the fact that Operation Barga 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 the *bargadars* for two reasons: 1) once a *bargadar* is recorded and he is given a certificate it becomes more difficult for the landowner to evict him than an unrecorded *bagadar*; 2) the *barga* certificate entitles him to financial assistance from institutional sources. Protection against eviction is of vital importance to a *bargadar* but it has a very limited scope for promoting his economic interests. After recording, he would probably get his due share of the produce more easily as there would be behind him the organized strength of *bargadars* of his locality. Operation Barga cannot bring about any other change in his economic condition. Again, financial assistance from institutional sources, to which he becomes entitled by the *barga* certificate, would not come to him directly through Operation Barga.

With a view to promoting the economic interest of poor peasants the state government has already started a separate programme.<sup>9</sup> During the *kharif* season of 1978 a pilot scheme was initiated by the government with the help of five public sector banks and a cooperative bank to provide agricultural credit to recorded *bargadars* and assignees of vested land in 23 selected clusters in 12 districts. The experiment was, by and large, successful. In 1979, 11 banks were involved in the scheme to give loans to 79,837 sharecroppers and assignees of vested lands. Under this scheme, credit is made available to the sharecroppers on the basis of *barga* certificates. The assignees of vested lands get the loan on the basis of *pattas* (entitlement deeds) issued by the settlement department. The rate of interest charged for this credit is either zero or nominal. With the help of *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 fertilizers depending on the requirement of the *bargadars* so that there is no misuse of the loan.

The recipients of agricultural loans benefit in two ways: 1) the perpetual dependence on the moneylenders is reduced to some extent and 2) they are encouraged to increase production on the lands they cultivate. But agricultural credit for a single crop season cannot bring about any definite improvement of their economic condition. If they are to be made free from the perpetual indebtedness to the moneylenders, the credit should be recycled for a few years.

Two psychological factors have constrained a successful implementation of the financing scheme. The first factor is an institutional bias, reflected in certain mental reservations amongst a category of banks' managerial staff about the viability or even the desirability of financing hitherto "non-bankable entities" like sharecroppers, assignees of vested lands and real marginal farmers.<sup>10</sup> The second factor is the reluctance on the part of a large number of *bargadars* and assignees of vested lands to come forward to take institutional loan to which they do not have an easy access. They do not feel assured that the financing scheme will be recycled from year to year. Moreover, the institutional loan, once taken, will antagonize the village moneylenders and their easy access to this source of financial help in times of need will be lost.

Easy availability of institutional credit for the poor *bargadars* and small allottees of vested lands has been rendered difficult by the first factor. The second factor seems to have been largely responsible for the failure to bring a large section of the target group under the scheme. As the report goes, about 60,000 *bargadars* and small allottees of vested lands have taken agricultural loan.

In the coming crop seasons the government will have to take necessary steps to increase the coverage of the financing programme in much wider areas with the ultimate aim of covering all the poor *bargadars* and small allottees of vested lands in the state. But even a successful implementation of this programme cannot bring about any radical change in the rural economy. The economic gains from the institutional credit will not be substantial to enable the poor *bargadars* and other recipients of the loan to snap their economic links with the local moneylenders within a short

period. But the financing programme has another useful purpose to serve. It will begin the process of containing the usurious exploiters who very often happen to be the landlords and *jotedars*. The organized movement of *bargadars* has gained momentum under the impact of Operation Barga as a result of which the landlords and *jotedars* have been losing their grip on the rural society. The cumulative effect of the twin programmes will be to expedite the process of polarization of the rural people in two camps of exploiters and exploited, and thus prepare the ground for an all-out attack on the feudal and semi-feudal agrarian relations prevailing in the state.

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- <sup>1</sup> *Bargadar* means sharecropper. A *bargadar* has been defined in the West Bengal Land Reforms Act, 1955, as a person who under the system generally known as *adhi, barga* or *bhag* cultivates the land of another person on condition of delivering a share of the produce of such land to that person and includes a person who under the system generally known as *kishani* cultivates the land of another person on condition of receiving a share of the produce of such land from that person.
- <sup>2</sup> Reorientation Camp at Halusai Polba, Dist Hooghly, May 18, 1978 to May 20, 1978, document prepared by the Directorate of Land Records and Surveys, Government of West Bengal.
- <sup>3</sup> *Mouza* is the lowest unit of revenue administration, comprising one or more villages.
- <sup>4</sup> Board of Revenue, West Bengal, Workshop on Land Reforms, June 23-24, 1978.
- <sup>5</sup> These figures were given by the Director of Land Records and Surveys, Government of West Bengal.
- <sup>6</sup> Asim Mukhopadhyay, "Operation Barga", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XIV, No 37, September 15, 1979, pp 1566-1567.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> Board of Revenue, West Bengal, Workshop of Land Reforms, June 23-24, 1978 and Workshop on Land Reforms (II), May 4-5, 1979.
- <sup>10</sup> Government of West Bengal, *Bank Loan and West Bengal*, statistical report prepared by combined statistical cell of the Board of Revenue and Land Utilisation and Reforms, and Land and Land Revenue Department.
- <sup>11</sup> Debabrata Bandyopadhyay, "Operation Barga and Land Reforms", in *From Tebhaga to Operation Barga* (in Bengali), Board of Revenue, West Bengal, 1979, p 31.