

**Hunger, Food Scarcity, and Popular Protests
in West Bengal**

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[These two essays on hunger, scarcity of food, and popular protests in West Bengal follow the earlier publication by the CRG on “*Whither Right to Food? Rights Institutions and Hungry Labour in Tea Plantations of North Bengal*” (Policies and Practices No. 24). Two more stories will follow. These two essays show (a) how inequality in accessing food becomes categorical and durable, and categories of caste, gender, location, age, income, and class make certain inequality durable in society; and (b) how governmental operations turn a specific right into a matter of state grant, delivery and largesse. The history of Right to Food in India is marked by these two features.]

Food Crisis, Right to Food, and Popular Politics in West Bengal

Kumar Rana

Food-Scarcity and Left Politics

"There is no other way. Hence the struggle!" wrote the *Swadhinata*, organ of the West Bengal unit of the undivided Communist Party of India and then these lines, on 9 July 1959:

There is no dearth of food in our state, but still the people of towns and villages have been compelled to buy rice at Rs.30-33 per maund. In the rural area the supply of ration is almost stopped. There is no food in the deficit and distressed areas and no provision for test relief work for the poor landless labourers and unemployed. In the distressed areas people are dying of starvation. The agriculture is in severe crisis. The peasants are without any work or money. People in the towns and villages, peasants, workers, middle and lower middle class, all strata of the society have been shattered because of the food crisis.¹

The passage, took me to my childhood. These lines had appeared three years before my birth. But, the distress of the people continued. So was the struggle. Just seven years after the 1959 food movement, a landmark in West Bengal's current political history, the state saw another vigorous food movement, bigger and stronger, in 1966. In its ferocity this was to surpass all previous food movements. I was yet to be enrolled in primary school, but I vividly remember a song of a local *jatrapala* that classified the society in two distinct parts: one that eats and the other who starves.

*Duniyata bhai ajab karkhana
Kei ba khayee khiri khechiri, kahar pete uda kana*

[What a crazy theatre this world is! Some enjoy delicious food while others starve wrapping a wet rag around the belly (to minimize the pain of hunger)].

¹ Cited in Das Suranjan and Premansu Kumar Bandyopadhyay (eds) (2004); *Food Movement of 1959: Documenting A Turning Point In The History Of West Bengal*, K P Bagchi, Kolkata

Hunger was widespread, but it did not really shatter “all strata of the society”. There was a small section that enjoyed varieties of food. The *mahajan* in our area (Gopiballabhpur, in Medinipur – since 2001 West Mediniupur district) belonged to this solvent group. Immediately after the harvest in winter (only kharif crop was grown; boro was yet to come to occupy the field and economy) the *mahajan* came with his bullock carts. Apart from his “due” collections that ruined the peasant households, he exacted from each of the households a bowl of rice, a bowl of ghee, one cock or hen and a bottle of *mahua*² liquor as “gift”. Not only the borrowers, the free households too had to pay this tribute: who could anticipate “when we would need the support of the *mahajan*?” He went on feasting everyday during his stay in the village. His departure from the village signaled the starvation: he took with him on his bullock carts the major chunk of the harvest.

The agricultural wage rate in the area was far too low. When I took part in a movement for wage enhancement in 1977 the existing daily wage rate was 1.5 kg of unhusked rice – women got even less. In our first phase of the movement we demanded to raise this to 3 kg, and later able to enhance this to 5 and then to 8 kg – for both men and women. Survival was tough: people used to eat various sorts of wild roots, vegetables, coarse cereals, and so on. The public distribution shop sold rice and wheat at cheaper price, but people could hardly afford buying the provisions. The ration dealer sold it in open market to make a substantial profit.

Those days, condition all over West Bengal was more or less similar to what the *Swadhinata* had described. The Communist Party had formed an alliance with other left and democratic parties in order to launch a movement against the faulty “Congress Government and its food policy”, which “are fully responsible for their [the peoples’] destitute condition.” The *Swadhinata* asked, “How will the people survive if the Government is not forced to do something to ease the problem?” And, “hence the struggle and its preparation.”

Nevertheless, despite the prevalence of widespread hunger across the state, the 1959 Food Movement did not have a universal spread and momentum: it remained confined to areas of influence of the Communist Party and its allies. (In our area, there was no such influence, and hence it did not participate in the 1966 movement too. However, the anger and sense of deprivation accumulated among the people of our area never died: West Bengal saw its outburst in 1969 – through the harvest movement.³ Also, despite the vehemence of the struggle the actions taken by the successive governments were less effective than required. As we know, after a brief hibernation the crisis re-emerged in 1966. And re-emerged again the alliance, now led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (the CPI was split into two in 1964; despite the CPI’s retaining the original name the CPI (M) emerged as a much bigger force). Prafulla Chandra Sen, Minister-in-Charge of Food and Supply in the Bidhan Chandra Roy’s government during the 1959 movement had now become the

² *Basia latifolia*, the flowers are dried, fermented and distilled to produce a liquor of intoxicating qualities. (The fruits of the same tree are used to produce oil.)

³ See for details, Rana Santosh, (2006), “Gopiballabhpurer Dhankata Abbhutthan”, in his collection of essays, *Samaj Sreni Rajniti*, CAMP, Kolkata

Chief Minister of the state. Sen was particularly infamous for his insensitive remarks – ‘eat green bananas instead of rice’ was one of the most famous quotes. Both Roy and Sen adopted brutality as the most effective method to handle the situation, and Sen, perhaps surpassed his predecessor in applying state violence upon the masses. While thousands of masses died of hunger many of the protesters were gunned down by the police.

However, state violence failed to silence the mass fury; rather this precipitated the end of Congress rule in the state. The CPI(M) played a crucial role in guiding the public outrage over high prices and scarcity of food not only to build up a strong support base for its own but also to strengthen the unity of the Left parties. As Das and Bandopaddhaya comment:

The emerging Left political unity in electoral politics in West Bengal reached a turning point in the 1967 general election, which resulted in the formation of the first non-Congress United Front Government in West Bengal. This regime, however, had a short life. But the social and political consciousness in West Bengal had become so deeply motivated and shaped by organized Left politics that the decade-long post-1967 political turmoil could not stem the surging tide of a political process that culminated in 1977 with the formation of a CPI(M)-led Left Front government. ...The Food Movement of 1959 can thus be justifiably considered as a significant landmark that set the ball rolling for a new political alignment in West Bengal.⁴

Certainly, food not only became a central issue, it became the strongest tool for the Left politics in West Bengal that ‘shaped’ the political future of the state. One may say that the crisis of food by itself did not generate a movement; it had to be organized. There were many areas marked by food scarcity, yet not all of these areas were marked by protests now remembered as the great food movement. The maps of the food movements of 1959 and 1966 resemble the geographical reach of the Left movement in West Bengal: the movements started and took massive form in areas where the Left, more precisely, the communists had some organizational strength, and in Kolkata (then Calcutta), which became the epicenter of the movement. In other words, it was politics, guided particularly by the leadership that shaped the movement for food. Of course, the crisis of food created a situation where politics could garner popular support. Without such a situation it would not have been possible for the Left parties, particularly the CPI, later on the CPI (M) to build up a solid organization that transformed the party in due course into a ruling power. The ruling Left Front was therefore fully aware of the centrality of food question in West Bengal popular politics. In its initial years (1977-1982) the government perhaps took this issue much more seriously than it took in the latest phase (2006 onward) its much heralded agenda of industrialization. Amidst poor records of the delivery of other basic services the successful implementation of the centrally sponsored Food For Work (FFW) programme in West Bengal in the initial years of the Left Front rule is testimony to this.

⁴ Das Suranjan and Premansu Kumar Bandyopadhyay (eds) (2004); “Introduction”, *Food Movement of 1959: Documenting A Turning Point In The History Of West Bengal*, K P Bagchi, Kolkata

The success of the Food For Work programme was largely due to the informed activism on the part of the Left parties. The memory of the 1959 and 1966 food movement was yet to fade out – many of the stalwarts of those movements now headed the government. They depended more on societal activism than following bureaucratic ways. So, the Left party workers were given a bigger role in ensuring that the FFW be implemented. However, before long, the enthusiasm dried up: programme implementation became a routine governmental work than an issue of politically motivated activism. Several factors might have influenced the situation: exclusive dependence on the success of land-reform in isolation of other empowering measures and the resultant neglect of other programmes (including the functioning of the public distribution system, enhancement of wages, and increase in the purchasing power of the agricultural wage labourers, security of food, and so on) led the people more into depending on free market rather than government's own programmes and initiatives.

Apparently, the food crisis of the sixties and seventies came to an end. The free market saw an abundance of food. Possibly among the lower income groups in the society also the degree of hunger reduced. This was perhaps the reason that food did not become a crucial issue during the middle phase of the Left Front rule. Dreze and Sen noted, “regimes where the political power is particularly concentrated in the hands of the rich have a tendency to favour development models which give greater prominence to economic growth – whether as an element of a strategy of growth mediated security, or in the form of un-aimed opulence (or indeed in the form of opulence aimed at the privileged classes).”⁵ Perhaps the Left Front Government was turning quick to be such a regime.

Hunger Reappears?

But, did hunger go away? If so, what makes it reappear embarrassing the government and the West Bengal society as a whole? In fact it did not go away. It did exist among sections of the population – however invisible the hungry groups may be. The Pratiche Trust's report on primary education⁶ gave evidences of acute hunger among the *adivasis* of Purulia and Birbhum. The NSSO reports found that a substantial number of people did not get sufficient food. There were many other evidences of persistent hunger, one of the major evidences being the wide acceptance of the Mid-day Meal scheme in the primary school launched in 2004. Also, the acceptance of the supplementary nutrition through the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), notwithstanding its abysmally poor quality, among the marginal sections of society was another indication. Surprising as it was, despite these evidences, hunger continued to kill hundreds of people in Dreze and Sen's words “in a ‘legal’ and

⁵ Dreze Jean and Sen Amartya, (1999[Sixth Indian Impression of the first Indian paperback edition of 1993; first published 1989]), *Hunger and Public Action*, OUP, New Delhi, p.229

⁶ *The Pratiche Education Report I, with an introduction by Amartya Sen*, TLM Books in association with the Pratiche Trust, Delhi 2001, pp5-7

‘orderly’ way”.⁷ It became an issue only after the media reports on the cases of hunger death in Amlasole, an adivasi village in West Medinipur district, ‘shocked’ the middle classes. Also news of hunger deaths came in from North Bengal tea gardens. Yet, the government and the Left Front leader CPI(M) appeared unconcerned: while the Chief Minister admitted casually the existence of hunger – not just in Amlasole, but also in Kolkata - the Minister in Charge of Backward Classes Welfare Department echoed the Left Front Chairman’s claim that the deaths were caused by ailments, not by hunger.⁸ There were some declarations of measures for relief, but the realization of the promises remained doubtful. And, regrettably, the issue of food as a human right quickly disappeared from the public domain.

Despite persistent hunger among sections of population there was not much political activism either of the ‘socially and politically conscious’ Left or of the opposition parties. It was the so called civil society – in the beginning few NGOs – which tried to bring the issue of hunger into the public domain. But, their activism on Right to Food copied the all India pattern of ensuring this right primarily through legal activism. Given the socio-political fabric of West Bengal, where public policies are guided more by organized politics than through legal and other administrative maneuvers, the issue of Right to Food in this phase never took the form of a movement. The civil society succeeded in influencing through its reports the Supreme Court to pass orders directing the government to ensure the delivery of food to the hungry.⁹ The government did not care much. Even the compliance to the Supreme Court orders was partial.

We can take the example of the Mid-day Meal scheme: the Supreme Court directed to bring all primary school going children into the fold of the scheme by 2002¹⁰; yet even today large chunk of the urban primary school children are not provided with meals under the scheme. The coverage of the children of upper primary schools under this scheme, despite the court order, is still about 25 percent.¹¹ However, the implementation of the Mid-day Meal scheme is more successful than many other programmes, and this is closely linked with the acuteness of hunger prevailing in the society. Despite severe opposition from bureaucracy, media, and the reluctance of the political leadership to mobilize in support of the scheme, the programme was welcomed by the village population, and the implementation of the scheme became a political demand. Similar is the case of the ICDS: the

⁷ Dreze Jean and Sen Amartya, (1999[Sixth Indian Impression of the first Indian paperback edition of 1993; first published 1989]), *Hunger and Public Action*, OUP, New Delhi, p.229

⁸ The Indian Express, June 24, 2004

⁹ For the various reports and subsequent Supreme Court Orders see, *Supreme Court Orders on the Right to Food: A Tool for Action*, Secretariat of the Right to Food Campaign, New Delhi, 2005. Also, available at www.righttofoodindia.org.

¹⁰ Supreme Court order on the writ petition (civil) No. 196, of 2001 by Peoples Union for Civil Liberties Rajasathan on November 28, 2001.

¹¹ Interview with the Officer-in-Charge, Mid-day Meal, Department of School Education, Government of West Bengal, February 2009.

implementation is still partial¹², and, while the Supreme Court order has influence in enforcing the partial implementation, this too was connected with a political demand among the working population in the cities and towns. The difference in the strength of the response concerning the ICDS from that concerning the Mid-day Meal has much to do with the constituency of the ‘beneficiaries’ of the two schemes: the primary schools are attended by all sections of the children, including the affluent in the rural areas. In fact the affluent families grumble against poor implementation. But the ICDS centres are yet to have universal attendance. Generally only children of the poor families attend the centres, and the marginal situation of the parents of the ICDS going children is reflected in the lackluster nature of the delivery of the programme.

The question remains: What made the central leadership of the West Bengal Left Front shut its eyes towards the issue of hunger? Before attempting to answer this question let us examine the extent and pattern of hunger prevailing in the state.

Shift in the Target of Hunger

In July 2001 we visited, in connection with the Pratichi Tust’s study on primary education, Khuditand village of Puncha block in Purulia. The inhabitants, members of Kheriya Sabar community told us that that they ate only once a day. To assuage hunger they took tea added with salt (they could seldom buy sugar). The area was drought prone; rain-fed agriculture could not ensure either food security or wage employment. Moreover, the Kheriya Sabar community was a new entrant to agricultural practices (either as cultivator or as labourers). And, when we reported this in the Pratichi report¹³ we were told by the authorities, also some academics – that it was a sporadic incidence, and could not be generalised for the whole of the state.

In 2004, I spent a week in my village, which was much different from Khuditand. Agriculture was diversified: with locally developed irrigation system most of the land was brought under multiple crop. Though, 75 percent of the village population consists of the Adivasis, these groups (Santals and Mundas), with a rich history of settled agriculture, differed much from the Sabars. Yet, the village offered some similarity with that of Khuditand.

In November 2006, I visited a village in Jalpaiguri district. Half of the harvest of the Kharif paddy was already done. Yet, when I asked an agricultural labourer household about their usual menu those days, the old man heading the family asked me if I intended to accompany him to see for my eyes what they ate. I followed him. We walked about a kilometre inside the forest. He dug out a wild yam, no less than 10 kg in weight. He took enough care to protect his skin from the sap of the yam the contact of which would cause severe harm to the skin. Bringing it home he cut it into round pieces and laid them on the wall so as to drain out the sap. Then

¹² The Pratichi Child Report, with a foreword by Amartya Sen, Pratichi Trust, Delhi, 2009.

¹³ *The Pratichi Education Report I, with an Introduction by Amartya Sen*, TLM Books in association with the Pratichi Trust (2002), p.105

he would leave the pieces in salt-water overnight. After drying the pieces properly they would boil them. It used to be the staple food for them – at least for a substantial part of the year. And, the diet was not out of choice but was a forced one (“*keu sakhe khayna go, garta bharate gilte hoy*”).

The above incidences are only a few of many that one can come across in villages in West Bengal. But, what was most surprising was the prevalence of hunger in some villages in Bardhaman – the rice bowl of West Bengal. Nevertheless, personal experiences have their own limitations, and difficult to generalise. But when they are corroborated by wider studies the concern on the issue cannot but deepen. As Chakraborty and Mukherjee observe on the basis of the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) reports:

It is generally well known that household food insecurity may very well coexist with adequate availability of food at the national or sub-national level. Yet, the fact that the percentage of people in West Bengal who reportedly do not get two square meals a day at least some days in a year is the highest among all the major states would definitely surprise all, given the state’s remarkable achievement in agricultural production. The state has been holding on to this dubious distinction for more than a decade now, as revealed by NSS reports on ‘reported adequacy of food intake’.¹⁴

The NSSO reports categorize two kinds food inadequacy: (a) households reporting “not getting” two square meals a day in some months of the year, and (b) households reporting not getting the same throughout the year. From the NSSO reports it is found that the reported inadequacies of both the kinds were not only higher in rural West Bengal as opposed to the All India average but also that the inadequacies have remained for over a decade (See Table 1).

Table1: Reported Inadequacy of Food Intake in West Bengal

		Percentage of Households whose Members do not get Two Square Meals A Day					
		Throughout the Year			Some Months of the Year		
		1999-00	1993-94	2004-05	1999-00	1993-94	2004-05
West Bengal	Rural	2.3	3	1.3	8.1	11.1	10.6
	Urban	1.1	1.5	0.7	0.9	2	0.6
India	Rural	0.7	0.9	0.4	2.6	4.2	2
	Urban	0.6	0.5	0.4	0.3	1.1	0.1

Source: NSS Report nos. 415, 466, 512¹⁵

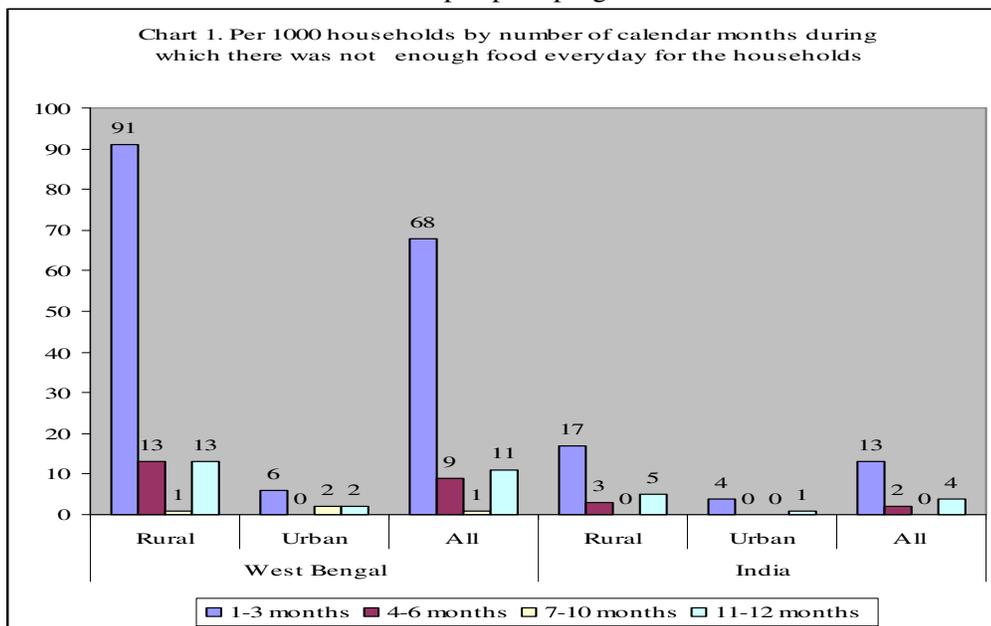
The acuteness of hunger, particularly in rural West Bengal was reported by the NSSO (2004-05) to be much higher than the All India average. While reported food inadequacy for 1-3 months in the year was reported by 9.1 percent of rural households in West Bengal, the all India figure appeared to be 1.7 percent. Round the

¹⁴ Chakraborty Achin and Subrata Mukherjee (2009), MDG-Based Poverty Reduction Strategy for West Bengal; Institute of Development Studies, Kolkata, mineo.

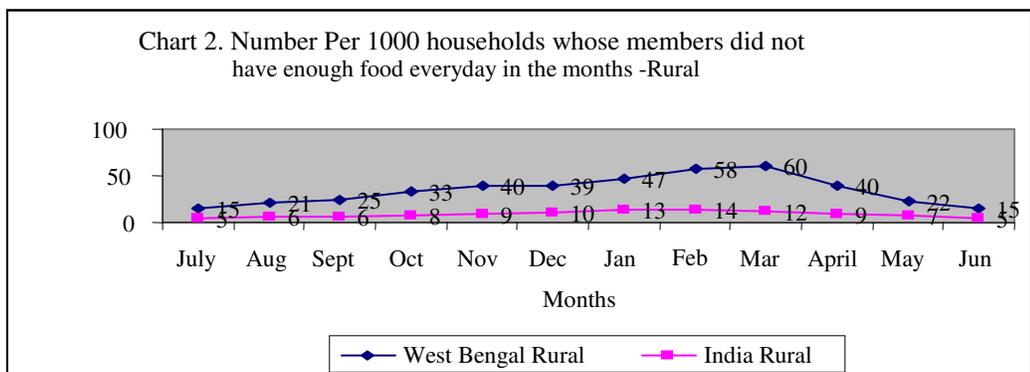
¹⁵ Cited from Chakraborty and Mukherjee, *ibid*

year inadequacy of food in rural West Bengal (1.7 percent) too was found to be much higher than the all India average (0.5 percent).

Again, regarding seasonality of hunger, the extent in West Bengal has been far higher than that of the All India picture. The NSSO data on seasonality of hunger is particularly striking: a substantial number of rural households' suffering from food inadequacy even in the months of kharif harvest show their exclusion from the so called success of land reform or other pro-poor programmes.



Source: Report No. 512(61/1.0/5) Perceived Adequacy of Food Consumption in Indian Households 2004-2005, NSS 61st Round, July 2004- June 2005



Source: Report No. 512(61/1.0/5) Perceived Adequacy of Food Consumption in Indian Households 2004-2005, NSS 61st Round, July 2004- June 2005

The persistence of hunger is coincided with two other facts: one, the rate of decline in rural poverty in West Bengal has been much slower between 1993-94 and

2004-05 than in the previous two decades (1973-74 to 1993-94), which again coincided with much higher agricultural growth rate (the annual exponential growth being 6.4 percent during 1981-82 to 1990-91), and two, West Bengal's taking a reverse trend regarding real wage. As Chakraborty and Mukherjee point out:

It is the only state where real wages for both casual agricultural and non-agricultural workers actually declined in the period between 1993-94 and 1999-2000 – two NSS rounds...Given the evidence that between the last two censuses the percentage of agricultural labourers in total (main + marginal) workers actually increased and the absolute number increased significantly, it seems that the non-farm sector could hardly absorb the growing number of people with very little human capital. In other words a large number of rural inhabitants are stuck with the kind of work that has little prospect of generating adequate income to get out of poverty, given the stagnating average wages in both agriculture and non-agriculture.¹⁶

Now who are the poor and hungry? Let us disaggregate the NSSO data further on the line of occupational class and social identity. While in 2004-05, 'households not getting enough food everyday for some months of the year' in rural West Bengal formed 1.3 percent of the total (see table 1), the figures among the agricultural labourers and other labourers were 1.8 percent and 3.7 percent respectively (Table 2). Again, average proportion of rural 'households getting inadequate food for some months of the year' was 10.6 percent (table 1), but the figures for the agricultural labourers and other labourers were 23.3 and 8.9 percent respectively (table 2).

Table 2. Per 1000 Distribution of Households by Food-Availability Status by Household Types – Rural

	West Bengal		India	
	Getting Inadequate Food Everyday for Some Months of the Year (Rural)	Not Getting Enough Food Everyday in Any Month	Getting Inadequate Food Everyday for Some Months of the Year (Rural)	Not Getting Enough Food Everyday in Any Month
Self-Employed in Non-Agricultural Activities	44	9	12	4
Agricultural Labourers	233	18	51	7
Other Labourers	89	37	21	9
Self Employed in Agriculture	34	1	5	1
Other Households	35	14	8	5
Not Recorded	0	0	7	11
All Class	106	13	20	4

Source: Report No. 512(61/1.0/5) Perceived Adequacy of Food Consumption in Indian Households 2004-2005, NSS 61st Round, July 2004- June 2005

¹⁶ Chakraborty and Mukherjee, *ibid.*

While the proportion of agricultural labourers suffering from hunger in some months of the year was greater than that of the other labourers, it was the other way around in the case of round the year hunger. Whatever the case be, the labouring class of West Bengal in general had to face much acute hunger than that of their all India counter-parts. To explain this contradiction – the pro-poor image of the Left Front *vis a vis* the violation of the Right to Food of the labourers – we need to go into some more details of the constituency of the labouring class.

According to the 2001 Census 71 percent of the agricultural labourers of West Bengal came from the Adivasis, Dalits and Muslims, though their share in the total population was 54 percent. Now, if we look at the NSSO reports, we find that the Adivasis and Dalits are the sections most vulnerable to hunger. In 2004-05 the proportion of Adivasis of rural West Bengal ‘getting inadequate food everyday for some months of the year’ was 16.8 percent, which was much higher to ‘other’ categories (5.3 percent), also compared to the all India average of the Adivasis (3.5). Similar was the condition of the Dalits: While Dalits in rural West Bengal who got inadequate food everyday for some months of the year formed 11.9 percent against the all India figure of 3.5 percent (see table 3).

Table 3. Per 1000 Distribution of Households by Food Availability Status by Social Groups

	Getting Enough Food Everyday for Some Months of the Year						Not Getting Enough Food Everyday in Any Month					
	West Bengal			India			West Bengal			India		
	Rural	Urban	All	Rural	Urban	All	Rural	Urban	All	Rural	Urban	All
ST	175	74	168	37	8	35	9	0	9	5	0	4
SC	144	17	119	33	8	27	19	12	17	7	3	6
OBC	66	5	54	10	4	9	2	4	2	2	1	2
Others	80	3	53	19	1	12	11	5	9	6	1	4
All	106	7	78	20	4	16	13	6	11	4	1	4

Source: Report No. 512(61/1.0/5) Perceived Adequacy of Food Consumption in Indian Households 2004-2005, NSS 61st Round, July 2004- June 2005

The NSSO does not give separate figures for the Muslims; indeed, as the nutrition data provided by the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) indicate (see table 4 and 5), if separated from the ‘others’ the inadequacy of food among the Muslims could be much higher while the figure for the ‘others’ could be much lower.

Table 4: Status of Women’s Health among Different Social Groups in West Bengal

	Women with BMI<18.5kg/m2 in %		Women (15-49) with Any Anemia in %	
	NFHS II	NFHS III	NFHS II	NFHS III
SC	49.4	42.5	67.1	66.8

ST	64.2	55.6	80.6	78
Muslim	47.6	42.7	59.2	61.3
Others	39.9	36.5	59.1	60.8
All	43.7	39.1	62.7	63.2

Source: *National Family Health Survey (NFHS) III, West Bengal 1999-2000 and 2005-06, International Institute of Population Sciences, Mumbai, 2007*

Table 5. Nutritional Status of Children in West Bengal NFHS II (1998-99)

	Underweight (%)	
	NFHS II	NFHS III
SC	56.1	40.0
ST	57.4	59.7
OBC	36.1	22.7
Muslim	58.0	40.3
Others	45.8	37.0
All	48.7	44.6

Source: *National Family Health Survey (NFHS) III, West Bengal 1999-2000 and 2005-06, International Institute of Population Sciences, Mumbai, 2007*

It is true that there has been a general decline in the extent of under nutrition among women and children in West Bengal, but still the degree is much higher among the Dalits, Adivasis and Muslims compared to the others. Also there has been a slight increase in anemia among Muslim women and under nutrition among Adivasi Children.

Failure in Programme Implementation

Clearly, hunger and under nutrition have been continued to persist in West Bengal society. But, given the constituency of the hungry population – socio-economically and geographically marginalized and mostly without access to media – the case of food inadequacy did not find a proper place in political and academic discourse. Also, the vulnerability of these people never allowed them to rise in protest against the deprivation of the Right to Food.

Why are they still so hungry? As for the case of the village cited earlier, though landlessness had lessened, the inequality in terms of land-ownership still remains high. Most of the adivasi households have less than one acre of cultivable land. Moreover, the land they possess have been mostly single cropped (as opposed to those of the non-adivasis). Secondly, own harvest, wage employment (which has been around Rs 30 per day) and other income can sustain the hard pressed Adivasi households for only 8-9 months of the year. So, most of the households have reduced intake of food to sustain themselves during the hungry months of Bhadra and Aswin (August-October). As Pitho Marandi told me,

“I have a family of six members – three adults and three children. We require at least three kgs of rice every day. Where would we get that? So we eat less in order

to save some rice for the hungry days lurking ahead. All of us earn something. Even the children are engaged in plucking green sal leaves to make leaf-plates. They can at least supplement a portion of the food requirement of the household. When would they go school, and how? A hungry stomach does not allow learning.”

During that visit I had been to another five villages and found the situation worse in some of them. Not only the indigenous people, but also among the poorer communities like *mal*, *majhi* (*bagdi*) and *dom* of the area, hunger and poverty are still synonymous.¹⁷ Many of the parents of the poorer communities told that they could not provide their children with enough food (the Mid-day Meal was yet to be launched in the schools in the area when this visit was made)) and this caused the poor rate of attendance in the school (*Khaite di parini, iskool ki patheiba?*) Many of the parents said – “*khali pete ki parha hai? Parha nai kari parne master pitla, ar iskoolke gelanni* (children cannot learn in empty stomach. When they fail to recite the lessons teachers beat them and children stop going to school.)”¹⁸

But then what about the Public Distribution System (PDS)? As Pitho Mandi said, “Seldom did I get any rice or wheat from the ration shop. When there was the

¹⁷ In Santali *rengec'* means hunger. Also it means poor. *Rengec' kana* – feeling hungry. *Rengec' hor kanain'* – I am a poor man. In the local tongue of Gopiballabhpur area *bhok* denotes hunger and *bhokila* denotes both hungry and poor. However, the relatively affluent non-Adivasis, sometime use the term *garib* (poor) for self-ascription. For example, *Amar garaib nok-* We are poor people. Such poverty does not relate to hunger, but to the want of wealth or prosperity. On the other hand, they consider the hand to mouth toilers *bhokila* (hungry). *Bhokila nok ga* – the hungry people, or more specifically, *bhokila mulia-kamunga* – the hungry male and female workers.

¹⁸ The wide prevalence of poverty and hunger has influenced the literacy rate of the area. For example, the literacy rate of Gopiballavpur I Block is, according to 2001 Census, 57 percent, while the rate of literacy of the district of West Medinipur is 69 percent. Number of female literates in this block is just half the number of the male literates. Again, the workers' profile show that above 40 percent of the main workers are agricultural labourers, while the state average is 25 percent. Such regional variations are caused by different reasons – geographical, climatic, and perhaps very importantly demographic. All the blocks of Jhargram sub-division of Medinipur district, an area with high concentration of Adivasis, have much smaller literacy rate than the state and district average. Also the state level data regarding the literacy rate and work profile among the adivasis show a clear correlation between these two. For a fuller discussion see Rana Kumar (2006): *Khandita Unnayan: Jhargram Mahakumar Ekti Rekhachitra*, Prashnabachi, Kolkata.

Again, The overall literacy rate among the adivasi communities in West Bengal in 2001 is 43 percent (the overall literacy for the state is 68 percent). The main workers among the Adivasis are consisted of more than 50 percent of agricultural labourers, while the figures for the other castes is below 20 percent. Among the SCs figures for literacy rate and contribution of the agricultural labourers to main workers are 59 percent and 38 percent respectively. Among the Muslims in West Bengal; the literacy rate is 57 percent and the proportion of agricultural labourer is 31 percent. Also, Muslims are engaged in many different low income works. Thus, most of the studies on Mid-day Meal have found much higher acceptance of the programme from these communities.

allotment I did not have the money to buy, and when there was money the dealer said that there was no allotment. Tell me what do I do?"

Indeed, a further desegregation of the NSSO data on food inadequacy show that the Antyodaya and Below Poverty Line (BPL) households, who were supposed to be protected under the PDS, had actually suffered most from food inadequacy.

Table 6: Per 1000 Distribution of Households by Food Availability Status by Ration Card Type

	Getting Inadequate Food Everyday for Some Months of the Year						Not Getting Enough Food Everyday in Any Month					
	West Bengal			India			West Bengal			India		
	Rural	Urban	All	Rural	Urban	All	Rural	Urban	All	Rural	Urban	All
Antyodaya	299	0	273	58	4	53	19	34	20	4	3	4
BPL	203	47	186	36	15	33	29	24	23	8	3	7
Others	54	3	38	11	3	8	5	3	4	3	1	2
No Ration-Card	95	2	51	18	2	12	11	8	10	5	2	4
All	106	7	78	20	4	16	13	6	11	4	1	4

Report No. 512(61/1.0/5), Perceived Adequacy of Food Consumption, in Indian Households 2004-2005, NSS 61st Round, July 2004- June 2005

The Central Government's policy on the PDS has been marked with a withdrawal syndrome.¹⁹ The policy to shrink the PDS has been more consistent than making it universal. This has had its impact on the delivery of the PDS in West Bengal. But, what is intriguing is the fact that despite the shrinkage in the PDS the All India picture of buying food from the PDS has been much better than that of West Bengal. While the monthly quantity of food consumed by the Antayodaya and BPL households in West Bengal from PDS was 3.4 kg. in rural areas and 3.1 kg in urban areas the corresponding all India figures were 9.5 kg and 10.7 kg respectively. Not only the level of accessing the PDS by the poorer households at all India level was higher than that of West Bengal but it was also found to be higher among the combined figures (all rural households in West Bengal bought 1.2 kg as against the all India figure of 4 kg).

Table 7: Monthly Consumption per Household from PDS of Rice

Average Quantity Consumed (KG) by Households Holding Antyodaya or BPL Ration	Average Quantity Consumed (KG) by all Households
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¹⁹ Utsa Pattanayak, (2007) *The Republic of Hunger*, Three Essays Collective, Swaminathan Madhura (2000), *Weakening Welfare: The Public Distribution of Food in India*, Leftword, New Delhi

Cards from PDS and Other Sources								
	West Bengal		India		West Bengal		India	
	PDS	Other Sources	PDS	Other Sources	PDS	Other Sources	PDS	Other Sources
Rural	3.411	54.74	9.527	25.23	1.248	53.248	4.09	27.03
Urban	3.138	37.956	10.657	19.832	0.551	28.899	2.311	18.241

Report No. 510(61/1.0/3), Public Distribution System and Other Sources of Household Consumption, 2004-05, NSS 61st Round, (July 2004 - June 2005), Volume - I.

In fact the NSSO data show a much poorer reach of the PDS in West Bengal as against the all India picture. While the proportion consumed from PDS in rural West Bengal has been about 13 percent, the all India figure has been above 24 percent. The urban figures (consumption from PDS in West Bengal 5.4 percent as against 13 percent for all Indian states) are more contrasting.

Table 8: Number per 1000 Households Reporting Consumption from PDS and Other Sources

	West Bengal			India		
	PDS	Other Sources	All Sources	PDS	Other Sources	All Sources
Rural	128	985	989	244	853	924
Urban	54	927	937	131	891	922

Report No. 510(61/1.0/3), Public Distribution System and Other Sources of Household Consumption, 2004-05, NSS 61st Round, (July 2004 - June 2005), Volume - I

All these show that West Bengal has been maintaining a huge gap between requirements of food among the state population and the state's failure to meet that requirement. The PDS in West Bengal, has indeed become impaired, and this has clear linkages with the socio-economic fabric of West Bengal where political governance is concentrated in the hands of the urban elite, who needed the PDS in 1959 and 1966, but does not need it any more, and now can depend on free market mechanisms, and hence has maintained silence on the public policy implementation on hunger.

The Government of West Bengal had complained time and again that central allocation of grains has been reduced. There is substance in the argument. The monthly average figures of allotment of rice and wheat followed a declining trend since 2002-03 (except for the category of Antyodaya Annapurna Yojana - AAY). While the total allotment of wheat and rice in 2002-03 was 521400 MT, it came down in 2006-07 to 351700 MT.²⁰ Having recognized this one is struck with the fact that the Government of West Bengal has not even been able to lift fully the allotted

²⁰ indstat.com

grains under different categories. In spite of showing some efficiency in utilizing the central allotment the performance of the Government of West Bengal contrasts sharply with some major states. As in the case of allotment under BPL category the utilization of allotment has increased from 41.7 percent in 2001-02 to 73.8 percent in 2006-07.²¹ Nevertheless the figure was not only lower than some major performing states but also the all India average. Similar has been the case for AAY.

However, the line followed in the case of Above Poverty Line (APL) category was somewhat different. In this category the West Bengal figures of lifting over allotment have been higher than some of the smarter states and the national average. However, the utilization of allotment under APL category has generally been poor across the country, which was directly related to the competitive market price of grains during the period. As soon as the market price went up in 2005-06 the demand for grains under APL category also enhanced, which resulted in some increase in the lifting of the allotment by all states. But, given the very thin line of difference between the APL and BPL (Below Poverty Line) in West Bengal²² the lifting under APL category needed to be enhanced manifold, which has not been done. There was no reason why the Government did not lift the allotted APL category grains when the open market price was clearly growing upwards.

Left Shifts our Attention from Poor to Power

It was the failure of the state food security to balance the crisis of food, particularly wheat, due to the increased open market price, that played a major role in the ration rage in West Bengal in 2007. It was mainly the APL category people who led the revolts against the ration dealers. Nevertheless, given the long persisting anger against the ration dealers the ration rage garnered immediate support from the masses in general. Although the BPL category people were not to receive much benefit from the movement they took part in it in order to exert their fury against the ration dealers who were infamous for their corrupt practices.

Was the corruption among the ration dealers a new phenomenon? No. Let us look into the business of a ration dealer in some detail.

The dealer has his ration shop in a village 13 KM away from the block headquarter of Gopiballabhpur in West Medinipur district. He is a middle farmer and was given the dealership in 1973. Apart from his own village his shop serves three other localities in the area. He has 816 BPL cards, 866 APL cards, 138 Antyodaya cards and 2 Annapurna Anna Yojana cards spread over 450 families. With 4 acres of

²¹ *ibid*; for a fuller discussion see Bhattacharya Dwaipayan, and Kumar Rana (2008) "Politics of PDS anger in West Bengal", *Economic & Political Weekly February 2, 2008*.

²² According to a study, the selection of BPL population was blotted with 31 percent exclusion error, which is the third highest in the country. See, Planning Commission (2005) Performance Evaluation of Targeted Public Distribution System, Programme Evaluation Organisation Planning Commission, New Delhi. for the irrationalities in the selection of the BPL, See, Rana Santosh (2007) *Prakrito Daridryo o BPL Talika : sarkari hisabeyr karchupi*; Santosh Rana : Prasnabachi Prakasana, Kolkata

cultivable land he is self-sufficient in food and other necessities. He can hardly save any money from his agricultural income. However, he has managed to accumulate substantial assets from the dealership. He has a rice-holler, which is run by his elder son; an electrical equipment shop in the market – 13 Km away from his village, which is run by his younger son; two motor-cycles; and some other things marking his rural affluence.. According to the accounts given by him he would have to “sell the property” had he run the business with fairness. The incentive he got for BPL wheat was Rs 14 per quintal. But, in effect the margin actually becomes negative when one counts the losses in terms of shortages, carriage and others. The policy irrationalities, according to him, justified his “selling a major chunk of the allotment of rice and wheat in the open market, where I make Rs 200-250 of profit per quintal per week. Not only the APL goods”, he says, “I also sell out some other allotments.” According to him his monthly income from the business was roughly Rs 15,000. Major part of his income came from kerosene. He sold out more than half of the allotment (about 1000 ltrs) in the open market that earned him about Rs 5,000. Also he charges about 25 paise per litre over the stipulated price.

He managed to keep the dissatisfaction of the people in control through various means. Firstly, “most of the customers are illiterate and have no information about the allotment/supply.” The dealer kept the cards with him. Secondly he kept a small group obliged. He extended favour to the non-advaitis (*hatua* in local tongue) and some young tribal men who could be potential trouble-makers. Thirdly, “all the local political workers and other powerful persons are “well fed” by the dealers. They collect regular donations and also take various obligations – kerosene, wheat, sugar, etc”. Kinship was also a big factor: in most of the places the dealers were the relatives of the local leaders.

While talking with a district level leader of the CPI(M) in Birbhum, we found that most of the contentions of the ration dealer was not at all unknown to him. He admitted that “in the past one and half decade class collaboration has emerged in rural West Bengal. Ration dealers are only a part of this scenario. For some years, Government policies were either guided against the poor or the pro-poor policies remained unimplemented...whatever be the case there has been a big change in political activism that now favours the neo-rich in the rural areas.” As an individual he felt ashamed to take side of the dealers during the ration rage in 2007, but, “unfortunately it was our party’s policy to protect them”.

The CPI(M) stated that some anti-people forces were engaged in destabilizing the PDS system and thus it had to stand by the dealers attacked by the mob. But, it did not clearly state as to why the party that came to power through the food movements of 1959 and 1966 never tried to streamline the PDS system in the state. Rather, it maintained the status-quo in the system, the linkage of which with the poor was in any case never strong: and after the introduction of the targeted PDS (TPDS), the exclusion of the affluent section from the PDS has actually made the position of the poor more vulnerable as it were the affluent whose grumbling capabilities kept the system somewhat functioning. As was seen in 1959 and 1966, the movement for Right to Food was actually led by the middle class while the poor

followed it. But, the general dissociation of the middle class from the PDS has made the isolation of the poor from public discourse over the delivery of services complete.

The affinitive ties between the ration dealer and the local political leaders symbolic of the class collaboration in rural areas (mentioned by the CPI(M) leader) exhibit in a miniature way the features of the overall political structure of West Bengal. The availability of food in open market and the conspicuous consumption of the urban and rural middle class on one hand and the post reform policy of targeted PDS on the other have created a situation where the PDS has become virtually irrelevant. It was only during a span of time when the market price of wheat increased awfully that made some rural affluent suddenly wake up against the malpractices of the ration dealers. But, till the time food was available in the open market there was no hue and cry against the long prevailing corruption of the dealers and the Food Department. In fact, most of the local political activists belonging to all kinds of political parties received financial patronization of the dealers.

To be exact, it was not only on the question of food security, most of the policies of the ruling partners and thus of the Government were guided all these years by a strong tendency of the exclusion of the poor from social policies. In the field of education, it is the poor who are excluded from the services due to a lackluster delivery: while the affluent could develop a safety net through private schooling or private tuition, the poor had no option but to remain illiterate.²³ The miserable health delivery system has excluded the poor from the basic health services: while the rich could enjoy the comfort of paid private health care the poor had to depend on the quacks or traditional healers or suffer without any treatment.²⁴ (As a zonal level leader of the CPI(M) sarcastically commented, “there were two Ps – Poor and Power – our party’s intoxicating clinging to the latter has added another P which has changed the entire notion of left politics: it is now PPP – public private partnership that has become the mantra of the day and the poor have been sent to oblivion”.)

Similar has been the case of the ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services)—a programme for the children with central importance for the children. The delivery of the programme in West Bengal has been miserable, and the quality of food served almost horrible. Yet, the vulnerability of the poor forces the children to access this lackluster service.²⁵ But, while the ruling Left Front partners let the state delivery system function in a regrettably poor manner, the opposition parties or the civil society too remained silent for long

What influenced the behaviour of the Left, particularly the CPI(M) towards the poor? What explains the dichotomy of their taking side of the poor through the intervention in land reform, Operation *Barga* and wage movements in the early years of the Left Front and the persisting neglect in the delivery of state services including food security particularly in the later years? It was perhaps the convergence of the

²³ See *The Pratichi Education Report I, with an introduction by Amartya Sen*, TLM Books in association with the Pratichi Trust, Delhi 2001 particularly the “Introduction”

²⁴ See *Pratichi Health Report I, with an Introduction by Amartya Sen*, TLM Books, In association with Pratichi Trust, Delhi, 2005

²⁵ See, *Pratichi Child Report I*, Pratichi Trust, Delhi, 2009

social structure of West Bengal and the composition of the Left parties, particularly the CPI(M) that accounted for the Left Front in its policies of early years in favour of some interventions while continuing to safe guard the agenda of the urban and rural middle classes - the class that the Left political leadership represents. It should not be therefore surprising for us that the Chief Minister of West Bengal argued in the beginning against the launching of the Mid-day Meal scheme²⁶ and the School Education Minister's putting a note on Government file, namely 'we are against Mid-day Meal'²⁷.

Before the Singur episode the ruling party was able to subdue protests with the help of cadres and police force. But, 2006 onward the political course of West Bengal took a dramatic turn. The CPI(M) started receiving serious challenges one after another. Within a year the Nandigram episode, the ration rage of 2007 and other demonstrations against the Government changed the political scenario. While the ration rage of 2007 did not receive much attention in the beginning, it was recognized soon as a major outburst against the existing rule. The issue of food was vital, but the implicit demand for rights perhaps became centrally important. It appeared to the poor as a channel to exert their anger against the 'authority' imposed upon them by the combination of party machinery and bureaucratic machinery, which together had re-established a feudal raj, though in modified manner.

It was this process that resulted in new forms of subjugation: land patta, ration card, NREGA job card, and recognition of other rights of the people were soon converted into "benefits" to be accorded, and were used as collateral against the "beneficiaries" receiving these benefits for physical sustenance – bluntly speaking, to ensure two square meals a day. In other words the 'support' that the party garnered among the masses was converted to 'loyalty' – those who were not inclined to be loyal were taught lessons mainly through the denials of the basic requirements. The mode was generally sugar-coated and was found to be more convenient than exhibiting physical brutality. However, physical punishments were there also. We know of the instance in Dinhat of Coochbehar district where firing by the police on February 5, 2008 killed no less than five Forward Block activists who took part in a demonstration organised by their party demanding better implementation of the state sponsored programmes, like NREGA.²⁸ The failure in implementing the public

²⁶ In his address at the open session of the All Bengal Primary Teachers' Association at Siliguri on December 26[CHECK], 2001.

²⁷ Note given on 16.04.97 on a proposal (file (P) DO No. 1-1/96-Desk(MDM 10M-25/97) of visit by some officials to make a visit to Tamil Nadu to gather direct experience of Mid-day Meal

²⁸ It was another matter, however, that the same Forward Block that demanded proper implementation of the NREGA and other programmes had been heading the crucial department of Food and Supply for the last three decades. The RSP – that shows frequent resentment mainly in the media – has been heading the department of Women and Child and Social Welfare, responsible for running the ICDS programme. The performance of these departments – very crucial for human development – has been more lackluster than better. It's a different dynamics: the CPI(M) state Secretary Biman Bose wrote, "...the backdrop to

programmes has roots in this political dynamics. While the Governmental bureaucracy operates in a feudal manner, the party bureaucracy at the lower level matches it with another sort of feudal rule in the rural areas. Party activism boils down to management of government largesse towards ensuring loyalty.

The Circular Path of Food

By 2006 the changes through land reforms had already been undone by the re-establishment of the rural elites. The old rich changed colour but not the content: they took the patronage of the ruling party only to reorganize and strengthen their economic base through political maneuvering of the opportunities offered by diversification and growth oriented development. As Barbara Harris White notes, “The era of diversification and growth did not affect the agrarian structure much as it provided commercial elites with new opportunities for investment in agro processing and storage [in Bardhaman].”²⁹ Along with this emerged many opportunities for the rural elites: government contract works, transport business, shops and other establishments, and so on. On the other hand opportunities of the poor continued to shrink: reverse tenancy in land,³⁰ reversal in real wages of the agricultural labourers, appalling performance of the Government in implementing programmes like NREGA and the failure to protect people from hunger, particularly in marginalized areas, like North Bengal and Paschimanchal.

Nevertheless, as current events show, while the villagers could hardly come up openly to contest the regime for past several years, recent agitations against the PDS system, and in places such Singur and Nandigram, plus their electoral stand in three consecutive elections – Panchayat Election 2008, Lok Sabha Election 2009, and then the Municipality Election 2009, have brought back the question of Right to Food openly on the public political agenda. The issue of food security and hunger had brought the Left parties into power, but 32 years of uninterrupted Left Front rule have failed to resolve, in fact even recognize, the issue of persistent hunger in West Bengal. The issue of food is as powerful as it was in 1959. And, as it seems, the circle has come close to a full turn. Food appears to take the revenge of neglect.

evolution of the Bengal Left Front comprised a variegated and rich realistic developments. These included the experience of working in a United Front, the variety and different forms of functioning of its constituents in different time periods, and the bitter fruit of experience we all had to taste as a result of their taking positions contrary to one another.” (Peoples Democracy Vol XXXI, No. 25, June 24, 2007).

The Front partners, however, sometime dared to “taking positions contrary to one another” – read CPI(M) – but the “variegated and rich realistic developments” taught them not to go beyond a limit lest they tasted the “bitter fruit” of kicked out of the government by the big brother CPI(M).

²⁹ Barbara Harris-White(2008), *Rural Commercial Capital: Agrarian Markets in West Bengal*, OUP, New Delhi

³⁰ See *West Bengal Human Development Report*, 2004, Department of Planning, Government of West Bengal, Kolkata.

The PDS Agitation in West Bengal: Outrage against and Hunger and Bureaucratic Feudalism

Manisha Banerjee

Introduction

People have been suffering the corrupt Public Distribution System (PDS) for decades all over India, but the public outrage that broke over it in West Bengal in 2007 had far reaching consequences. In fact the much-hyped “change” which is now the buzzword in whatever is happening in the state has got its foothold from this particular movement against the corrupt PDS system. The common complaints were:

1. The shops did not function regularly.
2. The usual plea of the dealer was non-availability of stock.³¹
3. The ration provided was unfit for human consumption.
4. Ration issued fell short of the entitled quota.
5. The rates charged were more than the official rates.
6. Items were siphoned off by making false entries in the records.

³¹ Arvind Virmani and P.V. Rajeev (2002) *Excess Food Stocks, PDS and Procurement Policy*, Planning Commission Working Paper No5/2002-PC May 2002

7. The dealers piled a stock of false ration cards in their hold to pursue their corrupt practices.

The mass perception was that the dealers tried their best not to let people have their due, so that they could sell them in open markets.³² Also, there was a common belief that as the dealers had been receiving the party backing, no one could ruffle their hair. It was commonly understood that the dealer paid the party as well as the inspecting government offices; and again, the payment made to the party ensured the latter's ensuring the protection of the dealer. Meanwhile, all the dealers complained that it was the government system (less commission, discounted supply, etc.) that forced them to involve in malpractices – of course the statement bore truth, and not that the party did not know this. But, instead of pursuing for a systemic change the party found it easy to carry on with stopgap arrangements. Why so? Clearly, it had no intention to break the traditional power structure. The ration dealers, inter alia, contractors, school teachers, and other power-holders, as a general case, are rooted deep in the traditional ground of power, where social origin, the economic and the political perfectly converge with each other. The same dealer, in most of the cases, also served as one of the leaders of the local level party committee.

A Quick Outline of the PDS Outrage in West Bengal

Although there are several opinions regarding the epicenter of this agitation, which thereafter became completely centre-less, there is a common argument that it had originated in Bankura sometime in August 2007 and spread into neighbouring Birbhum and Bardhaman in no time, thereafter spreading into almost nine districts of South Bengal and one in North Bengal by October.

A mass fury agitating against the diversion of food meant for the PDS into the open market attacked ration dealers, their assets and houses and made them promise monetary compensation for their theft. The common refrain in the agitation was that ration shop owners were entrenched in a corrupt nexus, mostly affiliated to or patronized by CPM leaders.³³ Instead of making a weekly quota of wheat and rice available to the card-holders, they often sold them in the open market at a higher margin.

As in most cases it was found that the dealers were being sheltered by the ruling CPI(M), mob resentment went against the party as well paving the way for their political defeat in the Panchayat Election round the corner. The agitation had all the attributes of a grass root movement marked by spontaneity, people's participation, unorganized chaos and a very conspicuous absence of the big leaders of the Opposition.

³² PARIVARTAN Public Distribution System: An Overview, Fighting Corruption website. www.parivartan.com. Parivartan is a Delhi based citizens' movement trying to ensure a just, transparent and accountable governance.

³³ Rajat Roy (2007), *Hard News*, November 2007. A magazine and a website www.hardnewsmedia.com. Hardnews is the South Asian partner of Le Monde diplomatique, Paris, France.

It must be noted that West Bengal has a memory of its decades' old Left rule coming into power in the mid-sixties riding on the social unrest and popular wave of a 'Food movement'. This might well be a nemesis of the same Left rule that came into power as against the corrupt practices of the Congress Government.

It had been the worst nightmare for the ruling CPI(M), which as champion of the poor has been always vocal for strengthening the PDS. It has been alleged again and again that the ration dealers are entrenched in a corrupt nexus, affiliated to or patronized by CPI(M) leaders. Again, according to the National Sample Survey report published in the same year, West Bengal had the highest percentage (10.6) of rural households that do not get adequate food during some months of the year. Reports of several starvation deaths have come from different parts of the State adding enough embarrassment to the 'pro-poor' Government. Hunger rules, whatever may be the argument.

Following the Supreme Court Directives, in August 2006, the West Bengal state Government issued a notification explaining the quota of wheat and rice and their different prices for the APL(Above Poverty Line), BPL(Below Poverty Line), Antyoday and Annapurna categories. According to rules, every ration shop-owner has to put up a list showing the products available with the price range to keep the card-holders informed. Ration shop-owners seldom did that and the government turned a blind eye.

As usual the Government tried to blame the Congress in the Centre for cutting down the State's quota of food grain. The Centre slashed West Bengal's monthly allocation for the APL section from 228,000 tonnes to 7,700 tonnes.³⁴ State officials say that was mainly responsible for the shortfall. Of the 8.35 crore ration cardholders in the state, almost 60 per cent belong to the APL category they were the ones giving all the trouble. APL cardholders, who usually bought grains from the open market, were coming to the ration shops after the recent price rise. The monthly average allotment of rice and wheat did show a sudden decline from 2002-03 to 2006-07, but the counter-argument was that the Government itself had availed less than the allotted quota in the last three years. Why then the demand increased had to be looked into. Price hike in the open market was the only excuse provided. Center's decision to allow rice exports to Bangladesh had further complicated the matter. Again Tata Economic Consultancy Service 2006 Report shows that 40 percent of the rice and 34 percent of the wheat from the PDS have been diverted through the wrong path in West Bengal. Another drawback is that in West Bengal the fair price shops were mostly run under private ownership. The ration dealers were fairly organized and supported by two strong unions. The movement also revealed an uncanny consensus among all the dealers of the State, a sort of conspiracy in not providing the subscribers their quota of food items. Corruption had become the rule, rather than the exception here.

³⁴ Report submitted to West Bengal Government, on 8 December, 2007 by Biraj Pattanayak, Chief Adviser to Supreme Court Commission.

The other excuses provided by the ruling party was a rather diabolical conspiracy hatched by the Opposition to dismantle the state's smooth running apparatus. But reality proved that neither the Opposition nor the ruling party ever paid any attention to the faulty and corrupt PDS of the state, otherwise, this would not have had gone on unnoticed for so long. It had become a norm that ration shops are meant for the poor who has no other alternative and to be a ration dealer one has to be as corrupt as possible under the sun. The unnatural flourishing of the dealers within a rural poor setup was overlooked by all.

PDS Anger: Revolt against Bureaucratic Feudalism

One can find from a general reading a connection between the mass outrage against corrupt ration dealers, as well as the whole PDS generated in West Bengal in 2007 and the change of power in the following Panchayat election of 2009. While this relationship made its presence felt across the state, in some of the districts the line appeared much conspicuously. Indeed, a simple mapping of the PDS outrage and the debacle of the regime show a clear correlation between the two. That rural Bengal which has been taken for granted for long to be the red bastion has changed its color and the slogan of change has become believable even in the Parliamentary election has drawn a lot from PDS agitation could be seen clearly from this map constituting Birbhum, North and South 24 Parganas and Nadia. Of course there had been some aberrations, like Bankura, where despite the PDS agitation's reaching much volatile degree the results of panchayat election did not occur to be disastrous for the regime. But, it's only apparent and a deeper inquiry could bring out a different story. We will however, concentrate in Bardhaman and Birbhum district of West Bengal, the rice bowl of the state and traditional stronghold of the CPI(M) that has been presiding over successfully the ruling coalition for nearly one third of a century.

Let's begin with a case from Bardhaman, the Red Fort of the CPI(M). Amarpur Gram Panchayat of Ausgram Block of Bardhaman District has a large population of Muslims and Scheduled castes. This Panchayat has witnessed an extraordinary turn over of the local political power balance originating from the movement against corrupt ration dealers. It has generated a longstanding effect on the local village community that has a direct rendering on the politics of food and hunger.

During the ongoing agitation in the State over PDS irregularities, two villages under this Panchayat Bisnupur (1736 voters) and Belemath (730 voters) were under the dealership of Musha Molla who had allegedly been cheating the villagers for long and had been enjoying the patronage of the ruling CPM all through. As elsewhere in the state here too the villagers were suffering from various malpractices of the ruling party which included corruption in various welfare projects of the Panchayat, irregularities in NREGA programme, faulty BPL list, and above all the tremendous authoritarian reign of "the party" (read CPI(M)) that mixed, brilliantly indeed, the feudal legacy with the newly emerged bureaucratic functioning in such a manner that earned it unquestioned political loyalty of the masses. There has not been

any slightest of dissent, except one about two decades ago when Bishnupur saw a spark of a revolt through a youth's joining the Naxalite movement. The youth Azim Dafadar, alias Kajal Chatterjee left home and was murdered in Birbhum while fighting a land-grabbing movement in the mid eighties.

While the emergence of the Left Front was closely connected with resolving to a certain extent some contradictions related to feudal land relations regrettable, as it is the achievement itself was contradicted by a newer development in the political path of West Bengal. The CPI (M)'s manoeuvrings for absolute control of the party on every sphere of life of the people – both public and private – transformed the definition of political support into a sort of enslavement, where people were brought under the control of the different party committees, often reined single-handedly by a particular leader. In other words it gave rise to a party bureaucracy that imposed upon the people, a sort of feudal bondage.

Again, the very composition of the CPI(M) leadership that was in-charge of the Government found among the bureaucracy a perfect counterpart – in many cases literally related with kinship – upon whose hands it comfortably devolved all the responsibilities of policy planning and implementation. The party that fought against the bureaucracy before coming to power mitigated all their antagonism with it quite amicably and naturally. The bureaucracy in West Bengal is centrally urban, high caste Hindu with no linkages with the people that could generate their empathy towards them. Rather, the officials found themselves as monarchs of their own official territory and ruled without any contestation from the party.

In a word, the convergence of the party bureaucracy with that of the governmental bureaucracy gave way to the rejuvenation of the feudal pattern in a somewhat modified way.

The dissent got its voice when news of PDS agitation in other areas of the state reached here. The villagers approached the ration dealer and enquired about the quota of wheat the APL cardholders were supposed to receive. As it happened elsewhere it was revealed that he had been cheating them for long and the villagers demanded a cash compensation for the loss they were forced to incur. When the dealer dealt with them rather harshly as he was obviously sure of his CPM patronage to help him, the villagers got united under this common cause. A sort of on-the-spot organization was built up that took the first move of making a deputation to the Block Development Officer of Ausgram II, Inspector, Food and Supply, Ausgram and The Sub-Divisional Controller (Food and Supply), Bardhaman.

The English rendering of the Memorandum, written in Bangla and signed by 500 odd villagers representing almost all the households is as follows:

Sir,

It is our humble submission that we, the undersigned persons are residents of Bishnupur and Belemath villages of Amarpur G.P. under Ausgram Block II. Musha Molla Ration Shop No.26 is the dealer for these two villages.

The following allegations against this ration dealer need your strong attention.

1. The APL subscribers have not received their quota of wheat as fixed by the Government (weekly 250gms, per unit) since March 2001. Neither the government pr the ration dealer have made any announcement regarding this.
2. BPL cardholders have not received their quota of rice and wheat since 1996 to 2005. Even now some are deprived of these substances.
3. The subscribers do not receive kerosene as per Government allotment. Most of the villages are without electricity. Thus the educations of the students are hampered.
4. The shops have no notice board. Stock and price lists are not displayed.
5. The shop remains open only on Fridays and Saturdays from 2-5 pm only. As majority of the people here belong to either lower middle class or agricultural labourers, many are not able to take their things on time.
6. Ration dealer does not follow govt. rules and don't give cash memo to the subscribers.
7. They charge more price than what's fixed by the Govt.

Due to the above allegations the villagers have become agitated against the dealer.

Therefore our urgent request is that you look into the above matters as early as possible and take necessary legal steps against the faulty dealer.

The memorandum clearly reflects the grievances of the local people and gross irregularities that were going on around PDS. What's interesting is that even without the presence of any partisan motivator, the people themselves built up an organized protest in which they initially appealed to the different bureaucratic setups involved with the PDS mechanism. At the same time as it is common with any mass movement they approached the source of corruption, the local dealer and asked for redress. Once the cause was established and the guilt pronounced, the agitated villagers put a strong fine on the corrupt dealer and the movement turned anti-establishment when the dealer was given refuge by the local CPI-M party. The evil nexus between the party in power and the local exploiter, once exposed motivated the common people to look for a more radical change than mere punishment of the dealer. The protection of the ration dealers by the local CPM leaders and the party had been a common feature throughout the state during the movement. In fact this is what paved the way for the opposition to gain over as corruption became synonymous with the ruling party.

The right to food stir ultimately made the people of Ausgram aware of the violation of other rights as well and the *Ganaandolan Committee* formed by the villagers who spearheaded the agitation decided to fight in the Panchayat Elections of 2008. They floated three independent candidates, Ashis Molla, Bahadur Shaikh and Debdas Mete who fought the election with the symbol of table fan and were elected as members of Amarpur Gram Panchayat from Bisnupur, Belemath and Moukhira Gram Sangsads. While the announcement of the independent candidates' standing in the election was seen by the local political authorities audacious enough, their winning the election simply astonished the party bosses. As the scale of power forced the dealer to succumb to local pressure and ultimately made him pay a fine of

Rs. 600,000 for his corrupt dealings. The people distributed the money among the 3000 cardholders and have made a fund with part of the money.

But the story continues in the direction of the means of primary consumption. Within eight months of their coming to power, this local organization of the people and their representatives to the Panchayat have inaugurated a long lost village market near Bisnupur Bus stand, a *haat*, which was launched 22 years ago by Azim, alias Kajal, mentioned above, but alleged to have closed down later by the ruling party goons. This market is essentially a market for food – fresh vegetables, fish and other items coming directly from the producers. As Subal Halder, resident of a nearby village Chora Colony stated he could make up to 1000 rupees a day by selling vegetables in the Haat. What started as a movement against the corruption in supply of essential foodstuff has ultimately taken a constructive step again in the direction of procurement of food for the not so privileged villagers. Jahiruddin Sk., Secretary of the market committee who also runs a small tea shop which actually served as the control room of the agitation remarks: “We will employ our all strength to prevent the red to come back here...we have been under this flag all through our life and even sparing our life to keep it swinging high was nothing more than a triviality.” One can see the degree of frustration, sense of deprivation and consequent anger and hatred for the party – the CPM. The same pattern of the movement could be seen in many other areas in Bardhaman, Bankura and Birbhum as it spread like a prairie fire from one place to another in no time. Although Ramchandra Dom of CPM won the Parliamentary seat here but the winning margin has come down significantly and many are of the opinion that the Assembly elections of 2011 won't be a smooth one for the ruling Left.

Voices against the Politics of Deprivation and Continued Subjugation

It is the foremost duty of the State to provide fairness, opportunity and security to its citizens. But the PDS corruption and its maneuvering by the ruling power shows how the politics of deprivation is being practiced here with the party control over the use of public resources as well as their distribution. Now the general apathy around the present state is that it does not address the issues unless and until people starve which forces them to take up the law in their hands.

Khiruli of Sattor Panchayat, Bolpur block of Birbhum district is predominantly a Muslim village that has a population of about 1000. It has got one *gram sangsad* seat that was retained by the CPI (M) in the 2003 Panchayat election. The village economy is primarily agricultural and the majority of the main workers are either cultivators or agricultural labourers or both. The licensed Modified Ration (MR) dealer, Mr. Susanta Ghosh lives in Bergram, about one kilometer away from Khiruli and the MR shop is attached to his residence. Mr. Ghosh is a declared CPI(M) supporter.

In spite of discontent among a section of people over his ill-treatment there had not been any explicit outrage till July 2007. In June 2007 some of the villagers of Khiruli heard a rumour that the dealer had not distributed among the APL

cardholders the wheat stipulated for them for the last 11 months. The news spread across the villages under the jurisdiction of the MR shop and a crowd of about 500 went to meet the dealer to seek an explanation. At the first instance the dealer denied the allegation. But as the conversations went ahead he admitted the muddling but did not appear to be apologetic. This made the assembled mob furious but some leading locales managed to keep things under control. Finally, a date (July 9, 2007) was fixed for a public meeting where the dealer would announce his guilt and subsequent compensation. He agreed to compensate the undelivered wheat by doubling thenceforth the stipulated quota, about which the crowd had so far no idea. There was absolutely no information on this before the rumour broke out. Indeed, one of the major causes of discontent was the complete concealment of information, a mechanism that has been developed and used by the regime – both the party and the government – to maintain the hegemony over the people.

The villagers gathered on the date at a local high school fixed for the meeting. Among them there were supporters of different political parties including CPI(M). In fact a CPI(M) local committee member was also there. But the dealer did not turn up which added to people's enraged impatience. They wanted to visit him at his residence. Anticipating a disastrous consequence some of the leading participants appealed to the masses to maintain peace and only four representatives visited the dealer's house. But he was not found in his house too and his wife said that he had gone to attend a CPI(M) meeting. The assembly dispersed with anger only to reassemble again within two-three days. The dealer allegedly said that the CPI(M) had told him not to abide by his promises that he made before the gathering on the first day. Whether the allegation was true or not is unknown but that the dealer enjoyed administrative support was more than certain. Again, the hands of the political controllers guiding the administrative actions were not invisible: the presence of the long hands could be felt at every walk of life. Officials of Food and Supply Department, accompanied by police came to rescue the dealer and disburse the angry masses. As Ramadan (the month of fasting) followed the local inhabitants being Muslims could not pursue the case any further. But the sprit remained and in the Panchayat election of 2009, this seat was won by the opposition candidate of a newly formed political party Peoples' Democratic Conference of India (PDCI), the name of which was not at all a familiar one.

Let us make a quick round of another village, Kuitha, under Sahapur panchayat of Dubrajpur Block, in Birbhum. The village has an absolute preponderance of the Muslims. The PDS dissent was transmitted to this village through an incidence of physical assault on a dealer of the neighbouring village, Sahapur, Mr Rajibul Alam. The dealer promised, in presence of the police, to pay Rs 300 per APL cardholder. This news poured enthusiasm upon the villagers of Kuitha who gathered in front of the dealer's house. Two brothers Naresh Sadhu and Santi Sadhu, both very rich and own many other businesses, ran two ration shops from the same place and served 7 villages. It's too a common phenomenon: the traditional rich and power holders continued to dominate over the economy and politics. Sadhu

brothers are no sporadic case, but represent the main current, which we have seen in many villages in Birbhum and Bardhaman.

Nevertheless, the dealer's house virtually took shape of a people's court where a mass of about 700 was gathered. He was asked a series of questions by the villagers. The answers revealed gross irregularity in the dealer's work. He had not only cheated the APL cardholders but also the BPL ones. Following the proceedings a paper was signed by the dealer who agreed to give Rs 300 per APL cardholder. Interestingly the case of the BPL cardholders was left unresolved for a future course. But the dealers left the house overnight and started staying in a different village. However, after several messages sent to them the dealers came back and appealed that the previous agreement be modified. According to a new agreement the dealer promised to give 15 kg wheat in addition to the due amount, which was also 15 kg, at the government specified price (Rs 6.75).

Since the Muslim festival Eid was over the villagers asked the dealer to distribute the wheat among the Hindu customers first. He did it but with some mischief. He gave 15 kg wheat and assured that the rest would be given later. Similarly he gave the Muslim customers the same amount and assurance. But he did not give anybody the additional wheat he promised. In the meantime his licence has been cancelled by the administration. The consequence of the cancellation of the licence has been very negative. Now people have to collect their ration from a shop 6 Km away. Villagers have submitted mass petition to the authorities to give the dealership to someone from the village so that they can get their ration easily. But no positive action was taken till the date of interview. "*Chorer sasti hoyna, chor dharar sasti hoy* – the thief is not punished, rather those who detect the thief are penalised", said a villager.

Later it was found that the license was still with him and after giving the compensation amount to all the villagers (both Hindus and Muslims) he was reinstated as the dealer. The protection that the CPI(M) gave him exacted a huge price: it suffered a humiliating defeat in the hands of a combined opposition who won 7 out of 11 seats of the Panchayat with a population of 11000. A very significant feature of the whole episode was that Asnara Begum, the erstwhile CPM Pradhan who was made to quit for protesting against the malpractices of CPI(M) had fought as an opposition candidate and has won her seat again. That the anger against the bureaucratic feudalism that reigned supreme in the countryside was more a general pattern rather being isolated could be seen more clearly at Abinashpur, of Suri I block. With a population of about 1500 Abinashpur is a multi-ethnic village. While the Muslims and SCs are two major groups the Hindu middle castes like Sadgopes form a substantial portion of the households.

The agitation started as a sympathetic resonance to the ongoing agitations across the district. There was rumour that people of such and such villages had received the undelivered wheat and also money from the ration dealers. The rumour added incentive to the already furious masses who were extremely unhappy with the dealer's malfunctioning (ill treatment, cheating, irregularity, keeping fake ration cards, keeping the cards in his custody, etc). There was no particular party affiliation

among the crowd - supporters of all the parties joined it. The crowd met the dealer Sisir Bhandari at his residence from where he ran his shop. He admitted his misdoing and made written commitment that he would pay each BPL cardholder a sum of Rs 250 as compensation within 15 days. However he did not keep his promise that led the people getting assembled again. They had given him prior notice. But he was not present on that date. Angry crowd pelted stone to damage the glass windows. Hearing this over phone he came back from outside. Also came the sub-divisional food controller and the local police. A meeting was held in presence of the controller and police. The dealer asked for some relaxation in the fine imposed earlier and it was cut down to Rs 150 (or 10 kg of wheat). But the food controller clearly said that fine could not be imposed; instead the dealer would distribute the due wheat. But the mob did not agree and got another agreement signed by the dealer where, he promised pay Rs 150 per APL card. But finally he did not implement the agreement. In the meantime the local administration had ceased his licence. But people still believe that he should make the compensation. Here too, the CPIM and local administration had opposed imposing fine and took side of the dealer. Gradually the movement faded out. But the strain remained.

Although CPI(M) could retain the Panchayat it lost the *gram sangsad* which it had been winning for decades. It was the course of PDS movement that caused to erode the support base of the CPI(M) here. During Panchayat election 2009 in Abinashpur Panchayat following the concept of one against one, candidates from different political parties were put up as independents against the ruling CPI(M) under the banner of Janaswartho Raksha Sangram Committee and they won three seats including Abinashpur. One significant win is the tribal seat at Kubirpur, which was for a long time a stronghold of CPI(M). Tapan Das, a local youth who was once a member of the Panchayat winning the seat as a CPI(M) candidate, now a fervent opposition sums up, “Anyone if he becomes part of the ruling party can’t avoid corruption. *Ora merey khaoar janyoi Panchayat jai.*” In the Parliament election of 2009, Satabdi Roy, the candidate of opposition coalition who was totally a newcomer in this area as well as in politics (She’s famous as an actress) swept away the Left Front veteran Brajo Mukherjee who had been Jela Sabhadhipati as well as one of the crucial power handlers of the CPI(M) Party.

The Organization and the Unmaking of the Agitation

Significantly, Bankura, Burdwan and Birbhum — three districts where the movement gathered momentum — are strong CPI(M) bases. It was found that after initial hesitation party cadres of the lower rung joined the movement out of their own will. In almost all the places, the agitation started after receiving news from the adjacent villages. Rumor commonly perceived as the root of all riots in the ‘other’ India, acquired a positive dimension here. It spread like wild fire much to the disbelief of the prevalent organized communication system and the pattern got repeated everywhere. The agitators went to the dealer, poured out their grievances, called for justice, imposed a fine and when refused ransacked his properties. In many places,

with utmost sincerity the common people submitted mass petitions to the local and district level authorities of the PDS. When the ruling party with the help of administration tried to intervene chaos broke in. There were instances of death by police firing in this agitation. One can recall such deaths during the historical food movement led by today's ruling Left and who had been bestowed the status of martyrs later on.

Absence of prominent leadership was another salient feature of the whole agitation. Everywhere the movement was spearheaded by local youths or other socially active elders under the banner of newly formed grassroots committees. Names like Gana-andolon Committee, Jana adhikar suraksha mancho were floated. It should be noted that later during Panchayat election these committees functioned as political agencies in putting up independent candidates. Although the opposition quickly realized the potential and put their feet in, yet for the larger part this remained people's movement in the truest sense. As this study reveals there have been instances where all the political parties are made to put up their candidates as independent candidates after a common consensus of the people and despite severe objections from the higher level leadership, they fought under the banner of these new committees and succeeded. The concept of alignment among different opposition parties commonly known as 'jot' actually was revived in the grass root level. Thus in the Panchayat election of 2008 at village level the concept of one against one got the popular mandate and the ruling party suffered a great defeat.

A common observation about the movement is that this was initiated by the APL cardholders, people who are in a slightly better financial position within the village population. Some have marked them as the 'rural elite' otherwise content with their lot. It's just a matter of chance that the price hike made them fall back on PDS hitherto neglected and the corruption got exposed. BPL cardholders are being deprived through ages, but they don't possess the voice to speak for their rights. This argument is partly true as nowhere BPL candidates were given share of the compensation money squeezed from the dealers. But As Dwaiyapan Bhattacharya and Kumar Rana have found out "The rise in the price of wheat and corresponding non-availability from the FPS hit the poor people the hardest, especially those who were victims of "exclusion errors" (more than 30percent of the APL population fall in this category).³⁵ Yet to give full justice to this people's movements the discrepancies in the faulty BPL list made by the state has to be looked into. Many had been put into the APL even though they fulfilled the criteria of BPL, to limit the number of BPL cardholders in the State.³⁶ As Madhura Swaminathan points out, "for a casual labourer whose earnings fluctuate from day to day, a static (one-time) poverty line is an inappropriate indicator of vulnerability. Another important aspect of income targeting in India is that the official poverty line used as a cut-off is set at an absurdly low level, corresponding to the expenditure required to purchase a

³⁵ Bhattacharya Dwaiyapan and Kumar Rana "Politics of PDS Anger in West Bengal", in *Economic & Political Weekly* February 2, 2008

³⁶ Rana Santosh (2007) *Prakrito Daridryo o BPL Talika: sarkari hisabeyr karchupi* ; Prasnabachi Prakasana

minimum of calories. It is in no way an indicator of the adequacy of purchasing power to provide for a minimum decent standard of living.”³⁷

The BPL list still continues to be a major issue, the apple of discord in rural Bengal. After Panchayat elections, people who have changed the guards faced another round of disillusionment with the fact that listing of BPL cardholders is not under the jurisdiction of the Panchayat. It is still being monitored by bureaucrats whom people have every reason to believe to be sycophants of CPM.

Thus if the mainstream complains about the people falling heavily on local issues during Parliament election 2009, they fail to see that the people at the receiving end have realised that to change locally one has to empower centrally. As Nasima Bibi of Katiahat village P.S. Baduria of North 24 Parganas speaks out, “Aro Kshamata din,taholeyi badal kara jabey.” She interestingly is still part of the CPI(M) women’s wing. Sanatan Tudu, the Pradhan of the opposition led Panchayat Ghurisha of Illambazar block of Birbhum finds himself in a catch 22 situation when he fails to deliver justice to the very people who put him there for change. One of the primary demand is to amend the BPL list and the officials at the Panchayat informs him again and again that he cannot do anything here, - “ Sab upor thekey hoi, ami chalileyo kichu kortey parina. Sekhaney to anyo daleyr rajattwo.” Another significant contributor to the unmaking of this movement is the hijacking of the agitation by the big opposition parties. Once situation started getting out of control in the back drop of the Singur and Nandigram incidents, the ruling CPI(M) exerted its damage control mechanism, on the other hand the dominant opposition Trinamool Congress (TMC) started building up a controlling agency for the people’s struggle. As in many places it was common that the ration dealers paid regular donations to TMC as well, some hush-ups and dilution of the movement also took place.

An interview with a TMC leader of Kasba, Kasba Panchayat, Birbhum will further illustrate. Kasba is a CPI(M) stronghold, but the presence of Trinamool congress was also there. No protest against the dealer was organised. According to Narayan Bhandari, TMC organiser of the village, “some of the villagers wanted to organise protest”, but, “the TMC appealed to abstain from such move.”

- Why?
- The CPI(M) is in power and they might unleash attack on the people. No political movement can succeed in CPI(M) raj. Why should then people shed blood?
- Do you know the dealer?
- Yes, I do.
- How does he appear to you?
- Very nice. Basically it’s not the dealer who is the main culprit. It’s the government who is doing al these.
- Have you ever collected donation from the dealer?

³⁷ Swaminathan Madhura (2001), “A further attack on the PDS”, in *Frontline*, Volume 18 - Issue 02, Jan. 20 - Feb. 02, 2001.

Yes, sometime. All the parties do. In fact, in all social occasions people ask the dealer for contribution.

Food and Political Freedom

A recent follow-up visit of some areas shows considerable improvement in the PDS. The village monitoring committee is functioning properly, the dealer's behavior has changed towards the cardholders, and supply although not up to the mark has improved a lot. A display board shows the current stock of the dealer which previously never came into practice although it was mandatory. Nevertheless, it may not be a general case. There have been complaints from many areas that the dealers, party and the department have been carrying out the malpractices as before. Also, in some areas the changed political representation in the Panchayat has allegedly been succumbed to the systemic anti-people dynamics, where an alliance of the corrupt has been made disregarding the political nomenclatures and boundaries. Yet, the changes that the PDS anger has contributed to need not be seen from a cynic point of view. Indeed, the contribution of the expression of this unrest could well be identified as a historic turning point in West Bengal politics. It was the PDS anger, inter alia, Singur and Nandigram resistance that gave the people the much required self-confidence and esteem to start speaking against the regime. That the people found after many decades a collective voice through these agitations has also been admitted, in private conversations, by some CPI(M) leaders. As a leader said, "I never thought that I would have to stand by a man known for his notoriety. It was another matter that he has been stealing public goods and I never thought it important to go against this. But, when it came to defend him, I felt as though I am raping own political ideology built over years." In fact, the erosion of morality among sections of the workers of the CPI(M) caused by the party's taking side of the corrupt dealers openly has also added to the party's debacle in some areas. While the agitators stood on high moral ground the CPI(M) workers either continued to murmur the monotonous phrases – "conspiracy against the Left Front government" – which caused more harm than good. Again, majority of them continued to be the local oppressors – the *rajas* of their respective areas. The failure to deliver and aggravating the vulnerability of the masses on the one hand and keeping them fully subjugated on the other has been the phenomenon in rural Bengal.

The PDS anger was not just an issue. It was the manifestation against many different irregularities, corruption, failure in delivery, etc. on one hand, and stopping forcibly any attempt to raise any tiniest of complaint against the regime. As to why the anger was expressed through the PDS outlet, while there could be several other occasions, is a question that needs to be examined in the light of actual food situation in the state; the acuteness of hunger vis a vis increase in inequality. Crisis of food is a cruel reality in this state "producing excess food". And therefore no other issue than food could come out to be the spearhead of an anti-regime movement. There is a famous proverb in Bangla: "*bhat debar bhatar noy kil marar gosai* – a husband who does not provide the required [and promised while marrying] food to his wife, but

beats her frequently instead.” Precisely, a similar perception was gaining since long a ground among the people, which manifested in the PDS anger underlining two specific demands: food for all and stopping of oppression on the people. The message is not just for CPI(M), but for all convened in political governance.